Choices and Consequences

by SatansSin

Summary

Returning home, both Thor and Loki drift apart, anger driving them away, resentment increasing the gap. Now, years later, they are forced to mend their relationship or lose the throne. Naturally, neither will bend. So who will break? Add in the Avengers and an angry Chitauri ruler to make matters worse. How will they cope?

Yay, I messed up stuff

Notes

Woohoo! To everyone that commented, gave Kudos and even READ it, I love you ALL!! mariskaization, YellowPhoenix26, Nat_Nav, FrostMistress, atypicalsnowman, Illyse, Lucretia123, semiseverus, JackJack, Sigynthefaithful, lotr195, octavaluna, miravisu, nickita, rexluscus, Myrth, wickedbadsugar, Seven and karnilla.

You are awesome!!
Also, this is not a Thorki, so if you don't like a simple brother bonding, then move on.
Chapter 1

The Royalty gardens were a relatively new place in the Asgard castle. They were restricted to only the nobility and the royals themselves. Flanked on three sides by high white walls that supported the greenest and most rare ivy, and shadowed by the large impressive form of the royal chambers themselves, the gardens provided more than enough privacy to any member of the royal court or the royal family itself, should they choose to indulge.

Right now the winter sun, so rare these days, shone down on the garden, illuminating the glittering snow and gathering on one of the small groups of people sitting on a large carpet placed on the ice. Food of all sorts was scattered on the blue, white trimmed rug in a manner that indicated that a jolly picnic was taking place.

Sigyn was there, calmly munching on cheese and bread as she leaned back on Theoric's lap, listening to Thor narrate his latest escapade. The warrior's three and Sif were there, too, cutting into the conversation and occasionally negating Thor's exaggerated heroics. He laughed with them when they agreed and mocked them in good nature, calling them on their jealousy, when they said something that opposed his words. All in all, they were having a good time.

Sigyn's gaze went to the prince, sprawled as he was, on the thick rug. He had changed in the past five years, not much physically even though his hair, which had grown much longer, was now chopped so that it reached just between his shoulder blades or his overall form, that had grown larger still, if possible. His person had changed.

It had been five years since Thor had returned from Midgard, after stopping his brother's rampage against the weaklings, and did those five years change him. He had lost much of his good humor, his smiles and his joyful nature. Taking its place had been rage, anger and a fury so strong it had even made his friends take a few steps back. He hadn't been happy about his brother's sentence and he had nothing to take it out on.

Now, he had improved. He still had bouts of rage so powerful that many left the premises, but he had more than enough jovial times and laughs to make up for those. Like right now, laughing with his friends at his antics where he recently went to fight a large mob of boars that were terrorizing a village nearby. There had been twelve of those ghastly beasts and each one had been served up as food for the peasants.

Yes, her prince had certainly changed in the five years after his return.

"So what of the leader of the village?" Theoric asked, his voice rumbling over Sigyn's spine "I heard he kissed the royal knuckles with more passion than necessary."

The Warriors chuckled and Thor rolled his eyes.

"They exaggerate" he said "he was merely grateful."

"Aye, that he was" Volstagg said, stuffing meat into his mouth "and he was more than willing to show exactly how grateful he was if Thor gave him a chance."

Thor laughed with his friends "Come now you know it was nothing like that."

He playfully shoved Volstagg, but it was of no use since the man was planted on his heavy bottom. It was probably a ruse, for Thor, to avoid having the slight embarrassed flush to his cheeks noticed. It didn't work.

Theoric laughed and pointed it out "Look how he blushes!"

Thor glared at him amid the laughter of his friends "Watch it, Theoric, or I might take offence at that."

Theoric blew a kiss at him and winked "Go ahead, prince."

Thor began to stand, ready for a wrestling match. Sigyn scrambled off Theoric's lap and Thor pounced a second later.

The cheering reached the skies as Theoric and Thor wrestled in the snow, each a trained warrior, each capable of defeating the other. Sigyn watched, only a little nervous, as Thor managed to get Theoric in a pin.
For only an instant, as Theoric easily slipped from his grasp and attacked.
She smiled as the match and cheering went on for a good ten minutes. Clearly, no man was winning.
Eventually, breathless, Theoric raised a hand.
"Enough, I concede"
"Ha!" Thor slapped his hands together, getting rid of the snow on them "defeated so readily?"
"No" Theoric breathed "I would love to take you on any time of day, prince, but my beloved
warrants my attention more than a match at the moment."
Sigyn blushed furiously as the men howled.
Thor clapped his good friend on the back "A good reason as any, friend." He pushed him forward
"Go enjoy her smiles; you waste your time with me."
Theoric needed no second command. He walked over to the red faced Sigyn and took her in his
arms.
"Worried, were you?" he asked, looking down at her.
"Not in the least" she said.
Theoric kissed her forehead and Sigyn's eyes fell on the thick scar across his throat. She concealed
her shudder well, when reminded of how she had gained him back after losing him so cruelly.
"Thy lunch is getting cold, lovers" Fandral called
Sigyn extracted herself from Theoric and sat cross legged on the rug again, this time digging into an
orange.
Thor sat back his head placed, suddenly, in Sif's lap.
"So, what have you planned for this day?" Thor asked, opening his mouth as Sif put a grape inside.
Sigyn watched her prince "Well, I had a few spells I needed to test out. I was hoping for someone to
volunteer."
The answers to her small query never came.
The castle doors burst open with such force that they slammed back against the walls, gaining
everyone's attention.
Sigyn looked up to feel a trickle of genuine fear and regret crawled up and down her back. Theoric's
hand on her shoulder tightened, probably of its own violation.
Their other prince walked through the doors in a manner befitting royalty. His head was held high,
his back straight. He made no sound as he walked over the path that divided the gardens and lead out
to the rest of the castle. His face was impassive, eyes intelligent as he took in every presence and
ignored it. His steel based boots clicked on the polished icy marble as he made a determined way to
wherever he was heading.
No one could call Loki anything other than royal; he was the epitome of it in his emerald and blacks.
Royal stride, royal demeanor and royal blue blood in his icy veins. He was just as proud as his
stature, considering the nobility and the one single royal around him only barely as he walked
through.
Thor's narrowed eyes watched Loki. His brother's entrance, as always, was impressive. Where Thor
had to announce his arrival in a manner befitting a king, Loki didn't even have to try. He would just
enter a room and every gaze, all attention was his. The worst part was that, although he denied it, it
always left a slight sting of jealousy within Thor. He watched his adopted brother walk through the
nobility dotted across the gardens and past him without acknowledging their presence.
"Barely even turned his head" Volstagg commented.
Thor hummed but said nothing else.
Loki disappeared past the narrow gates at the other end of the gardens and so did the antagonism
inside him.
"So" he said casually "A volunteer, is needed?"
The group relaxed, happy that their prince had let go of the anger her had undoubtedly felt and began
talking again.
Though Sigyn replied often enough, she always found her gaze going to the place where her one
time husband had vanished so resolutely.

***
It was getting dark, the ceiling to the library had long since turned into a black abyss and the blackness crept down the walls now. Loki had to light a couple of candles as he continued reading the thick, parched paper book laid on the table in front of him.

One hand was laid straight and flat on the table, his fingers playing an idle tattoo on the wood, while the other was holding the end of the paper, softly massaging his fingertips against the rough page. His green eyes moved with excellent speed, taking in the foreign magic language without a hitch. His feet were under the chair, elegantly crossed at the ankles and his posture was proud as always.

Beside him, two more books lay read and learnt. He came to the end of the passage and turned the page. In doing so, his gaze lifted to the wall in front of him, behind the array of shelves, and to the larger than life portrait of the great thunder god.

Loki allowed himself a moment of disgust and went back to his reading. He had neither the time nor the inclination for someone so stupid.

When they had returned, Loki had been bound and gagged like a horse, taken to Odin's throne room and thrown at his feet. Thor had shoved him so hard in anger that Loki had stumbled, kneeling in front of his king unwillingly.

Odin had looked down at him, so much emotion in his eyes, that Loki had taken a few minutes to understand them all.

Thor had been standing behind him, hoping that Loki remember his words clearly.

'Imagine a room so small you can neither stand nor lie in it. That the only company you will have will be the teeth marks and the scratches of men that were trapped in it before you. Your thoughts shall plague you and your mind will leave. Remember that room, brother, for it was your design. Now, you shall stay there till you repent.'

Loki had remembered his words and he had recalled them as Odin stood and walked down the steps of the dais…

…only to drop to his knees in front of Loki. He grabbed Loki's face in his hands and pulled him close and before Loki knew it, was begging him. Odin was asking for forgiveness, saying he understood what made him want to hurt him. He told him he knew that he had only acted in anger and it was no one's fault but his. Then he said something Loki had never heard him say.

'I love you, my son.'

The shock that coursed through Loki was beyond description. All he could do was stare at the man, his king, his All-Father, as he crumbled before him. He had never, not even in his wildest imagination, thought this would happen.

Apparently, Thor had been just as shocked as he. But where Loki remained inactive in his surprise, Thor turned to suspicion and anger. He grabbed Loki from behind and slammed him into a nearby pillar, demanding he tell him the curse he had undoubtedly placed upon his father.

When he was there, seeing stars dance before him, held by the throat against a heavy pillar, Loki became aware of Odin yelling at Thor. A few moments later, Loki was free and he managed to stay on his feet rather than fall and disgrace himself.

In the time Thor and Odin argued, Loki composd himself enough to hear them.

Thor was demanding that Odin think straight and punish Loki instead of forgiving him. Odin yelled back at him that it was his decision and his alone.

Eventually, through their yelling, Thor gained enough sense to fall silent. He turned to Loki with a previously unseen anger in his gaze.

'Now, release his bond and leave us' Odin had said.

Loki watched carefully as Thor approached him again.

Thor had seen his eyes crinkle and knew that the trickster was grinning beneath that muzzle. It made more boiling fury rise in him. Slowly, obeying his king Thor reached up and, all the while gazing into Loki's insolent gaze, removed the muzzle.

He had been right.

Loki's eyes and his toothy grin mocked him. He didn't say anything, but even as Thor removed his chains, Loki chuckled softly.

It had taken every ounce of control for Thor to not fling Loki through the nearest wall, but he
managed it and in the end he left the room like Odin had ordered.

A few hours later, Loki had emerged from the throne room, a thick onyx ring on the middle finger of his right hand, and gone straight to the containment chambers. It had later become known that the ring stopped all magic. Where he wore one, Odin wore the other. Odin's ring was more powerful, capable of controlling the magic that Loki's bound and the trickster was to wear it. Even when he was sentenced to five years in an isolation cell, the ring stayed tightly on his finger. However, Odin's heart proved kind. Where Thor was angry at the unjust and light punishment, Odin couldn't stand the torment it was putting him through. so, instead of letting Loki complete the five years, he let him go after only three. Though Loki was free enough, his ring stayed on till the original allotted time.

Obviously, Loki wasn't happy about it, but the knowledge at his free movement throughout the castle angered Thor made it more and more bearable every day.

As his fingers played the tune and his eyes roved over the pages, Loki's ring suddenly clacked against the wood, gaining his attention.

He looked at it, a feeling of loss covering him for the merest moment before his usual, scorning grin took its place.

His ring would come off eventually, Thor's anger would not diminish and that was something Loki intended to cherish.

With a renewed humor, Loki went back to his reading, the tattoo he played gaining more rhythm this time round.

***

Holding the parcels more firmly in her harms, Sigyn raced through the halls, careful not to drop any of the firmly packaged objects.

It was Sif's day of birth today and Thor had suggested no one give her any sort of blessings, pretending not to notice her special day and then surprise her later into the evening.

It was evening now, and the room they had chosen for the small feast was Sigyn's practice room. The chambers were small and ideal for the plan because Sif avoided them at all costs, should she be pulled in for a spell testing.

Sigyn knew that the Warriors Three and Thor had taken Sif out of the castle and would be returning in an hour. That left her and Theoric to take care of the food and slight decorations that needed to be put up. Therefore, she was currently balancing candles, streams of ribbon and goblets in her dainty arms as she ran to the practice chambers. Her feet didn't even skid as she rounded a corner.

And crashed head on into something firm and solid.

So unyielding was the object that Sigyn ended up flat on her rear, her things scattered around her in a noisy clutter.

"Could you watch where you are –" she broke off her irritated tirade as she looked up.

The familiar twinges of fear ran through her.

Loki looked down at her, an eyebrow elegantly raised.

"My prince," she began "I apologize, I didn't-"

"You are in my way" Loki said flatly, raising a leg and stepping over her to continue down his path, unhindered.

She watched his retreating back then looked at the things she had dropped.

Footsteps sounded from the rooms and Theoric emerged.

"Sigyn!" he rushed over "what happened? I heard a crash."

She stood without his help "Nothing, I just slipped, running as I was."

Theoric smiled "Goose. I thought that Loki did something to you. I saw him leave the chambers a few moments ago."

"No" Sigyn said, collecting her fallen items "I saw him leave, too."

She deposited the things in Theoric's arms and beamed at him "Let us go."

Theoric followed her, lost in her beautiful gaze, as they made their way back.

Halfway through the decoration, Fandral arrived, announcing that he intended on helping. He was assigned the task of making sure the table was evenly laid out for food and that there was more than
enough edible substance to sustain even Volstagg.
"I think there needs to be more" Fandral said as he eyed the fruits, sweets and breads spread around
"I once saw him eat more than this in one sitting."
Theoric laughed and clapped him on the back "Then we shall control him, my friend, perhaps Thor
would undertake the task."
"Control Volstagg?" Sigyn laughed "There is more chance of Sif giving up fighting."
"That is true…” Fandral considered.
Footsteps sounded in the hall and Hogun appeared "Is everything ready?"
They nodded and he vanished again.
Sigyn closed the drapes around the room and pulled it into darkness. Theoric and Fandral were
stationed next to them, to fling them open when Sif arrived. A few more footsteps sounded, and the
figures of Hogun and Volstagg entered, silhouetted against the door.
Volstagg headed straight for the table.
There was a tight slapping sound.
"Ouch! What was that for?" Volstagg said
"Keep your hands to yourself" Hogun rasped.
Theoric and Sigyn smiled while Fandral chuckled.
Suddenly voices sounded outside.
"I do not care if she is a good friend" Sif was saying "If she tries magic, I will refuse."
"Just give this a chance, maybe you will like it" Thor replied.
They came through the halls.
"Surprise!"
Theoric and Fandral pushed the curtains aside, the rest of them yelled loudly, laughing and clapping.
They walked forward, ecstatic at her shocked expression.
Sif stood agape "What…?"
Thor laughed and put an arm around her shoulders "Did you really think we would forget?"
"I…"
"Blessings on the day of your birth" Sigyn came over to embrace her.
Sif grinned at her, then took everyone's blessings and entered the room. She saw the ribbons, the
decorations, the lovely food and all her friends. Sif felt overwhelmed.
"This is too much” she smiled "Thank you."
"Do indulge" Hogun smirked, glaring at Volstagg when he tried sneaking into the desserts. The large
man stopped.
"Don't mind if I do" Sif said, walking up to the table and lifting a platter.
"Do hurry," Fandral said "Volstagg has been eyeing the tables for far too long and I doubt he can
contain himself any longer."
Sif laughed, placing some sweet pie into her platter "Well, as long it's my day, he can enjoy
everything as he wishes."
"Do not encourage me to" Volstagg said, already filling his plate "Believe Fandral and I when I say
there might not be much left after an invitation like that."
Thor laughed, along with his friends and relaxed. This evening was going to be a wonderful one.
They talked and ate, enjoying the private feast for over two hours before they were interrupted.
The doors were pushed open and Loki stood between them. Immediately, all merriment stopped.
"Loki, what are you doing here?"
Thor strained against Sif's grasp.
"Ever so welcomed" Loki sneered "Right, brother?"
Thor growled and Sif put a hand on his arm. "Tell us why you invade our feast, Loki."
"Oh, so that's what it was" Loki asked in mock surprise "Forgive me, the raucous noise threw me
off, I thought someone was dying in here."
Thor strained against Sif's grasp.
"But do not worry" Loki spoke before he could "I came here against my will because I have a
question to ask - you."
His green eyes turned to Sigyn, who immediately felt conscious.
"Me?" she asked, noting Theoric move closer to her.

Loki rolled his eyes "Such distrust. Anyway, I wish to know where Amora has gone. I have not seen her all morning, since you spend so much time with her, I find myself lowered to asking you, where is she?"

"Why do you wish to-" Sigyn asked, ignoring the escalating tension in the room.

"Just" Loki cut in "Answer my question. Do you know where she is?"

"No," Sigyn said "But I -"

"That is all" Loki spun around suddenly and walked away.

Thor scoffed when he left, keeping what rude thoughts he had to himself.

There was an awkward moment as everyone tried to think of something to say, something to diffuse the tension.

It didn't work, Loki had successfully diminished the good mood.

***

Thor wasn't able to sleep. He had had so much to eat, it was becoming difficult for him to sleep now. When he had laid down, his stomach had started to hurt and he had to make an effort just to get up and go to the bath. However, that hadn't solved his problem and he thought maybe a walk might help.

When the pain had receded, he had stood and walked out of his rooms, out of the halls and eventually into the snow covered Royalty gardens.

The hour was late and there was no one around.

The newly settled snow was so crystalline it seemed magical. Thor walked on the path between the royal chambers and the castle. The cold night air nipped at him and he wished he had brought along something warmer than the simple cloak he wore.

He walked the marble path a couple of times, feeling slowly better, and noticed something he had previously not seen.

A trail of footsteps led from the immediate exit of the doors into the snow and curled around the side of the building.

Curious, Thor followed them, wondering who else could be up at this time. The trail traveled along the side of the building and then behind it, where they began a straight path to the small shed that had once been the watchman's post.

Thor followed them, aware that he could end up with a failed search but since it took his attention away from the pain in his gut he didn't mind. There was little light coming from the shed and Thor opened the cracked and slightly bent door.

The occupant looked up in surprise. He grabbed a few papers and pulled them out of view.

"Thor!" Loki said, blinking from his spot on the floor "What are you doing here?"

"What are those?" Thor asked, pointing to the papers Loki had hidden.

Loki smirked, his usual demeanor overtaking the surprise "None of your concern, brother. Why are you here?"

Thor frowned lightly "I could not sleep. Why are you here?"

Loki stood "My business."

Thor narrowed his gaze and stepped into the shed, making the confined space even tighter. He closed the door behind him. Loki took a step back and stumbled a little, there was suddenly no space for him to move to.

"Thor, what the Hel are you doing?" Loki asked, moving his arms to gain some balance.

Thor grabbed his arm – unyieldingly "Answer my question. Are you practicing magic?"

Loki narrowed his gaze dangerously "Release me or you shall regret it, Thor"

"Answer me" Thor hissed

"You have till the count of three" Loki rasped.

"Have you found a way to harness magic?" Thor asked a little loudly.

"One"

"Loki!"

"Two..."
Thor shook him hard "Tell me!"
The door to the shed was thrown open as Thor flew through it, falling with a groan into an ungraceful heap in the snow. The blow was so hard he skidded in the ice before stopping. He lay there blinking for a while.
Snow crunched beneath his feet as Loki drew near. He changed his arm back to his pale form from the Jotun blue it had become.
"Not magic, brother" Loki said, looking down at him "Harnessing my natural prowess."
Thor growled and moved to sit. Only to have Loki plant a foot on his chest and push him back down.
"Don't you dare sneak up on me again" Loki warned "I will not be so tolerant next time."
Thor tried moving, but found Loki stunningly strong. His foot was actually beginning to hurt him.
Loki bent low and looked him in the eyes "Understand it."
They stared at each other for a while. Loki's gaze was cold, collected and warning. Thor's blue gaze was blazing in anger, fury and bruised pride.
Then Loki smiled at him and removed his foot. He straightened and walked back into the castle, talking over his shoulder "Good night, brother. I hope whatever ails you lingers for a while longer."
Thor stared after him, too angry to say anything. He was sitting up in the snow, one hand moving over his chest where Loki had placed his foot and where he had been hit not too long ago.
***
Loki growled in frustration as another spell became undone a second after it started.
The goblet he was levitating fell to the ground with a metallic clank.
Loki exhaled loudly and ran his fingers through his hair.
"Damn it" he muttered.
He put his elbows on his knees and placed his head in his palms, slowly kneading his scalp, trying to make the pain go away. He was sitting cross legged on the floor of the shed, this time placing a lock on the doors to avoid what happened last time, his pages of incantations and enchantments spread around him.
Thor had been right; he had been practicing magic.
Since the ring on his finger had stopped all his own craft, he had been using someone else's. It had been easy enough, looking for a host, mainly because she was so willingly available to him.
Loki knew Amora had a desire to be queen and had eyed Thor for a long time now. She spent time with Sif and Sigyn in the hopes that their closeness with the prince would eventually lead to her being close – if not closer – to the golden god. It hadn't worked as well as she had hoped and Amora often found her subtle signals ignored by Thor. Thor was simply too thick to understand the under currents, the finely wrapped words Amora flung at him, but Loki saw them. He sensed them and he knew he could manipulate her into giving him use.
So, one night, after Amora had had too much to drink, Loki had played the caring friend and guided her to her chambers. There, he had sat patiently as she broke down, revealing her desire for Thor and how badly she wanted him. Loki shook his head at the appropriate points and nodded at the right moments and eventually left her asleep.
She had sought him out the next day to thank him and he had hinted at the false desire he had for her. Amora's eyes lit up, then. If she couldn't have Thor, she could settle for Loki. They had started spending time together in secret, Loki insisting on privacy for their own good, and Amora couldn't have been happier.
Eventually, she had begun sharing his bed and found herself the happiest. She didn't dare tell Sif or Sigyn, but every time she saw Thor or Theoric, she couldn't help but think that she had got the better part of the bargain.
Loki knew this of course, how she was taking their relationship, and he didn't care. She could weave all the dreams and hopes she wanted. All he needed was her magic.
It was a simple thing to steal her magic. All he needed to do was touch her and he absorbed from her. The more intimate the touch, the more magic he took. She didn't know; the trick was imperceptible and being the trickster himself, Loki performed it with unbelievable skill. Amora had no idea of what
he was really doing.
He was calmer now. He lifted his head and then slowly raised his hands, fingers spread, to the goblet once more. His lips moved in the silence and the goblet lifted off the ground. It levitated without hobbling and Loki lifted it higher till it touched the roof of the shed with a small click.
He smiled, perfect teeth flashing in the candle light.
Suddenly he heard footsteps crunch in the snow.
The goblet fell and Loki caught it. He grabbed the papers around him and shoved them in his pocket. He blew out the candle and listened.
The steps came closer. They were heavy and determined.
There was a knock on the door.
"Loki, open up" Thor called "I wish to discuss something."
Loki rolled his eyes. He had no desire to talk to that oaf. He remained silent.
Thor knocked again "Come on, Loki I saw the light go out, I know you are in there."
Sighing, Loki rose to his feet. He unlatched the door slowly and pushed it open.
Thor stood before him. He glanced behind Loki, at the random clutter on the shed floor, then at his face.
"What are you doing in here?" Thor asked
Loki shrugged "You have something of import to say to me? If not then, pray, let me leave."
"No, I – " Thor rubbed the back of his neck "I just wished to talk."
"Why?" Loki asked.
Either it was his imagination or Thor had flushed.
"I kind of need your help" Thor said.
Loki had imagined it. He was probably imagining this as well.
"What?" he asked, frowning.
Thor looked around "I need your – can we go someplace else? The cold is bitter."
Loki raised a brow at him but that was the most of his movement. "Why?" he asked again.
This was a completely different question and Thor didn't really have an answer to it.
"I just – " he broke off "I know how awkward this must feel, but I honestly require your assist. No one else will do."
Loki looked at him, going through various options. He leaned forward slightly, arms crossed, and looked around.
Thor smiled a little "There is no trick. I come alone."
"Forgive me if I do not believe you" Loki said, taking a step out "our past makes sure of the distrust between us." He looked at Thor and sighed "State your demand. If I deem it worthy, I shall hear the rest of it."
Thor exhaled, knowing this was the one chance he had to do this right "There is an amulet buried deep in the Black Forest. The Warrior's Three and I –"
"No" Loki cut in and walked past him.
Thor blinked "Wait, you have not even heard the rest of it."
"I do not care to" Loki replied over his shoulder.
"Loki!" Thor followed, growling at the reason he was doing this.

Theoric placed the map on the table with flourish and looked down at it.
"There" his finger rested on a point somewhere deep in the forest "This is where they saw it last."
"You mean the adventurers?" Thor asked, looking down at the large map. It fell over the corners of the table it was set on. Thor watched the forest lay out, one hand across his chest while the other's elbow was planted on his hand, fingers idly scratching his chin; he was thinking.
"Yes" Thoeric looked at him, eyes shining behind the flaming hair as it fell over his forehead. His gaze glittered "So what, say Prince? Are you ready for action?"
"The Black Forest is more dangerous than anything else we come across" Thor said "combined."
His blue gaze lifted when he heard a metallic clank.
Sif was sparring with Hogun on the mats. Volstagg and Fandral were cheering them on from the
benches in the practice arena, while Sigyn watched from the farthest bench, half her gaze into a thin
book she was reading and half of it on the match. Amora cheered for Sif, clapping and calling louder
than needed.
"I know that" Theoric said "But does that not light up the fire within?"
"In me, yes" Thor looked at him "I don't know much about them."
Thor nodded to his friends.
Theoric rolled the map up "Why not ask them?"
He walked over, as Thor watched, and interrupted the match. Thor didn't hear what he said, but a
few minutes later, all of them were walking over. Thor lowered his hands as they neared.
"So" Sif said, holstering her weapon "The Black Forest. We would need a proper guide, Thor."
Thor's eyes lingered "Who exactly counts as 'we'?"
Everyone save Amora raised their hands.
"Sigyn, you too?" Thor asked, raising his brows.
"Of course" she smiled, ignoring Theoric's disapproving gaze "I have been through a lot with you,
this adventure will count as another escapade."
Thor hummed and met Theoric's gaze "What say you about this?"
Theoric shrugged "The lady had made up her mind. All I can do is make sure I'm beside her."
Thor nodded.
"Which brings up the point" Fandral said "We all choose a partner."
"Exactly" Thor said, moving to Sif immediately.
Eventually, Volstagg was left without a partner. He announced it immediately.
"You can go with the guide" Theoric said "Which begs the question; that who would do that for us?
Or are we enough for maneuvering through the aptly named Forest of Death?"
"It would have to be someone who has gone to the forest more than once and knows the forest like
the back of their hand" Sif said
"Someone who has come back alive and unharmed" Fandral suggested.
"The guide would be someone who knows us and knows that we are not as rash headed as many
think" Thor said "Otherwise we could end up with no one."
"Also, it has to be someone extremely intelligent and capable of quick thinking in case we need to
escape." Hogun said.
The answer came to them together.
"Oh no" Sif groaned
Thor's angry snarl was vey audible "No, there has to be someone else."
"There isn't" Theoric said "He is the only one that fits into every requirement. He knows the forest
better than anyone. He goes there the most."
"I said no" Thor growled.
"Then we have no guide" Sigyn said "and we give up this venture."
Their disappointment was almost opaque.
Thor saw their disappointed faces. He knew they were just as excited as he was to go after the
amulet. But there was just no way he could bring himself to ask his brother to accompany them.
Yes, Loki fit perfectly into their desired requirements. He had basically lived in the forest as a child
and still went there whenever he could. He knew every route in and out, he had survived each visit
without a scratch and he –
"He would never agree" Thor said
"We could ask him nicely" Theoric pointed out "Maybe he will concur."
"I doubt it" Sif said "He likes our company as much as we like his."
"Well, we can't go in the forest without him" Fandral said "That would be suicide."
"Then we don't go" Volstagg said, visibly deflating.
Thor felt guilty now. His friends had really wanted to go. He could see it on their faces, the desire for
adventure, the craving for danger…
Damn it, he was going to regret this.
He sighed "Fine. I shall ask him."
His friends didn't hide their relief well. "But don't get your hopes up" Thor said "he will probably refuse and if he agrees, you will have to face his company for more than a day."
That pretty much soured their mood.

But no too much, since Thor was currently chasing after Loki right now.
"Loki" Thor growled and kept a good hold on his temper.
Loki didn't even turn. He kept walking until Thor reached out to grab his shoulder.
"Just give me a chance to talk" Thor said, turning him.
Loki wrenched out of his grasp and looked at him "Obviously, I wasn't clear enough before. I have no desire to go anywhere with you or those rash, dim-witted, cack-headed apes you call friends. As far as I am concerned, you are nothing but a waste of my time and energy. I would rather swallow coal than spend any more time with you than I can help, Thor."
"What if I offered you something, like a favor?" Thor asked, ignoring the parade of insults that had been hurled at him and following Loki as he walked away again.
"No"
Thor sighed angrily and stopped. He didn't want to do this, but he found himself with no choice.
"Come with us" Thor said, his voice hard "Or I will tell father you have found a way to gain magic."
Loki, who had stepped onto the marble path leading back to the chambers, stopped and turned slowly.
His gaze was so deadly, a wiser man would have turned and run. However, Thor remained standing.
"What did you say?" Loki hissed, walking back to him.
"Exactly what you heard" Thor glared back at him "You refuse, and I shall go straight to Father and tell him that you have found a way around his punishment to use magic." He smiled unpleasantly
"He won't take kindly to that, now, will he? Especially after he had to convince the entire council to let him give you the lenient punishment you freely enjoy. And I wonder what punishment awaits you after."
Loki slit his gaze, weighing his options. His stolen magic wasn't nearly as strong as he wanted otherwise Thor would have been cowering in pain at his feet. He couldn't have Odin know that he was cheating; the consequences could be grave. He was so angry his posture had gone rigid.
Thor saw his intelligent eyes work and he knew when he won.
He smiled and patted Loki's cheek "Don't fret, you cannot win them all."
Loki pulled back from him. His fury was lightly controlled as he glowered at Thor.
"What" he began, his voice a sound of barely controlled rage "do you have in mind?"
Thor smiled again and walked to the building, gesturing for Loki to follow.

***
"I think we have waited long enough" Sif said, eyeing the sky "If we are to reach the forest before dark, we should leave in the next few minutes."
"If we leave." Fandral said "We don't know if Thor managed to bring his brother into this."
"He's done it many times before" Theoric said, patting his horse "He can do it again."
"Yes," Volstagg said "But that was before Loki had turned himself into one of the worst villains in Asgard."
"True" Hogun said "So what will we do if Loki, by some miracle, agrees?"
"We cross that improbable bridge when it comes" Theoric said.

They waited for a while, their horses ready and nibbling at the small clumps of grass around them. All of them had dismounted and now stood in a group outside the palace gates. There was a small grouping of trees that they had chosen as their meeting point and Thor had yet to show. If he came with Loki, then their mission was to start and the only problem they would have would be managing the shamed prince. If Thor didn't show, well, their disappointment would be great. The amulet was lost to Asgard centuries ago and if they recovered it, their heroics would be glorious. Of course, that paled in comparison to the adventure they all sought out.
Sigyn looked at the sun "I don't think Thor managed anything."
"I am beginning to agree" Fandral said, his shoulders drooping.
"So what now?" Sif asked.
"Head back?" Theoric asked in a deflated voice.
They had just turned to their steeds when the guards at the small gate went on attention. Their spears stood in a mark of respect and made the small group glance up.
Thor slowly walked his white horse through the gates. His tent and other necessities were rolled or hung on his horse's sides.
"Thor" Fandral smiled "We were getting worried, old chap. Uh – unsuccessful, were you?"
Thor smiled at the hope in his voice and in the expression of his friends' faces. He didn't say anything, just moved his horse forward.
Another figure emerged from the gates, riding his stealthy steed through the small gate. Loki wore a heavy cowl; hood pulled over his head and moved his lean black stallion onward. Like his horse, he was a vision in black and contrasted heavily against the white snow around.
Fandral raised his brows, just as surprised as the rest, but wisely remained silent.
"Are you ready?" Thor smiled at the relief and surprise on his friends' faces.
"Uh" Sif turned her gaze to Thor "Yes"
"Good" Thor grinned "then pair up and start riding, my friends."
There was a minor hustle as the Warriors Three, Sif, Sigyn and Theoric found their rides and mounted them.
Volstagg looked at Loki, who held his head high and watched the scenery around, and then at Thor. Thor exhaled, knowing what he wanted "Sif, you ride with Volstagg"
Sif looked at him in mild surprise, her hand easing her brown mare, then nodded "Very well"
Thor gave her a grateful look "Alright, then. Let's ride."
He moved far ahead of the group, already naming himself a leader, and the rest followed. Loki narrowed his eyes slightly and let the group pass him by before signaling his horse to follow them. He remained a few steps back, not really part of the group and not really estranged from them. He kept his gaze forward, aware of the surprise of Thor's friends and their silent whispering, and his gloved fingers pulled gently at the reins whenever his horse got tired of walking slowly.
They rode safely enough, keeping up the appearance of a group merely going out to enjoy a relaxing trip in the forest. Going to the Black Forest was forbidden; and that was why Loki preferred to visit it so much. They occasionally waved and nodded to children or peasants that greeted them but otherwise remained focused on their goal.
Thor was in the lead, behind him Hogun and Fandral tailing them were Theoric and Sigyn then Sif and Volstagg. Loki observed them all, deeming them beneath him, watching their body language. Apparently none of them were happy that he had accompanied them. The thought was mutual; he had been forced into this situation and hated it. His green gaze lifted to Thor, who rode on as arrogantly as he could.
Eventually, they reached the outskirts of Asgard's city. The enchanted fields that had been a golden blanket around them had long gone, replaced by the brown and grey stones that signaled the end of the kingdom.
"Alright" Thor pulled the reins of his horse and stopped it "This is far enough, now the fun begins."
The hum of excitement spread throughout the group but left untouched the lone figure at the back. Theoric pulled his hood over his face and the other did the same. Thor reached up and pulled the cover of his magnificent red cloak over his face – and was doused immediately in rotten, foul smelling mold.
"What the –" he broke off when he heard his friends astonished cries and laughter. He pushed his hood back and began removed the stuff from his hair. "What is this?"
"Mushrooms" Theoric laughed "rotten mushrooms"
Volstagg's great belly rumbled as he chuckled
Thor turned and glared at him, then when he shut up, his gaze lifted to the one figure at the very end of their group.
"You" Thor scowled.
All laughter stopped when Thor turned his horse and made for Loki.
"Thor" Fandral warned but was ignored at Thor prowled past him.
Sif moved her horse forward and blocked his path.
"Thor, calm down" she said, her eyes pleading "Let it go."
Thor didn't look at her; his eyes were locked with Loki's who glared back – daring him to continue.
"Thor" Sif placed a hand on his arm and he visibly calmed "It was a joke, leave it alone."
Thor glowered at Loki for a moment longer, then turned back and headed to the start of the group.
"It grows late by the second" Thor said "We should move faster."
He enunciated his order by digging in his heels.
His horse neighed and lunged forward, leaping through the air. Mighty footsteps beat against the ground as the horses ran through the quickly passing day.
Thor looked back and saw, to his relief, Loki following them. His horse was running slower than usual, he noted. Loki was deliberately keeping back. Thor growled; it put on an unwanted pressure on him. He raised a hand and put it to his mouth.
"Loki!" he called "Come forward!"
Loki gave no sign of acknowledging the order, but a few moments later, his black steed began to overtake his friends.
Loki kept his mouth shut at the overconfident call and patted his horse's neck.
The black animal, lethal in every aspect, obeyed the command and galloped faster. Loki cut a path through the middle of the group, passing Thor's friends two by two until he rode right behind Thor.
Thor glanced at him once, the cloth of his hood flying in the wind, then back at his path. Loki moved one hand to the front of his saddle and grasped it tightly. The other hand held the reins that he flapped once.
His stallion lowered its head and galloped even faster, leaving Thor and the group behind.
"Loki!" Thor called him.
But Loki didn't listen. He ordered his steed to run faster still, till there was a good gap between him and the rest, and then turned into the mouth of a cavern.
The others followed him, instantly changing their course, the hooves of their steeds hammering against the cavern floor and echoing off the walls.
Theoric rode next to Thor "Where is he going?"
"I don't know" Thor said, "But I am about to find out."
He yelled and dug his heels in, breaking free from the group and chasing Loki.
"This will not end well" Theoric said and went after him, suddenly leading the group.
***
Loki heard the wind flap his hood and looked behind him.
Thor was closing the distance between them quickly. His horse was like a machine as it tore through the cavern that would prove a relatively private way to the Black Forest.
Loki rolled his eyes and pulled on the reins of his horse. His animal began to slow down, giving Thor a good enough chance to reach him.
Loki brought his stallion to a stop and waited for Thor.
The thunder god didn't wait for his horse to stop, instead jumping off the startled animal and pounding to Loki.
"What" he nearly roared "do you think you are doing?"
Loki looked at him unfazed. He arched an eyebrow as Thor "What do you mean?"
Thor reached up and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him down. He pushed him back against the horse's rump. Loki had not expected him to lash out and it took a moment for him to regain some lost ground.
"Why did you run away?" Thor growled, pushing his face close to Loki's. Loki glared back defiantly "Is that any way to treat your only guide?"
"Talking back to me will not do you any good, Trickster" Thor rumbled "Thor!"
Loki turned his gaze to Theoric. The man was scowling.
"Do let him go" Theoric asked pleasantly enough, but his eyes were flashing "He is our only way in and out of the forest if you recall."
Thor watched his friends. They didn't say anything but he could tell they agreed with Theoric. Thor closed his eyes and released Loki.
The raven haired god got onto his horse again as if nothing had happened.
"This cavern is the fastest and safest way to the forest" Loki explained "It also guarantees that no one see us."
"Why did you not tell me?" Thor asked, irritated "Why bolt like you did?"
Loki shrugged elegantly and clicked his tongue. His horse walked forward.
Thor glared after him. A hand rested on his shoulder and he looked back.
Theoric looked at him "Listen, I know you resent him and probably dislike him a lot at this point. We all agree, no one more than me, but if you keep manhandling him, he will react and that is something we do not need."
Thor smiled "Relax, friend. He will not react."
Theoric narrowed is eyes slightly "You do not know that."
"Of course I do" Thor lowered his voice "I'm blackmailing him."
Theoric blinked but Thor was gone after his horse by then.
"Why does that make me feel worse?"

***
"So," Thor said "Where to now, guide?"
Loki gave him a cursory glance. They were at the exit of the long tunneling cavern they had entered almost too long ago. Beneath them, was the entire mountain range that kissed Asgard's feet.
"There is a path that leads to the base of this mountain" Loki said, his voice devoid of emotion
"When we get there, it is an hour's ride at most before we reach the forest."
"Wonderful" Thor smiled at his friends "Are you ready?"
"Just give us a few minutes" Fandral said, standing beside his horse and bending over.
The ride had been rough and the men, apart from Thor and Loki apparently, had been given a rather harsh treatment.
Thor winced "Very well. It is far beyond time, but I think we should start lunch."
He slid off his horse and groaned as shooting pain erupted in his groin. He doubled over lightly, like Fandral and Theoric.
Sif and Sigyn pointedly looked away. Their gazes were turned away but their shoulders moved in laughter.
Loki rolled his eyes and dismounted. There was no hitch in his stride as he moved to the head of his horse and began to pet it.
Once they could, the men spread a rug on the ground and began taking out their food. The women helped and soon a small picnic began.
Loki remained by his horse, running his gloved fingers over its head and neck. Then he slid along the mouth of the cave and sat down gracefully.
Sigyn looked at him and bit her lip. Shamed or not, this was wrong.
She elbowed Theoric "We should ask him to join. He might not like us and the other way around, but this is rude."
Theoric nodded and gazed at Thor, who he knew had heard Sigyn.
Thor sighed "Alright."
He put aside the fruit he was eating and stood. His steps were small as he walked to Loki.
Loki had one leg pulled up and his arm was resting upon his knee, held out straight. An apple was seized loosely between his fingers. He sliced it with a thin knife and popped a neat piece in his mouth. He cut another and raised his hand high above his head.
His horse, that stood beside him loyally, lowered its neck and took it out of his grasp.
Thor approached them "Uh – Loki?"
"There is no need for false hospitality" Loki said, keeping his gaze ahead, to the slowly dipping sun.
"I fear it to be a wasted sentiment."
Thor sighed "You cannot spend time with a horse."
"Lucifer is far better of the two companies" Loki stated, cutting another slice and popping it in his mouth. He gave another to Lucifer.
"Come now, brother" Thor moved and sat beside him "Let the unpleasantness be forgotten for now." Loki didn't say anything.
Thor attempted to scoot closer to Loki, but stopped when Loki idly twirled the deadly knife in his fingers, the blade conveniently pointed to Thor.
"Loki"
"What?" Loki asked, cutting into the half eaten apple.
"Just come and sit with us" Thor's voice was gentle "Please"
Loki looked at him then and turned his gaze back to the skies "We should leave in a few minutes. The sun is already setting and it will take time to set up camp."
Thor sighed and stood. "Very well. We shall depart in half an hour."
Loki cut into the apple again and Thor took that as a response.
He walked back and shook his head to his friends.
They sympathized but silently agreed to leave Loki alone.
Half an hour later, they were ready to leave again.
The path leading down the mountain was narrow and had to be taken in single file. Thor was in the lead and, once again, Loki trailed behind.
Their horses were beginning to get agitated by something and by the time they reached the base, almost every horse was nickering nervously.
"What is getting these horses riled up?" Fandral asked, gently patting his horses back.
"I have no clue" Thor said, trying to calm his own.
Sigyn's mare was beginning to prance. She reached down and placed a hand on her neck, putting a gentle spell on her. She stopped the prancing, but her ears tuned about everywhere.
The only calm horse was Loki's and everyone noticed this as he parted them and rode through.
"Give us a little spell, Sigyn" Fandral said, his pale grey horse was moving his head, looking for something.
"It will do you no good" Loki drawled as he moved ahead of the group where he stood next to the beginnings of a tree sheltered meadow. He closed his eyes "I can sense him."
Immediately a nervous stillness came over the Asgardians. They didn't move after Loki's statement.
"Sense who?" Thor asked the dreaded question.
Loki looked over his shoulder and smiled at him "Why, Fenrir, my dear brother. This is his occasional hunting ground."
"Son of a bitch…" Theoric said, taking out his weapon.
"Actually, son of mine" Loki looked back at him "put that away, it will do you no good."
"You lead us here!" Thor snapped "On purpose!"
Loki sneered at him "Relax, Thor. I come here every week. He doesn't harm anyone – much."
"Why?" Thor demanded.
"Quickest route" Loki stated "Now you can either follow me or leave, I don't particularly care. But do not, I repeat, do not make more noise than necessary. You might wake him."
"Wake him?" Theoric asked "How can you possible know he is sleeping."
Loki leered at him and moved his horse away as an answer.
Sigyn put a hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying out.
There, once Loki was out of the way, hidden by the thick trees was the huge, monstrous shape of the feared wolf, Fenrir. He was so big, even in sleep, that the fur on his back reached the very top of the trees. His growling breathing rumbled around them.
Even Thor felt the unmistakable trickle of fear lance through him.
"Do control your overly loud voices" Loki drawled, calmly walking along the edge of the trees "His ears are remarkably good at hearing."
They followed him, keeping a good eye on the sleeping monster, as he cut a path farthest from Fenrir
and led them into the cluster of trees and shrubs alike. Thor moved beside Loki "You are certain he will not awaken?"
"Of course he will" Loki gave him a condescending look "he has to eat some time."
"You know what I mean" Thor hissed. Loki raised an eyebrow at his irritation. He looked behind him, at the carcasses placed next to Fenrir's paws "No, he seems well fed. He will not awaken till he needs to feast again."
"And when is that?" Theoric whispered from behind them.
Loki shrugged. They were a good mile away from Fenrir now, but if Thor glanced back, he could still see the bump that was Asgard's largest and deadliest wolf. Which meant he could see them too. "He stays in the Black Forest?" Thor asked "Why did you not tell us?"
"You never asked" Loki replied easily "And this is not the Black Forest. This is merely a canopy of trees that lead to it. We have a good ride to the forest itself."
"How long will it take?" Fandral asked, giving a glance over his shoulder. "Patience" Loki said, his green eyes darted here and there "Look for a large rock that is shaped like a fish the forest is beyond that. If any of you sees it, do tell me."
Thor nodded and looked around. There were many rocks around them, some large, others huge, but so far none of them looked like a fish.
Theoric cast Sigyn a glance. She was alright, looking around like everyone else, and was probably taking this whole Fenrir scare better than he had thought. But the sky was slowly darkening and it was becoming clear their journey had a good time left in it.
"Loki," Thor said after an hour into the slow ride "Are we lost?"
"No" Loki replied "Why do you ask?"
"Because we have been riding for a good hour and so far no fish shaped rock has appeared" Thor nearly snapped.
Loki grinned but kept looking ahead at the path "Yes, I lied about that. There is no rock."
"What?" Thor snapped "Your friends and you needed to be silent" Loki said "Apparently just telling you to be quiet wasn't enough."
"So you lied?" Thor asked archly. "Yes" Loki stopped his horse "There it is."
They had stopped at a high point. Behind them, the canopy of trees began to darken and in front of them, past the hill they were perched on, stood the Black Forest.
Even as they watched, a few trees moved in the distance, of their own accord, and brought their branches and tops together as if catching something within their grasps. A cry of pain erupted from the forest soon after.
"What was that?" Sif asked, eyes wide.
"Probably the trees grabbing dinner" Loki said, glancing at the forest. "I beg your pardon?" Fandral asked "Trees grabbing dinner??"
"Have you never wondered why no one took your precious amulet before? Especially since it has been here, so close to Asgard for decades?" Loki asked, looking at the dark sky. He looked over his shoulder at Fandral "The forest is alive. It ate the men that entered it."
Thor, and undoubtedly everyone else, paled. Loki smiled at their discomfort "Fenrir is the least of your problems. Even he wouldn't dare to step close to the Black Forest. He knows it to be too big a risk."
"We should set up camp here" Loki continued when it became clear no one could talk.
He dismounted and began to take off the required items. The night was going to be a cold one.
"What about your – uh – Fenrir?" Sif asked as she took off her tent and furs.
"My Fenrir?" Loki asked distractedly "Do not worry. We have strayed too far into the turf of the dragon. He will not get here."
"Dragon!?!" Thor, Sif and Theoric asked simultaneously.
Loki, who was spreading furs on the snow looked up and grinned slowly "You people are so easy to
Sif and Theoric exhaled in relief while Thor narrowed his eyes. "That wasn't funny" Thor said.

"Actually" Loki grunted as he got to his feet and grabbed his tent "It was." Thor inclined his jaw but remained silent. He needed his energy to put up his camp. They had a good tedious journey ahead of them.

Once the tents were set, Loki went to his horse and pulled a large, thick fur from the saddle bag. As everyone watched, he removed the horse's reins and saddle, placing them on the side, and pulled the thick fur over Lucifer. He put his forehead against the horse's and pet him.

Thor and the rest looked at their horses, all huddled closely in the snow, and felt guilty. Loki muttered to his horse and stepped back. Lucifer nipped at him, taking a strand of hair in his mouth lovingly. Loki pet him then retreated to his tent. A few minutes later, Lucifer fell to his knees, making himself comfortable in the snow and got ready to sleep.

They had lit a fire and were sitting around it, pulling their thick cloaks closer.

"Who would have thought" Volstagg said "Loki has a soft side." The rest of the group looked at each other awkwardly. They remained silent.

The night wore on and eventually everyone retired to their own tents. Sif and Sigyn shared a tent where as the men kept their separate. Loki was farthest from the entire group, placed closer to Lucifer than anyone else. So, if anything should happen to him, it would be rather difficult to know. It was this thought that was keeping Thor up at the latest hours of the night. He found himself, unwillingly, worrying about Loki.

He sighed and turned over under the many furs and thick woolen blankets that covered him. Nothing was going to happen; there were seven other people there for crying out loud.

But even as he thought this, Thor found himself raising a hand and lifting the fabric of the tent slightly so he could see Loki's.

Nothing was amiss. Lucifer was silently slumbering next to Loki's black tent, not even noticing the gentle breeze that flapped the cloth.

Thor rolled his eyes and was about to lower his hand when he caught sight of something. A figure was standing on the ledge of their currently occupied hill.

Thor immediately went on alert, one hand went to Mjolnir. The wind moved the snow and ice between them and the time it took Thor to adjust, the figure was gone.

Frowning, and more than a little peeved, Thor sat up to pull on his cloak. Something moved inside his tent. Thor grabbed his hammer ready to swing, then froze, deadly still.

Jane was sitting opposite him, crouched at his feet in the snow. Her brown hair lifted and dropped while her soft eyes watched him with a mixture of fear and longing. Thor, hand still raised and wielding his hammer, stared. Some part of his mind was telling him this was impossible but the other, louder part was too busy staring at her, taking in everything and being overcome by emotion.

"Thor" Jane said, moving forward a little "What are you doing?"

Her eyes went to the hammer then to his face. She was worried. Thor didn't move, he couldn't. His hand was still raised but he knew it wouldn't harm her.

Jane's expression began to soften "Put that away, I won't hurt you." Thor's hand was slowly pushed down as Jane was suddenly there – right in front of him, sitting in his lap.

She smiled and raised a hand to graze across his cheek "Where did you go, Thor?"
"I – " Thor couldn't manage the words. His world was slowly disintegrating, whirling behind him in dull colors and sounds. Everything began to vanish. It started with the interior of his shelter, swirling away, then the feel of the blankets and furs, then the sounds around him.
Nothing was there, suddenly, but a white wash around him and Jane sitting before him, carefully touching him.
"I missed you" she said, leaning forward.
Thor closed his eyes, his hand finally releasing the nonexistent Mjolnir and leaned forward.
Oh, he had wanted this for so long.
"Come with me" Jane whispered and kissed him.
Thor groaned at the sweetness that coursed through him, raising his hand to pull her closer.
"Get away, monster!"
Thor's eyes flew open when Jane's sweet weight was suddenly lifted from him.
Loki yanked Jane by her hair, ignoring her screeching screams and dragged her out.
"Loki, what are you doing!?!" Thor hollered, grabbing his hammer and running after him.
Jane was screeching; her voice a shrill sound and kicking, trying to dislodge the man holding her so brutally. Loki dragged her into the middle of their camp.
"Let her go!" Thor hollered, moving in to kill Loki.
"Stop him!" Loki yelled as he restrained Jane by grabbing her hair and arm.
Thor was suddenly grabbed from behind "Unhand me!"
Theoric and Fandral held their ground before him while Volstagg kept him in a tight hug. Thor growled and yelled, kicking out.
"Let me go, can you not see what he is doing!?!"
Loki pushed Jane into the snow, releasing one arm to take out a thin, sliver, double edged dagger from his clothes. He lifted the screeching and kicking Jane's head, exposing her neck.
"Make him watch" Loki growled, yanking Jane closer when she tried to run.
Her attempts at escape intensified and she screamed louder.
"No!" Thor roared, his struggling increased.
Once he was sure he had Thor's attention, Loki reached down and carved out the screeching Jane's throat in a vicious arc.
"No!" Thor cried "Jane!"
Her limp form fell as Loki dropped her. She twitched and kicked a little in the snow. Her crimson blood painting the white ground.
"No!" Thor cried, lowering his head.
"Thor!"
Sif's cry made him look up again.
The form at Loki's feet began to transform.
Jane's features disintegrated, the pale dress she wore turned to tatters. Her face lost the natural color and turned a disgusting grey, her eyes hollowed out till they were a ghastly orange and her hair thickened till it resembled heavy green vines.
The last thing to change was her size. Gone was the Jane Thor knew and in her place was the tiny bony, skeletal body of another greenish grey creature.
Thor watched in horror, his heart beating erratically, as the creature died at Loki's feet. He was breathing heavily and raised his gaze to his brother's.
Loki pushed back the hair that had fallen over his face and straightened his back proudly "Release him."
Volstagg hesitated but did as he was commanded.
Thor stumbled a little when he was released, his gaze fixed on the thing that had taken Jane's form.
"What –" he broke off and attempted to speak again "What happened?"
"That, my brother" Loki was panting a little "was a siren. Not your average siren, mind you, this one belongs to the Black Forest." He smiled, the motion feral "She was going to take you to the forest and devour your heart. You would have died crying for Jane."
Thor watched the creature again, then moved his eyes to his group.
Sif and Sigyn were horrified; their eyes were wide as they thought back on what Loki had done.
Theoric and Fandral watched Thor incase he lost it again and Volstagg and Hogun walked past him to observe the creature.
Thor raised his gaze to Loki. He suddenly felt ashamed; Loki had saved his life. Oh how the thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Loki didn't say anything. He pocketed the dagger and observed the two men crouched beside the dead siren.

"How did you know what to do?" Volstagg asked, looking up at Loki.
Loki shrugged "I read. Myths instruct one to kill a siren in front of its victim. It's the only way to break the hold it has."

"And if you don't kill it that way?" Theoric asked
"Then the victim will turn to depression and become suicidal" Loki replied "he will yearn for the siren and die a broken man."

Another silence fell.

"We should retire" Hogun eventually said "Make use of what is left of the night."
"First we get rid of this" Loki kicked the body of the siren "They hunt in packs and if they find her here, they will attack."

Sif's eyes widened "Pack? Where can they be?"
"Back in the forest" Loki said, moving to Lucifer's saddle "They probably await her return."

He lifted a thin cloth from the bag and walked over to the dead body. As they watched, he carelessly wrapped the dead siren and lifted it into his arms.

"You rest" he said as he straightened to his feet "I shall return shortly."

"Where are you going?" Thor asked
"Worried, brother?" Loki mocked "Do not fret, I shall not run away. I merely wish to deposit this away from our camp."

No one said anything as Loki carried the dead siren over the side of the hill and disappeared below.

"Someone should go with him" Hogun said.

No one moved.

Thor avoided everyone's gaze; he felt his actions catch up with him and felt so embarrassed he could barely look up from the ground.

Volstagg looked at his friends "Well?"
Theoric sighed and growled "Fine"

He trudged past them, weapon readied, and followed the path Loki had taken. They watched him go, then turned to their tents.

"We should probably sleep" Fandral said "We shall need it for tomorrow."

"I second that" Fandral said, turning to his shelter.

Eventually only Thor was left, last to Sif who had given him a sad look, staring at the Black Forest.

His mind has long since wandered and he felt so guilty now.
He was with Sif but his thoughts were held by Jane.
He couldn't imagine the pain Sif must have felt when she realized. He looked to her tent and suddenly felt sick.

There was no way he could make it up to her.

He had returned to his tent some time later and was lying down, his eyes wide open when he heard two pairs of feet trudge in the snow and crawl into their respective tents.

***

"We leave the horses"

Fandral looked up at Loki's announcement "What? Why?"

Loki, who was garbed in his black cape and cowl, removed a satchel from his horse and slung it over his shoulder. He looked at Fandral.

"Apart from the fact that they prove to be an excellent form of prey to anything in the forest," Loki replied "they will make our presence more highlighted than it already is. The forest will know there are intruders lurking within."

Thor, who still doubted Loki's claim on the forest being alive, scoffed. "Stop it, brother. If you want us to leave the horses, just say so. Do not lace your words with lies" he said, pulling off a bag that held what could prove necessary.
Loki rolled his eyes, the wind blew, playing with his hair and he pushed it down. "Come, the light is a luxury we can't afford to waste."

After securing their horses, making sure their weapons were deadly and their partners around, the group followed the surprisingly open path to the mouth of the Black Forest.

Where behind them, the Asgardian jungle remained and the Black Forest stood at their front, the path between was completely barren. Nothing grew here.

"Why is this place so empty?" Sigyn asked

Loki, who was looking at a small book in his hands, frowned over something "This is a clear marker. A warning, if you please, to anyone who strays too close to the forest."

He stopped "where did you say the amulet was?"

Theoric walked forward, unrolling the map. He placed it on the ground and pointed to a spot "Here. This is where the last recorded entries place it."

Loki kneeled down beside him and looked at it. He looked at the book in his hands and turned a few pages. He placed a gloved finger where Theoric was pointing, then cross referenced his book. "Well" Loki said softly "I do know this place, I have been there once."

"But?" Theoric looked at him, knowing there was more.

Loki looked at him and smiled "But I have only been there once."

Theoric looked at the single finger he had raised, then to his face "And I'll wager there is a reason for that."

Loki smirked and stood. He didn't reply, but put the book in his pocket.

"Onwards, whenever you feel ready."

Thor nodded "We remain by our partners the whole time. No one leaves the group."

"Aye"

"Then let's go"

Thor and Loki led the group into the dreaded forest. They entered through a tunnel constructed entirely of trees leaning down over one another. There were no leaves, no birds, no sounds other than their soft footsteps. The sun shone down on the ground like shattered glass, scattered everywhere and giving almost no help.

One of the first things they noticed was that no snow covered the ground they walked on. "Loki" Fandral called "Why is there no snow here?"

Loki simpered "As I keep telling you, this forest is alive. It is radiating heat and whatever snow falls on it, melts."

Fandral didn't know what to make of it and remained silent. However, soon it began to get hot and they were forced to shed their extra clothing.

They walked further, deeper into the forest and soon the pale brown ground beneath their feet began to sprout grass. Leaves and bud began appearing on the trees, birds began to chirp in the distance.

Their tunneling path finally came to an end where they encountered a curtain of falling vines.

Loki pushed it aside and walked through.

The warriors behind him followed and gasped at the beauty in front of them.

Gone were the barren trees and the empty ground.

They were faced by sunlight, falling in rays on the grass laden ground. Thick trees, higher than they had ever seen before, reached for the sky. Birds of all colors flew about, plants, larger than any, larger than themselves grew from the thick carpet of grass. The rocks that dotted the grassy plane had patterns upon them.

It was all magical.

Sigyn's eyes went wide "This is stunning."

Loki looked at her, something raw and open moving in his gaze. His mouth opened to say something, but closed it and he looked away, climbing down the mound they were standing on. He stepped carefully, on the rocks and everything, and jumped to the ground.

"Do not dawdle" Loki called back "The place only stays beautiful for so long."

Thor went down first, followed by the rest. His gaze was captured by the splendor of the forest; the colors the greenery the absolutely stunning landscape.
He heard sounds he hadn't heard before; squeaking, squealing and other joyful little sounds that seemed to erupt from the shrubs and trees and flowers around him. He looked at the ground and found small yellow flowers waving in the breeze gently.

He bent down to pick one up, intending on putting it in Sif's hair. He reached forward, then pulled his hand back when the flower suddenly uprooted itself and raised its head to look at him. It squeaked and jumped away, running from him. Soon his fellows, about a dozen more, jumped up and ran away from Thor squealing in delight.

Sigyn and the warriors laughed, their grins huge as they watched. Even Thor was amazed.

"Loki what is this place?" Thor asked in wonder.

"The Black Forest" Loki said from far ahead "Do not be fooled by its delight. It turns nasty once the sun goes down."

He was walking through the forest, stepping over fallen trees and exposed roots.

"Do watch out for the roots" Loki warned "the trees like to raise them to see if they can trip us."

Fandral laughed and looked around.

A very large flower, one he had never thought possible, raised its neck and looked at them. It reached out with a leaf and touched Volstagg.

The fat man jumped and looked around "Who did that?"

The flower retracted its leaf and seemed to cock his head to the side.

"By Odin" Sif said "This place is wonderful"

"Pales in comparison to you" Thor whispered to her.

To his relief, she flushed lightly and looked away.

Thor and the crew followed Loki till they came to the remnants of a dried up stream. The gap was deep and too wide to jump.

Thor saw some wild flowers growing at its edge and bent down. He remembered what happened last time and paused.

"How do you pick a flower?" he asked

Loki gave him a cursory glance "You don't. You place your hand there and wait for it to pick you."

Thor frowned and placed his hand on the ground next to a flower, palm up. A few moments later, a flower turned its head to Thor's palm and squealed in what sounded like laughter. It removed itself from the ground and jumped into his hand.

Sif laughed in pleasure.

Thor lifted his hand where the flower danced and raised it to Sif's hair. The flower hopped from his palm and tied itself into her locks with a delighted noise. It touched its face to her cheek.

More wondrous laughter came from Loki's companions. He rolled his eyes to the heavens.

"Shall we go on?" he asked "Or would you like to waste more time with flowers?"

That brought them back.

"How do we cross?" Theoric asked, coming up beside Loki "We can't jump and it is too deep."

"Oh ye of little faith" Loki muttered and turned back. He walked to a tree, thicker and larger than any they had encountered so far. Its roots were surfacing through the ground here and there, clearly visible. He climbed over a few till he reached the trunk and placed his hand on the thick bark.

An eye opened in the tree and focused on Loki.

Thor and his friends gasped.

Loki didn't say anything, patted the trunk once. The tree obliged and a root tore from the ground. It extended over the large gap, making a broad bridge for them.

"Come along" Loki said, walking over it "he might think it funny to remove it once we are walking over."

Shaking their heads, the warriors followed Loki again.

Many marvels greeted them as they went deeper into the forest.

Vines extended, their yellow flowers watching the invaders curiously. One of them reached down and lifted Theoric's sword from its sheath. It danced it out of his reach as he jumped for it.

Loki had been no help, leaning against a trunk and watching it. It was Sigyn who had used some magic to take the sword from the vine. After that, the vine had rubbed against her cheek and she had
laughed till Loki pointed out that it could be a poisonous vine. It hadn't and the wonders only increased. Twice, Volstagg had been outdone by flowers thrice his size. They had hit him, shoved him gently, and when he had reacted, a bough had extended from them suddenly and hit him in earnest, throwing him to the ground. Finally, they came up against a hurdle that looked like it belonged in the Black Forest. It was a ditch. So black and deep that the end was invisible.

"So what now, guide?" Thor asked, looking into the trench. Loki looked behind him, then his gaze traveled across the path till he saw something he desired. "Follow me" he said, walking over to the very edge of the grassy path. They watched as Loki looked down over the ledge – and jumped. "No!" Thor called as he saw Loki vanish in the ditch. Sigyn had her hands on her mouth, suppressing the gasp that erupted. "Where is he?" Hogun asked. There was a rumbling from underneath them and the ground began to move. As they flailed their arms for balance, Loki burst through the ditch, securely set on a large piece of rock that lifted him to the other side of the ditch. As they watched, once again agape, the rock moved back to them and waited. "Do hurry" Loki said "It has almost no patience."

They scrambled over the rock, gaining their balance as it took them to Loki. Once they were on the higher side of the ditch, Loki took out his book again. He flipped the pages till he came to what he needed. "It is half an hour's walk from here" he told them "you can rest in you wish."

Volstagg gratefully fell on his behind. Hogun and Fandral walked a small distance away from the mouth of the ditch and settled themselves on the soft ground with a tired groan. Sif and Thor went to a more private part while Theoric and Sigyn picked up twigs that had fallen here and there. Loki remained ahead, glancing at the most impossible of flowers, but never touching them. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Theoric place a bundle of twigs on the ground. Sigyn raised her hand, a flame held in it. "I wouldn't do that" Loki called, stopping them

"Why?" Theoric asked. "They don't like being burnt" Loki replied. Theoric scoffed, then balked when the twigs leapt up, giggling, and ran away. Sigyn laughed and extinguished the flame. "How do we eat?" Theoric asked, his question highlighted by Volstagg's hungry groan. "Simple" Loki said, his voice gentle "You ask."

"What?" Fandral said

Loki went to the nearest three and placed his hand in the trunk. He rubbed his hand up and down, like caressing a lover, and looked up. A branch lowered itself and lay at his feet. He climbed on it and once he was secure, he was lifted into the high leaves. "I can't see him" Sigyn said, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare. They looked for Loki in the trees but failed to see him. He could have been anywhere. A few minutes later, the branches began to lower and Loki came in view, his arms laden with fruits of all sorts. Once it reached the ground, Loki stepped off the branch and walked forward. "Here" he said, placing the fruits on the soft ground "Lunch."

"How did you do that?" Sif asked as she and Thor walked over Loki shrugged. He grabbed a pear and an apple and turned to leave. "Wait!"

Loki turned when three people, Sif, Theoric and Sigyn, called him suddenly. "Please," Sigyn said "Join us."

"It would" Sif began "be nice."
Loki eyed them suspiciously for a while then sat – not with them but also not away from them. The lunch was enjoyed and thoroughly sweet.

***

"Here we are" Loki said.
They had reached the place where the amulet was last seen.
The lagoon glittered in the remaining sunlight. The surrounding trees had become denser and little light fell here.
There was a waterfall that fell from - the skies it seemed and at its base was a cave. Housed within that cave was the amulet.
"How certain are you that the amulet is there?" Loki asked Theoric.
The man thought for a while before answering "Uh – the archives had around eight parchments that suggested to this place."
"Meaning it could not be here?" Loki concluded.
Theoric nodded slowly "Yes"
"Perfect" Loki said, looking down at the lagoon "Well, no good has ever come from waiting for something, let's go."
"Hold it" Thor placed a hand on Loki's shoulder "We go as two's."
"Don't you trust me, Thor?" Loki arched a brow.
"Not in the least" Thor replied.
Loki narrowed his eyes but said nothing else. He let Thor take the lead. He watched him go to the edge of the lagoon and prepare to dive in.
"I wouldn't do that if I were you" Loki called, halting everyone who was preparing to go in the water.
Thor looked at him "Why not?"
"Two reasons" Loki said, walking over to pick up a small rock "The first is that the water lives."
He threw the rock into the water. A whirlpool formed beneath the airborne rock and took in into its depths. It disappeared.
"It will fancy you a good feast" Loki looked at Thor's face.
"What is the second reason?" Hogun asked.
Feminine giggling interrupted them.
"That" Loki replied. He unconsciously placed a hand on Thor's arm and pulled him back, stepping away from the water's edge.
The water crackled as beings floated under its surface. They didn't come up, but a tail, gaily colored and fishlike cracked through the water for an instant before vanishing.
"Mermaids" Theoric snarled.
"Damn it" Volstagg said "must we face these beasts?"
Loki scoffed "There are many who would die for something like this."
"And die they would" Sigyn said "So what do we do?"
Thor got the idea "Only one of us goes"
Loki looked at him "How?"
Thor hefted Mjolnir and grinned.
The warriors sighed, glad that they were not going to face the dreaded mermaids.
"Wonderful idea, Thor" Loki drawled, crossing his arms "But how will you know where to go?"
"I shall search" Thor replied
"Till sundown?" Loki asked "The forest is lethal by then. You will sentence us to death."
"What do you suggest?" Thor snapped.
"Either take him" Loki pointed to Theoric "or me. Both of us can guide you well."
"I respectfully refuse" Theoric said "I once flew with you and I decline doing it again."
Thor exhaled angrily "That leaves me no choice, then."
"How glad that makes me" Loki said sarcastically.
Thor held on to his temper "Very well. You stay here, Loki and I shall bring the amulet."
"If we find it" Loki said
"We will" Thor looked at him "Do you need anything?"
"No" Loki said.
Thor readied Mjolnir and extended the other arm to Loki "Then come on."
It seemed to the warriors that Loki hesitated a second before he walked forward.
The trickster walked next to Thor and latched onto his side.
"Put your arms around my shoulders" Thor instructed "Otherwise you will fall."
Loki did as he was asked and Thor held him firmly around the waist.
"Try not to scream" Thor grinned and shot off.
Loki's small gasp and tightened grip suddenly put Thor in a playful mood. He took them higher,
higher than the trees and into the sky.
"What are you doing?" Loki gasped
"Don't you enjoy this?" Thor asked
"Take us down"
"Why?"
"Because I will stab you if you don't" Loki rasped.
Thor rolled his eyes and took them lower. They landed on the opposite side of the ledge, next to the
waterfall. He released Loki and the younger god went behind the waterfall.
"Oh, excellent" Loki's sarcastic voice came.
"What?" Thor followed him.
"The lagoon goes in here as well" Loki said, plastered to the wall.
There was almost no place to move. The only place above the water was a few inches next to the
cave walls. They had to stick close and keep a good balance.
"Try not to fall in" Loki said. He had his back and hands pasted on the wall behind him and walked
in the smallest steps. A few stones dropped in the water but other than that, there were no sounds.
"We could fly through" Thor suggested. He walked exactly as Loki was.
"Don't even think about that" Loki said, keeping his gaze ahead.
Water crackled and feminine laughter reached them.
"Damn" Loki said, slowing further "Thor, if they call to you, try and resist. Remember what
happened with the siren."
Thor glared at him but was prevented from replying when a shimmering tail moved under the black
water. A redhead surfaced shyly, then went back in.
Another lifted from the water in front of Loki and began following him. Her hair was blonde and her
eyes were blue as she talked to him.
"My, what a handsome man you are" she said. Her voice was like honey as she cooed at him. "Such
incredible features, such a lean body."
"Yes" another laughed and surfaced next to her "Lean body."
Loki ignored them, keeping at his plastered walking. Thor watched him, slight panic unfurling within
him.
"Loki…"
"Ignore them, Thor" Loki said, keeping his gaze fixed ahead.
"Oh, come on, prince" the mermaids taunted "give us a taste, please. All we ask is a small favor. A
few moments with that ravishing body of yours."
"Leave him alone!" Thor snapped.
The mermaids looked at him, eyes glittering. "Why? Do you wish to have him yourself?"
"One thing I asked, Thor" Loki said "One thing; ignore them how hard is that?"
"Oh," the mermaids said, turning to Loki again "How hard can you get, prince?"
"How long till he reach the place?" Thor asked him.
"How long is he?" the mermaids asked, following Loki.
"A few more moments" Loki said, he was beginning to get annoyed by these mermaids as he scaled
the walls. A few moments later, they reached relatively solid land. The water only wet the ground
and Loki jumped on it gratefully.
Thor followed.
"Oh, come back, prince" the mermaids called "Come back and let us please you. See how good it is to take one of us."
"Or three" another called.
Loki concealed a shudder and walked forward, aware that Thor was behind him.
They encountered a series of tunnels and soon discovered that most of them housed dead ends.
Thor growled "Where is it?"
Loki ignored him and went to another tunnel.
He jumped back, slamming his back into Thor.
"What?" Thor asked
"I think this is the way" Loki said, pointing ahead.
Thor looked over his shoulder and paled.
"What happened to them?" Thor asked.
Loki shrugged and looked ahead "There it is."
The smell of the lake was strong and the air was dank in this part of the caverns. They were now standing in the mouth of a passageway and staring into a cavernous chamber. Water lapped somewhere ahead and Loki knew it connected with the rest of the mermaid infested lake. They were standing before what seemed like an old stone quay of some sort. Rusted iron rings embedded in the stone were evidence that this place had probably been used once, but was now sealed, no doubt, to keep the amulet safe.
However, what lay before them, what Thor had paled upon seeing, were the remains of adventures past. Skeletons and dusted remnants of bone and skin carpeted the stone floor before them.
Water crackled ahead and Loki saw a mermaid ascend from the water. In front of her, trapped in a crystalline case, was the golden chained, red stone amulet. The entire casket was placed on a podium carved from boulders.
"Take it, go ahead" one of them urged.
Thor moved forward but Loki put a hand out to stop him. He looked at the younger god in confusion.
"What?"
"Obviously there is a catch to this" Loki said, keeping his gaze on the amulet "How badly do you want it?"
"It means a lot to us all if we find it" Thor replied
"Fine" Loki moved his hand and walked over the paling skeletons. He was careful not to disturb them as he strode across the channel and closed in on the amulet. He stopped before the podium and looked at the casing of the amulet.
"Go on" the mermaids urged "take it"
Three more arrived and outnumbered the royals. They watched them both.
"Well" Thor said from behind Loki "What is it?"
"Just figuring out the trap," Loki said, moving away from Thor. He didn't dare go farther than the podium because that was where the mermaids waited.
"Just take it," Thor stepped forward
"No!" Loki moved to stop him.
Thor froze as Loki suddenly put both hands on his outstretched arm; he gazed at Loki in irritation.
A soft, ominous click sounded before he could speak.
Both princes looked down and saw the trigger Thor had stepped on.
"Oh no" Loki muttered.
Behind them, a rumble sounded. They turned their heads at the sudden, terrible shriek of metal and stone and their eyes widened in horror.
A thick stone gate, descending from the ceiling, was barring the tunnel from ceiling to floor.
"Run!" Thor grabbed Loki's arm and tore through the skeletons, throwing them everywhere. But it was no use. The door had sealed shut before they had even reached halfway through.
"Damn it!" Thor growled as they reached the closed gate.
He placed a hand on it to find it solid and unmoving. Loki touched it, feeling its unforgiving hardness.
"Step back" Thor said, unhooking Mjolnir.
"It will be no use" a mermaid said, giggling "No magic works here."
Thor scoffed but remained silent after Loki’s glare. He pulled his hand back and brought Mjolnir down on the door –
Only to receive a bone jarring jolt as the hammer hit the rocks and did nothing.
"What?" Thor asked, his face a mask of confusion. He lifted his hand again and hit the doors once more.
Again, all he felt was a shocking pain in his arms.
The mermaids giggled.
Loki stood, watching impassively "Well, clearly this place is enchanted."
"How is this possible?" Thor asked "Mjolnir is far too powerful."
"Yes" Loki said, humoring him "but all power has its limits."
Thor looked at the wall and his hammer again. He was unwilling to believe this was happening.
Loki walked back to the case and observed it, keeping a good eye on the five mermaids scattered not too far away. The amulet was on the water's edge, basically, and they could reach out and grab him if he got too close.
"So what now?" Thor came back, trampling the remaining bones.
"This is obviously some sort of acid" Loki said, his green eyes going over the filled case "but the amulet remains unharmed."
The mermaids giggled "Sap of the trees, it is."
"Yes" another said "taken from the most poisonous trees in the forest. Nothing is safe from it."
Loki’s gaze dropped to the mermaids and then lifted to the amulet again "Thor, I know you do not trust me, but if I were to get us out, would you follow?"
"I would have no other choice, would I?" Thor growled, Mjolnir once again at his hip.
"Yes" Loki said, touching the crystal case. It was very fragile.
"There is only one way out of here" Loki sighed "we would have to swim."
Thor scoffed "Excellent thinking, brother. So they can get us" he gestured to the mermaids.
The girls giggled happily.
Loki looked over his shoulder at Thor.
The only warning Thor got was the way Loki moved his eyes to the water and then back to his face.
Loki suddenly pushed the case over, towards the water. It shattered on the ground, the smoking, hissing acid dousing the mermaids.
They screamed, clutching their faces and dove into the water.
"Jump in!" Loki didn't waste any time. He saw the opening the mermaids had made and dove into the cold, black water.
Thor grabbed the amulet, shoved it into his clothes and followed. He dove in and immediately saw Loki swimming far ahead, apparently the water was deeper and connected to the rest of the lake. He swam faster when he saw the mermaids, thrashing under water, holding their ruined faces.
Loki found a path, because he turned left and Thor tailed him.
A few minutes later, swimming in the black water, the only guide being his brother, Thor suddenly found himself in an opening. Loki broke the surface first and scampered onto the edge. Thor came up a few seconds later and found himself in the entrance once again. He pulled up next to Loki, panting.
"How-" he breathed deeply "How did you know where to go?"
Loki grinned, water cascading down his face "I didn't. I just assumed this was the way to go."
Thor narrowed his eyes at him "So you..."
"Not enough time for that" Loki snapped, surging to his feet "we have angered the mermaids and they will seek revenge."
He ran to the wall they had used to enter and once again plastered himself to it, scaling his way across.
"We did nothing" Thor said, standing "You doused them in acid."
"Try keeping up with what is important" Loki said.
Thor was about to retort when he heard the angry shrieking. His throat tried to work, but he couldn't do it in time.
He saw the mermaids swimming up, heading straight for them and by the time he opened his mouth it was too late.
They burst through the water, grabbed Loki's legs and pulled him under.
"Loki!" Thor called, watching him disappear.
***
Loki saw the impression of Thor get farther and farther as he was pulled deeper into the water. He held his breath and kicked out, trying to get the mermaids to let go.
But he was outnumbered. Two of them were holding his legs while another held his arms.
Their words were nothing but babbling to him as they screamed and howled. He looked at them and reached into his clothing to take out his dagger.
He lashed out, gaining a lucky cut and one of the mermaids let go.
They had reached the floor of the lagoon and Loki was still held down, rapidly becoming devoid of air.
A roaring splash sounded above and Loki saw a dark shape dive into the water. The injured mermaid rushed forward, towards Thor as he swam to Loki, and tried to attack.
That was all Loki saw as another mermaid turned his head and kissed him.
Loki felt her take his breath and struggled, but the third creature held him down, placing a giant rock on his cloak. The mermaids released him as he tried undoing his cloak, ready to watch him die. His fingers couldn't find the clasp and things were beginning to get dark. He struggled and kicked the females as they neared him, trying to aggravate him, but it was no use.
He tried harnessing his stolen magic but realized it had reached its end.
Bubbles floated from his mouth as he struggled against the attacking mermaids and his cloak that they had begun wrapping around his face. He felt their hands on his trousers.
His head was feeling heavy, pressure increased on him and all of a sudden, he felt the world going dark.
Thor was only a few feet from Loki when he saw his body go limp.
No!
***
Theoric and the rest were anxiously waiting.
This was taking more time than they had expected and since the sun was slowly setting, they needed to leave.
Thor exploded through the water, Mjolnir held high and a limp form held in his hands.
They surged to their feet as Thor landed, placing Loki on the ground.
"Help me!" Thor said, removing Loki's torn cloak.
The man wasn't moving.
"Oh no" Sif said, running behind the rest.
"Move!" Theoric pushed Thor away as he skidded to a halt on his knees. He placed his ear near Loki's mouth. He straightened, then lifted both his clasped hands over his head and hit Loki in the chest.
Once, twice, three times…
And Loki spluttered, coughing up water and turning to his side as more spasms hit him. He gasped as he lay on his side, water dripping down his face and body.
"Thank the stars!"
He glared at the lake, at the creatures within it and felt the rage rise in him. He also felt something was undone. He looked down and curled up in mortification.
However, it was too late as he pulled up and fastened his trousers.
The ladies had politely turned away but he knew they had seen him exposed. So had the others, he could tell by their faces and their silence.
"Are you alright?" Thor asked, looking down at him.
"Yes" Loki said shortly, trying to push his humiliation aside and standing.
His cloak whipped at him and he angrily pulled it off, slamming it into the ground with a growl. "Let's go back" he growled, water dripping off him "You have wasted enough of my time."
"You're welcome" Theoric muttered as he stood as well.
Thor placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and shook his head. They followed Loki, keeping what little anxiety they had to themselves.
Loki led them back without talking to them or looking to see if they were still here. In fact, by the straight set of his shoulders and the pace of his stride, it seemed he preferred them gone.
Thor was behind him, keeping an eye on him. He had told the others about the incident and he knew Loki didn't appreciate it. However, since they had gained the amulet, he was willing to wager they wouldn't remember by whose hand Loki had nearly died.
He was wrong.
They had completed most of their journey, passing through familiar areas, when the first of the snickering started.
It began softly, Volstagg being the one to start, but eventually it reached a point where Thor knew Loki was capable of hearing it.
Thor turned to his friends and shook his head.
They nodded but failed to control their whispering and chuckling.
"Mauled by mermaids, of all things" Fandral said, chortling unintentionally loudly.
Loki froze.
Thor closed his eyes as his brother turned slowly, his emerald eyes going to Fandral and Volstagg who were giggling. Then they went to Hogun, whose usually impassive face was evidence of humor.
Thor thought he imagined the flash of hurt that painted Loki's features. He could have imagined it; the way his eyebrows raised lightly over the pain that filled his eyes and how his mouth dropped a little when he realized what the Warriors Three had said. But it was gone before Thor could say, or even think, anything; replaced by the scowl on Loki's face.
Loki spun around and resumed his walking.
"Dolts!" Sif walked over and wacked the laughing men on the head.
"Ow!" Fandral said "What did we do?"
"Just shut up" Sif said, narrowing her eyes in warning and walking to Thor.
"Will he be alright?" she asked the thunder god.
Thor shrugged and followed Loki.
It was beginning to get dark now and he was worrying about their chances of getting back in time. He trotted over to Loki.
"How much farther, brother?" he asked, hoping to distract him from the hurtful situation.
"Not much" Loki said flatly "but it is turning dark and that is a time we need to be careful."
"It is not dark yet" Thor said, eyeing the sky.
"Yes," Loki replied "but everything that is dangerous starts to awaken by this time. We need to be quiet; you can tell those giggling buffoons to shut up."
Thor shrugged and followed Loki.
Loki looked at him "Why not? It's kinder than most of the things your lot says about me."
Thor stopped and glared at him "Pardon me, but my friends do not deserve insults."
The rest of the party stopped. This was going to get ugly.
Loki paused and turned to Thor, eye brow arched "Meaning I do?"
"Don't answer that" Theoric muttered under his breath "For the love of Odin, don't answer that."
"You haven't done anything not to deserve it" Thor retorted.
Theoric slapped his forehead.
Loki walked back to Thor, his gaze and stride angry "If you have something to say, something to call me, I suggest you say it. Don't veil it behind unimaginative barbs."
Thor narrowed his eyes " You —-
"That's enough!" Fandral walked between the two "This is neither the time nor the place for this."
He looked between both princes who glared at each other in fierce anger.
"Let it go" Fandral said.
Thor sighed and stepped back "He's right. This is no place for an argument."
Loki backed off, keeping his angry gaze on Thor. He kept his mouth shut and strode forward. They were both angry and where Loki chose to walk it off, Thor didn't.
With an angry growl, he slammed his fist into a nearby rock – hard. He didn't register that whatever he had hit felt slightly softer than stone. He began to walk off when he heard the growl.
The others turned and froze.
Behind Thor, an eye looked at them, larger then Volstagg, and focused on them. Cracking sounds broke through the air, making birds fly into the darkening sky, and slowly, eventually the towering figure Thor had awakened loomed over them.
"Ogre!" Loki yelled "Run!"
He turned around and ran, behind him his unwilling fellows pursued him.
***
All eight of them ran faster than they had ever run before, feet hitting the ground with tight noises as they pounded through the path.
The ogre was shorter than they had previously thought, probably about ten feet high, and managed to keep up with them. He lashed at them, hoping to catch one or more of the delicious food he had come upon.
Thor ducked as the giant hand went over his head, increasing his pace.
When they ducked into trees, he tore them apart and chased them.
"Don't scatter!" Loki yelled "It will only make it easy for him!"
So they remained in a tight group, running for their lives through the forest.
"There!" Loki suddenly yelled.
The path they had used to enter was within sights.
He was now in the middle of their pack, running as fast as he could. Thor was in the lead, holding Sif's arm and flying through. Loki saw them all, then looked back at the beast.
He yelped and ducked as the ogre lashed out for one of them.
As they passed it, Loki never saw the tree suddenly extend a root high above the ground. He was too busy looking behind him.
Where everyone used their impressive instincts and jumped over it – Loki tripped.
***
Thor burst through the canopy of suddenly very intimidating trees, Sif by his side. Twigs snapped as his friends tore through, grazing the sides of the trees and landing into the relative safety of a few meters from their camp site.
Their horses looked up and nickered.
Panting, Thor braced himself on his knees, catching his breath. He saw Sif doing the same, although she gave him an exhausted smile.
"We did it!" Fandral panted, looking behind him at the forest.
No ogre remained, but they could hear it growling in the distance.
Theoric smiled, panting heavily and looked at Sigyn. She grinned at him, exhilarated.
Thor straightened, wincing at the stitch in his side "That was by far, one of our greater adventures."
"Are you jesting?" Volstagg asked, gasping for air "I have never run like that before."
"What about Nornhiem?" Sif asked, bending a little to ease the pain in her side.
"That was years ago" Volstagg said "No where near as exciting as this."
"Behold" Thor removed the amulet from his clothes "the Amulet of the Ancients."
"Lost for centuries" gasping, Fandral moved forward, touching it.
Hogun and the rest crowded around Thor.
"It's beautiful" Sigyn said, placing her fingertips on its surface.
"Father will be proud" Thor said, pocketing the necklace "and we have you, Loki, to thank for it."
Thor was smiling as he looked around. When he didn't find Loki in the immediate circle, he frowned and looked to the horses that stood in the snow.
"Loki?"
Theoric looked here and there, searching the darkness for him, just like the others.
"Loki?" Sif called, a fear unknotting in her gut.
"Loki!" Thor cupped his hands around his mouth and called out.
No response came.
"Loki, this is not funny!" Thor said, his face worried.
They searched the area but found no trace of the trickster.
Thor began to panic "Loki!"
His voice echoed back, replied to by different creatures of the night, but Loki's voice never came.
They looked at each other, all in a different state of fear and dread. As one, they began a search they knew would fail. They entered as close as they dared into the Black Forest and searched for a good two hours, but eventually one thing became clear.
Loki wasn't there.
***
"I hope all of you realize the seriousness of this situation"
The seven warriors, standing before their king, lowered their heads. It was well past midnight and they had returned an hour ago, bearing grave news for Odin.
Odin had been furious at them for venturing into the Black Forest and his rage had seemed uncontrollable when they had told him who they had lost.
He had scoured through the castle, at first refusing to believe them, then had turned his terrorizing rage on them.
Thor had felt the fear lance through him with every word then and now he stood, ready as the soldiers behind him, to venture again to the Forest of Death and get back his brother.
Thunder clapped outside, illuminating the falling rain.
Even the weather seemed angry and Thor had nothing to do with it.
"The only reason you are still here and not headed to the gallows is because I require your assistance" Odin growled at Thor's friends.
They didn't dare look up.
Thor saw the fear in their eyes and felt it in their stance. This wasn't fair, they hadn't done anything.
"Father…"
"Nay!" Odin yelled, turning to him "You do not get to speak! Your punishment awaits at a later time!"
Thor would have been lying if he said he wasn't intimidated.
"We march immediately" Odin announced "You remember the path you took, do you not?"
The warriors nodded softly.
The great hall seemed to shake with Odin's anger.
"Then we must depart instantly" he walked forward "Wasting time is never – "
Odin broke off when the doors to the great hall slammed open.
Thunder flashed and lightning roared, making the entrance of the individual even more menacing.
Loki stood with his head lowered, drenched from head to toe, holding the doors open and scowling at everyone inside. His clothes were torn and what light fell on his livid face revealed a gash across his cheek. His hair fell over his face and dripped water on the clean marble floor.
"Loki!" Odin said, his voice holding more than a hint of relief. He jogged forward "You live!"
But Loki's attention wasn't on Odin. His furious gaze went from Sif to Sigyn, then the Warriors Three, Theoric and finally landed on Thor.
His already narrowed eyes turned to raging slits. He was breathing heavily against his anger and the rain.
"Are you alright?" Odin asked, standing before him.
Loki looked down at him "Do I look alright?"
The snarl echoed in the deafening silence of the Great Hall.
Odin frowned "Come inside, dry off, Loki. We shall discuss this is the morning."
"Indeed" Loki kept his gaze on Thor.
He pushed himself from the doors and stalked through the people assembled to search for him. He didn't say anything, but when he reached his former companions, he slowed.

His furious gaze locked with Thor's and the latter, for the first time in his life, felt a twinge of fear crawl up his spine at the rage and fury he saw in the emerald depths.

Loki turned his head away and stomped away, leaving a trail of cold water behind him.

***

Loki felt the lifted root clip his leg and he knew he was doomed even before he fell face first into the hard ground.

He lifted himself immediately, leaping to run after his brother, the only person he saw.

But the ogre reached down and grabbed him, wrapping his moldy fingers around his entire body and picking him up, lifting him into the air.

"Thor!" Loki called, but the sound came out ragged, lacking in breath because the ogre's grip was crushing him. Loki struggled, trying to pull himself out of the monster's grasp, but the ogre only held on tighter, squeezing him till Loki saw stars before his eyes.

He felt a rib pop in his chest and pain flared up inside him.

"Thor!" Loki tried yelling, but choked and fell forward, bracing himself on the ogre's large hand.

Stars were dancing before his eyes as he lifted his head and watched his group disappear. His head began to hurt and his vision blurred.

"Thor..." he called weakly and then simply passed out.

When he came to, the first thought that rose in his mind was that he was still capable of consciousness. The second thought was that nothing on his anatomy was missing. He sat up suddenly and regretted the hasty action when his head began to spin. He groaned and put a hand to his head. He gasped when he felt the searing pain in his chest and put a hand to it, bending over.

When it receded to the point of being bearable, Loki sat up slowly and looked around.

Clearly, he was in a cave. There was no light and no sound apart from the rain outside.

"Perfect" Loki muttered, lying back down again. The pain on his side was throbbing again.

He waited, once more, till it receded and began feeling around for a way out.

It was pitch black and he bumped his head into more things than one, but eventually he came upon the wall of the cavern. He touched it where it met the ground and keeping his fingers pressed to it, began to stand.

He felt his way through, not even lifting his feet higher than a few centimeters. He had gone only a few feet when his fingertips encountered something hard and depressingly damp. He was just feeling it, trying to figure out what it was when lightning flashed and illuminated the world around. In the split second light, Loki found himself touching the decaying face of a skeleton.

He pulled back, too quickly, and the pain in his side began again. He bent over, trying to control the pain and the retching feel rising inside him.

He straightened after a while, his resolve hardened. He didn't know where he was, but he was going to get out.

He felt his way around, again, this time in the opposite direction and came upon one thing of use. What he had first mistaken, when he stumbled over it, as a bone was in fact a thick branch. He picked it up, using it as a blind man would, and felt his way around.

Fortunately, he discovered that the cave he was trapped in didn't house many tunnels. Unfortunately, it still housed the ogre. Loki could hear and smell it. He would be able to find his way out, but when the ogre would awaken and catch him, he didn't know.

He muttered light spells, something to enlighten the world around, but he could only manage weak sparks from his fingers. At one point, he tried removing the ring on his finger, but it wouldn't budge.

Cursing, he used his stick again.

He passed something big, probably the ogre, and felt the freshness of rain on his face. He followed it. He knew there was a mouth somewhere, the lightning that gave him a few precious seconds of light had to come from there. He blindly stumbled forward and finally, finally, he saw the opening of the cave. He dropped the stick and ran forward like a mad man, into the rain and into the night shrouded Black Forest.
The rest of his journey had required finesse he was more than capable of. The rain provided excellent cover and other than a boar and beast chasing him, he found little trouble. His cheek was cut when a tree whipped its branches at him and he was pretty sure his chest was numb from the pain, but a few hours later, he found himself on the edge of the Black Forest.
He looked back, drenched in rain, and narrowed his eyes. It was in the nature of the forest to kill, he didn't fault it.
He looked forward; the fault lay with a few others he intended to avenge himself against.
He trudged through the rain and snow, turning himself to his Jotun form to avoid being killed by the frost, itching to get back to Asgard.
That was two nights ago.
Now, the insistent knocking on his door awakened him. His brilliant emerald eyes lifted their lids and blinked a few times. He was still sleepy and the bed was warm. He turned over, damning whoever was knocking on his doors to hell, and got ready to sleep again.
But his visitor wasn't having it.
The knocking continued, even after he pulled a pillow over his head.
"Loki!"
"What!?" he yelled back, hoping his loud call would dissuade his visitor.
"Open the door, brother, I wish to tell you something" Thor called.
Loki didn't reply. He went back to his attempt at sleeping.
Thor knocked again and Loki growled, getting out of the warm bed. He hissed when his feet hit the cold floor and stood. The bandages around his abdomen held off some cold as he pulled on a robe and went to open the door.
He pulled yanked the doors open "What, Thor!??" Thor actually stepped back, hands raised a little, probably trying to placate him.
"I – erm – " Thor began.
"Spit it out!" Loki snapped.
"We – Father and I were just worried that you hadn't shown up for lunch" Thor said "I came over to check."
"Well, I'm fine" Loki said waspishly "Now leave."
He made to close the door but Thor put a hand on it and stopped him.
"Also… " Thor said at his angry glare "Father wished to see us both. Dress formally and arrive in the throne room in an hour."
Loki didn't respond. He applied more pressure to the door, till Thor backed away, then slammed it closed. He locked it.
Sighing, he gave his bed a longing glance, but knew he wasn't getting back into it.
He disrobed and went to the bath. If Odin wanted to see him, there was nothing he could do but obey.
***
An hour later, Loki, dressed in his royal robes and gleaming helmet stood before the throne room doors. They were pulled open for him and he entered the gleaming chamber.
The first thing he saw was that he had beaten Thor here. Good, that would work in his favor.
The second thing he saw was Frigga sitting beside Odin. Loki felt and suppressed the stab of pain in his heart. Since the five years of his return, Frigga had not once visited him. He knew she secretly sided with Thor and that hurt him more than he thought it should.
Never matter, he wasn't one to linger over such things.
"My king" Loki said, kneeling on one knee, hand over his heart and head bowed.
"My son" Odin nodded "Where is your brother?"
"I don't know" Loki said, still kneeling.
"That is unfortunate" Odin said "Rise, Loki, we have much to discuss."
Loki stood and a second later, a ruckus sounded behind him. He turned politely and saw Thor run in, straightening his helmet and jogging at the same time. Loki looked back to Odin, his face impassive.
"Father" Thor grinned "Forgive me, I was held up."
Odin hummed but didn't say much beyond that. He looked down at his sons, noting the contrast between them.

"I have an urgent matter to discuss with you" he said "and I wish to have your full attention and silence till I am done, understood?"

Loki nodded once.

"Yes, Father" Thor said.

Odin looked at them both "I have come to the decision that it is time for me to step down as king."

Loki showed no emotion while Thor made a sound.

"It is clear to me that you are ready to take my place" Odin said, looking down at them both "one of you will step up and become the next King of Asgard in no more than three years. That is the time I step down." He looked at them "I have watched you grow from boys to men, and many things have transpired between this family in that time."

"Loki" he gained Loki's full, if not more, attention "you have proved to be difficult in the best of times. You betrayed your family, you nearly killed your brother, you waged war on Jotunhiem and killed innocents in Midgard. You fell from your grace and were shamed as a prince and as a god. You lie, cheat, deceive and trick everyone and no one knows your motives clearly" he watched Loki's emotionless face "However, I have seen good in you. I see it when you help people even as you condescend them; I know you genuinely care for Asgard and even though you do not show it, you care for us. Your actions have been harmful, but they have never harmed Asgard and I see you change, even if it is by a degree, everyday."

Loki remained silent, aware of Thor's silent glee. The man was gaining a throne and could hardly keep his excitement to himself, this was just a formality at this point.

"Thor" Odin turned to his golden son "you are honest where Loki lies, you are open and free. You do not harm anyone and you fight not only for Asgard, but for any realm that needs it. You stopped your brother's mad quest and brought him back after we believed him lost. You left your love for Asgard, my son, a great sacrifice" he saw Thor's smile "But I have seen you change. I see in you a darkness that I hadn't seen before; you are angry, resentful towards your brother and towards me. You can be rash in judgment, which results in fighting not only in Asgard, but other realms as well.

A year ago you struck war with the Dark elves and that was a grave mistake. I see you change, day after day, making up your mind to change things in Asgard when you gain the throne. You are open and that is why your emotion sometimes clouds your judgement. I fear for you, my son."

"Father, those are things of the past" Thor said, smiling

"Nevertheless I see them surface" Odin said. He then turned to them both "I will make one of you the crowned prince of Asgard by tonight and know I do it for the good of Asgard, no matter how much you resent me. My time is coming to an end and I realize it. I wish to leave the kingdom in wise hands, to a good ruler."

Loki suddenly began to grin and that grin escalated to laughter.

Thor gazed at him in shock "Loki! Have you gone crazy?"

"No" Loki laughed, nearly dropping his helmet back "but I sense you are about to."

Thor glared at him, his fingers itching to shake the mirth from him "What are you talking about?"

"How the tables turn, brother" Loki hooted in mirth "Your father, my king, is about to pronounce me the crowned prince of Asgard."

Thor scoffed loudly "You are insane, he would never do that."

Odin, who was watching the conversation, spoke then, directly to Thor.

"Yes, Thor. I would."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

And how, pray tell, will Thor act?

Loki leaned against a pillar and watched the shouting match continue. It had been going on for half an hour and he marveled at the lungs of both his father and his brother. Frigga had long since left, the guards were quick to follow. Loki should have left, too, but this was far too entertaining for him to abandon. Odin was defending his decision, though in Loki's opinion a King's decision needed no defense, fiercely and determinedly. He wished for Thor to understand why he was naming Loki their crown prince and his heir.

Thor was yelling at how mad Odin had suddenly become. His argument was biased, Loki thought, he kept saying the same things again and again. "You can't possibly think any good will come from this!" Thor yelled "putting Loki on the throne is akin to destroying Asgard itself!"

"He has never harmed Asgard" Odin shouted back "he never brought war upon it, he fought for it, even if his methods were lax."

"Lax!" Thor asked, "He tried to kill all of Jotunhiem! He nearly destroyed Midgard and allied with one of the most feared entities in all the realms! He tried to kill me, does that not matter to you!?"

"Oh, excellent point" Loki muttered, smirking.

"Do not throw that at me!" Odin said "He paid for those crimes and you know it. Can you not see why he did what he did? It was in anger and resentment!!"

"And can you not see how absolutely insane you sound at this moment?" Thor asked "He killed eighty people in two days, two days Father! And you give him power over all our realm as a reward! Do you really believe he will not destroy us all?"

"Leave the past where it belongs!" Odin yelled "I punished him for those crimes."

Thor scoffed loudly "Oh yes, I forgot. He wears a damned ring to stop his magic, how terrible!"

"But he roams free throughout the entire castle doing whatever he pleases!" Thor continued "Oh stars what a horrible punishment. He killed innocents and he gets a ring!"

"Do not mock my decision" Odin said

"Why not?" Thor growled "The whole kingdom doubts your ability to think. Tell me, did he place a spell on you, because I cannot fathom you thinking this way otherwise."

"The punishment was mine and the councils to give" Odin said "Just because you resent it doesn't make it wrong."

"It doesn't make it right, either" Thor said "Or makes it functional."

Loki straightened. He knew where this was headed.

"What do you mean?" Odin asked.

"Nothing other than the blabber he is already spewing" Loki said, moving a little nervously.

"He practices magic, Father" Thor said "He had found a way to harness it and does it in secret. I have seen him."

Loki didn't bother glaring at Thor. He kept his gaze on Odin as he turned. Damn, the man had believed him. Loki could see it in his eyes as he turned and looked at him for confirmation.

"Is this true?" Odin asked

Loki didn't say anything, he just looked Odin right in the eyes, waiting for his reaction.
Odin inhaled in displeasure "Well, that is news to me."
"See?" Thor gestured to Loki "You can't even trust him and you wished to give him the throne."
"Wish, Thor" Odin looked at Thor "I still wish that."
Thor growled "Oh my Lord, how can you be so naïve!?"
"It's not naïve to believe your child to change for the greater good!" Odin yelled. "He had shown change for the better while you have turned to bitterness and rage!"
"He is a lunatic!" Thor yelled
"He is your brother!"
"He will kill us all and you know it! He is a murderer, a liar and a thief that runs freely throughout our kingdom! For the love of Asgard, he is not even our kind!"
The gasp that escaped Loki's lips was involuntary and so was the wounded expression on his face. He blinked at the pain those words caused him and was surprised at it. Thor regretted the words immediately.
"Thor!" Odin scolded him, his eyes going to Loki. The man was reeling from Thor's insult. His gaze was on the floor and he was having a little trouble breathing.
"Loki, I didn't mean…" Thor began walking to him.
Loki stepped back. Thor stopped and felt his guilt increase ten times when Loki looked at his face and exposed the pain in his eyes behind the anger.
Loki didn't say anything. He pushed past Thor and walked to the doors.
"Loki!" Odin called.
But Loki didn't turn. He pushed the door open and left.
Thor remained where he was, his back to Odin.
"I suppose you are satisfied now?" Odin asked.
"No" Thor didn't turn "This did not make me happy. But neither does it change my stance." He turned to his father then "I will still stand against you on this matter. You are making a big mistake, and I only hope you see it in time."
Thor left then, and Odin was left alone in the chambers.
***
Frigga was pacing.
She tried to halt it a few moments ago, but it only turned her to more frustration. She had nearly glowered at her maids and told them she needed privacy. Odin had returned over an hour ago and told her he needed to rest for a while.
She knew of the argument he had had with Thor and she knew Odin was probably upset by it. It was one of the only reasons that Odin retired the way he had.
Frigga sighed.
This entire episode was not going to end well.
Thor was furious, understandably, at what Odin had done. He had always thought he would be named king, had prepared for it his entire life; it was his dream to rule Asgard. And now, when he had realized that his dream was being taken away and given to Loki, he fought fiercely against it. He would not let this go.
Frigga knew why Odin was naming Loki the crowned prince – but that didn't mean she liked it. The man had proved himself an enemy and a threat, there was no guarantee he wasn't going to try and destroy them once he gains unlimited power. Frigga knew she shouldn't think like this, she had raised him after all, but Loki's actions forced her into this train of thought. She couldn't not think this way.
A small rustling sounded somewhere and broke into Frigga's thoughts. She looked around, but there was nothing in the parlor she was currently walking in. This was her place, no one was allowed in here.
She shrugged the sound off.
The family was going to be torn apart, she thought. Odin could see that, surely, but he refused to change his decision. Thor was the rightful king and he should be the heir to Odin. Loki was –
Frigga sighed again.
She couldn't finish that sentence without feeling like a terrible mother.
Ever since Loki returned, she had not once gone to see him. In fact she had avoided him at all costs, disappointment and a hint of fear rose in her whenever she looked at him. How had she gone so wrong?
Suddenly a hand clamped on her mouth and an arm went around her waist, pulling her back, despite her struggles, till she felt a man's body behind her.
"Ssh" Loki whispered in her ear "Relax, Frigga it is only your former son." She stopped struggling but she couldn't push down the awful fear that had taken hold of her. Her breath was ragged when she felt Loki's lips brush her ear.
"I have a few questions for you" Loki whispered "You are to nod or shake your head, understand? And, pray, do not lie to me, it will not end well."
Frigga nodded.
"Does Odin really desire to crown me?" Loki's voice was flat.
Again she nodded, slower this time.
She could feel his smile
"This isn't a trick?" Loki asked "Perhaps he thinks it entertaining to raise my hopes and destroy them."
Frigga shook her head, swallowing.
Loki chuckled softly "I am going to remove my hand now. But I have one more question you have to answer. Do not scream, Frigga, like I know you are itching to do. It will be for your own good."
Frigga waited.
Loki removed the hand around her mouth and she took a deep breath.
"Why?" his voice was a growl.
Frigga swallowed "He thinks your judgement will better suit Asgard. Thor is impulsive and rash at the best of times. You have mastered control greatly. Your vices have made you stronger, in his opinion, and in the end that is what matters."
Loki didn't say anything, but a few moments later, Frigga was released.
She spun around and backed away but she needn't have bothered.
The room was empty.
***
The Warriors three, Sif and Theoric watched Thor annihilate the training room.
"We should do something" Theoric muttered to Fandral.
Fandral raised a brow when Thor picked up an entire bench and slammed it into the walls.
"No" he said "I think we should let him release the anger upon the training arena"
"There will be no arena left if he continues" Sif said crossly.
"Are you volunteering?" Theoric asked hopefully.
Another crash sounded as Thor kicked down a whole shelf of swords.
"Merely pointing it out" Sif said.
A few more minutes of destruction later, Thor picked up another bench and got ready to hurl it at something. But he paused, dropped the bench and fell to his knees.
"I think it's safe now" Sif said, walking to him when Thor doubled over "Give us some privacy, please."
She didn't turn to make sure of her command was obeyed but a few minutes later, she heard the doors close and knew she was alone with Thor.
Thor had his face in his hands, elbows braced on the ground as he crouched low. She walked without making a sound, but when she got close, Thor spoke.
"How did everything go so wrong?" he mumbled.
Sif sighed and sat beside him, putting a hand on his back. She began to rub it gently.
"Not just this, but everything" Thor continued, his voice barely above a whisper "We were so happy, I never thought this could happen" he turned his gaze to her and she was surprised to see his eyes were wet "Was I so wrong on thinking that? Did the fates really take such an offence at our joy that
they turned us to this life?"
Sif didn't know how to reply to that and wisely didn't.
"We were brothers" Thor went on, looking at her, but not talking to her "true to the sense. We did
everything together, got into so much trouble, we had so many adventures, so many great times.
How could it all just - go away?"
Sif looked at the ground, her throat constricting.
"He told me never to doubt that he loved me" Thor said "I don't doubt it still, but I can't take any
more of this hostility."
"Why don't you say that to him?" Sif asked softly "Those exact words?"
Thor smiled sadly "Because he would never believe me. He thinks I hate him, and at some level I do,
but he only sees that. I do resent him but that doesn't mean I don't love him. He is and always will be
my younger brother."
Sif touched his hair softly "You can't keep this to yourself."
Thor looked at her "I have to."
He took a deep, steadying breath and straightened "I have to keep everything to myself now, nothing
can be shared with him again."
"Thor…"
"He will become king" Thor said "and I will – I will take all my secrets and my pain to the grave."
She tried stopping him, but he stood and began to walk away. His shoulders had a resolve she had
seen few times and she knew there was nothing that would change his mind.
She didn't know how long she sat there, but she became aware of the staff coming in to clean up the
mess their prince had made.
Sif sighed and stood; she had a crowning to attend.
***
The fanfare sounded loudly outside.
Loki took a deep breath and looked at the doors that would soon open, to look at the prize destiny
had placed before him and to look at his side where Thor stood.
Loki had seen him dejected more than once but this – this was a whole new level of misery, even for
Thor. He actually looked depressed. His hair had lost its shine, his armor wasn't glowing and Mjolnir
was held loosely in his hand. His helmet was on his head but it lacked its splendor. His head was
lowered and his gaze was planted firmly on the ground. Every now and then he took a deep breath
and Loki suspected he was – what? – holding back tears?
The feeling that coursed through Loki was unexpected.
There was a stabbing pain in his chest that had nothing to do with his broken rib and everything to
do with his crushed brother. He realized he couldn't look at Thor when he was so broken. A part of
him wanted to reach out and comfort him badly but the other part, his pride, forbade it. He was
finally getting what Thor wanted and he couldn't wait to have it.
Loki looked away suddenly. Not because Thor had suddenly glanced up at him, but because an
insane, totally out of character thought surged through him and slammed into his thoughts.
He had considered refusing the crown
Loki blinked and tried focusing his thoughts. Apparently he wasn't thinking clearly and the stress had
gotten to him.
He looked ahead, aware that Thor had taken to staring at the floor once more.
The fanfare sounded once more, signaling that both of them were due in a few moments.
Shuffling sounded beside him and Loki turned his head to see a servant arrive with his helmet.
He stared at the gear for a long moment, emotions storming inside him. The familiarity of the
situation was making it difficult to breath. His hesitation was taken as nerves, not the emotional
turmoil inside him, as he slowly reached out to take the helm.
'Ooh…nice feathers…
You don't really want to start this again…do you, cow?
I was being sincere…
…you are incapable of sincerity…
...sometimes I am envious…
You are my brother…my friend…
Never doubt that I love you.'

Loki gasped softly and his hands shook and in that moment of weakness, triggered by that memory so long ago, Loki looked behind him, his mouth shaping the name already.

But Thor was gone.
Loki looked at Thor's abandoned place, then at the doors. The hall was lit in gold and his future kingdom awaited him.

Loki swallowed, set his jaw and grabbed his helmet. He placed it on his head firmly. The servant vanished and Loki strode forward, his cape billowing behind him, through the hallway and into the coronation chamber.

No one cheered as he entered. They far too shocked.

The chamber was packed, as it was when Thor was about to gain the kingdom, but the people weren't cheering. They stared.

Their gazes went from Loki to Thor, who stood next to Frigga. Both of them looked wretched.

Loki pulled his emotions back, drove his resolve forward and walked.

Since he had no weapon, his hands were swaying by his sides as he gracefully walked to stand before Odin.

The silence seemed to deepen, as if the kingdom expected this to be a joke and end suddenly. That Thor would take his place in an instant.

It wasn't going to happen.
"Loki Odinson" Odin boomed, stilling even the flames on the candles "Kneel before your king."

Loki walked forward and bowed to Odin before falling on one knee and placing a hand over his rapidly beating heart.

A squeal erupted from the crowd and Loki knew immediately it was Amora.

Yes, she would be delighted to have Loki crowned.
Loki would have scoffed, had it not been for his wildly beating heart, she would be disappointed. Thunder cracked outside, lightning flashed afterwards.

"Do you swear to uphold your courage for Asgard?" Odin's voice boomed across the hall.
"I swear" Loki said
"Does your strength swear to protect those who cannot defend themselves?" Odin continued, his voice getting louder with each word "Do you swear to lift your blade only against those that harm Asgard?"
"I swear"
"Does your might swear allegiance to this kingdom?" Odin nearly yelled "Does your valor defend this realm? Do you swear to hold tight to Asgard's laws and her ways?"
"I swear!" Loki said loudly.
"Do you vow honesty to this kingdom?" Odin hollered, making everyone hear this answer.
Thunder roared, crashing sounds erupted in the chamber, nearly drowning Loki's answer.
"I vow honesty to Asgard!" Loki called back.

Odin nodded, turning to the servant holding a cushion.

The crown on it was made of the darkest silver, so dark it appeared black. Sapphire and emeralds decorated the center while tiny jade and rubies glittered on the borders. It was just as elegant as Loki. Odin reached down and removed Loki's helmet.
Loki's heart was beating so loud he almost missed Odin's next words.
"I command thee, Loki of Asgard," Odin lifted the crown in his hands "to rise not only as a god, but as I announce you. Rise Crowned Prince of Asgard!"

Odin settled the crown on Loki's head.
Thunder hollered outside, wind howled as Loki rose to his feet. Odin placed and secured a thick dark green cape around his shoulders. He looked into Loki's eyes and for the first time, gave him a genuine smile. He turned Loki to face his kingdom.
Loki was having trouble breathing as he took in the words, the sights and the people.
They all stared at him, they all refused to believe what had happened and they all hated him. The last thought, more than anything else, calmed Loki. He looked down at his subjects and grinned. They were supposed to bow to him now, as was Asgardian tradition, in a show of their loyalty. His gaze narrowed ever so slightly and he raised an eyebrow, daring them to stay as they were without a word. Then first of the people moved. A small group bowed slowly, reluctantly to their crowned prince and eventually everyone else followed. Loki straightened his shoulders and nodded in approval. Yes, he could get used to this life.

***

The feasting was silent, just like his mother and brother, Loki realized. Both of them had barely said a word to either Odin or Loki as they sat at the royal dais and picked at their food. There were soft whispers and the clattering on utensils that echoed in the hall, not the cheers of celebration. People moved about hesitantly as if their movement would gain Loki's attention and he would call them on their misbehavior against him. Some had snuck off earlier, heading back to their homes to tell others of the terrible act Odin had gone through with. Loki shook his head. He had no intention on calling anyone on their transgressions against him. They were beneath him and he had no intention of wasting his time with them. Odin looked up at Loki "When you are done here, I request your presence in my study. We have something to discuss."
Loki looked at him, stopping his slow chewing. "What?"
Thor looked between the two, glancing at them for the first time all night. "You shall find out soon enough" Odin stood to leave. The entire hall got to their feet in a mark of respect and only reseated themselves once he was gone. Loki, who was watching Odin's back, didn't see Frigga begin to leave till she made a small sound. He looked at her uncertainly. "Excuse me, I have matters to tend to" she said, forcing a smile "Congratulations on gaining the crown."
She put a hand on Thor's shoulder and departed. Loki remained standing, watching her go. He swallowed heavily, feeling a mild pain flare in his heart, and lowered his gaze. The crown glittered in the light as he sat down and found himself alone with Thor. Thor's entire platter was untouched. He merely poked around with his fork. Loki opened his mouth to say something and closed it again. He didn't know what to say. He gazed at the people gathered there, watching them leave now that Odin had gone. To them, that was the extent of their loyalty to him. "I promised myself not to face you in battle again" Thor spoke.
Loki looked at him, his green eyes watching and his mind deciphering already. "That I will not fight you" Thor looked at him, watching the way Loki looked at him up and down "but it seems I have to break that oath."
Loki set his jaw. "I will not let you have this kingdom, Loki" Thor continued "It means too much to me and I will not let you destroy it. So I find myself pitted against you. Father may believe you are worthy of this kingdom, but I do not. So either step down or fight me."
Loki picked up a grape and popped it in his mouth. He turned to Thor and smiled "What do you have in mind? A joust? A sword fight?"
"No" Thor negated him "but like Father said, you will find out."
Loki watched him go, feeling more heaviness settle on his heart.

After it became apparent that his appetite wasn't going to return, Loki got to his feet, ignoring the few scattered people that stood with him, and made his path to Odin's study.
He didn't let himself think of anything other than his victory tonight, so neither Thor nor Frigga invaded his thoughts.
He arrived at Odin's chambers faster than he intended. Knocking, he entered the rooms to find Odin already in the middle of a divan.
"Loki" Odin greeted. He stood and walked to his study "Follow me."
Loki gulped. The man hadn't wasted much time. He avoided Frigga's gaze as he followed his adopted father into the study.
"Close the doors" Odin instructed.
Loki did as he was asked, turning around to find Odin standing at the desk. He walked over, calming his beating heart and stood opposite him.
Odin raised a hand and placed one finger on the thick ring on his finger.
Immediately Loki felt a little of his magic return to him. It was like breathing the smallest gasp of air after staying submerged in water for a long time. It felt wonderful.
"I give you only a little so you can shield us, my son" Odin said "Do it."
Loki looked at his hands, at the power they suddenly wielded. They shook a little, but eventually he did as he was asked.
"Is it done?" Odin asked
"Yes" Loki replied, holding the spell.
"Good" Odin sighed and sat down "Now I wish to ask you how you harnessed magic when I specifically forbade you to do it?"
Oh no…
Loki opened his mouth to lie, to say that Thor had lied. He thoughts of many ploys that Odin would readily believe at this point, but Odin spoke again before he could.
"Do not lie to me" Odin warned, his grip on his staff tightening "I'll be able to tell."
Loki sighed and pulled his arms behind his back "I – I stole it."
"How?"
"From Amora" Loki replied, keeping his gaze on the floor "It is a simple incantation, anyone can do it, but it requires great skill. I managed it."
Odin nodded "I know of this enchantment. What I do not know is why."
Loki swallowed. He couldn't tell him the truth, that he did it because he could, that magic was like his soul to him, that he did it so he could spite Thor, no there was no excuse.
"Why, Loki?" Odin repeated his question when Loki didn't answer he sighed "Do you know how long I argued with the council to give you the punishment you got? How difficult it was for me to gain that deal? I had to beg them, hear me, beg them to let me give you the lenient punishment and I guaranteed that I will be able to change you. Tell me, was I wrong?"
Loki kept his gaze on the ground, suddenly, lightly ashamed.
"Look at me" Odin commanded.
Loki lifted his gaze and balked at the anger he saw.
"They had sentenced you to die" Odin revealed
Loki paled. He felt the air become constricted and the spell waver.
"What?"
"You were to be turned mortal and beheaded the instant you returned." Odin told him "That was the punishment that awaited you. I did everything, including get on my knees to beg them to change it, and after all that, you still disregard my leniency? You still attempt to make a fool of me by cheating me!"
"All-Father," Loki said "I did not know, I –"
"Silence!" Odin cut him off harshly "Fortunately for you, Thor is the only one who has figured out
what you were doing. He will not tell anyone, I made sure of it, but this cannot go on. You were forbidden magic for a reason, Loki! Understand the concept of punishment because if you do not, the punishment you live in now can still be changed. The council can still change their decision. Five years you have to change yourself, my child, but knowing what I know now, I fear you cannot change in time."

Loki swallowed as a thought occurred to him "Is that why you crowned me?"

"It is one of the reasons, yes" Odin said "You have great potential, you can truly lead us. But you require changing your deceptive nature. I crowned you to gain some protection from the councilmen, however, that will not do much good if you remain on the path you are currently on."

Loki felt his crown become heavy. It was a ruse, his crowning had nothing to do with him save protect him from the Royal Council. His mouth turned bitter, the taste was nasty and made Loki wish to retch.

"Now I have a plan" Odin said "but it needs your full and honest co-operation. If it succeeds, you will take the throne and no one will be the wiser."

"It is not as big a situation as you make it, king" Loki said "Like you said, only Thor knows and he –"

"It is very grave, Loki" Odin said "I cannot trust you to keep your word and not use magic. Even with that ring, you have managed to harness it, who knows what else you are capable of doing. No, we cannot rely on you right now, know it hurts me to say it. someone else will notice, Loki."

"My King…" Loki sighed

"You are to do to Midgard" Odin cut him off.

"What?!" Loki cried out, dropping his calm "Why? Why would you send me there?"

"Listen to me" Odin said "You shall go to Midgard and you shall stay there for the remainder of your sentence. Yes, you will" he said when Loki shook his head "you shall return a changed man or you will give up the throne. I cannot let you stay here and destroy yourself with the lies and chaos of your nature."

Panic was unfurling in Loki. He fought against it and began to lose.

"No, please" Loki said, moving forward and placing his hands on the desk "I promise you I will change, I will not use magic, I swear" he lowered his head when Odin shook his "I shall stop"

Odin stood and walked over to him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I shall protect you till the last breath in me, Loki" Odin said "but I cannot do that if you continue to deceive me." His eyes softened when Loki looked at him "My son, I know you think you can stop yourself using magic, you have probably convinced yourself of it. But I have known you your whole life and I know that magic is as big a part of you as your soul. You cannot live without it that is why I took it in the first place, it is a part of you and you feel its absence with every breath. You will attempt to gain it again and that will result in nothing but bad." He sighed "You will go to Midgard in a week."

Loki looked away.

"And you will take Thor with you."

Loki's head snapped back "What? No, I am not taking him with me. Is it not enough that I have to live like a peasant?"

Odin's mouth quirked "Always the spoiled one. Yes, Thor will go with you for two reasons; the first being protection. Without your magic, you are vulnerable and I am sure you have made enemies on that realm. The second" Odin sighed "The second reason, and I need your assistance on this as well, is that he needs to change too. He is turning angry and resentful, two things that tear a family apart. I wish for him to see the world that turned him noble so that he can change back."

Loki scoffed "So this is some sort of holy, cleansing ritual you send us on?"

"Call it whatever you wish" Odin said "Thor has already agreed to it."

Loki rolled his eyes "Of course he did."

So that's what he meant at the dinner table earlier. The fight was between them. If Loki doesn't change, the throne goes to Thor. If he does change, it remains with him.

It was clever if it wasn't so stupid.
Some of his emotion must have shown on his face for Odin sighed. "Loki, I am doing this to save you both from the paths of destruction you have chosen" he said "You may not see it now, but you will destroy yourself and so will Thor if you remain as you are. You lie and cheat and deceive everyone, including yourself when you think no one will catch you. Thor is becoming avenging, angry and bitter. Neither is behaving like my sons. I cannot stand it."
"So what?" Loki mocked "we will not return till I have repented and Thor has become the forgiving, loving person he was?"

Odin made to scold him for his rudeness, to tell him to behave, when an idea popped into his head. "Yes"

Loki blinked "Excuse me?"
"Yes" Odin smiled "Those are the conditions. If Thor gets you to repent and if you get him to forgive you, you can return. This is perfect. I will speak to the council tomorrow on this."

"No," Loki laughed nervously, placing a hand on Odin's arm "No, no ,no ,no you misunderstand. I was mocking you, I didn't mean it."

"Well I do" Odin looked at him "Now leave, I have much to plan."

"But –" Loki followed him as he left the room "you can't, it was a joke."

"It is the perfect solution" Odin said, walking Loki to the doors "it will serve my earlier purpose and it will make you both respect one another. Loki, you are truly an intellectual being."

"All-Father" Loki said as he was pushed out of the doors "I was merely jesting, this will solve nothing!"

"It had better" Odin said and closed the doors with a dull bang.

Loki stared at the doors for a while. A moment later, he felt his magic drain from him.

"Oh damn it to Hel!" he cursed and turned around.

He may be an intelligent, superior, being, but that was the stupidest thing he had ever done!

***

The clouds hid the sun that morning.

Two women cried out and jumped out of the way as the three raging horsemen tore through the alley in a hellish race.

They glared after them, screaming curses, as their fruits and other foodstuff scattered in the snow.

Loki didn't even glance back; he was too busy winning the race.

His black stallion Lucifer, so lean and fierce, cut a swath through the startled crowd, head lowered as he galloped through Asgard's streets. The people jumped back, terrified of getting trampled by the dangerous animal. Behind him, almost to Lucifer's tail now, the two guards forced their horses to run faster. Their faces were determined as they attempted to win the race against their newly crowned prince.

They had a wager on this they intended to win.

One of them yelled and kicked his horse, the animal grunted and ran faster, but it was no use. Loki's horse was succeeded only by Sleipnir.

Loki felt the desperation of the guards and turned his head ever so slightly to look at them. They were really trying, but there was no way they would beat him.

He was low, bent just like Lucifer to avoid any wind resistance, so no one saw the almost imperceptible command he gave to the horse.

The people who were watching, from their roofs and windows, were awed when not one, but both guards suddenly over took the prince and ran to the end of the docks, where the race ended.

Loki pounded after them, but they had already won.

"Damn it!" Loki cursed, looking away as Lucifer slowed to a stop.

The guards tried hiding their grins as they patted their panting horses. No one beat Prince Loki in a horse race, the man was indomitable in a contest. This victory was sweet and well enunciated by the scattered applause of the town's people.

Loki pet Lucifer's head, his gaze ahead and glaring into the water.

"It seems my Prince, that you lost the wager" one of the guards pointed out in good humor.

"I know that!" Loki snapped at him "congratulations on being so incredibly astute."
The guard’s grin vanished.
"Here" Loki tossed him a small, fattened bag.
The guard caught the bag with his excellent reflexes.
Loki turned his horse around, heading back "Sixty pieces of silver, as wagered. Try not to spend
them all on drink."
The guard opened the back and peeked in. He gaped; this was far more than sixty pieces, twice that,
easily.
"My lord…” the guard called out "there had been a mistake – "
"Bore someone else with your pointless blabbering" Loki said over his shoulder "I lack patience for
this. Stay here or escort me home if you please, but do stop talking."
The guards looked at each other and shrugged. They weren't going to complain if Loki wasn't
listening. They each gave a sigh of relief.
This morning they had gone to see the king because they needed money urgently. They had debts to
cover and their houses were destroyed by recent rains. They lacked sufficient funds. Sixty pieces of
silver was going to help them both immensely.
Sadly, Odin had refused. He said other matters that needed immediate attention and he would solve
theirs when he could. They had left the throne room deflated, ready to face another day of
disappointment, when Prince Loki had ordered their presence. He was bored and he wished to race,
his said. If they were interested, they would spice it with a wager.
The sum had been startlingly specific and the guards had agreed more out of desperation than
anything.
If they beat him, Loki said, he would pay them sixty pieces of silver from his own pocket.
They looked at each other now and wondered if this was all planned.
"Well?" Loki called "are you coming or not?"
Rolling their eyes, they moved their horses to follow the prince.
Their return was slower this time, taking it easy on their horses, and Loki had the time to make his
presence and the crown on his head known.
It glittered in the snowy sky's light and Loki saw more than a few heads turn away to whisper. He
didn't care, he was going to rule them all.
He stopped his horse when two small children, far too small for their age, tried cutting across his
path. He didn't frown at them, but nor did he smile. He watched them impassively as they kept a
close eye on him and trotted forward. They disappeared and Loki paid them no heed.
He clicked his tongue and Lucifer moved forward.
People watched and gestured to him, telling each other truths and lies about him. He kept his head
held high and continued to ignore them.
"Well, look who decided to lower himself to visit his people!"
Loki closed his eyes and exhaled when he recognized the voice.
Amora had not taken kindly to the termination of their relationship. He looked behind him and found
her leaning against a wall, watching him as she held a bottle in her hand.
She glared at him "Nothing to do in the castle, eh Prince?"
"Go home, Amora" Loki sighed "you embarrass only yourself."
"Oh, so you care if I embarrass myself?” she said loudly as she pushed herself off the wall. She was
clearly deep in drink "Then tell me, oh crowned prince, how did you think I felt when you threw me
away so recklessly? Was I not embarrassed then?"
People were beginning to stare, Loki realized. Usually, it wouldn’t bother him, but since he was
crowned, he had to keep his dignity even more robust than before. He sighed and dismounted.
Amora gasped and clapped in mocking "Well, he condescends to put his feet on the ground, how
lovely."
A woman touched Amora's shoulder, telling her to stop but she shook it off, watching Loki as he
advanced on her.
"Come, you need rest" Loki gently took her hand.
"Do not touch me!” Amora shrieked, yanking herself out of his grasp and shattering the bottle on the
ground in consequence "you don't get to touch me again."
"Amora, please" Loki said a little more firmly "you are creating a scene."
"So?" she asked defiantly "you deserve more than a scene and you know it!"
Loki had a good hold on his temper, so he tried again "You are drunk, Amora. You are only giving
these people the satisfaction of watching you fall, do you really wish that?" he asked softly.
What was she doing here, anyway?
She glared at him "Why do you care? You left me, you bastard. Or do you not remember? You
threw me out the day you became the Crowned Prince!"
"Amora…"
"No!" she yelled "you are nothing but a liar and a cheat. And I was a fool to think we had something
in common."
She turned around to leave and stumbled. Loki reached out to steady her.
Amora spun around and slapped his face.
The crowd gasped as Loki's head turned aside from the blow. He slowly turned back to her. The
guards dismounted instantly and made for them but stopped when Loki held up a hand.
"Don't…touch me" Amora said, frowning as the drink was taking over. She stumbled again and fell.
This time, Loki caught her in his arms before she hit the ground. She was passed out.
He was aware that the whole town would soon know about this and talk about how he had acted. He
could either dump her in the sea like itched to, or he could show them, and eventually Odin that he
could change - or pretend to, anyway.
Sighing, he lifted her more firmly in his arms, ignoring the semi conscious babbling she spurted, and
walked to his horse. Loki clicked his tongue three times and Lucifer fell to his knees. He waited till
Loki was sat firmly, securely holding Amora in his grasp, and then stood when Loki pulled the reins.
Without saying a word, Loki rode his horse forward, holding his former lover in his arms.
When he reached a secluded part of the town, he stopped his horse.
"Go on ahead" he said over his shoulder to the guards "I shall catch up."
"But your Majesty…" the guards began. They weren't to leave his side.
"Now!" Loki said harshly.
The guards looked at each other uncertainly and left.
Once they were out of sight, Loki turned his horse another way. He turned Lucifer through the alleys
till he came upon the home that housed Amora's sister.
He dismounted and went to the door with his burden. Since his hands were full, he tapped the door
with his foot, hoping the woman was there.
At the movement inside, he was relieved. The door opened and Amora's sister gaped. The sight of
her crowned prince holding her unconscious sister wasn't one she was prepared for.
"My Prince!" she moved awkwardly, not knowing whether to bow or help him.
Loki solved her problem "Where is your bed?"
"There" she rushed inside and opened a room.
Three children, who were playing inside, were shooed out. They watched in awe as Loki stepped
into the room and placed Amora on the soft bed. He pulled the blanket over her and straightened.
The woman watched, eyes large, as he exited.
"She had too much to drink" Loki said, ill at ease in the house "do make sure she doesn't feel it."
"Yes, my lord" the woman bowed.
She followed him out and only spoke when he had mounted his steed.
"Thank you, my prince" she said softly "there are many who would have taken advantage of her in
this state."
Loki nodded and flicked his reins. Lucifer began a walk through the alley.
He exited somewhere ahead and decided on letting Lucifer choose the route home.
No one had ever thanked him, he realized and the feeling wasn't particularly bad. He didn't think it
was something that would become a usual for him, he wasn't so stupid, he had merely noticed that he
liked it.
"Thieves!"
Loki's head snapped to the place where the gruff voice came from. The two children, the very ones that had crossed his path, were being held by two men. It didn't take long for Loki to figure out that the men owned a fruit cart and the children had taken fruit from it.

The first man, fat and large, held the girl by her arm and was shaking her roughly. The few people around were either sadists or they were frightened of the two men who caught the little thieves.

"I will teach you to steal from me, you rat!" he raised a hand, ready to strike her. His arm came down in a vicious curve right on the girls face.

But someone suddenly grabbed it, halting him. He turned his furious gaze to the man – and paled when he met Loki's blazing green gaze.

"Your highness!" he said, his grip releasing the child.

"You would strike a child?" Loki rasped, not releasing him "and a girl at that?!"

The girl went around and hid behind Loki. Her brother joined her a second later after he extracted himself from the second man's grasp.

"You don't understand" the fat fruit vendor said "they stole my fruit. I work hard for it!"

"That is no excuse" Loki growled, still holding his arm "they are children, they do not know better or they do it out of desperation. You are a grown, and apparently well fed man, you should have shown more sense."

Horses burred behind him and Loki saw his guards ride over.

"Arrest them both" Loki ordered releasing the seller, ignoring the way the man paled "throw them both in the dungeon."

"No, please!" the men begged, falling to Loki's feet "I have a family, children."

"Then your wife will run the cart" Loki said mercilessly. He ignored them both as the guards hauled them away. The kept begging as they were dragged away, destined for the dungeons.

Loki glared at the people before him, daring them to say anything.

The girl made a small noise behind him and he looked at her. She looked up at him with wide eyes and his expression softened.

"Hello" he said, turning to her "what is your name?"

"Lia" she said, "this is Liam. We were just hungry, we didn't mean to-"

"I know" Loki said "but stealing is wrong. Where are your parents?"

"Work" Liam said "they are hardly ever home, your Majesty."

Loki hummed and looked around. A man was watching them and Loki saw more than an impersonal look in his eyes.

"You there," Loki called him "do you know them?"

The man, who had jumped at his call, collected himself "Yes, my lord. I am their neighbor."

"Then take them home" Loki said "and make sure to send their father to me when he arrives, understand?"

"Yes, yes" the man nodded "Come along, children."

The children bowed to Loki and went to the man. Loki watched them go, his mouth twitching lightly as they turned and waved to him.

He lifted a hand to them, then turned to Lucifer.

He mounted and kicked his heels. Lucifer began trotting.

Apparently, luck had favored him twice today, Loki thought, he wondered how long it would hold out.

***

"You understand the conditions, then Odin?"

"Yes, I do" Odin said, glancing at the men that made up the Royal Council.

"We respect you, my king" one of them said "but the prince has shown more than once that he is incapable of trust and respect."

"I am aware of that" Odin said "otherwise I would not be here."

The men nodded "Very well. Now all we need is the signature of both brothers and they can depart when they please."
"Good" Odin said, looking down at the paper and smiling.

***

"They expect me to what!?" Loki cried when he finished reading the paper. Thor was hiding his grin very badly, he wasn't even trying, and even Odin was a little amused. "Come, my son, we both know the council is giving you a second chance" Odin said "it is apparent. But they need this as a guarantee, think of it as a formality."

"I will not sign this" Loki said simply "I won't."

Odin sighed. He knew this was going to be difficult but it had to be done "Loki…"

"No" Loki said "I refuse. I refuse to" he glanced at the parchment "live like a mortal among common men that my brother gets to choose! This is insulting – we all know who he intends to choose, All-Father, and they despise me!"

Odin rolled his eyes heavenwards "Loki this is the only way you get to keep the council away, why don't you understand?"

"Because – " he broke off, growling "I will not live with the enemy."

"If you want father's decision to be over turned and I to become king, then do as you please" Thor said, smiling.

"Shut up, you look like a damned ponce with that smile." Loki snapped.

"Loki!" Odin scolded, amazed at the language his son used.

Thor merely laughed "Agitated, Loki?"

"Of course, you are here aren't you?" then Loki sighed "If I sign this, does the council back off?"

"Significantly" Odin nodded.

Loki prayed for patience "Then I guess I have no choice."

Thor's smile vanished as Loki placed the rolled parchment on the table in Odin's study and lifted a quill, dipping it in ink, then signed his name under the contract with a flourish.

"There" Loki placed the quill aside "tis done."

He straightened and crossed his arms, watching the other two men present.

"Now you, Thor" Odin ordered. Loki raised an eye brow as Thor read the parchment. He seemed to hesitate but eventually signed the contract that stated that the brothers remain on Midgard till either Thor forgives Loki or Loki repents for his sins. If neither does it, Asgard will be left without a king. It wasn't a jovial contract, but the few terms and conditions made Thor laugh.

"Look, Loki" Thor said after signing "I also get to make the major decisions, I think you missed that."

"Bite me!" Loki snapped, spun around and left.

Thor blinked at Odin "Why would I bite him?"

***

"Ready?"

Loki looked up at the intrusion "What are you doing in my room?"

Thor shrugged from the doors "The doors were opened."

"Yes," Loki said "but that doesn't mean you are invited here."

Thor didn't move "You are not taking much, are you?"

Loki eyed the single bag of books and parchment he had placed on his bed "No, only things I need. Why? Do you need a place to stuff Sif as well?"

Thor narrowed his gaze "I understand your insults to me, but leave my friends out of it, Loki. I do not appreciate it."

"And I do not appreciate you invading my privacy" Loki countered, going to lift a few more books "but since that is happening, I chose to level the field."

"That is not leveling the field" Thor said, walking in "that is deliberately angering me."

Loki calmly placed the last of his books inside the bag "Call it whatever you wish, but leave my chambers. I have business to attend to."

Thor, who was walking around Loki's room, looking at his things, turned "What kind of business?"

"It is of a private nature" Loki replied as he pulled the strings on the bag, shutting its gaping mouth
"why should I tell you?"
"Because I can give you a little magic as reward" Thor tossed at him casually.
Loki's head snapped up, his full attention on Thor "What?"
Thor raised his right hand where a black onyx ring rested. It was identical to Loki's only it was more powerful. Loki looked at it with a sense of disbelief.
"Where did you get that?" he asked.
Thor smiled "Father gave it to me. Apparently, I now control your magic."
Loki slit his gaze, biting down on his anger "Oh how this must please you."
Thor grinned "Extremely."
Loki swallowed his rage and shrugged "Very well. Enjoy this tiny morsel if you wish, but keep in mind I shall have the feast when we return."
"I highly doubt it" Thor challenged "for I shall never forgive you."
"Nor will I repent" Loki smiled as he lifted the bag of books and placed it on the floor "I suspect this will come down to a staring match. Whoever looks away, loses."
"So be it" Thor growled.
"So be it" Loki agreed.

There was a moment of tense silence before Loki looked around.
"Well, seeing as I am done here, I request that you leave" he told Thor "I have something I need to do."
Thor didn't say anything, he watched Loki as he left and closed the doors behind him.
Only to hide behind a pillar and wait.
Loki emerged a few moments later and looked around, making sure that Thor wasn't there. Once he was satisfied, he pulled a small bag from behind him and walked down the hall.
Thor pressed back into the pillar and waited for him to leave before following him.
Since it was evening, the darkness played in his favor.
Loki trotted down the stairs and past the hall of the Royal Chambers. He opened the doors and walked out into the frozen night. He didn't glance behind him so Thor knew he hadn't made himself known. He tailed Loki as the younger man trudged through the snow and turned left halfway through the grounds.
Thor pulled back and kept a good distance as Loki kept his determined path. He paid no heed to the darkness and eventually Thor found himself at the stables.
Loki opened the doors and went in. Thor remained outside, choosing to go to the window and peek inside.
Loki was with Lucifer first, he put a hand into the bag and took out a green apple that he gave to his horse. Lucifer nickered and whined, then took it from him, batting Loki with his nose. Loki put a hand on his forehead and rubbed his head.
Then he turned his head to glance at the stall at the very end of the stables.
It was much larger than the rest and the doors that were closed were barred. Loki walked to it, his steps slow, and placed a hand on the bars.
"Sleipnir" he called softly.
The eight legged marvel lifted its head from its slumber and neighed in delight. He stood and walked to where Loki was, trying to get past the bars.
Loki put a hand through the bars and offered Odin's horse an apple. Sleipnir nudged his hand, leaving the morsel in favor of Loki's touch.
Thor saw the saddened look on Loki's face as he looked up into Sleipnir's eyes. He felt something move inside him, but stepped on it. He continued to watch his brother.
Loki then looked around, to make sure no one was watching. After he was certain that the doors were closed, he went to the cabinet that held the key to Sleipnir's stall. He opened it and it groaned loudly.
Loki didn't seem to notice.
Sleipnir stepped out and Thor winced. If that animal attacked, Loki would have no chance against it. But the horse didn't attack. Loki moved forward and wrapped his arms around Sleipnir's neck and
ran his hand down his collar and shoulders. They remained like that for a while before Sleipnir settled on the floor. Loki chuckled and sat next to him, softly talking to him even though he knew he didn't understand a word.

Eventually, Loki settled his back against Sleipnir and the horse looked back at him. Loki pet him, running his fingers through his hair, his eyes unfocused as he thought. Thor got tired of watching and it was getting cold. He turned after a while and trudged back to the castle, trying to ignore the idea of Loki having any softness in him.

***

Thor and Loki were ready to depart, were at the doors of the Bifrost when they were called from behind.

Both brothers turned, holding their bags held over their shoulders, to find Frigga riding over. Behind her, all of Thor's friends rode on their separate horses.

Frigga dismounted and smiled at Thor.

"You were leaving without saying goodbye to your mother?" she walked over, taking his face in her hands and kissing his cheek.

"I said good bye last night" Thor laughed, hugging her.

"I deserve a proper farewell if my son is leaving for five years" Frigga said, squeezing him tightly.

Thor held her to him, suddenly unwilling to go. After a good while, Frigga let him go. She stroked his cheek "I shall miss you dearly, my son."

Thor put his hand over hers "And I, you Mother"

"Oh" she said suddenly "I have something for you."

She reached into the pouch at her hip and extracted a tightly wrapped parcel. She gave it to Thor.

"Open it in Midgard, not here" she smiled

"As you wish" Thor put down his large bag and placed the item inside carefully.

When he bent over, Frigga's gaze went to Loki. He wasn't looking at them, his gaze was far away, over the stars and into an abyss, as he waited for Thor. She had something for him, too, but she didn't know if he would accept it or not.

Frigga walked over to Loki, her steps hesitant. Behind her, she heard Thor talking to his friends.

"Loki"

Loki turned his head to her, blinked once, and bowed "My Queen."

Frigga bit her lip, suddenly unsure of what to do "I have a farewell gift for you, my son."

Loki nodded once but remained silent, watching as she took out a small parcel and handed it to him.

"Open it" she said softly.

Loki let his bag go. It dropped behind him with a thud and he reached over to take the small object from Frigga. He pulled the paper aside.

Loki blinked, his brow furrowing lightly, when he recognized the gift.

It was a gem, green as his eyes and as big as his palm. He had turned a stone into this when he was eleven. It was his first time transforming something and he had been ecstatic. He recalled how Odin had given him the barest of acknowledgements and how he had cheered for Thor when he had broken through three brick walls at the same time.

"I thought I had lost this" Loki said, running his fingertips over the clear gem.

Frigga smiled "No, I saved it. It was the result of your first transformation spell, I will always remember it."

She moved forward to embrace him but Loki stepped back.

"Thank you" he said, ignoring the pain he saw in Frigga's eyes.

He picked up his back, put the gem in his pocket and strode to the Bifrost.

Frigga held back the tears that threatened to fall.

She deserved this; she had put the space between them, no one else.

Thor's voice could be heard behind her.

"You shouldn't have done this" Thor grinned at his friends.

They had brought Thor a gift, too. It was a pendant with Thor's helmet engraved into it.
"For you to remember us" Theoric said "I don't know your friends on Midgard, but I fear you might forget us, poor lacking fellows."
Thor laughed "That can never happen, Theoric, you know that."
"You never know" Sif said, looking up at him.
"Hey" Thor said, putting a hand under her chin and making her look into his eyes "it will never happen."
He lowered his head and brushed his lips against hers, inciting hoots from his friends.
"Alright, off with you!" he said, embracing Sif.
"Come here!" Fandral said, walking over and trapping Thor in a bear hug.
Suddenly he was surrounded, all his friends pulling him in a combined hug.
"Alright, alright!" Thor said, pulling away finally "now I really have to go."
They followed him, Frigga in the lead, till he joined Loki at the Bifrost.
Loki straightened his clothing, simple and plain, pulled his bag closer and waited patiently.
Thor was dressed in simple, casual clothes as well and stood next to him.
"Ready brother?"
"As I'll ever be" Loki said flatly, not paying attention to Thor's well wishers.
Thor looked back and waved to his mother and his friends while Loki turned to Heimdall and nodded.
The exotic man turned on the Bifrost and a second later, the battling princes were gone.
"What does it say?"
Loki looked up from his reading to glance into the large, curious blue eyes of his wife. He didn't like being disturbed when he was fully focused, but looking at her now, as she leaned over across the desk, looking at his text upside down, he didn't feel the twinge of irritation he would usually have. Loki sighed and looked back at the ancient text "It gives no extra detail. Midgard was, at the very best, uncultivated when it came to magics. Excalibur was just a figment of one's imagination, apparently."
Sigyn sighed and sat back properly in the chair she was occupying in an undignified, extremely unladylike manner "I had hoped it existed. I would have loved to wield a sword holding such power."
He nodded and went back to his reading. His gaze roamed over the words with expert ease and he was so focused that he didn't even notice when Sigyn pulled her chair next to him and sat down. It was only when she placed a hand on his shoulder that he was startled out of his work. She had never voluntarily touched him before. Loki eyed her with suspicion."What are you doing?" he asked, watching her. "We have been here for three hours" she said softly "it will be four in the morning soon. Do you not think we should retire?"
"Together?" Loki raised a brow "If I recall correctly, you would rather die than do anything with me. What brings on the sudden change? And don't lie, I am the last person you would wish to deceive."
She sighed, a soft noise in the darkness of the library "I have an answer to your question, husband. I merely wished to give it to you in private."
Loki raised his brows, the only reaction he gave to her announcement "Well, you took your time with it. Six months, has it been?"
She flushed. Loki never made things easy for her "Yes, that has been the time."
Loki didn't move; he waited patiently. When she looked everywhere but at him, he gently grasped her jaw and made her turn to look into his eyes "Well? What is your answer?"
She blinked slowly "Yes."
"Yes, what?" he asked, eyeing her lips. Thunder rumbled somewhere behind him in the skies, lighting them up.
"Yes, I wish to give this marriage all that I have left in me" she said clearly. Loki smiled and crushed her mouth beneath his own. This time, instead of trying to push him away as she normally did, Sigyn slid off her chair and into his lap. Her hands went around his neck as he pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. The din of thunder and rain seemed to dull as the blood rushed through Loki's veins. He could actually hear his beating heart. He groaned, his tongue surging into the heat of her mouth when she parted her lips. His hands tightened around her waist. Sigyn let out a small gasp when he spread his legs and she dropped between them. Loki broke off the kiss to breathe. He looked into her face.
"Why the change of heart?"
She was flushed and had to take a deep breath before answering "All this time I was caught up in how I had been wronged, how I had suffered and what I had lost. I still mourn it, but I only now
realized that you had lost as well. There is no point in both us to be in mourning…"
"So you sought to make the best of a bad situation?" he asked, nuzzling her throat.
She ran her hands through his midnight black hair "In a way…"
"That is not a clear answer, my dear" Loki replied, his mouth going over her jaw and catching her
mouth. He kissed her till she was breathless before releasing her "give me a proper answer."
"Yes, I made the best of a bad situation" she said, planting kisses over his neck, jaw and chin.
"Very well" Loki said. He reached out to grasp a handful of her hair and brought her mouth to his in
a demanding, unrelenting kiss.
Thunder rumbled outside and Loki felt someone take his legs into their grip.
He opened his eyes to find himself in his bed, the rain pouring outside, the roaring of thunderclaps
and flashes of lightning the only things he heard. His legs were being held by Sigyn who was
sleeping on the wrong side of the bed.
He sat up and crawled over to her. One and a half year of their marriage was nearly passing and she
had yet to learn where to sleep. No matter, he would wait.
He was lying next to her when he heard the words that destroyed him.
"Theoric…"
Thunder roared outside.

~~~~

Loki opened his eyes as the dream ended. He blinked a few times, to wake himself up and to get rid
of that memory. It took its time diminishing and by the time it was only the wrecked, faded whim it
had been, Loki had realized he could still hear the thunder and that someone was indeed holding
both his shins in an iron like grip.
He looked down at his feet and his features twitched in irritation.
Since he was asleep with his head at the foot of the bed, Thor had taken his legs as a pillow and now
held them to his chest as he snored like a dying goat.
"Idiot" Loki muttered and kicked himself free. He placed his feet on the floor and sat on the edge of
the large bed they were sharing. He stretched, relaxing when he felt the calming pops from his back
and sighing.
Outside, the Midgard morning had already begun.
His gaze went to the window, then the door, where it stayed as he thought back on how they had
arrived here two days ago.
* Two Days Earlier*
Loki nodded to Heimdall and a few seconds later, they vanished in a flash.
Colors flew past them, over them, even through them as they passed from the limbo that would land
them on Earth.
It had lasted only a moment or so, but to them it seemed like an eternity.
They ended up on the thick covering of sand and it blew up in dust as they landed on their knee,
kneeling, rather than falling.
Loki looked up from his crouch, his face portraying disgust at the filthy world they were in. Dirt and
dust, a usual thing in the desert, blew around them. He stood, holding his bag over his shoulder and
glancing at the world he was going to spend so much time in.
Thor grinned at the familiar place. He could barely hide his excitement. He was happy to be here,
happy to be back, he had so much he wanted to do. The urgency of his last visits was no more and
he could easily explore everything he wanted to.
"Midgard, brother" Thor smiled "take a good look now that you are not destroying it"
Loki gave him a cursory glance, "Yes, it suits you. Empty, dank and depressingly dull; no wonder
you love it here."
Thor's mood deflated slightly. He hitched his bag firmly to him and walked "Come along, we have a
long walk from here."
Loki rolled his eyes and followed. He looked at the skies that seemed to want to fry them and
squinted against the harsh sun. Wasn't it supposed to be winter?
The heat was beginning to bother him and Loki lifted his bag over his head, ignoring how silly he
looked. Thor was a few paces ahead and he could already see the sweat that dampened the back of his collar.
"Thor!" Loki called after they had walked for a while.
Thor turned, wiping the perspiration from his brow "What?"
"Would you mind changing the weather a little?" Loki asked, he was beginning to feel sick.
Thor looked at the harsh sky "Yes, it is rather hot is it not?"
"You are a shrewd one" Loki asked, lowering the bag and wiping his face.
Thor shook his head and focused on a less harsh part of the sky. Within a few moments, dark clouds gathered over New Mexico. Loki let out a grateful exhale as the temperature began to drop a little.
"You're welcome" Thor said over his shoulder.
"I never thanked you" Loki pointed out.
Thor looked back at him "You know, there is a faster way to get to where we want."
"Really?" Loki asked in mock delight "you intend to give me my magic back?"
Thor laughed sarcastically "No"
Thor stopped, turning to Loki and placing his bag on the ground. Loki walked over, more to save energy than anything else and watched him.
Thor lifted Mjolnir from the bag.
"No" Loki stepped back "and I cannot believe you brought that."
"Why shouldn't I have?" Thor threw the hammer in the air where it spun before he caught it with ease "you brought your magic."
Loki narrowed his eyes "It is bound and gagged you stupid ass, and you well know it."
Thor shrugged "Whatever you say."
He bent down and pulled his bag shut "Are you ready?"
Loki took another step back "I am not flying with you. If you wish to go, go ahead, but I will keep my feet firmly on the ground."
Thor hefted his bag over his shoulder. His eyes had an uncommon glint to them as he straightened "You can't be scared, Loki, can you?" he began walking to Loki.
"No, I just hate the idea of being closer to you than necessary" Loki walked backwards, away from Thor.
"It will save time" Thor said, advancing on him, the grin on his face openly playful now.
"Don't even think about it, you oaf" Loki kept backing away, increasing his speed slightly in response to Thor's fast paced walk.
"I am not even thinking about it" Thor grinned and lunged.
"No!" Loki sidestepped him and tried to jog away "Stay away from me, Thor!"
The last word was a yelp as Thor reached out and grabbed him, hoisting him over his shoulder.
"Let me go!"
Thor smiled, gripped Loki and his bag tight and shot off into the sky.
Loki's yell echoed into the skies as they soared to the clouds. He had his eyes closed tightly, one hand holding Thor while the other held his bag.
Thor had one hand holding him and his bag, with the other he maneuvered Mjolnir. His grip wasn't as tight as it should have been.
Loki felt himself slide.
"Thor! I'm slipping!" he called, trying desperately to gain his balance as the city disappeared totally underneath a thick sheet of clouds.
Thor tried tightening his grip but there were too many things in his hand. "Take my bag from me so I can hold you tighter."
Loki, who was bent over Thor's shoulder, looked behind him to the pressure on his back and found Thor's bag. Slowly, careful not to upset the too fragile balance, Loki reached out to take the damned sack. Once he had it, he pulled it over and held it with his own, hanging them both in his hands. He hadn't kept in mind the weight of Thor's things.
Thor's heart stopped when he suddenly felt Loki slide off over his back. His brother's terrified yell only confirmed the worse.
Thor turned immediately, diving down to catch his falling brother. He flew below Loki and simply caught him in his arms when he fell past.

Loki was terrified, but Thor had to admit he was impressed when he saw the trickster's hands tightly holding the ropes of both bags.

"Are you alright?" Thor asked.

"Go. To. Hell" Loki said, his voice barely a whisper.

He placed the bags firmly on him and pulled an arm around Thor's shoulders "Just go to hell"

Thor bit his lip, feeling guilty. He hadn't intended to scare Loki – okay, he had, but only a little. He didn't mean to terrify the man.

Or to drop him hundreds of feet to the ground.

Yes, that was definitely guilt he felt.

He started gliding rather than outright fly and finally – he thought he heard Loki send a prayer into the skies – finally landed in a secluded part of the desert which was only a few minutes' walk from the city.

As soon as they landed, Loki pushed away from Thor. He dropped Thor's bag carelessly in the dust and patted himself straight.

Thor lifted his bag and bit his lip. He really did feel bad at the moment "Loki…"

"Don't talk to me" Loki said, "if you aren't going to at least respect my wishes, then don't talk to me."

"I'm sorry" Thor said, walking over "I didn't do it on purpose."

"Yes, you did" Loki's head snapped to him "you didn't drop me on purpose, but you deliberately did what I asked you not to do. You disregarded my request and did exactly what you wanted, just like you –"

"Just like I, what?" Thor asked when Loki broke off.

"Nothing" Loki said, walking away "come, your friends await."

Thor waited a few steps before following him. He wanted Loki to continue what he was saying, but now wasn't the time.

They entered the city Thor had chosen and felt the hard road under their shoes. Since it had been so hot earlier, the road burned.

Loki stepped onto the sidewalk and Thor followed.

About a minute later, Loki paused. Thor caught up with him.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at Loki's turned away face "why did you stop?"

"I don't know where to go" he waved a hand for Thor "you lead."

Thor nodded and started to walk to the one place he was dying to get to.

Few, if any, people stared at them as they passed. It wasn't uncommon for people to carry their belongings in a sack after all, so it was easy to go about relatively unknown.

Thor couldn't stop looking around. He was back and this time he had nothing but his brother to worry about – and even that was slight.

He recalled how Odin had told him to stick close to Loki, not to go anywhere without him and to protect him. The last part he had stressed on greatly and even now, Thor looked over his shoulder to find his brother walking a few feet behind him. His green eyes were lowered to the ground and he seemed uninterested in his surroundings.

A car honked its horn somewhere and Thor turned his head, watching the traffic of Puente Antiguo as it stuck around at points and flowed smoothly in others. Other sounds mixed in with the traffic as Thor walked, leading Loki through the city where he had met the beautiful, enchanting Jane Foster.

He intended on seeing her again, right now in fact, and he couldn't hold in his excitement. He imagined her face, her surprise as his arrival and knew she would be as overjoyed as he was at the moment.

He looked to his side, to the large window of a store, and caught Loki's reflection. The man was still looking at the sidewalk and he still walked as if he would rather ditch Thor and run. He probably wanted to, Thor thought, the only reason he was following him now was because he had nowhere to go.

The thought made Thor frown lightly, but he shook it off. He forgot it a second later when he looked
ahead and caught sight of a familiar place. It was the diner Jane had taken him to. Thor grinned at it, beam- ing like a little boy as he stopped. "Brother!" he called, making Loki look up "we shall feast here."

Loki gave the diner a patronizing look "Why?"

Thor looked at him in irritation "Because I am hungry."

"Aren't you always?" Loki muttered as Thor crossed the street to the restaurant. He caught up with him "Do you have a plan to rob them? Seeing as we have no money."

"Nonsense, brother" Thor smiled "they know me. I was here before."

Loki stopped following him "Oh this I have to watch."

Thor looked back, frowning "What do you mean?"

"Nothing" Loki smiled at him "go on, get us food. I shall wait here."

Thor shrugged and went in. Loki watched as Thor went to counter and began talking to the man there.

Loki looked around him, at the people that walked and exhaled in disgust. Imbecilic fools, they were. Nothing but mud and dirt to him.

He saw a man, dressed in better attire than the rest, as he talked on – what was that again? – a phone.

Loki eyed his shoes, the expensive cut of his suit and arched a brow when he picked out a leather wallet from his pocket and took out a stiff card.

He looked at Thor, who was waiting for an order, then back at the man. It seemed Thor was taking his time.

Loki looked back at the man, his gaze suddenly reckless.

Thor drummed his fingers on the counter as he waited for his food to arrive. He had taken a look at the menu and ordered something called a 'hot dog' after he was assured there were no shawarma's here. For Loki, he had ordered something lighter, since he preferred fruits and vegetables, something called a 'Caesar's Salad'.

"Order up!"

Thor grinned as the woman who had taken his order came with the food.

"That will be twenty dollars" she smiled.

Thor nodded and took the food from her "Thank you, lady."

"Hey!" the girl called when he turned without paying "Hey, pal, wait!"

"Never mind him" Loki suddenly emerged in front of her "he is a little dense. How much was it?"

"Twenty dollars" she smiled, blinking at the gorgeous man standing in front of her.

Loki extracted the money out of a thickly filled wallet and gave it to her "Thank you."

"Loki, what are you doing?" Thor said, walking back over, his hand holding their bags of food.

"Paying her, you dolt" Loki smiled, turning to Thor and pocketing his stolen wallet "that's how you get food here."

Thor frowned, unable to really grasp how they had to pay this time when they didn't last time.

Loki rolled his eyes and walked out of the diner.

Thor followed him "Where did you get the money?"

Loki lifted the bag he had over his shoulder "Pay attention to more important things, Thor"

Thor jogged ahead and stood before him "Answer me, Loki where did you get the money?"

"Around" Loki shrugged

"You stole it" Thor narrowed his gaze.

"So?" Loki snatched the smaller brown paper bag from Thor and walked past him.

Thor growled, following him "Loki, you cannot do that"

"Why not?" Loki looked both ways before crossing the street.

Thor walked in, frowning at the people when their cars screeched to a stop and honked. He jogged after Loki, keeping him in sights as he walked on, heedless of Thor's absence.

"Loki!" he called, snarling when the man didn't even look back. He ran a little and grabbed Loki's arm.

"I said, stop" Thor spun him around.

Loki glared at him, pulling away "What do you want?"
"You can't steal from people, Loki!" Thor snapped "it's wrong."
Loki rolled his eyes to the heavens but didn't say anything. Thor took it as a good sign, especially when Loki began to walk behind him once more.
They walked in silence, as Thor tried recalling where Jane lived, exactly. He felt some familiarity but nothing concrete. He led his brother around the city till they reached the entrance of a small park.
"Just admit it, Thor" Loki said "we're lost."
"No we are not" Thor growled "I know where to go."
"Really?" Loki asked "Where?"
Thor looked around, frustrated. All the streets looked the same to him suddenly. He didn't know what to do.
The clouds, that had vanished a long time ago, gathered again.
Loki scoffed "I sense you are in difficulty, brother."
Thor closed his eyes, praying for patience. He turned around to face Loki "Alright, I don't know where I am going, happy?"
Loki's eyes glittered "Very"
Thor raised his hand, ring sparkling on his finger "If you help, I shall give you some magic"
Loki narrowed his eyes "Forget it"
"Why?" Thor asked, surprised when Loki turned away. He put a hand on his arm in case he left again.
"I am not some dog that does a trick and gets a treat, understand?" Loki rasped "I am a prince, your crowned prince and I will be treated with respect."
Thor recalled his words, wondering how he could have offended Loki. He didn't find anything wrong with his sentence.
He shook his head, "Alright, your Majesty, would you kindly lower yourself to help me locate dear Lady Jane?"
Loki's mouth twitched unwillingly "Very well."
Thor held back the rude comment he was about to utter and placed his finger on the ring, pushing it only lightly.
Loki felt the magic rise in him; it was like water to a dying man. He closed his eyes.
Thor lifted his finger but the magic stayed.
"How did you do that?" Loki opened his eyes.
"Intention, Loki" Thor said "the ring senses the intention I have. My desire was to give to magic, not flow it into you, rather simple."
Loki nodded "Alright, let's get you to Jane then."
A few seconds later, Loki had discovered where Jane lived and walked beside Thor now as they walked through the city.
Half an hour later, Thor found himself at Jane's door. He was nervous, Loki could tell. He had been standing there for over ten minutes, he was fidgeting. He pulled his bag up, put it down, ran his hands through his hair.
"Will you just get on with it?" Loki snapped.
Thor glared at him, then raised a hand to knock on the door.
"Coming!"
The voice made Thor's heart beat faster; he didn't notice Loki duck out of sight, stand farther away so the woman couldn't see him.
The door opened and Jane froze. Thor watched the recognition, the emotion, pass her face.
"Oh my God!" she screamed and threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.
Loki raised his brow as her wanton behavior.
Thor laughed, holding her close and spinning her around.
"What?" another woman called "who is it?"
Darcy came running out. She caught sight of Thor and screamed, lunging at him.
Loki rolled his eyes to the sky; no Asgardian woman behaved with such wanton abandon of morals, well - not in public, at least. He watched them both as they embraced his brother, shrieking in shrill
voices as they guided him inside.
"Wait!") Thor grinned, extracting himself "I wish to ask you something first"
"What?" Jane beamed, she couldn't stop smiling "Come inside first, we can talk there."
"Actually" Thor stepped back, grabbing his bag "I am not alone." Thor turned his head and only then did Jane see the younger man standing some feet away.
"I have my brother with me" Thor said, watching their reactions.
"Your brother?" Jane asked, then her eyes widened "Your brother as in the one who tried to kill us all - that brother?"
"Lady Jane Foster, meet my brother Loki - " Thor said, hoping Jane wouldn't run or scream or do whatever else she could do "Uh…"
"Laufeyson" Loki nodded to her, but remained where he was. Thor frowned at the name he had used.
"Whoa" Darcy said, eyeing the elegant, dazzling man standing at their door "Do I need my tazer?"
Jane watched Loki and he watched her right back. She knew he was the more dangerous of the two, and had a feeling he could prove to be more trouble if he wanted. But Thor was here, what could he really do?
"Okay" she said, gesturing for Thor to enter "Come in both of you."
Thor grinned, relieved and grabbed his bag, looking back over his shoulder at Loki. He waited a heartbeat before following him again.
"I'm Darcy" the girl said as Loki went past her. Loki eyed her carefully and walked forward without answering.
She shrugged "Nice to meet you, too."
She closed the door behind him.

*Present*
The rest of the time Loki had spent in the room allotted to him and Thor. He had a feeling that the guest room, as they called it, was for his use alone and that Thor was intended to stay somewhere else.
However, the thunder god had requested he stay with his brother and this was how he found himself sharing a room with a brother he detested.
Thor snored and Loki looked back at him, shaking his head. He stood, stretching once more before walking over to don the tunic he had brought with him. He opened his bag and took the fabric out from under the books. It was slightly wrinkled, but that couldn't be helped now. He pulled it over his head and went to relieve himself in the bathroom he was pointed to earlier.
He opened the door and was glad no one was around. He had no interest interacting with Midgardians. His feet were bare so he made virtually no sound as he walked to the bathroom. He walked in and closed the door, locking it firmly before going about his business.
As he washed his hands, he observed his reflection in the mirror. He looked a little tired, but that couldn't be helped either, the heat in this place was awful.
He recalled, vaguely, Thor mentioning to him that winter here was arid and snowless and that it got better up north. Loki didn't care. This place held no significance for him.
He opened the door and almost groaned out loud when he heard someone moving about in the morning. He found himself almost wishing it was Thor. But as he neared, he saw it was Jane who stood in the kitchen, making herself a cup of a steaming hot drink. She had her back to him, standing across the isle and didn't hear or see him immediately.
He was walking away when she turned.
"Hey" she greeted, "Good morning."
Loki looked at her and snapped his head away. The woman was barely dressed!
Jane had worn the most comfortable clothes she had; a tiny shirt and almost nonexistent shorts. It was hot and she preferred it this way.
"You okay?" she asked, approaching him with a hot cup of something.
Keeping his head averted, Loki nodded and when he caught sight of her at his side, he walked off, leaving her confused.
Jane shook her head when the door closed behind him "Asgardians…"
She had started on her breakfast when Darcy woke. She had moved in here after it became clear that Jane was not going to get another assistant and it suited them both perfectly.
"Mornin'" Darcy yawned, walking over and sitting on the kitchen chair.
"Hey" Jane said, looking at her
"Am I the only one up?" Darcy asked
"No," Jane stirred her food "Loki is awake. He nearly had a heart attack when he found me in the kitchen, though."
Darcy snickered "Can you blame him? These people come from like the third century. Women don't dress like that in the morning."
Jane looked down at herself and grimaced "Yeah, I guess you're right."
"I'm thinking these were meant for someone else" Darcy drawled "and poor Loki only got in the way."
"Shut up" Jane said, but she began flushing.
"Aha!" Darcy jumped off the chair "I knew it! Now what am I getting?"
Jane was just telling her that she wasn't getting anything till she made it herself when the door to the guest room opened.
"Greetings, maidens!" Thor walked out, rubbing his eyes.
Jane grinned widely, feeling the butterflies in her stomach the way she did every time he was there
"Good morning. Would you like coffee?"
"A few moments, if you please" Thor said and walked to the bathroom.
Jane started on his coffee and Darcy picked up a box of pop tarts. Thor emerged fifteen minutes later, fresh and active. His eyes glittered when he saw Darcy holding up a familiar box.
"Are those…" he asked
"Pop tarts?" Darcy finished "yeah"
"May I have them, please?" Thor asked, moving forward.
Darcy thought about it "Uh…no"
Jane had to laugh at the dejected look on Thor's face "Darcy is just being mean, Thor. You can have them, go on."
Darcy picked out four plates and set them on the table. Thor was devouring the pop tarts already before Jane sat down with her omelet.
"Hey, doesn't Loki want breakfast?" Darcy asked, bringing over her cereal. She had stared at Loki the whole time he was in her presence and talked about him when he wasn't.
Thor shrugged.
"Well, ask him" Jane said "he is probably hungry."
"I'll do it!" Darcy jumped off.
Thor tried to stop her, but his mouth was full. Disturbing Loki was never a good idea.
Darcy had reached the room and now knocked on the door.
"Hey, Loki?" she called "What do you want for breakfast?"
Jane put a hand on her temple. Darcy had no decorum sometimes.
"She could stand there all day" Thor said after swallowing "my brother won't reply."
"Why?" Jane asked "I mean why has he isolated himself from us?"
Thor shrugged "He thinks you are beneath him."
Jane blinked at the blunt, straight answer "Oh"
"Loki!" Darcy called and opened the door.
"Don't!" Thor stood and hurried after her "Lady Darcy, my brother doesn't like – "
He entered the room, ready to pull Darcy from Loki's anger but stopped when he saw Loki asleep. The younger man had a pillow over his head and snored softly.
Thor smiled when Darcy went over on her toes and took a picture of Loki.
"I wouldn't do that" Thor whispered "he hates it when people enter his room while he is sleeping."
"He's so cute" she showed Thor the picture, apparently not having heard him.
Thor gestured for her to move and stepped forward. He picked up the book Loki had begun reading
and put it aside. He was pulling the drapes shut when he heard Darcy again.

"Cool" she said, catching his attention.

He saw her lift one of Loki's books

"This is from Asgard, right?" she asked, taking out her camera again "so going on Facebook."

Thor walked over "Don't touch them, he doesn't like it."

"Man, what does he like?" she asked when Thor took the book from her.

"Privacy" Thor said gently but firmly. He began pushing her out.

"Hey, I just want a picture" she said quickly but Thor had already guided her out.

Jane looked at the pair when they emerged from the room "Well?"

"He's asleep" Darcy said, going through her camera "but look at this."

Jane looked and smacked Darcy lightly "What is wrong with you?" she asked in disapproval "people don't like having their picture taken when they're sleeping."

"First of all, Ow" Darcy said, rubbing her head "and secondly, who cares, it's not like he's on Facebook."

"You are not putting that on the internet"

"Why not? He's so cute"

Thor watched the conversation between the two, a grin on his face and a contented feeling settling on his heart.

***

"So what do we have planned for today?"

They were in the living room now. The girls were talking while Thor watched TV. He seemed enchanted by it. He flicked through the channels so fast it gave the girls a headache. He was marveled at the little box that housed so many worlds. Half an hour ago, he had hollered for Loki to come and watch this. The younger god had emerged from the room, heard his request, hissed at him in Nordic and gone back.

"This is amazing!" Thor said, laughing "I have never seen anything like this, not even at Stark's abode."

"Tony Stark doesn't have a TV?" Darcy asked.

"No, he has one of those" Thor gestured with his hands, trying to make a shape "Those - computers?" at Darcy's nod he continued "they float in the air."

"Holograms" Jane nodded "and we could go shopping. God knows they need it."

Thor was wearing another ill-fitting shirt and Loki had that thick black tunic. It didn't look comfortable.

"You think?" Darcy said "Hey, Thor! You feel like going shopping?"

Thor looked at her "Shopping? For food?"

"Among other things" Jane said "It will be fun, come on."

"You will accompany me?" Thor asked

"Yes"

"Then it is done" Thor stood "let me fetch Loki."

They watched him leave and close the door behind him.

"Is it me, or does the thought of Loki accompanying us make you happier than it should?" Darcy asked Jane when they were alone.

"Not just you" Jane said, looking for her keys "I mean I know he is evil but did he have to be – "

"So damn hot?" Darcy said "you stare at him much?"

"Are you kidding?" Jane said, walking to her bag and fishing for the keys "I have to actively keep my eyes away from him. I mean I love Thor but –"

"Loki is un-un-stare-able?" Darcy asked, cocking her tazer.

"You are going to kill someone with that one day" Jane pointed out "come on, let's get some junk out of my car."

They left the living room and the only sounds coming were from the guest room.

"Loki, come on" Thor nearly growled "you have been locked in here for two days. Even you need to admit it's unhealthy."
"I am fine just the way I am, thank you" Loki replied flatly. He was lying on the bed, one hand behind his head as he read one of the books he had brought. Thor held on to his temper "No, you aren't. You can't stay in this state for five years!"
"I am not intending on staying here for five years" Loki said without looking at him "I'll give you a few months before you break. I know you will forgive me sooner or later, so I intend on waiting it out."
Thor crossed his arms "You are living a fools dream, my prince."
"Odin will not let the kingdom fall" Loki said, finally gazing at him "Five years or not, he will call us back and I will sit in the throne. It is only a matter of waiting."
"Believe whatever suits you, brother" Thor said softly.
Silent settled for a while.
"Are you going to stand there indefinitely?" Loki asked as he turned a page.
"No" Thor said, walking over.
He grabbed Mjolnir in one hand and snatched Loki's book from him.
"What are you doing?" Loki snapped getting up.
But Thor moved faster. He threw the book in Loki's bag and placed his hammer on it.
"No!" Loki arrived a second too late.
He looked down at his trapped books, then turned his furious gaze to Thor.
"Come with us" Thor told him "and I will lift it when we get back. But you have to behave and stop wrong doing, understand?"
"Or I could slice your throat out right here" Loki snarled.
"Go ahead" Thor grinned.
It was one of his favorite past times, getting under Loki's skin, and he enjoyed it just like in his boyhood.
Thor saw the rage, the anger and the resentment flash over Loki's face a second before he became disturbingly calm.
"Very well" Loki said pleasantly "have this small victory. Have all the small victories you want, because that is all you are getting."
He turned around elegantly and left the room, leaving Thor with a whisper of a worry in his gut.
***
"What did you call this again?" Thor asked, pointing to the food in his hand.
"Burger" Jane replied, biting into her sandwich.
They were at the largest mall their county had to offer and had been here for over an hour without actually shopping. Thor had been fascinated by everything and had demanded they turn into every shop, see every billboard and experience everything. Consequently, they had walked around for a long time without a destination.
Now, since all the walking had made them hungry, they had gone to the food section of the mall and gotten their desired meals.
Thor had been attracted by the restaurant that had two yellow arches which stood out on a red banner. He had walked through the doors and gained every woman's attention. Jane had pulled an arm through his when a few women gazed at him for too long. It had helped when Loki walked in behind them and absorbed all the attention from him brother.
Darcy had stuck close to him, but the result wasn't the same. Every woman, married or single or taken, was suddenly looking at Loki like he was a piece delicious of meat.
Apparently he had noticed as well, because Darcy suddenly felt him tense and focus his eyes to the ground, a faint blush on his pale cheek. He didn't order anything when asked what he wanted.
Jane and Darcy exchanged looks. He had been here two days and had yet to eat anything. Against their will, they felt some concern unlacing in them.
Now, they were walking to a bench in the sitting area outside the mall where they intended to enjoy their food.
"I like this burger" Thor pulled back a chair and sat on it. It creaked under his weight.
When it became clear the chair wouldn't break, Jane smiled "Yes, many people like it."
"What is in this?" Thor lifted the bun and peeked inside.
"Well, ham, cheese, pickles..." Darcy began.
Thor made a disgusted noise "What is this?"
Thor held out the burger to Loki, who glanced at it, arms crossed as he sat next to Thor "That, brother, is a pickle."
Thor made a face at it.
Loki rolled his eyes "You are infantile"
He casually reached out and plucked the two slices of pickle from Thor's burger. He popped them into his mouth and chewed as if they weren't harsh in flavor.
Jane and Darcy smiled at each other. They didn't want to, but they were relieved. Pickle wasn't exactly a food, but at least he had eaten.
"Will the other one have them, too?" Thor asked, biting into his fixed burger.
"Yes" Loki said, looking around, squinting in the sunlight. He was feeling incredibly hot.
Darcy pulled on the straw of her drink, making a gurgling sound. She blushed when Loki and Thor glanced at her, their expressions just short of scandalsized.
She swallowed and smiled sheepishly "Sorry."
"After we eat, what have you planned?" Thor asked, pulling out his next burger.
"Well," Jane said, lifting a few fries "we go to the men's clothing department."
"The what?" Thor asked, holding his bun open for his brother.
Loki lifted the pickles and put them into his mouth then resumed looking about aimlessly.
"Place where you shall buy clothes" Jane giggled "Hurry up and we can go."
Thor finished the burger in record time. He was leaving when Darcy pointed to his untouched drink.
"What is this?" Thor asked, lifting the cup to his eyes.
"Coke"
Jane pushed a straw in for Thor and watched him drink.
Thor took a sip and blinked rapidly when the fizz hit him. The girls laughed at him.
"It is awful" he held the cup out.
Loki, curious owing to his reaction, took the drink from him and sipped.
It was a welcome cool against the heat and he took another, larger sip.
Thor shrugged and walked with the girls, Loki trailing behind him enjoying his cold, sweet drink. The men's department was large and it smelled like masculinity.
Loki tossed the empty cup in a nearby bin and followed the girls in. He inhaled the scent and looked around; music wafted from some place and it was relaxingly cool in the room. He didn't feel like leaving.
"Ladies, Gentlemen!" a voice called, "how may I be of service?"
Loki turned his head to see a young man walking over, a smile pasted over his too perfectly grinning face. He reeked of distrust.
"We need a whole new wardrobe" Jane was saying, oblivious to the deceit of his appearance "for these two."
"Splendid!" the man cheered, gesturing them inside "Follow me, if you please, I shall guide you to the best of the best!"
Loki scoffed and followed, watching the man speak in a hurried manner. Loki noticed he moved his eyes too much and gave far too many details. The man was a trained liar, Loki smiled, but he couldn't possibly pull the wool over the eyes of the god of lies.
"And this one" he was holding out a brown dress shirt, plucking its sleeve "this arrived right this morning. I know it will suit this gentleman perfectly. And I shall give it to you on a discount, if you buy it right now."
Loki raised a brow. The shirt's shoulders held a little dust, the stubborn kind that doesn't get patted away easily. The man was obviously a charlatan, hoping to give his brother old clothes at a significantly raised price.
It was a good idea, if Loki had liked the man. Right now, he was inclined to unravel the man's words.
"You say it’s new?" Loki asked.
His companions turned, a little surprised that he had broken his vow against talking to Midgardians.
"Why yes" the salesman smiled.
"So I guess the dust on the shoulders and the faded cuffs are part of the charm?" Loki asked casually walking over to inspect the shirt. He lifted the price tag "My advice, try rubbing off the dirt before you place a new, more expensive price on an item you intend to cheat someone with."
Loki’s black nailed fingers held the price tag. It was browned and a stark contrast against the white price tag.
The salesman looked at the damning evidence "Uh, this must be a mistake. I shall have it checked out."
He ducked out of sight, taking the shirt with him.
Thor smiled at him "Good eye, brother."
Loki didn't respond. Instead, he roamed about, looking here and there.
He was here, he might as well choose something to wear. Contrary to what he told Thor, he really couldn't stay in this state happily.
He came upon a row of elegant, obviously very expensive clothes. Trousers of the finest cut, shirts that would please him, lined a whole wall to wall shelf. Loki reached out and touched the fabric.
It wasn't pure silk, but he could sense the texture of the royal fabric somewhere underneath.
He ran his finger beside him, running over shirts as he passed them, looking for a color he would like. He paused at a color and lifted it out. The emerald green shirt looked gaudy but he seemed to like it.
"Yuck" Darcy walked over "you couldn't have chosen an uglier color?"
Loki looked at her but remained silent. He turned around, spotted a room labeled changing rooms and walked in.
Darcy looked around, when she was sure no one was watching, he snuck into the stall next to Loki's. She emerged a second later, disappointed. There was no opening between them to peek over.
Thor chose two shirts, after looking for flaws, one dark blue and the other was crimson.
Loki emerged and once again, Darcy was disappointed when he wore the same clothes he had walked in with.
"Hey, what gives?" she exclaimed "you have to show us what you look like."
Loki chose to look at other clothes, shirts, trousers, vests he liked.
Thor rushed to the changing rooms and emerged a few minutes later, showing off his clothes for the girls. They applauded lightly and laughed when he flexed his muscles.
Loki ignored them; Thor was a show off, this wasn't new to him. His arm held about ten different shirts, all ranging from greens to blacks. He chose black trousers, formally cut and a few vests.
After making his purchase, he put all his clothes on the counter to be priced.
"I think your brother's done" Darcy pointed out to Thor.
A machine beeped and marked all of Loki's chosen items.
"Do you have what you want?" Jane asked Thor.
"Yes, I do" he held up a few dress shirts.
Jane hummed, "Maybe you like casual more than formal, no?"
Thor shrugged and she laughed.
"Come on, let's get you out of here"
They were surprised when Loki paid for his clothes with a credit card, but didn't comment when Thor shook his head.
They had taken their shopping and stepped outside when Thor debated on telling them the secret of Loki’s money. He thought against it; he had angered his brother enough for one day and besides, Loki knew he was doing something wrong he could…
He nearly growled at the indecision. Loki had a way of complicating things with the minimum of effort.
The girls lead them to another shop where Thor chose some easy, casual clothes. Loki walked over to where they kept hats and found two, one black and the other white, and bought them instantly.
"I think your brother likes shopping" Jane commented
"No, he just likes spending stolen money" he muttered then smiled "but I think young Darcy likes my brother."
"You noticed it too, huh?" Jane asked, watching as Darcy stood next to Loki, watching his every move.
She was talking to him constantly, her eyes going over his face and – Thor grinned – his finely sculpted rear.
Jane looked away "I can't help but feel sorry for him. She is totally stalking him."
"Yes, she does resemble a lioness in heat" Thor observed "but do not worry, Loki can handle himself better than most people think."
Jane frowned at his tone, not his words. Thor has been giving bitter remarks about his brother all day to her; this wasn't a side she saw to him last time.
"Thor" she said, pulling him farther from the gawking Darcy and Loki "can I ask you something?"
"Anything" he smiled
"What happened?" she asked "I don't remember you being this bitter. I mean I don't know about your relationship to Loki, but I remember you apologizing to him for something you had no control over. I don't think I can ever forget that and now, you – you have changed. Why are you making such snide comments about Loki?"
"You think me bitter?" Thor asked, surprised.
"More like acidic" she said "just enough to make me uncomfortable."
Thor sighed. He didn't realize it, but how could he help it? He did resent Loki at the moment and lashing out with words was really the only thing he could do.
Damn, he blinked I sound just like Loki.
He had never felt the need to attack someone like this...
Maybe Odin was right and he had changed. Thor shook his head.
"Well?" Jane asked.
"Uh" Thor looked at her but was mercifully denied answering when Darcy walked over.
"Loki doesn't talk to me" she complained "I think he hates me."
He hates everyone, Thor was going to say.
Instead he gestured for Darcy to come closer "Mention the name Sleipnir. Say you read a book about an eight legged horse" Thor told her "he will respond to that. He likes books and legends."
"Won't he suspect you told me?" she asked.
"Not if you be skillful" Thor smiled
Thor straightened and she left.
They watched the pair.
"So, you like books, huh?" Darcy began.
Loki didn't acknowledge her.
"I only ask because I saw a lot of books in your room. They had like really weird titles" she continued, delighted a little when he looked at her momentarily. Perhaps it was his way of letting her know she had his attention even as he went through coats and jackets.
"I read this weird book once" she said, running her hand over a thick white coat "it was some legend about an eight legged horse."
True to what Thor said, Loki snapped to attention, looking right at her.
"A horse?" he asked, his voice hesitant.
Darcy tried not to beam "Yes, it had a strange name, though. Slenpir or something."
"Sleipnir?" Loki asked, turning to her
"Yeah!" she said, "How did you know?"
"Because I saw you go to Thor and gain an idea from him a few moments ago" Loki replied casually.
Darcy blinked "Uh…what?"
"Refrain from going through my private property in the future" Loki said, turning back to the jackets "I don't like telling someone twice."
Darcy felt a few drops of fear travel up and down her back. Somehow, she found him even hotter than before. ***

The sun had begun to set when they walked to the parking lot. Thor's arms were laden with bags of clothes, shoes and other necessities the girls had picked out for him. He followed Loki, who held on to his bags carefully as they crossed the car populated lot. The girls had relatively less to carry and Jane moved her entire load to one arm as she opened the boot of her ancient car.

They placed their items and moved aside for Loki to do the same. Thor waited behind, looking around.

Jane went to start the car as Loki stepped back. He looked behind him to see Thor's bags abandoned and the man himself standing in front of a small, jolly looking cart with Darcy. Sighing, Loki lifted Thor's purchase and stuffed them in. He heard them approach, heard Thor's rumble of laughter at something Darcy said as he pulled the boot shut.

A savage screeching sounded, making Loki turn. He saw a car swerve dangerously, as the driver accelerated, rocketing straight for Thor who watched the missile head for him, unable to move.

Darcy screamed. "Thor look out!" Loki yelled, sprinting forward with magnificent speed and tackled Thor to the ground, moments before the car tore down the place Thor had been occupying.

They fell to the concrete ground hard. Loki felt his elbow get scraped but he didn't bother. He looked at Thor, seeming to check if he was okay.

The girls were hurling insults and curses at the driver as he sped off.

Thor blinked at his brother, startled. He looked into Loki's wide eyes "I'm fine"

Loki pushed himself off and stood.

"Oh my God, are you alright!?” Jane arrived, panicked.

Darcy ran over "Are they dead?"

Loki gave her an annoyed look.

"I'm alright" Thor said, standing, he watched Loki the whole time. The man was looking everywhere but directly at him "I'm fine, I just – are you okay?"

Loki looked at him "Yes, I'm fine."

"That idiot!" Jane snapped "Darcy, did you get the license plate?"

"Uh no"

"It's alright, Jane" Thor turned to her, holding her shoulders "We are both fine, nothing happened." "He nearly ran you over" Jane said "if Loki hadn't…"

Thor shushed her "It's alright" he chuckled "you forget, I can't die."

It took a while, but eventually both Jane and Darcy calmed down enough to get into the car where Loki was already waiting.

Thor got in beside his brother as Darcy took the front seat. Jane watched them in the rear view mirror as she started the car.

Loki had his arms crossed and was avoiding Thor's gaze. He was looking firmly out of the window. A whirlwind of emotions were going on inside Thor. He wasn't in any real danger. The car would not have killed him; even Loki knew that. But in that terrible instant, when he saw it come right at him, Thor had seen flashes of his life pass him by and in every flash, he saw Loki and their childhood. They were brothers, they grew up together, loved each other, they had fought, they had defended each other, they had contested against each other, they had fought side by side, back to back. He had seen everything and he had heard.

He heard the one thing that Loki had said to him, the one thing even he himself seemed to have forgotten.

'Never doubt that I love you'

And a moment later, he had felt the lean, hard push as Loki shoved him to the ground, out of harm's way. He knew the car wouldn't kill him, but he saved him out of what? Instinct? Love?
Thor itched to know and he knew Loki would never tell. The feeling only heightened the adrenaline in his veins.
Loki watched Thor out of the corner of his eye. The man was deep in thought, Loki should be too, but he forbade himself to think over his actions.
Then Thor suddenly beamed and Loki rolled his eyes to the window.
"Oh great"
Thor didn't say anything then, but when they reached Jane's house and the girls went in, Thor turned to Loki as they took out their shopping.
"So?" Thor beamed "Looks like my chances of getting you to repent have suddenly increased."
Loki sighed, lifting another bag "Do not get your hopes up, brother. I did it merely to save my own skin. If something happened to you, I get the blame. It had nothing to do with love."
"Who ever said anything about love?" Thor grinned, lifting his bags and leaving "say what you wish, Loki. This place is already changing you. Our stay here might win me this battle we wage."
Loki looked after him, picking up the last of his bags.
***
A week later, Thor was awakened by a blood curling scream.
"Jane!"
He leapt from the bed, heart in his throat, and ran through the door.
"Jane where are you!?" he called, when he got to the living room.
She emerged from the bathroom, holding her head "My hair!"
Thor's mouth hung open.
Jane's hair, the locks that reached the middle of her back was chopped short as if she had viciously used a knife on it.
Thor gaped like a fish.
"What happened?" he asked
"My hair's gone!" she shrieked "I have no hair!"
Thor, who was trying to understand what happened and calming her down at the same time, didn't know what to do.
Loki emerged, clad in a casual t-shirt and soft pants he had bought to use in the night. He hung on the doorjamb, a politely surprised look on his face.
"Oh my…"
Jane turned to him "You! You did this!"
Loki raised his eyebrows "I beg your pardon?"
She advanced on him, pulling, or trying to, when Thor restrained her "I know you did it, don't bother lying! How could you!? I took you into my home!"
Loki smirked at her.
Thor looked at him "Loki?"
He looked at him, smirk in place, before slowly turning and going back to the room.
"I'll kill him!" Jane shrieked and Thor felt suddenly worried.
"Jane, calm down"
"No!" she wrenched out of his grasp and turned to him "I want him gone."
"What?" Thor blinked
"You heard me" she rasped, looking more dangerous than many creatures Thor had encountered "I want him out of my house, right now!"
"Jane, you need to keep calm, think before you-"
"He chopped off my hair!" she snapped "Thor! He cut my hair off."
She suddenly fell to her knees and began to cry in anger.
Thor felt his heart twist as he knelt beside her. He didn't stop when she resisted and pulled her into his arms.
"I'm sorry" Thor muttered "I am so sorry."
***
"Why?" Jane let a few more angry tears fall before she sat up "Why did he do this? What did I ever
do to him?"
"Forgive me, I have no answer to that question" Thor said.
She sagged against him "I can't go to out like this"
"Yes you can" Thor said, looking down at her "You look like a sprite now."
She chuckled a little and sniffed. Silence fell in which Thor rubbed her back gently as they sat on the couch.
"Thor?" she said after a while.
"Hmm?"
"I want him to go" Jane said "because I have a feeling this is only the beginning."
"I'll talk to him" Thor said, feeling a sense of loss in him
"Has he ever listened to you before?" she asked
Thor thought back.
Loki had never really listened to him, ever. He hadn't listened when he told him to stay away from Sigyn, hadn't listened to him when he tried reasoning with him to let her go, hadn't listened when she got hurt and he –
Thor broke off. The thoughts were only making him angry
"No"
Jane exhaled "He can live nearby; I mean there are apartments…"
"No," Thor cut in sadly, gently "you don't understand, I mean how could you I haven't told you anything, but I can't stay here if he isn't."
"What?" Jane said, looking up at him "Why not?"
"I promised my Father" Thor said "we stay together wherever we go. That is not up for argument."
Jane hummed "So if I kick him out, you go too?"
Thor smiled sadly and kissed her hair "Yes"
She stayed silent for a while. Thor began to get nervous; he didn't want to leave, not when he had gotten close to her again. She was silent for so long, he opened his mouth to ask her what she was thinking.
"Fine then" she said.
"Fine to what?" Thor asked, dreading the answer.
"We will look for a place for both of you" Jane said.
Thor closed his eyes in pain "Jane…"
"There are many houses and apartments close by" Jane cut in, her voice husky "and the price will be well within our reach"
"Jane…"
"It will just take a little…"
"Jane" Thor turned her head to look into her eyes "you know as well as I that is impossible. You cannot get us a home."
"I was renting one" she said, lowering her gaze
Thor smiled "So brave, you are. I can almost see the sadness in your eyes and yet you put on such a brave front."
"I will not lose you again" Jane said, her voice hard.
"You won't" Thor said "I am here for a long time."
"Yeah, five years" Jane mumbled "big whoop."
Thor didn't understand her words, but he sensed her sarcasm "I could always take you to Asgard"
Jane smiled "I like that thought. But Loki would be there, too."
"Yes" Thor sighed "he would."
"Has he ever done this before?" Jane asked after a while "cut off a woman's hair?"
"No" Thor kissed her hair "but he changed Sif's hair from gold to black."
She sat up suddenly "What?"
He smiled at her horrified expression "Yes, my brother is the epitome of mischief. I have lost count of how many people he tricked."
"Why does he do it?" she asked "attention?"
Thor shrugged "Tis his nature, in my opinion. I am not excusing his behavior, just pointing out a fact."

Jane had gone thoughtful again.

She didn't want Loki here, she hadn't wanted him from the start, but since it meant staying with Thor, she decided to overlook it. Now when almost all her hair was gone – and in only the first week of his arrival – she was beginning to doubt her decision.

She sighed "Thor, this can be difficult. I mean I really want you here, but if Loki keeps this up…"

"I'll put an end to it" Thor cut in "give me one chance"

She touched his face "It's not you who needs a chance."

He smiled "I understand."

Jane brushed his hair back and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "Do you want to go out for breakfast?"

Thor grinned "Of course, if the lady accompanies me."

Jane stood "She will!"

She grimaced as she touched her hair "As soon as I get a scarf."

Thor stood and watched her go to her room. When she left, his gaze fell to the figure standing in the doorway of the room he had slept in.

Thor's good humor vanished as he glared at Loki. Loki's green eyes bored right back into him.

Neither spoke a word but the scent of battle, the hardening of determination and the strength of resolve was almost palpable.

The challenge had been laid down and accepted.

Thor was going to change Loki and he was going to fight it.

Loki was going to make Thor miserable; he would attack his friends and make his life unbearable till Odin called him back to take the throne.

Their gazes bored for a second longer before Jane arrived and broke the resolute tension between the two.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

And adventures continue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki winced when the spanner in his hand hit the axel of the vehicle with a loud clank. He tipped his head back, looking for a tell tale sign of someone's arrival. He stilled, so motionless was he that even his breathing seemed to stop. He stayed that way, frozen under Jane's ancient Jeep, for a while before it became clear that no one had heard him in the darkness of the hour.

He continued, slower this time, raising the spanner to the sides of the axel and loosening the screws he found there. He repeated the action till both screws of the front wheels were slack. This was going to be dangerous, he grinned, his teeth flashing in the night. It was also going to drive Thor mad, harm coming to his precious Jane, and hopefully, get him out of this wasteland.

Loki put the spanner aside and looked around to confirm his isolation. Satisfied, he slid gracefully out from under the sagging vehicle and stood. After patting himself off, he threw the spanner in the air and caught it with expert ease. He had been here, suspiciously undetected, for almost two months now and had played so many tricks on his hosts that they had begun to turn paranoid. He smiled a little when he recalled his previous trick.

Poor girl, that Darcy was, she never saw the rattlers in her bed till she sat in it. It was a shame, really, Loki thought, how she had screamed and alerted his overzealous brother about the snakes. He'd killed all three before Loki's intended prank had occurred. The snakes didn't have a chance to strike the chit.

No matter, he had other tricks up his sleeves.

A light flicked on inside his temporary home and Loki made a small dash for the back door. He slithered through the door, softly closing and locking it to make sure no one knew of his midnight stroll.

He pasted himself of the wall and looked over its side when he heard movement. Darcy, torch and tazer ready, was making her way to the bathroom. Loki rolled his eyes and waited.

When she slept doused girl closed the door, Loki tip toed to the guest room and went inside. The bed was empty, which was the one thing making his stay here bearable.

After he had chopped off Jane's hair...Oh how long ago that appeared...Thor had shifted to Jane's room. It was something bound to happen; Loki's prank was just a good excuse.

He locked the door behind him, put the spanner safely under his bed and lay down on the soft mattress. Pulling his hands behind his head, he found himself unable to sleep. It had been restlessness that had instigated the tricks he had placed around the house, and finally the jeep, and even now he found himself wide awake. The impatience was crawling down his body, up his back and into his
mind; he needed to do something and he couldn't find out what it was. He raised a hand and
contemplated a recent discovery.

Thor and he had come to a non verbal agreement. If Loki behaved himself, Thor gave him a small
percentage of magic. It wasn't the most flattering of arrangements, but the only reason Loki was
silent and not scalping Thor, was because he came upon a simple find.

Since magic had been so long a part of him, any magic Thor gave him and believed to be used up,
actually multiplied. Granted it was slow increase, but Loki had felt it. Given enough time, he would
have all his magic back and no one could do anything to him. Right now, he had round about twenty
percent of his original power. He *could* use it and it *would* decrease, but it would begin to fill up
again and be slightly more than it had been in only a matter of days.

He had used some magic right now, on the traps he had set about the house, and he could already
feel its absence. It was like something had hollowed out inside him.

He watched his hand for a while, twisting it a little, eyeing his dark nails and pale skin before falling
into another path of thought completely against his will.

He had saved Thor.

Why?

It had been so long ago, but the thought still plagued him. He should have let the car hit him, let him
be injured; it would have won him this - whatever this was - immediately. But he hadn't.

The second he saw that car racing towards his brother, Loki had felt his gut turn to ice. He saw the
accident before it happened, he saw Thor's blood all over the street, he saw Thor's bloodied face,
eyes closing as he tried breathing through a broken nose, broken jaw hanging open.

Loki shook his head.

Why were the images disturbing him so much? Why did the thought of Thor getting hurt make his
heart stop?

Why had he run and saved the man who was standing between him and the throne?

He knew the answer; he didn't want to say it, even to himself, but he knew.

Loki didn't want anyone hurting his brother. That was his right and his right alone. If anyone was
going to hurt, harm or even kill Thor, it would be Loki.*He* would be the one to make the call on
Thor's life, no one else.

The crowned prince sighed and lowered his hand.

The unwanted thoughts needed to shut up and they weren't going to do that on their own. Making up
his mind, Loki put two fingers on his temple and muttered a spell.

His finger tips glowed an icy blue and a few moments later, his eyelids drooped in a dreamless sleep.

***

Jane stirred a little against Thor. His weight was crushing her into her bedding but she didn't mind. It
was a good thing she had him here, next to her, protecting her from Loki's continuous attacks against
her.
She turned over, laughing when Thor muttered something in his sleep and buried into his embrace that pulled her closer automatically.

Last night had been vastly energetic and Jane still felt the slight soreness that came from making love to a god.

And a god he had been indeed, she smiled. She had never had it better.

She flushed now when she recalled all the places he had touched her with crystalline precision. Thor definitely knew what he was doing. She muttered a small curse when her musings were too soon interrupted by the alarm clock blaring.

She reluctantly reached over and pushed the button to turn it off before Thor awakened. However, when she turned, his startling blue eyes were watching her over a pillow he had folded in his arms.

"Hey there" she smiled, turning over to kiss him.

"Good morning" he replied, kissing her back.

She pushed herself into his grasp again, smiling when he slid on top of her again.

A crude knocking interrupted them halfway through.

Thor growled in protest when Jane pushed him off just enough to raise her head.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Darcy!" the reply came "Listen, I know you are really enthusiastic about getting your boyfriend back, but we still have to work. So get up..."

"Let her leave" Thor said, nuzzling Jane's throat

"Or I'm coming in" Darcy finished.

"I'm up!" Jane pushed Thor off her, finally. She wrapped the sheet around herself, snickering at Thor's confused expression "She will actually walk in here."

Darcy had apparently been satisfied and decided against entering. Thor thought it was unfair and wanted to continue his... tryst ... with Jane, Jane apologized, saying something about being late for work. Since she now had guests, she needed the income and had taken a well paying job in the astronomy department of a local college.

The money was good, the distance was not. It was in another county and it took more than an hour's drive to get there. The result was that Jane was gone almost the whole day and Thor was left alone with his brother. He had tried getting Loki to come and explore the city with him, but the man steadfastly refused. Thor hoped to annoy him into agreeing one day; he knew he was getting close because Loki had stopped passing snide remarks and taken to ignoring him. It was sign he was about to bend.

"Must you go?" Thor asked, watching Jane dress.

She looked over as she pulled on a shirt "We've been through this, Thor, and the answer is always the same. Yes, I have to go."

He rolled his eyes and fell back into bed, burying his face in the pillows.
Jane laughed, pulling on some pants and walked over. She shoved him playfully.

"Come on" she chuckled when he shook his head "I got you pop tarts"

Thor lifted his head and looked at her "How many?"

"Whole box, just for you" Jane grinned. She slapped his bottom "Get up, you're making me late."

She left then, leaving him alone. He took his time, dressing, and by the time he exited the room, he saw Jane was already at the table waiting for him.

"Yo..." Darcy lifted her cereal spoon at him

"Grata kván" Thor bowed to her.

"Grata ka-what?" Darcy asked, mirroring Jane's confused expression.

"That's Nordic" Thor explained as he sat at the table "it means 'greetings Lady'."

"Ah" Darcy said "So what do I say?"

"Grata" Thor replied.

"Grata" Darcy repeated, extending a hand that Thor shook.

Jane shook her head at the pair and began to eat. She ate quickly because, thanks to Thor, she was already late.

Damn the man's stamina.

"Where's Loki?" Darcy asked after a large swallow "And won't he eat?"

"Still sleeping," Jane replied, standing and taking her plates to the sink "I haven't heard him all morning."

She sounded relieved, Thor noticed. His gaze went to her hair. It was still short, coming down to the middle of her neck now, and it didn't look like it was hacked off viciously after she came back from a 'salon'. He stood, putting down his food and went to where Jane was

"My brother can go weeks without eating anything" he answered Darcy "on Asgard, we would be lucky to see him even once or twice a month at dinner while he was absorbed in his scholarly pursuits."

"Surely he ate something" Darcy said "Or even if he didn't, he still had his magic. Maybe he used that."

"Mayhap" Thor said, shrugging. He watched as Jane turned on the water "but he eats nothing here."

"He had a strawberry that Thor didn't like" Darcy pointed out "and olives."

"I noticed that he eats only when you give him something" Jane said "So far all he has eaten were pickles."

"Also he stole a pop tart off your plate once" Darcy told Thor "you didn't notice because he put it back after making a face. I noticed."
Thor nodded, listening to them and realizing that they were right. Loki considered these people beneath them and therefore avoided their touch, their voice and even their food. But since Thor shared his status, he didn't mind taking food from Thor.

_Damn_ Thor realized _Loki must be starving!_

"Why don't you let me wash?" he asked, taking the plates from Jane. He took his mind off his brother "you can have more time then."

"What a gentleman" Darcy said, lifting her bowl to drain the last of the cereal "here you go."

Thor smiled, taking the bowl and spoon from her as she left to dress.

Jane grinned at him "Thanks"

She stood on her toes to kiss him. His hands occupied at the moment, Thor let Jane slid her arms around his neck and pull him closer and deepen the kiss.

"I knew it!"

They broke off at the angry shriek, turning to the source of the voice.

Jane was confused at the tall, black haired woman that stood in front of the sliding glass doors and Thor paled.

"Sif!"

"How could you?!" she demanded, walking over she glared at Thor's confused and stunned face "after all this time with me, this is the loyalty you show?!"

"Sif?" Jane asked, highly confused "what is going on?"

But Sif ignored her, choosing to stare at the very guilty looking Thor "I trusted you!"

Her voice was defeated.

"Sif, let me explain...how did you get here?" Thor fumbled.

"I came to give you a surprise" Sif said, backing away "but I see there is no need for it."

Sif gave Jane a murderous glare, turned around and stomped away.

"No, wait Sif!" Thor called, running after her.

Jane watched him go with a feeling of loss. She saw him go to the sliding door, following his... his what? That was what Jane wanted to know.

He stepped out into the open and looked around but apparently Sif had gone just as suddenly as she had arrived.

_Where did she come from anyway?_

One second they had the place to themselves and the next...

Something was very wrong.

Thor came jogging back before Jane could dwell on it further.
"She's gone" Thor said sadly "She didn't even leave tracks."

Jane had her arms crossed as she watched him "Who was she?"

Thor hesitated "That was Sif, you met her before, remember?"

"I know her name" Jane said, her voice soft "but who is she to you? Why did you look so guilty? What did you have to explain to her?"

Thor tried to think of a way to answer her questions, some way where she would not get hurt by the answers, but he found nothing.

"I ... uh..."

Jane scoffed and waved it off "Forget it, you just told me."

Thor panicked as she turned to leave. What was happening?!

"Jane, wait!" he ran after her, gently grasping her arm and turning her and placing his hands on her shoulders "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Jane asked "for not telling me that you already have a girl friend or for making me the other woman in your life?"

Thor winced at the pain her words caused "I..."

"And how did she get here, anyway?" Jane asked "the doors were locked, it was almost like she came...out...of thin...air."

Jane looked at his face as realization dawned on them.

Loki

"I am going to kill him" Thor growled.

"Really?" Jane crossed her arms "for what? Exposing the fact that you were already involved with someone?"

"No, Jane please..." Thor started

"You know what?" Jane stepped out of his grasp "forget it. I am late for work and I really need to go."

"Jane" Thor went after her, but stopped when she gave him a nasty glare. He let her go and flinched at the sound of the door slamming.

His hands fell to his sides and a feeling of great loss enveloped him. He turned back to the abandoned dishes with sadness upon him, a second before red hot rage erupted in him.

He turned around, forgetting the guilt that had settled in him when he realized why Loki was fasting, and stormed to Loki's door.

"Loki! Get out right now!" he bellowed, banging on the door.

He didn't hear movement inside as he hit his fist against the wood, but a few seconds later, Darcy emerged, putting on an earring.
"What the hell is going on?" she exclaimed.

Thor spun to face her "Is there a way to open this from the outside without breaking it?"

She blinked at how menacing he looked and wisely didn't ask.

She pointed to a shelf that had a thick wad of keys on it. "It's the silver one"

Thor stomped over and took out the key, opening Loki's door a second later.

The room was empty. Thor growled and turned back, going to the place he knew Loki had taken a liking to.

Darcy stepped away from him as he strode past and watched him go out the front door and into the suddenly darkening outdoors.

***

Loki was reading his thick book when he sensed the skies getting dark. His brilliant emerald gaze never left the page, but a slow smile spread on his lips.

Apparently Thor had discovered one of his triggered traps. He would probably be looking for him now, he mused, if he had his magic at a good enough power, he would have made the search tricky but the idea of what was about to occur raised a perverse pleasure in Loki. Let him come, let him yell at him, beat him, do whatever he wished, because that was all Thor was getting. The feeling wasn't unlike the one he had when he destroyed New York; the feeling of wanting to be beaten, wanting to be battered and thrown away. Maybe if he was lucky, Thor would...;

He blinked.

The feelings weren't particularly jovial and Loki found himself surprised going down their path again.

Pushing them aside, Loki concentrated on thinking about anything else, anything that didn't include him wanting to be violently thrashed.

What flashed in his mind was completely unwelcome. It rose from the ashes like a gold phoenix, raining him in delight and regret at the same time.

'You're not going to let my brother and me take all the glory, are you?'

'What?' Loki was surprised, astonished, stunned and unbelievably honored at the thought of going with his brother on another trip. Thor was his idol, his older brother, his mentor.

He felt the disappointment in Thor's voice rather than hear his words. He had taken his surprise as rejection, the oaf.

'You are coming with me, aren't you?'

The hope in that phrase make Loki ecstatic and it was clear on his face, for once not hidden behind an impassive mask, when he turned and smiled beatifically at Thor.

"Yes, of course"

Thor grinned at him, so happy he was. Loki stood, just as happy if not more, honored, thrilled, flattered and so, so excited to go on a journey with his brother.
Loki gasped, dropping his book.

His face was a mask of anguish as he felt the pain flare in his chest.

*It was real, Oh Odin, the pain was real!*

Loki hunched over. His chest hurt, his throat had become tight. He felt tears slide over his eyes, slim and so deceiving. He pushed them back, hid his face as he lowered it.

*Dear gods, he'd lost everything! He had lost his brother's love, his admiration to Thor, the feelings of pure untainted worship he had for his older brother. They were all gone and they were not coming back!*

*Oh, what had he done?! What had he accepted?!*

When he looked up, his face was a mask of dread and he could still feel the pain in his heart, his throat and his chest.

*What had he done to Thor? He had changed him too, spread his poison in him as well? Yes, he had. Thor resembled Loki more than he did his loving, forgiving self. He had turned bitter, just like All-Father had said.*

*Oh, Stars, how did this become so twisted?*

Loki started to breathe deeply, trying to calm himself as he doubled over on the roof on Jane's house.

He needed to calm down. Thoughts like this only tore at his insides and he needed to stay focused. It took a few moments, but Loki eventually bit down on the random panic that rose in him. He didn't even dwell on it for fear of resurrecting more thoughts like that. He didn't need memories; he needed to be brutal, cold and detached towards everything he cherished, and still held close to his soul, with Thor.

He straightened, sitting on his knees now, rather than bending over in the unexpected but highly physical pain he'd just endured, and idly looked down at the grey powered mark the concrete of the roof had left on his black trousers. He patted it away.

He was calmer now, much calmer than he's been a few minutes before, but he still couldn't think of Thor, even vaguely, without having that soul tearing sorrow and anguish envelope him. He couldn't face him, not right now.

Thunder clashed over his head and Loki heard the ominous thumping of Thor's gait.

His green eyes widened as he straightened and began to scramble off the roof. He could have dealt with Thor's presence easily any other time, but right now he couldn't risk facing him without having to face those same agonizing memories.

He grabbed his book and shot to his feet, looking for another way down, just as Thor's head emerged from where the stairs led to the roof.

"You!" Thor hollered.

Loki looked over his shoulder at him, then down at the ground. The drop wasn't that high, he would probably make it.

"Oh no, you don't" Thor growled, running forward as he guessed Loki's intent.
Loki made up his mind. He looked down, ready to jump, but hesitated a second too long.

***

He was going to kill him.

Thor stomped up the last of the steps when he saw Loki spot him and surge to his feet.

"You!" Thor bellowed, marching over.

He saw Loki panic; probably knowing he was in trouble, and run.

"Oh no, you don't!" Thor said, sprinting over.

He wasn't going to let Loki get away that easy. The man was going to pay.

He saw the trickster look down, getting ready to jump, and hesitate.

That was all the time Thor needed.

Just as Loki prepared, Thor grabbed his arm in a vice like grip and pulled him back. He spun him around with so much force that the younger god's book flew out of his grasp and landed with a thud on the dusty concrete roof.

He grabbed Loki's collar and pulled him close "I am going to twist you in half!"

Loki flinched, raising a hand to protect himself against the fist Thor had unconsciously raised. He cringed, turning his face away from the blow.

Thor froze. He had expected Loki to sneer at him, mock him, like he did every time he played a successful prank. But this, this sudden fear the thunder god saw in Loki's brilliant eyes and read on his face, was the last thing he thought he would see ... or wanted to see.

Thor stared at him, unable to say anything, and lowered his fist. He gazed at Loki, uncertainty replacing his anger, as his brother slowly, carefully turned to see why he hadn't been pummeled yet. He looked straight into Thor' face with wide eyes ... a second later, he looked away.

Thor still held him by the collar, and Loki still avoided his gaze, but the anger was receding.

"Loki, what wrong?" Thor's voice was thick.

Loki licked his lips and gulped. His chest felt tight and uncomfortable again.

Mercifully, he was denied the opportunity to answer.

A terrible screech rose from below and the brother's glanced down.

Jane's jeep reversed at a dangerous momentum. Thor watched, horrified, as it swerved in a deadly arc.

Before he could release Loki and run, before he could move, before he could even call out, the vehicle backed up swiftly and crashed into another car that went by oblivious to the danger. The crunch of metal and the breaking of glass confirmed the worst.

"Jane!" Thor yelled, he leapt off the roof, landing safely on the ground, and sprinted to the accident site.
He ripped open the driver's door "Jane!"

His heart was beating so loudly, he couldn't hear her. But he saw; he saw she was safe, he saw Darcy was well and other than a cut on her forehead and a split lip, there wasn't much damage. Jane had a bruise on her forehead.

"Are you alright?" Thor asked his lover.

"Yes" Jane mumbled, looking at the people that had gathered behind Thor "I ... I think so."

She tried moving but Thor stopped her.

"Wait, let me" he easily carried her in his arms.

Darcy was helped out by another gentleman.

Thor, after making sure the other driver was alright, carried Jane inside. He heard sirens behind him as he entered the house and knew someone had called the 'police'. As he carried the dazed Jane into the living room, he found Loki casually sitting at the kitchen table, reading his book. He didn't even glance up when the couple entered.

"Loki, I need your help" Thor said, gently placing Jane on the couch "Darcy is hurt, I need you to get her inside."

Loki gave him a patronizing look that Thor missed because his back was turned. He went back to his book.

Thor looked behind him "Loki!"

"Yes?" Loki asked, continuing his reading.

"Go get Darcy!"

Without moving his eyes, Loki pointed to the door. Thor turned to see a random man helping the injured woman in. His lips tightened and when he looked back, Loki was gone.

His previous anger returned, but he stepped down on it.

Other matters needed his attention first.

***

Loki deigned himself to emerge from the guest room sometime around five in the evening.

Thor had apparently dealt with the injured women and both of them were now sleeping on the couch, Jane's shoulder supporting Darcy's head. The TV was turned on and droned softly.

Loki made a disgusted face at them and shook his head. Archaic thinking, insipid beings.

The smell of cooking food reached him suddenly and he followed it, knowing who it was behind the counter.

Thor had a thick cloth over one shoulder as he read from a book perched on the table, opened to the desired page. He stirred the contents of a pot, leaned over to read, then went back to stirring. He looked up when Loki entered and the trickster saw his gaze narrow in anger.
He didn't say anything as Loki pulled a chair and sat in it, observing his brother. A few minutes passed before Thor took out a bowl and, as Loki watched, grabbed a ladle to put a generous amount of whatever he was making into it.

He turned around and placed it before Loki wordlessly. He gave him a spoon and a napkin as well.

It was soup, Loki discovered as he looked down at it.

"You expect me to eat this?" Loki asked, raising an eyebrow. However, he picked up the spoon and began to stir it.

Thor didn't answer. He began to clean up after himself.

Loki watched him, idly taking spoonfuls of the spicy soup. He liked it, he wouldn't ever admit to it, but he liked it.

Thor clanked a plate against the sink in the silence.

Loki sneered "So, by not talking to me do you think I will feel... what?"

"I was hoping you would feel remorse" Thor said "that wasn't a nice trick. And you didn't even help when they needed it" he turned around; bracing his hip against the counter "Are you really that cold?"

Loki watched him, spoon hanging from his fingers. He didn't respond, but he smiled slowly, turning into his Jotun form right before Thor's eyes.

Thor hid most of how disturbed he was well, but the part he couldn't hide, the instinctual fear that had been trained into his bones and rose at the sight of a Frost Giant, Loki saw.

He blinked his hellish red eyes "What do you think, Thor? Am I cold enough?"

"You make yourself cold" Thor said, hoping to repair some of the broken bond between them "and that was a nasty trick, you really hurt her, Loki"

"Oh come on," Loki waved a hand, thankfully transforming back to his pale skinned self "it was just an accident, if I really wanted to hurt her, I would have made it explode."

Thor frowned "What are you talking about?"

Loki stilled "Uh oh"

"What are you talking about?" he asked instead of responding.

"The illusion with Sif" Thor said, slowly pushing himself off the counter "What were you referring to?"

Loki looked down, hiding a self deriding smirk. Trapped by the one person who could trap him... himself.

Thor's face was red with anger "You little bastard! You caused the accident, didn't you?!"

Loki jumped out of the chair when his older brother approached. He had no chance of going against Thor without his magic. The man had brute force that he would use against him. His only asset was his silver tongue.
"Your tricks have harmed so many already, Trickster" Thor continued "have you not had enough?!"

"Oh, come on, Thor" Loki said, stepping out of his reach.

"You could have killed them!" Thor stalked him "Have you no shame!? They took us into their home, took care of us and this is what you do!?"

Loki backed away, keeping good distance between his raging brother and himself "Really, Thor, if I wanted to kill them, they would have been dead the second we got here. Besides, my tricks haven't killed anyone, so you can put your mind at ease."

Out of the corner of his eye, Loki saw the women emerge. Damn.

"Never killed anybody?!" Thor scoffed "Please, brother, you have lost your memory? How do you explain what happened to..."

He broke off abruptly, stopping, when he saw his hosts.

"What's going on?" Jane asked.

She was never answered, because all eyes were on Loki, who had frozen, stock still, his narrowed eyes focused on Thor in an anger no one had really seen before.

"How do I explain what happened to who, Thor?" Loki asked dangerously. He was grinning, but his grin wasn't a normal one, it was a threat, a sinister, hair raising threat.

Thor was silent, all anger paling in front of what he had just dragged from the past. He shook his head a little, wanting Loki to drop the subject.

It was a painful and damning part of their lives that needed to remain a secret.

However, now that he had brought it up, for the sole purpose of hurting Loki, the trickster wasn't about to let it go.

"Say it, Thor" Loki hissed "say his name."

"We're gonna" Darcy said, pulling Jane back because she had walked into the kitchen "go"

They turned to leave, but the door slammed shut itself, not letting them escape. They jumped back and turned to Loki.

"Stay here, he might need witnesses" Loki rasped, looking so intimidating they couldn't do anything else.

He turned his green gaze to Thor.

"Loki, don't do this, don't bring this up" Thor was nearly pleading.

Loki smiled, a deadly, feral gesture it was, "Oh brother, but I didn't bring it up, you did. I merely intend to finish it."

"Loki..."

"What were you saying?" Loki pretended to think "Oh yes, my tricks have killed someone, who was it, brother? Do you remember?"
"Loki, please"

"Ah, yes" Loki's smile vanished and Thor preferred it hadn't "You couldn't be talking about Balder, would you? You can't be that stupid."

Thor flinched at the name "Brother..."

"Yes, he was, wasn't he?" Loki said "our brother. Tell me, Thor, when my 'trick' killed him, what did you do?"

Thor looked at the ground, lips tight. He didn't say anything.

"Tell me!" Loki shouted, his voice deeper and guttural than it usually was.

"Nothing" Thor said softly.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Loki asked, "I couldn't hear you, over the sound of a pact breaking."

"I said 'nothing'" Thor looked up at him, his gaze tormented.

"Exactly" Loki grinned again, that threatening grin "You did nothing." His smile vanished "You damned him to death, as much as a culprit as I was, Thor. You staged the whole scene, put every piece together and pushed me into it. What would one call that? A plot, a plan, a 'trick'?"

"Loki..."

But Loki was furious "I may have been in the forefront, the one to push the dagger into his heart, but you ... you orchestrated the whole thing, Thor. You had him killed; I was merely the tool to do it. I shouldn't have been punished, you should have. Instead, I was sent to Midgard for ten years while you were crowned behind my back; how did you think that made me feel, Thor?"

Thor swallowed, aware of the fact that both women heard everything Loki had said. They weren't dumb, they understood.

"And now you have the gall to stand here and tell me" Loki went on "that my trick was the one that killed the crowned prince of Asgard, when we both know it wasn't mine alone."

"You know how he was" Thor said

"Of course I know!" Loki snapped, waving a hand "Everyone in Asgard knew what he was like; Balder the Brave, Balder the god of Light. Balder the pompous bastard, traitorous whore, the son of a bitch that allied himself with the Dark Elves!"

The girls blinked at the series of curses.

"He was going to destroy Asgard before Odin's very eyes and everyone knew that." Loki continued "but because he was the Golden One, everyone turned a blind eye. Then we killed him" he sneered "and you took his place, you became the Golden Prince, the apple of Odin's eye while I rotted in some god-awful, atrocious pile of dung that these inane beings call home as a damned mask! Tell me, what happened to you?"

Thor didn't reply "Brother"

"Don't call me that!" Loki said loudly "I am not your brother, I never was. All I am is a stolen relic that was punished for a crime we both committed. Yes, you did!" he snapped when Thor shook his head "You were there beside me when we plotted to kill him, when you wanted the throne, nothing
stood in your way, even your own brother was expendable! I wonder how Odin will take to that. His beloved Thor, the reason a prince of Asgard was slain...;how wonderful.

"You would do anything to gain the throne, Thor" Loki went on in a calming voice "you think it is your right. Well let me tell you something; adopted or not, I am not giving up the throne now that I have it..."

"What!?" Jane cut in, flinching when Loki turned to her.

"Yes, dearest Jane" he leered "I am the crowned prince, not your beloved Thor."

Loki turned to his brother "He is merely the conspirator in the assassination of our eldest brother."

Thor's angry gaze was held to the ground

"So before you tell me that my tricks killed someone," Loki told him "remember who that someone was and remember your part in all of it; because I am not one to forget it, Thor. We had an agreement that you broke tonight; you know the consequences."

Thor looked at him and swallowed, trying to push past the lump in his throat.

The door behind the girls suddenly opened of its own accord. Loki walked to it, deliberately going past Thor. He stopped in front of his brother, glaring him in the eyes.

When Thor looked up, Loki's green eyes were livid.

"Mention this incident again" Loki whispered "and I will skin you alive."

He walked away, not giving Thor or the frozen girls another glance.

***

"So you understand everything, right?"

Thor looked up when Jane spoke. There was sadness in his eyes and more than a hint of regret and loss when he gazed at her.

"Yes," Thor said "and even if I don't, I know Loki does. He will guide me."

"Are you sure?" Jane eyed Loki, who was bringing his recently bought suitcase outside. Unlike Thor's, Loki's had wheels behind it and it made it easy for him to drag.

"He didn't seem very happy with you a week ago"

Thor hummed and straightened from his crouch. He eyed his shoelace, now that it was retied, and moved his foot about "Yes, he was upset. But...that is in the past now, where it belongs."

Jane smiled sadly "So I have no chance of hearing about it?"

Thor knew he was only half joking. Instead of replying, he kissed her. She smiled against his mouth and pulled her arms around his neck.

Loki rolled his eyes as he went past them, one hand wheeling his suitcase forward while the other held a smaller case that had his scarves, hats and other items he bought. Behind him, Darcy walked, tailing him.
Their cab was waiting by the sidewalk.

When Thor and Jane broke apart, Thor's gaze fell on Loki. The man placed his bags carefully in the truck before he straightened. As he came to his full height, Loki caught sight of a suited man, standing some distance away, watching them.

Thor frowned as Loki stared at the man. A second later, the stranger turned around and walked away.

Satisfied, Loki finished his loading and slammed the trunk down. Instead of sitting like Thor thought he would, Loki waited.

The cab driver got out and walked over to Loki, talking about something. Loki listened, then took out his stolen wallet and handed him a hundred dollar bill. The man nodded happily and took the bribe, going to start the car. Loki was putting his wallet back when he saw Darcy watching him with wide, apprehensive eyes.

Loki rolled his eyes, sighed and extracted his wallet again. He had a flat look on his face as he handed her a hundred.

Jane smiled, rolling her eyes when Darcy beamed and squealed.

Even Thor laughed when she threw herself at Loki, the man catching her in surprise. The look on his face was priceless.

"So" Jane ran a hand over Thor's arm "are you alright? I mean, after...you know"

Thor sighed "Yes, I am. Thank you, for not discussing it again, I don't know how to express my gratitude."

Jane grinned and winked at him "You expressed it plenty last night"

Thor blushed, scratching his head "I...uh"

Jane laughed and embraced him, holding him tight "I am going to miss you so much."

Thor kissed her hair "You will be there in a month, the time will pass quickly I'm sure"

"Hmm" Jane pulled back and kissed his mouth again "I don't want to say goodbye."

"Then don't" Thor said, brushing her lips against hers "say 'till we meet again"

"Till we meet again" Jane kissed him.

They were interrupted by someone clearing his throat. They broke apart to see Loki standing beside them. They parted, looking at him.

"Lady Jane" Loki said, bowing and taking her hand to his lips "thank you for having us, I had an entertaining time"

Jane gaped at him, at his black hair, as he kissed her hand "Uh&..."

He straightened and gave her his customary mischievous smile.

"You're welcome?" she blushed.
Oh, why did he have to be so hot?

Even Thor was surprised.

"Hey, what about me?" Darcy asked, walking over.

Loki turned obligingly "Forgive me"

He gently grasped her extended hand, to repeat the gesture, but Darcy was quick. She grabbed his hand instead and yanked him closer, putting a hard kiss full on his mouth.

Thor guffawed and Jane laughed. Loki was red in the face, as he stared at Darcy, who smiled at him before walking around him.

Loki, keeping his head lowered, went to sit in the dank cab.

Jane groaned when Thor made to leave "Do you have to go?"

Thor smiled, pulled her close and kissed her, lingering because it was going to be the last kiss he would give for a month. He broke off to breathe and looked down at her "We shall meet again, I vow it. But right now, I think it best that he be somewhere he can't inflict so much damage."

Jane sighed, extracting herself from him "I know, but I'll miss you"

"As I you"

The driver honked the horn.

Thor sighed "My brother is getting impatient."

"More likely fearing another kiss attack from Darcy" Jane said

"Hey!" Darcy said, lowering the hundred dollar note she was examining "I was just curious"

"Yeah, right" Jane rolled her eyes.

"Jane, Darcy" Thor bowed his head to them and stepped onto the road.

He opened the door and got in, making the cab lurch.

"About time" Loki mumbled as he closed the door "I thought I would expire from waiting."

Thor turned around, twisting to wave to the girls as the taxi drove forward. They waved back till the cab turned and Thor lost them.

He straightened, "Why are you so agitated?"

"That chit" Loki rubbed the back of his hand across his lips "both of them, I couldn't stand them."

Thor frowned "You didn't seem to mind when you kissed their hands in farewell."

Loki smirked "You always were obtuse, Thor. I am the god of mischief, I merely acted as it."

Thor stared at him in alarm "What did you do?"

Loki lowered his head to gaze at the buildings they passed, trying to see their tops "I merely put a memory hex on them. Come tomorrow morning, they will remember nothing of our argument two
weeks ago."

Thor didn't know whether to believe him or not, or to be relieved or not. On the one hand, he was glad Loki had done what he did, on the other; he didn't like him messing with Jane's mind. When he couldn't decide between thanking him or berating him, he chose another question.

"How did you hex them? You have no magic."

Loki smirked and looked at him, running a hand through his long hair "I have my ways."

Thor was about to say something when he noticed the driver looking at them awkwardly.

"Keep your eyes on the road, Midgardian" Loki ordered in a strict voice.

The man obeyed as if he was a slave.

Thor looked at Loki, then the driver "Loki, do you have him under a spell?"

Loki smiled slowly "Midgard minds are so easy to manipulate. I don't use even three percent of the magic I have saved in me."

Thor's lips tightened "That is wrong, Loki. This is not why I gave you magic."

"You should be thanking me" Loki kept looking out of the windshield, the driver's window and his own. He seemed curious about his surroundings, but Thor knew better.

"What are you looking for?" Thor asked, leaning over to look out of Loki's window.

Loki pulled back, irritated at having her personal space invaded, and hit his head "Go to your own window."

Thor sat back "What are you looking for?"

Loki looked straight at him "When we arrived here those friends of yours - SHIELD? .... they sent their members here, presumably to take me away. I have been keeping them at bay with a mind control hex. They go back, each and every one of them, and report that there was nothing here. I merely lifted the spell and now worry they might be following us."

Again, Thor didn't know whether to be impressed or angry.

"How did you do that without magic?" Thor asked.

Loki sneered at him "I compromise. When I don't eat, my body produces magic to keep me alive. I use that magic on this 'protection' instead."

Thor gaped at him in horror "Loki!"

"Oh, don't act like you care" Loki snapped "I starved for two and a half months here and you didn't say anything then. Don't say it now."

"You could have asked me for magic" Thor said earnestly.

"Yes, because that would have ended well" Loki looked at the rooftops again.

"Brother..."
"Do tell the driver we need to hurry" Loki cut in "the train is destined to depart in an hour."

Thor sighed, he knew Loki wasn't going to discuss it now. He gave up for the moment and gave the spellbound driver Loki's order.

***

Loki rubbed his temples with one hand as he watched his brother prance about like a love struck stallion was too graceful a comparison ... mule.

Thor was fascinated by the train station. He listened to everything the loudspeaker announced, he went to every stall after taking money from Loki. He bought three boxes of pop tarts that he finished in record time then he went to the restaurant with the two yellow arches to buy himself burgers. Now, he was swinging on something called a 'jungle gym' ... a strange modernization of a swing... and played with the children there. The children laughed as he chased them around, their mother's watching with grins on their faces.

Thor had long since been deemed harmless and sweet by everyone that sat in the First Class waiting lounge of the train station.

As luck would have it, there had been an hour long delay in their journey because something had gone wrong with the train.

So Loki was sitting on a couch, one hand across his slender waist while the other idly rubbed the slowly forming headache behind his eyes.

"Brother!"

Loki looked up, tiredly, as Thor came over "Yes?"

"I have been told there is a sweet shop not too far from here" Thor said, sitting next to him "would you be interested in going?"

Loki made a 'what' gesture with his hand.

"Who did you hear it from?" Loki asked "Your new friends?"

Thor followed Loki's gaze to the children waving at him "Mayhap"

Loki rolled his eyes to him "And do your friends expect me to fund their sweet tooth as well?"

Thor grinned "Maybe"

"You are a child, Thor" Loki muttered, staring at him.

"Please?" Thor smiled at him, batting his eyes like a woman would, just to irritate him further.

Growling, Loki grabbed his briefcase and stood "Let's go"

When Loki passed him, Thor threw his fists in the air, cheering at the children in silence. The children applauded and cheered at him, but stopped when Loki glanced back at them.

The parents laughed at their antics as they watched Thor and Loki leave.

Thor led Loki to the sweet shop, but frowned when Loki turned another way completely.
"Loki?" he followed him.

Loki went to the toilet and closed the door behind him. Thor entered behind him.

"Brother, what are you doing?"

Loki was bent over, glancing under the cubicles to make sure they were alone.

"Just filling my wallet up again" Loki said absently. He walked over and placed his brief case on the sink top. He opened it and Thor gaped.

Inside the tiny case, were Loki's hats, scarves and bundles upon bundles of the currency used here.

"Where did you get this?" Thor asked, walking over "how much is it?"

"A little over a million, I lost count after that" Loki broke the seal off one bundle and took out some notes that he stuffed in his wallet. He picked out a rubber band from one of the many pouches in the lid of the case and tied it around "as to where I got it, I conjured some of it and withdrew the rest."

"Withdraw?" Thor asked "From where?"

"A bank" Loki smiled, shutting the lid "I emptied out an account after I sto &$150; gained &$150; a credit card. It is really simple."

Thor was confused "I do not get it"

Loki rolled his eyes and lifted the briefcase "That is why I have the money and you don't."

"How did you ..." Thor broke off "You hexed the bag, didn't you? To fit everything in."

"Good Thor" Loki said, holding the door open "Do you want a treat?"

Thor scowled at him but followed silently.

They reached the sweets shop in under a minute and Loki closed his eyes when he entered. The incense was intoxicating. His eyes doubled in size when he saw assorted sweets and cakes.

Thor grinned. He fished through his pockets and took out a list that he handed to Loki "Here. This is what I want"

Loki looked at the list placed in his hand "What is this?"

He read through the childish handwriting and found it to be the order of the many children Thor had been playing with.

He rolled his eyes "No, Thor"

"Loki, it's..."

"No!"

Thor's mood deflated. Unconsciously, his lips formed a sad pout and he looked imploringly at Loki. Loki hated that look. It reminded him of a whipped dog.

"Stop it, Thor" Loki said.
It didn’t work, Thor made his eyes even wider.

"Thor, stop it" Loki said through gritted teeth.

Thor stuck out his lower lip.

***

Loki sat back, his eyes on his brother and the small impromptu picnic he was having with about thirteen children. They all sat in a huddle, munching on the treats Loki had bought them. They seemed to be enjoying them.

They should Loki thought it cost about a hundred and fifty dollars

He gripped a string of licorice between his teeth and pulled till it broke before taking it into his mouth and chewing. His own bag of treats was placed next to him on the couch.

The parents had long since come and thanked him, not one of them willing to repay him. Loki didn't mind, he had already shifted some of their 'cash', as they called it, into his pocket via magic.

Thor was now involved in a betting game with a young, blonde haired girl. Loki watched her, her bouncing curls, her big blue eyes.

A pang of something that may have been pain lashed through him.

Sigyn had the same colored eyes, only hers were impossibly wide and innocent. They were curious and inquisitive and made his heart skip a beat whenever she glanced at him.

Without thinking, Loki put his arm around his middle, the place he had been wounded when...

He shook himself out of the memories. They served little purpose and he didn't need them. If he had his magic, he would rid himself of the memories, keep only the pain that drove him, and live off that.

"Excuse me"

Loki turned to see a heavily pregnant woman standing beside him.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked, looking down at him.

Loki shook his head and moved his case and bag of treats to make room for the expectant mother to be.

She sat down with a grateful sigh "Thank you. You don't know how satisfying it is to sit down in this condition."

Loki smirked to himself. He did, actually.

To her, he just nodded.

She looked at him and extended a hand "I'm Emma"

Loki looked at the hand, then at his own. He gripped it gently and shook it once before releasing it.

She smiled, not offended at the cold treatment "This is the part where you say your name. You can talk, right?"
Loki looked at her, no irritation showing on his face "Yes"

She grinned "Ah, so the cat hath not taken your tongue."

Loki found his lips twitching lightly.

"Loki!"

The god of mischief closed his eyes at the crude call. He held back a curse when he heard Thor approach.

"Loki, huh?" Emma smiled "and you're gonna stick with that?"

"Greetings, good Lady" Thor arrived. He took her hand and kissed it "Is my brother being a nuisance?"

Emma smiled "No, more like the other way round. I'm Emma"

"Beautiful name" Thor said "I am Thor Odinson, this is Loki."

"Thor and Loki?" Emma directed the question to Loki "No wonder you didn't want to tell me. Tell me, were your parents really into Norse mythology or did they like what happened in New York a few years ago?"

"We have no parents" Loki said rudely. He stood then, grabbing his things and walking away.

Emma winced "I think I offended him"

"No," Thor said, kissing her hand again "he merely heard our train is departing. Fare thee well, Lady Emma, I wish you and your child every happiness."

"Why thank you, kind sir" Emma bowed.

Thor grinned, straightened and waved to the children, who began to cry out in protest, then left.

***

The thrumming of the tracks and train were soothing to Thor. He felt his eyes begin to droop at the sound.

"Pardon me, sir"

Thor opened his blue gaze to find the wench of the train standing beside him. No, not wench, Loki had told him not to use that word. What did he say? Oh yes, hostess.

"Yes, my lady?"

She blushed at the handsome man looking at her "We will be serving our Midnight Snacks to everyone who is awake. Would you like some?"

"What are you offering?" Thor asked

"Well, we have a variety of sandwiches, finger food and crisps. Other than that, we have a little lobster left over, some roast and a few chocolate assorted sweets. Thought we do not offer what is left of dinner to our guests, I noticed your partner... "
"Brother" Thor supplied looking at Loki. The man's head was turned away as he slept, the blanket fallen to his lap.

"Brother," she seemed happy then "didn't have anything to eat throughout the journey. I was merely wondering."

"He is alright" Thor smiled "And may I have some sandwiches, with beef, if you would be so kind"

She smiled, "Thank you, sir"

After she left, Thor turned back to Loki. His chest moved in and out softly and occasionally his eyes flickereded but he was fast asleep.

Thor reached out and pulled the blanket higher, gently lifting Loki's head to place it firmly on the pillow. He reached back, to the button the 'hostess' had shown him earlier and pressed it. Loki's seat began to recline and Thor released it only when it was flat like a bed.

The woman arrived with Thor's sandwich, lingering a little longer now that she knew he was straight, she fluffed his pillow, straightened his blanket and departed a few moments later. Thor reclined his chair, munching on his sandwich and thinking.

His friends were going to have the surprise of their lives, he realized. The last thing they would expect would be him. He smiled, thinking of Anthony Stark and his humor, of Steve and his admonishments and of the Doctor and his ... green side.

He bit his lip, glancing at Loki who slept by his side. They would not be happy he had arrived. Surely, Loki must have known that, so why had he agreed so readily?

Look, Brother, I get to make all the major decisions

Thor winced at the reminder. Loki didn't say anything because he deemed it useless. Thor had chosen a path and Loki knew he would stick to it. There would be no use for argument.

Loki sighed in his sleep, and turned over, involuntarily placing his head next to Thor's shoulder. He seemed to sense the warmth because he slid closer, breathing contentedly.

Thor suddenly felt the urge to protect him.

Nothing was going to harm his brother, he thought, even if his father had not commanded him, Thor was going to do whatever he could for Loki.

The road ahead was going to be rough when they stopped in New York in the morning and Thor didn't intend to make it harder for his brother.

Thor lifted a hand and placed it around Loki's shoulder as the younger sibling slid over on his chest. He smiled softly. They hadn't slept like this since they were children and Thor found it very soothing. His eyes began to droop again.

When the Stewardess arrived, she saw the brother's snuggled together and smiled. Getting the train's Polaroid camera, she silently took a picture and placed it in the pocket of Thor' causal gray polo shirt.

***

"I blame you for this"
Thor grinned, holding the picture out of Loki's reach. He'd found it when he had awakened this morning, stuffed into his pocket with 'Best wishes' written over the train's name.

Loki tried snatching it from him, but Thor pulled it away. He grinned down at Loki

"I am not giving it to you with the knowledge that you intend to destroy it" Thor laughed "If you wish to see it, here"

He shoved it in Loki's face, like had done a hundred times, and pulled it back before he could take it.

Loki growled at him. He was mortified to see himself cuddled like a child to Thor's side. If only he could get his hands on the wench who took the picture. Damn her, damn Thor, damn everybody!

Thor laughed at his face and stepped out of the train station and into New York city.

There was snow everywhere, on the roads, on the sidewalk and on the people. The temperature was predictably freezing and Thor regretted not wearing something warmer. He looked to his side to see Loki shrug into a long black coat and wrap a green scarf around his shoulders.

He grimaced.

"Feeling cold, are we?" Loki asked, lifting their luggage off the cart and placing it on the concrete floor.

"Yes, I had not thought of this weather" Thor grumbled

"And you wonder why I call you stupid" Loki rolled his eyes, grabbed his belongings and began to walk.

Thor picked up his suitcase and followed him "Where are you going? The cars are that way."

"Cars would mean getting to your friends sooner" Loki called over his shoulder "walking will delay the unpleasant meeting. I wish to enjoy what little solitude I have left, thank you."

Thor jogged by him, slowing to a walk as he came beside him. He knew Loki was unhappy and tried to console him.

"They won't hurt you, you know" Thor said "I will make sure of it."

Loki scoffed "You fool yourself thinking I need protection."

"You needed it the last time" Thor said unthinkingly. He winced "I meant..."

"Never mind" Loki said, looking at the pitiful humans he walked with "You cannot expect your tiny brain to keep completely in track of what it says and thinks at the same time, can you?"

Thor was about to say that was an unwanted insult when a cold wind blew, making him shiver.

"Loki," he said "you would have an extra coat, would you?"

Loki rolled his eyes "Thor, your lack of intellect and common sense astounds me sometimes."

"It is not my fault" Thor said "if I am as stupid as you say, you should have become immune to it by now. I find something wrong with you if you can't do that."

Loki looked at him and smiled. It was a small, genuine one filled with humor.
"That wasn't a bad joke, Thor" Loki said in approval "my minion learns."

Thor narrowed his eyes.

"Stop here" Loki said

Thor stopped and watched as Loki opened his suitcase and pulled out another black coat. It was wrinkled, but after closing the case firmly, Loki ran a hand over it and it looked brand new.

Thor made a face at the magic, but donned the coat. Since it was Loki's it didn't fit him that well, though they were the same in height. It was opened at the front and wouldn't close, so Thor let it go.

They walked in silence for a while, snow crunching beneath their boots, before Thor spoke again.

"You wouldn't be worried by any chance, Loki?"

"No." Loki said steadfastly

"Good, so you have no qualms about me showing this picture to my friends?" Thor grinned.

Loki glared at him through murderous eyes "Don't you dare."

Thor grinned "Behave, let me talk to them, and I won't. Consider it a deal."

Loki looked at Thor's extended hand. He debated for a second before shaking it. "Deal"

They walked in companionable silence and sooner than Loki wanted, found themselves a few meters away from Stark Towers.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, I am having major problems with either the formatting or these irritating codes. Can someone help? I swear I am not annoying!! I'm just new here and am still learning. How can I make these codes vanish?
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Onwards to the Avengers

Thor walked through the doors, extremely aware of the fact that his brother was behind him, almost pasted to his back. He received a few curious stares as he carried three cases inside but no one said much and apart from a handful of lengthy glances, Thor had no attention paid to him.

Somehow, he found that a little insulting.

"Stop thinking" Loki whispered from behind him, keeping a hand on Thor's shoulder "this is your plan and for some reason I have chosen to trust you. Do not make me regret it by doing something as foreign as thinking."

"Your insulting is not appreciated, brother" Thor replied.

"Keep your eyes ahead" Loki said, keeping close to Thor "it will look strange, you talking to yourself. You are gaining more than enough attention as it is."

Thor held back on the retort he wanted to make and made his way to the counter his invisible brother had directed him to. He could still he him, Loki had made sure of that.

"Tell her who you are and demand to see Anthony Stark" Loki whispered "Make sure you sound arrogant" he slapped Thor's rump "That should be easy for you."

The woman behind the counter frowned lightly when the huge blonde man approaching her suddenly jumped, his mouth tightening in anger. Her face was impassive when he reached her.

"Good morning, sir" she said "who do you have an appointment with?"

"Uh..." Thor began, forgetting whatever Loki had said.

Loki massaged his temples as he stood beside Thor "You are Thor Odinson, you don't need an appointment."

"I am Thor, I need no appointment" Thor said "tell Mr. Stark his friend had arrived."

The woman looked at him impassively "Will that be all?"

"She doesn't believe you" Loki sneered "stupidly, I had thought your plan would work."

Thor moved as if to put one ankle behind the other and kicked his shin, smiling lightly when Loki hopped on one leg, cursing him in different tongues. He placed his elbows on the counter and looked at the woman again.

"Listen, lady" he said, with just a trace of arrogance in his voice "believe me or not when I say I am Thor of Asgard, the man who saved your city five years ago from a maniac trying to destroy it, that is your choice." He felt Loki kick him back, but he didn't even flinch "However, believe this; if Tony
Stark finds out I was here and that I left without meeting him because you were the one who stopped me, he will not be pleased. So I suggest you press whatever contraption you have to summon Stark and still keep your ill paying profession."

The woman nodded and pressed a button.

"That went surprisingly well" Loki said an hour later from where he leaned on the wall "At least you were arrogant."

Thor was sitting inside a secure cell in the basement of Stark Towers. He was seated on a cement bench, elbows braced on his knees, face held in his hands.

"Shut up, Loki" Thor muttered "or I will strip the magic from you."

Loki didn't reply. He walked about freely, looking over things, forcing his way into the computers and looking at personal files. Thor watched him snoop about, frowning when his demand to get the keys was rejected by his younger brother. He didn't even give a reason for his answer.

Thor saw him sit in one of the employees chairs and begin tapping the keys of his computer.

"Ooh" he grimaced "Nasty."

"What is it?" Thor asked, standing.

Loki was about to reply when he heard voices and heavy footsteps approach.

Thor saw his eyes widen and saw him stand an instant before realizing he couldn't be seen. However, he still walked to a safe hiding place incase Thor decided to end his magic.

"Why was I not informed an hour ago!?"

Thor grinned when he heard Tony Stark's voice. A second later, the man himself walked through the doors, the receptionist and a security man at his side.

His eyes sought for Thor and blinked at finding him. He grinned and walked over; he snickered when he saw what Thor had gotten himself into.

"Let him out" Tony said to his security man "he's a friend."

Thor was grinning as he was let loose and walked out.

"Stark!"

Loki rolled his eyes when Thor grabbed Tony in a bear hug that the other man clearly disliked.

Tony felt his back pop under the pressure Thor put on him.

"Okay, okay, okay, let me go!" he croaked, panting when Thor released him "still a hugger, Sparky."

Thor laughed, slapping his back "It is so good to see you, my friend. Where are the others?"

"Heh" Tony chuckled "Not so fast, first you gotta tell me why you are here. Did that lunatic brother of yours escape?"

Loki narrowed his eyes, moving forward. He stopped, surprisingly, when Thor looked at him over
Tony's head.

"Uh, no" Thor said, ignoring the way Loki shook his head in disgust "but... there is something I need to discuss with you."

"Your dire statements always bode ill, Sparks" Tony said, grimacing. Then he smiled "Sure, It's been a good day, why not spoil it with some bad news? Come on."

He turned around to leave and Thor followed him, once again aware of how Loki stuck close to him. He could feel the anger emanating from the trickster.

***

Loki once again leaned on the wall as he watched Thor explain the situation to Tony. He wouldn't admit it, but he was glad Thor had chosen Tony to talk to. Out of all those accursed Avengers, he was the one with the most chance of listening without really lashing out.

Then again, that was only a guess.

They were now in the very room Loki had thrown Tony out of five years ago. It had been renovated and refurnished. Loki noticed, his lip curling, that the place their monster had left him was once again perfected; no sign of his bashing existed. He growled lightly and looked around.

Loki was still invisible to everyone but Thor. He didn't mind; the more magic he used, the more he would save up for later.

Tony was holding a glass of weak drink as he listened to Thor. He smiled lightly at the fact that Thor had omitted how Loki was here only a few feet away from the billionaire. He'd changed the story to suit him, he noted, telling Tony half truths and the like; basically not letting the man know, for now, that the one entity he feared, was somewhere behind him.

Had he wanted to, Loki would have been proud.

"So," he said after Thor finished "you were sent here because your brother was crowned ... which I find incredibly stupid on Daddy's behalf ... and now you have to .... what?"

Thor took a deep breath, giving Loki a small glance "Make my brother repent. Otherwise, he becomes King to Asgard."

"Strange ritual, you people have, make one king, then change your mind. Your father is kind of extreme, no?" Tony scoffed, standing with his glass "And fat chance of getting your brother to repent, he is by far the most evil, homicidal, maniacal psycho I have ever seen. He tried killing us because he could and now you expect him to repent when he isn't even here? Is there something you need to tell me, Sparks? I mean, why are you here, really? Why did your father send you and not your brother when he..." Tony broke off as a thought occurred "He's right behind me, isn't he?"

Thor looked at the floor in apology.

Tony pretended he hadn't whimpered when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He stood still as Loki walked to stand beside him.

"Anthony Stark" Loki smiled, looking down at him. The gesture didn't do anything to soften his features or make him any less intimidating than the last time Tony had been alone with him.

Tony turned to look at him with a mixture of the arrogance and fear on his face "Hey..."
Loki gasped softly when he suddenly felt the magic drain from him. He snapped his head to Thor, his anger evident on his face. Thor was standing now, ready to defend Tony incase Loki decided to kill him.

"Jarvis, do enable my defense system" Tony said, slinking out of Loki's grasp "keep it ready, please"

Defense system armed, sir

"Thank you" Tony watched the silent byplay between the gods and found himself not panicking for some reason. He saw Loki narrow his eyes and Thor shake his head ever so slightly.

A few tense seconds later, the god of lies backed off.

"Okay, that was highly unexpected" Tony said, surprised at Loki’s easy retreat "Why don't we start at the beginning? Jarvis, shield us."

I do not think that is wise, Sir. Do you not recall what happened the last time this gentleman was here?

"Do it, Jarvis" Tony said

I could play it for you

"Jarvis..."

Jarvis sighed Very well. You are now shielded, shall I keep a copy here for you?

"No," Tony said "Just make sure no one enters this room, okay?"

Very wise, Sir

Tony smirked at his computer and turned to the two gods in the room. Loki looked livid and Thor looked edgy; dangerous combination.

"I suggest you start talking" Tony said, going to fill his glass again "and explain everything twice for good measure."

***

Tony rubbed his temples as he digested everything Thor had just explained for a third time. There was a half finished bottle of vodka placed next to him and he filled his glass again as Thor explained how Odin had told him Loki would make a better king than he.

Loki snickered at this, gaining a dirty look from his brother. He no longer had sufficient magic and had decided on invading Tony's drinks cabinet.

"You find something amusing, brother?" Thor asked.

"Yes" Loki, who was perched elegantly on a barstool, replied "your constant belief that you have a chance of beating me."

"I will" Thor said "that crown is mine, Loki. I will not let it go"

"You don't have it" Loki pointed down, downing the contents of his own large glass like water.

Tony winced.
"I am the crowned prince" Loki clarified "I am the one your father chose and I will be the one to sit on the throne .... again."

"Again?" Tony couldn't help himself "so this has happened before?"

Thor's gaze narrowed dangerously at Loki "Unfortunately, my brother thought it wise to put our father into a comatose state after I was ... sent - to Earth before. He took the throne by force."

"It was handed to me by your mother" Loki grinned "funny how that hurts, is it not?"

Thor stood "That was an act of desperation, and you know it."

"Call it whatever you wish" Loki said lightly, filling his glass with the bland drink again "but you will show me respect when we get back, Subject."

Thor growled and began to walk to Loki.

"Jarvis, do we have insurance against godly destruction?" Tony asked from his perch.

**Yes, Sir. You had that put into contract after Prince Loki's last attack**

Tony scowled at the status Jarvis mentioned, but chose to ignore it, turning his attention to the two dangerous men in his living room. Insured or not, he had no desire for this.

"Hey, hey that's enough" he jumped to his feet, getting between the two; he grimaced at the fact that he had to look up to both of them as they glared at each other. They ignored him, walking to each other in their rage, as he wasn't even there.

"I said, stop!" Tony spread his arms, hands on both their chests as they closed in.

They stopped, much to his surprise, but their angry gazes were still locked with each other.

"Okay, why don't we calm down and...;"

Tony's sentence was cut off when the door exploded.

"What the...? Jarvis!"

A whole line of agents came into the room, their weapons pointed at the three occupants of the room.

"What the hell is going on!?!" Tony demanded hands raised, not in surrender, in a placating manner.

"I could ask the same of you"

**Sir, it seems Director Fury is here to see you**

"Thank you, Jarvis" Tony said dryly. To Fury, he smiled "Fury, what brings you to my humble home?"

"Save it for the Board, Stark" Nick Fury snapped "you're going to need it."

"Come on," Tony laughed a little nervously "what did I do?"

"Harbor a criminal, Stark" Fury said "did you really think we wouldn't find out? Your receptionist alerted us the second she saw Thor. Your receptionist! Why didn't you come to us the second they arrived?"
Tony frowned, looking patronizing even as he was worried "Because I do not answer to you."

Clearly, the Director didn't like this. But he chose to ignore the simple truth.

Fury's gaze went to the two Asgardians. He narrowed his eyes at Loki, who glared back insolently.

"Arrest him"

"No!" Thor moved forward, shielding Loki. Mjolnir flew through one of Tony's walls; much to the dislike of the billionaire, and landed in his hand "No one touches him."

"Step down, Asgardian" Fury rasped "there is no need to make this ugly."

"You want my brother, you have to go through me" Thor glared at him.

"We have no desire to fight you" Fury said, raising a hand when his agents cocked their weapons "we merely want him."

"You can't have him" Thor rasped.

Once again, Tony stepped between a fight, rolling his eyes. "Gentlemen, let's talk like civilized people for once, no?"

"There is nothing civilized about this" Fury said "Thor, I give you the last warning. Step back or we will take him by force. Either way, he is coming with us."

"No" Thor said, the skies began to darken outside.

"Very well" Fury said sadly "I didn't wish to do this, Thor, but you leave me no choice. Your brother is a terrorist to this world. He is a dangerous criminal and deserves to be locked up, not run around freely."

Thor ignored the fact that he had said something just like that to Odin and disagreed "Nevertheless, he is my prince and I will not let harm come to him."

"If you do not hand him over," Fury said, extending a hand for a file an agent gave him "then I am afraid we will have to make you."

Tony frowned

"Either we take him" Fury said flatly "or Jane. The choice is yours."

Thor went white in both anger and fear. He felt Loki shift behind him, muttering under his breath.

"Don't, brother" Thor said softly and to his surprise, Loki stopped the weak curse.

Fury was about to move when Tony stopped him "Give me a chance to talk to them. Five minutes to change their minds."

Fury seemed reluctant, but since it would prevent a blood bath, he nodded "Five minutes."

"Listen to him, Thor" Tony said, coming beside the thunder god "there is no way to save them both."

Thor glared at him "What?"
"I said listen to him" Tony muttered, ignoring the way Loki glowered at him "he is not kidding. He will go and get Jane; let Loki go now, and I will find a way to bring him back."

"Bastard," Loki cussed at him "you just want me out of your hair."

"Partly," Tony said bluntly "but mostly because I know you can take a lot more than that innocent girl can."

Thor watched Tony turn back to him "I know these people, they don't joke around, Thor. Let him go now, I have a plan, trust me."

Loki scoffed "We have no intention of trusting you, Anthony. Let them do their worse."

"Very well" Thor said loudly.

Tony closed his eyes in relief, Loki stared at him.

"What?!" he looked at the man standing not too far away and at his agents. A slight fear stirred within "Thor, you can't be serious."

Fury nodded and his men moved forward.

Loki stepped away from them, startled when Thor didn't even move "Thor, what are you doing?"

Thor looked away, his heart beginning to hurt. He couldn't let them take Jane, but he couldn't let them harm Loki either. It hurt him, physically hurt him, when Loki backed away from his side, but it was the lesser of two evils. He exhaled, trying to breathe.

Tony placed a hand on his shoulder.

"No!" Loki cried, trying to get away. He turned to bolt past, but three agents grabbed him firmly "Unhand me, you fools! Thor!"

He looked back at Thor, struggling against the men dragging him away "Thor, help me!"

Thor closed his eyes against the sight of his brother being dragged off, but he couldn't get rid of his cries for help.

"Thor!" he pulled against the men but, without his magic, they had him "Brother, please!"

Tears stung his eyes but he refused to let them fall. One agent, larger than even Thor, had grabbed Loki around the waist and lifted him, easily taking him away despite his struggles.

"Thor, help me, please!" Loki's yells for help receded into the distance and Thor could feel the pain in his heart increase with every desperate wail.

***

Steve leaned against the wall as he listened to Tony explain everything. He had come here when Tony had sent an urgent message to him and found all the other Avengers, Clint excluded, waiting at his apartment.

Even Thor was there, but the god was hunched over a chair, head in his hands. His hammer was carelessly dropped on the ground. He looked broken.

"Steve, you in on this?" Tony asked him suddenly.
He didn't like it. Not one bit. He had been less vocal than Natasha and Bruce, but he silently agreed with them.

Loki was a criminal, a deadly one at that; he'd killed hundreds and destroyed more than half of this city. Fury was doing the right thing in taking him away. Granted it wasn't the best way, but he was right.

Captain America sighed "I don't know."

"Don't know?" Tony asked "Cap, that man has no magic. He won't be able to heal himself when they torture him"

Thor made a small sound

"If they torture him" Tony corrected, wincing.

"Tony," Natasha said "do you hear yourself? We fought against him, he is the enemy. Since when have we helped those who kill innocent people for fun?"

"Nat," Tony sighed, trying to persuade them for the tenth time in the past hour "you can't possibly be this..."

"This what, Tony?" she snapped "This cold? Of course I am, but you can't be this naïve, Loki will destroy us if we even give him a whisper of a chance!"

"He is a villain" Bruce added "how would you like it if we brought one of our enemies here and ask that they stay with us?"

"This is different" Tony nearly growled "Our enemies have not been weakened, they have not been banished or had their powers taken away."

"He killed Coulson" Steve said "how will we forgive that?"

Tony rubbed his face. He knew this wasn't going to be easy.

"Guys, please just listen..."

"We are not recruiting him as one of us" Natasha said firmly, standing "you saw what he did to Clint, what's stopping him from doing it again?"

"I am"

They all turned to the weak voice Thor raised. They saw him stand.

"My brother has been through more, seen more than all of us combined" Thor told them "he had suffered throughout his life and I am sad to say I have done little to prevent it. Whatever sins he committed against you were retaliation against my father and me. He was angry; his life had been taken away, ripped from him in an instant and he lashed out in pain. When he was taken back to Asgard, he was broken and battered. I am ashamed at how badly I treated him and impressed at how proudly he took everything. But this," he broke off to take a deep breath "this is a crime he has already paid for. He holds no magic, my friends; he is fragile and defenseless. Please, help me bring him back because the only other way of doing so is a fight. I do not wish to fight you, I fought beside you and I prefer that. Please, I ask you not as a god, but as a brother, help Loki and I will keep him from causing trouble."
There was a terse silence after Thor's words and he was afraid they were refusing.

Then Natasha growled "Damn you, Thor. This is going to get me fired!"

Bruce put his head in his hands "I can't believe I am doing this."

"Neither did I" Tony said, relieved "but this guy is one smooth talker."

"I had better not regret this" Natasha said, pointing a finger at Thor.

Thor smiled slightly "I shall do everything not to make it so."

Steve was the only one who didn't say anything. He pushed himself off the wall and joined his friends.

"So what is your plan, Stark?"

Tony grinned "We go get Loki; our new Avenger."

***

Loki stumbled and fell on the floor when he was pushed inside. He hit the solid ground with more force than he'd predicted and cried out against the thick leather strap that covered his mouth.

His hands were tied behind his bleeding back and his ankles were chained together.

Funny how, through the pain and humiliation, Loki found a way to be impressed by the efficiency of SHIELD and their methods.

Fury had lost no time in stripping Loki, leaving only enough to be moral, and strapping him to a thick metal table.

He'd begun asking him why he was there, what his agenda was, did he have control of an army again?

When Loki had sneered, called him a son of a cankerous whore, the spawn of an immoral cunt, Fury had initiated an exquisite suffering.

Loki had been electrocuted till he screamed, his body arched off the table as the agonizing pain lashed through him, killing him but not letting him die at the same time.

He'd been slashed too, but he couldn't remember when. Probably sometime after they had placed that strap across his mouth.

His terror filled, anguished screams had gained too much attention and Fury had taken that away from him as well.

He'd been beaten to a pulp by a few agents in retribution to Coulson and then he'd been thrown back here.

It was amazing how all this happened in a few hours. He wondered what they could do in a day.

He lay on the ground, bound like a common animal, and let the few tears fall from his eyes.

Oh, how he wished his brother was here.
He wished for Thor so badly he wasn't even angry at him abandoning him at the first sign of trouble. He understood it, Loki realized, that Jane would have been dead had this been directed at her and Thor couldn't allow it. Loki, at least, was immortal.

He flinched involuntarily when the bolt opened once more.

He willed himself to ignore the urge to cringe when a dark figure emerged from the door, silhouetted against the light.

They couldn't possibly be ready again? He hadn't even time to recover!

"Loki!"

Loki froze when he heard Thor's voice. His voice was muffled against the gag, but the relief was apparent.

Thor rushed forward, dropping to his knees beside Loki. He embraced him tightly, then released him when Loki made a painful noise. He buried his face momentarily in Thor's shoulder, composing himself.

"Brother, what have they done to you?" Thor looked down, fear in his eyes as he saw the blood and wounds on Loki.

Loki didn't reply, he couldn't really, but he moved away from Thor and slid across the floor.

He saw Thor's eyes widen as his heart broke. His worst fear had come true. Loki was blaming him for this.

"Loki...." Thor made to move forward.

He stopped when he saw the murder in Loki's green eyes and the way he pushed himself farther away from Thor. He dropped his hands to his sides, his shoulders slumping in grief.

Another noise made the brothers look up.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt" Steve said, hanging on the door "but the board is ready for you. Loki, I'll get you some clothes and you can change in privacy. You have to come, too."

Loki glanced from Steve to Thor and back. He didn't really know what was happening, but he had an idea. Steve vanished, leaving Loki alone with Thor again.

Thor was still on his knees, reeling from Loki's rejection, his accusations and the horrible pain in his heart.

"Loki, I -"

Loki looked away, unable to speak. They stayed in silence again.

A few minutes later, Steve came back with a casual t-shirt and sweat pants.

"Thor, you could have untied him" Steve said disapprovingly. He handed Thor the clothes and approached Loki slowly.

"I won't hurt you" Steve said "so you don't get to hurt me, understand?"

Loki didn't nod or shake his head, but Steve moved to undo the bounds on his wrists. Loki moved a
little to give him more space and a few minutes later, he was free. His hands went to the blasted thing around his mouth and he tore it off.

Steve and Thor winced at the bruise on Loki's eye and the cuts on his lips.

Loki threw the thing away and went to work on the bounds on his ankles. He stopped suddenly, realizing Steve had the key. He turned his head to Captain America and raised a hand.

They key was dropped in and a few seconds later, Loki was free.

He stood on slightly shaking legs and gazed at the men in the room.

"If you could give me some privacy that would be appreciated" he muttered.

Steve nodded and pulled Thor with him as he went out, throwing Loki the clothes he had found. Loki caught them with relative ease, but refused to meet Thor's gaze as the man left the room.

The door closed heavily for Thor, far too heavy for him to think beyond his betrayal to his brother.

***

Tony was fighting back a grin as he saw Loki sitting in an Avenger's sweat shirt.

The man was clearly unhappy, obviously, but he seemed composed as he answered the questions the SHIELD agent asked him. He was seated with a young, probably easily manipulated agent, in one of the interrogation rooms; he looked irritated rather than the traumatized man she should have been. He was obviously stronger than Thor had thought.

"And that would be in years?" the young man asked the god sitting opposite him.

"Of course, you idiot, what other measure is there for age?" Loki snapped.

Bruce snickered as the young agent flinched "Tony, this was a brilliant idea. But I am afraid of what will happen if he ever -"

"He won't" Thor cut in "I will make sure of that."

Bruce shrugged "Alright"

He didn't really believe him, but when he agreed to this, he was left little choice but to believe what Thor - and Tony -said.

They watched the young agent from the recording room, wondering if he knew why he was so zealously pushed in and never let out.

Natasha smiled a little when she recalled how the man had turned back to run when he realized who he would interview. He seemed to have calmed down, but every move Loki made, the agent twitched in worry. Loki seemed to have noticed to, because he was making all sorts of strange gestures.

"Um, your marital s-status?" the agent asked

Loki narrowed his eyes and stilled. It didn't seem like he wanted to answer and Steve noticed how Thor had tensed as well.

"I would have filled that myself" Tony said, sipping coffee "it's painfully obvious and it only seems
to piss him off."

"Divorced" Loki supplied.

Tony did a spit take "What!?"

He was shushed by everyone in the room.

"Divorced?" Tony whispered to Thor, who raised a hand to tell him 'later'. He looked around to see the others somewhere between amused and surprised. However, they all listened with increased fervor now.

"Okay," the young man wrote Loki's answer down "You ... Did you ... Do you have any children? I only ask because we need to know incase an enemy-"

"Four"

Tony's eyes widened, but he remained silent. Suddenly, he realized he knew nothing of Loki.

"A- and where are they?" the agent asked "um, situated, if -"

"Not on this planet" Loki answered.

"Wow, there is apparently a lot Loki is hiding" Natasha commented.

"Uh-" the young agent stuttered over an awkward question "have you been classified as ... as homicidal?"

Loki raised an eyebrow.

The Avengers waited.

"Yes" Loki eventually said

"Okay," the agent said "um, you have to elaborate on - on that, sir"

"Okay" Loki sighed and sat forward, smirking when the agent backed up a little in response "I killed, what, eighty people in two days, I killed an entire alien clan and so many other beings that I lost count after three hundred years."

The man nodded and scribbled his answer.

"Will that jeopardize the membership?" Steve asked Tony

"No, I don't think so" the man replied "I mean, Clint and Nat killed even before they were SHIELD agents, right?"

Natasha smiled at Steve's suddenly worried face "Yep"

"Are you suicidal?"

The next question put Loki on edge "What?"

The man flinched and swallowed "I only ask the questions, I'm not even a field agent."

"Stop your whimpering, you ill bred varlot" Loki snapped "it annoys me."
The agent took a breath to compose himself.

Loki sighed, scratching his head "What was - your question?"

"Have - have you ever tried killing yourself?"

Tony turned when Thor made a deceptively small movement. The man's knuckles were white as he clenched his hands around his biceps, awaiting Loki's answer.

Loki took a deep breath before continuing with a dead panned expression "Yes, I have."

Where the Avengers were surprised, stunned really, Thor closed his eyes in pain.

Oh, Loki.

"Uh" the agent didn't know how to ask the next question.

Loki answered it for him "Three times, human. The answer is three times. Now are you done?"

He shook his head "A few more"

Loki rolled his eyes to the ceiling "Very well, go on, boy."

The rest of the interview passed by in a daze for Thor.

*His brother had tried killing himself not once, but three times*

He was still reeling from what he knew was the first time Loki let go of Mjolnir and fell; he knew that was a try for death. And now he was faced with the idea of him trying two more times and failing.

Odin, what torment must Loki deal with everyday!? What torture he must have gone through to first decide upon ending his life, then attempting it and staggering from the failure of the act, not one but three times! What poison flowed in his blood? Oh stars, this was more complicated than Thor thought possible.

He suddenly felt sick.

"Steve..."

Thor didn't know he had stumbled till Tony's voice wafted in the air and he felt Steve steady him.

"Come on, Thor" Steve said, helping him "You need a little rest."

Thor didn't resist as he was taken away.

Natasha, Bruce and Tony looked at each other.

Suddenly, they knew the true motive behind Loki's attack on New York.

***

A few weeks later, Tony emerged from his room to start the day. Last night had been a dizzy one for him, all he really remembered was flashes of lights and women & 150; oh the women he remembered clearly.

Ever since he'd broken up with Pepper, this was the way he lived. He worked, or he partied; there
was no middle ground. A year had passed like this and he had yet to notice. His head was spinning and it took longer than usual to make his way to the kitchen.

"Jarvis..." he grumbled "Door..."

The door to the kitchen slid open and Tony walked through. He came to a dead stop when he saw what was happening inside.

Loki was sitting at the kitchen island, calmly drinking his coffee as he waited for his breakfast. His cook, Tony blinked, was wearing a pink apron over ill fitting, torn trousers and nothing else. His green skin was tight as he moved about, making Loki's omelets, bacon and pancakes.

Tony rubbed his eyes as the Hulk turned, a blank look on his face, and placed the food he had finished making in front of Loki. He then brought over orange juice and poured it for the god.

"Good monster" Loki said sneeringly

The hulk bowed to him and went to stand in the corner, hands tied at his front.

"Tell me I'm dreaming" Tony muttered, walking over "Enjoying the morning, Loki?"

Loki gave him a small glance "I was"

He started on his breakfast as Tony went to the coffee machine.

"You ...uh" Tony leaned against the counter "you mind explaining what that is?"

He gestured to the clearly trance induced Hulk.

"I do not know what you are talking about" Loki muttered, looking through a newspaper.

Tony moved forward "Loki, you can't put people under a..."

Tony broke off as the Hulk pushed himself off the wall and glowered at him.

"Do not fret, my pet" Loki addressed the green man, his green eyes scanning the paper "he merely had too much to drink."

Tony's lips tightened but he knew he was no match for the Hulk.

*Jesus, why hadn't Loki done this before?*

They would have been pulverized if he had controlled Bruce this way.

*But, Tony thought, his intention wasn't really to take over Earth, was it?*

Ever since that revelation, the Avengers had developed a small percentile of softness towards Loki. They knew he didn't like it but if he noticed, he hadn't shown it.

Tony growled, threw his hands up and left the kitchen. He stomped through the halls and into the bedroom Thor had been assigned.

"Sparky!" Tony banged his fist on the door, ignoring the headache it gave him "Sparky open up, your bro's doing it again!"

Tony kept banging his fist till the door swung open. He stumbled and looked up at the sleep
"What is it?" Thor grumbled, squinting against the light

"Your brother is controlling Bruce again" Tony said "stop it"

"What?" Thor looked behind him, to the bed and found it empty. He growled in slowly rising anger
"Loki..."

Tony stepped aside and let him pass.

Thor, dressed only in soft pants, padded through the kitchen. Sure enough, Loki was sitting, not on a chair, but lounging on the Hulk, who was on all fours in the middle of the kitchen.

"Loki!" Thor said, his expression scandalized.

Loki turned to him with a bored expression as he sipped Tony's intended coffee "Yes?"

Thor walked over "Loki, what are you doing? Get off!"

Rolling his eyes, Loki jumped off the Hulk.

"Release him!" Thor said, stopping before him.

Loki snapped his fingers.

The Hulk blinked, confused at his position. He looked around and spotted Thor and Loki.

Thor pulled Loki behind his back as he saw Bruce put the pieces together. The Hulk stood, flexing his muscles and glared down at them.

Thor held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"Bruce, it's alright nothing happened" Thor said, his voice soothing "it was a joke, a harmless joke."

Hulk looked at Loki once, his eyes narrowing at his smirk, then shook his head.

"Puny god" he muttered the two words he knew pissed Loki off.

Loki's gaze narrowed as the beast passed and he lifted a hand, cradling a red curse in it.

"No, Loki" Thor pulled his hand down just in time.

The spell disintegrated and Bruce went through the door.

"What is wrong with you?" Thor spun on Loki, grabbing his shoulders "why can't you understand one simple thing? Do not hex the people who saved you!"

"We have to establish a few basic ground rules" Tony said, walking in "Number one, nothing good comes from messing around with the Hulk."

"That's a rule?" Loki asked, scoffing.

"No, you didn't let me finish" Tony picked out another mug to make his coffee "Nothing good comes from messing with the Hulk, so the next time you do; he will decide what to do with you."

Loki rolled his eyes and downed the scalding coffee in one single gulp, making both Thor and Tony
wince.

He placed the cup aside with a clank "Do your worst."

He walked off but found his path blocked by Tony. He looked down at the shorter man challengingly. A small staring match ensued.

Then Tony sighed and let him pass. Loki didn't look back as he disappeared down the hall.

"Where the hell does he get his magic?" Tony asked as he made his coffee "I thought you stopped it!"

"He starves himself and his body produces it" Thor replied, sliding into a chair "it is meant for survival but he uses it to create chaos."

"He's not starving, I just saw him &150; " Tony stopped when he turned to the plate Loki had filled.

It was apparent only a bite or two had been taken and the rest was just the way it had been.

Thor sighed and pulled the plate over, grabbing Loki's fork and finishing his breakfast.

Tony sighed "This can't be healthy"

"It's not" Thor said, forking up some bacon "but he won't listen to anything I say."

"He listened now" Tony pointed out, as he waited.

"A rarity" Thor said "as was the way he talked to me"

Tony's mug began to fill "He talks..."

"He curses me, Stark" Thor said sadly "there is a difference."

Tony bit his lip and went silent. When his coffee was done, he sat opposite his friend and sipped it. The second it went down his throat, he felt better and the migraine receded.

"What do I do?" Thor asked, pushing the now empty plate away "I have destroyed the small tether of friendship I had with him by choosing Jane and now ..."

Tony waited as he broke off.

"Now he hates me even more" Thor lowered his head.

"He doesn't hate you" Tony drawled "He's just pissed off right now. We can't really blame him."

Thor glared at him tiredly.

"Sorry" Tony said, sipping his coffee again.

Eventually, Bruce joined them. He surprised Thor, this man, for example, he wasn't mad that Loki had controlled him ...for what seemed like the hundredth time... he had a good humor about it and wanted to study Loki's abilities. Thor would have punched the daylights out of his brother the first time he tried it...perhaps that was the difference, right there, that Thor needed to change.

Thor sighed "I'm tired-I shall retire once again."
Bruce wanted to ask him to stay but Tony shook his head. Now wasn't the time.

Thor trudged back to the room he and Loki shared, his head heavy with his thoughts. He opened the door to find Loki already sprawled on the bed, sleeping. Thor gently closed the door and walked in, getting in beside Loki. He was pulling up the covers when he saw something grasped loosely in Loki's hand. He leaned forward and smiled softly.

It was the picture the woman on the train had taken. It was bent in half now, and Thor gently took it from Loki's fingers and straightened it out. He grabbed one of Loki's books and placed the picture inside before putting it under his pillow.

For the first time in weeks, Thor didn't silently cry himself to sleep.

***

When Thor emerged from the room a second time that day, he noticed two things; one was that there was no one around, and the other thing he felt was a distinct coldness around Stark's home.

There was nothing out of place, but the sheer emptiness was there, almost transparent.

Thor looked around for a good half hour before it became clear there was no one around. He turned back to his rooms, wanting to make sure Loki was still there.

He was, curled up in a starvation induced sleep and calmly breathing. Thor stepped out of the room, but didn't step away.

"Sir Jarvis?"

Yes?

Thor was amazed at how a computer could mimic discomfort "Where is everyone?"

*Downstairs in the laboratory. They have been there for almost an hour.*

"Is anything wrong?"

*Something concerning Agent Barton, other than that I am not allowed to tell you unless Mr. Stark approves it*

"Thank you, Sir Jarvis" Thor said, making his way to where he knew Tony's lab was.

*Welcome, Prince of Asgard*

Thor could swear Jarvis had rolled his eyes if he was real. He hastened his stride and soon found himself in Tony Stark's lab. The doors were glass and he could see his friends on the other side, gathered over something. All of their faces were dire.

He knocked on the glass and was surprised when he saw small holographic lights dance on the smooth surface.

Jarvis sighed  *Sir, enter the password if you wish to go in*

"What?"

There was a sigh again and Thor saw Tony lift his head and then glance at the door. He muttered
something to Jarvis and a second later the doors parted for Thor.

"Friends, what is happening?" he asked walking over.

Natasha didn't glance up, her gaze was firmly planted on the floor in what Thor suspected was an attempt at controlling hysteria.

"Clint is missing" Steve told him "he was on a four week mission and was expected to return three nights ago. When he didn't, a few agents were sent in to investigate." He sighed "all they found was his bow and blood on the walls."

Natasha had a finger to her lips, chewing her nail softly. She didn't say anything, but her body tensed.

"Fury wants us to look into it" Steve continued, then turned to Tony "which is surprising since he hadn't talked to us in weeks."

"Then it must be dire" Thor concluded "We have to go"

"Go where?" Natasha said, her voice terse "We don't know where the hell he is! All we have is blood and a bow, there is no trace, no trace, of him, believe me when I say it. SHIELD doesn't say 'nothing was found' unless they mean it." she sighed "where do we even start?"

"We could spread out" Tony began

"And what?" Bruce asked "Each of us take a continent? Even if we had the whole of SHEILD we couldn't manage that. We would need a miracle or a tracking device the size of Asia to find him."

A thought popped into Thor's mind "I may not have an Asia tracking device, but I do have a miracle"

They turned to him, frowning.

Tony rolled his eyes "Yeah, good luck in getting him to co operate. We have a better chance at the Asia Tracker."

"Thor this is no time for..."

"No, my friends, hear me out" Thor cut off Steve "his magic is powerful, much more than you have ever seen. He can cast a spell to discover your Barton in mere moments. We can fetch him then."

"If he's alive" Natasha murmured.

"Loki can alter-" Thor broke off then, gaining unwanted attention.

"Alter what?" Natasha looked at him; then her eyes widened "Alter death? He can bring people to life?"

"I didn't say that" Thor said

"But you didn't not say it" Natasha's hope was suddenly shown on her impassive face "Thor, do you know what this means?"

"It means" Bruce cut in, gaining a grateful look from Thor "that we cross that bridge when it comes, right now, we need Loki to help."
"That is something I never thought I would hear you say, Bruce" Tony said.

"I never thought I would say it, either" Bruce replied "but the fact of the matter is, it's the only way we seem to have other than combing the whole world for Clint."

Silence fell as each person was taken in by their thoughts.

"So" Tony said eventually "any ideas on how to get Loki to co operate?"

***

"No"

Thor closed his eyes and placed his forehead against the table he sat on "Loki-"

"I said 'no'" Loki repeated "I have no interest in gaining you a good rapport with your friends, Thor. Leave me be."

"Loki, he could be dead" Thor pleaded for the twentieth time in the past two hours

"I don't care" Loki said, flipping the page of his book and reading.

"They rescued you, Loki" Thor said "by putting their names on the line, they took you from that horrid place!"

"That you threw me into, Thor" Loki added "try not forgetting that."

Thor growled at the guilt that coursed through him "Brother, you weren't there to see how they pleaded for your release. They all stood by me and threatened to quit the Avengers if Fury and the Council didn't let you go. They wanted you in their protection, under their banner."

Loki lifted his hand and turned another page, shifting to more comfort on the couch in their guest room.

Thor sighed "Loki, please, you have to help them. You owe it to them."

"I owe them nothing"

"Yes you do, you would still be getting tortured if they hadn't stepped in" Thor pointed out.

Loki snapped the book shut and looked at Thor "Do you know what was going through my mind when they were trying to force me to 'cooperate'?"

Thor blinked but remained silent, bracing himself.

"I was thinking of you and how you would come bursting through the doors any moment and stop them" Loki went on, putting the book aside "when they electrocuted me, I screamed in nothing but the hope that somehow you would hear me, I shrieked in terror because I had no magic and was at the mercy of that - that son of a whore, Fury. And has no mercy, I can tell you that." Loki sneered and stood "When you didn't come, I came to a resolve; I would never call for you again, because you ignored my pleas for help the second I needed you most. How do you think that made me feel?" he walked away, leaving Thor at the table "it made me feel dead, cold and aloof. And that is why I say 'no'. No to your pleas for help, no to your begging and no to those friends of yours that I detest. Go! Do whatever you please but do not have the gall to come asking me for help when you denied it to me at the first sign of trouble!"
Thor gazed at him, shattered to his soul "Loki, brother, I ..."

"Don't call me that" Loki snapped at him over his shoulder "I am not your brother."

Thor waited, till the numbness in his body was gone before he stood. He was walking so slowly it looked like he was sick. He left the door open as he exited, leaving Loki with a straight back and a conceited look on his face.

When he entered the living room, everyone knew he'd been denied. The broken posture of his back and the torn look on his face was enough. They didn't say anything as he slumped on a couch and buried his face in his hands.

Steve watched him for a while "Should we say something?" he muttered softly to Bruce.

"I don't think there is much we can say" the doctor hung his head a little.

Tony cursed and turned to his liquor cabinet "I need a drink"

"Make it a double" Steve said, joining him.

Bruce got up and left a moment later, rolling his eyes at Steve's sudden interest in drinking. They huddled together and began to think of a plan.

Natasha, chewing on her lip, looked at Thor, then at the men. There was one thing she was good at and she intended to use it, to usurp the thinking power Loki had and use it to her advantage. She stood slowly from the couch and left the room; no one followed her.

Her quick steps led her to the room Loki was occupying.

She entered without knocking and Loki glanced up, mildly surprised, from the book he was reading.

"Well" he smiled "if it isn't the quim."

She narrowed her eyes and closed the door behind her.

"Ooh" Loki stood, towering over her petite form and wincing in mockery "looks like you mean business."

"Why aren't you helping him?" she walked over, standing right in front of him "after all we did for you, you can't deny this."

"Why not?" he asked, sneering at her "I am a god, I deny everyone everything"

He leaned forward a little but she held her ground "There is nothing to lose if you help him, why not do it? You need to show your father you've changed, right?"

Loki smiled "Well, I think Thor has a bigger mouth than I previously thought"

"No," Natasha said "he's just easy to manipulate."

She could tell he was amused by the glint in his eyes.

"Very clever, you are" Loki mused, stepping back a little and walking to the side, initiating a circle around her "insulting my brother to seek some common ground with me. But you forget I have nothing to gain by helping your beau, why should I do it without a price?"
She shrugged "Maybe to show people you aren't an evil son of a bitch?"

He scoffed lightly "Why would I do that? I may not be the greatest of personalities but my reputation has its uses."

Natasha sighed "What do you want in return?"

"Ah, a deal. About time you fell to that" Loki stopped circling her and stood behind her, probably to unnerve her "what do you have in mind?"

"Thor will give you your magic" she offered, facing him

He looked at her demeaning her with a single green eyed stare "Liar, you can't guarantee that to me. Besides, I already have a good enough plan running in that area."

"How about the basic?" Natasha asked "Money?"

He clicked his tongue "No"

Natasha sighed. He wasn't going to crack, there was only one way to ensure she had his attention and his help.

"Very well" she shrugged, pretending to leave "I had hoped to strike a deal with you, but I'm afraid it won't work."

"Giving up already?" he sneered.

"No" she said, walking over to lock the door.

"Ah, I see" Loki crossed his arms over the elegant white high neck and black vest he wore "you intend to beat me into submission; typical of this violently primitive race."

"Wrong again" she walked over and stood so close to him, there was only a few millimeters gap between then "I was offering you something a like more - wild - in nature."

His green gaze flashed "And what is that?"

Natasha didn't bat an eye "Me"

"You ..." he was clearly surprised, and it took a few moments to regain the lost composure "Yourself?"

She smiled at the desire she suddenly saw in him and stepped back "But, if you are not interested, perhaps something else will do? Why don't you tell me what you want?"

Loki leaned in, so close their lips were nearly touching. Natasha was suddenly filled with a strange kind of excitement, it bordered on lust, how her body was suddenly reacting to him, to his suddenly very distractingly obvious sexuality.

"Get out, whore"

Her heart fell somewhere below her stomach and her rage shot through the roof. She lashed out at him in a vicious right hook.

Loki was ready. He stepped back swiftly and grabbed her lashing forearm, twisted it behind her back and spun her around, wrapping his arm around her throat.
Natasha suddenly felt the cold chill of a blade, she didn't even know he had, pressed against her jugular. She struggled but he out did her with brute strength alone.

He put his mouth close to her ear, his lips brushing a sensitive spot behind it "I would be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued. But a woman so willing is beneath my taste."

"You asshole, I saved your life," she snapped "you owe it to me!"

"I owe you nothing" Loki smiled.

She shivered suddenly when his perfect teeth caught the top of her ear "I made you such an offer once, if you remember. You refused me then, I refuse you now."

He shoved her forward with so much force that she stumbled. She spun around, her own dagger raised in her agitation.

"Get out" Loki drawled "and don't come back. It will be a futile exertion."

She spat a curse at him, turned around and yanked open the door. He could hear her stomp through the halls and smiled.

Her anger was more directed at herself than at his refusal.

***

Natasha felt her throat constrict when she saw the hideout Clint had taken.

It was in shambles now, after the agents had been through with it, the only evidence of someone living here was the smears of blood on the walls. She was glad that the blood wasn't his, which meant that he was still alive.

Or was before he vanished.

She closed her eyes. Now was not the time to get emotional; she needed to focus and find Clint.

There were unresolved things between them that needed fixing.

"Nothing in this area" Steve said, his eyes turning to Tony behind his mask.

"Apart from a few scratches and more non-Clint blood, I have nothing" Iron Man replied, shutting off the scanners "Thor, what about you?"

"I have nothing, Man of Iron" Thor spoke through their ear piece "I have searched the skies here like you asked but I find no Archer."

"His name is Clint" Natasha nearly snapped at the god "or Hawkeye if you wish."

"Forgive me, Lady Spider"

Tony grunted in laughter and shut up when Natasha glared at him "Sorry"

"How long did Fury say he monitored these people?" Steve spoke before Natasha harmed Tony.

"Four weeks of observation," she supplied "then if he was ordered to, he was going to attack and destroy them."
"The whole clan?" Tony asked

"Yes" she stepped over to another wall, looking for something, anything that would lead her to Clint. As she searched, her eyes went to where lone person was still sitting stubbornly in the silver jet that had brought them here over three hours ago.

It had been three days since her conversation with Loki and the man had yet to glance at her. It was no different than any other time, except for the humiliation she experienced whenever she looked at him. She had used her...natural talents...many times before, when she wished for a gentle form of persuasion, but it had never really exceeded a glimpse of cleavage or a flash of leg. This time, she had offered something more, much more than she was used to in the hopes of appealing to his carnal nature. It was a clear sign that she was desperate to find Clint.

They searched for a good hour, spread out and searched like the agents had done before them and found nothing else. Their trail had led them here, in Egypt, where Clint was last scene and apart from finding his transmitter, they went home empty handed.

'Home' was the jet they were using. It wasn't as large as the heli-carrier, not by a long shot, but it sufficed. The pilot was automatic, piloted by Jarvis himself, and so the Avengers could relax on their way home.

They were trying to relax, the pain of missing one of their own was great, as they lounged in the control chamber and were disturbed when Loki entered the room.

He was as elegant as ever, dressed in an emerald shirt and black coat over black trousers, and eyed the group of people he was forced to spend his time with.

He didn't glance at anyone but Natasha when he spoke.

"He is in the place you call Scotland" Loki said, his voice flat "in one of the ruins of the castles there. He needs sustenance or he will expire"

She shot to her feet, followed by Steve and Bruce.

"How do you know that?" Steve asked "and why should we trust you?"

"Don't" Loki said simply "I couldn't care less."

He spun around and left before anyone could say anything else.

"Jarvis, set a course for Scotland" Tony ordered "Tell me the second we cross over. Put us in stealth mode."

**Any other orders that cross your mind, Sir?**

"No," Tony sighed "just get me some whiskey"

**Wonderful, Sir**

Tony set on the computer once he got his whiskey, looking for a way to hack into the satellites that floated over Scotland. He wanted to see their intel.

Thor looked lost. He still stared where his brother had gone, his heart break clear on his face.

Steve and Bruce took pity on him and guided him to the computer Tony worked on; Thor liked the
technology Tony surrounded himself with.

A few days ago, he was trying to convince Jarvis to show him what he thought he would look like if
he had been human. The poor computer was scandalized and even that delighted him.

Natasha rolled her eyes and decided to sleep. If they were really going to find Clint, she needed her
rest.

She walked to her room, but her feet stopped when she saw Loki standing in the small kitchen,
looking into the fridge. Her feet were already leading her to him when she made up her mind.

"Why?" she asked.

Loki looked down at her "I beg your pardon?"

"Why are you helping us?" she asked "is it a trick?"

"No" Loki said, closing the fridge "I think you forget that we have a deal."

"We have no deal" she snapped

"Yes we do" Loki turned to face her, taking a step forward.

She forced herself not to step back.

"I remember you making a <em>very</em> distinct offer," he raised a hand and gently curled a
finger under her chin "Natasha."

She pretended she hadn't felt the shiver pass through her when he said her name "You rejected it,
remember <em>that</em>?"

"No," he said, looking into her eyes "merely thought it over."

"So you will help?" she asked, ignoring the sudden heat pooling within her.

He smirked and placed his hands around her throat softly, almost feather light.

She had a sudden image of those tapered fingers going around her neck and snapping it. She resisted
his touch. But she couldn't suppress the shiver that went through her when he raised her face to his.

She could swear she saw fire in his green gaze a second before he lowered his head and took her
mouth in an almost savage kiss.

***

When she woke, Natasha was in her own bed - alone.

She sat up and last night played before her eyes with painful precision. She recalled how he had
touched her <em>everywhere</em>, it seemed and how she had clung to him with a wantonness that surprised
even her and how during the hot moment of culmination, when he had loomed over her and taken
her with raw passion, he has whispered her name.

"Natasha...Natasha!"

She flushed now, suddenly realizing she would need a cool shower to get rid of all the feelings she
had. When she wrapped a sheet around her stood, she spotted a small mark on her shoulder, just at
the start of her arm. Grabbing the sheet tighter, she went to the small case of essentials she had and took out a mirror.

Her blush darkened when she saw the marks Loki had left on her neck, her shoulders and collarbone.

She would have to find a way to cover them up before the others saw. They would clearly think her mad.

As she dressed, she hoped she hadn't really lost her mind when she wondered if this would ever happen again.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Off to find the lost Avenger, Loki acts unpredictably.

They landed in Scotland in the morning, Jarvis settling it on the ground with expertise while the plane remained in Stealth mode; after all, they didn't get any authorization for invading the place.

As they exited, their gazes fell upon the ruins of early the early Scottish world. The culture of the old country, the stories that they had heard throughout their life began to play before them almost against their wills. The place was beautiful.

But Natasha wasn't aware of anything. Her mind was on how close they were to Clint. As she stepped off the ramp, she pushed back the thought that Loki could have tricked her into sleeping with him by dangling the bait of locating Clint before her. She didn't want to think about it and about how it would make her feel used in the most primitive way possible.

Still, even as she pushed it down, the idea remained in her mind, stuck.

"Okay Tinker Bell" Tony said, turning to Loki "where to now?"

Loki was being hauled with them against his will. He had preferred staying in the plane, but the decision had been taken from his hands, albeit reluctantly, when Thor told him it was one of his 'major decisions'. This had ended like everyone expected it to; with Loki saying something in Nordic and Thor paling in pain. He trailed behind them, keeping a good enough distance to satisfy both himself and the Avengers.

At Tony's endearment, he slit his gaze "Call me another name like that one. Go ahead, I dare you."

They couldn't see Tony's face behind the Iron Man mask, but his voice was a few octaves higher than usual when he spoke again "Sorry, your Highness. But we are on a tight schedule. If it pleaseth thou, guide us to our archer, our knight in arms, and we shall shower thee with praises beyond thy imagination."

Thor snorted in laughter and kept his head lowered. Loki glared at Tony but chose to ignore it; or delay his reaction. He walked forward, his gaze a little hooded as he turned his head to see their location. It looked like he was scanning the area.

"I feel his presence" Loki said "he's growing weaker but I sense him."

He spread his hands and the Avengers saw the air between them move, like steam, before an orb of green light emerged between his palms. It levitated from his grasp, floated into the air and stopped about ten feet above Loki. Then with a soft boom, it transformed into a thin line that flowed through the air and faded into the distance.

"There, follow that strip and it will lead you to your archer" Loki said, turning back

"You're coming with us" Steve stated
"No, I am not" Loki told him.

"Yes, you are" Thor said

Loki was visibly angry. His lips thinned as he scowled at Thor, but he spun around and strode ahead, passing even Tony, who led the group.

"Oye, Reinde ... I mean Loki" Tony said "We can't walk all the way there, it will take forever!"

"Tell me that when I give a damn" Loki called back over his shoulder stubbornly

"Is he always like this?" Steve asked Thor.

"Most of the time" Thor replied, lifting his hammer

"How do you deal with it?" Bruce asked

"Usually when we have to walk a great distance, he teleports us" Thor replied "or I haul him over my shoulder and fly."

"And now?" Steve asked

"Now" Thor sighed "I walk with him. You can take a faster route of you want."

"Good" Natasha snapped sarcastically "can we go now?"

The men winced; they were talking about futile things at the moment. They doubled back and went to the jet while Thor followed the stubborn Loki, who has walked off a good distance. Thor flinched lightly when the jet flew over them, following the green ribbon that Loki had created for them.

There was silence after the large machine left the two brothers alone. Both of them were absorbed in their own thoughts and Thor realized this was the first time since they had arrived here that they were truly alone. There were no Avengers around them and no Jarvis that could hear their conversation.

It was, Thor resolved, the perfect place to talk to Loki and get all the issues between them out in the open. It wasn't going to be pleasant, but it needed to be done.

"Loki" Thor called, jogging over to him

Loki didn't even turn his head as he heard his buffoon of a brother approach him.

"Where are you going?" Thor asked.

"Away from you" Loki said, hastening his pace.

"Brother - " Thor held on to his patience, he owed Loki that much at least "Loki, please, talk to me."

"Talk to you?" Loki asked, turning to him "why would I want to do that?"

"So I can apologize" Thor said firmly.

That stopped Loki. He didn't respond, but he didn't immediately walk away when Thor approached him. His green gaze looked into Thor's when the older brother faced him.

"I - " Thor began, raising his hands and dropping them when he found himself with a lack of words "I'm sorry, Loki. I am sorry for everything I did and everything I didn't..." his voice trailed off and
Loki could easily tell he was fumbling for words.

Thor took a deep breath "I hurt you, not just now but in the past as well. I behaved... badly, not at all like a brother should and I wish to apologize for that. Yes, your actions were damning and hurtful, but I was more so... I..."

He broke off again, unable to say more "I shouldn't have let them take you away. You didn't deserve it."

Loki blinked, his features softening now.

"I should have been the one to take you back, not Stark and the others" Thor continued, his voice thickening "I should been by your side, my loyalty should have been to you first... both as a brother and a prince... and..." he sighed "and I have no more."

Loki smiled softly at that. There was a lump in his throat that was getting bigger with every breath he took.

"You always were an idiot with words, Thor" Loki muttered.

"I'm sorry, brother" Thor said, scratching his head.

"I know" Loki said, his voice suddenly devoid of hateful feelings and thickening with emotion "I heard you first three thousand times, you big oaf."

Thor smiled, chuckling once "Is that your way of telling me that you changed your mind and are forgiving me?"

Loki chuckled, "Yes, I -"

He broke off suddenly, a sick feeling in his stomach. Thor saw his amusement, his smile vanish and be replaced by a look so cold, he froze in apprehension.

"Loki?"

"You sick son of a bitch" Loki whispered and Thor gaped "you think yourself so clever? This was it, wasn't it? Your attempt at winning this battle"

"What?" Thor asked, stunned at this sudden change of situation "No, Loki, I ... what are you talking about?"

"Do not!" Loki said loudly, advancing on him "have the audacity to feign innocence! You know exactly what you were doing!"

Thor stepped back as Loki stalked him "Loki, I don't understand, I was apologizing!"

"In the event that you, Thor, get me, Loki, to repent, to change " Loki began quoting the contract the Asgardian Royal Council had prepared "You take the crown from me when you return."

Thor paled, suddenly realizing what Loki was talking about.

"No, it's not like that, I swear!" Thor said, backing away

"Like Hel it isn't!" Loki yelled, pursuing him "What was it you said? That you would use every weapon at your disposal? That the crown was not mine? That you would do anything to take it away from me!?"
"Loki, listen to me" Thor said "This wasn't ..."

"No, you listen!" Loki snapped at him, a muscle twitching in his jaw "That crown is mine! Odin gave it to me and I will not let it go for the sake of a petty whim! You can apologize all you want, you can get down on your knees and beg me, but I will never repent or change my mind. If you want the crown so badly, you're going to have to kill me and pry it from my cold, dead hands because that is the only way you will get it!"

Thor stopped backing away "Loki, listen to yourself! This is not who you are, what happened to you?"

"Nothing happened to me you twit!" Loki snapped "I merely realized my potential."

"A potential for killing!?" Thor asked him

"No," Loki sneered "For ruling. I will rule Asgard, Thor. I will be the king you and your mindless friends will bow to."

"You are not yourself" Thor told him "In your anger you are trying to hurt me because you see some sort of justification in it. I know you, ever since you were a child I know you. You do not want to rule a realm, Loki, you are merely -"

"Do not finish that sentence, Thor" Loki cut in, his voice soft "you know nothing of me, nothing of what I have been through and nothing of what I have had to overcome."

"Then tell me" Thor nearly begged "Let me help you, Loki."

"No!" Loki said viciously "No one can help me. I stand alone, I always have and I always will. No one can help me, not your father or mother, not your friends and especially not you."

"Give me a chance, brother" Thor said

"No" Loki said softly "I won't."

His soft words were more terrifying than his anger and Thor knew there and then that Loki needed more help than he had previously thought. He made up his mind then.

The throne would now be his secondary goal. Healing Loki was his first. The man was so damaged he had surrounded himself in lies to keep away anything and everything. It worked, in a way, the wall Loki had around himself because it protected him from harmful and hurtful things. However, it also kept at bay anything that would soothe him, heal him and fix him. That was why he had thought Thor was trying to deceive him; he didn't want to make himself vulnerable to the fact that Thor was actually apologizing, with no hidden agenda up his sleeve.

Thor sighed now "Loki...;"

"We should start walking" Loki cut in, making an almost visible effort to contain himself "your friend could need healing."

Thor didn't say anything, didn't even comment on the implication Loki had made of helping Clint heal. He simply followed Loki as they followed the glowing strip above their heads.

***

Natasha was paired with Steve while Tony and Bruce walked around and behind the room Clint was
supposedly kept in.

The light strip that Loki had conjured for them still thrummed over their heads, dimming and growing stronger like a heartbeat, as it vanished into the ancient thick wood door they were now positioned in front of.

Natasha cocked her gun, feeling the consoling weight of her dagger at her side, and nodded to Steve. She didn't speak; she couldn't speak because the anticipation, the fear, the anger at the person who was responsible for taking Clint, the person who Tony had sensed through the wooden door, had constricted her throat long ago.

Steve held his shield closer and grasped his own weapon tighter.

The door slammed open by Natasha's vicious kick and she entered, gun aimed and ready, eyes searching.

A woman was seated on a small stool and she looked up in surprise, her bright green eyes wide.

She threw Natasha off, momentarily, because her presence was highly unexpected. However, when her gaze fell to the woman's feet, a second later, to the prone form of a man, his shirtfront dampened and his pallor grey from blood loss, Natasha raised her gun again.

"Step away from him!" she ordered.

Steve had long since frozen, his eyes going to the beautiful woman sitting before him, he didn't even seem to notice the bloody Clint on the floor.

The woman laughed, tossing glowing blonde hair over her shoulder "Your puny weapons have nothing I should be wary of." She sang. Her voice was mesmerizing, tinkling and, Natasha noticed, highly annoying.

"I will shoot you, regardless" Natasha said "this is my final warning."

The woman laughed again and to prove a point, dipped her finger into the wound on Clint's middle.

The man jerked in pain, signaling that he was alive. Natasha pulled the trigger.

At the same instant, the wall smashed open and Iron Man flew in, arms raised and hands glowing. He arrived just in time to see a blonde woman scream and duck, a bullet pause halfway in the air and Clint on the floor.

"What the hell?"

His statement was mirrored when Bruce walked in, his gun ready.

Natasha was already on the floor beside Clint. He was alive and rasping breath, moving so raggedly it looked like every intake hurt him.

"Steve, help me" Natasha said, trying to hoist Clint on her shoulders.

When she got no reply, she looked up.

Steve was staring, his gun and shield lowered, as his mouth almost hung open at the woman before them. She had straightened again, ignoring Natasha as she plucked the bullet still hovering in mid air.

"I told you" she simpered at the Black Widow and flicked the bullet at her.
"Well, hello!" Iron man stepped forward. His mask lifted, showing his face "I'm Iron Man."

The woman giggled, presenting her hand to him.

"Who might you be?" Tony asked

"Call me anything you wish, Iron Man" she smiled.

Natasha gaped for a second before figuring it out.

"I'm Steve" Captain America trudged over, much to the annoyance of Tony and Bruce.

"Who asked you?" Bruce snapped, turning to the woman "You can call me Bruce"

The strange woman giggled, apparently oblivious to the absurdity of the whole scenario.

"Jesus Christ" Natasha murmured, already knowing that an attempt at gaining the men's attention was futile. This woman was clearly a witch...and the other rhyming word. She began to take Clint to the plane by herself.

"Oh you must be kind to him" the woman cooed, lifting a hand to gently touching Steve's jaw

"I'd rather be kind to you" Tony moved, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her close.

"Hands off, Tony" Steve pulled them apart and stood in front of the woman "the lady clearly wants me."

"Have you lost your mind?" Bruce asked, moving forward to shove Steve aside.

However, Steve pushed him back harshly "I said stay away."

"You son of a bitch" Tony walked in, ready to fight "You don't tell me what to do."

"Oh shit" Natasha muttered. Then her hand went to her ear piece "Thor? We need you."

Unfortunately, all she heard was static. "Damn it!"

Tony pushed Bruce aside, not even noticing how the woman had gone back to sitting contentedly on a stool, and ran for Steve.

The punch was expected, but even Natasha winced when Steve was thrown across the room. There began a mindless, angry trade of blows and insults that only grew harsher and more dangerous by the second. Natasha had no idea of handling this. On one hand, Clint was dying, on the other, her team mates were about to kill each other in this anger.

All three of them looked possessed, enraged beyond reason as they shoved and pushed each other, punching soon following. Over their angry shouts, Natasha heard the woman laughing. It was only when Tony snapped and brought out his hands, already glowing that she acted.

Natasha dropped Clint and pulled out her gun instantly, shooting Tony in the arm. His hand crackled as it was forced aside and he screamed in pain and anger.

"Guys, what's the matter with you!?" she screamed, running forward.

The thought of Clint dying was closer to her heart than anything and she was bordering on being desperate. She came in between them, throwing a spinning kick at Steve, who was trying to attack
Bruce. This was her priority now, making sure Bruce didn't change.

Steve spun around and fell to the floor just as Bruce shoved Natasha aside, lunging for Tony.

"No, Tony!" Natasha yelled as Tony lifted his hands again, the deadly blue orbs already firing.

She watched in horror as Bruce descended on Tony, his face contorted in anger. The woman's delighted screaming was in the background even as Natasha lunged forward, trying to come between the two men.

Suddenly a shield materialized between them, blue and crackling. It was a strange force as Natasha crashed against it softly before falling on the ground unharmed. It contained Tony's attack, making it fade in a haze of blue, and forced Bruce to the ground, bound and gagged, on his knees. Transparent blue tentacles extended from its side and wrapped themselves around Steve, holding him tighter than a lover's embrace. It was so tight, he almost felt his ribs break.

Natasha spun around and saw Thor and Loki standing at the door.

Thor was bound, just like Steve and Bruce, while Loki has free from restraints, his hand raised in a spell that had stopped the Avengers from killing each other, and a furious look on his face.

He didn't even acknowledge Natasha or Clint for his emerald gaze was focused on the woman in the room.

"Loki!" the woman said, jumping to her feet. Her hand, Natasha noticed, held a small string of beads that she had suddenly stopped counting.

"Amora" Loki rasped.

"What just happened?"

Natasha looked up from her place on the floor to see Tony, still trapped inside Loki's shield, looking around with a hand on his head. Bruce and Steve groaned. Their gazes were confused as they focused and it took them a moment to figure out where they were.

"Where are we?" Bruce groaned.

Beside Loki, Thor groaned, his head shaking as he tried to make sense of what was happening. He looked down at himself, bound like a piece of stringed meat.

"Loki, what is going on?"

But Loki wasn't listening to him. His hand dropped suddenly and the bonds around the Avengers evaporated. His gaze was focused on the lone woman who stood in a corner, suddenly looking worried.

"M-my prince" she attempted a smile, then fell to her knees in a bow.

"Amora!?" Thor asked, ridding himself of the last of the daze he was in "What are you doing here?"

"I called her" Loki said shortly "but I do not recall demanding this from you, woman."

"Wait, you know her?" Tony said, having the gall, after what he went through only a while ago, to smirk at her "Hey, there sweetheart."

Loki gave him an irritated glare "Do try and control the drool that escapes you, Anthony, she isn't the
sort to waste bodily fluids over.”

Amora didn't say anything, she remained in her bow.

Natasha had scampered over to Clint, who looked like he was on his last breaths.

"Nat..." he groaned "Nat..."

"I'm here" she grasped his hand to her chest, and despite herself, felt a few tears drop from her eyes.

There was a sound of scampering and the rest of the Avengers were there.

"Scan him, Jarvis" Tony said, Iron Man mask on.

**Severe blood loss, sir. Needs immediate transfusion**

"I was afraid of that" Tony muttered "Alright, we..."

"Clint!" Natasha said, suddenly panicking.

Clint's chest wasn't moving.

"Clint!" she shook him, ignoring the tears on her panic stricken face "No, Clint!"

"Oh shit" Tony cussed.

***

Loki turned when he heard Natasha scream. Thor wasn't there beside him anymore and Loki saw why. He closed his eyes to sense it anyway and found that Clint Barton had indeed succumbed to his injuries.

He felt indifferent, but seeing the look of loss on his brother's face made his heart churn. He felt like someone was branding him, burning him, with Thor's anguish and it only made the rage in his heart erupt; rage at this weakness, rage at this situation, at what Thor had tried to do only moments ago, at the battle he waged for the throne, at his dulled magic, at his entrapment here, at his mother, his father, his defeat, his heritage, his failure and finally... at himself.

With a guttural growl, Loki strode forward. His eyes were blazing as he advanced on Amora and snapped a hand around her throat.

She choked, struggling for breath, as he lifted her clean off the floor and brought her to his face level.

"Why?" he rasped "When I asked you for one thing and one thing alone?"

She gasped, kicking the air for some sort of release "I'm ... I can't breathe."

"Good" Loki hissed, then abruptly released her "Get up."

A hand at her throat, Amora coughed even as she stood on shaky legs. She gasped when Loki's heavy hand grabbed the back of her neck and guided her to the mourning Avengers. He pushed her down on her knees.

"My prince..." she began to plead.

"Beg" he commanded, tightening his hold "beg for mercy, bitch."
She squealed in pain, raising her head as much as Loki allowed and looking at the Avengers.

"Please..." she whimpered "Mercy"

Natasha growled, releasing Clint and lunging for her.

But Loki was faster; he put himself between the women "Calm yourself, Ms. Romanov" he said "she will fix him."

"What?" Amora asked

The word was chorused a few seconds later.

Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes "We are magi, we contort a great many things."

Natasha moved forward, pushing close to Loki so that he could see the faint patterns in her eyes.

"Don't you dare let this be a trick" she rasped "only move if you can do something about it."

Loki sneered at her and stepped back. Instead of answering, he grabbed Amora again. His fingers tightened painfully in her hair as he lifted her off the ground.

"Stay still, wench" Loki muttered as he brought her before him.

Amora looked at him with fear, hands raised in case he hit her, and her eyes widened when he lowered his head and gently caught her mouth in his.

"Whoa..." Tony said.

Both magi began to glow a dull purple and blue respectively. Their glow started to increase, getting brighter and spanning outwards from them, softly hitting against the members in the room. They felt it even as they didn't; rather like the way light would feel if once sensed its touch. Then it started to grow in brightness till it turned white, blinding everyone in the room a second before vanishing with a dull boom.

When they dared to, the Avengers opened their eyes.

Loki and Amora were still locked at the lips, but this time it was in a passionate kiss. Loki had his arms around her, a slight frown on his face as he continued kissing her, a groan erupting from his throat when Amora tightened her grasp around his neck.

"I repeat: whoa" Tony muttered.

A pain filled groan came from the ground and the couple broke apart to glance at their feet.

"What the fuck happened?" Clint said as he sat up.

"Clint!" Natasha said loudly, leaping at him.

He only had time to prepare before she fell on him, holding him so close he felt his bones clack. He pulled his arms around her, burying his face in her hair.

He didn't know what was going on, but he knew he had almost lost her.

They didn't move for a while and the Avengers waited patiently.
Clint still hadn't seen him, Thor realized, his brother was bound to cause distress to the archer.

But even as he decided to intervene, to make a move before the archer, Clint turned to Loki.

"The fuck!" he pushed Natasha back and lunged at Loki.

"Clint, don't!"

It is not clear exactly who said that, but Clint ignored them all, leaping for Loki the second he saw him. His dagger was out as he attacked, hitting Loki a second after the bastard pushed a woman out of the way.

He was ready for it, the kill. He tasted it on his tongue, felt it in his blood, smelled the scent of it...he was ready to kill the man and everything was in slow motion as he flew closer to Loki. Oh, he was so ready to kill that bastard.

However, what he wasn't ready for, was his pounce stopping halfway of its own volition. He was on the ground a second later, looking at the tips of Loki's highly polished and extremely fashionable black shoes.

He tried moving instantly, but found himself pinned by an invisible force.

"Clint!"

Loki stepped back, so that the tips of his shoes scuffed Clint's jaw, and a second later, the man could move.

He thought about lunging at Loki again with a growl, but found Thor shielding him behind his back and Loki shielding the strange woman, who looked oddly familiar, behind his.

The rest of his team, Natasha glued to his side, were already trying to placate him.

"Aw, shit" Clint muttered "I am not going to like this am I?"

It turned out, he was right.

He was explained everything twice by Natasha, then Bruce, Steve and Tony. Thor cut in every now and then, but his gaze went to the place Loki and that woman had gone to.

He was still having a hard time trying to understand that Loki had found him. Not only that, but he had saved him, that he was living with them now...he shook his head, trying to talk about something he would understand.

"So what's the deal with the broad?" Clint asked as he sat back in one of the soft chairs on their...or rather Tony's...jet "Who, by the way, is smokin' hot!"

He yelped when Natasha smacked his head.

"That's Loki's...uh..." Steve began, looking at Thor for help.

"Student" Thor replied idly shifting his glass of weak vodka.

"Student?" Tony asked, raising his brows "I'm betting she was the straight A student?"
Thor frowned "I do not understand your question"

"Nevermind" Natasha said, standing "I suggest we rest in the little time we have. Fury will expect a report in a few hours."

Steve sighed and stood "That he will."

There was a flurry of goodnights and goodbyes still Thor was the only one who remained. He smiled a little when he saw Clint pull Natasha close just as they vanished down the hall.

It made his heart ache a little and think about something he didn't want to.

Jane hadn't come.

It had been a week over a month and Thor still waited for her. He had 'called' her on a 'feletone' that Tony had given him, dialed for him, explained how it worked to him and eventually told him that Jane was not picking up her device.

He had gotten Loki to do it too, ending in the same result. Then he had given into the urge and asked Tony to do as he had offered days ago. A 'scan' revealed that both Jane and Darcy had shifted their abode somewhere else. They had changed their 'numbers' and moved somewhere else.

Tony said he could find them.

Thor had declined. He expected too much if he thought Jane would stay. Especially after she discovered the dark past he had.

He growled, suddenly blaming Loki. But as soon as he did, he damned himself. Loki had merely acted out to what Thor had done.

He sighed now, taking the glass with him to the kitchen before going to the room he and Loki shared.

He entered without knocking and paused. He'd overlooked an element.

The said element was sleeping soundly, her bare arms around his brother. Both of them were asleep, the sheet around them their only covering.

Thor grimaced as Amora shifted in her sleep, burying her face in Loki's throat and the man tightened his hold on her before sighing in slumber.

Rolling his eyes, Thor backed up, closing the door firmly.

He decided on a sleepless night. There was no other choice, really, as he went back to the room he'd come from.

He sat back in the chair he'd taken, waiting for the journey to end.

His last thoughts were of how he was going to question Loki and how it was possible that no woman was resisting him...

***

Once again in stark Towers, Loki stood on the balcony with Amora, the woman kissing him good bye. Since the glass doors were closed, their audience was unable to hear their murmurs.
"How..." Tony began finally "How can Loki land a babe like that? Aren't villains like, supposed to be 'forever alone'?"

"My brother is not a villain" Thor spoke from behind them.

They were all seated on the couches while Thor was placed, defiantly, on the bar stool.

"Really?" Tony said sarcastically "Because the killing and the threatening threw me off."

Thor narrowed his gaze "He is hurt. And if he was a villain, he wouldn't have saved Barton"

Tony opened his mouth to say something, but Steve shushed him. Their gazes went back to the couple.

Loki smirked as he looked down at Amora; his hand gently pushing back her hair.

"I can't believe they are so blind" she said, looking up at him, her arms rubbing his biceps under the thick black high necked sweater and black trench coat he wore.

"Believe it, they you were surprisingly convincing. You did exactly as I asked, killing him before helping me reincarnate him, I'd say you would make a wonderful - what do they call it here? - Actress. One fit to rule the stage" Loki muttered, lowering his head to kiss her. The second her did, he felt himself absorb more of her magic. He prolonged the gesture, till he felt Amora whine against him.

He pulled back to breathe "I find myself - glad - that you brought what I asked. I didn't think you would"

Amora smiled "It was merely a staff, my lord and is that a 'Thank you' I am hearing?"

Loki smirked "The thing closest to it"

She hummed in laughter and kissed him again. More passion, more magic.

"I didn't think you would ever talk to me again" Amora said, pulling back "Our last meeting wasn't exactly..."

"Hush" Loki kissed her again, felt more magic drain into him "Forget the past. Now is important. What we did now, and what we will do later."

She bit her lip and giggled. She kissed him again, for longer, till he groaned in his throat "I have to leave. Someone is bound to notice my absence."

Loki pretended to make a small sound of protest as she left him, just to get another kiss and more magic.

Amora smiled and stepped back. She lifted her hands to her sides and flickered out of existence ...but not before Loki snapped his fingers, freeing her of the love spell he had on her and making sure she wasn't going to remember this episode.

He got what he wanted from her, he didn't need her anymore.

With more magic in him now, ready to recharge when he used it, Loki went back into the room where his 'teammates' had been watching his goodbye.

He rolled his eyes and pushed the glass door aside to enter. He ignored the stares he got by the
occupants of the room, but he couldn't ignore the loud call.

"Brother, I wish to speak with you"

Loki didn't exactly respond, but he didn't shrug it off in a Nordic curse either. Taking it as a good sign, Thor followed his brother and found him going into their room, leaving the door open.

He was pulling out a scarf from his suit case as Thor entered.

"Loki, why not use the closet like I do?" he sighed, closing the door behind him "It would make is easier on you."

"Since when have I ever made anything easy?" Loki asked, putting the scarf around his neck.

"Are you leaving?" Thor asked, frowning "I asked to speak with you."

"I heard you" Loki said, pulling out his wallet to make sure he had money "that is why I am leaving. This place is making me ill and I need a taste of the outside, I find. We can talk while we walk in the drab Midgard air."

It took only a while for Thor to locate his own newly bought coat and soon they were walking in the New York snow.

***

They walked in relative silence, Thor marveling at everything around him while Loki kept his gaze firmly on his path; apparently lost in his thoughts.

Their footsteps crunched snow and soon the crowd around them began to lessen.

Thor looked at Loki and suddenly felt awkward. He didn't know where to start, what to ask, how to ask. There wasn't an appropriate time for asking all that he wished to. In his mild frustration, Thor idly kicked some snow.

The movement caught Loki's attention and he looked at his brother "What is wrong, Thor?"

"Nothing" Thor grumbled, suddenly feeling infantile.

Loki raised his brows "Doesn't seem like nothing, you are behaving like a child."

"I am not a child" Thor turned to him "You are merely an old man."

"I am not old" Loki said, unconsciously rising to his brother's bait "I am four years younger to you."

"In age, maybe." Thor scoffed "in mentality..."

"I am light-years ahead of you, is that what you are saying?" Loki asked, deceptively polite.

"Yes" Thor said, then frowned "No, I mean..."

Loki smirked "Let it go, brother, you will only hurt yourself."

The air suddenly warmer between them, Thor nudged Loki with his shoulder as they walked. Loki ignored him, but a smile settled on his lips. Thor, encouraged, did it again. Loki shoved him back and, when Thor made a rough movement in a speedy shove, he stepped back.
Loki laughed as Thor found himself stunned after walking into the side of a building with so much force that the glass window shook. He cackled when the people seated inside the coffee shop stared at Thor in surprise.

"That wasn't funny" Thor said, a hand to his head.

"You bet your thundering arse it was" Loki laughed again.

Amid his pain, Thor suddenly found himself smiling at his brother's laughter. He hadn't heard it in such a long time.

Loki looked at him and his humor began to diminish "You're bleeding."

Thor touched his hairline where it stung the most and looked at the blood on his hand. He felt it trickle down his forehead "So I am"

"Damn," Loki moved forward "Here, let me."

Before Thor could stop him, Loki passed a hand over the injury and a second later the pain vanished. He looked at Loki, a mixture of emotions going through him.

"I wanted to speak to you" Thor said after Loki stepped back.

"I know" Loki said, keeping his gaze averted. He gestured to the coffee shop "Let's go in there."

He didn't wait for Thor's response, instead he walked in through the spinning doors and didn't look back.

Thor followed him and soon Loki found them a secluded spot by the heater.

Loki shrugged off his coat as he sat down, pulling at his collar "Don't you feel hot, Thor?"

"No" Thor shook his head, smiling as the waitress came for their order "Do you have those Pop tarts?"

She smiled apologetically "No, sir I am sorry, but we have our own tarts, chocolate, orange, lemon and walnut."

"Bring two of each" Thor said, looking at Loki, who was looking around the room "and two coffees."

She nodded and left.

"I don't want tarts" Loki said

"Who said they were for you?" Thor asked.

Loki smirked again and knew it was time they got to the point.

"Thor, what do you wish to ask me?"

Thor looked away, a clear sign he was having a hard time at the moment.

"Thor?" Loki prompted, leaning forward to hang his hands between his knees.

"So much, Loki" Thor said softly, not looking at him "I have so much I wish to ask but I find myself
tied at the thought of asking you those questions."

Loki exhaled and nodded "Alright, why don't you start at the beginning? And I will answer as many as I can."

*As many as you want, you mean. Brother, you cannot fool me anymore*

"Okay" Thor leaned forward like Loki "First question: Did you replace Mother's bathing lotion for the poison ivy extracts?"

Loki blinked "What?"

This was not what he had expected at all.

Thor smiled "Just answer me"

Loki stared at him, figuring out what he was doing, then smiled lightly "Yes, and I laughed when you got the blame for it."

Thor narrowed his eyes "Sadist."

Loki smiled, suddenly feeling lighter "At least I'm not arrogant."

"You think me arrogant?" Thor asked in mock surprise.

"Well, you did order without asking me what I wanted" Loki said, sitting back.

"You'll like it" Thor said.

Loki nodded in mild laughter "You think me arrogant?" he mimicked in a deeper treble.

Thor laughed, feeling his heart go light.

A few moments passed before he spoke again.

"Why did you do it, Loki?" he asked softly, all humor gone "why did you kill me?"

Loki closed his eyes in pain, one elbow braced on the chair while his hand held his jaw, his head turned away.

"Loki?" Thor said when he didn't reply.

"I was so angry" Loki said, his voice barely above a whisper "So angry at fa - Odin, that I thought it justified. All my anger, all my resentment against him flowed to you when he fell to Odin-sleep, it had no way to go, I suppose, and even as I -" he swallowed "even as I hurt you, I regretted it. You had done nothing wrong and I blamed you for your innocene. Even when you came to me so willingly, asking for your death, asking me for forgiveness, I ... " he broke off to take a deep breath.

"I couldn't" he muttered "I couldn't forgive you without damning myself completely. So I fought you. I fought you in the hope that - "

The waitress arrived again and Loki broke off, taking the time to compose himself. She placed the things between them, but Loki could sense Thor's gaze on him.

He spoke after the woman left, shoving the chocolate tarts at Loki, making sure he touched them "In the hopes of what, Loki?"
Loki shook his head. He leaned forward and seized a chocolate tart that he bit into "Next question."

Thor wasn't pleased, but he let it go. He grabbed an orange tart, leaving the chocolate for Loki since he'd taken a liking to it.

"Do you like your tart?" Thor asked pointedly.

Loki narrowed his eyes at him even as he hid a grin "No"

"Liar" Thor said, settling back into another light mood.

He let Loki finish his first tart before speaking.

"Where did you get your magic? Really?"

Loki looked at him warily "Uh..."

"It's alright" Thor raised a hand "I won't tell anyone if you don't."

Loki sighed "I stole it from Amora. It's an incantation to steal a living being's essence. I simply made her a donor."

"She knows?" Thor sipped his coffee.

Loki shook his head "No, I made it undetectable."

Thor hummed "I knew there was a reason you were drawn to her so passionately."

Loki didn't know what to make of that comment so he stayed silent. He sipped his coffee.

Thor chuckled when he made a face "The sugar's right there."

Loki saw where Thor pointed to then put three tiny bags of sugar in his coffee, tasted it, and put two more.

Thor waited for him to take a satisfied gulp before asking another dreaded question.

"Why did you let go, brother?"

Loki looked at him over the rim on his cup. He wasn't drinking, but he wasn't lowering it either.

He was hiding, Thor realized "Loki..."

He lowered the mug "Next question"

"Loki... brother..."

"I said next question, Thor" Loki said, placing the cup down with a shaking hand "I won't answer it."

"Won't or can't, Loki?" Thor asked.

Loki looked at him, looking suddenly vulnerable "Please?"

The plea was so small, Thor felt his heart hurt "Brother, I have to know."

"Why?" Loki asked
"I have no answer to that" Thor replied "Why do plants need water? Why do we need air? What answer do we give to these questions?" he looked straight at Loki "Brother, I mourned for you for a year, drunk myself to a stupor when you vanished. I thought you dead and I wanted to cease living. Then I found you and..." he sighed "I need the answer, Loki. I deserve it."

Loki watched him silently and Thor thought he wouldn't answer.

"It was so much easier, Thor" he replied softly "and so welcoming after looking into father's disappointed eyes and your forgiving ones. It was what I deserved."

"No" Thor said firmly "you didn't deserve it, brother."

Loki looked miserable now and Thor felt terrible.

"When you let Sleipnir loose in the castle" Thor asked "did you think he would cause so much damage?"

Loki smiled in humor and fondness "No, my son exceeded my expectations and made me proud."

"He destroyed Father's monument" Thor reminded him "that was a present from Mother and took a fortune to carve."

Loki smiled "Like I said, he made me proud."

More idle prattle went back and forth between the two. Thor discovered Amora had arrived here with a few things he had asked for and that whole stunt at the castle was unexpected. He discovered Loki hated all Midgardian food other than sweets or highly spiced dishes.

Loki discovered that Thor had learnt a few bad words from Tony, that Jarvis was now afraid of him and that he would do anything for Pop tarts right now.

They left the coffee shop and out into the cold where Loki breathed a sigh of relief.

Thor looked at him "Brother, why do you wear all this if you love the cold so much?"

Loki bit the inside of his lip "I do not have my magic at a sufficient power."

Thor frowned "What does that have to do with anything?"

Loki sighed and bent down, picking up some snow. He crushed it between his fingers when he straightened and let it go.

Thor's eyes widened when he saw his blue palm.

"Oh"

"I kept myself warm with magic on Asgard" Loki said, pocketing his hand "here, I remain cold."

Thor reached out and touched his cheek. He was almost as cold as the wind around. Then Thor grinned and slapped him gently.

Loki pulled away, cussing but smiling.

Thor didn't feel like going back so they started walking about aimlessly.

"Why did you change your mind about helping us?" Thor asked while they strolled through the park.
Loki, who had both his hands in his pockets, watched a few children play about "I just reasoned it to be the easier choice rather than being watched like a criminal the whole day." He shrugged "Plus, Amora had crossed a line she shouldn't have by killing him. He didn't deserve it."

Thor gave him an odd look.

Lokie turned to him and frowned "Come on, Thor, I am the god of Mischief, not Evil. I am perfectly capable of keeping a conscience...when I want."

Thor nodded but kept silent.

A few minutes later, they had crossed the park and turned left. Immediately, Loki's eye fell on an advertisement about a New York stable opening somewhere close.

"Thor, look" he walked over and ripped the flyer off the tree it was stuck to "They open today."

Thor looked at the paper and didn't hesitate for a second "Let's go then."

***

The stables were large and expensive. They were ushered in quickly, because of Loki's quick tongue and quicker bribe, and found themselves in a lush place of grass and trees.

Horses neighed and walked about, carrying children and women. Other horses watched from their places in the stables. It was beautiful, the green grass and the toned animals trotting and occasionally prancing.

Thor looked at Loki and saw a sad look in his eyes; he missed Sleipnir.

Thor hummed and made up his mind "Come, brother, we shall ride."

Loki kept his joy to himself at the familiarity of the situation and soon found himself with a beautiful brown horse. Thor came up beside him on a white stallion, the only one that seemed to be able to take his weight.

A recognizable glint came over Thor's eye and Loki guessed what it was.

A moment later, both gods were racing through the large expanse of field, amid the startled shrieks and disgruntled protests of the managing staff.

An hour later, after they had allowed themselves to be caught, they were escorted out.

Thor smiled, rubbing his hands over his face "By Odin, I have never seen you race that way before; your steed zipped around like it had known you forever."

Loki laughed and walked, noticing that the sun was slightly lower than before "Yes, brother that is what we call skill."

Thor laughed then grimaced when his stomach grumbled. He looked at Loki and flushed when he realized he'd heard the growl.

"Thor, we just ate" Loki said.

Then his own gut growled.

Thor snorted "Loki, we just ate"
"Shove off" Loki said, flushing at the undignified exhibition of his hunger.

Thor followed him and soon found himself distracted by an exotic smell. He turned to it without warning, leaving Loki to wonder what the hell had happened.

It was a hot dog stand. And Thor bought three for himself while Loki made a face at the food.

Once again walking in the snow, his food already gone, Thor turned to Loki as he licked off his fingers.

"Brother," he said "I have one last question."

Loki tensed lightly "What?"

"Why did you align yourself with them?"

Loki paled, paler than Thor had ever seen him and a sudden fear overcame his eyes. He swallowed audibly "I didn't want to."

Thor frowned at his averted face "Then why did you?"

Loki looked at him, his eyes too wide and fearful Thor felt the irrepresible need to protect him "I wasn't given a choice."

Thor felt a chill go through him "Loki, what...?"

"It gets late" Loki suddenly walked off "We should go back"

"Loki, wait!" Thor jogged after him "Brother!"

But Loki wasn't having it. He walked faster until he was just short of running as he tried to push down the terrible memories, the torture he experienced at the hands of the Chitauri. Soon he felt Thor's presence being left behind and used the increasing crowd to duck into an alley.

Here, in some semblance of privacy, he hid in a doorway and put his head back against the cool metal of the door. He closed his eyes and focused on breathing, on thinking about anything other than those monsters who had...

He heard a small growl and scrambling somewhere close to him, steps like Thor's come towards him.

Loki gasped in horror when he saw one of them standing before him, looking down at him through terrifying eyes. A huge clawed hand clamped down on his mouth before he could scream and he was pushed, no crushed back, into the metal door with so much force it groaned.

His green eyes were tearing up as the creature lifted another hand and pushed a claw through his jacket, through his clothes till it touched his soft skin. Loki didn't struggle; he was too terrified to move and could only feel as the claw traced a chilling pattern under his last rib, feel the sting of his skin parting beneath the painful pressure, feel the blood trickle down his side and mar his clothes. He closed his eyes at the pain it induced, tears slipping down his cheek and over the hand that kept him captive; he couldn't breathe, he could think, he couldn't move, as more and more memories surfaced, till he heard their threats, his own screams of pain, then his own begging, his terrified shrieks as what was happening to him.

The last thing he remembered was his voice calling Thor's name and feeling the pressure around him.
leave a second before his vision darkened and he fell to the snowy ground ... unconscious.

"I won't do it..."

***

Loki woke in bed. His eyes opened slowly, almost unwillingly, and he realized he was back in Stark's abode. Someone had removed his thick coat, scarf and shoes.

Part of him cursed and the stronger part was relieved that he was here, where it was relatively safer. He lay still, a hand going over his face as he tried to calm himself, slow his rapidly beating heart.

He had been spooked by his own imagination Loki thought. It was nothing more than a hallucination his terrified mind had conjured when unwanted memories resurfaced. It had happened once or twice before, though the degree was less intense, and he had control over it. However, even as he tried convincing himself that it was nothing more than an illusion, his hand drifted to his side, to the last rib, where he would have been touched.

Nothing.

Loki heaved a sigh of relief. There was nothing there, no pain, no pattern and no blood.

He pushed his head back into the pillow, closing his eyes. He was about to fall back into slumber when he heard a roaring snore.

Lifting his head, he saw Thor dozing. The man was half on the bed and half off it, with his hands crossed on the mattress and head placed on them contentedly.

Clearly, he'd been watching Loki.

The trickster watched him for a moment, smiling when he muttered something in his sleep, and then decided to wake him up. He lifted his hand and a sick looking green orb appeared in his hand. He brought it to his nose and sniffed, making a disgusted face at the horrid stench. Then he blew it towards Thor with a gentle breath.

He watched at it went to Thor and spread around his head.

Thor spluttered and pushed himself away from the smell, falling with a thump on the ground.

Loki snickered as Thor sat up, slapping the smell away. He was wide awake now, a great feat since Thor slept like the dead, and glared at Loki.

"Brother!" it was a mixture of relief and anger.

"Good morning, Thor" Loki said, sitting up in bed. The room began to spin and he put a hand on his head.

Thor was there instantly "What is it?"

"Nothing" Loki said, putting his feet on the floor "Just sat up too fast."

"Nothing?" Thor frowned " Is it similar to the 'nothing' yesterday?"

Loki gave him a strange look, Thor couldn't decipher it.

"Brother, what happened?" he asked, sitting next to Loki, leaving a foot of distance between them.
"It was..." Loki began, then he sighed and lowered his head "Thor, don't ask me that. Ask me anything else. Please."

"Loki" Thor's dull anger vanished at his brother's words, at the way Loki was holding his head in his hands "Tell me, I can help."

"No one can help me" Loki mumbled, his voice thick and soft "No one can carry my ache and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Thor put a hand on his shoulder and balked when Loki leaned into his touch; put his head in Thor's lap. He froze, stunned, when he felt Loki's shoulders and back shudder.

Was he crying!?

Thor didn't dare move. He rubbed a hand over Loki's shuddering back, trying to live down the soft sobs that escaped Loki's lips.

He didn't say anything, just rubbed Loki's back till the storm subsided. After a while, he realized the sobs had stopped. He looked down to see Loki sleeping with his head in his lap. A few tears shone on his cheeks.

Sighing, Thor brushed back Loki's hair and lifted him into his arms like he had done not too long ago and placed him on the pillows again. He pulled off his socks and then covered him with the blanket. He walked to open the window, to let in the cold air from outside, because Loki preferred it that way and came back to sit next to Loki.

He brushed some hair off Loki's face, then leaned down to gently kiss his temple.

"Sleep, brother" Thor said softly before standing up and leaving the room.

***

"So about your children" Tony, almost drunk, asked "Spill."

It had been almost a year since the brother's were here now and had still to get used to seeing a drunk Tony. He was surprisingly funny, Loki thought.

They were seated on the floor of the living room, all of them, and had decided, in a drunken stupor, to play a game called 'Truth or Dare'.

Loki thought it ironic, being the god of lies, to participate in this. He had only done it because Thor had asked him to.

It had been months since Thor and Loki had become warmer to each other. They still had their moments of intense anger and harsh words, but that was somewhat expected since they were fire and ice.

"My children?" Loki asked, raising a brow.

He might have warmed up to Thor, but the Avengers were still a long way off. They stood just above the vermin Loki would stomp with his magic on Asgard; petty and unimportant like things like roaches, spiders and the like.
"Yeah" Natasha said, burping delicately behind a hand "I was wondering about that, too. I still can't believe you have kids!"

Loki looked at her, then at the rest. Steve was composed; he had little to drink, Bruce was slightly drunk, the slight frown on his face the only thing exposing his stupor.

Loki hummed, chewing his lip before asking "What do you wish to know?"

"Their order" Tony said, grabbing his glass again and swallowing the drink "and who they are with."

Loki cleared his throat, crossing his arms across his chest "Okay"

Thor grinned at the look in Loki's eye.

"My youngest is a beautiful girl" Loki said, unknowingly smiling at the memory "She is called Hel and dwells there. She is half Asgardian and half Jotun so that adds to her odd appearance."

"Hold up, hold up," Tony slurred "Dwells where? And odd appearance?"

"She lives in Asgardian Hel" Loki said "and that is all you need to know."

Thor realized Loki wouldn't take kindly to anyone passing a comment on his niece's appearance.

"Okay, whatever" Tony said "Go on."

"My third born, Jormungandr is a serpent" Loki smiled at their faces "Again born to the same woman in Jotunhiem. He is younger to Fenrir, a wolf, larger than you've ever seen, same mother."

"Who the hell is this woman?" Tony blurted out, then his eyes widened "it wasn't..."

"Of course not, you idiot, that's Amora" Loki said "I said Jotun, not Asgardian. Have you already become so wasted?"

"Okay" Tony waved a hand, swaying a little "Sorry"

Loki rolled his eyes and looked at Thor, who was still grinning. He longed to see how they would take the news of Sleipnir.

"What about your first?" Bruce asked, scowling against his drink. Loki didn't think he was interested.

"Ah, yes" Loki said "My first born."

They leaned in as if he was telling them a particularly good story.

"Young Sleipnir" Loki said, his face clouding over with fondness "I had him as a result of an...uh...attempt at creating mischief to thwart a rival from victory."

"Ooh," Natasha grinned "you got someone pregnant at a very inconvenient time, didn't you?"

Loki felt his lips twitch "You can say that, but there's more to the story and I fear I find your lack of intellect off putting."

He stood, amid the shouts of disappointment and cries to continue, then stopped.
"Loki you cannot just abandon it here," Tony said "Finish it"

"No" Loki said, smirking at Thor.

The blonde god laughed and shook his head "Come brother, it is a good story. Besides, you have heard all of theirs, it would be unfair."

"Whoever said I was fair?" Loki retorted, but sat back down "Fine."

They all shut up and Loki had to suppress a smile.

"I was sent on a mission to stop a nobleman from doing something that was going to conflict with the interests of Asgard. I was nineteen and this was to be my quest to gain myself the Royal emblem and helm." He went on "I will spare you the details, but I managed to tire his horse enough that he couldn't take his master for a ride in the morning."

"What had this got to do with your baby?" Tony asked

Loki raised a brow "Think, Anthony, I can shift shape and there is really only one way to tire a stallion enough to make him incapable of moving in the morning."

He waited, watching their expressions carefully. They would get it, he'd made sure to add the innuendo and proper tone of voice, they just needed a second - or two.

"Oh Sweet fuck!"

Loki hadn't expected him to get it, but Clint's expression was bordering on horror and that made Loki laugh.

"You..." Bruce gaped "Oh shit!!"

"What?" Tony asked, twisting around to see the man beside him "What?"

Clint was still reeling, staring at Loki with a mixture of horror and curiosity "That's not possible."

"I have an eight legged horse that proves otherwise" Loki spoke.

"Your first born is an eight legged horse?" Tony asked.

Natasha guessed it next "Oh my God!"

Thor laughed when one by one each of them figured out where Sleipnir came from.

"He's lying!" Steve eventually said "Aren't you?"

Loki shook his head "No"

"You can't have given birth to a horse" Tony snapped "It had no place to come out of. What did you do? Shove it out your ass?"

"No" Loki snarled at him "and thank you for that image, though."

Thor was snickering "My brother speaks the truth, Stark. He had indeed done what he says, though that image was more impressive than what Loki had done."

He laughed when Loki slapped him.
"Whatever" Tony muttered "So what happened after you...I mean... after the baby came out."

"Well" Loki flicked at something on his sleeve "it is customary in Asgard for the mother to eat the after birth gore because it benefits the babe."

Their faces were an ideal picture of horror.

He laughed "I jest, but the looks of your faces were worth it!"

A few moments passed as the Avengers digested what they said.

Clint watched Loki carefully, taking a sip of his drink and looking like had had something he wanted to say. Out of everyone, he was the only one still hesitant to accept Loki, understandably. Loki stared right back at him, daring him to say it. Clint took a long swig of his drink and turned back to him.

"So what happened to your boobs?"

Bruce choked on his drink, spraying almost everyone with his drink. Thor looked at Loki, to see if he was offended or not. His face was placid but humor shone in his eyes.

"Sadly, for you, I didn't grow any" Loki replied "the child was magic. I merely mixed my own blood in his food to give him the nourishment he needed."

Another scandalized silence fell that broke when Thor guffawed.

Tony exhaled in relief, the terror on his face was mirrored by others "God damn it, I think I peed myself."

Both brothers laughed at the undignified Avengers and the mounting horror on their faces. They enjoyed it.

***

That night, Loki had a nightmare.

It wasn't anything imagined; it was worse because memories were playing before him.

He fell on the burning ground ... hard. So hard, in fact, he felt a few ribs crack as he huffed in pain. He lay there, cheek against the burning sand, willing himself to die, cursing himself because his fall had not ended him.

Damn his immortality.

He didn't want to get up, he didn't have the energy to. He willed himself to die, to stay here till some nasty creature came to him and destroyed him. Then he cried.

First they were soft, controlled sobs, then he was screaming. He crying like a child, turning on his back as sobs wrecked his body, tore from his throat to the skies in the hope that Odin would hear him. He screamed that he wanted to die, that he hated them for what they did to him; it was unfair and uncalled for.

He cried for so long and cried so loudly, that when he was suddenly hauled to his feet, he let out a startled sound.

**
Their king was a harsh creature. He threw him in a cell and refused to give him sustenance.

He beat him everyday till Loki bled and screamed against the pain. He used his magic against Loki, bringing out his worst fears and playing them for him every day. He slashed him with his knives, poured acid over the scars till Loki’s voice was hoarse from screaming, till he could no longer ask for his brother to help him.

Then the king tried to reason with him, ask him to take over a pathetic planet for him. Loki could be there, serving at his pet.

Loki denied. He wasn't evil, he was a trickster.

He’d been hung by his neck and carved with a blade for his insolence. He wished to die, he was so happy that he was going to, but he didn't.

**

Then he was dragged to the king's palace, his form so weak from lack of food and his thrashing that he couldn't even stand.

The king had used magic to heal him, tried a softer approach by offering him food. Loki had refused, he was still tied in chains like an animal. He refused the offer and he refused the food.

Their king had lost his patience with him then. And had used the most barbaric way to tame Loki.

**

He screamed against his gag as the king rutted into him, branding him, marking him as his own with every thrust.

It was like he was being torn apart from the inside as Loki screamed, he felt the creature's hands over his body, in the most intimate of places and he screamed, he screamed.

**

Through his tears, he could see Thor.

"Brother..."

Another rut, another terror and pain filled scream.

"Loki"

The sound was a gentle balm on him as he felt his side being split open and felt claws enter his skin, going inside, searing pain following immediately. He felt something move in his ribs.

"Brother!"

Thor's face was close even through the tears, he saw Thor's worried face, framed by a light blue in the deep, dark red sky.

He writhed but his bounds prevented him from doing anything.
"Loki!"
"I will not do it"
***

Thor looked down, panicked, as Loki thrashed around, screaming at the top of his lungs. He tried holding him down, but Loki hit him, eyes tightly shut and mouth opened on another blood curling scream.

"Loki wake up!" Thor held his wrists and shook him as he sat beside him on the bed.

Loki scratched, kicked and shrieked, refusing to open his eyes as he struggled against Thor.

"I will not do it!" he screamed at whatever he was seeing.

"Brother!" Thor shook his shoulders, but he was too far into the dream.

Behind him, he heard the door open, but he didn't care.

There was only one way to wake him up.

"Forgive me, brother" Thor muttered before grabbing his flailing wrists in one hand and raising the other. Thor slapped Loki harshly across the face.

Loki's head snapped to the side and his eyes opened. He stopped struggling immediately and froze, breathing heavily.

Then he turned his head and looked at Thor with wide, terror filled eyes.

"Loki, are you...oof!" Thor grunted when Loki suddenly threw himself at him, locking his arms around Thor's waist and burying his face in his shirt. He held on so tightly, Thor felt his back pop.

"Brother..." Thor croaked, feeling Loki's pain. His hands went around and held on tightly, refusing to let go.

He turned his head to see Tony and the rest of the Avengers watching with large eyes. Natasha had her gun lowered and Clint was holding down his bow and arrow.

Thor shook his head at them and they left soundlessly.

Loki didn't notice them leave. He was holding onto Thor like he was the only thing that could save him and he wasn't letting go. Slowly, sobs started to come back and Thor embraced him back, vowing to fix whatever this was.

***

The night sky hid him perfectly; he knew no one was going to see him there, perched next to the window as he was in the dark.

He glanced back at the man who moved about inside the room, getting ready to sleep.

He was still the same, the same arrogant idiot that had dared to defy him.

Loki didn't notice his presence as he lifted the sheets to get in, but he saw. That was his property, his possession and now that he'd found him, he was going to take him, just like he had done on his
homeland.

He hadn't become the ruler of the Chitauri because he let things go; in fact, it was the exact opposite that made him the most terrifying being in the nine realms.

He was going to break Loki, destroy everything he held dear and then kill him. He knew what was precious to Loki, the man had made no secret of it when he screamed for his brother.

He smiled when Loki got under the sheets and lifted a hand.

Tonight, Loki would remember everything he'd done to him so that when he eventually made himself known, the man would feel the torment tenfold.

He snapped his fingers and let the last of his pathetic magic go.

It was going to be worth it.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

You can never truly escape, can you?

Steve raised a brow when the man opposite him yawned loudly.

Thor blinked at turned a dull red "Sorry"

"Don't mention it" Steve replied, going to finish his oatmeal.

Thor looked awful. His hair was messed up, his eyes had bags under them and he was lazy from all that yawning. He even looked gaunt.

It was no secret why he appeared this way, they heard it almost every night now, Loki screaming as more and more nightmares hit him at night. It had been going on for about a week now and though neither brother told them why this was suddenly happening, they had a vague idea.

Loki's cries for help and his begging left no doubt about who he saw behind his closed lids at night.

Thor was there with him throughout the attacks. He would wake him up almost as soon as they screaming began and calm him till he slept again, which resulted in Loki becoming desperate to stay close to Thor and trying to avoid sleep altogether. However, his hunger and lack of proper sleep was denying him even that small solace.

It was also keeping the Avengers on edge; every time they heard the blood curling screams, they would leap into action only to realize that it was Loki. They went to the brothers' rooms to check, but soon Thor had begun locking the door and they had no choice but to go back.

It was killing Thor, they saw it every day, the way this was going. He was becoming lax, he didn't talk much to anyone besides Loki, comforting him in both Nordic and English. He barely slept, staying on edge, waiting for Loki to start screaming again so he can wake him up. His hammer was always in the room, deposited on the floor carelessly. Even his cheeks were beginning to hollow out.

Steve sighed now "Dreams again?"

"I wouldn't call them dreams" Thor sipped his coffee "They're far too unpleasant for that name."

"Does he tell you what he sees?" Steve asked, keeping his voice light.

Thor shook his head "No, but I am not stupid, my friend. I know exactly who he dreams about and if they weren't already dead, I would rip them apart scale by scale for whatever they did to Loki."

Steve hummed "Yes, we figured it was them he dreamed about. I just wish he told you, if not us, what he sees, it could give him some sort of relief."

"Aye" Thor said, sipping his coffee "but he refuses to tell me anything. I can force it out of him, but it wouldn't be pleasant" he took another small sip "for either of us."
They were interrupted then, by Tony who walked in, grinning at them both.

"Good morning ladies!" he stretched his arms high above his head, sighing at the relaxing stretch his body gave before putting them down. He smiled contentedly and walked over.

"Good morning, Tony" Steve droned then balked when Tony pulled him into a hug from behind.

Thor snickered
"Steve..." Tony put his head on Steve's hair and hugged him tightly "I meessed you."

Thor snorted "I think our friend had not yet removed himself from last night's stupor."

Tony giggled "You talk funny"

"Okay, Tony" Steve pried his arms from around his throat "You should get back to bed."

"Why?" Tony asked "Besides, it's occupied."

Thor raised his brows and Steve flushed.

"By who?" Natasha walked in, wearing Clint's shirt and sweat pants. She headed straight for the coffee pot.

Tony finally released Steve, much to the man's relief, and straightened, pretending to think "I ... don't remember. I mean I know there were two."

Thor snorted and laughter.

"You're a pig" Natasha said, joining Thor on the table "Good morning"

Thor raised his mug in a salute to her "Greetings."

A choking sound came from nearby and they saw Tony had once again grabbed Steve in a hug.

"Steve..." his voice was slurred and affectionate.

Steve was just short of terrified at this point.

Bruce walked in then, rubbing his sleep mussed hair "Morning."

He was greeted in a chorus as he sat down to breakfast. He rubbed his face and thanked her when Natasha got up to get him coffee.

Eventually Clint arrived, dressed in nothing but his boxers. He was promptly sent back by everyone to clothe himself in proper attire.

He came back a few moments later in a white tank and shorts "Good morning." He frowned "Why is Tony humping Steve?"

"Vodka" Natasha replied as if that explained everything.

"Oh" Clint said, then moved to the coffee pot.

"A little help would be appreciated" Steve choked "Tony, can you let me go now?"

"No" Tony held on tighter "You sho shexy"
"Oh God" Steve muttered

Clint laughed, then finally took pity on Steve "Come on, Tony let the captain go." He slapped Tony's back. When Tony didn't let loose, he poked his side.

With a laughing yelp, Tony jumped aside and glared at him "That was not funny"

Steve, who had immediately changed his seat with Natasha and now sat next to Thor, grimaced "Neither was the hug. And go take a bath, you stink"

Tony rolled his eyes "Whatever"

He walked to the coffee machine and started making himself a hot mug.

They sat in relative silence for a while, only the mildest of conversation going on between the clinking of utensils, eating their breakfast when they heard the faintest of footsteps approach. They looked when Loki entered, dragging his feet and keeping his gaze lowered.

No one really appreciated the quick witted insulting Loki, he was a pain to deal with and undesired on his best days. But this, this worn out, tired Loki was a much horrible sight. His hair had lost its shine, his eyes were hollow, skin pale and stretched tightly over his high cheek bones. His mouth had tired lines around it and his forehead was creased in a frown.

He didn't speak to anyone, but silently made his way inside the kitchen, almost like a zombie.

Steve quietly got up from beside Thor to give Loki the seat and the man went to it almost automatically. Once seated, his gaze didn't lift.

"Brother" Thor managed to sound cheerful, not letting his voice crack like he knew it was close to. He put an arm around Loki's shoulders "Would you like to break fast with us?"

Loki shrugged, arms held loosely in his lap. He was wearing a soft shirt and sleep pants, not even bothering to change into his usual stylish attire.

"Why don't you try this?" Natasha suddenly got up and went to retrieve a bowl and some cereal.

"I loved these as a kid and still keep them for the occasional urges" she smiled softly, placing the cereal box before Loki.

He didn't raise his gaze, but Thor picked it up "Coco Pops?"

"They're delicious" she assured him, getting some milk.

Thor poured it in the bowl, then put in the Coco Pops. Taking a spoon from Steve, Thor put it before Loki.

The man ignored it.

"Loki, you have to eat" Thor said, softly.

Loki didn't say anything.

Then Thor had an idea; he leaned forward and whispered in Loki's ear "Eat it or I show them the picture the wench took of us"

There rose a fire in Loki's green eyes as he lifted his head to glare at Thor. It took a second of
defiance before he admitted defeat, but he eventually lifted a thin hand to take a tentative bite of the cereal.

The Avengers hid their relief when he took a larger bite the next time and soon began to devour it in earnest.

***

"How about shopping?" Natasha asked a few weeks later.

Pepper snickered and made a small note on her notepad "I already have everything I need, Nat."

"No you don't" Natasha said, groaning "Pepper, please! This will look awful on my record."

Pepper gave her a small look "Natasha, relax, it's nothing. It happens to the best of us."

"Not to me!" Natasha said, sliding down till she was half lying on the table "Please?"

Pepper patted her head gently "Natasha, come on, you're making it a bigger deal than it is, really."

"Have you ever pushed a weapons facility's self destruct button by mistake?" Natasha growled, unmoving.

Pepper chuckled "No, but I know it stopped the missile from launching in its containment and destroying the whole state."

Natasha groaned again "There has to be something you want! This is not possible!"

Their conversation was interrupted by Loki walking in. He was clearly looking for his brother, but paused when he saw the women.

He looked better now, healthier than he had in a long time. There was color in his cheeks and he didn't drag his feet anymore. He had also stopped dreaming apparently; Natasha suspected Thor had finally given in to Loki's request and granted him magic to put a spell on himself. Or he'd done it anyway with the magic he seemingly produced.

"Ladies" he bowed low, the ends on his scarf almost touching the floor.

"Prince" Natasha sat up, waving her fingers at him.

When Loki straightened, the red haired woman noticed his gaze linger on Pepper for a second longer than it should before he turned away. She also noticed Pepper blushing and looking into her notepad with more attention than before.

She smiled then, apparently uncovering something that could get Pepper to skip putting her mistake on paper.

"Has either of you seen my brother?" Loki asked, eyes flitting to Pepper often.

"No," Natasha replied "He's still on his shift."

Loki hummed and looked at the sky, hoping for a sign of his brother "Perhaps he encountered trouble along the way."

"Perhaps" Pepper said, looking at him from under her lashes.
Loki nodded to them and left.

Natasha turned to Pepper, who was apparently still deep in her notepad, but her pen was stilled.

"So" Natasha said "Nothing I gave help you with?"

Pepper pulled out of her thoughts "Sadly, no."

"How about a date with Loki?" Natasha nearly whispered.

"What?" Pepper said, a little too loud "That's crazy! Why would you think that?"

"Because you were totally checking him out" Natasha said, already guessing it correctly "Admit it, you like him."

"I do not!" Pepper countered.

"I would have believed you if you hadn't blushed, Pep" Natasha said, crossing her arms "So? What say?"

"I say no" Pepper stood, slapping her pad on the table. She was deceptively red in the face "I don't know how you came up with that, but I can tell you that you are wrong. I don't have feelings for Loki, he is a villain, or was one or whatever and I don't have a crush on villains."

"Who said anything about feelings or a crush?" Natasha grinned.

Pepper frowned at her "Go away"

Natasha laughed "Sweetheart, this is my home. You leave if you are so flustered."

Pepper scoffed and spun around, muttering.

"My offer is still available, though" Natasha called after her as she went to the elevator.

Pepper muttered something very dark after that.

***

Thor didn't return that evening and Loki's pacing was putting everyone on edge.

He had scanned for him, using his magic a while ago, and discovered him in a place called Oregon. What he was doing there and why he hadn't responded to the Avenger's calling was beyond him.

Loki was agitated; his mouth was a thin line, his frown dark and he was muttering in a language no one understood. He had shed his coat a long time ago and it lay on the back of the couch Tony occupied. He had a drink in his hand, eyes following the well dressed, pacing god.

Steve was playing a game on his new phone while Clint was lounging on a couch, hurling a ball in the air and catching it.

Loki growled "When he gets back, I shall kill him."

"Jesus," Tony muttered, standing "Relax, man. He can handle himself in case you forget."

Loki glared at him "I am relaxed. An agitated me would be tearing this country apart by now."

Tony rolled his eyes "Stop pacing and come have a drink"
Loki scoffed "That's your answer for everything, isn't it Anthony? Drink."

Tony smirked as he lifted a long elegant decanter from behind the bar. Transparent alcohol moved behind the glass "Judge me if you wish, but I find it the best remedy."

He placed the decanter in the bar top "Jarvis, where did this come from?"

_A gift, Sir. Doctor Simmons brought it up some time ago, if you recall._

"Doctor Simmons?" Tony asked, thinking "Hey, wasn't he the psycho who..."

_Tried stealing the files to the mind manipulating device you created, Sir_

"Yes" Tony said, opening the bottle. He paused "Did he give this before or after I fired him."

_Before, Sir_

The top popped open.

Loki exhaled and walked over, deciding a drink would dull the edge he was on. He sat opposite Tony on the barstool, watching as Tony took out a glass for him.

"What about you guys?" Tony called

He received wordless grunts from the other two men. Shrugging, he filled a glass that Loki immediately took to his lips.

He thought about filling his own glass, then decided to look for a bigger one if it was available.

Loki put his glass down, then grabbed the decanter again. The drink was startlingly biting; he liked it. He poured himself some more and gulped it down.

Tony chuckled as he filled his large glass, emptying the decanter "I take it that you liked the drink?"

"Yes" Loki said absently, there was a strange chill in his gut and he wondered if it had anything to do with the drink and not the fear Thor's absence had lit in him.

"Well," Tony said as Loki stood, a distant look on his face and a hand on his stomach "I'll drink to that."

He was raising the glass to his lips when Loki's hand on the rim of his glass stopped him.

Tony looked at him, startled as the man lowered his glass "What gives?"

"That's not vodka" he croaked.

Then Loki turned and vomited a fountain of blood.

"Holy fuck!" Clint jumped up, running over with Steve at his heels.

"Jarvis!" Tony shouted, running around the bar.

_Already alerted Doctor Banner, Sir_

Tony kneeled beside Loki, who had fallen on the floor, gagging as more blood tore out from his mouth.
"Tell Thor to get his ass back here now!" Tony hollered "Guys, help me lift him up."

Loki was a big man, but they managed to lift his gagging, retching form to the couch.

Bruce skidded into the room and paled at the sight before him "What the hell!?"

"Poison!" Tony said "Doc, as much as I love seeing you stunned, because you rarely are, could you haulass!?"

Bruce sprinted forward, looking down at the blood splattered Loki. "What did he have?"

"A drink" Tony said, his face pale.

Steve had a towel that he held before Loki, wiping his face while Clint inserted his fingers down Loki's throat, making him empty the last of the poison.

Loki choked and lifted himself to retch at their feet.

His hands were trying to take off the ring on his bloodied fingers but he was failing. He dropped back onto the couch, curling and groaning in pain.

"Jarvis!" Tony hollered

**Sir, Thor seems to have turned his comm off**

"Awesome!" Clint growled, holding Loki down as he made him throw up again "Fan-fucking-tastic."

"Get...back" Loki croaked, forcing himself to sit up after more spasms hit him violently.

The room was spinning and he could feel himself burn from the inside. His vision blurred and he closed his eyes, he didn't need his sight to force the spell on himself.

Slowly, as they watched, Loki's body began to relax. His shaking, stopped as did his retching and the painful noises he made. He started falling back and soon, he was lying still, his head lolling over the edge of the couch.

"Is he...?" Tony asked, paling.

"No," Bruce said "He's breathing."

Sure enough, Loki's chest was slowly moving up and down as he breathed.

"Okay, what the *fuck* happened?" Clint asked, stepping away and looking at the huge disgusting mess Loki had made in the short time span.

"Clearly" Tony said, his gaze on Loki "Someone wanted me dead."

"What is that?" Steve walked over to the glass Tony had filled but not touched "It's like nothing I have ever encountered."

He sniffed it, frowning at the sharp smell. How did Tony not smell it?

"Jarvis" Tony called "Remind me to test that thing"

**Yes, Sir**
"What do we do about him?" Clint pointed to Loki.

"Clearly, he's healing himself" Bruce said "Jarvis, could you scan him, please. Tell me what you see"

**Yes, Sir**

Over Loki, a wide strip of light started moving. It went from his prone head to his feet, then back. It vanished a second later.

A holographic screen fell from the ceiling, right in front of Bruce.

*Sir his insides have been burned and melted together, starting with his throat. He's healing himself as we speak and it showed a small percentile of improvement in the time I scanned him*

"Well that's good at least" Bruce looked at the photos of Loki's insides and winced. His flesh had been melted and glued together, both in his stomach and his food pipe "This is beyond survival. I think the only thing that saved him was the fact that he's immortal and controlled magic."

Clint came up beside Bruce, looking at the pictures "Damn"

Steve had long since looked away, opting to clean Loki's hair and face instead of looking at the grotesque pictures.

"Clint, you saved him by making him retch" Bruce pointed out "a few more moments in there and that - whatever the hell it is - would have burned right through his guts."

Clint grunted but didn't say anything more.

"Jarvis, another scan please" Bruce said

More pictures hovered before him and Bruce raised his eyebrows in surprise when he saw that it looked better than it had before.

"He is healing himself" Bruce said, turning "thank you Jarvis."

The screen went back in the ceiling.

"We have to get him to his room" Bruce pointed out.

Steve moved to Loki's head and grasped him under his arms. He looked at the others, eyebrows raised.

Tony moved forward, grabbing Loki under the knees and lifting him.

"Damn" Tony wrinkled his nose as they carried his prone form off to his room "he smells like shit."

"Stop it, Tony" Steve muttered "the man saved your life."

Tony scowled as he looked at Loki, at the blood splattered on his crisp white shirt and grey vest.

"Don't I know it."

It had been acid, Tony discovered later, dulled down by some chemicals to make the smell nonexistent and the effect to intensify. He paled when he realized that he had stood no chance against it, that he would have been dead from the first sip.
Unwillingly, Steve's words about how Loki had saved him came back.

He cussed; he didn't like being in anyone's debt.

***

He was pretty sure his heart had broken. It hurt in his chest and he was having so much trouble breathing, he wanted to stop altogether.

Against his will, Thor had seen Jane. He'd caught a glimpse of her when she was walking behind a news reporter, somewhere in front of aN astronomy department of a University in Oregon. After taking the directions from Sir Jarvis, he had flown there immediately, ignoring everything inside that said it was a bad idea.

His heart was pounding as he landed in the grounds of the campus, unheeding of the stir he caused. People were taking his pictures, asking for autographs and making videos, he did care, not about their admiration, not about their screaming for his attention, all he wished for was a moment with Jane.

He had asked about her and soon discovered where he 'office' was. He had rushed there, a huge smile on his face.

Just to have his heart ripped out and stepped on.

Jane pretended she didn't know him. He tried reasoning with her, telling her that he understood why she was made then begged her to end this charade.

She had refused to recall who he was, not only that, even Darcy didn't wish to let anyone know she knew him.

He'd been escorted out of there by security then torn into the skies, chilling the tears in his eyes.

The rest of the day he'd spent mourning, cursing himself for the humiliation and pain he had endured. The clouds had gathered over him but he didn't care. He'd gotten rid of his comm a while ago, not wanting his friends to witness his pain.

When the searing pain in his heart subsided, when he could think without crying, he made a straight path to New York. He knew there was only one person who could fix him, make the pain go away and he wasn't above asking Loki for help.

This was going through his mind when he landed on the top of Stark Towers, sometime after midnight. Mjolnir dragged on the cement behind him till he lifted it to hook into his belt as he descended.

He entered the living room to find everyone, minus Loki, waiting for him.

They looked angry at his late arrival. Sighing, he pushed aside the glass doors just as Tony walked over. Steve jumped to follow him.

"Friends, I can explain"

Tony punched him before he could say anything else.

Thor's head snapped to the side because of the blow and he gazed at Tony in disbelief.

"You fucking retard!" Tony yelled, straining against Steve who held him back "Where the fuck were
Thor stared at him, stunned. He didn't know being late was this big a deal.

"Stark...what?"

"Something happened, Bolt" Clint said from his place by the couch, his hip propped against the piece of furniture "To your brother"

Thor paled "What?"

"He was poisoned!" Tony snapped, pulling away from Steve "By some bastard that tried to kill me. He's in a coma now, no thanks to you!"

Thor felt the room spin, all thoughts of Jane leaving him "Where?"

"Your room" Bruce said.

Thor sprinted forward, no regard for anyone other than his brother. He raced through the halls till he found himself in front of his room.

He pushed the door open and found Loki lying in bed, eyes half closed as he slowly read a book. He was dressed in his sleep clothes and looked exhausted. There, in a pile on the floor, were bloodied clothes. Thor tore his anguished gaze from them.

"Loki!" Thor moved forward.

"Ah" Loki croaked weakly "the bumbling troll arrives."

Thor fell to his knees beside the bed "Brother, what happened?"

Loki glared at him "You left" he rasped, his voice so gruff it pained to speak "that's what happened."

Thor paled, "Brother I..."

"I needed my magic today" Loki told him in a graved tone "I needed it desperately but you weren't here to give it to me. Tell me where you... where you were."

Thor felt guilty, even more so when he spotted a blood splattered handkerchief by Loki's side.

"I..."

"Yes, that's what we'd all like to know"

Thor turned to see Tony and the rest of the Avengers at the door.

"Please, my friends" Thor pleaded "We need privacy"

"Actually" Loki hissed, making Thor turn back to him "since they were the ones that saved my life, they are more welcome here than you."

He saw the pain in Thor's eyes, expressed on his face. But he didn't have the time to watch it because a coughing spasm hit him.

Loki quickly turned, reached for the bloodied cloth and put it to his mouth, coughing violently. He felt Thor's hand on his back, soothing him, but the fit didn't stop.
Eventually, the cough receded enough that he could remove the bloody handkerchief from his lips. He grimaced at the new spots of blood there.

He lay back, suddenly devoid of energy. He closed his eyes, bloody lips parted slightly to breathe.

"Who did this?" Thor asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Bruce, who had moved into the room at Loki's coughing, sat on the edge of the bed "An unexpected enemy of Tony's."

Thor stared at him "What? Who?"

"An ex employee" Tony supplied, walking in and sitting on the couch "I'm already looking for him, but the bastard covered his trail well."

"This wasn't meant for Loki?" Thor asked, finding himself relieved.

"No" Tony said shortly, his gaze more dangerous than Thor had previously seen "it wasn't."

Thor looked at Loki again and was surprised to see that he had more color in his cheeks "Brother, you feel better!"

"No thanks to you" Loki rasped, eyes still closed "This is the second time you were absent when I needed you, Thor."

Thor flinched at the words "Loki, I ...."

"Leave me" Loki croaked "I require rest."

Thor lowered his head, the pain in his heart increasing tenfold "I am sorry, brother"

"I said leave" Loki turned away from him "All of you."

The Avengers didn't need telling twice, even as Tony rolled his eyes at the lack of gratitude, and filed out of the room.

Thor remained, kneeling next to Loki. He wished to say so much, but found himself lacking. He swallowed against his pain and turned to leave the room, leaving Loki to sleep. He unpinned his hammer and let it drop to the floor before closing the door behind him.

He followed the halls blindly, coming to the living room where the rest of the team waited.

Tony was away from the bar, leaning against the wall beside the couches where everyone sat.

They stopped talking when Thor entered.

Tony cleared his throat "You mind telling us where you went?"

"Not now," Thor rumbled, head lowered as he continued to walk away.

"But..." Tony was hushed by Bruce, who shook his head.

They all intended to rip into Thor, now was just not the time.

Thor's guilt increased with every step he took, recalling Loki's anger, his words, the pain and hurt behind the anger, everything served to cut Thor open from the inside.
His feet let him back to the roof where he stood thinking.

If Loki had been well, he would have made a joke about Thor's ability to think.

But he wasn't well; he'd been poisoned and Thor wasn't there, once again, when he needed him. He closed his eyes. He didn't know how to fix this; he had vowed to protect Loki from this and now...

He sighed.

He was torn from the inside out. Jane was gone, and now Loki had damned him to hell.

What was he to do?

So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he never heard the footsteps behind him.

The clicking of the claws behind him only registered when it was too late.

Thor turned, barely had time to see what was behind him, when a large clawed hand rammed into his chest, ripping the armor like paper.

***

When Loki woke, he was alone. Thor's side of the bed was untouched and even as he feigned indifference, he felt a stab of regret at his brother's absence.

He was feeling much better, proved when he sat up and felt nothing out of the ordinary about his person. He turned his head to see if his brother was in a couch of something, but he wasn't.

Sighing, Loki got up to relieve himself. Once he was done, he looked at his reflection in the mirror and found himself paler than he remember and raised a hand to fix it.

Nothing but frizzled sparks erupted from his finger tips.

"Perfect" he muttered, realizing his magic was indeed gone.

He should have expected it, he did expect it, but that didn't stop him from feeling the sting of disappointment. His breath fanned the mirror, he was so close, as he sighed with his thoughts. He had used up all his stored magic; a necessity since his brother had made himself scarce at the most inopportune time.

Loki leaned his forehead against the cool glass.

Things had developed so well between the two in the past. He could either let this go like he yearned to or he could hold onto it, the choice was his and so were the results. How things would go from here rested in his hands and his alone.

Another sigh escaped his lips.

Fighting Thor was the one way he showed he had no room for weakness, it was his defense, resisting and fighting Thor at every step. However, at the same time, it exhausted him.

He could blame this whole thing on Thor, it wasn't difficult, but he suddenly found himself craving the softer approach, the one where he kept his brother as a friend not as an enemy.

The battle waged within him for a good hour before he finally made up his mind.
"So," Natasha said, looking at his profile and following his gaze "are you gonna say something to her or will you keep staring at her?"

Loki looked at her and blinked "Excuse me?"

"You've been staring at Pepper for the most part of the day, don't think I'm blind" she nudged his shoulder "go on."

Loki narrowed his eyes at her but returned his gaze forward.

They were seated on one of Tony's comfortable couches. Natasha had joined him, uninvited, while he sat there immersed in one of his books. He had been reading, somewhat calmly, before her arrival and had been forced into an almost one sided conversation with the woman.

He wasn't stupid, he knew Rogers had sent her here to take his mind off the fact that his brother was still missing.

Hours ago, Loki had come out of his rooms looking for Thor and had been greeted by the worst news he could. Once again, Thor was gone. The roof had been the last place anyone had seen him and when searched, the only evidence found, were drops of red blood.

They were Thor's Loki had no doubt about it, but rather than submit to the gut wrenching terror that had rose in him the second he realized his brother was gone, Loki had turned to the calmer, colder side he wasn't surprised still existed in him.

Not a few hours ago, they had returned from another fruitless search.

It had started to snow now, so their search had been put on hold. Loki had gone straight to his rooms, thrashed the whole thing, even flipping the king size bed over, then returned with a book to read on the couch.

The Avengers didn't know what to do, so they had sent Natasha to calm him down and ask him if he knew who would take him.

His eyes roved the room, deliberately staying away from Pepper, who was on the phone with the police.

Tony was on his computers with Bruce manning another. Steve had another phone to his head, instructing the SHIELD agents while Barton was at the bar, drinking something he bought himself. Behind him, the empty shelves shone.

Tony had thrown out all the alcohol and more had yet to arrive.

Loki sighed and put the book aside "If I had my magic, I would have found him hours ago."

He hadn't said it to her, but Natasha nodded "I know. But can you think of anyone who would wish to harm him, anyone who would have taken him?"

"No" Loki shook his head "No one in the Nine Realms would dare to harm my brother."

Natasha smirked "Are they afraid of him or your father?"

"Neither" Loki turned to her "They fear me."
He stood and walked a short distance away "My father and brother hold on to their scruples and morals like lifelines. I have none so many fear what I am capable of doing." He sneered "That, coupled with my magic makes me a formidable enemy, but you know that already."

Natasha stared back at him "We stopped you"

"Yes" Loki said, turning to her, book held in one hand as he crossed his arms across his chest "but do you not ever wonder how? How is it that a group of puny mortals could stop the god of Chaos?" he paused "Did it ever occur to you that maybe I suppressed my magic, that I wished to be stopped?"

Natasha looked at him "It did."

He blinked, clearly surprised "What?"

She stood "Sometime around the time when you took on the Hulk alone, it occurred to me. You wouldn't be so stupid as to do that without an alternate agenda. Of course, I could be completely wrong about that" she was standing before him now "But what made me believe it, truly believe it, were your eyes when you told that boy you had tried killing yourself. No one, not even the god of lies could fake that trauma, the hurt and the resignation I saw for those few seconds, plain across your face. And right now, I saw a small glimpse of it again not too long ago" she smirked as he blinked in surprise. Then her face went blank "You knew what was in that drink, didn't you? You drank it on purpose."

"What?" Loki said, a little too quickly "You have lost your mind, woman."

"Have I?" she asked, realizing that her teammates were beginning to stare. She lowered her voice "Look me in the eye and tell me, Loki, was that drink not another way to go for a suicide? Did you not, for a second, think that maybe, maybe this was the answer. You thought of it before. What was it? A test to see what would happen so you can try it again later?"

Loki didn't say anything, just watched her. He swallowed, the bobbing of his Adam's apple giving Natasha the answer.

"I knew it" she said softly "you did that deliberately. Why?"

"Why do you care?" Loki whispered "All of you hate me."

"I don't" she said, shrugging "God knows I should, but I don't. You saved Clint for me, that's enough."

"That was a deal" Loki said, looking down at her "and where are you going with this? If you have a course for this conversation then tell me otherwise step back."

She looked him in the eye "Don't try this again. Thor wouldn't be happy and neither will your father. I am pretty sure if you die, Odin is going to have something to say about it to us and I assume he is better with his weapons than his words. I don't want the Wrath of the Titans on my planet just because you decided to push up daisies. Understand it, Loki."

Loki scoffed, then spoke after a few moments silence "Do be careful, Ms Romanov. It comes across as if you care about a villain that nearly killed you."

She shrugged and stepped back, walking off as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

***
Thor knew the second the man snapped. He yelped and spun around to run.

Loki was waiting at the doors outside. He jumped when Thor tore through them and grabbed his wrist, hauling him forward.

Behind them, he heard the pounding footsteps of the giant they had angered.

"Thor what did you do!" Loki asked, running faster when the giant's large steps brought it closer.

Thor looked over his shoulder and ran faster, pulling Loki along "Said something about his mother, I think. My language isn't that good."

"Really!" Loki asked, cursing as a hand barely missed them "Damn it"

A second after his muttered spell, both of them vanished.

Thor's head slumped as another cherished memory was torn from him. His hands were secured by thick chains, stretched to the limit as he was on his knees in the strange glass case. Blood was slowly dripping from the gash in his chest onto the glass floor of the cylinder, making him weaker by the second.

His eyes opened on the wonderful memory, going down from where he was suspended to the other occupants of the room.

There was a human among the monsters, looking at the multiple computer screens that lit and showed him the progress his machine was having on Thor.

He was short, had graying hair that stood up in every direction and blue eyes far too focused to be sane.

Behind him, taller than even the Hulk himself, stood the creature Thor had thought dead. The Chitauri King was a fearsome sight; the tentacles, thin and deadly, the protruded from his head like hair moved slowly, indicating that their appearance was just as dangerous as their function. His skin, a strange grayish brown was rippling with muscles as he breathed, hands crossed over his chest. His large jaws jutted out viciously, angular teeth and his snake like tongue going over them every now and then.

His minions were smaller in size, but no less dangerous. There were three that Thor had counted, which explained the scientist's presence.

These four creatures were all that was left of the Chitauri and Thor had a feeling they had kept him alive for one reason and one reason alone.

He tried speaking, but ended up giving a whisper of a groan.

The King turned to him. His language was a mixture of clicks and growls, nothing Thor could understand and that put him at a grave disadvantage.

The scientist looked up "Ah, yes. So you have awakened, young prince."

Thor's lips moved slightly, but no noise came out.

"Nevermind" the man smiled, he looked down at the computer again.
More clicks and growls sounded.

The scientist looked at the King and nodded while he spoke "Sorry, my liege." He turned to Thor "His majesty would like to know if you prefer a good memory or one of those bad ones we procured from your mind?"

Thor pulled at the chains weakly. It resulted in nothing but the pool of blood at his knees getting darker.

"Hmm" the man snorted then shrugged "Then I guess we make it a nasty one"

Thor lifted his head as he saw the man reach out to press a button.

"Wait..."

His voice was a hoarse crackling that was lost to them. A sharp sound rose in him, then his vision went white.

*He was fighting a Jotun beast now, the creature trying to claw at him as he jumped aside and dodged its moves.*

*He laughed when he landed a heavy blow, leaving the creature, a mixture of horse and snake, reel back and whine. He moved in for the kill, his eyes already on the tooth he intended on giving Sif when he returned. He was so close, jumping into the air as the creature pulled back a claw.*

"Thor, no!"

*He heard Loki's call a second too late. The creature didn't ram him with the claw.*

*It struck out with poisonous fangs.*

Burning so intense erupted in Thor he thought he was on fire. He struggled against the chains, trying to break them, as the anguish intensified, the venom tearing him apart from the inside.

His screams of agony delighted the King to no end as his protruding jaws opened, in a nasty flower of teeth and tongue, his lower jaw splitting in two and almost reaching his chest. He laughed, a roaring, grating sound to Thor's anguished screaming.

Then the pain stopped.

Thor sagged forward, held only by the chains on his wrists. Blood dripped from his wound as he remained suspended, not even allowed to fall on the ground for relief.

Another sharp sound and his vision was a harsh white again.

*Thor was a child, a toddler, when the doors swung open.*

*He lifted his head and saw his mother and father approach. His father now had one eye, which was covered by a gold patch, and that delighted Thor to no extent.*

*He shot to his feet and paused when he saw his mother holding a small bundle. His confused gaze went to his parents.*
"What is that?" he pointed to the thing.

Frigga smiled "Why, Thor. This is your brother."

Thor frowned "I don't have a brother"

"You do now" Odin walked over to him and knelt down "this is Loki, Thor. Your new baby brother."

Still a little reluctant, Thor pouted "I don't want him"

Odin laughed while Frigga began to get a little nervous, not lowering down to let Thor see.

"Why don't you look at him first?" Odin asked.

Thor crossed his arms across his chest but obeyed his father. Frigga knelt down and he walked over.

The baby was tiny and bald. Thor made a face.

"He's ugly"

"Thor!" Frigga scolded, looking down at the newly named Loki who was gazing at the world with sharp green eyes.

"He doesn't have hair" Thor argued, still frowning "I don't like him."

Odin rubbed his back "Thor, don't say that. He is your brother, to take care of, play with and love. You can teach him everything you learn. You will be warriors together, fight together, help each other when you need it the most."

"Where did he come from?" Thor asked, looking at Frigga.

She bit her lip but Odin answered in a heartbeat.

"Valhalla"

"Loki..." Thor rasped softly.

As slowly as he could manage, his strength weakening, Thor moved his middle finger that still bore the ring. It dipped lightly while he moved his thumb over it.

"Help me..."

***

Loki's green eyes suddenly lifted, his gaze leaving the book.

He felt something stir in him, like he was a glass and someone was pouring a warm fluid inside, he suddenly felt full. It spread from the back of his neck, going down to his spine, then travelling to his arms, legs and finally, so fast that it made his lightheaded, to his mind.

He gasped softly and stood, gaining everyone's attention.

"My magic" he breathed to himself "it's back"

"What is it?" Tony asked, walking over.
As an answer, Loki raised a hand, palm up, and produced a blue flame in his hand.

Tony stopped "Oh"

The flame vanished and Loki stared at his hand "Look's like I got something back."

When he looked up, he sneered at the fear in the Avenger's faces "Don't worry, I have other things to do rather than tear your world apart."

Barton narrowed his eyes but remained still.

Loki raised both his hands and closed his eyes. One hand still held the book loosely.

"What are you doing?" Steve asked.

"What do you think?" Loki asked without lifting his lids.

He didn't hear the Captain's answer, instead he began to turn back time, finding himself in the kitchen.

He saw the Avengers move about, saw himself reading a book, saw Natasha sitting beside him. He pushed past, going back further till he saw Thor.

He began to follow Thor without moving, he found himself being dragged wherever the man went. He barely touched the stairs as Thor climbed them, freshly wounded from Loki's words. He saw him stand there, the fool, thinking.

Funny, Loki didn't think he could do that alone.

He stood there for a while before Loki heard another presence. It was blurred, so he concentrated.

He saw it then, one of the Chitauri, pull his claw back and...

Loki gasped loudly, eyes flying open.

The book fell to the ground with a thud.

He put a hand to his forehead, suddenly feeling dizzy "No..."

"What?" it was Stark "Loki, what is it?"

Loki looked at him like he was a stranger "I have to find him. I have to go to him."

"What?" Tony stepped back "Loki, what are you talking about?"

"Thor, you idiot!" Loki shoved past "I have to find him. He gave me my magic for no other reason than that he was in trouble."

He had reached the hallway as he talked, his Midgard attire glowing till he was wearing his black Asgardian battle armor. When he reached the room, his staff flew from where he'd hidden it under the mattress and into his hand. His helmet formed on his head.

When the Avengers followed him, they balked, halting in their tracks.

For a second, they didn't know what to do; what he would do.

But Loki merely sneered at them. He was hiding his fear perfectly, not letting one trace of the knee
buckling terror escape him.

"You wouldn't happen to have some sort of transmitter would you?" he asked, walking over, letting his heavy black coat flow behind him menacingly. The gold ring around his neck glistened.

"Over there" Tony pointed to a vague area over his shoulder.

Loki slit his gaze, looking very intimidating "Then get it for me, please, Anthony."

***

Thor screamed.

There was nothing else left for him to do as more memories crashed into him, sweet, bitter, soft, harsh, pleasuring, painful, tormenting, reliving, love, hate, pain pleasure, pain, pain, pain!

His knees slipped on the bloody pool beneath, dangling him like a broken doll against the chains. His head bowed, hair dampened with sweat and sticking to his face. Every fiber of his being hurt, every vein protested, every breath seemed like he was inhaling fire.

His mind was no better; he had lived through so many memories, so many painful feelings had been resurrected, clawing at the farthest corners of his brain. He had felt every injury he ever received, the pain increasing tenfold, the only difference in this torture; he never got the reprieve from the injury at Loki's hands.

Whenever Thor was injured, Loki healed him, fixed him, tended to him with his magic and more than once, gone off to the being responsible for harming Thor and exacting severe retribution.

Loki, his brother, his enemy, his family....his savior.

He was always there for him, always helping him even when Thor didn't ask for it.

A growl and a few clicking sounds came from above and Thor raised his head as much as he could.

The King was talking to the scientist again, lowering his gaze only slightly.

The man was transfixed, looking at him with something akin to worship "Yes, your Majesty. Anything you desire."

The man moved to the computer again and Thor tried readying himself for the pain.

It never came. He waited for what seemed like eternity before finally daring to look up.

He was alone.

The Chitauri and the strange man had left him; probably leaving him to bleed for as long as his immortality bore.

***

Loki held on tightly, cursing himself for agreeing to this. He was holding his staff in one hand which made his grip more fragile than he wanted.

"Scared, Snow Flake?" Steve laughed in an uncharacteristic manner as he addressed him in one of Tony's nicknames, looking over his shoulder at the god that looked like he was paling by the second.
They tore through the streets on Captain America's highly modified motorcycle. Loki was hesitant, especially when Tony had told him it was a prototype that needed testing.

"Keep your eyes on the bloody road mortal," Loki snarled, tightening his single handed grip around Steve's middle "especially if you wish to keep them."

Steve smiled and accelerated, smiling at Loki's undignified yelp.

"Hey, Reindeer Games, you alright?" Tony's voice called through his ear piece.

"Pay no heed to me, Metal Man" Loki said, thinking about teleporting into the car Natasha drove somewhere behind.

He looked over his shoulder and slit his gaze when she smiled at him from behind the wheel of another of Stark's monstrosities. This one was large and black, reminding him of an elephant.

The mobile had thick tires protruding from its sides and it was shaped like a Hummer, the resemblance marred only by the guns and sleek canons jutting out from its sides.

Behind Natasha, Clint arrived. He saw Loki and chuckled...then leapt into the air when Loki gave him a shock of magic right in his ass.

Steve turned unnecessarily sharply and Loki placed a hand on his helmet, holding Steve's shoulder and staff in the other "Try and knock me off again and I will ram your own intestines down your throat!"

Steve gave himself a satisfied laugh before behaving.

Loki put a finger to the device in his ear "Stark, we take the next turn here. The red abandoned building is where he's held. I go in alone and you await my signal."

"No can do, Frosty" Tony called back "I am not letting you out of my sight. Nothing personal, I just have trust issues."

"Too bad" Loki muttered.

Natasha cussed when he vanished from behind Steve.

***

Loki's heart was beating so loudly, he was stunned it hadn't given him away yet.

His magic hummed under his skin reassuringly as he walked further into the hall he knew Thor was at the end of.

The abandoned building was in one of the more notorious parts of New York. The top floors were broken, held together only by the building's own will, and the basement was divided so it spread far and deep into the ground.

And it was here that Loki walked now, staff raised for protection, eyes darting everywhere. He suspected one of the damned Chitauri to jump out and grab him from the shadows.

Loki jumped, slamming his back into the wall when he heard a loud thud. He raised his staff and fired a blue beam at the source of the sound.

The leaky pipe exploded at the contact.
Loki exhaled, calming his taut nerves, stretched to the limit and tightening further. He blew out air and relaxed a fraction.

"Calm yourself" Loki muttered, his voice distant over his beating heart "Calm, cool... another noise made him jump "Calm down!"

His bark echoed down the dark path, coming back to him as a whisper.

He closed his eyes and put his helmed head back, closing his eyes and expecting himself to relax.

What he didn't expect was a groan that sounded from the hall.

Loki slowly turned his head to the sound. His eyes widening. A second and magic vision later, he moved forward.

"Thor!" he called, relieved that no one else was there.

He ran to the end of the hall and came upon a cemented room. There was a dull light there, computers that were black now and suspended from the ceiling, trapped in a bloody cylinder...

"Brother!" Loki dropped his staff, forgetting it, and sprinted forward.

He waved a hand and the chains holding Thor vanished, releasing him to fall. Another wave, and the cylinder vanished.

Loki was ready, standing under him, and caught him as he fell from above. Loki fell to his knees as he caught the full, unsupported weight of his brother.

Thor groaned softly, turning his head and looking at him through slit eyes "Brother..."

Loki was about to reply to the hoarse whisper but froze, his gut turning to ice. His gaze dropped to his hand, which was placed on Thor's chest.

Loki went paper white when he saw the gaping wound on Thor's chest and his heart beating through it, scratched and bleeding. It gushed the warm crimson liquid over his fingers, over his clothes and onto the cement floor.

"Oh ,great Odin" Loki muttered, holding back the sick feeling in his heart. He grasped Thor tighter "It's alright, brother, I'm here. I'll help you."

Thor didn't reply, he closed his eyes "You came..."

"Hey, your Highness" Tony's irritating voice came through his ear "Where the hell you at?"

"Meet me back at your abode" Loki muttered.

His staff flew in his hand and a second later, he vanished.

Loki appeared in Tony's living room, kneeling beside the bleeding Thor.

"Don't worry, brother" Loki muttered, dropping his staff and lifting Thor in his arms "I wont let you go."

He carried Thor to their bedroom, much like the numerous times the thunder god had done during their childhood.
The room was tidy and repaired before Loki got in, a small example of his magic. He put his bleeding brother on the bed and knelt beside him.

"Thor, I need you to look at me, brother" Loki said, brushing back his hair from his face with gentle bloodied fingers.

Thor didn't reply; his shattered chest moving raggedly and that being the limit of his movement.

"Thor!" Loki snapped, shaking him lightly "Thor, wake up!"

Thor's eyes flickered "Loki, I missed her so much, I had to see" he gasped "See her..."

"Focus on staying awake" Loki told him "I need you to stay with me."

Thor looked at him "I loved her..."

"Thor!" Loki slapped his face lightly "Focus, you idiot."

Thor opened his eyes and looked at his brother "What?"

Loki smiled and wasted no time. He raised a hand over Thor's chest and began the curse.

Thor groaned, arching against the pain in his chest. His hand went to Loki's, grabbing his bloody fingers.

"Ssh" Loki squeezed his fingers back "Trust me"

The pain shot through Thor again and he bowed, the tendons on his neck rising as he screamed agonizingly.

Loki concentrated, keeping every feeling, every thought out of his mind. Soon, his hand began to glow, he felt the magic go from him and flow into Thor, going into his chest like wisps, wrapping around his heart and jamming into the slashed organ. He growled softly when he realized those monsters had sunk poison into Thor's system; poison that made the whole healing harder.

Loki increased the echelon of his spell.

Thor's finger's crushed Loki's own; he heard a snap of breaking bone but felt no pain.

More magic flowed in him and Thor's screams got louder and louder, tears falling down his cheeks, leaving shining streaks.

Loki felt his magic drain, felt a dullness rise from his bent knees and slowly going higher. He felt his eyes hurt and then his temples, but he didn't let the spell go.

Thor thrashed on the bed, crushed more of Loki's bones, then finally, finally, felt relief begin to swell in his chest.

It started slowly, like warmth, like another life was going in him. But soon it gained speed, stole momentum from the man beside him. It came through his like a release; slowly and effectively. He felt it meld into his wound, fix the cracks and tame the searing pain, making it docile and eventually vanished.

Thor closed his eyes, exhausted.

Loki dropped the spell after holding it for an excruciatingly long time; it left him drained, both
physically and mentally, he swayed slightly and his eyes closed.

Tony burst into the room just as Loki collapsed to the floor in a dead faint.

***

He heard voices, hushed and careful, and decided trying to open his eyes.

It took more energy than need be, but he managed it.

Through his slit gaze, Thor saw Loki talking to someone as he held the door open only a sliver.

"No" Loki said softly

There was a muffled reply.

"I said no, Stark" Loki cut Tony off "He can go to hell as far as I'm concerned. I have nothing to say to him, nothing to report, tell him whatever the hell pleases you."

Another voice joined Tony's.

Loki listened for a while before he replied in a deadly tone "Be careful who you try and insult, mortal. My brother may be smitten by you, but I will have no qualms about skinning you and using your pelt to clean my boots."

More voices. Thor tried to hear what they were saying, but his energy was leaving him again.

Loki laughed softly, the sound sinister in the silence "I would love you see you try that, Fury. My brother is under my care, touch him and I will tear out your innards while you watch."

He closed the door then, locking it by magic. As he turned, Thor saw a bandage around Loki's hand.

He tried levering himself to ask what happened, but a wave of exhaustion, so intense he saw stars, rushed over him, shutting his eyes and dropping him into slumber.

He woke again, for a few seconds, only to see Loki lying beside him. His elbow levered him up as he read a book, head held in his palm.

His blue eyes lifted to see Loki pace before him, his face unguarded and - frightened.

Thor woke, finally, completely and found himself alone. He looked around but saw no sign of Loki. The door was slightly ajar and Thor saw a thin strip of light on the floor.

He lay for a while, waiting to see if sleep would take him again. It didn't and after a moment, Thor sat up.

He placed a hand on his head when the room spun and waited for it to pass. It took its time, seemingly reluctant to leave his side, but when it did, he placed both his feet on the floor and stood. After spending a good twenty minutes in the toilet, Thor walked back to the empty room. He pulled on his shoes and changed his clothes before going into the hall.

He blinked at the stinging light, raising a hand against it as his eyes adjusted. It took his some time, mainly because he'd gone to the kitchen to make himself something to eat, but eventually, Thor found his comrades in a 'recreation' room. Here, they could relax and do whatever they wished.

Clint was the first to see him from his perch on the 'lounger'. 
"Hey" the man smiled "Look who decided to join the world of the living!"

The rest of them turned, Tony, Steve, Bruce and Natasha. Even Pepper was there; she waved at him and gave him a beautiful smile.

"Morning, Sunshine" Tony walked over and clapped Thor on the back "You alright?"

Thor scratched his head "Yes, I feel" he searched for the word "healed."

"That's good to hear" Bruce said "Your brother will be relieved when he sees you awake."

Thor smiled "Thank you. Where is Loki?"

Steve pointed to where the study was "Been in there all morning. Apparently he's trying to take his mind off your injury by working himself to dea- the bone"

Thor saw how Steve had changed his words at Natasha's glare. Though it was strange, it would also wait.

Thor trudged to the study. He opened the door to find Loki at the very end of the large room, bent over something; muttering.

He opened his mouth to speak, then grinned evilly. It would be more fun to scare his brother.

Thor tip toed over, making no sound as he stalked Loki. He was halfway across the room when Loki straightened.

"You have no stealth" Loki said, keeping his back to Thor "Valhalla knows how you are able to hunt, brother."

Thor sighed, slumping, then stomped all the way over as if making up for being wickedly silent.

"Brother!" Thor slapped Loki on the back, laughing when he flinched "I awaken."

"Yes," Loki grabbed whatever he was muttering to and stuffed in his trouser pocket. He turned to Thor "I am acutely aware of that highly palpable fact."

Thor grinned, not at his words, but at something else entirely.

Loki had a mask of calm indifference over his face, but Thor knew better. Beneath the tranquil surface, he knew a sea was raging within Loki. He could see the torment, the emotion, the fear and the relief that Loki felt at the moment. It blazed in his gaze, in his posture, his crossed arms merely a gesture to shield himself from Thor's scrutiny.

"Pray tell" Loki drawled "what has you grinning like a fool?"

Thor grinned wider "You"

Loki grunted in surprise when Thor suddenly grabbed him in a bone crushing hug. He groaned into Thor's shoulder as he heard his back pop.

"Thor, get off!" his voice was muffled.

But Thor only held tighter "I missed you, brother."

Loki's hands, that were pushing at him, dropped "I am beginning to understand that. Thank you for
explaining it though, I now feel like a courted maiden."

Thor laughed, pulling back only slightly, so Loki could breath. The trickster gave him an annoyed look.

"Are you quite done?" Loki asked "Because I can no longer feel my spine."

Thor chuckled once and let him go. Loki stepped back, slapping the creases from his clothes.

"Brother" Thor began, humor vanishing "Loki."

Loki, who had ignored the previous call, halted his movement. He looked at Thor and knew instantly what he wished to discuss.

"Forget it, Thor" Loki said, only the slightest tremble in his voice "I will not discuss it."

"They nearly killed me"

"Thor" Loki began in a warning tone, turning away from him "do not continue."

Thor ignored him, his voice controlled "You saved me, brother. How can I not continue?"

"By keeping your mouth shut" Loki hissed through gritted teeth "I know what I have done, there is no need for you to tell me."

"But I wish to thank you" Thor said, placing a hand on Loki's shoulder and making him turn.

"Loki, look at me" he instructed when Loki looked at the floor.

Loki raised his gaze and glared at him "What?"

"Thank you, my brother" Thor said earnestly, his voice gruff "You came to me in my time of need when I failed to show up for you on numerous occasions. I cannot tell you how much that means to me."

Loki's throat worked to keep his emotions in check "I believed you gone. Can you even fathom what I felt when I saw you strung up like that?"

"Yes" Thor replied instantly "Fear, rage and a desire for vengeance. But mostly you felt fear, gnawing at your insides like an animal trying to escape, desperate, wild and uncontrolled. You must have lost your thinking capacity the second you saw me and moved only on instinct." He smiled sadly "Am I right?"

Loki's eyes were wide "You can't possibly know that."

"I do" Thor said, pulling him in a gentle embrace "Because that's what I felt when you woke up screaming and when I went through the pointless torture of those monsters." He held Loki tighter "And when I think of what you went through at their hands."

Loki's hands lifted, to Thor's pleasant surprise, and wrapped themselves around him; for once taking the comfort Thor was giving.

They stayed like that for a while. They didn't even hear the door to the room hiss open. They were comforting each other like they had done when they were children.

"Gay!"
Loki pushed Thor away at the obnoxious call Tony Stark gave. He glared at him.

"Do you ever sprout anything other than horse piss from your mouth?" Loki snapped.

Thor chuckled, slapping Loki on the back and holding on "Brother, I think you take more offence than you should at the relief of Stark here."

Tony grinned from where he leaned on the door.

Loki gave him a dry glare "Do you even know what he said?"

"Yes" Thor smiled, guiding Loki forward "He's happy, nothing to get upset over."

Tony snorted as Loki rolled his eyes "Forget it, Frosty, we got dinner prepared so if you two lovebirds would deem it worthy do follow me."

Loki narrowed his eyes at him, opening his mouth to cuss.

"Lovebirds?" Thor was confused, looking at Loki.

Tony saw it, the glint in Loki's eyes before he smirked at him, he saw it when Loki turned to Thor's ear and whispered something. But for some reason he didn't run, like he should have.

Till he saw realization dawn on Thor's face.

"You dare to insult the Princes of Asgard!?" Thor hollered, going for Tony; the unwilling bait to Loki's planned privacy.

The trickster laughed when Thor chased down a surprisingly fast Tony down the halls, shouting curses in Nordic.

He shook his head at how easily he could manipulate his brother and sobered. He took out the scroll he had stuffed in his trousers pocket and looked at the rolled parchment.

It mocked him, refusing to burn and die before his magic.

He wasn't surprised, it was his own magic that protected it after all, but it didn't dampen down the frustration and rage he felt when he couldn't destroy it. It also lit within him a fear that he hadn't bothered to hide.

He'd found it in Thor's pocket when he was healing him and the instant he recognized it, his heart stopped beating.

Should Thor have seen it...

No, there had to be a way to destroy it. That was the only option. He had made sure, when he'd signed it, that it return to the one who broke the deal written on it. He'd done it in a way to mock the Chitauri, but it seemed that his scorn had come back to bite him instead.

He wasn't going to give up on this so easily, Valhalla knew he'd given up on so many things before.

No, he was going to destroy this damning evidence and then take Thor and go home.

Nothing was going to keep him here, not after knowing that those monsters had survived and were searching for his blood.
They knew his weakness, he didn't want to give them anything else.
Chapter 8

Loki was becoming terrified, his veins and nerves strained as if his blood tried to rip them, blow them apart from the inside. His paranoia was clawing at his insides, thrilling him...the fear tearing at him with sharp claws. He sees the Chiauri King, he sees his promise, he tries kidding from it, but it finds him always, a bond to him that he has no hope of breaking. And it is through this bond, that the dreams drive into Loki, forcing themselves in his mind, scratching his mind till he thinks himself insane, till he sees nothing but the brutality of the torture forced on him. His world is becoming an abyss; dark and swirling and sucking him in whenever he is a sleep or sometimes when he is simply awake. Sometimes it comes to him when he least expects it, when he takes a bath or reads a book or talks to Thor. It's chasing the sanity from him, slowly and efficiently.

He jumped, heart beating erratically when Thor stirred beside him on the bed. It breaks his thoughts, runs into their terrifying and grotesque nature, and makes them fade away.

Loki still breathed heavily, but he soon calms himself.

The dream he'd woken from was yet another memory, another anguish he had suffered at the Chitauri's hands. He was sitting up, he realized; not remembering when he'd done that, Loki pushed it into the back of his mind.

He lay back, putting his head on the pillow dampened with his sweat. Or at least that's what he told himself; he'd woken up crying soundlessly for a long time now. Rubbing his hands over his face he realized that exactly how exhausted he was from the past two days.

His search for Thor, his healing and the endless waiting, the confrontations with Thor's friends, with Fury had taken more from him than he previously thought.

They had demanded to know exactly what had taken Thor and what had been done to him. While he healed him, they came to the door, commanding he open.

Loki had given them no answer, telling him that he will move on from his threats, turn them into promises if they disturbed Thor again. They hadn't come to the door again, but they cornered him whenever they got the chance; they still would, he knew. He wasn't going to answer their questions.

He wasn't staying here for long anyway.

He looked at Thor, at his sleeping back, and wondered how best to break the news of their departure to him. He wouldn't like it, granted, but Loki wasn't going to give him a choice.

Thor would either leave with him now or stay here while Loki took the throne. It wasn't going to be difficult; Loki still had his magic so leaving was no problem.

The only hitch he found in his plan was Thor and his reaction to Loki's bluff. No matter how much conviction he'd put in the lie, he wasn't leaving without Thor. The risk of those damned monsters getting him again was too high. Loki forbade himself to wonder what would happen then, forbade himself to think of how badly the Chitauri would want Thor or why they released him so abruptly.

Nothing good ended at that trail of thought.

Thor stirred again, turning to Loki and opening his eyes.

He smiled, the warmth reaching his blue eyes "Morn greetings"
Loki hid his smile behind his hand "Valhalla, Thor! Your breath smells like the dying."

Thor exhaled on him heavily as a reply and laughed heartily when Loki pushed off the bed with a noise of disgust.

"Thor, you are disgusting!"

"Then greet me proper next time" Thor lay on his back and stretched as Loki closed the bathroom door.

He was still in that position, hands over his head and a smile on his face, when Loki emerged, hair brushed and teeth shining.

"Greetings of the morn, brother" Loki clipped.

Thor laughed and rocked forward to stand on his feet. He went to the bathroom.

"Do hurry, I intend to bathe, Thor" Loki said as he lifted a white button down shirt, a green tie and black trousers from his case. As an afterthought, he pulled out a black, green bordered vest. His gaze fell to the black trilby he'd bought.

When Thor emerged from the bath, Loki was standing in front of the mirror, trying to decide if he looked nice in his hat or not. Naturally, he did.

Thor laughed "You know, Stark may have been right about you when he called you - gay? Was it?"

Loki didn't turn to him, didn't acknowledge his presence as he pulled the hat off "Fuck you, Thor."

His tone was so pleasant, it could have been a blessing, but Thor laughed and padded out of the room.

"At least wear your shoes, you brute!" Loki called, dismayed that his brother had the manners of a boor.

Thor padded back "What?"

"Have some semblance of humanity" Loki said, gathering his things and placing them on the bed "and wear shoes before you leave the room."

He didn't glance to see if Thor had obeyed him or not, simply went to the bathroom. He hung on the door.

"Oh, and lock the door behind you when you leave"

Thor rolled his eyes when the door closed and put on his slippers. He was just leaving the room when his gaze fell on Loki's neatly placed clothes.

He grinned mischievously.

Thor moved back into the room and gathered all of Loki's clothes. Then he lifted the case that held all of Loki's belongings. He placed the things outside the room then closed the door before snickering and taking Loki's bag and neat clothes to the one place he knew they would be safe.

He went to have his breakfast with whichever friend he saw first.

Turned out it was Steve. The man was reading the newspaper while the coffee pot did its job.
"Good morning, Captain" Thor grinned at him.

Steve lowered the paper "You're in an awfully good mood today. How are you feeling?"

"Never been better" Thor smiled.

They had been halfway through the breakfast when Clint walked in, asleep on his feet. Natasha followed, then Bruce and finally Tony.

"So, where is your brother?" Tony asked, biting down on some toast.

Thor smiled then swallowed "Probably in the room, fuming."

"Fuming?" Natasha sipped her tea "Why?"

Thor chuckled and told them what he'd done.

"I don't think that's a good idea" Bruce said after the initial laughter and encouraging words "It's not even a smart thing to do; taking of the famed Trickster."

Thor shrugged "I have done it several times, Banner, he may be a trickster, but I have a few pranks up my sleeve, too."

They would have believed him & 150; if Loki hadn't entered then.

Dressed so elegantly in a green tie, shirt, a bordered waist coat and trousers he looked like a model straight from the magazine. The hat on his head made the masculine perfection even more enhanced.

Even Natasha had to make herself look away "Good morning, Loki."

Loki's mouth lifted at the edge only slightly at her quickly cleared throat "Miss Romanoff"

Clint narrowed his eyes slightly at Natasha's suddenly heightened breathing "Are you alright?"

She breathed out, calming herself "Yes"

"Are you sure?" Clint stirred his drink.

"Yes" she said more determinedly, grabbing her tea and drinking it with a hardened resolve.

Thor looked deflated. His prank hadn't worked "Good morning, brother. What would you like to feast on?"

Loki gaze him a hooded glare "Whatever I have is no concern of yours, would be trickster."

The Avengers lowered their smiling faces; obviously Loki had known what Thor had done. What they wanted to see was his reaction.

Thor rolled his eyes "Have my seat, brother. I have finished."

Loki hummed but didn't say anything. He remained standing, hip cocked against the counter, as he watched Thor leave in a deflated mood. When the man was gone, he rolled his eyes and walked to the side, ignoring Thor's suggestion to take his seat.

"Hey," Tony called "where are you going?"

"I have work to do" Loki called over his shoulder.
"What about-" Steve broke off as Loki vanished "breakfast?"

Steve shrugged a few seconds later and continued his own meal. Tony stood to follow Loki. The man needed to have questions answered and he resolved to make Loki answer them.

He took his time, going into the study, making sure that Loki had started on his work before he began interrogating him. That way, the man would be sufficiently irritated and answer his questions quickly, just to get rid of him.

Or he would throw Tony through the window again.

Tony contemplated going back for those wrist bands of his, the ones that saved his life the last time he was thrown from his own house, but realized he had already reached the small room Loki had taken as a study.

*When did that happen, anyway?*

He paused in the act of sliding the door aside when he heard voices from within. He placed his ear on the door to listen.

"Sorry," a breathy voice said "I didn't think anyone would come here."

It was Pepper, Tony realized and listened.

"No, I should have knocked" Loki murmured, looking at the wall behind her "I walked in like it was my abode, not Anthony's."

Pepper laughed a little, causing Loki to stare at her. Her smile, the pull of her gentle lips was hypnotic to him and her laughter entranced him.

He had a sudden image of himself kissing that laughing mouth till it began to respond.

He blinked, suddenly awkward "What amuses you?"

"You called him Anthony" Pepper grinned, turning to lift a file from the table beside her "No one but his mother called him that."

As she moved the file, a few papers fluttered to the floor.

"Oh crap"

Loki smirked a little at the unladylike curse and bent down as she did, to pick up the offending items.

"Oh, you don't have to..." she said, looking up but pausing when he handed her the quickly collected papers anyway "Thank you"

She stood quickly, looking down at his bent form as he elegantly lifted a flyer that had fallen from the stack. He straightened gracefully, eyes reading the page.

"What is this?" he asked politely.

"What is what?" she craned her neck to look as he held it out to her "Oh that. That's an annual ball they have in honor on Tony. It's a way to thank him for doing what he does." She stepped back "He never attends, which means I have to. Which also means that I will be standing there alone tonight, bored and hopelessly out of my comfort zone because..." she broke off and blushed "Sorry, I was rambling."
Loki shook his head "No need to apologize, Miss Potts"

"Please" she said, walking away "Call me Pepper, everyone does."

She opened the door when he spoke again.

"That's not your real name, is it?" Loki asked.

"No" she laughed and ducked out of sight in the empty hallway. She didn't give him and answer to the implied question &#150; he liked it.

Loki stood where he was, a gentle smile on his lips before he shook his head and walked over to close the door.

"Yo!" Tony walked over, hanging in the door frame "Got a second?"

Loki slit his gaze, good mood gone "Not for you"

"Great" Tony walked in, careful not to touch him "So, what are you up to?"

"I was trying to work" Loki said, pulling his temper back "Until you arrived."

"Uh huh, yeah perfect" Tony muttered, crossing his arms "So, uh....what were you and Pepper talking about?"

Loki cocked his head to the side, a smirk on his lips "Why is that any business of yours?"

Tony didn't like it, but other than a small twitch in his jaw, his reaction wasn't noticeable "It's not, I was just curious, you know. Bad guy suddenly chatting up the one person that manages my business almost single handedly, it just raised my suspicions. Don't be offended or anything, I just have to be careful."

Loki slit his gaze. He scoffed "Oh yes, you have to be very careful, indeed."

Tony resisted the urge to step back as Loki approached him.

"Especially when a 'bad guy' like me," Loki continued, stalking him "can do so much more than what you are worried about at this moment" he stopped directly in front of Tony and looked him in the eye "Marvelous thing, this" he looked down at it then raised a long, tapered finger and placed it on Tony's reactor "I wonder what happens when I...

The arc reactor flickered under his finger tip.

"Jesus!" Tony pushed him off and stepped back, hand to his chest. He was staring at Loki with a mixture of fear and awe "How did you..."

Loki merely smiled at him and pushed his hands in his pockets "Yes, you need to be very careful, my friend."

The fact that Tony was no such thing to Loki coupled with the reality of what he could do, made the threat so much more chilling than it should have been.

Before Tony could gain his voice and speak, though, an angry yell erupted from somewhere behind them.

"Loki, I am going to kill you!"
Tony looked at the door, then at Loki who had an amused expression on his face.

"Forgive me, Stark" Loki said "I believe the time has come to make myself scarce. If you would be so kind as to leave me in peace?"

It wasn't a question and Tony was more than willing to leave the close proximity of perhaps the most dangerous man in his acquaintance.

***

Natasha watched Clint drain the last of his coffee when the kitchen was invaded by Thor again ... who was wearing nothing but what he'd been given naturally.

"Jesus Christ, Thor!" Bruce yelled.

Clint blew his coffee out through his nose and Steve and Natasha covered their eyes as they yelled at him for decency.

"What the hell, man!?" Clint rasped between coughs, gaze averted.

Thor was so surprised by his friends' reactions that it took him a good moment to realize what was wrong.

"Odin's beard be damned!" he hollered when he realized he was completely naked.

He covered himself as best he could and turned back to run, his face red and flaming.

"Loki, I am going to kill you!" he roared as he sprinted back to his rooms.

When he was gone and the image erased from their minds, the humor set in.

Natasha snorted first, followed by Bruce and Clint. Steve was still traumatized, keeping his gaze on the breakfast he wasn't intending on finishing.

Tony rushed in then "What happened?"

_You might not wish to know, Sir_" Jarvis replied.

Loki came after Tony, a satisfied smile on his face.

Clint saw him and laughed harder "Fuck, man. How did you do that?"

Loki shrugged, eyes on the door where Thor had gone.

"You figured out what he'd done" Bruce chuckled "How?"

"He's good" Loki nodded in allowance and smirked "I'm better"

Natasha shook her head, then went back into a fit of laughter. Thor's face was priceless.

Thor wouldn't emerge for the rest of the morning and that was exactly what Loki wanted. The scroll was in his pocket once more, ready to be magicked on again.

He left the mortals snickering among themselves, giving Tony a glare, and went to a fairly secluded place where he moved to take the damned parchment again.

He shoved his hand in his pocket ...and found nothing.
Loki went white; knowing exactly where the thing had gone. He spun around and sprinted back, ignoring the startled cries of the Avengers, and tore through the halls to his room and blasted through the door.

Thor was fully dressed, lying on the bed and looked up in surprise. One look at Loki's frantic face and he sat up.

"Brother, what's wrong?" he asked.

Loki resisted the urge to sigh in relief "Nothing, I just thought I lost something. Nevermind"

Now assured that nothing was amiss, Thor narrowed his eyes "That was not funny, brother."

Loki looked at him for a confused second, then snorted in laughter "Yes, it was. I only regret not being there to see your face" he grinned "among other things"

Thor flushed "Loki, I was in the kitchen!"

Loki went into another fit of laughter.

Thor rolled his eyes, his face a bright red, and looked away. His gaze fell on a scroll that was placed on the bed, right next to where he was previously lying.

"Brother, what's that?" Thor asked, moving to it.

Loki stopped laughing, his face was horrified as he saw where Thor was headed. He needed to be quick and impulsive

He suddenly lunged, tackling Thor.

Thor gave a surprised squeak when he was wrestled to the ground. Loki turned him on his back, one hand twisted behind his back as he held him down.

"Loki, what is the matter with you?" he asked as Loki pinned him down.

"What?" Loki sneered, the attempt so much harder than before "Caught you by surprise, did I? That would be the second time today, brother, getting weak?"

That was all it took.

The fire blazed in Thor's eyes as he rose to the challenge. He kicked his legs, dislodging the pin and lunged for Loki. The man didn't disappear; instead falling on his back as Thor came and used his legs to topple Thor over his shoulders and head.

Thor crashed through the drywall and into the hall was a huge bang.

Loki pushed himself to his feet before grabbing the parchment and stuffing it in his pocket. He crouched, waiting for Thor to attack again.

"What the hell is going on here!?"

Loki closed his eyes in irritation at Stark's voice.

Thor rose to his feet "Nothing, Stark. We were just..."

"My wall!" Tony cut in "What is it with you gods and destruction, huh?!!"
"Calm yourself, Stark" Loki said, lifting a hand. He snapped his fingers and the wall was repaired. "Happy?"

Clearly, Tony wasn't but Thor was calming him now so Loki ignored him. His hand was in his pocket, firmly holding the scroll that was his contract with the Chitauri. He knew what was written on it, hell he was the one who had made it as it was, so he didn't need to look at it. He only wanted to keep it with himself, safe under his grasp where his brother couldn't see it.

Idly, he became aware of Thor and Tony's stress free voices; which was a sudden change from a few moments ago.

"Loki, you in?"

Loki frowned "In what?"

"Since you two have so much energy to spend and the whole day is pretty much free," Tony went on "why don't we have a contest?"

"A contest?" Loki bent to pick up his hat. It had nearly been crushed in the small battle.

"Tis an excellent idea, brother" Thor walked through the door "We haven't had a tournament in ages."

"There is a reason for that" Loki went to place his hat on the bed, one hand still in his pocket, holding the scroll securely.

Thor smirked "Scared, are you?"

Loki paused at that. He turned slowly to Thor "I beg your pardon?"

Thor's eyes glittered; he knew Loki too well. The man was not going to stand a barb to his pride.

"Or perhaps you find that I and the mortals are capable of beating you" he paused deliberately "again."

Loki knew what the man was doing, that he should know better than to respond, but that last taunt was going a little too far.

He narrowed his emerald gaze "Very well, brother, you will get what you want."

"A tournament?" Tony asked, watching the by play.

"With a prize" Loki added "For the winner. Anything they ask"

Thor grinned "Anything, brother? Be it a dare or ..."

"Anything" Loki cut in, his grin bordering on feral.

"Whoa, whoa hold up" Tony said, coming between them "no one said anything about a prize, guys. This is just casual, nothing to be won or lost."

Loki raised a brow at him "Why not? You like to gamble, don't you? How is this different?"

"Because when I gamble, I have actually..." Tony shook his head "Nevermind. This is different, in a gamble, there are stakes, limits. What's the limit here?"
Thor and Loki looked at each other and grinned.

***

"No limit?" Natasha asked, frowning "you can't possibly mean that. I mean I could ask for a billion dollars or my own country or I don't know, a car that isn't even invented yet."

"And you would get it" Loki nodded.

They were in the training room, with Thor and Steve exchanging a few practice blows while Tony watched.

"That's not possible" Bruce said, crossing his arms "how will we even do that?"

Loki sneered and bowed in mocking "God, remember?"

Clint raised a brow "You mean to tell me that you can give us anything we desire. Like, literally anything?"

"I see you are finally getting it" Loki said as he straightened "but only if you win."

They waved a hand at him as if taunting him.

"Details"

Thor stopped, raising a hand for Steve to do the same "But only one of us gets it. The one who wins the final battle."

There was a renewed passion in their gazes now, bordered only slightly by greed.

"I am not so sure about the prize, but" Bruce shrugged "what harm can a few simple rounds of combat have?"

"I'm in" Clint added "I would love to get my hands on a couple of new wheels."

Natasha snorted "In your dreams, Barton. This is mine."

Loki watched the small insignificant banter, his hand on the scroll at his side. This was going to be more interesting that he thought.

The matches began after they changed.

Natasha was garbed in a blue sleeveless shirt and black combat pants. As instructed, her feet were bare. She padded across the floor and went to the small basket that held neatly folded papers and withdrew the name of her opponent.

She threw her head back with a smile "Steve"

Steve lowered his head and stood from the bench, stepping on the back of his boots to take them off. He towered over Natasha as they took their stances and waited for Tony to ring the bell.

"First one with their backs to the mat loses." Tony called, winking when Pepper walked in.

"What's going on?" she asked as she stopped beside him.

"Tournament" Tony replied "We were bored, had nothing to do."
"Tony," Pepper said wearily "You have no training in combat"

Tony rang the bell.

Steve hopped lightly on the balls of his feet as Natasha took a deadly stance.

She moved without warning, launching herself in the air as she delivered a spinning kick to Steve's head. The man stepped back and grabbed her ankle, using the momentum to sabotage her landing.

It didn't work; she landed gracefully on her feet, smiling at him "Nice move, Steve."

"Thanks" Steve said, going into defensive mode.

Thor watched as Natasha attacked again, only to be deflected once more. She had all the grace of a lioness as she landed and attacked all in the same motion. She was blocked again, barely saving herself from losing.

"The Captain defends, true to his legacy" Thor leaned over to mutter to Loki who sat with his arms crossed and one ankle propped on his knee.

"Hmm" Loki said, watching them "but how long will that help him? The lady is a devastating artist in combat. She will wear him down eventually."

Thor nodded "Or perhaps she would tire and only then would he attack"

But Loki was proved right, when after ten minutes, Steve was lying flat on his back with a stunned look on his face. Natasha was grinning down at him, one foot planted firmly on his chest.

Loki smiled "See?"

Thor rolled his eyes and Natasha smiled, going to the other side of the mat to wait for the other two who would soon join her.

Clint stood up next, announcing his decision to be second. He walked over to the basket and lifted a name.

"Oh fuck" he muttered, lifting the paper "Thor"

Thor laughed and stood, depositing Mjolnir on the ground with a thump. He was wearing his Midgardian attire; a simple shirt and jeans and he kicked off his shoes while Clint sat down to undo his own.

They took the mat.

Tony laughed at the small hint of worry on Clint's face as he fought a god.

"Hoy! Clint" he called, making the man look over "Try not to let your mortality get in the way. Forget he's immortal and capable of crushing everything."

Clint gave him the finger "Fuck you, Tony. Fuck you"

Tony laughed. He winced when Pepper hit him "What?"

"Stop annoying him" Pepper said "You could easily be in his shoes"

"Nah, babe" Tony lifted a hand with a small paper inside "I am not going into the ring at all."
It was the slip with Tony's name on it and Pepper scowled "Cheater."

They turned to the men on the mat.

Thor took his stance; a causal stand it was.

Clint took one resembling Natasha's slightly. His muscles beneath his half sleeved t-shirt were bunching up in tension.

They were both ready, one more than the other.

Tony rang the bell.

Clint launched himself at Thor, trying to tackle him to the ground. Thor merely took a gentle step back at the assault. A second later, Clint felt himself being lifted into the air.

"What the hell?!" he cried.

Thor simply deposited him on his back on the mat. Laughter erupted from the ring as Clint stared at the stars around his head. Even Loki had a small smirk on his lips.

"That wasn't fair" Pepper said, when the laughter died down "You can't expect a mortal to beat a god. Clint was outmatched."

"Thank you" Clint croaked from the ground, he pushed himself up "I find myself agreeing with the injustice of this match. The thing was rigged."

"Then what do you suggest, Lady Spice?" Thor asked.

Tony snorted at the name, mirroring the humor in everyone's eyes. He shut up when Pepper glared at him.

"Pit him against Bruce" Pepper said "We all know Thor and Loki are going to get in anyhow, why not add one opponent for Nat? You will need to do it anyway."

They looked at each other for approval. This wasn't something they took seriously, so what was the harm?

Loki was getting in scot free, that's what.

Tony piped up this point.

"Hmm, that he does" Natasha said frowning "Why don't we give him a qualifying match? Who wants to go up against him?"

"I could" Thor said, grinning "I mean I am already ahead. If he beats me he can join, in not then someone else could take his place."

Again, they shrugged. Sure, why not?

So, Loki stood and pulled off his shoes and socks. He shrugged out of his waist coat and pulled off his tie, undoing the first few buttons on his shirt.

For some reason, the women couldn't stop staring at him.

He stepped onto the mats with a mischievous grin on his face.
"No magic, Loki" Thor warned "or I use Mjolnir."

Loki rolled his eyes with a groan "Brother, must you take the fun out of this fight?"

"No magic" Thor repeated "Or I use Mjolnir"

"As you wish" Loki stood across him, body deceptively calm. Inside, his muscles were tense and alert, just like him.

Thor took his stance; one foot before the other, hands fisted before him.

Loki raised his own hands, open and straight; fingers joined together as he aligned them one ahead of the other. His green gaze sparkled as his eyes met Thor's and he grinned.

They were so still it seemed time had frozen. When he closed his eyes and concentrated, Thor could hear the tiny flicker of dust, gold as the sun, descend over all their heads. He could hear the world outside the walls and he could still the ball of tension in his own gut slowly halting its swell with each breath he took.

The bell rung.

His eyes flew open.

Loki moved swiftly, slamming the side of his hand onto Thor's shoulder just as he lifted his lids. The blow was hard and it forced Thor down on one knee, just as Loki brought his knee up to Thor's jaw, sending him back.

The Avengers gasped at the highly unexpected movement.

But Thor steadied himself, holding himself up with one hand as he massaged his jaw with the other. Loki had stepped back to let him breathe.

"Impressive" Thor said, standing straight "Mayhap you depend on more than just magic, brother."

Loki grinned, the curve as deadly as a blade "Mayhap. Do you care to find out?"

Thor smiled.

Thor attacked this time, bringing his fist out in a dangerous arc that would have easily slain a mortal. Loki side stepped it and grabbed the limb, twisting it viciously till Thor grunted in pain. He brought it behind Thor's back and held it there painfully.

"Don't tell me you've had enough" Loki sneered.

"Never" Thor smiled, pulling his head back and slamming it into Loki's nose.

Loki staggered back, hand to his bleeding face, ignoring the winces of the Avengers "Very nice, and here I was thinking I played dirty" he wiped the blood from his broken nose on his fore arm.

"Did I break something?" Thor smirked.

"No, but I will" Loki charged in earnest this time, no more jests.

Then began a true battle. They traded blows so severe that it make the Avengers jump on more than one occasion, the walls seemed to shake whenever one of them landed a hit and they entire team watched in morbid fascination as both brothers beat each other to oblivion.
However, where their blows were harsh and violent, their expressions were just as jovial as their good natured taunting.

"You appear maidenly, brother" Thor wiped blood from a gash in his forehead "perhaps that deceived me into thinking you fight like one."

Loki grinned, blood dripping down his chin from the cut in the middle of his lip "Ah, but I never underestimated you; your brawn is as promising as I expected, a good match for a brain so weak."

Natasha smiled a little, slightly on edge as the match went on. It had been a good half hour and it didn't seem like either was even breaking a sweat.

"How about we end this?" Loki asked a second later "we have the final battle to look forward to."

Thor laughed "Brother, are you so arrogant to believe you will beat me here?"

"Not arrogant" Loki smiled, eyeing Thor's blackened eye "Just prepared"

With that, Loki lunged at Thor.

The man was ready, however, and grabbed Loki just as he collided with him. He meant to lift him up, just like he'd done with Clint, fisting his hands in the front of his shirt and hoisting him over his head.

But Loki wasn't about to submit.

He rolled back, toppling Thor's weight and the thunder god immediately released him amid the sounds of Loki's shirt ripping. He fell on his feet and used Thor's imbalance to pull him down onto the mat in a successful pin. He sat on Thor's chest, one hand on his throat, and held him there.

They were both breathing heavily, Loki's usually elegant hair falling over his face and he grinned down at Thor.

A scattered applause sounded and Loki looked up to see the Avengers clapping for him. They had smiles on their faces, even Tony, who had his hands above his head as he clapped with unnecessary enthusiasm.

Loki watched them with a strange expression on his face.

Thor laughed "Brother, do not fret, they merely cheer for you."

Loki looked down at him and then pulled back, standing.

"Intense" Natasha said, walking over. She saw Loki step off the mat and wipe blood off his face.

"That was\#133;" she smirked as she walked beside him "unexpected."

Loki nodded to her and his gaze fell on Pepper, who watched him with a mixture of awe and morose interest. He winced mentally, thinking he probably looked like a mess.

Looking down at his tattered shirt, he sighed. He'd taken a liking to it.

"Brother!" Thor walked over, face bloody, and clapped Loki on the back "I never knew you to be such a warrior"

Loki smirked and turned to him "You don't know a lot of things, Thor, that is not surprising. Hold
still" he placed a hand on Thor's shoulder to keep him in place. The other hand he lifted and passed over Thor's face.

All wounds and blood vanished, leaving him clean and fixed.

Thor grinned, as he always did when Loki used magic "That was not needed, brother"

Loki idly healed himself, grimacing when his crooked nose straightened with a click "Agreed, that look did suit your barbaric nature better, but we need to move on, I have a wager to win."

Thor laughed "Again, brother. And you call me arrogant."

Loki fixed his shirt, removing the tatters and blood "I am merely ... hopeful, nothing else"

Thor scoffed in disbelief and turned to the match between Bruce and Clint.

Loki watched as well, keeping an eye on Pepper as she observed. Every now and then she glanced at him but looked away quickly.

Clint had opted for offensive, while Bruce remained on defense.

However, after a few minutes, Bruce fell back and lost the match.

Loki felt a twinge of disappointment; he'd wanted to take him on, preferably when he embraced his – greener side.

So there it was; Clint, Natasha, Loki and Thor went on to the second last rounds.

Pepper sat beside Tony now, watching as Loki went over to lift a folded paper. He opened it and a slow smile spread on his lips.

"Barton"

There was a dangerous glint in Clint's eye as he moved to the mat; he had wanted a one on one with Loki for some time now, this seemed perfect.

"How about we make this interesting?" Clint asked almost too casually.

"How so?" Loki stepped back on the mat, depressing it beneath his feet.

Natasha raised a brow when Clint stepped off and went to the weapons cabinet. He brought out two wooden sticks and threw one to Loki who caught it with ease.

"I take it you know how to use it?" Clint mocked.

As an answer, Loki spun the staff between his hands, almost floating it by his fingertips, threw it behind his back and caught again before stilling it with chilling ease.

Clint didn't show how nervous he was.

"First to disarm, wins" Tony called and ran the bell.

Clint moved swiftly, running forward to use the staff and leap over and behind Loki.

It was disrupted when Loki simply tripped Clint with his stick and sent him sprawling on his face. Then he flicked the weapon out of Clint's grasp with his own.
"I win"

Bruce and Steve were trying their hardest not to laugh; hands over their faces and backs to Clint. Thor was bent over in laughter and Natasha was snickering softly. Even Pepper was snickering softly, Loki noticed.

Clint was red in the face as he retrieved the weapon and walked off.

Pepper gave him a comforting pat on his back as he sat beside her and Tony on the bench.

Then Thor and Natasha took the mats.

Natasha tried pulling Thor’s legs out from under him halfway through but ended up on her back, pinned, when Thor simply pushed her down.

Loki sneered.

It was him and Thor - again.

This time, the battle was gaining them something far more important than a simple win. Each was going to get exactly what they wanted.

Loki knew what he desired and he was going to get it no matter what it took.

***

"So, brother" Thor walked over, a huge grin on his face "What have you to wager?"

Loki, who was bent over as he placed his shoes aside, straightened "What do I have to wager? Many things, brother, to what do you refer?"

Thor rolled his eyes and crossed his arms "You know what."

Loki rolled his eyes and looked at the ring where Natasha and Steve jumped about, occasionally throwing punches.

"Loki?"

Loki sighed, then smirked at Thor "Why don't you tell me, brother? What is it that you want, what can I give you?"

Thor thought for a moment before he replied. His face was sober and, Loki noted, sad "I wish for matters to be repaired between Jane and I"

For a second, Thor thought he saw a mild panic on Loki’s face; something akin to alarm. But it was gone half a second later, replaced by his usual flat expression.

"In my opinion, you are better off without her, brother" he said without much conviction.

Thor sighed "I cannot fathom a life without her, Loki, she is far too important to me."

Loki gave him a pitying glare "She has made you soft, weak and easily manipulated. You were once a grand warrior, now you pine over a lost love."

Thor chose to ignore that and gazed at the small training in the roped ring "What about you, brother? What will you do if you win?"
Loki smiled and looked at him "When I win, I want return to Asgard. I wish for both of us to go home."

Thor looked at him in surprise "What? Surely you jest."

Loki looked away, a longing expression on his face "I do not. I have been away this long only once in my entire life and it was not a good experience. I truly wish to return home, brother, where I want to be."

"But the contract says..." Thor began

"The contract is nothing more than a chain for me" Loki cut in harshly "if this is a way to escape it, I shall use it without hesitating." He gazed at Thor "if you wish to keep me here, you have to beat me at the match or leave with me. Those are your choices, brother."

Thor watched him with a strange ache in his heart. He was interrupted before he could say what he wanted.

"Are you going to keep us waiting or what?" Clint called, waving at them to hurry over.

"One moment, comrade" Thor called, turning to complete his conversation, but Loki was already gone; moving to the ring and leaving him to follow.

"What are you betting?" Tony asked, hanging his arms over the rope as Loki entered.

"Our return home" Loki replied, bending to get under the ropes.

"Really?" Tony asked "I thought you like it here."

"No" Loki watched Thor trudge over "he likes it here. I am merely bearing it."

"Harsh for you" Tony said without sympathy "But that is not what I asked. I want to know what you are betting, nor what you are getting."

"What do you mean, Stark?" Thor asked as he walked into the ring.

"I mean, if you lose, what will the penalty be?"

Loki thought about it, just like Thor. The lure was too good and it added more thrill to the sport.

"I shall comply to my brother's wishes if he wins" Thor said after a while.

Loki looked at him in surprise when Thor nodded, he grinned "And I shall bind my magic for a week if I lose."

There were murmur of interest, but Loki paid them no heed.

It seemed rash, his decision, but he knew he had no chance of losing; Thor was too deep in his thoughts and bound emotionally for a good clean win. Loki's earlier comments had done their job and the man was suitably distracted.

They took their positions.

"How about weapons?" Clint asked "I mean with the stakes high for you, it would seem reasonable. And I doubt you can really harm one another."
Thor and Loki looked at each other and shrugged; sure, why not.

"What weapon do you wish for, brother?" Loki asked "I refuse to go up against Mjolnir without my magic."

"A sword" Thor replied without hesitating.

Thor's own battle sword, the one before Mjolnir, conjured at his feet within seconds.

Loki stretched his hands out before him and his sparring staff appeared in his hands.

"Interesting" Bruce said

They ignored him and readied their weapons.

Tony rung the bell.

Thor swung his blade at Loki, seeing his prize before his eyes, the force so strong it rippled the air around him. It landed harmlessly on the ground when Loki struck it down with his staff. He raised the other end immediately and slammed it into the back of Thor's neck.

Thor fell to his knees but was up within seconds, deflecting Loki's second blow.

He stumbled lightly, green eyes narrowing before he attacked again, this time aiming for Thor's middle. Thor grabbed hit the scepter with his blade, swinging it aside then grasped Loki by the collar to put him in a pin or to knock him out with a head butt.

But Loki anticipated his move and twisted, spinning his staff and smashing it into Thor's foot. Thor yelped and jumped back only to have the end of the staff slammed into his cheek.

This time Thor stumbled and Loki went back out of reach.

The match continued this way, with Thor blocking some of Loki's moves while the other pressed on his advantage. At one point, Thor was on his knees, unable to stand but Loki stepped back and allowed his to compose himself before attacking.

Thor attacked suddenly and without warning.

He jumped into the air, bringing his foot out in a deadly arc and aimed for Loki's unprotected head.

Loki saw what was coming, he was ready for it and had even thought of using the momentum Thor had to beat him; it would have been easy, just a pressure applied to the right spot under his knee and Thor would crumple.

He raised his staff to initiate his win when something unexpectedly caught his eye.

There, right behind Pepper and Tony, Loki saw something that made his insides freeze.

He saw himself, bound with his arms behind him as he lay on his back. The Chitauri King was on top of him, forcing his tongue down Loki's throat, snaking his hands all over his exposed body. He ignored the terrified screams muffled against his hideous mouth and reached lower, past his abdomen, past his navel till he reached the most intimate place on Loki's anatomy. He lifted Loki's legs higher, spreading them wider and ignoring the shrieks that begged him to stop.

Then he plunged himself in.
Loki choked then, unable to move even though the illusion had gone, there was nothing there but the empty wooden and polished floor and the sunlight from the slim, horizontal windows by the ceiling. He stared, the pain and humiliation coursing through him like a searing poison; it made him boneless and in that instant, his arms fell.

***

Thor was halfway through his kick, he knew Loki was going to deflect it, he saw it in his gaze.

He didn't mind; he wished for Loki to win this and perhaps it would get them home like Loki wanted, perhaps not. Right now, all he wished was for Loki to see that he was on his side, not anyone else's.

So Thor had decided to lose. It would be deliberate but Loki would never know because Thor would fight valiantly till the planned end.

However, what he hadn't planned was Loki suddenly going limp in the middle of Thor's attack.

Thor only had time to register what happened before his foot collided with Loki's skull with a sickening crack.

Loki's head snapped to the side and he was thrown a good eight feet away, going over the ropes of the ring and landing in an ungraceful heap on the floor. His staff clattered beside him.

Loki didn't move.

"Oh shit!" Tony said, rushing over with the others.

Pepper had both her hands over her mouth as the Avengers reached Loki's prone form.

"Loki!" Thor rushed over, falling to his knees beside his brother "Loki, are you alright?"

Loki didn't reply, his head was turned from Thor as he lay motionless.

"You knocked him out" Clint said in a deadpan voice.

Sure enough, Loki's immobile form was breathing. Thor sighed in relief "Thank the gods."

Tony snorted in laughter, then looked at Thor "Sorry"

But even Thor was having a slight issue with the small humor filled smile on his face. For all his boasting and arrogance, Loki had just lost a fixed match.

Natasha was next to snicker "I'm sorry, but that was unexpected."

"Is he alright?" Pepper walked over, looking down at Loki.

"Yes, he's just passed out" Bruce replied, checking Loki's pulse "He'll..."

But whatever Bruce was about to say, was abruptly cut off.

Loki suddenly screamed.

Everyone jumped back as Loki began to thrash on the ground, screaming so loudly it reverberated on the walls.
"Stay back!" Loki begged, neck arched and eyes shut tightly as he screamed. He kicked and punched at the air, trying to dislodge whatever was upon him.

"Loki!" Thor cried and rushed over, trying to shake him out of his dream "Brother, wake up!"

"No!" Loki kicked him, sending him sprawling as he continued to fight "Stay away from me!"

His scream broke into a sob as he struggled against the invisible creature "No, please don't!"

Thor's eyes were shining with tears as he moved forward, grabbing Loki by the shoulders before pinning him down "Brother, wake up!"

"Thor, help me!" Loki shrieked, shaking beneath him "Please, help me!"

His name and that terrible plea froze Thor. He'd never called for him like this and it burnt him inside out.

Then Pepper ran forward, a glass of water in her hand. Without a word, she threw it in Loki's screaming face.

Loki spluttered and his eyes blinked open. He looked around, chest moving up and down rapidly. His confused gaze went from Tony, who watched him with wide eyes to Natasha and Bruce, who looked away. Clint watched him with a tightly clenched jaw and Steve's mouth was slightly parted, his horror plain to see.

He looked up at Thor and saw the heartbreak in his gaze. Then he realized what had happened.

_Stars, not here, please not here_

"Loki, what happened?"

It was Pepper, her face pale as paper as she watched him.

Thor was still frozen above him.

"Thor, get off" Loki said softly, willing his brother to move.

When he didn't, and only stared at him with teary eyes, he shoved him only to be pushed back.

"Brother" Thor croaked "What did they do to you?"

Loki paled, his eyes widened a second before he vanished, leaving Thor where he was; a mess of a broken soul.

***

"Why are we doing this, again?" Natasha walked into the living room, her high heels dangling on one finger over her shoulder.

"A favor to Thor" Clint replied, fixing his bow tie as he looked in the mirror behind the drinks on the shelves "he wants Loki to take his mind off whatever happened this morning"

Natasha sighed "I don't know how this will help.

"Well," Steve said, flicking something off his black trousers "in my opinion, parties always distract people from their troubles. I guess Thor simply agrees."
"What about Loki?" Natasha sat on a stool, pulling on her heels "Did he agree to this?"

"Not exactly" Steve said "but I am pretty sure he's coming with us"

"How do you know that?" Clint turned to him.

"Because Thor called it one of his major decisions" Steve replied from his couch "Obviously Loki didn't like it but he has little choice"

"I think this is more Thor helping himself rather than Loki" Natasha stood and gained a perfect grip of her black shoes "The man seemed calm enough all day."

Steve shrugged and Bruce walked in looking uncomfortable in formal clothes.

Natasha smirked "Ready, Bruce?"

"As I'll ever be" he muttered, hands in his pockets.

"So where's the guest of honor?"

"He's going to be fashionably late" Pepper walked in, dressed in a red cocktail dress that highlighted each of her curves and her tall, slender figure perfectly "At least that's what he told me"

"Wow" Natasha grinned "Looks like you got out the big guns tonight, Pep"

"You look lovely, too Natasha" Pepper said with a soft smile "Everyone ready?"

"Just waiting for our divine beings, ma'am" Steve said, standing.

"I don't see how this has any import to us"

"There they are" Natasha said as Loki and Thor walked in.

They blinked at the change in Thor.

The man, out of his usual casual garbs, looked stunning. His hair was pulled back in a tight pony tail and his massive frame was clothed in the most expensive clothes in New York. A black suit over black trousers, an off white shirt and a blazing red tie made him look absolutely striking.

So much more different than the Thor they were used to.

The Avengers stared at him.

He shattered the impression of a true elitist gentleman by lifting a leg and shaking it "This <em>thing</em> makes me uncomfortable, brother, must I wear it?"

"It's called underwear, you brute" Loki replied "and yes, if you wish to be civilized, you have to."

Thor growled and stalked off, leaving Loki behind.

He was drop dead gorgeous, Pepper realized as her heart beat accelerated.

Wearing a black suit over a dark green vest and white shirt with an emerald tie, Loki was the epitome of masculine perfection at the moment. The stark contrasts coupled with his pale skin made her stare far longer than she should have.

Loki had a long, thin walking stick in hand and he waved it casually as he walked in.
Pepper swallowed "Okay then, I shall call for the cars."

***

Loki cursed himself.

Or he would have if he could.

True to their wager, his magic had been sealed sometime during the day. He wouldn't have done it, no, he hadn't intended on doing it at all, really. But when Thor began to cajole him and tell him that he didn't need to honor the wager, practically begged him not to, his pride took over. He just had to do it then, just to get Thor to stop worrying about him.

Granted, Thor had good reason but it still irritated Loki. The man had hovered over him like a mother hen and treated him like a fragile piece of glass. That was really something he hated.

He sighed now, pushing a hand in his trousers pocket and watched the feast take place. It was different than those on Asgard; no one was brawling, no wenches offered themselves up to men, no warriors broke mugs of ale on the ground. Instead, polite waiters and waitresses moved about, giving out champagne and wine to the guests who conversed with each other in muted tones, spreading rumor and gossip like the plague.

Well, that at least was similar to Asgard.

"Brother!"

Loki closed his eyes and prayed for patience when Thor walked up to him, holding two glasses of wine.

Releasing the hold he had on the scroll, Loki took the tall glass of weak drink and sipped.

"it appears no one knows who were are" Thor smiled at him, looking around.

"No one knows who I am, Thor" Loki said with a hint of venom "They all love you"

Thor scoffed "They don't love me, they only wish to be seen with me. Their screams and shouts for my name are only hopes of being in the same fame I am drowned in, if even for the briefest moment."

Loki gave him a surprised look.

"What?" Thor asked

"Nothing" Loki sipped his champagne "I just never thought you capable of such astute thinking."

Thor smiled and nudged him with his shoulder "Is that a compliment I am hearing?"

"An observation"

Thor chuckled "Let me give you an observation for yours. I find Lady Pepper has been unable to take her gaze off you all night, brother. And I would go so far as say the gesture was well returned."

Loki rolled his eyes "You are mistaken."

"Am I?" Thor challenged "So if I were to say, get her to dance with me, you would not mind?"
"There is nothing to mind, Thor" Loki swallowed his drink again "Dance with whoever you wish."

"I will" Thor threw back his drink without a wince and walked off, placing his empty glass on the tray of a passing waiter.

Loki's gaze narrowed only slightly when Thor bowed over Pepper's hand. Instead of taking her to the floor like he expected, Thor turned and pointed to Loki.

"Damn you, Thor" Loki muttered when both of them walked over to him.

He placed a smirk on his face as Pepper arrived.

"Miss Potts" Loki bowed, taking her hand to his lips.

She flushed beautifully "Loki"

"I was just telling her, brother, how you had wished to dance but found yourself without a partner" Thor grinned, ignoring the dangerous glare Loki gave him "she agreed like the good woman she is."

"Well, I mean if Loki wants to, I can't really force him" Pepper fluttered nervously.

Loki gave Thor a good scowl before turning to Pepper "It would be a well wanted relief from my brother's undesired company, Madam" he raised his arm for her "Shall we?"

Pepper hooked her arm under his and they began to walk.

As he passed, Loki stuck out his walking stick and tripped Thor.

He ignored the resulting bang and chaos, throwing his stick to a waiter and turning to the dance floor.

He swept Pepper into his arms and began an elegant waltz to the soft music.

Thor glowered at him as he patted red wine off his hair and clothes. He was sprawled on the floor in an undignified posture.

Loki cocked his head at him and smirked.

"I'm sorry my brother pushed us into this" he looked down at Pepper "sometimes he is the biggest idiot of the lot."

"No," she smiled "don't be sorry, it's ... nice ... to do something other than sit around and drink all night. Don't get me wrong, it is one of the things I love to do, but at events like these I just feel..." she broke off, blushing "sorry"

"Don't be" Loki smiled down at her, utterly mesmerized by her beauty, by her laughing eyes, the scattered freckles on her face and her hair.

Oh, her hair was like spun gold to him; soft and glowing. He couldn't help but look at her.

"What?" she asked, smiling "What's wrong?"

Loki blinked. He realized he'd been staring at her "Nothing, nothing at all miss."

"No," she narrowed her eyes a little "There is something. You can tell me"
Again, that smile. It was causing his heart to begin racing and he found himself unable to look away. So instead of replying, he swept her out in a daring twirl before pulling her back.

A few dancers stepped back, many were awed at the sudden move and a handful of people began to watch.

Pepper had her lip between her teeth as she smiled. Loki smirked down at her, suddenly feeling reckless.

Apparently, she felt the same.

She excused herself for a second and went to the band. Whispering something to them, she returned to Loki's arms.

"Let's see your dancing skills, Mr Loki"

Loki smiled "Laufeyson, Miss Potts. That's my name. And why not?"

The music was similar to the last one, only the tempo increased.

The dance took on a more daring edge; Loki swung her around, taking her into spin after spin till she clutched his shoulders for balance. He held her close, his hand tightening around her waist till her breath sounded in his ear. He swirled her out again, yanking her back so she rammed into his chest.

His arm went around her tightly again, lingering ever so minutely on her bare back before shifting to a more appropriate place.

Then they went into another series of spins, noting nothing around them. There were no other dancers, a ring of people only watched the couple as they twirled and spun around and around on the dance floor.

Pepper was breathless and she was clutching onto Loki's shoulder as he all but carried her around, taking her where he willed. She couldn't see anything, just lights passing before her eyes, the music she heard and Loki, oh Loki, she felt. She felt the intimate way he held her, she felt his beating heart and she felt his warmth. She leaned into it and felt the deep rumble of his laughter.

Natasha raised her brows when she saw the couple that was dancing. People had begun to murmur now, asking who Pepper was dancing with, who the stranger was and where he'd come from.

"My brother seems to be enjoying himself"

She looked at him as Thor came up beside her.

"Yes," she said, eyes going back to Loki and Pepper. She blinked when Loki all but threw Pepper gracefully into a spin before pulling her back, keeping her back to his front. His arms went around her waist and his chin was nearly resting between her neck and shoulder.

"I just hope he's done by the time Tony arrives" Natasha muttered "he will not like this."

Thor frowned "I thought Stark and Lady Pepper's association had ended."

"So did I" she said, walking to the bar with Thor in tow "but he is insanely jealous, where she is concerned. I don't think he will appreciate your brother hitting on his girl."

Thor didn't understand her words, but he gathered enough to know what she meant.
"Why do you think he drinks so much?" Natasha asked, delicately lifting a glass of martini to her lips.

Thor gave her a glance, then turned back to Loki. He smirked when Loki spun Pepper around to face him, his hand floating over her back in a highly seductive fashion.

He'd learned that from Thor.

He relaxed when it became apparent that the music was ending. Pepper was flushed and looked like she had been highly invigorated by the simple dance. Her eyes were sparkling and her face was flushed, obvious even from where Thor watched.

Then, just as he thought it was safe, Iron Man arrived.

"Oh shit" Natasha muttered half heartedly "I hope he's not..."

"Ladies!" Tony hollered through the mask, clearly drunk.

"Great" Natasha muttered again, her voice lost in the cheers and applause of the people.

Thor saw Pepper push Loki off a little and turn around to look at Tony.

"Thank you, thank you" Iron Man greeted, lurching over to the crowd and taking their cheers greedily.

"So how have you been people?!!" he hollered, releasing the flares around him into the air.

More applause and cheers sounded at the impromptu fireworks.

Iron Man's mask lifted, exposing his face. His gaze landed on Pepper.

"Pepper!" he called, making the woman blush "My love, my life, my heart' he burped "break. Come here!"

Pepper was red in the face and stood where she was. Tony stumbled over and tripped, bracing himself on Pepper's shoulder's heavily.

People began to take pictures.

Pepper laughed nervously "Alright, Tony. I think you've had enough."

"Really?" he slurred, looking at her "Because I don't think so. I mean if I had enough, I wouldn't need to - hic - drink more."

"Okay" she muttered, trying to drag him away "I think we should leave."

"But I just got here!" Tony argued, leaning heavily on her. She began to lurch under his weight.

"Tony!" she muttered, then gasped as Tony's entire weight was suddenly lifted off her.

Tony blinked, startled, when he was grabbed by the collar roughly and straightened "What the...?"

Loki had a firm hold of his throat. It wasn't hostile, but it wasn't not dangerous either ... at least not yet.
"I suggest you do as the lady says, Stark" Loki began in a deadly soft voice "and leave."

Tony pretended to consider it "But it's my party"

Loki slit his gaze "It will be nothing but a painful memory if you continue as you are, boy."

Tony glared at him and swatted his hand away "You threatening me?"

"Oh fuck" Clint muttered when he saw what was happening "Bruce, I think we should..."

"Yeah" Bruce joined him as he jogged forward.

"No," Loki was smiling at Tony "Merely promising."

Tony leaned forward, close to Loki's face "You don't know who you're messing with. I saved your life, pal."

"A debt truly repaid" Loki rasped "And I think it is you who is unaware of the power he faces."

Natasha tapped Thor's arm, gaining his attention. Her gaze was fixed on the two terse men "We got trouble."

Thor followed her as she went to avert a drunken disaster.

"What power?" Tony leered "You are nothing but a powerless god who screams like a girl every night and cries for his big brother."

Loki paled.

"Tony!" Pepper gasped.

But Tony was glaring at Loki, a drunken, sadistic smile on his face "Burns, doesn't it?"

Loki merely smiled back, recomposed, and bowed "Consider this a small victory on your part. But I have something more than the satisfaction of a few words, Anthony." He finished as he straightened "And the fact that you lost it or are about to lose it to me leaves an almost deliciously peppered flavor in my pallet."

Tony slit his gaze, taking the bait. His gaze went from Loki to Pepper.

"What the hell are you talking about, Reindeer Games?" he rasped "Spell it out."

Loki didn't even flinch as Tony advanced on him. People began taking pictures and making videos.

"Okay!"

Loki felt a twinge of disappointment when Clint came between them. Bruce began to pull Tony back as Clint tried dispersing the crowd.

"Nothing to see here, folks"

Tony was glaring at Loki and while he had his eyes on them, his full attention, Loki simply looked away.

Tony's drunken rage till the roof when Loki put an arm around Pepper's waist and began to guide her away.
"Get off her, you bastard!"

That was all the warning the Avengers got before Tony attacked.

Loki had only time to look back and shove Pepper away before he was thrown across the large hall, going through the glass doors at the entrance. The front of his shirt burnt from the laser blasts Tony's palms gave.

People screamed and began to scatter. They ran for the closest exits.

"Loki!"

Thor tackled Iron Man and held him down.

Natasha blew out all the lights with her gun and Bruce followed Pepper to where Loki lay.

Loki groaned, eyes shut to keep out the pain. He tried moving but the pain intensified.

"Loki..."

He tried to look at the two faces before him but it was getting darker by the second. The lack of light was so alluring, so promising that he couldn't do anything but submit.

***

When Loki woke, it was to a searing pain in his chest.

He was all alone, his guest room a dark recess and devoid of any life but his own. His burnt shirt and waist coat were on the floor and he had a bandage across his torso.

Somewhere outside, he heard the sounds of an argument. It was loud and angry.

"He has no powers, the effect was just like it would be on one of us!"

"How could you be so stupid?"

"I don't care if he goaded you, that's what he does!"

"Have you seen the papers?!"

Loki chuckled softly at the argument and made to get off the bed. He hissed as his wounds protested.

"Drunken bastard"

He had expected more pain in his throat, more agony, perhaps he even expected to fall out of consciousness again.

What he didn't expect, however, was a reply.

"I warned you no realm could protect you, Loki"

Loki's eyes widened and he felt the chill slice through his gut.

However, before he could even blink, a rough hand clamped around his mouth, caging his cry before it even began.

As the world went dark, Loki could only feel the burn in his chest intensify and the long building
fear unleash within him.
Thor was desperate; he was losing control and spiraling to the ground with nothing to catch him. He was going to die, desperate and delirious, he was just going to fall off the edge and never come back up. His chest hurt so much he wanted to stop breathing. He hears things and realizes it's only his thoughts, clawing at him just as they killed his hope.

Every day for three days, Thor searched. He scoured through the skies, tearing them as he searched. He called for Hiemdall, begging him to go to Odin, but no help came, no reply came.

*Where the hell were they!*?

There was nothing and no one that could help him now. There was nothing left to do, nowhere to go, nothing to feel.

He crashed to the floor on the control room, his head in his hands and his hammer beside him.

He didn't want to, but he was crying; bent over, elbows on his knees as silent tears trickled down his face.

Natasha was the first to crack.

It was predictable, since she was the only one who remained in the building when Thor arrived from another fruitless search.

The others were still out and Thor's torment was becoming unbearable.

She walked over and placed a hand on his back "Hey, it's alright. We'll find him, big guy."

Thor didn't move, didn't respond to her touch. Tears slipped down his face and he blinked every now and then, wondering what and how everything had gone wrong.

One minute he had been arguing with Stark about how unjustly he had treated his brother, supported by his friends wholeheartedly, and the next minute, he was thrown into raging terror when he entered his assigned rooms and found it empty. Apart from the blankets that were strewn on the floor, in an obvious attempt at some sort of escape, there was nothing and no one there.

For a few blessed seconds, he'd suspected that Loki had played a trick on him and in actuality still had his magic. But that was a hope quickly dispelled when he saw the opened window and the scratch marks on the walls.

Loki was gone and Thor had been absent &lt;#150; again.

He choked on a sob behind his hands, ashamed and so incredibly guilty.

Natasha rubbed his back softly, willing someone to come back with something other than another
apology.

She looked to the computers she was monitoring as they scanned the city, hacking into every camera in the hopes of finding an image of Loki.

Natasha remembered this working once before, though the situation was different than now.

"He has no magic"

She jumped a little when Thor suddenly spoke "What?"

"I made him honor the wager" he continued in a dead voice "I made him seal off his magic and now those beasts have him."

"Thor, you couldn't possibly have known about this"

"Don't think it to be true, Lady Natasha" Thor cut in "I knew very well of their existence. Had I not been captured and tormented only a while back? I should have made him keep his magic and ..."

"And what?" she cut in "Thor, those things were really powerful. There is nothing you could have done"

"I could have refused Father"

Natasha blinked at him, confused "What?"

"I could have refused the whole thing, let him take the throne" Thor droned on "I should have supported him like a brother should and I should have honored Father's decision. Instead I behaved like a jealous boy, resenting my only brother for gaining something I wanted. I may not have handed Loki to them physically, but there is no doubt of my part in his capture."

"Thor, we could sit here and argue about the should haves and what ifs all day" Natasha told him "but it won't get him back. We need to focus, you need to focus, Thor because without that, we will lose."

"I've already lost" he muttered, bowing his head "And have only myself to blame."

She saw no logic in this so she stayed silent; she rubbed his back as he began to sob silently again.

"How could I have done this?" he croaked.

Natasha hushed him almost like a mother soothing her child "It's alright, Thor. It's going to be okay."

There was, from behind her, a small alarm on the computer, the slightest of beeps, but it made her heart leap to her throat in hope.

She jumped to her feet, heart beating, and tapped the keys. Thor stumbled behind her, his gaze on the many screens in the control room they occupied.

Natasha clicked it a couple of times, praying that she saw Loki's image of catch a glimpse of him somewhere on the screen.

When he had discovered that Loki had gone, Tony had flipped his already frazzled switch.

"How the hell are these things getting into my house!?'" Tony screamed, standing far too swiftly for someone so drunk "How are they not tripping any alarms and where the hell are you in all this
Jarvis!?

'I had no idea they were intruders in the pent house, Sir' Jarvis had said with a long suffering sigh 'Perhaps they control magic?'

"No such thing, Jarvis" Tony had scolded. Then he put a hand to his head "Damn"

After that, everything had been a blur for her. A blur of orders, a blur of motions, a blur of emotions and a blur of the environment as they searched for their comrade.

She looked at the screens now, looking for a familiar shape, dress or even his face.

But what she saw, the disturbance that had made her stand and run to the screen, made her blink in surprise.

"I'll be damned"

***

"Strange, this place is" Thoeric muttered as he patted sand and dust off his shoulders.
Beside him, Sif, the Warriors Three and Sigyn looked at the dust covered world they now stood in.
"This is Midgard?" Sigyn asked with a delicate frown "I fail to see what Thor finds so beautiful about this place."
"That's because you haven't met her yet" Sif said, walking onwards "We waste time here. Come, we must find Thor."

"Find him?" Thoeric asked, pushing back his flaming red bangs from his face "Heimdall said nothing about finding him. Where do we even look?"

Fandral smiled at him "Worried, Thoeric? Where is your sense of adventure, friend?"
"Still here" he said, looking over his shoulder at Sigyn "Just drowned in doubt for the moment."
"There should be no doubt" Sif said, moving faster "Heimdall said he resides in the York's new city. That will be easy to find once we ask around."

"And how are we going to do that, pray tell?" Theoric asked "Do you know the native language?"

Sif unsheathed her sword and swung it about as an answer "I can manage."

Thoeric merely rolled his eyes and threw a prayer somewhere above. He hitched the leather back he carried over his shoulder securely and walked faster.

"It's rather hot, isn't it?" Volstagg muttered halfway through their journey.

"That's because you still have your coat on" Fandral replied with an easy grin.
Rolling his eyes, Volstagg shook the offending item off. He immediately found himself without a place to put it.

"Damnation" he muttered before simply throwing it in the sand.

Fandral chuckled once and followed Sif, who had gone far ahead. Their armor glinted in the
sunlight, reflecting it back.

"Dreadful weather, this" Fandral huffed, sweating profusely. He glanced back over his shoulder to see Sigyn and Thoeric pleasantly unaffected by the heat.

"You two seem surprisingly fresh" he said, with only a hint of accusation "Any special secret to that?"

Sigyn smiled and gave Thoeric a small peck on the lips "I guess you win, husband, dearest."

He rolled his eyes "More a planned win, this. I merely know when my friends become aware of a spell."

Fandral rolled his eyes in uncharacteristic irritation. No one cloud blame him, they had just come from the lovely weather of Asgard to this desert in a matter of seconds.

"Just give us some, milady" Fandral requested in the most charming voice he could muster.

Sigyn giggled and waved her hand about coupled with a spell muttered softly. A few seconds later, all the Asgardian Warriors breathed a sigh of relief at the welcome reprieve from the heat.

Their walking increased its pace and for the while, they forgot about their discomfort and focused on gaining their mission as quickly as they could. They had been informed, via Heimdall, that Thor was in dire need of their help.

It didn't need much for them to get motivated. One second they were sparring their time away and the next, they had sprinted to the Bifrost. They were determined to help their friend in need and their resolve only got stronger as they made their way to the town new city of Yok.

However, fate seemed to have other plans.

Thoeric reacted first, pulling out his blades with lethal ease as the three black creatures roared towards them.

Sigyn raised her hands, glowing blue in their eagerness for releasing spells, and narrowed her eyes at the creatures.

"Don't!"

They both blinked when their friends spun around and halted their attacks. Hogun and Volstagg positioned themselves between the husband and wife and those gleaming black creatures. As they watched, the sides of the creatures were flung open; small black doors moved and strangely dressed men and women stood before them.

Thoeric raised his blades ever so slightly.

"Don't attack them!" Sif said, stretching out her hands "They are friends."

He narrowed his gaze but lowered his arms. Sif was tense beside him, noting that he hadn't yet put the blades away. His brilliant eyes skated over the imposing looking new comers and the thrum of anxiety and anticipation hung in the air.

"Let me guess" one of them said. He was dark skinned, darker than Thoeric had ever seen before and had an eye patch over one eye "You're friends of Thor's?"

"What is it to you, Beast Rider?" Thoeric rasped before anyone could stop him.
Fury raised a brow "Guess I was right." He pinched the bridge of his nose then looked up again "Come along, we have alot to do."

"Why should we trust you?" Sif asked "You are a stranger to us, we have never encountered you before. Where is the son of Cole? We demand to speak to him at once."

"Well, you can't" Fury said snappishly "You only have me."

"I suggest you listen to the lady" Fandral said "Get us this son of Cole."

"Agent Coulson is dead" Fury told her in a flat voice "He died by Loki's hands, years ago. I think a meeting with him is difficult at the moment."

There was a stunned silence at those words.

"Now, please just get in the car before ... Son of a bitch!"

Fury cursed because at that moment, there were thundering clouds above them, angry and loud.

Theoric and the others smiled as they saw a familiar figure, garbed in attire they couldn't understand, land before them.

"Friends"

Thor's tone was sad but that didn't deter his friends from leaping at him in a bone crushing hug.

"Never fear, Thor" Fandral managed, being stuck between Thor and Volstagg as he was, "We are here to aid you in the quest of rescuing your brother."

"How...?" Thor frowned when they separated "How did you know?"

"Heimdall sent us" Sif said "he informed us that Loki was suddenly visible to him. Thor, he saw the remaining Chitauri. How are they ...?"

"Can we please conduct this somewhere else?" Fury cut in "Thor, tell your friends that they are safe if they trust me."

"Implying that we will be in danger if we do not?" Theoric asked.

Fury gave him a helpless look. Then he turned away "I am getting too old for this"

Thor chuckled a little "Friends, you can trust the man. I do, with my life."

"Thank you" Fury said from the car "Now can we please just get this done with?"

Thor herded his friends into the car and joined them. A few minutes later, he was laughing at Theoric, who had grabbed the seat he sat in with both hands till his knuckles went white. His face was tight as he tried to gain some semblance of dignity.

However, since everyone was already laughing at him, it was a highly lost cause.

***

"You have got to be kidding me"

Tony rubbed a hand over his tired face, warily staring at the new group of friends he had apparently
He watched as they walked about his living room, going from one thing to the other in awe. One of them, a fat, bearded man, touched Jarvis' control panel.

**You are not authorized to access this area**

"Who said that?" the fat man jumped, pulling out his weapon "Show yourself, demon!"

"Are you serious?" Tony muttered.

Beside him, Steve was holding back some of his giggles behind his hand "Well, they seem like nice people."

Tony gave him a wan glare "You are enjoying this, aren't you?"

Steve didn't defend himself to the accusation. He didn't deny it either.

Tony's head snapped to the sound when the grim looking one accidentally knocked over a glass case holding Tony's first Iron Man mask.

"Hey!" Tony cried indignantly, walking over "Get away from that!"

Steve snickered, then stalled awkwardly when a man emerged to his side. He looked charming, like a fairy tale prince.

"Hello" Steve said, discomfited by him immediately.

"Greetings, friend" Fandral bowed "By what name shall I call thee?"

"Uh, Steve" he extended a hand.

Fandral frowned a little at the extended limb. In Asgard, women extended their hand for a kiss. Mayhap they have the custom here as well.

Tony was pulling Volstagg away from the fridge when he heard Steve's startled cry.

He spun around to see him cradling his hand to his chest and gaping in horror at the man before him. The man, for his part, looked chagrined.

He didn't know what had happened and was denied the time to dwell on it when he heard the doors slide open.

"Oh my God," Clint walked in, laughing "I didn't think it was true!"

Tony rolled his eyes "Just shut up and help me."

Clint was followed by Bruce and Natasha, all of them in some form of humor at the situation. Bruce outright cackled when Volstagg began to drag Tony and Clint, who hung on his arms, with him to the fridge.

"Where the hell is Thor?!" Tony demanded

"He has gone to a meeting with your angry friend and Lady Sif" Tony looked up to see a tall man with flaming red hair arrive. He had gone with Thor when they had arrived.
"Volstagg, control yourself" the man said in a low voice. The tenor was soft, but the command behind it was not one to be ignored.

Volstagg straightened with a huff.

"Thank you!" Tony said. He walked over to Theoric "I'm Tony Stark. Who might you be?"

"Theoric" the man supplied, "that there, the man talking to your black haired is Fandral, Hogun the Grim is with the archer and the one who is currently raiding your strange white box is Volstagg"

"What?" Tony spun around to see Volstagg leaning into his fridge "Ah, fuck it"

Theoric raised a brow "I am afraid I do not comprehend your demand."

"It means...forget it" Tony waved a hand "Just...could you calm them down?"

"They are calm" Theoric said "Had they not been calm, your adobe would have been torn to litters by now."

"Okay," Tony massaged his temples "Let's try -"

"What he means is" Natasha cut in "It would be easier if all of you sat down. We could have proper introductions, then."

"Splendid idea" Theoric said calmly, then on a louder voice "Warriors! Assemble here."

Tony blinked as the offending men gathered beside them.

"That was all it took?"

"I am their superior officer" Theoric told him in a plain voice "they listen to me."

"Okay" Tony sighed, walking over to a couch.

Clint was still snickering as he walked over.

"Okay," Natasha said, looking at the strange men "Let me see if I got this right. You are Fendrel?"

"Fandral, milady" he bowed "and may I say what grace you exhibit. May I inquire the name of such a beautiful maiden?"

"Natasha" she supplied, raising an eyebrow at the blatant flirting.

"Natasha" Fandral said it like a caress "what flaming hair, doth the goddess..."

Theoric cleared his throat in warning.

Fandral shut up.

Natasha rolled her eyes "You are, Hogun, am I right?"

Hogun nodded but remained silent.

"I am Volstagg" the fat man said, biting down on the cold turkey leg that was last night's dinner.

"He doesn't speak?" Clint asked Theoric, pointing to Hogun
"Only in grim times, my friend"

The doors slid open and Sigyn walked in, marveled at the technology.

Tony whistled in appreciation "Well, hello gorgeous"

Natasha rolled her eyes. Really, the man had no sense sometimes. She opened her mouth to say something but, just as Tony walked over, she saw Theoric’s tense stance and decided to let him handle it.

"The name's Tony" he said, casually flinging an arm around Sigyn "Billionaire, genius, playboy. Which do you prefer, oh maid so fair?"

Sigyn gave him an awkward glance "I ... do not understand you, sir"

"Please" Tony released her to stand in front of her and take her hand in his "Call me Tony"

When he kissed her hand the third time, Theoric moved forward.

"Stark" he gently tapped the man on the shoulder "Would you discontinue this unconcealed wooing of my wife?"

Natasha snorted in laughter when Tony made a few hasty apologies and all but ran back over to them, carefully positioning himself next to Steve, who still sat on the bar; the place farthest from Fandral.

"Alright," Natasha said "Let's get this over with."

"No time"

They looked up to see Thor enter the room. In tow was Sif and Director Fury.

"We must leave immediately," Thor commanded "Before they change the position Heimdall pointed to."

"He knows where he is?" Tony asked as Clint and Natasha ran out of the room to change.

"Yes," Thor said, his tone rough "Why he didn't tell me is beyond me, though. I will ask him the moment I return home"

"Wonderful," Fandral said "should we leave?"

"In a moment" Theoric cut in, leaving Sigyn alone after a short look at Tony. He went over to where he had deposited his bag.

"I think this will suit you more than those rags, my prince"

Thor caught the heavy bag and it clanked. He knew immediately what was in there and a small smile curved his lips.

"Thank you, my friend."

***

Bruce and Hogun were sitting together in front and driver's seat of their large Avengers battle car. Tony was standing with Clint and Steve while Natasha and Sif were explaining to everyone what
their plan of action was going to be.

They tore through the city streets, going to the long shut down factory in the industrial area of New York. That was where the Chitauri held Loki and that was where, in Natasha's opinion; Thor was going to head into a massacre and come out successful and bloodied.

She had a bet going on with the Avengers and though most of them agreed, time and the amount of blood wagered on, Bruce was the only one who said that Thor wasn't going to get to face the Chitauri.

Of course, Thor knew nothing of the wager and neither did the Warrior's Three.

Natasha seemed to have found herself a new best friend, recently, however.

Sif had been ecstatic when she found out that Natasha was also a part of their team. She positively beamed at the other woman warrior among them and had not left her side since.

Tony snickered, gaining Clint and Steve's attention.

"What?" Clint asked.

Tony pointed to Hogun and Bruce "Hulk Hogun."

Steve rolled his eyes as Clint began to chuckle lightly.

"Reaching the industrial area in ten minutes, guys" Bruce called from the driver's seat "Be vigilant."

There was a metallic clank as Thor stood from his seat.

He looked every bit the god he was and twice as intimidating.

This helmet glittered dangerously on his head, shining like the promise in his eyes. He towered over the others, looking larger than the Avengers remembered him.

"Take whatever minion you find," Thor said softly, dangerously "but the King belongs to me."

Tony opened his mouth to say something, but closed it when Clint cleared his throat. Now was not the time to be smart.

There was a silence in the vehicle; one of preparation and anticipation. In Thor's case, it was bloodlust.

They arrived spectacularly, completely tearing the through the once electrified gates of the grounds that housed the building.

Thor was the first one to leap out, the golden sun reflected off his magnificent helmet.

Natasha followed, loading her guns and behind her, everyone else piled out.

"I'll scope out the skies" Iron Man said a second before he launched into the air.

"Clint, you're with me" Natasha said "We take the east entrance. Bruce, you and Hogun take the west. Theoric..."

"I shall take Fandral and Sigyn to the South" Theoric said, already flanked by his partners "The remaining warriors take the foyer at the start. If we find nothing, we meet in the middle and continue
"Remember, people" Captain America called "This is a rescue operation. We don't need to attack the enemy. Our priority is finding Loki"

"Speak for yourselves" Thor muttered, leading Sif and Volstagg forward "if I find those Chitauri monsters, I will slay them"

"Steve" Natasha muttered "Go with him, I need someone who..."

"Got it" Captain America said, following Thor and the others.

Natasha gave his back a short glance before following Clint who was armed and ready, to the east.

The doorway was easily crushed under Thor's foot and anger. He marched through it, keeping his eyes peeled for anything, any movement, any sign of those dreaded Chitauri.

With all his conviction and hatred mounting in him with every step, Thor still felt the stab of fear gnaw at him every now and then.

The Chitauri were feared for a reason. No one knew where they came from or what they were.

Many thought they were a culmination of all Nine Realms, a terrible mixture of magic and power. Others thought they were the souls that escaped from Hel itself. Even fewer believed them to be reincarnated gods, made evil by greed and lust for power.

All Thor knew, was that they were the beings that had harmed his brother. That was all he was counting on as motivation.

A small thud made him spin around, Mjolnir held in a deadly manner.

"Who goes there!?"

"Just me" Bruce walked out, hands raised "Relax, I just tripped"

Behind him, Hogun nodded in confirmation.

Before he could answer, another sharp sound erupted from the side.

It was Clint and Natasha.

"You guys find anything?" Clint asked

Thor shook his head

"I have nothing here, guys" Tony called through their ear pieces "My infrared shows no signs of activity from up here"

"Then come to the ground and check" Steve's said "Because we have nothing"

A few moments later, Theoric and his team arrived.

"Forgive me, my prince" Theoric said "we found nothing"

"There are multiple basements here, people" Tony told them "Maybe they are in one of them"

"We take them as the bands we are" Thor said rushing forward "Stark, see if your eyes... "
He broke off, raising a hand to shield himself as the glass window beside him exploded. Iron Man landed in the middle of the startled rescue team with all the flourish of Alexander McQueen.

"You rang?"

Thor resisted the urge to roll his eyes "See if you can find them here"

Iron Man's slitted gaze glowed as he looked to the ground "Five levels, guys. I can't see past the...Oh shit."

Thor paled at the cuss "What is it?"

"They're down there, alright" Iron Man said "About thirty of them."

"Thirty?" Clint repeated

"Is Loki among them?" Thor asked

"I don't know, big guy, I only pick up body heat" Iron Man said

"Then it is not the Chitauri'" Thor concluded "They have no heat to give. They are cold to the touch."

"Then who the hell is down there?" Natasha asked, frowning

"That" Iron Man said "Is an excellent question"

***

"Stark"

"Receiving" Tony replied to Steve's query.

"Were you sleeping on the job again, Tony?" Captain America asked

"I am as ready as you are, Cap" Tony replied as if the question hadn't even been asked. At the other end, Steve sighed.

"Alright then, we have found one on the tunnels" Natasha said "Clint goes in first."

"Oh goody" Clint muttered.

"You worried, Hawkeye?" Bruce asked

"Nah," Clint scoffed "why should I be? I mean it's not like we are a hundred feet underground, heading into a multitude of tunnels that appeared out of nowhere and probably have more dead ends than actual exits. Nor are we about to face an army for thirty almost undefeatable Chitauri that can rip us to shreds in an instant."

"He's worried" Natasha mumbled

"Don't be," Iron Man said easily "That's my job"

"Great. Who is the idiot that assigned him this job?" Clint asked

"I would be that idiot, thank you, Clint" Bruce said into the mic "Although in retrospect there were other, better choices available"
Tony snickered a little, relaxing that the little banter was actually making them more relaxed about this whole ordeal.

The abandoned factory they worked in was one of the many taken over by Stark Industries early on in the weapons manufacturing empire. This building had been deemed hazardous and closed down about thirty years ago.

According to Heimdall, Tony rolled his eyes at this, and his own sensors there were tunnels under the basements of the buildings. They were relatively new and spread into a large network of cavernous channels that either ended in a dead stop or what Tony had deduced was a large chamber some 'billion feet under the civilized world'.

According to Thor, this was where Loki was being held. No one wanted to point out that he had no way of knowing this and kept their opinions to themselves.

Now, each team of two was looking for a way to the chamber and trying to avoid any Chitauri they could come across.

Tony had eyes on everyone, thanks to his communicators. They send him all the necessary information along with their heart rate, breathing patterns and surrounding audio. He had already made up his mind about trying adding video to these features.

He watched them flit about on his screen, tiny dots on his radar. They mapped the places they went for him automatically, so that he knew which route to take when a speedy escape would be needed.

"Guys, keep talking to me" Tony muttered.

They all began at once.

"One at a time!" Iron Man winced "Jesus"

"Sorry, friend"

"My bad"

"Apologies, Stark"

"Who is Jesus?"

Tony snorted at the last, it was Volstagg, the man most enthralled by his tiny invention that set in the ear and let him hear everyone else.

"We have a dead end here, guys" Bruce said

"Track them, if you must" Thor rumbled "We have been here barely an hour, there are more passages to be explored."

"Excellent idea, my friend" Fandral said "Tell me, do you see tracks?"

"I need a sound off, guys. Teams at a time" Iron Man cut in before Thor could respond.

"Hawkeye"

"Black Widow"

"Theoric"
Tony sighed "Iron Man"
"Sif"
"Sigyn"
"Hulk"
"Hogun"
Tony laughed "Thanks for that guys"
"Stark, mind yourself. Thor"
"Captain America"
"Volstagg"
"Fandral"
"Excellent, we have a full class" Tony said "now keep talking, so that I know you are with me."
"What would you have us discuss, man of iron?"
"I am glad you asked, Lady Sif" Tony said, freezing when he heard a small sound up ahead. When it was nothing than a rock that had fallen, he continued "How about a date?"
"Date?" Sif asked amid the groans of despair "No, thank you I prefer figs, Shining One"
There were undignified snorts of laughter from the Avengers.
"Yeah, yeah, hilarious guys" Tony muttered, grimacing when he hit a dead end. He turned, nearly bumped into the silent Thoeric before gesturing him to turn and move.
"Lady Sif what I meant was a ..." he turned off his mic and pulled Theoric closer "What do you call a date in your language?"
"Date" he supplied, frowning.
"No, when a man wants to take a woman to dinner and shit"
"Shit?" Theoric asked
Tony gave up "Lady Sif, would you accompany me to dinner?"
"Oh"
There was a strained silence that had nothing to do with their current mission. Theoric had stilled, much to Tony's chagrin.
Could that man peel off the suit to hurt him?
"Forgive me, but I am not ..."
"She is with me, Stark" Thor said sternly "Kindly keep your advances to yourself."
There was another moment of awkwardness between the Avengers but they remained silent.
"Fellow warriors" Fandral called a while later "I have found a path to the chambers."

***

"I am not surprised by this"

"I guess we owe Bruce about five hundred dollars" Tony muttered at Steve's comment.

"Stark, how is this possible?" Clint asked "You saw them here barely two hours ago"

"This feels like a trap" Natasha said, cocking her gun and moving into the shadows of the empty chamber.

It was large, larger than even the coronation chamber Thor had been in so many years ago, and it was empty. Darkness loomed in a few corners, but other than that, the twelve people that entered it were the only ones who occupied it.

"This doesn't make sense" Thor said, helmet gleaming in the light cast by Iron Man's eyes and Natasha's torch "How can this be?"

They step in single file and carefully look around in the little light offered to them.

"Stark?" Bruce called "Do you see anything?"

"Nothing," Iron Man replied, his weapons were on alert in case something moved "People, Natasha might have a point. We could be walking into a trap"

It was a groan that made them all jump and spin around, weapons aimed.

The black haired figure sprawled on the floor moved, softly grazing his ankles against the rough concrete surface of the ground. His white shirt was cuffed and dirty, his shoes tattered, bruises decorated his once handsome face and his pale skin was ghostly white in the lights.

"Loki!"

"Thor, wait this could be a ... "

But Natasha's warning came far too late.

The resulting boom rocked the entire chamber from its core. The tremor so powerful, it knocked off the last will of the dying building and it sagged to the ground, breaking it utterly as it crashed onto the heads of the Avengers and the gods within.

***

The first thing he heard was the metallic clanking that was dulled because of the increasing headache around his cranium.

The second thing he heard was someone calling his name.

"God damn it, wake up!"

He felt a slap across his face.

Thor opened his eyes slowly, shutting them against the stinging bright lights a second later.
“He's awake”

More clanking whirring and heavy machines moved somewhere in the background. His head hurt so bad it had formed tears in his eyes. He groaned, rolling over to avoid the beams.

Sharp clanking, shrill and unpleasant, tore through his ears. Thor winced and covered his ears, increasing the noise.

"Hey"

The voice was softer, calmer, and insistent. Thor felt someone shield his eyes from the light and slowly opened them again.

Sif looked down at him "Thor?"

He blinked slowly, trying to pull the pain back "What happened?"

His voice was like gravel and he coughed against the roughness in his throat.

"You need to get up" Sif said "can you muster up strength?"

He nodded and slowly, with help from Sif, managed to sit up. He looked awful.

His hair was mussed up, there was a bruise forming under his eye and his lip felt swollen. He was pretty sure he had bruises under his armor, large ones if he judged them by the pain they caused at every movement. There were cuts and scrapes all over his face.

"You alright, bug guy?"

Thor turned to see Tony sitting ungracefully on the ground beside him. His legs were spread out in front him and thick chains were bound across his wrists.

A quick look showed all of them were in more or less the same state.

Thor’s eyes widened when he saw a thick collar around Sigyn’s throat; it held her fast to the wall.

"Hoy! Thor!" Tony called, raising a hand and waving it "You alright?"

"Yes" Thor rasped. He cleared his throat "Yes, my friend I fare well." He looked around "Could you explain what happened?"

Tony sighed "Well, the short version is that the whole factory collapsed down on us after the explosion. We have no contact from the outside world and are trapped in this glass case that I find chillingly similar to the one we had on the hellicarrier. We are also chained in these. I'm guessing they take away our powers because neither my suit works nor can Bruce Hulk out. Everyone else is just weak too” he lifted his hands where the chains jiggled. They were gold and black, embossed in a design that Thor realized he could recognize.

"Sweet Odin…" Thor cursed as the gravity of his situation set in.

"Why does that make me feel like he is not missing his father?” Tony muttered

"These engravings" Thor said, looking down at his shackles and chains "They are the same that bound&#133;" he broke of suddenly, wildly looking around "Where is my brother!?”

"Hey, hey Hey!!" Tony said, raising his hands in a placating manner as Thor began a frantic search
for Loki, spinning at every sound, every flash of light around them "Thor, calm down!"

Thor was twisting around, looking everywhere for Loki "Where is he?!

"Thor!"

He turned his frenzied gaze to Sif

"He's right there!"

Thor snapped his head to where Sif pointed.

In another glass case, one very similar to theirs, Loki kneeled, bound and gagged. His head was lowered, his hair hiding his face as he bent low on his knees. The limited light cast a deathly glare on him, making him look ethereal. His hands were tied behind his back and gave extra movement whenever he breathed.

"Loki!" Thor hit the glass with his fist. Naturally, nothing happened.

"He's fine, Thor" Sif said "He's probably sleeping again. We have been here for a good while, my prince."

He turned back to her, a little too fast, and the room began to spin. He put a hand on his head and stumbled.

"Take it easily, my prince" Sif was there in an instant of clinking chains. She held his weight and gently settled him on his rump again.

When it became clear that the room was no longer spinning and that he wasn't in danger of losing consciousness, he looked up.

"What is this? How did we get here?"

Sif sighed "It was indeed a trap, as the Black Widow stated. The Chitauri knew we were coming and I am assuming it is they who locked us here"

"Assume?" Thor rubbed his head "Are you not certain?"

"Our captors have yet to show themselves" Thoeric said, pulling Sigyn close "We have tried escaping but these chains drain our powers."

"And we feared you dead, my prince" Fandral croaked, his voice hoarse "We would not act unless we were sure of it."

Thor grumbled "Fandral, you forget I am immortal, my friend"

"For now"

They shot to their feet, all twelve of them and turned to the source of the new voice.

"Son of a bitch" Tony muttered, slitting his gaze.

Doctor Simmons grinned at Tony "Greetings Mr. Stark. I hope you find your current living arrangements satisfactory"

"If this is some retaliation against me," Tony rasped "you have gone too far, Simmons. Your fight is
with me, not them."

Simmons cackled, the pitch a little above sane, and smiled at Tony "Oh, Mr. Stark! You really are a narcissistic bastard. What makes you think this is your fight?"

Tony glared at him with narrowed eyes.

"This is nothing more than an agreement taking place, a transaction, if you will" Simmons said "Your involvement is strictly commercial"

Thor watched him "What are you talking about?"

Simmons cackled again "All in good time, Asgardian Prince"

As he spoke, he pulled out a remote control and pressed the button.

The sides to Loki's glass case began to slide aside.

"No!" Thor banged against the glass, but nothing happened. He was weak as any mortal around. He tried summoning Mjolnir, but found it a fruitless task "Leave him alone!"

Simmons chuckled "I'm not the one you should be begging, Asgardian prince"

There was a sound of something sharp clicking against the surface; the only warning Thor got of another's entrance in their containment chamber.

Despite his resolve, Thor felt a sliver of fear snake up his spine. The Chitauri King stepped into the dark chamber. He was wearing his royal armor, dented and slit in places. And as his massive frame walked in, someone behind Thor gulped loudly.

Theoric pulled Sigyn behind him, just like Clint blocked Natasha.

The King chuckled "Have no fear, I will not harm you ... as yet"

"You will not harm us at all" Thor growled with a bravado he didn't feel "State your demand, Chitauri, lest I feel merciful"

The King rolled his eyes "Such impudence, lord of Storms. I fear you to be a challenge in taming"

Thor ignored the chill that went through him at those words "You know who you will end up angering. Should anything happen to me or my brother, all of Asgard will be after your blood."

The Chitauri King ignored Thor and went to where Loki crouched.

Thor felt the color drain from his face "Don't you dare touch him!"

Thor banged his fist on the glass as the King went over to his brother but he was ignored. Even his eleven companions watched, frozen in horror as he stepped, deliberately silent, up behind Loki.

The man had indeed been dozing.

When the King touched the back of his neck, Loki sprang to life, looking around him, his eyes going to the glass cage that held Thor, in such hope that it tugged at Thor's heart.

When his eyes landed on Thor, they widened in fear a second before he looked behind him.
"No!" Thor yelled when his brother cringed from the king, back pedaling as he tried to get away from him.

The fear in his eyes was raw and open and Loki made no attempt to hide it as he saw his tormentor advance on him.

A single terror filled cry erupted from his throat when the King reached down and grabbed his ankle, dragging him close.

"Let him go!" Thor demanded, fear filled eyes tearing up "I'll do anything! Please!"

It was like the King was waiting for these words. He turned to Thor with a malevolent smile and his eyes glittered.

Loki whimpered when the King grabbed his bounds and stood him up, dragging him to Thor while clicking at Simmons. He placed Loki right before Thor, so close to the glass that the older brother could see the tears in his eyes.

The scientist nodded and pressed a button on his remote. The doors to their cage shifted open.

The Avengers made to move but the King extended a long claw and placed it under Loki's jaw, tracing his jugular. The man watched them with imploring eyes, his breath harsh in the silent room. They stopped their movement.

The doors behind Simmons opened and three more Chitauri, smaller than their ruler, walked in. each had talons on their hands that glistened in the dim light. They walked towards the Avengers.

"They are going to unleash you, Thor" Simmons told him "Do not try anything because your brother will pay the price."

Thor glowered at him, then at the creatures who came to him. They lashed at Steve, who jumped aside to avoid their sharp claws. They removed his chains from where they were all fastened, a small degrading hook at the top of the glass container, and for a second he thought about destroying the whole lot.

Then one look at Loki and he changed his mind. He let himself he guided to the King.

"Thor," Bruce said as he passed him "don't do this, man"

Thor lashed out at him, slamming him into the glass with so much force something cracked.

"How dare you presume to command me mortal!?" Thor hollered, pulling against the Chitauri "How dare you try and command me you pathetic piece of rot!?"

Thor ignored the Avenger's shouts and the Chitauri that pulled him back.

"Thor!" Simmons called "Your brother!"

Thor stilled immediately. He glared at Bruce as the man sagged against the glass, his mouth leaking blood. He allowed himself to be maneuvered outside.

Loki stares at his brother being manhandled to his knees before him. Thor looks into his face, his eyes searching Loki for signs of wounds.

Loki shook his head. Why he did that, neither brother knew.
"Do you give your word to do whatever the master asks?" Simmons voice cut in

"Your master can speak for himself" Thor said insolently "I heard him not too long ago myself."

The King released Loki, ignored his pleading cries and hit Thor across the face. Thor flew a good few feet before landing on the hard floor.

Loki tried scrambling forward to his fallen brother but was cruelly yanked back by his hair. His eyes fell on the Avengers still trapped in the sturdy glass chamber.

Yes, how wrong this feels when you are the one behind it

Thor groaned, lifting himself on his elbows.

Simmons walked over and pulled Thor up by yanking on his hair "You will mind your tongue or I will rip it out of your mouth!"

Thor scoffed at him, grinning "When I get out of this, I am going to shred you with my bare hands"

Simmons released him and raised a hand to strike him.

The King growled.

Simmons immediately went on attention "My lord requires an answer"

Thor looked up at Simmons, then at Loki. The younger god, strapped in similar bounds, shook his head.

"Yes" Thor said "Release them all and he will have a favor from me"

The King cackled in terrible, grating laughter. He made a few more growling and clicking noises.

"My master wishes me to translate for you" Simmons nearly droned, stepping back a little as Thor slowly, gingerly, moved to his feet.

"Whatever pleases you" Thor said, looking the King in the eye

The Chitauri ruler growled at him.

"He wishes only one thing from you" Simmons stated

The King clicked and growled, keeping his gaze on Thor and his hand tightly in Loki's hair. He yanked it, gaining a cry from the younger man.

"Should you deny the simple request, your brother, currently my master's prisoner, is going to take the punishment from it." Simmons continued.

"Seems like I hardly have a choice, then" Thor said, moving his gaze to the cage where his friends were either around Bruce, inspecting his injuries, or watching him.

The King clicked in the strange tongue and grinned.

"What he wishes of you is simple and you are well within your power to give to him" Simmons said

Thor remained silent.

There were more noises as the King relayed his command to Simmons.
"Do you agree to this?"

"Yes"

Loki struggled against the grip, shaking his head and doing everything he could to get Thor to change his mind. He yelped loudly when the King lifted him to his feet by his hair.

Thor tensed but forced himself to remain where he was.

The King looked at Loki and grinned before snarling again.

"My master wants your word on this" Simmons said

"Release my friends and my brother and he shall have it" Thor said without missing a beat.

The King looked at Thor "I want our favor first. Give it to me and I will give you what you want."

Thor stopped for a heartbeat. His gaze went to his brother who was weakly struggling against the monster that held him, his eyes filled with fear and pleading as he looked at Thor. Loki shook his head when Thor locked eyes with him.

"You have my word" Thor said, his voice strong "What do you want?"

The King dropped Loki to the ground and the man crumpled unceremoniously. He snapped his head up to look at Thor, willing him to run, to change his mind, to get himself out of here.

The King clicked a small command at Simmons.

Loki's eyes widened and he made a sound, gaining Thor's attention. He shook his head vigorously.

*Don't do it, Thor! Please don't agree to this!*

"Your immortality" Simmons said in a stone cold voice "Princess"

Even Bruce, who was examining his injuries looked up when Loki suddenly launched himself at Simmons, beating down the man with his shackles.

It took two Chitauri guards to take him off.

Thor, who was held back by the third, watched, his anger rising as one of them backhanded Loki, causing him to fall on the hard ground.

"Do not touch him!" Thor hollered "you got what you want, now leave him alone!"

Loki spun around to stare at him in shock. He shook his head and tried moving only to be pushed back.

*NO!*

Even the King was taken aback, but he smiled and looked down at Loki.

"Your brother is wiser than you, princess"

Loki ignored him; for once staring at Thor.

The man avoided his gaze.
"My brother, my friends? They will all live?" Thor asked

The King laughed "Of course, of course"

Thor forced himself to stay still as he approached, but the being only extended a hand.

"Congratulations, Prince" the King rasped "You have struck yourself a deal."

Loki once again tried to move but was pulled back roughly. He shook his head at Thor, begging him not to do this.

Thor looked at Loki, at his friends that were captured and then at the king before him.

Without a word, he grasped the creature's hand.

***

Thor felt it, the energy drain from him for the second time in his life.

It wasn't pleasant. It was like some had rammed a hand into his chest and was slowly pulling his heart out.

The pain was excruciating, making him double over and fall to his knees, gasp for air. Tears formed behind his eyes and all he could see was a blur. Nothing made sense and nothing was where it was supposed to be.

His headache erupted behind his eyes, dark clouds fogging his vision.

Then he felt weak. His back began to hurt, then his arms and then his entire body began to throb in a dull ache.

His knees buckled and he collapsed on the ground.

The King stood beside him, roaring as Thor's immortality was pushed into him. It changed him; he began to grow taller, muscles erupting in his torso like a grotesque magic trick.

Loki watched in horror as his brother fell to his knees, barely keeping himself up as the King began to grow, he began to swell, growing larger till the top of his tentacle head touched the ceiling of their chamber. He shrunk back, green eyes wide as the creature before him became so powerful that his aura radiated around him.

"Yes...Yes... The King growled "Power, so much power!"

Thor pulled himself up, wavering.

The King looked at him disdainfully "Feeling weak, prince? No matter, you still have more to take"

His guards brought Loki to him and Thor could only watch as the King pulled his brother close

"Sorry, Loki" the King growled "but the deal's been made"

He snapped his fingers and Loki's shackles and gag fell off, highlighted by a soft gasp from the man.

"Thor!"

Loki ran to his brother, steadying him "Thor, what have you done?"
Thor winked at him "Brother, I have a plan"

A second later, the glass container exploded, shattering glass everywhere.

The Hulk tore through the containment, the Avengers on his tail.

Then there was fire, explosion. Somewhere, Iron Man yelled orders, Steve tore through. Their weapons were found and Clint had Simmons pinned on the ground.

A second later, a thick layer of smoke veiled them before they all vanished with nary a sound.

***

"You have no idea what you are up against!" Simmons yelled at him "With his immortality, his powers have grown and my king is undefeatable!"

Tony shook his head, muttered to himself about madness. They had been back for almost a day and this was how it had progressed.

Bruce had treated them for their injuries. No one apart from the now mortal Thor had sustained anything serious and he was resting in his room.

Natasha was searching the whole city for those Chitauri while Clint, Steve and Tony took turns interrogating their captive.

Fury had yet to be informed about this.

Steve and Clint were just as unsuccessful as Tony in their interrogation and sighed when Tony failed once again. They moved aside as Tony moved between them and went through the doors.

"Forget it guys, he's not going to talk"

Simmons laughed at them, bound to the chair and leaning as far as he could "The time for talking is done. It is time for action, my lords action, your future ruler's action" He smiled into a pause "Or perhaps this is the perfect time to talk about a friend of yours."

Tony stopped at his tone. The other men tensed as Tony turned.

"What are you talking about?" Tony rasped

"Perhaps you should reconsider your hospitality towards a former criminal" Simmons chuckled "Did it ever occur to you that maybe your lying friend might have been working for our King all the time?"

Tony rolled his eyes "That is..."

"Absurd? Impossible?" Simmons asked "Think it through, or perhaps you need some evidence of that claim?"

***

Loki wasn't looking at him. His back was turned and he was pretending to contemplate the wall before him, but Thor knew him better. He knew he was terrified, scared beyond reason for both Thor and himself.

He was also furious. Furious at Thor for agreeing to something like that, something so stupid. He had
already yelled at him long enough for that.

"Loki?" Thor ventured.

Loki didn't move

Thor sighed "Brother?"

"Did you ever think about how I would get you back home now that you are mortal?" Loki asked, his voice soft but his anger was deafening "Are you so stupid?"

"I had a plan, brother" Thor said for the hundredth time

"Yes, fabulous plan in loosening the monster's shackles in the hopes that he would save us" Loki sneered, twisting himself to look at Thor "Brilliant plan"

Thor sighed from his place on the bed. The sheets were pulled up and he still felt weak. Loki was sitting on the opposite edge, arms crossed and expression grim.

"Brother, it was the only way I could guarantee your safety" Thor said "Was that not my job when Father sent us to Midgard?"

At this, Loki rounded on him in so much fury, Thor felt himself cringe from him.

"How dare you insinuate you did this out of some out of proportion duty towards me!?!" Loki roared, stood and moved forward and grabbing Thor's collar. He lifted him off the bed with frightening strength "You did this for one reason and one reason alone! Tell me why!"

Thor, who was still stunned, attempted to remove Loki's hands "Brother - "

"Don't call me that!" Loki released him suddenly and Thor barely gained his balance on the floor "I am not your brother, I never will be! How dare you say that!? How dare you sacrifice yourself so willingly to someone like me!?"

Thor was utterly shocked and fumbled over his words.

He was denied the chance when the doors opened.

Both men turned to see Stark, Steve and Clint standing there.

"Now is not a good time, gentleman" Loki hissed at them.

"Well, make time" Tony said, walking in and looking him straight in the eye "Loki, did you strike a deal with that King? Our heads for your freedom?"

"That whole scene back there" Steve continued "It was a trick, wasn't it? None of it was true"

"What are you talking about?" Loki rasped

"This" Clint lifted a long, thick piece of rolled parchment "You recognize it?"

Loki had gone paper white beneath his skin. Not because of the three men, but because of the one behind him, watching the exchange with narrowed eyes.

"Friends, what are you saying?" Thor asked
"Nothing," Loki said, glaring at the men, he had just tried making the thing vanish but the enchanted thing was not obeying his command "Go back to sleep, Thor"

"No" Thor said, walking over and reaching for the scroll

"Thor, don't!" Loki waved a hand and the three Avengers were pulled against the wall, the scroll dropping from Tony's grasp. He lunged for it but it was a second too late.

Loki gasped suddenly when he felt a powerful jolt somewhere behind his heart. A second later, he felt his energy drain from him as his magic left him. He looked at Thor and saw him lower his hand off the ring.

NO!

And while Loki was still dizzy, Thor picked up the dropped scroll. Tony and the other two dusted themselves off as they watched Thor read.

Loki stood on shaking legs, which had nothing to do with his recent power drainage, and watched Thor with apprehensive eyes.

It was written in the All Tongue. A language that all Nine Realms understood because it was presented as their native words. There was no chance of Thor not understanding what was written.

Thor felt his chest constrict as he went through the binding deal. A blinding anger, so wild it made his teeth clench, rose in him. Feelings of hate, loathing and disgust flew within him like hot molten gold. It burned him, branded him and infuriated him with every word he read.

Loki had promised Thor's immortality, the heads of the Avengers and Thor himself, in his mortal form, to the King of the Chitauri as payment if they let him go off scot free. The transaction was a compensation.

Since Loki had failed to give Earth to the Chitauri, his punishment was long overdue, according to a previous deal he had struck with them. In that deal, Loki belonged to the King should he fail. As payment for said deal, Loki was to hand Thor over to the King as a spoil of war.

However, during his recent capture, Loki had struck another deal, the one Thor now held in his hand, the binding contract that stated that Loki would be freed of his earlier contract if he gave over the Avengers and Thor as damages.

Below the rest of the writing, Loki's signature glowed with the magic that bound this contract.

Idly, Loki put a hand to where the previous contract now lay, the one he had so badly tried to hide before. It crumpled beneath his fingertips in his trousers. He couldn't meet Thor's eyes.

"You tricked us" Thor said.

He didn't yell but Loki flinched as if he had "I had no choice"

"You had no..?!" Thor broke off in mid shout. He sighed "Friends..."

"We're going" Clint gave Loki one last glare before turning.

Steve didn't say anything as he followed, but Tony stayed for second.

"Keep in mind, Thor" Tony said in a sift voice "none of us belong to anyone."
With a last glare at Loki, Tony left as well. That left the brothers alone.

"Brother, I ..."

"You deliberately deceived me" Thor cut in "You lead us like a fish to a hook and then you betrayed us. Betrayed me!"

Loki stood still "I was given little choice"

Thor scoffed "I refuse to believe that, Loki. Everyone had a choice"

"And every choice has consequences!" Loki cut in "You have no idea of what I went through with them, no idea what they are capable of... "

"Yes I do!" Thor cut in "I was taken as well, if you remember." Then a thought occurred to him "Did you orchestrate that as well?"

The hurt in Loki's eyes was hidden by the anger "How dare you?"

"I dare because now I know there is no limit for you!" Thor nearly yelled "You would stoop to every low to get yourself out of trouble, even sell your own brother. Loki, you tricked me into giving up my immortality!"

"I tried stopping you!"

"Lies! All of it!" Thor hollered "You lied everyone, you lied to me! And I was an idiot to believe you"

Loki sighed "You don't know... "

"Then tell me!" Thor begged, moved forward and grabbed his shoulders "Tell me! Tell me what they did you and tell me why you did this to me!"

Loki's eyes were watering at the hurt he saw in Thor's eyes "I can't..."

Thor growled and let him go.

"But there is a way to get your immortality back"

Thor looked at him "What?"

Loki sighed, as if it was a great burden he was about to release. He gently reached for the paper held limply in Thor's hands. He lifted it before his face and read over the agreement.

"The immortality given to the King has a flaw" Loki said "I made sure of it when I gave him my magic. Your immortality can be given back to you if ..."

"If what?" Thor asked, he didn't look like he trusted Loki and the other didn't comment on it

"Kill me and you will have your godhood again"

He didn't expect Thor to lash out like that.

Thor gave a mighty roar and grabbed Loki by the throat, pinning him against the wall with one hand fast around his neck.
"You think I am in the mood for humor, Silver Tongue?!

Loki held his forearm and grinned "Do it, brother. All you have to do is squeeze and see if I truly lie or not"

Thor shook his head in disgust "You are a traitor. I am ashamed to call you my kin or that I trusted you."

"Then kill me" Loki goaded "Strangle me and rectify that mistake before it is too late. Save your friends minute lives and be the hero once again. Kill me, Thor and reign supreme over Asgard." His grip over Thor's hands tightened "Do it"

But an explosion interrupted them both.

It was far away, much too far away, but the sound merely confirmed its lethal intensity. A few seconds later, the alarms in Stark Towers blared to life. The ground began to shake with the strength of another blast, this time closer.

"It's too late" Loki said, his eyes a mixture of sadness and insanity "You're too late"

Thor watched his brother laugh in his grip and a heavy, terrifying weight settled on his heart.

"What have you done?"

"I did nothing" Loki snapped, pulling free of Thor "I merely saved myself from those bloodless demons."

Their door was burst open

"Is there something amiss about the alarm!" Natasha asked them "We need you, damn it"

"I'm coming" Thor droned to the empty doorway.

Loki blocked his path "Don't be a fool, Thor. This is no time for stupidity. Give me my magic and let me fight"

Thor shook his head "I am done trusting you, brother. I know now what it leads to"

He tried passing but Loki stopped him again "Without your strength and immortality you will be killed. I am not misleading you this time ... Thor!" he called as his brother pushed past him "Thor let me help you!"

Thor ignored him and went into the hallway. He was going to die, he knew.

But he felt nothing. Loki's betrayal had taken more out of him than he thought. No feeling remained, nothing beat inside him.

"Thor!"

Loki ran behind him and spun him around.

"Why are you doing this?" Loki asked "To punish me?"

Thor scoffed "To what result, brother? Nothing works on you; you don't change. You will remain the liar and deceiver you have always been. No, I do this not as a punishment, but as a sacrifice to those I love"
Loki scoffed "That woman who doesn't even remember you?"

His words hit him like the next blast to shake the city. People were screaming below him. Thor should be there, saving them, but instead he found himself asking

"How did you know she doesn't remember me?"

Loki blinked "What?"

"How did you know Jane doesn't know who I am?" Thor pulled himself to his full height, looming over his brother "I never told you that"

"Yes you did" Loki refused to step back "when you were whimpering about how you love her and miss her and ..."

He broke off, choking when Thor once again rammed him into the wall with a hand around his throat.

"Tell me the truth, Loki!" Thor growled "How did you know!??"

Loki looked at him for a good while before replying "I hexed her. She lost every memory of you and I"

Thor growled, his fury threatening to tear him up inside. He raised a hand as if to hit Loki, then dropped it.

"Go ahead" Loki said "Kill me!"

"No" Thor dropped him to the ground "You are not the one to die today."

Loki looked up at him, one hand on his throat. Thor's meaning set in.

"If you die, my magic will be returned to me" Loki said as he stood "I will be free to go home, brother. I shall win."

"I know" Thor said sadly "Then I guess this is good bye, brother"

They stared at each other for a long time.

Around them, the world was breaking around them, loud explosions and sounds of screaming erupted from below. Somewhere, Thor became aware of an army approaching but he didn't care.

He stared into Loki's merciless eyes for a long time before closing his own.

This was it, then. His end.

Loki won.

"Good bye, Your Majesty"
Loki looked up from his perch on the kitchen counter. He lowered the magazine he was riffling through.

The Avengers, minus Bruce, hobbled into the brightly lit room and knocking a few chairs about in their haste to get their injured teammate to the healing room down the hall.

Loki followed them, holding his magazine loosely between his fingers

Tony Stark *looked* terrible. His suit was crumpled, probably crushed, and blackened. It would be of no use anymore. He had no mask and the burn wounds on the left side of his face almost made Loki wince. Almost.

"Had a fun day, did you?" he asked, jumping to sit on one of the three beds in the room.

"Fuck you, Loki" Clint said as he helped Thor deposit Tony on the bed "Fuck you"

"Hmm ... " Loki said going back to the magazine "If only..."

"Brother..." Thor began tiredly "Do not test us."

"And why not?" Loki flipped a page.

"Because we are not in the mood for it" a bloody and disheveled Natasha replied, going to the refrigerator where sterilized needles and other necessities were placed "Jarvis, we are out of anesthetics"

_Sorry, Miss Romanoff, but the pharmaceutical shops and their databases have been erased. I ran a search and ordered a few from the next state. It will take a few days to arrive, the situation being what it is_

"Great" she slammed the refrigerator shut "Now what?"

"We wait" Tony rasped, already feeling weak "Simmons controls the traffic and multimedia control. He had eyes everywhere we need to be careful when bringing in supplies."

"How did he do that?" Natasha asked, walking over

"The same way he shut down every working computer in the city" Tony said

"The same way he took over the city" Clint added

"And cut off all the power" Bruce walked in, eyeing Tony "Makes me feel guilty about you using your uninterrupted energy"
'Also, his abode and food, Sir'

"Thank you, Jarvis" Tony whispered, going towards the darkness surrounding him.

Bruce immediately went to healing Tony's face. The man winced and hissed when Bruce put healing balm over the burn

"Watch it, Doc" he said, his voice was hoarse and he looked just about to pass out "It hurts"

"What happened?" Bruce asked, looking at the relatively less injured people around him.

"Ambush" Clint said, placing an antiseptic over the gash on his arm "We were holding down pretty well on our own. Most of the Chitauri guerillas were either dead or incapable of moving. I thought I heard a woman screaming in one of the apartments."

Bruce looked up, frowning "That's impossible. We got everyone out two days ago"

"I know" Clint nodded, wincing as Natasha pulled a shard of glass from her side with her bare hands "Which was why I was confused. Anyway, I sent Tony in to check it out and -"

"And?" Bruce asked when Clint broke off.

"The building exploded" Thor continued "We were lucky enough to get only minor scrapes but Stark got the worse of it."

"I didn't realize I was this stupid" Clint muttered

"Stop it, Clint" Natasha walked over "You didn't know-"

"I should have!" Clint snapped "I should have known it was a trap. I fucked it all up and look where Tony is now!"

"Oh, Odin...!"

They whirled around to Loki, who had an irritated expression on his face.

"Spare me the theatrics" Loki said with an exaggerated roll of his eyes "Here"

He waved a hand and ripples shot from him, hitting each of the injured Avengers. A second later, a soothing calmness enveloped them.

When they blinked, it was gone. So were their injuries.

Thor sighed, looking to where the glass and shards of concrete had hit him. There was no sign of any injuries.

"All gone" Loki sneered at them, then jumped off his perch and left the room, taking his magazine with him.

"Why is he still here, again?" Natasha asked, dropping herself in Loki's vacated spot "I mean aside from the obvious?"

Thor sighed "He refuses to tell me. He mocks me for my idiocy then curses at me in Nordic. I think he is waiting for me to give up."

"Or he's just waiting for you to die" Natasha said calmly "That way he can get all of his magic back
"He could leave now if he chose" Thor sighed and sat on a chair "All he really needs is to save his magic to a great extent"

"Which he probably is" Steve, who had silently sat on a bed for so long, said solemnly.

"No, my friends" Thor said softly "My brother is not saving his magic, as you can clearly see. He uses it to heal us every time we battle. It had been this way all month, if you recall"

Tony groaned then, feeling the side of his face gingerly. When he found it as smooth as before, he grinned "Great work, Doc"

"I had nothing to do with it" Bruce said, crossing his arms "That is Loki's doing."

"Ah" Tony said as he sat up "I was wondering when he would come around to it"

"Meaning you knew he would?" Natasha asked

Tony scoffed "Of course. He does it every time, doesn't he?"

When there was an awkward silence, Tony frowned "Come on, guys you know as well as I he fixes us. I mean he may be an ass about it, but he eventually comes around to it"

"And that doesn't worry you?" Clint asked "This is Loki, he does everything for a reason"

"Yeah, except fight" Natasha muttered "I mean, we have been going out for what? A month, now? He never helps. He is just - "

"Have a care about the way you talk about my brother, Lady Natasha" Thor said, his voice hard "My brother may not be helping us fight, but that doesn't mean he is not helping us at all."

"Sparky's right" Tony said, standing "I mean with the mess we make of ourselves, I'm pretty sure we would be dead if we didn't have his magical healing powers."

Clint rolled his eyes "I think you guys are way too trusting. The guy sold us for Christ's sake! If it were up to him, we would be in that maniac's clutches by now."

"And yet we aren't" Thor said, straightening from where he leaned against the counter "My brother might have appeared to sell us as you say, but I know there is always a reason Loki does what he does."

"So you trust him, is that what you are saying?" Steve asked. He nodded to Thor's ring "Because that says otherwise"

Thor sighed " I trust my brother with many things. Staying when he has the option to leave isn't one of them."

Footsteps sounded outside and Sif lead the others in.

"Loki said you had returned" Sif said "What happened?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary" Tony said, smiling at her

"So you weren't mewling like a babe?" Sif frowned.
Bruce chuckled softly as Tony scowled.

Tony sighed then "I've had enough of this. Guys, meet me in the control room in an hour. All of you deserve a rest."

***

Loki was once again perched on the opened window sill, his feet dangling over the edge with a little too much nonchalance. The magazine he had been going through earlier was carelessly dropped on the bed where it formed a paper tent. He paid it no heed.

He had other things on his mind.

It had been a month since this battle took place and he was rather impressed with the human's ability to take care of it. So far the damage had been nearly minimum, the lives lost of only those that were either too slow or too stupid to evacuate the large city of New York. All the others had been taken out of the city according to something they called a 'drill' in which all homes were to be abandoned immediately.

He smiled a little when he recalled that the 'drill' was implemented after his own attack on the city years ago.

However, his attack had been a mere act of rebellion against his father and mostly stemmed from the urge to escape from those monsters.

He shuddered involuntarily when he recalled them. The Chitauri were a barbaric race, even more than Loki thought after he saw what they had done to the humans.

Simmons had stolen more than just a mind controlling device file from Stark. He'd taken a DNA accelerator as well.

Created by Stark to help the famine that hit Africa every year, the device was supposed to make the plants in the starving nation grow ten times their original size. It meddled with the plants DNA and made them into giant vegetation. There had been a few side effects that Stark had yet to work on but otherwise it was perfect.

Loki sighed.

Except that, when used on humans it turned them into monsters. Grotesque, large as the Hulk and mindless. When mixed with the blood of the King, they turned into ruthless killing machines that had no qualms about ripping a man's head off. Or biting it off, as one mortal was unfortunate enough to discover.

The Avengers and the Asgardian warriors had managed to steal the thing back; after Loki planted the idea in Tony's thick skull one night. So the constant fear of the King creating more army was put to rest.

The army he had created was vicious, terrible even, capable of destroying anything in their paths. But they were also mortal; something the Avengers used and usurped in an instant. The army was also, thanks to their retrieval of the device, numbered. And in the whole month it took, it had substantially decreased.

And that was where the good part of his life ended.

Yes, the Avengers had fought impressively, yes they had the Midgardian army at their fingers tips,
yes the Chitauri were weakening and yes they had saved millions of lives slowly and surely.

But the King still remained.

When the battle had started, one of the first things the Chitauri had done was take Simmons from Stark's building. No one but Loki had been there and those dreaded guards for the King had leered at him as he watched, frozen in place because of his fear, before dragging the mad scientist away. Apparently, the King needed the enthusiast.

Loki had told everyone he had been knocked unconscious in the rescue. They didn't care, so they believed him.

Now, Simmons had turned off all the power in the city, put a virus in every computer and destroyed all communications from the army stationed at the exits of the city.

The humans had played their hand against the Chitauri and the mutants created. They had lost many and excruciatingly. After that, SHIELD had told them to remain at the exits and make sure no creature escaped as the Avengers dealt with them.

However, that still left Loki's problem.

The King could be anywhere, attack at anytime because he was more powerful than ever and a sadist to the last drops of cold blood. Loki feared that he would take his brother or even him and that kept him awake most nights. He refused to sleep at all when Thor had to leave for a midnight attack or a late night shift.

He was in bed by the time Thor came back, feigning sleep to keep his worry to himself.

Loki sighed and tiredly rubbed his eyes. His legs dangled precariously over the edge where he sat only barely.

"Loki?"

Loki squealed and fell off the window sill.

"No!"

The second he saw his brother vanish from sight, Thor sprinted forward and looked down.

Loki was nowhere to be seen.

The fact that he'd just killed his brother made Thor's heart stop. Panic settled in his heart as he felt tears around his eyes.

"You idiot!"

Thor whirled around to see Loki standing behind him, his hair a little windblown, but he looked perfectly fine otherwise.

"Loki!"

Before he could move, Thor had him trapped in a bear hug

"Brother you are alright!"

"Yes" Loki grunted, trying to push him off "Congratulations, you oaf. You finally managed to sneak
"Brother, I am..." Thor began as he pulled away

"Hush" Loki said "Your apologies are dull and they bore me."

Loki walked to where his magazine stayed and picked it up, reading as though he hadn't just fallen from a fifty story building.

"Brother?" Thor walks over to him

"Don't call me that" Loki says automatically "You know it to be a false endearment."

Thor stopped on his way to sit beside Loki. His good humor and relief vanishing "Why do you do this, Loki? To deliberately anger and hurt me?"

Loki scoffed, not taking his eyes off the book "Do what? Flaunt our false brotherhood in your face?" he closed the magazine and looked at Thor "Because I can. Because we are not true brothers, because your father lied to me."

Thor clenched his jaw "Father has..."

"Is there something you needed?" Loki cut him off, standing abruptly "Because I find myself weary with the desire to sleep."

Thor consciously bit down on his anger. He counted backwards from ten, like Stark had taught him. It worked.

Thor sighed "Loki, Stark wishes for us to join him in his planning. They wait"

Loki gave him a confused look "Wait for what?"

His deliberate misunderstanding was the first warning.

"Us, brother" Thor exhaled loudly "We had to meet Stark and the others in the room for meeting."

Loki's gentle laugh was the second warning.

"Thor, I am not going to sit with a bunch of mortals and discuss how to stop an unstoppable enemy" Loki said, walking over and taking out some clothes for himself "Better if you just come with me to Asgard where everything will be peaceful."

"And leave the world to die?" Thor asked incredulously

Loki sighed and looked at Thor. This was the final warning; the exasperation in his features. Should Thor choose to heed it, things would go well.

If not...

"Thor, I am tired" Loki said flatly "So are you and frankly, I find nothing useful in your meetings because all it really does is fail. Nothing you plan out succeeds, brother, or have you not noticed"

Thor narrowed his eyes in warning "You tell me you intend to sit here and read this - this magazine while the entire world falls into the grasp of a warlord?"
Loki pretended to think about it.

"Yes" he said matter of factly.

"No!" Thor said "Wrong, Loki! You cannot sit idly by when-"

"And why not?" Loki asked, turning to him "What is wrong with it? If it saves us from death and things far worse, what harm is there in self preservation?"

"It is not the path of warriors" Thor cut in, then he sighed "We are in a war, Loki there in nothing honorable about..."

"Honorable?" Loki snapped "You think this is honorable? This is nothing short of suicide, Thor, or do you wish for death so fervently that you would march into a battle you have no hope of winning?"

"But we are winning!" Thor walked over to him "Brother, open your eyes and see. We have beaten down most of the army and the King remains in hiding."

"You can't possibly be this blind" Loki said softly "You think this is it? That the war that King wishes upon us is so small and your release so easy? You ask me to open my eyes, when it is you who is running about blind." Loki walked up to him, looked him in the eyes "Think, Thor. I know how that creature's mind works, I helped cultivate it after all," he smiled a little proudly.

Thor frowned at the pride.

"There is something much bigger coming this way, Thor" Loki looked at him "Something far larger than you have ever seen because this army" Loki waved a hand to the window, encompassing the dark city "It's just a diversion. It is a decoy and you have fallen for it. Nothing is this easy, Thor, believe me."

Loki suddenly grabbed Thor's shoulders, the touch surprisingly gentle "Come home with me, brother. Let me take us back"

Thor looked at his younger brother and sighed "No, Loki, I will not leave this planet to the mercy of those monsters and neither should you."

Loki looked away from him "You are hopeless"

Thor grasped his forearm "Why? Because I choose a warrior's way?"

Loki scoffed, "No, because you are going to get yourself killed"

Thor huffed "Why do you keep thinking that? In case you haven't noticed, I kept my strength"

"Yes, but you are a mortal" Loki leered at him "Facing an enemy that has taken your immortality. He is not going to hesitate killing you, I hope you understand."

Thor reigned in his temper "What drives you to this, Loki? What makes you this way?"

Loki narrowed his eyes "Makes me what way?"

Thor realized his mistake a little too late "I didn't mean ..."

"Mean what?" Loki rasped, looking at him "That I am a coward, is that what you were implying?"
"No, of course not!" Thor said "I never called you a coward"

"But you weren't far from it" Loki sneered "You think because I choose to be careful, because I don't take the warrior's way like you, I am a coward." He scoffed "you and Odin are far more alike than I previously thought. All you care about is fighting, all you care about is honor and revenge and would go to your death in their name! You call me a coward, but you are selfish, which is far worse."

Thor's anger returned with a vengeance and no amount of counting helped.

"Selfish?" Thor advanced on Loki "How can you call me selfish when I am here doing this for you? I am cleaning up your mess, fighting the war you brought upon us with your betrayal! If anyone is selfish, it's you because you sold your own brother to the devil to escape! But there is no surprise there, is it? You've done it before"

Loki had gone as pale as death and stock still. The only physical sign of his anger was the slight shaking of his limbs.

"Get out" Loki rasped "Get out of this room"

Thor's anger disappeared as swiftly as it had come. He realized then what he had said.

"Loki, I..."

"I said, get out" Loki's voice didn't rise, but the temperature in the room dropped by several degrees "Now, Thor, before I do something you'll regret."

"No," Thor said, knowing the dangerous ground he walked on "I'm sorry, I didn't mean what I said but I need you to listen..."

"No!" Loki cut him off "I will not listen to you, because all you keep doing is hurting me!"

Thor exhaled "Brother..."

"I am not your brother!" Loki nearly yelled "Stop living in that dream! I am not your brother, I never was and I never will be! All I am is a stolen relic, bound to be moved about like a pawn till I am found of use!"

"Really?!" Thor asked loudly "Then how do you explain the fact that you were crowned instead of me? If you are so adamant in believing you are not my brother and merely something that could be of use, explain how Father chose you instead of me for the throne?"

Loki scoffed "I can do that easily. Odin only gave me the throne to protect me from the Council. They wanted my head on a platter" he laughed at Thor's confused expression "It's the truth, whether you believe me or not. Your Father only crowned me out of pity, it had nothing to with love or the fact that I deserved it. In fact, I wouldn't put it past him to crown you at the end of this stupid test."

Thor was stunned. He didn't know the Council wanted Loki executed not did he know what Loki was saying right now. It must have been the truth because Loki neither sneered nor did he appear to have any joy in giving the news.

"Loki, I - "

The door opened then.
"Guys, we have been waiting for a long time," Steve called them "Hurry up"
Thor looked from Steve to his brother.
Loki had his arms crossed "Thor will accompany you back, Captain" he turned away to finish
getting his clothes laid out "I have work to do"
Thor didn't argue, not with Steve hovering behind him. He nodded to Loki’s back and spun on his
heel to leave.
The door was left open behind him.
***
"So" Tony clapped his hands together and looked at the people assembled before him "What have
me surmised so far?"
The people in the room groaned. Nick Fury scratched his bald head in the screen before them.
Tony didn't blame them, they had been at this for over three hours and it had begun to get on his
nerves as well.
With a few good calculations, they had guessed that the number of monsterized human-Chitauri had
decreased to about twenty percent. Though this was a good news in all its rights, the bad news was
that they couldn't find the twenty percent.
They had searched many buildings, gone through the sewage system and the subway tunnels; which
were the favorite places of the Chitauri hybrids.
Now, three weeks later, they had all vanished.
It made Loki’s words come back to haunt Thor. Perhaps he was right and the King had planned
something far graver than the simple attacks and thefts.
He sighed, gaining everyone's attention.
"What's wrong, Sparkles?" Tony asked "We boring you?"
"No" Thor exhaled "I am merely thinking about something my brother said"
Fury looked at him expectantly "And that would be....?"
"Do any of you think this might be too unproblematic?" Thor asked them "With all the fear inspired
by the infamous King, do these meager attacks not seem odd to you?"
There was a short silence after this.
"You mean to say" Natasha began finally "That there is something bigger going on? That this isn't
just domination?"
Thor nodded and searched their faces for a reaction.
"I agree"
Thor was surprised to hear Clint say it first.
"I mean I know all of us kick serious ass, but" Clint shrugged "I never pegged us as being good enough to beat a whole army. Without help from Odin or Selvig or the others." He added when the others began to protest "Guys, we stopped them only by chance, if you ask me. We couldn't fight them all because they kept on coming till Tony pulled the nuke on them. It was luck that all of them died right there. We didn't know they would do that, and we were already getting exhausted." He scoffed "I mean, we got lucky."

"And there was the fact that Loki wasn't even trying to fight" Natasha added.

Again, silence fell.

Each Avenger was lost in their own thoughts - thoughts very similar to what Clint and Natasha had just revealed.

It was true, they had hit a series of convenient incidents that helped them immensely. They were still a great force, one to be reckoned with, but it didn't change the fact that their first victory was massively assisted.

A mighty crash, followed by a yelp broke their thoughts.

"Christ, now what?" Tony muttered before going outside.

Sir, it would not benefit you if you leave to inspect that

Slowly, the others followed.

Volstagg and Sif had managed to drop a large, hundred and something thousand dollar genuine Rolls Royce engine, that Tony had bought years ago, in an undignified heap on the floor of his lab.

Thor could only laugh behind his hand as Tony gaped in horror.

I recall warning you, Sir

"My baby!" Tony wheezed as he scampered forward. His face was a depiction of great sadness as he crouched next to his destroyed possession. He let out whimpers from time to time, to the great amusement of the Avengers.

Volstagg and Sif carefully stepped aside, tip toeing out of the room and trying to make a hasty exit.

"Stop right there"

They froze in mid-step as Tony's call. They turned

Tony straightened but kept his gaze at his destroyed baby "You guys are going to-

Alarms blared then.

"Their world is in danger!" Volstagg howled "We're saved!"

Sir, a major disturbance in Brooklyn. There seems to be a group of metallic men surging from underground. They appear to be Chitauri but...

"Thank you, Jarvis" Tony said, walking to where he kept Iron Man "just help me get dressed, honey."

Jarvis sighed Very well, Sir
The others rushed up to where they held their weapons and armor.

Thor rushed to his room, banging open the door.

Loki looked up from where he sat reading one of his books "Trouble?"

Thor wrenched open the wardrobe and pulled out the tight fitting gauntlets Tony had designed for him. He stretched his fingers as the gauntlets activated. Then he lifted his armor and donned it.

"Something new has turned up" Thor said as he pulled on his cape "I have told the others about your fear. They all agree"

Loki scoffed and turned back to the book "How nice. Glad to know it takes three weeks for you to digest something. It shall help me in the future."

Thor ignored the jibe "You could come with us, brother. Fight by my side like we..."

"No" Loki said, stamping down on his fear "I am content here, thank you very much."

Thor exhaled his irritation but let him be. He knew that if Loki joined the fight, there would be nothing left of the Chitauri. His magic outreached their own with alarming power. But he also knew Loki was hiding. He didn't want to face the creature responsible for his night terrors.

They were still common and Thor had been there for him every night even when he was with Sif, he tore through the halls to be at Loki’s side whenever his brother needed him.

And just like that, a sense of urgency gripped Thor. Suddenly he wanted nothing more than to toss of his armor and weapons and let Loki take him home. The feeling nearly set him in panic.

He overrode it with an active hand but something still stirred within him, something vital to the point of being crucial.

"Thor?"

Loki's soft call broke him out of his strange reverie

"I am fine, brother" he finished clipping his cape on and looked down at his hands.

Mjolnir had been gone for more than a month but he still missed her. He felt empty inside, hollow and suddenly worried.

What worried him remained a mystery, had he stayed longer, he would have realized it as instinct.

But the others were already leaving.

Thor looked at Loki as he made to leave. He was still reading his book intently.

Without a thought, Thor walked over to him, looking at him as Loki glanced up.

"Take care, my brother" Thor said before he leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on Loki's forehead. He left a second later

Loki remained as he was, still and frozen.

Thor had only kissed his head like that once or twice before.
It had never ended well and for some reason, Loki felt a terrible fear gnaw at his insides.

***

Thor was the god of thunder, there was no way he couldn't handle himself, Loki argued with himself as he paced in his room hours later.

Even if he didn't have Mjolnir, he had his strength and those gauntlets Stark designed for him. Loki knew they were made to release the laser's that Iron Man had on his hands. He also knew they formed a shield over Thor whenever he went out to fight.

Then why was this sudden fear clawing at his insides? Why did he have this urge to run out and be on the battlefield with his brother instead of hiding here like a-

A loud thump interrupted his thoughts.

Loki halted, head cocked as he listened for the sounds again.

It came, the thump, this time louder and accompanied by a metallic dragging.

Loki gathered what magic he had in his hands. It wasn't much but. If it was an intruder that came for him, it would seriously injure them; or kill them, depending on Loki's mood.

The noise got closer and Loki slowly made his way to the door and plastered himself to the wall in wait.

Whoever it was definitely came for him.

It was not the sounds that told him of this, but something else entirely.

"Loki..."

The blood drained from Loki's face at the sinister drawl. The grating noise, that voice was far too familiar to him.

"Come out, my sweeting" the King rasped "I know you are there"

"Yes" another voice said, making Loki's knees weak "Come out, Asgardian. You cannot hide from us"

Loki swallowed audibly, pulling down his fear as he recognized the voice of the Other. That six fingered creature, the deal maker to the Chitauri.

He looked at the place where his scepter was, longing to make a run for it. He didn't have his magic at full strength, but the scepter would give him a small chance. He retrieved it on shaking legs and went back to the door's side.

"Jarvis" Loki whispered "Please be silent and tell me you sent Stark a message"

**Done, Sir** Jarvis said very softly **Shall I create a distraction for your attack?**

"That would be appreciated, yes" Loki whispered.

**MUST HAVE STABBED HER FIFTY FUCKIN' TIMES!!**

*I CANT BELIEVE IT*
RIPPED HER HEART OUT

RIGHT BEFORE HER EYES!

EYES OVER EASY

EAT IT, EAT IT, EAT IT!!

The blasting music startled the creatures outside so much that they began to attack at nothing.

Loki saw his chance and pulled open the door. As the angry, screaming music blared, he lunged forward, scepter aimed, rolled and crouched in a dangerous stance.

The King and the Other were looking around at the sound of the angry music so they didn't see him.

He used his magic and waved his hand in a vicious arc over the head of his weapon.

The Other turned just in time to be blasted off his feet by the orb of Loki's magic. He screamed as he fell through a glass window and into the adjoining room.

The King turned to the god and grunted in surprise as another orb hit him square in the chest, throwing him on his back.

Loki took the chance and bolted into another room. He hid against the wall, willing his magic to return faster.

He heard the King's laughter.

"Impressive" the King said "the little princeling has claws. I didn't see any of this from you when you were sobbing like a child before me."

Loki took deep breaths, calming himself. He didn't say a word and ducked further into what he now realized was a board room. Stark held meetings here. He found a door on the other side of the room.

"Jarvis" he called softly "What is beyond that door?"

The living room, Sir. The very one you threw Mr. Stark out of

If there was a reproach in Jarvis' whisper, Loki didn't hear it.

He stalked towards the door slowly.

The King exploded through the walls amid debris and dry wall "There you are!"

Loki gave him another stunning orb of magic and while he recovered from it, he pulled open the door and ran through.

Only to be caught and hoisted by the waist like a maiden.

"No!" Loki struggled, his movements those of fear and desperation when he dropped his staff "No, let me go!"

The Other laughed, his ragged breath hot on Loki's cold skin "No more tricks, Liesmith?"

Loki pulled, trying to use his magic to teleport himself out of there but found it lacking.

Damn you, Thor! This is getting ridiculous!
The King arrived then, shaking his head and tentacles of the stuff in it. He looked at the struggling Loki and smiled.

"You have stepped back on your word, Loki" he said, walking forward and standing before Loki "I have neither you nor your substitutes."

Loki watched him, fear dancing in his eyes as he tried to pull away from the King and stay away from the Other...who still held him like a doll, he realized with a strange chagrin.

He gasped when the King grasped his jaw painfully tight "I need my army, Jotun scum! They have destroyed most of them, but it is a small price to pay for what I have in mind"

Loki remained silent as he watched his tormentor.

"Your friends and their power is a valuable asset for me" the King snarled "Give them to me or I shall take you!" he sneered at Loki's horror "You remember that, don't you?"

Loki paled, his breathing getting harsher as the King lowered his hand, stroking Loki's jaw and throat.

Loki pulled back and cried out when another hand coiled around his hair and yanked his head back, exposing his long elegant neck.

"You recall it, yes" the King said against his arched neck, running his tongue over the fast pulse he found there "I can sense it in your bones, in your tremors. I remember too. I remember how you cried out, begged me to stop as I took you again and again against the wall, against table on the floor, everywhere because I could!"

"Step away from him"

The command was so terrifying that the King obeyed. He realized a second later what he'd done and sneered.

"Why Thor!" he leered "So nice to see you here"

Thor looked deadly. His eyes were angry, furiously glaring at the creatures holding his brother.

"Am I interrupting something?" Iron Man asked, flying in and landing beside Thor "good"

There was a soft hiss and a thunk.

The Other cried out in pain, dropping Loki. The Other howled in pain.

The Trickster scampered away, holding his scepter defensively against the monsters as he stood on shaking legs.

The Other screamed and pulled a sharp arrow from his back. He spun around, glaring at Hawkeye.

The man already aimed another at him "Come on, give me a reason."

The Black Widow and Bruce followed, the latter in tattered clothing.

Captain America's shield bounced off the King's head before going back to him.

Metal clanked as the Warrior's three, Sif, Theoric and Sigyn arrived, all armed and surrounding the Chitauri leaders.
The King laughed "Well, it seems we are vastly outnumbered"

"Oh, you have no idea" Iron Man, stretching his hands "Come on, make a move"

The King laughed and raised in hands in a gesture for clemency "I come in peace"

"Yeah, right" Iron Man scoffed.

A second later, he fired.

Thor hollered in anger and ran forth, blasting the dreadful looking creatures with his new weapons.

Sif and Thoeric ran to Loki's sides

"What is your command, your Majesty?" Theoric asked, keeping an eye out for danger.

The Other, currently getting beaten by the Hulk and Natasha, Clint and Volstagg, extracted a remote from his hands.

"Run" Loki said softly. Then he screamed " Thor, RUN!"

The warning was too late.

A second after his scream, the world around him exploded.

***

Loki groaned as the sounds from the waking world reached his too sensitive ears. He tried opening his eyes but found the lights above far too bright.

"Bruce, he's coming to"

The voice is familiar and Loki tries opening his eyes again.

"What happened?"

"Hey, hey stay with me" someone was slapping his face.

There was a faint whirring somewhere above and lights kept moving.

"Hey we need a stretcher over here!"

He felt dull - not the stupid dull - everything around him was slow. All sounds, the screams he heard were low pitched and deep to his ears. His vision was blurring so that nothing but bright white circles moved before him.

When someone grabbed and lifted him, Loki felt the pressure slowly, gradually till it was nothing more than a warm press by his arms.

He was placed on something - a bed.

"No" he moaned, trying to move "please don't..."

Bruce was there, Loki could smell blood

"Don't let them touch me-"
"Relax"

That was the only instruction he got before he felt a sharp prick at his side and the world became
dark once more.

***

This time, he got up like he usually did - swiftly and completely.

He was in a hospital, he knew. The scent of astringent and the too clean environment left no doubt
about where he was.

He looked around and found himself dressed in only a degrading paper garment. His clothes were
folded in a neat pile on the chair at the other side of the empty room.

He jumped off the bed, pushed back the dizziness and began to dress.

When the door opened, he was closing the last button on his cuff. He looked up and saw Natasha
enter.

"Hey" she gave him a wan smile "You're awake."

He took in her bruised face, her limp and the cast around her arm.

"Asgardians have a fast healing" he said, going back to the cuff "Jotun's are even faster. It makes no
sense to lay back when you know you are well enough."

She rolled her eyes then winced at the pain it induced "I was just asking. That's the sort of thing we
do around here."

Loki looked at her again. Her hair was tied back and he could clearly see the marks on her face.
They were purple and green, varying in size and probably pain.

He exhaled, cursing himself already.

"Come here, Miss Romanoff"

She frowned as he approached her but stayed her ground.

Loki grasped her broken arm with gentle fingers. He looked at the injury and concentrated.

Natasha gasped softly when the bones cracked into place, when the bruises reversed and when the
limp on her gait vanished.

Loki stepped back and gently, so gently that Natasha could only stare, stroked her face with his
knuckles.

"There, as beautiful as ever"

There was no sneer or his face and no ridicule in his gaze so Natasha had no control over the blush
that spread over her cheeks.

"Where is my brother?" Loki asked, passing her "I assume he is looking for me - what is it?"

He asked sharply at her sudden averted gaze "Loki..."
"Where is my brother?" Loki asked sharply, his voice ragged.

"Room 114"

Loki didn't wait. He pulled open the door and ran down the corridor.

His room was 87 so he had a good long run before he reached Thor. The urgency, the frantic beating of his heart almost made him miss Bruce.

"Hey!" Bruce grasped his arm as Loki passed, halting him "Are you- "

"I am fine" Loki snapped, taking his arm away "Where is Thor? And don't you dare lie to me or delay me, not unless you want to be roasted alive."

Bruce sighed and rolled his eyes "You're going the wrong way. He is in the other direction, room 114"

Loki spun around and sprinted to the directed path with Bruce in tow. He didn't look the least bit beaten.

After an eternity, Loki emerged from the hallway and found Thor's door.

He reached for the door knob -

and paused.

Was he prepared for what was behind this door?

Shaking his head, and idly noticing Tony and Clint joining Bruce in the sidelines, Loki opened the door.

The answer was no. He couldn't have been prepared himself for the sight before him. His heart clenched painfully at the sight, he felt sick and refused to bend down as the pain in his chest increased. He felt fear gnawing at him and fought it back.

This was not the time.

There were no tubes that extended from Thor to the machines, there were very little wires and the only thing on him was a mask over his face that helped him breathe.

His eyes were closed, bruised and battered like the rest of his face. The blanket was up to his chest where the simple paper dress hid whatever else damaged him.

Thor was breathing deeply, a blaring opposite to Loki who wasn't breathing at all.

"What...?"

"He is in a comatose state" Bruce said softly from behind Loki "he hasn't moved in three days"

*Three days!*?

"How long was I unconscious?" Loki droned, eyes on his brother.

"Not as long" Bruce replied, walking over to Thor "At least you moved about in your sleep, you even woke a couple of times, but I don't expect you to remember it..."
"What happened to him?" Loki cut in, unable to take his eyes off Thor - or move for that matter.

"Cement block hit his head" Bruce said "I managed to hear your warning and gathered most of us before jumping out. You, Thor, Natasha, Tony and Theoric were the ones that got caught in the blast. Out of them all, Thor got the worst of it."

Loki snapped himself out of it then "Leave us"

"I have to check - "

"I said leave" Loki rasped "Now"

Bruce gave him a long glance then nodded. He left without another word and left Loki alone with his brother.

Loki's face was impassive, but his eyes were blazing as he moved to Thor. He stood by his side, eyes going to the monitor that recorded his heart beat.

It blipped softly, the only sign that Thor was alive.

Loki looked down at Thor, at the mask over his mouth.

"Brother?"

Thor didn't reply.

Loki felt his heart constrict at the silence. Suddenly, the loving gesture Thor had bestowed on him coming to his memory with alarming clarity.

No wonder it felt like Thor was saying good bye.

Loki growled "No" he pulled a chair closer and looked at Thor "You are not getting away this easy, brother" he sat on the chair and held his hand loosely between his knees "it is my honor to kill you, not some depraved creature's. That right is mine and mine alone" he rasped, his anger slowly rising "I shall be the one to take your life, your last breath and I will not let you or anyone else take it from me, you understand!?"

Again, the only sound was the beeping of the machine.

Loki sat there, breathing a little heavily. He was keeping so many things at bay that anger seemed the only possible solution. Thor was not going to leave him, not like this.

Loki closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew what he needed, who he needed, and he stood, his resolve not wavering an inch.

When he yanked open the door, he found almost everyone there. Theoric had a black eye and his foot was in a cast. Tony was in a similar state, with bandages around his body, apparent because they hid beneath the collar of his shirt.

"Hey, you alright?" Tony asked, limping forward.

"Where is Sigyn?" Loki asked "I need her."

He ignored the way Theoric tensed. Volstagg placed a hand on his shoulder

"She is with Lady Natasha and Lady Sif" Fandral said, walking "I shall fetch her."
Loki barely nodded and turned to go back into the room.

"Loki"

He turned when Steve called him

"He's going to be alright, you know" Steve said "He's a strong man"

"I know he shall be fine" Loki shrugged with a nonchalence he didn't feel "I am going to ensure it."

Theoric frowned "What do you have in mind? Why do you need Sigyn?"

"I am not entitled to answer your queries, warrior" Loki rasped at him "quell your tongue lest I give you another gash to match the one on your throat."

Theoric's lips thinned but he fell silent. Loki disappeared behind the door and closed it.

There were a few minutes of silence before footfalls alerted them of Sigyn and the others' arrival.

"Loki is well?" Sif asked

"Yes" Theoric moved to Sigyn "My love, it is going to be alright - I am right here."

She frowned at him "What are you talking about?"

"Whatever he had planned" Theoric replied "if you don't like it, say so and I shall be there to - "

The door opened and Loki loomed

"Good, you are here" he gestured to Sigyn to come closer "Come here, my dear there is a boon I must ask of you"

Sigyn hesitated for only a second, moving when Loki narrowed his eyes in warning. He allowed her to pass, then closed the door behind them. He locked it.

"My lord, what are you - " she broke off, gasping, when Loki grabbed her upper arms and pinned her against the wall.

"I need something from you" he muttered a second before his mouth swooped down over hers.

And struggles were easily held down and when Sigyn tried using her magic, it drained from her. Loki continued to kiss her, ignoring her struggles and a few moments later, she felt a warmth pool within her. It radiated from her chest and spread all over her body, expanding till she felt it take Loki as well.

They kissed for a good while, Sigyn becoming more and more meek and Loki taking what he needed from her. When her hands went around his neck, he gently pulled them off and placed them by her side.

She moaned a little in protest, but he was already leaving her. She gazed up at him, stunned.

"You may leave" he said, gently wiping his mouth.

Sigyn was wrapped in so many feelings, so many emotions. The most blaring of all was regret, then familiarity. For an odd second, she regretted letting Loki go.
She shook herself of these feelings, touching her swollen lips "Why did you do that?"

Loki shrugged and moved to Thor "I told you I needed something. Now leave me"

"But - "

Sigyn jumped back, actually jumped back, at the hostile glare Loki gave her.

"Get out"

She scampered to the door.

"Tell them whatever lie suits you, my lady" Loki said without looking back at her "I shall confirm it if it's a wise one."

She gulped, knowing Loki wouldn't take kindly to being crossed and nodded "Yes, my prince."

If she felt drained, she didn't show it as she unlocked the door and left.

As soon as she left, Loki turned back to Thor. He leaned down and grasped Thor's face gently.

"Brother, I am going to heal you now" he said softly "You are going to open your eyes and look at me or so help me, I shall run down to Hel and bring you back the second you leave me."

He placed a gentle kiss on Thor's forehead and his hands began to glow. He felt his magic leave him and drain into his brother. He felt light headed, hollow and suddenly dizzy.

He pulled back; bringing his eyes to Thor's and hoped they were open.

They weren't.

Loki growled slowly, angry at his own weakness and his drained magic.

He stood on shaking legs, drawing from within him all energy, more than he needed to even remain upright, brought forth the essence of his soul and spirit.

He felt it, strings of his own existence breaking from him and going into the orb that collected between his palms, he felt every fiber break and reconnect, felt a tug by his heart, his spine, the most inner parts of his mind.

Immediately, he felt powerful, so powerful that the walls around the room began to quiver. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, summoned the very last drop of magic and strength within him and pushed.

The world when white before going completely dark.

***

When he woke up, again, it was twelve hours later and he felt groggy.

He hissed against a sudden harsh migraine and pressed his palms over his eyes.

"Whoa, hold up" a voice said "Here"

Loki looked up to see Bruce holding a small colorful box in front of his face.

Behind him, Thoeric, Fandral and Hogun stood, probably guarding him and making sure no one
attacked Loki while he slept.

Loki levered himself on his elbows "What is this, pray tell?"

Bruce smirked "Juice. It helps, really."

Loki gave him a distrustful glare but took the box, pushing the straw in and taking a sip.

He closed his eyes at the cool drink that went down his throat. He hummed in pleasure.

"I think he likes it"

Loki opened his eyes when he heard Stark, who limped forward "Morning, Tinker Bell. You feelin' alright?"

Loki gurgled the empty box in reply.

Tony laughed "I'll take that as a yes"

Loki sat up slowly, suspicious of the pleasant greeting he got. He looked at the people in the room.

They all had a look of plain relief on their faces. It was odd.

"What goes on here?" Loki asked.

Tony smirked "About time." He sighed then "Well, you pretty much passed out after that stunt you pulled and though we thought you were trying to hurt Thor, he told us you were doing nothing.."

"Thor's awake?" Loki asked sharply. He scrambled out of bed "Where is he?"

"Hey, hey" Bruce blocked his path "Hold on a second!"

He was avoiding his touch, Loki noticed, and he stepped forward. He smiled when Bruce took a step back.

"I need to make sure your alright" Bruce said, "just give me two seconds."

"You can have all the seconds after I see my brother" Loki pressed forward and finally Bruce let him pass "right now, I require seeing him."

Bruce dropped his arms with a sigh of defeat "Whatever."

Loki sneered but at the moment, the door to the room opened.

Thor paused when he looked at the empty bed, then his eyes roved till they rested on Loki.

Loki felt a great weight lift from his shoulders.

His brother was alright...

Without a word, he walked forward, meeting Thor halfway in an embrace that spoke volumes. The others politely concealed their surprise.

Loki hated hugs, but this he didn't mind. The bone crushing pressure of Thor's giant arms around him was something he thought he had lost when Thor was in a coma ... no matter how shortly.

"You bloody idiot" Loki rasped when he pulled away "How dare you do something so stupid?"
Thor smiled and gently cradled Loki's neck like he used to "I am perfectly alright, in case you haven't noticed."

"Yes," Loki said, crossing his arms "I noticed, perhaps a little more arrogant than you were previously, but still the same otherwise"

He was smiling and his words lacked conviction. Thor retracted his hand and pulled Loki in for another hug, this time crushing him.

"Ack!" Loki squawked "put me down!"

Thor held him tighter "I'm sorry, brother"

"You should be" Loki said as he was released "I had to use a good part of my magic to bring you back, I hope you know"

"I do" Thor said, "but that is not what I am talking about. I am talking about not being there when you were attacked - again. This was the third time and I - "

Loki held up a hand, silencing him "Forget it, if you recall, I handled myself very well"

Thor smirked "Good"

Loki felt something twinge within him "You scared me, I hope you know that"

"Okay!" Tony said suddenly "Guys, I think I heard something explode in the west wing, could you, you know, help?"

The others rolled their eyes at the unsubtle request and followed him slowly. They filed out of the room, leaving the two brothers alone.

Thor wasn't looking at him, he had fixed his gaze to the floor "It wasn't my fault."

"You didn't hear me?" Loki asked "When I screamed for you to run, did you not hear the call?"

Thor sighed and walked past him, going to sit in a chair "Loki, I heard you - "

"But?" Loki turned to look at him "You thought that you were still the glorious god that came to this planet and not the vulnerable mortal you are now?"

Thor ignored the jibe "Brother - "

"What?" Loki asked, walking over to sit opposite him on the bed "Did you enjoy the explosion? Did you want to be blown to bits? Why in Odin's name did you not run when I asked you?"

"Because I wanted to kill him" Thor looked him in the eye "for what he did to you, I wanted to murder him, to see him die right before my eyes and to feel his blood on me, knowing that I was the one responsible for destroying that devil's spawn."

Loki scoffed with false bravado "Thor, I think you were over reacting over a simple beating I took from him, I have gone through worse with you and - "

"That's not what I am referring to" Thor said softly "I heard what he said to you, what he wanted you to remember."

Loki went deathly pale. His mouth thinned into a straight line and had to swallow twice to make sure
his throat still worked.

"Loki" Thor leaned forward "Why did you -?"

"No!" Loki surged to his feet suddenly he spun away from Thor "I will not answer that"

"Loki!" Thor was right behind him "this is why you screamed every night, why did you not tell me?"

Loki looked back at him, his eyes held a very thin sheen of tears "For the plain reason that I wished you not to know. Thor, please don't make me talk about this. Please"

"I'm sorry" Thor said, placing his hand on the door and closing it as Loki pulled it open "Why didn't you tell me? When we returned home, you should have told me what happened."

"And then what?" Loki snapped, stepping away from Thor "Have you laugh in my face? I haven't forgotten your hostility against me, your pure, unfiltered hate every time you saw me. You hated me, hated the punishment that you called lenient and loathed me for it as long as we stayed in Asgard."

Thor stepped back, stunned.

"Oh don't look so shocked" Loki hissed "and don't say you didn't mean it, because you did! You think I would have come to you then, knowing how you detested me for daring to kill your friends? I had my pride after all and I'm sure you wouldn't have gotten out of your way to ask me if anything was wrong. I mean, why would you when you were so busy trying to convince Odin to give me a harsher punishment."

"Loki, I ..." Thor began "much has changed, brother. I do not ask you to pardon my sins, merely wish to know why you kept this torment to yourself for so long."

Loki laughed without humor "What? You would have everyone know you have an ergi for a brother?"

"Loki!" Thor roared and stepped forward, grabbing his brother by his upper arms.

He shook him roughly "Don't you dare call yourself that do you hear me!? You are a prince, the crowned prince of Asgard and you shall be king! Just because you went through torture gives you no right to call yourself something so demeaning. You are my brother and if anyone calls you that, I shall rip their lungs out! That includes you!"

Loki, who had regained some coherent thought after being shaken like a doll, stared at Thor.

"I will go the end of the Nine Realms and face Ragnarok itself if it meant taking your pain away" Thor said to the Loki, whose feet barely touched the ground, in his grip "You are my brother and I have failed you in so many ways it shames me. I cannot think of a way to make it up to you, brother. I need you to help me redeem myself, if only in my own eyes, because I can't."

Loki swallowed against the emotions raging within him.

Thor put Loki down and the younger was surprised to see tears on Thor's face. He reached up and wiped them away.

"Then I will do as you ask"
"They have been in there for a long time" Tony said, leaning against the wall.

Their arrival here, after the total destruction on Stark Towers, was inevitable. This was the only hospital Simmons hadn't gotten to with his minions and machines. The reason for that was simple enough.

This was SHIELD'S private hospital, named nowhere on the map and in the control of only those that SHIELD deemed worthy. It was a safe house, hospital and weaponry combined.

With Stark Towers gone, this was their new HQ. Why Clint hadn't told them before going to remain a mystery and why there were only a handful of doctors that took rounds was also secrecy. All Fury had told them was that SHEILD couldn't let the American soldiers stay on their posts without proper care and nourishment.

Which also made this a kitchen.

"How much you wanna bet their doing it?" Tony asked

"Tony!" Steve gave him an appalled look "what's the matter with you?"

"What?" Tony asked the people around him when they turned away in disgust "They're not brothers."

"I fail to understand what this discussion is about" Theoric said, frowning. He was sitting on a soft couch with Sigyn in his lap, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Forget it" Natasha said from her place on the couch with Sif and Clint "not worth understanding"

"Oh c'mon" Tony said "don't say you haven't thought about it. I mean the time they spend together and everything."

"Tony, do you remember what happened the last time you mentioned this?" Bruce asked, picking up a cup of coffee.

Tony winced "Yeah I find that hard to forget. I have never been so close to the floor before"

The last time Tony had joked about this, Loki had turned him into a cockroach.

"Not that" Natasha said "Before the cockroach incident."

Tony's jaw clenched at the memory "That wasn't funny"

"Sure as hell was" Steve chuckled.

Soon, the room was laughing at Tony and the memory of butterflies sprouting from his mouth whenever he tried speaking.

Sif had laughed for weeks after that.

Tony rolled his eyes and brought his coffee to his lips "Morons."

"Come now" Hogun said "you wanted me to have a sense of humor, friend. Loki's spells greatly amuse me."

Tony was about to retort when the door opened. He turned and his eyes widened when he saw the man enter.
If there was any doubt about his godhood, it vanished the second entered.

He walked in side by side and the other Asgardians in the room immediately fell to their knee in a respectful bow.

The Avengers were caught somewhere between awe and a trickle of fear.

Thor's armor gleamed in the light, his helmet seemed to be made of the hardest most radiant steel. His gaze was determined, angry and fear inducing.

"Friends" Thor spoke, his voice resonating within the room, unlike they had previously heard "I have news."

The door opened again and another figure walked in, extracting silent from even Tony Stark as he came to stand beside Thor.

Loki looked like absolutely dangerous in his battle gear. The black leather, the gold crest and his own helm exuded a terrorization the Avengers hadn't seen in him before. His scepter shone as he held it beside him. His eyes were narrowed and glittered menacingly. The hand that held his staff was devoid of the ring that bound his magic.

This was Loki. God of Chaos, Lord of Lies.

And he was unbound.

Despite themselves, the Avengers felt more than a little worried when he smirked at them.

Nothing bound his raw power, his terrible magic and his awe-inspiring authority. He was Loki and he was more powerful than all of them combined.

"My brother had joined our fight"
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

And things escalate.

Out of the corner of his eye Loki observed his brother, the tension that pierced Thor's muscled body and smirked. His own body remained loose and relaxed, despite to intimidating figure standing before him which he fought with blatant insolence.

Thor lunged then without warning, to his hybrid opponent, other than a roar than matched the thundering skies above. Thor swung his blade, curved and sharp, carving clean through one of the dreaded Chitauri hybrids. The creature fell in two neat slices on either side of Thor's feet. His other hand held his hammer that he swung with vicious accuracy.

He shook the rain out of his eyes and glanced up at Loki, probably looking for some sort of encouragement or cheer.

But Loki would have to disappoint because at that time, his own opponent, tall and heavily built, gathered enough balance to stand and try another attack. Loki braced himself for the attack, reassuring the creature that he wasn't going to disappear and making it turn the blow ten times harder. It snarled in anger when the clone vanished seconds after penetrating the midsection. It turned, looking for the Trickster but by then it was far too late.

Loki's scepter shot through its middle, straining when it encountered the beating heart before pushing forward, tearing the veins and arteries before pulling it right out, skewered at the end of his weapon. The blood was turned into a pinkish hue as the hard rain poured over them.

"Wow Loki, I didn't think you had a taste for the terribly grotesque" Iron Man's voice called in his ear.

"Yes," Loki drawled, slamming the next target he had with his staff twice in the face before spinning aside, leaping over it and ramming the jagged edge of his scepter into its misshapen skull. He yanked it out viciously, trailing its brains along "I advise you to remember that the next time you think about offending me."

If there was nervousness in his laughter, Tony refused to notice "Need help?"

"You mean after I have killed thirty hybrids by myself, you wish to help?" Loki ducked as a claw slashed at him and conjured a green flame in his hand. He threw it in the face of the creature, sending it reeling back in pain, howling.

The thick sheets of rain did nothing to lessen the pain.

"You could use it" Tony finished lamely.

Loki let forth a slightly maniacal laugh, head thrown back to the skies that reverberated through the comms and rang long after the thundering above them.

"Do you really believe me to be so lacking in combat, Anthony?"
The question wasn't a question; it was a statement. Or knowing Loki, a threat.

"Uh..."

"Forget it, fool" Loki suddenly swung the sharp edge of his blade back over his shoulder, jamming it into the eye on another attacker.

It felt to the ground with a thud.

"Mind that creature two stories above you"

Iron Man's lasers shot somewhere in the thundering skies.

Thor turned with so much force that the water droplets on his helm flew off.

The angry snarls and blinding white lightening had always been a warning in Asgard of Thor's temper. Now, it was the symbol of the rage of battle that took place in the middle of New York city.

He shouted with exertion as he blocked an attack from one of the metal made Chitauri. He swung his newly crafted weapon and shoved the impossibly sharp edge into the creatures middle, then slammed Mjolnir into its ugly face, crushing it totally.

He was no longer mortal and he chose to show the monsters that fact.

His gaze went to Loki again, who was fending off six or seven of these metal beings at the same time. Thor smiled, rain pouring down his face when Loki slammed the end of his staff into the ground, sending the creatures flying before catching them in a spell that blew them to tiny shatters.

Loki's battle armor glistened with coagulated blood as he spun around to stake his staff through the chest of another hybrid.

The creature screamed and Loki crouched low enough to look it in the face. He raised a hand before its face and cast a spell enabling him to know where the King was.

He saw tunnels, similar to those he had taken refuge in years ago, only darker and slimier than anything he had ever seen. He saw his vision go further till it rested on a huge chamber, deep within the earth, water shot through another tunnel, flowing into a maelstrom that was so fast it was just a blur. There, on the borders of that maelstrom, was another door...#133;

The vision snapped away.

Loki looked down to see his victim dead. He grimaced slightly and yanked out the weapon out with a morbid squelch.

"Loki, what the hell are you doing?!" Clint's voice came in his ear "We need help here!"

Rolling his eyes, Loki straightened and saw Clint, Theoric, Natasha and Sif struggling to gain some ground against the battle they fought with a dozen large Chitauri hybrids. A short distance away, the Hulk was ripping the enemies in half one by one while the others slashed and shot and impaled.

He flashed out of existence and appeared hovering above their heads. As he landed, he pushed his staff forward and blew the creatures out of existence.

The pulsing blast slaughtered every enemy in a five mile radius.

Thor was stunned when the opponent he was fighting suddenly went limp.
He looked up to see every other monster fall after their knees buckled.

"What the hell...?"

Iron Man had successfully mirrored everyone's reaction.

"Loki" Natasha said by way of explanation.

"Oh"

"Forgive me my lady, but I cannot take credit for this" Loki said warily "I am afraid I had nothing to do with this, they fell of their own volition."

"Why does that not make me feel better?" Iron Man asked after a good long silence.

Before anyone could reply, a deep rumble sounded, immediately accompanied by the ground beginning to vibrate.

"Does anyone else think this is just thunder?" Clint asked.

"I think it would be wise if we vacated this place immediately" Loki said

Natasha looked at him tiredly "Why?"

As an answer, he pointed to the buildings behind her.

The Avengers and warriors turned to see a huge black shape slowly raise itself to the skies, larger than the buildings, thicker than most. It raised itself higher, uncoiling from within the earth and rising till it was the tallest being in New York.

The serpent looked down at them, green eyes slit as it focused on the Avengers and their friends. The crest around its head lifted in agitation and a forked tongue flicked out.

"What - the - fuck - is that?" Clint asked, his face a mask of shock.

They began to back up at the serpent reared its head.

"That would be my son" Loki said, stepping back.

Jormungandr let out a terrifying shriek and struck forward.

***

Three Weeks Earlier

Thor looked at his brother, suddenly glad that he was willing to let him help, willing to let Thor make it up to him.

It didn't take him long to come up with an answer.

"Fight with us, brother" Thor said simply "help me destroy them."

Loki stepped back "No"

"Brother..."

"I said no, Thor" Loki cut him off "I have no desire to get close to those things. I am helping you
more than enough as it is."

"With what result?" Thor asked "We have been fighting them for over a month and all they do is multiply and become more aggressive. This is a stagnant fight, but if you join..."

"No"

"We shall be unstoppable" Thor continued "you and I have fought side by side and had done things these tiny mortals couldn't even fathom. We have destroyed armies, you with your magic have rendered enemies of Asgard to shreds and I - "

"Have used Mjolnir to destroy many" Loki finished, crossing his arms "but you forget, Thor. We neither have Mjolnir nor my magic. What do you propose then?"

Thor looked at him silently for a few moments. Then, as an answer, he removed the ring binding Loki's magic off his finger and threw it on the ground. He stepped on it immediately.

Loki gasped as he felt the power surge in him at an alarming rate and fuse itself within him.

"I have broken Father's bond" Thor told him "you now have all your magic, nothing to stop you from fighting with us."

"Or keep me from running away" Loki said calmly.

Thor smiled "You really wish me to believe that, brother?"

"You cannot be this stupid, Thor" Loki said, his voice dark "I can run away and take the throne, leaving you here as a mortal and fit to take neither the throne nor Mjolnir."

"Then go"

Loki blinked "What?"

"Go, brother" Thor said pleasantly, crossing his arms and waiting for Loki to make a move "Take the throne and leave me here if you wish. I will not hold it against you."

Loki narrowed his eyes at Thor, knowing what he was doing.

"Very well" Loki said

He vanished a second later.

Thor startled, jumping when his brother disappeared from his sight.

"Oh shit" Thor cursed in the local tongue. He hadn't expected Loki to actually leave! He had been so proud at catching his brother's bluff, he never thought it to be the truth.

He ran a hand through his hair.

"Odin, I am such an idiot" he muttered.

"That you are"

Thor whirled around to see Loki leaning against the wall behind him.

"That should teach you to try and outwit me" Loki sneered.
Thor, relieved that his brother hadn't gone, hid his tension and respite "I knew you wouldn't..."

"Yes, yes, clever Thor knew his god of lies brother to be a liar" Loki waved a dismissing hand "How miraculous."

Thor scowled slightly at the taunt but made himself aloof to it "So by staying, you are agreeing to my suggestion?"

"I have a few conditions" Loki straightened

"Of course" Thor said, going to sit on the bed "I assumed as much. I am aware you don't wish to fight that demon, so I will -"

"No"

Thor looked up, surprised, when Loki spoke "No? No to what?"

Loki sighed and moved forward, coming to sit beside his brother "I am aware of your desire to exact retribution on the King and I respect that. I wish him dead more than you and I will not dissuade you from fighting him. However, I have a few conditions." He repeated.

Thor nodded but remained silent.

"The first condition" Loki went on "is that I will answer to no one. No one questions me and I will not explain myself to anyone. If I say I know better about something, believe me and listen to me."

"Very well" Thor said "but -"

"I have not finished" Loki said, raising a hand "The the second condition; you will do as I say. Not because I hold any superiority in rank over you, but because you are a mortal and vulnerable."

Thor narrowed his eyes, biting back a retort.

"And let's face it, god trumps mortal any given day" Loki grinned

"Do you wish to know the curses I have learnt here of Midgard?"

"Like what? Shit?" Loki asked

"No, Asshole"

"Dick"

"Douchebag"

"Prick"

"Fuck"

"Fucker"

"Cunt"

"Mother fucker. Cunt licking, asshole raping bastard son of a whoring turd"

Thor blinked, stunned at his brother's impressive language "I concede. Though that made no sense"
"Gigolo"

Thor frowned "What's that?"

Loki laughed, feeling a little easier about what he was about to say. That was the whole idea of the abusive banter anyway.

"My third request" Loki said "is this. Though I respect your desire to kill the King, I want you to hold yourself back from it. I wish - no, I want you - to let me fight him or bring him to me if you encounter him before I do. I want to exact my vengeance of him slowly and painfully before I allow him to die. And I shall be the one to take his life and the life of the Other, no one else. These are my conditions."

Thor thought about it for a mere moment "Very well. You will have all your conditions met."

"Don't you have to talk to your posse about it?" Loki jeered

Thor scoffed "Please"

Loki rolled his eyes at the arrogance.

They sat in companionable silence for a while before Loki grinned.

"Do you not wish to give your friends the news of my backing?" he asked

Thor smiled "By the look of your face I'm assuming you will enjoy that part."

Loki chuckled once "Of course I will. Nothing stuns you like your former enemy standing before you with all his power. I shall enjoy their expressions once again."

"You are a sadist" Thor chuckled

"And you are a fool if you are surprised at that" Loki said. He sighed after a little while, making Thor look up

"What is it brother?" he asked

Loki shook his head "I have been running from these memories for so long and now that I have the power to erase them, I hesitate."

Thor watched him, a sadness enveloping him. He gently placed a hand on Loki's shoulder and pulled him closer. Surprisingly, Loki leaned against him.

"I don't know why" Loki said after a while "What could I possible desire from it?"

Thor gently squeezed his shoulder "Strength"

Loki was silenced by his brother's incredible insight.

"You have suffered the worst and rose from it like a phoenix, Loki" Thor continued "those memories may haunt you but you will gain your power from them."

Loki waited for a few seconds, silently removing the graphic images from his mind. They faded into nothingness, leaving not even the fear behind. The only thing he kept was the strength it gave him for moving forward.
"And here I was thinking you were nothing more than a dupe"

Thor hugged him with the arm slung over his shoulder's "You underestimate me"

Loki rolled his eyes "Whatever, brother."

Thor let him go as he stood. Loki straightened his clothes and looked back at Thor.

"If I am to go to your friends with all the divinity I have," Loki smiled "we need a change of clothes. You might not be a god, but you can sure look like one."

***

Turned out, Loki had enjoyed their expressions more because of the fight that took place a few hours after Thor revealed that Loki was no unbound, free and much more powerful than they had ever imagined.

They hadn't disagreed with him right then, they didn't really have any conflict against Loki's joining. What they did appear to be wary of, was his deceit they feared he would betray them again and wanted some sort of assurance that it wouldn't happen.

Loki had merely smiled at them and left the room.

Thor was left behind and when Loki returned an hour later, expecting a diplomatic solution, he was stunned to see everyone shouting at the top of their lungs.

"He is my brother and I will have you speak about him with respect!" Thor hollered at Clint's face and Loki had to marvel at the fact that the smaller man didn't back down.

Then again, he had always liked him best.

"He sold us, Thor!" Steve said "as if we were slaves!"

"Plus he is the god of lies in case you forgot" Tony said in a softer voice "he could very easily be working for those creatures again. This could all be a trick"

"This is not a trick, I have been telling you that for so long!" Thor retorted "he hates them and wishes for their demise more than all of us combined!"

"He hates us, too" Natasha said softly "What will prevent him from hurting us even if he does help us defeat the Chitauri?"

Loki's quiet laughter shut them all up.

"Still so suspicious, Lady Natasha" Loki sauntered in "even after all we went through, you deem me unworthy of trust. Have I not proved myself capable of even the slightest bit of confidence?"

Loki's meaning hit Natasha well and clearly. She was worried though she didn't show it and Loki noticed.

Loki walked in further using his intimidation to his advantage. After all, he was the most powerful being in this room. Probably in the world at this point.

"I don't think so"

Loki raised a brow to Steve.
"I don't trust you and I am sure no one else does as well" Steve said "You have tried harming us before, you can do it again. The only thing stopping you is the fact that you need our help to get rid of the mess you made."

"Really?" Loki asked "Is that what you really think?"

Steve nodded, looking around for support. Apart from the Asgardians, everyone had almost the same view of him.

"Aah"

Loki smiled softly and looked at the ground "Seems I have made a reputation for myself"

"What did you expect?" Clint asked "You aren't exactly a docile person."

Loki smirked "That you are right in saying, archer."

"You are a threat" Tony said simply "you attacked us once and just because you spent a year and a half without doing nothing doesn't mean you won't eventually do something. No offence"

"None taken" Loki shrugged "However, how about I make you a proposition."

"Oh this is interesting" Clint muttered

Loki ignored him "How about you keep your opinions to yourselves and I won't take offence at the things you said."

Tony snickered "Very funny - Oh."

Loki wasn't smiling.

"You aren't joking, are you?" Tony asked "that was actually a proposition."

"Yes" Loki said "would you care to see what happens when I take offence?"

"Loki" Thor began in a stern voice

Loki rolled his eyes and sighed "Very well" he looked at the Avengers "You can rest assured I have no desire to deceive you. I promised my brother I will give you my support and I shall. The rest I leave up to you."

He turned and left once again. Half an hour later, he was assured of their wavering loyalty.

***

Loki looked up from the metal he was examining when the doors to the lab opened.

He smirked at his brother "Greetings of the morn, Thor. What brings you here at this early hour?"

Thor, dressed in his soft night clothes, ran a hand through his hair and scratched his untidy head "Where is it, brother?"

It took Loki barely a second to understand him. Then he grinned mischievously.

"What are you talking about?"

"Loki, please" Thor grumbled "he dragged me out of bed to tell me to get it from you. Just hand it
"over."
Loki chuckled "I can't"

"Why not?" Thor nearly whined

"Because only he can find it, not you not anyone else" Loki went back to the metal, raising a magnifying glass to his eye.

"Then tell me where you hid it" Thor walked over and crashing down on a bench

"Oh that I absolutely can't do" Loki looked at him, his expression dead serious "I made it so it would vanish if I ever revealed its location."

Thor groaned "Loki...The shield is his weapon, he is very upset"

Loki's face became a mask of surprise, his hand going to his chest to complete the image "Oh dear, what have I done?"

Thor gave him a dry glare and stood "Brother, must you be so - oh never mind"

Loki chuckled as Thor left, shaking his head. Had Thor only looked where he sat, he wouldn't have needed to ask Loki anything.

Captain America's shield glittered under Thor's bench, vanishing as Loki waved his hand only to appear in the place the Captain was least likely to look. He forgot about it for a moment and focused his attentions back on the jagged piece of metal in his hands.

It was caught in the Hulk's shoulder after the Avengers came back from a fight. The large creature didn't even notice it, but Bruce did. He was rushed to the infirmary and treated by the doctors there. They were about to throw it away before Tony expressed his desire to study it. According to him, the metal hybrid Chitauri had been far too difficult to destroy.

He had taken it, ignoring Loki's request to see it and gone straight to the lab to observe it. After a few hours, he'd exited grim faced and told everyone it was a metal that rivaled the Captain's shield. It had no name, so Tony had named it after the Captain. He had immediately started to work on a way to destroy the Roger's metal and found himself unsuccessful. That didn't make him quit, though. He worked for thirty seven hours straight till he finally collapsed an hour ago. He had been taken to rest by the others and they had locked the lab behind them, at Tony's request. He wished to be the only one to test the Rogers.

Luckily, he didn't own the lab so Loki found it remarkably easy to make his way to the room and locate the Rogers. He had taken Captain America's shield as a distraction so no one other than Thor knew what he was doing and the older man had been half unconscious as he lumbered in, unlikely to notice what Loki was doing.

Now, Loki released a few sparks, mild in nature, to the Rogers. It reflected them easily.

He gave it slightly more power, increasing his spell every time. By the eighth time, managed to dent it and smirked.

He now had a base which he would set as his instigation point.

He placed a fire spell on it, then a spell that separated the molecular build of an object - or person. He increased it and pushed the metal apart before taking out a small sliver and pulling it back
together. This piece took to a microscope and studied carefully, noting many metals similar to the Captain's shield.

He snapped his fingers, still hunched over the telescope, and conjured the shield. It levitated beside his shoulder for a second before being soundlessly blown to atoms. Loki brought forth a few atoms and put them under the microscope this time.

He was right. The metals were almost the same in their molecular build.

That meant Stark's comment about the shield being indestructible was proved false - at least under Loki's magic.

Loki straightened and put the shield back together before vanishing it again. The Roger's was once again taken for his study.

Loki had destroyed it for about the hundredth time when he was disturbed.

No one could sneak up on Loki, not unless he allowed it, and this time was no different. As soon as he heard her steps, Loki stopped his magic and pretended to be studying one of Stark's suits. The metal had gone back to where Loki found it.

Sif opened the doors and walked in.

Loki hadn't seen much of her in the days past and now, as she emerged in elegant Midgardian clothes, he recalled how her attitude had changed towards him.

No longer was she hostile towards him, but nice pleasant and even defended him against the Avengers on more than one occasion. Though it surprised him, he said nothing about it and chose to see where this new sudden loyalty would lead.

"Lady Sif" Loki said, bowing a little in greeting.

She took in his waist coat, his black button up shirt and black trousers before bowing "My Prince"

"What brings you to seek my company this early in the morn?" Loki asked politely.

"It is three past noon, Loki" Sif said, walking over "you have been missing for a long time, my lord"

Her white sleeveless tank and black trousers complemented her, Loki realized belatedly.

He scoffed "No one really cares, my lady, so ease your mind."

Sif shrugged and sat on a chair not far from where Loki stood. She crossed her leg over her knee.

"Oh they care, my prince" she smirked "you have been greatly mentioned up above by the man of iron and his patriot friend. In fact, they used your name alongside rather colorful Midgardian profanities this morning."

"Ah" Loki smiled "they merely missed my company because they wished to thrash me."

"Among other things" Sif chuckled "What does 'fuck' mean?"

Loki laughed at that "I have no intention of speaking such language in front of a lady and am scandalized they did."

"Well, no one really sees me as a lady here" Sif said "apart from you and Thor and my own friends,
no one calls me that. I have heard words like chick and broad. Do I appear wide or poultry like?"

Loki laughed again "No, my lady you misunderstand. They are just crude words to describe a woman on this planet. Rather inane if you ask me."

Sif nodded "Crude words to describe women, how original."

He smiled then, realizing he was actually enjoying himself, with Sif of all people. There had to be a catch.

"Why are you really here, Sif?"

She looked up at him "As I said, you were missed above."

"Like I said," Loki replied pleasantly "no one misses me. Unless you are here to refute that fact. Are you saying you missed me?"

She gave no reply, no denial or acceptance, and that surprised Loki. She kept her gaze elsewhere, a clear sign that something was really bothering her.

"Sif?" Loki prompted.

"I-" she broke off, looking at the floor "I wished to ask you something, but I find myself unable to form words that are-appropriate."

For a second, panic flashed within him.

Had Thor told Sif what he went through? Did she know? Was that why she was here, to confirm the fact that he was an... that he had been...? Then again, the King hadn't been quiet about it, maybe - no. Thor was the only one there when he said it, no one else...

Loki was going to kill him.

Sif's sigh broke into his thought. The sound was far too personal. No, she hadn't come to talk about him, he relaxed. She had something else on her mind.

"Can I count on you to keep your silence?" she asked.

Loki's brows raised in surprise "That depends, what have you come to talk to me about?"

"Just..." she sighed again "I wish to know something. It's been bothering me for a long time and I need to know."

"Why ask me?" Loki said "I could lie"

"Because the only other person who knows the answer to my question is Thor and I don't want to ask him" Sif said, agitated "and you won't lie about this. You may be mischievous but I doubt you are a sadist... to a great degree."

Loki didn't speak, leaning back against a sturdy shelf to watch Sif pull at the hem of her shirt.

That complimented her figure immensely.

He blinked at that thought and pushed it out of his mind.

"Has..." Sif began and broke off. She shifted nervously on her chair, licked her lips, tugged at her
shirt and finally looked at him "Who..." she sighed again.

"You wish to know if Thor and Jane's association picked up again while we were here."

Loki's words weren't a statement.

She looked at his face "You read my mind, Prince." She accused softly.

"I didn't need to" Loki pushed himself off the shelf and pulled a chair out. He placed it across Sif's and sat in it "Your face is extraordinarily expressive"

"Oh" she said and sat back, lowering her gaze to the floor. She didn't notice Loki's avoidance of her accusation.

Loki didn't say anything, just kept his arms crossed across his chest and watched her.

She looked up after a long while "Well? Do you have an answer to my question? Did Thor and Jane become lovers while you were here?"

Loki looked at her for a second, then lowered his gaze.

Sif had her answer. She swallowed heavily "Oh"

She was trying to control her emotions; get a grip over herself. She had spent all her life being a warrior, proving others wrong and pushing forward in life, braving the worst and charging head on into battles that she forgot the simplest of things.

She was a woman, with a woman's delicate heart.

She leaned back in her chair, pulling her arms around her protectively "Oh"

"My lady," Loki said softly "I am terribly sorry"

"For what?" she looked at him with shining eyes, fingers over her mouth while the other arm still cradled her waist "you didn't do anything."

"I shouldn't have told you" Loki said, biting his lip

"Why not?" Sif nearly snapped "you would have me live like a fool?"

A few tears drops fell and she wiped at them angrily.

Loki sighed, raising a hand to place on her knee but held back "You are not a fool, Sif. You are a warrior, and a great one at that."

She scoffed "A warrior doesn't hold a Prince's heart"

Loki rolled his eyes "Nonsense. I remember a certain elf prince that fell for a certain warrior maiden. I remember how he followed her around for three days before finally daring to confess his love"

Sif watched him with an angry and defiant look about her crying face.

He smirked "I also remember said warrior maiden taking offence at the declaration and landing the elf face first in a pile of horse dung"

She laughed wetly at that, wiping more renegade tears away "He was stupid. He asked me to be his
mistress but nothing more because his mother wouldn't allow it."

"And you showed him you deserved more" Loki smiled "as is the truth."

She watched him for a while before sniffing a few tears away "Why are you being so kind to me? I have not shown you kindness"

Loki shrugged, not knowing why he was doing this either "I do not like seeing a hurt woman cry."

She smiled sadly then looked down again, her tears returning.

"Sif" Loki, taken in by the sudden urge to comfort her, leaned forward and tipped her head up with a hand under her chin "you have every right to be angry at Thor for what he did. And me, if that makes you feel better, but do not be angry at yourself. You are a fine warrior and a maiden worthy of a king. Don't let another's stupidity make to think otherwise"

She looked at him for a long while before seemingly making up her mind. She closed the short distance between them with a kiss.

Loki gave a muffled grunt but didn't pull back.

Somewhere in his mind, he had known this was how this meeting was going to end the second Sif walked in.

She broke off the kiss, looking into his eyes, searching for something "I am so sorry, my prince. I shouldn't have ... I mean you were so understanding and I-"

Loki placed two fingers over her lips "I may be understanding, but I am not an idiot"

He leaned further and kissed her again, this time groaning when her arms went about his shoulders. He deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue into her mouth and she moaned softly.

Sif had shut off all her thinking power and lived only in this moment. She tried pulling Loki closer then gave a small start when his hands came about her waist and pulled her into his lap where he held her firmly as he kissed her.

They pulled up to breathe, resting their foreheads together.

"My room is at the other end of the hall" she gasped as Loki nibbled along her throat "with a lot of company in the way."

"I don't care where this happens" Loki said, biting down on her ear and exacting a soft moan from her.

She smiled and looked down at him "Very well"

He kissed her and a hand reached up to undo her hair, latching onto it firmly as he continued his assault on her mouth.

There was no regret as she kissed him back.

***

Loki had been demanding to the point of it nearly making her cry.

He had taken her with more force that she had ever been taken, making her cry out his name so
loudly she was surprised no one had heard her. He had pleased her immensely and possessed her only when she was shaking and begging, pulling his hair in a command for release.

Then she had fallen asleep, cradled to his side with her head on his rapidly moving chest.

When she awoke, she was in her room, beneath her blankets. There was an imprint where he had lain beside her but nothing more other than the memory she couldn't bring herself to regret.

***

Thor was confused.

Both Sif and Loki had been avoiding him. They had begun spending time together recently and it had delighted him at first because they were finally getting along.

However, three days had passed since he had seen either of them for more than a moment and it was bothering him.

He wished to spend time with Loki and gain all the ground he had lost.

He wanted to be with Sif because, frankly, he missed her.

With these thoughts, he went on a quest to look for them.

***

"I hexed Jane" Loki said "I erased all memories she had of Thor because I found her highly irritating."

Sif laughed, her head on his chest as she listened to him talk. His voice was a rumble beneath her ear and she was acutely aware of his hand tracing patterns over her bare back. They were in her room now, behind locked doors, and embracing in her bed.

"I liked her at first" she confessed "I thought her brave when I met her. Then she came off as rather stupid because she had fallen for a man she met only three days ago. No one really does something like that"

"You elf did" he said to her

Sif chuckled "Yes and look where that got him."

Loki smiled and involuntarily craned his neck to kiss her head. He had one arm behind his head and slowly ran his fingers over his nape as he lay there.

"I also cut off her hair"

Sif giggled at that "I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, having received the end of that particular spell"

Loki's chest rumbled in low laughter "Yes, how insensitive of me. Although" he plucked a strand of her hair "you look stunning with dark hair rather than blonde. No other Asgardian had this color."

"You do" she said softly

He smiled "As I said, no Asgardian has this color. I am not of Asgard, lest you forget."

She levered herself on an elbow and looked at his face "You were born and raised in Asgard. That
makes you one of us"

Loki raised his brows "My, what a change in your thinking of me, my Lady"

She blushed "I had been cruel to you, Loki, but that was before I ...

"Discovered my prowess in bed?" Loki suggested

She lightly smacked his chest "Before I got to know you. You may have done bad things, but that
doesn't make you a bad person."

He didn't reply to that, opting to pull his hand behind her neck and kiss her mouth. This was easier,
anyway for both of them because they both avoided thinking about their impulsive actions and lived
only in the moment.

There was a knock on her door.

"Sif? Are you there?" Thor called

Sif nearly panicked, almost leaping off Loki. She covered herself with a blanket.

"Oh dear!"

Loki grabbed her arm "Calm down. Just tell him you were bathing and need a few minutes"

"What will happen in a few minutes?"

"You'll see" with that, he got out of bed and began to dress.

"Just a moment, Thor" Sif called, reaching for her Midgardian attire "I was bathing"

Thor chuckled "Excellent. I shall join you then"

Loki gave the door a scandalized look as Sif blushed. He pulled on his trousers and straightened,
looking for his shirt

"I'm done, I'm afraid" she said nervously, throwing Loki his shirt "I shall be along in a minute."

"I shall wait" Thor called.

Now dressed, Loki looked around for damning evidence. His clothes were slightly rumpled but other
than that, nothing else.

He waved a hand and the bed was perfectly made. Then his magic focused on his own clothes. They
turned to their pristine condition again.

Sif chose another outfit and placed it on the bed. She looked up as Loki approached.

He grasped her shoulders and straightened her.

"Don't kiss him"

He kissed her full on the mouth to enforce his words. He pulled back then vanished from her sight.

Sif hurriedly pulled on her new clothes, threw the others unceremoniously in the small bath she had
and looked at herself in the mirror.
There was a red mark on her neck which Loki had given her. Muttering, she pulled her collar higher and placed her hair over it before opening the door.

She found Thor, already talking pleasantly with Loki. As she watched, Loki deftly hid her mark with a perfectly conjured illusion.

***

A few days later, the Chitauri attacked again.

This time, they were focused on Thor and it ended up in a mad game that involved everyone trying to pull them off the now mortal god.

***

Then the King led an army of his own Chitauri, dressed in the Rogers and pouring through a portal he had made using her magic.

He laughed at their attempts to fight him and tried using magic to capture them.

Loki had stopped him with a countering spell.

The King vanished a second later.

***

He attacked again, this time with giant Chitauri monsters coming from his portal.

It took the Avengers and warriors twelve hours of fighting to get rid of them.

The King vanished again.

***

The King tried escaping New York.

The army and Loki's magic drew him back.

***

The Other found their HQ.

The Hulk scared him off.

***

Chitauri spies tried kidnapping Natasha.

She killed all three in an hour.

***

Clint was injured in battle.

Loki healed him and set him off again.

***
Thor was almost taken again.

Not one of the Chitauri survived Loki's wrath.

The Avengers kept their distance from him then.

***

Loki used his magic to create a sword for Thor. He used dark magic, ancient spells that were forbidden to all but extremely powerful. It took him a day, but he finally created a weapon that would steal the essence of the one it impaled.

Nothing would survive this weapon, not even the gods themselves, which was the reason it was a forbidden spell.

Loki didn't answer Thor's question about where he acquired it and after a good threat, Thor stopped asking.

It granted him great power, however, making him a fearsome opponent to behold.

***

Thor's chance to use his new toy came soon, much to his delight.

The Avengers were relaxing for once, sprawled carelessly in the recreation room assigned to them in the SHEILD's HQ.

Steve and Thor were playing a game of chess while Natasha, Sif and Theoric tried their hands at poker. The assassin would have won seven times by now had she not felt mercy and given her two opponents far too many chances to regain their lost ground.

Bruce and Tony were examining Thor's new sword, hoping to make a duplicate. The Warrior's three and Clint were idly chatting, what they were discussing, was beyond everyone.

Sif and Loki were nowhere to be seen.

The alarms Tony had set blared suddenly, after being inactive for three whole days.

"I was beginning to miss this guy" Tony muttered, going to the small computer and tapping on the keys.

The alarm turned off.

"They are somewhere is Brooklyn" he revealed "and there is something really big going on underground. It's heading straight for Brooklyn."

"Coincidence?" Natasha asked sarcastically

Tony scoffed "Alright, ladies, we have five minutes"

Sif ran through the doors of the room "What happened?"

"Get dressed, sweetheart" Tony said as he walked out "we are going to kick some ass."

Sif frowned but turned back immediately. No one noticed her blush or her swollen lips.
When need be, Bruce drove like a maniac.

This was proved when they all had to grab the edges of their seats as Bruce hurtled down the streets like a mad man. They secretly envied Loki, who had long since teleported himself to Brooklyn and they could hear a fight going on in the background.

"How much longer, Bruce?" Iron Man's voice called in their comms "we need help over here!"

Tony, too, they envied.

"Give me five minutes" Bruce called, stepping on the gas again

"Oh God" Clint muttered, praying softly when he realized Bruce intended to make a twenty minute journey in five minutes.

"Not enough"

Clint, and he was sure everyone else, had never been so glad to hear Loki's taunting voice.

A second later, their vehicle vanished from the streets to appear in the midst of a battle.

Bruce yelled and covered his face when the windshield exploded. An onslaught of lasers and Chitauri ammunition turned on them with the force of a storm.

Metal thunked loudly, as it hit their armored car and caused them to jump into action.

"You alright, Bruce?" Clint asked, loading his bow.

Bruce crawled over on his hands and knees, grabbing a gun "Just go!"

Bullets rained down on them, evidence of the fact that the Chitauri were looting New York for supplies.

As soon as they slid aside the door to their large vehicle, a grenade exploded beside them, sending their automobile flying, twirling them inside and throwing them around like a bunch of action figures.

Clint hit the wall, dazed and saw his vision blur far too much. He shook his head to clear it and found his team mates sprawled ungracefully around.

"Hey, you guys alright!?" Iron Man called

He received a chorus of groans dictating everyone was alive.

"Good" Iron Man called "now get out here, we need you!"

The sounds of a battle sounded outside and they rushed forward after their dizziness wore off.

Thor was the first to exit, swinging his blade like a maniac and slicing every enemy he encountered into two or even three pieces.

Hawkeye broke through a window of the over turned vehicle and climbed onto the top, shooting his arrows at every target Thor missed.
What the Archer left behind, Theoric tore with his thin twin blades, followed shortly by Fandral.

Volstagg attacked first with his bare hands, then with his weapons, crushing the hybrids after slicing through their metal after a few expertly placed strokes.

Sif and Sigyn made a lethal team, cutting through armour with Sigyn's soft magic and cleaving the bared flesh of the enemies with Sif's sword.

The Hulk blasted through the scene, running forward with a might that squashed the heads of enemies in one or two blows.

Captain America's shield preceded him as he clashed through the armor of the hybrid Chitauri, followed by bullets from the man's gun.

Natasha sliced, shot and attacked them with her bare hands when she could. After Loki gave them pointers, the Roger's sliced beneath her attacks.

Loki was using his spear, sending great orbs of magic at any enemy that breached his ten foot perimeter and blowing them to bits. Behind him, a Chitauri was blown to dust by a single spell as it tried attacking him.

As he stabbed the sharp end of his spear through the heart of another, Loki's gaze fell to a window in the building before him.

The Other was standing there, watching the battle.

The faint stirrings of fear in his gut were quickly over run by a blood boiling rage.

Though the ground rumbled under them, Loki ignored it and blasted the Chitauri creatures running for him with a powerful ripple of magic that sent them flying before charring into dust.

"Loki!"

Thor saw his brother run into a violently shaking building. He followed him with a small warning to the others.

"He is going to get himself killed!" Iron Man called, crashing through a higher floor window of the building.

The Hulk crushed two Chitauri together before leaping forth and following Loki, who was a good distance away.

The Warriors three disposed of their enemy and followed the green creature.

When they looked around, a few enemies stood before them. They stopped their pursuit to fight.

Black Widow pulled her dagger out of one of them and was straightening when she felt the shade of another over her.

There was a hiss and thud a second before the creature fell to the ground, an arrow in its eye.

She looked behind her to see Hawk Eye wink at her.

"Go after your friends!" Sif said, impaling another fiend on her blade "we have this under control."

They did.
Theorric attacked with a ferocity out reaching the Hulk as he sliced through, impaled and cut open one enemy after another. Sigyn and Sif blew apart and destroyed every Chitauri that came near them. The Warriors were a force to be reckoned with as they destroyed every enemy they saw.

In short, the broken street they stood in was a grave yard of the Chitauri and human hybrids.

The assassins nodded and followed their team mates, followed by Captain America.

They had barely reached the inside of the building when the ground fell from beneath their feet, landing them in a containment chamber fashioned of the same glass that held them before.

Natasha groaned and looked up.

Her jaw dropped when she saw Loki smiling at them from the other side, his Chitauri tormentor beside him.

* 

Loki sneered at his captives "Surprised?"

Thor gazed at his brother with a desire to murder. He roared in anger and ran forward to break the glass, only to be stopped by Loki's chilling laughter.

"I wouldn't do that that I were you" Loki drawled "the container is designed to self destruct if attacked from the inside."

"You sneaky son of a bitch" Iron Man rasped "I knew you would do this"

"Oh hush" Loki waved a hand, walking behind the Other. He leisurely stepped forward and stopped inches from the glass "Don't tell me you expected this, because you didn't. Not at the present, at least. You thought I had become a pliant, submissive do gooder like yourself."

"Loki," Thor growled "you will pay for this."

"Really?" Loki asked, unimpressed "how you do intend to do that, mortal?"

Thor narrowed his eyes, hand tightening on the sword her had "You have stepped over the line, Jotun. You have tricked me for the last time. Watch me as I make an oath to take this blade and run it through your cold heart."

Loki only blinked at that then smirked "Thank you for reminding me, brother."

The sword vanished from Thor's hand and appeared in Loki's.

Thor wasn't surprised.

Loki grinned at them, at their angry faces "What? Did you really expect me to turn from another payment to the Chitauri? I had no intention of facing their wrath again."

Thor sneered "They should be the least of your worries at the moment, Loki"

Loki rolled his eyes and turned back, stretching out his hands and offering the sword to the Other.

The Other smiled and looked at the god of mischief "You have done well. Consider our deal completed."
As he reached for the sword, Loki pulled it back "Make it official and I will give this to you"

The Other nodded "Clever little princess, you are"

Loki narrowed his eyes and took out the enchanted, binding scroll. He handed it to the Other.

The deal maker read through the scroll and smiled "It is real"

"Of course it is" Loki nearly snapped "I wouldn't get you a fake one, what would that get me?"

"This would have followed your soul to hell if you broke it" the Other said, smiling "a magical deal broken is a heavy price to pay for a spirit."

Loki exhaled forcibly "Get on with it"

The Other smirked and raised the scroll before him. It glowed softly as the enchantment and Loki's bound to it vanished, till he had fulfilled his deal of handing the Avengers over to the Other, and the scroll turned to a normal one.

The Other tore it in half and threw it at Loki's feet "There, you have completed the transaction and are now free of the bind."

Thor growled, thinking about testing Loki's claims about the containment exploding.

"Now give me the sword!" the Other lunged for Loki.

He stopped dead when the illusion vanished from his sight.

A second later, he gagged as the enchanted sword ripped through his middle, his heart speared at the end.

The Avengers jumped to attention when Loki impaled the creature on the sword and yanked it out ungently.

The Other collapsed, blood drooling from his mouth as he looked up at Loki "What have you done?"

Loki shrugged "Killed you—that is what this weapon does." He raised it, showing the hilt to the Other "Now I have your immortality." There was a small glow in one of the gems embedded in the hilt of the blade "To do with as I wish."

The Other coughed, glaring up at Loki and feeling his death come over "You will pay for this, Loki of Asgard - dearly."

Loki scoffed and put the tip of his blade at the Other's throat. He pushed it through with an angry force then yanked it out again, stepping back to avoid getting the blood of the dying Chitauri on his boots.

When he looked up, he saw the Avengers' mouth agape at they stared at him.

He chuckled "You can come out now, I lied about the container. It won't explode."

Immediately, the sound of glass breaking crashed through the room and Thor ran forward, stopping before his brother.

"Well?" Thor asked, smiling "what did you think?"
Loki chuckled lightly "I think if all else fails, you could become a good enough stage actor brother."

"Hold up" Iron Man walked up, making a T with his hands "you guys planned this?"

"Yes" Thor nodded, grinning

"All of it?" Iron Man asked again

"Well, Thor did manage to outreach himself" Loki said "but he got the gist right. Yes, we planned it all, Stark."

"How did you even know he- Fuck it" Iron Man turned away, walking off muttering something about how gods were getting on his nerves.

Loki looked at Thor, who was grinning "Go, assure your friends I mean no harm"

Thor's grin widened a second before he ripped off Loki's helmet and ruffled his hair.

"Thor you idiot!" Loki stepped back, one hand pushing back his hair while the other held the sword tightly.

Loki snatched his helmet back and thrust the sword at Thor.

"Go on, get out"

Thor laughs, takes another jab at Loki, chuckling when his brother jumps back. He takes the sword, swinging it casually as he goes to the glass container, climbs on its top where the floor had fallen through and goes to aid his friends.

Loki shakes his head and dons his helmet.

He looks down at the body of the Other, lifeless and pale against the dark room. His lips thin and his brows furrow at the creature who tortured him so brutally.

No memories come, only the faint pain of something that had once been. He kicked him, giving in on the impulse and grimaced when the act only wet his boots with blood.

Loki was just about to teleport when the world exploded.

* 

The sounds, like the pain, had dulled now. He feels the coldness increase as he slips into it, softly grasping his arms and pulling him. Somewhere, he could still hear the world though the sounds was like the rustle of a single leaf on a strangely silent day.

Dying during a battle is the greatest honor an Asgardian could get, leading straight to Valhalla. It was what he dreamed off as a child. Any soul killed in battle would go straight to the Elder gods and join their ranks forever.

As he lay there, his memories started to run behind his closed lids, going backwards.

First he sees the most recent; walking out and finding hundreds on those monsters waiting for him, his friends long since subdued. He had realized, belatedly, that these were not hybrids, but actual Chitauri.

That was all he remembered before once of them threw something at his feet, it touched his ankle
and, before he could even look, exploded.

Then he saw his brother and himself playing with his mother's potions. They were only children, hardly older than ten.

He saw his father scolding them after getting into a fight.

He saw Sif.

"Jesus Christ!"

"I found him!"

He heard dull screaming now, pure terror in every voice that crossed his dulled hearing.

Oh, how they would sing of him in Asgard, how he would be among the greatest dead. He had longed for this since he realized his love for battle.

Only now he didn't want to die.

He wished to spend time at home, live there, be with his friends, make amends.

"Don't worry, we got you, Thor. Try and wake up, buddy"

He wanted to, wanted to scream at them to save him but all he did was feel it as a lightness began to envelop him, taking away the last of the pain and leaving him numb. He was going now, so soft and smooth was the release he had never thought.

There was no pain, no fear, utter relaxation as he simply drifted away, floating higher, higher...

Something snaps his spine together and his pain returns with an avenging agony.

His eyes fly open, mouth parted on a choked scream.

The sight of his brother's agonized face stuns him. Loki's face is twisted in concentration and Thor felt as though his own lightning has coursed through him, so harsh was the pain.

Their eyes meet and Thor saw Loki's emerald gaze brimming with tears.

"No one kills you but me" Loki rasps at him, closing his eyes a second later to concentrate harder.

Thor arches suddenly when the pain comes far too suddenly and screams.

"Is he okay?"

As he lays back, he sees his friends looking over Loki's shoulder. His broken chest heaves as he breathes, leaking more warm fluid from within him.

Loki doesn't give Tony a reply, instead going back to fixing Thor's broken body. The light catches on his helmet, gleaming till Thor has to turn his head away.

When he opens his eyes, they widen in horror as he sees the sight behind his friends and brother.

There, scattered all over the streets of New York city covered with soot and most of them ripped asunder, lay the Chitauri army.

They were charred and burnt and Thor felt something twist within him when he realized that his
brother was responsible for the massacre.

Loki had done this.

The thought was ripped from his mind when Loki increased the spell and more pain flashed through his system. He burned.

He didn't remember when he started screaming, but he knew it stopped when the darkness took him again, leaving his brother to work his tapered fingers over him.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Something unexpected and highly dreaded finally happens

When he woke, he felt nothing.

Thor was numb all over and his body hummed strangely whenever he moved - or tried to. He shivered involuntarily and groaned as a fresh wave of fatigue washed over him.

He lay back against the pillows and waited for the dizziness to pass.

He thought about his brother and what Loki had done to bring him back from - well, the dead.

He is in his sleep clothes now, warm and soft, and as he waits, a hand over his eyes, his other roves over his gut.

Thor stills as his hand rests on the place where he had been blown open. He pressed down to make sure he still had the internal organs that he'd seen flying everywhere are the explosive went off.

He felt the bulges under his muscles and wondered if Loki had given him new ones or repaired the old ones.

Would they still be there if he went back?

The dizziness was gone now and Thor pushed off his covers to leave the empty room in search of his friends and brother.

He walked down the hall barefoot and the first person he encounters is Tony.

Tony is in the recreation room, perched on a chair as he writes something on paper. Seeing him without a computer is like seeing a bird without wings - it's painful.

"Stark!"

Tony jumped at the booming voice, dropping his pen.

"Sparky!" Tony stood and walked over "You feelin' alright?"

"My insides feel numb" Thor said, walking to sit on Tony's vacated seat "and I am hungry. Other than that, I am fine, my friend."

"Good" Tony said, sitting across from him "Because you scared the crap out of us"

Thor didn't really understand his words, but he got the gist. He lowered his head "Forgive me, Stark for I did not mean to take away your crap."

Tony chuckled and bowed his head grinning "Yeah, I missed you"

Thor reached over and placed a hand on Tony's shoulder "I missed you too, you are a good friend."
Tony waved a hand "Ah, you flatter me big guy."

"No" Thor said, giving his shoulder a squeeze "there are few who have the bravery, loyalty and determination you have. I am honored to be in your company."

Tony looked at him for a while "You're not gonna kiss me, are you?"

Thor laughed and released him "No, my friend, but I wish to ask you where everyone else is. Perhaps on a mission?"

Tony scoffed "As if ..."

At Thor's confused look, he explained "The Chitauri are not fighting us the way they did ... not after what Loki did, now way. Hell, I don't blame them. We go in twos and barely encounter anything; it's been a long time since any of us got even a whiff of anything Chitauri."

"What did my brother do?" Thor asked, though the question worried him.

Tony exhaled loudly and paled slightly "Man, I have never seen anyone do that. It was ... terrifying."

Thor waited for him.

"He just - " Tony ran a hand through his hair "ran through the smoke like a mad man, shouting your name. When he didn't see you a second later, he went ballistic!" he blew out some air to calm himself "it was like watching a nuclear bomb go off in slow motion - I can't explain it."

Thor sighed and stood, "Thank you, I shall search for him now"

"Check the kitchen" Tony said, rubbing a hand over his face.

He wasn't really showing it, but Tony was scared badly. Thor could see it, in his lone state, in his eyes, in his words; Thor could see how effectively his brother's actions had frightened the man of iron.

He left him to recover as he made his way to the kitchen. He heard voices, loud and laughing, even from here and quickened his pace.

They were all there, minus his brother, and as soon as they saw him, they ran forward.

"You're awake, Thank god!"

"Stars, we thought you were dead!"

"You should have seen where you stepped, my prince"

"How are you feeling?"

Their words jumbled together and Thor raised his hands to calm them down.

"Friends!" he laughed as they clapped him on the back, hugged him and embraced him "I am fare well. Only slightly hungry but as you can see I am in one piece"

Fandral rolled his eyes "Quite a scare you gave us there, mate. We thought you were done for."

Thor nodded "I am aware of that, but I think it unfair to leave all blame with me."
"And why not?" Sif asked "you are a warrior, with a warrior's instinct and should have jumped the moment they threw that explosive at you."

Thor smirked but before he could reply, he looked around and saw Loki wasn't around.

"Where is my brother?" he asked.

"He was ... " Fandral looked around and broke off "he was here a moment ago."

"Thor, the Chitauri are terrified" Theoric said "they refuse to leave their lair so we hunt them down like the animals they are."

Thor looked at his friend "Yes, Stark told me as much - what happened?"

They all looked at each other and motioned him to sit; he would need it.

When Loki had discovered what had happened, he had gone batshit insane as Clint phrased it, and run towards them like a bat of out of hell.

When he'd realized what the Chitauri had done, he had unleashed a fury so devastating that it left the creatures running. They didn't get far before Loki's magic had stripped them from their bones with enough deliberation to leave them screaming in horror.

The Avengers didn't dare approach him after that.

They just simply let him heal Thor - no, bring him back to life, because Thor had died.

Thor swallowed audibly at this. Although he knew he had passed, gone straight to the path of Valhalla, felt his life leave his body, it chilled him to hear someone say it.

"Then we came back here and had nothing to do, really, than wait" Bruce finished, shrugging.

Thor nodded soberly then turned to Sigyn "What spell did he use?"

"I do not know, my prince" she said with a small smile "they have already asked me and I gave them the same answer. It was a dark curse, one forbidden to everyone in the Nine Realms. It is extremely powerful and only a handful of sorcerers have accomplished it."

"So it is known, then?" Thor asked

She shook her head "I said a handful accomplished it, that doesn't mean they survived it like Loki did. I already shudder at the raw power of the curse."

Thor looked away then, no because he didn't know what to say or that Sigyn's words had scared him, but because the door suddenly opened and Loki walked in.

"Brother!" Thor leapt to his feet, sprinting towards Loki "I was searching for - "

Thor broke off as Loki's fist collided with his face so forcefully that he spun around and fell flat on his face.

Thor's friends ran forward, but an invisible force suddenly yanked them all back, spinning them around and out of the room a second before the doors closed and locked firmly.

He turned to look at his brother, his face a mask of surprise "Loki, what .. ?"
"You are a bigger fool than I thought you to be" Loki rasped. His voice was chillingly calm, reminding Thor of Jotunheim "Did you really think you could stand against them, so weak in your mortal form, and they wouldn't do you harm?"

Thor stood slowly.

"You could have been more cautious!" Loki snapped, eyes slit "you could have run back ... could have called for me. They knew you were weak and they attacked you. They will keep attacking you like they have been"

"Loki ..."

"Silence!" Loki said loudly "you don't have the right to speak after what you put me through!"

Thor blinked and went quiet.

Loki sighed, calming himself.

"Give me your hand" Loki said, extending his own

Thor hesitated for a mere second before stretching his hand out, palm open.

Loki placed the gem from his sword into his palm. Thor looked at him in confusion.

Loki sighed "The Other's immortality. Crush the stone and it will be yours."

***

Simmons sent them a message a day later.

He had an army, a new one, created under his knife and genius and the watchful eye of the King. Giving life to the dead monsters and stitching together the broken ones hand proved considerably easy after the King applied his magic. He wanted revenge for the death of his second in command and he wanted it quickly. All other things would wait, all he wanted was revenge. Simmons had assured them that their plan, this time, was flawless and nothing Tony or Loki did would stop them. It would be better if they surrendered.

"What an arrogant ass" Tony said, crumpling the paper the message was scrawled on "what makes him think we will surrender?"

"Well, he did create an almost indestructible metal" Steve said "he does have reason to be arrogant."

Tony rolled his eyes "Let him come"

He did.

Simmons led the Chitauri this time.

He knew the streets well and coordinated his attacks with great strategy. Volstagg had already been injured twice and Loki was far too busy fending off the attacks of the army to turn his attention that way.

However, soon it became apparent that Simmons was losing and the Avengers pressed their advantage, taking the fight into the heart of Manhattan where the Chitauri were losing heavily.

Loki was alternating between healing spells aimed at his 'partners' and fighting spells to destroy the
enemies. He watched the immortal Thor every now and then, just to see if he had managed his sword as well as Loki thought he would.

He had and now the Chitauri ran from Thor.

Loki smirked at his brother.

***

*Present*

Idly, Loki wondered why he hadn't questioned the King's absence tonight.

He felt fear trickle up his spine, making him marvel at the King's strategy. It wouldn't have been an easy thing, releasing his child and Loki knew exactly why the ruler had taken the risk.

As the Avengers scurried away, the Warriors Three and Theoric were saved behind Sif's protective shield as Jormungandr struck them.

He roared, throwing his head back and Loki used the moment to search for Thor.

His brother was with the Avengers, his eyes focused on his - well, nephew.

"What the hell kind of a kid is that, Loki!!" Iron Man's voice yelled in his ear.

"A product of a rather passionate night" Loki answered, running over to seek shelter behind a half broken wall.

Jormungandr looked around, his green eyes searching for something, someone to eat. And Loki knew who he was looking for.

"Thor" Loki called in his comm. "remain out of sight. My son comes for you."

"What?" Thor was understandably angered "you would have me sit out the battle?"

"Do you see those fangs?" Loki asked him casually, wincing when Jormungandr slammed head first through a building, his tongue flicking out "they will rip your godhood from you in a second and I don't have any to spare."

"I cannot let ... "

"Stay where you are!" Loki nearly yelled "or I will make you."

Thor growled but remained still, going further into the shadows.

"Okay, let's end this" Iron Man called a second before rising to the skies like a star. He soared high, gaining the serpent's attention. Jormungandr shrieked and followed the tiny man, his crest held low as he attacked.

Loki gasped when Iron Man swiftly turned and blasted his child with his lasers. Jormungandr howled in pain, writhing as the lasers burned him.

"Don't harm him!" Loki commanded, running from his place. He conjured a stunning spell in his hand and let it fly, hitting his child on the back of the head.

"Are you serious?" Clint asked, firing blasting arrows at the monster "What do you want us to do,
"babysit it?"

"Leave this to me" Loki muttered, making sure Jormungandr had his eyes on him "Make sure my brother doesn't do anything stupid and search for the King"

"Hey" Tony asked "who died and made you -"

"Now, Stark!" Loki barked, levitating himself off the ground and gliding to where his son was slithering.

He saw Iron Man fly to the ground, rounding everyone up as Loki caught Jormungandr's full attention.

The snake looked at Loki for a second, a sense of familiarity sparking in his eyes.

"I don't believe this" Natasha muttered as the giant serpent cocked its head as Loki hovered a few feet from its giant head.

The snake had suddenly become calm, docile, even, as Loki slowly raised a hand floated closer.

Only to see Jormungandr life his crest and expose a thick circular device, a little larger than Loki's hand, firmly planted at his nape.

He saw a movement on the building behind his son and spots two figures, one larger than the other and holding something like a remote in his hands.

Simmons grinned at Loki and pushed a button before the god could even comprehend what was going on.

A second later, Jormungandr lunged.

***

"No!"

Thor screamed when he saw the serpent strike his brother as he hovered in mid air, sending him spiraling downwards in a fall that seemed never ending.

Spinning Mjolnir, Thor flew forward, reaching Loki just as he was about to crash on the harsh Manhattan street.

Loki falls straight into Thor's stretched arms as he positioned himself under his brother.

Thor looked down, fear etched in his face, searching for blood, for broken bones, to see the extent of Loki's injury.

Instead, he finds Loki grinning "Scared you."

Thor gaped at him. His timing for jests was impeccable "You -"

"Oh stop spluttering and put me down, Thor" Loki snapped.

Thor obeyed and placed his brother on the street as he landed.

Loki stood, a little shaken from his drop and patted Thor's shoulder heavily "The King and Simmons are on the third building left from here. They will not be there for long. Leave my child to me."
"Got it!"
"Already there!"

The Avengers and warriors sounded in their ears, already moving to where Loki directed them.

But Thor didn't move.

Loki raised a brow at him "Do I need to give you a special invitation, brother?"

"Are you truly alright?" Thor asked, aware of the heavy hand Loki still had on his shoulder.

"Yes, I am" Loki said, pulling back "now go and bring that Chitauri bastard to me. And Thor? There is a device on Jormungandr that makes him this way. It is behind his head. Please take care of it."

Thor still looked unconvinced, but nodded.

Thor squeezed Loki's shoulder and lifted Mjolnir "Call for me if you need me. I shall be here in a second"

"Go, I shall be along" Loki said, stretching a hand for his staff that lay somewhere in the broken street.

Thor shot off into the skies and Loki's staff never came.

As soon as he was assured of his isolation, Loki reached down and touched his middle, feeling the spell drop.

His hand glistened with thick red blood as he removed it.

His son's fangs had tore right through him, giving him no chance of escape or healing. He simply held his balance and looked for a comfortable space to rest for a few moments.

Loki walked over to sit on a sidewalk and looked up at the skies where a battle raged without him.

***

Loki was right.

The King and Simmons were there, fighting wildly against the Avengers. The Warriors Three had tried capturing the mad scientist but he used Jormungandr against them, making the snake strike with so much force he broke most of the buildings they stood on or leapt to in an attempt to save themselves.

Sif landed on the harsh concrete after such an attack. She had barely time to look back when the serpent lunged again.

"Duck!"

Sif bowed her head when Iron Man's lasers scorched the front of the snake's head, sending him reeling back.

"Whoa, nice shot!" Clint's voice sounded.

Jormungandr shook his mighty head and focused on Iron Man.
"Uh oh"

Iron Man made a mad flight out of the crowded buildings, with Jormungandr at his tail.

He felt his jaws snap inches from his feet.

"Would someone stop him!?” Iron Man yelped when Jormungandr snapped at him again. He flew harder

"Coming, my friend"

Thor followed them as the pair began to reach to city's outskirts, where the army was stationed.

"Thor, I have an idea, buddy” Iron Man sounded "lead him to the bridges, the army will..."

"No, Stark” Thor said "I promised my brother no harm would come to his child. Let me handle this"

"Are you sure?” Iron Man asked "because this is a really big snake and -"

"Do you wish to test my brother's wrath, man of iron?"

"See ya"

Thor saw Jormungandr falter when Iron Man flew high, straight up and out of his reach. He stopped, confused as the sudden turn of events and looked around, tongue flicking out.

Thor paused in mid air, hovering behind the serpent. Sure enough, he spotted the device Loki mentioned.

Keeping in mind Loki’s warning, Thor didn't approach the animal and began to conjure lightning from the skies.

"Whoa, guys Thor's pissed"

"We caught Simmons" Captain America said "the King is heading South, probably going into the tunnels"

"Be careful guys" the Black Widow said "this guy is dangerous"

Lightning flashed in the skies, crashing down on the two places Thor concentrated on.

The first headed south, already searching for the target.

The second bolt shot through Jormungandar, making the animal scream in agony and making the device on his neck explode. Immediately, Thor stopped and winced.

Jormungandar let loose an ear piercing screech that echoed off into the distance. His eyes closed and his body went limp.

The huge serpent relaxed as consciousness left him and fell in a single earth shaking fall. The windows of the buildings next to the animal blew out with the force of the fall and the ground shook.

"What the hell was that?" Clint asked

Somewhere, the Hulk hollered.

"Bruce found him"
"He's stunned but - oh shit! He's getting up!"

The rain was illuminated by Iron Man's lasers and explosions.

"Fire!"

More explosions.

Hawkeye scored a hit, Thor could tell by his whoop.

Thor, having made sure Jormungandr was alive, flew to the skies and made for the place the fight was taking place.

The King was wrestling with the Hulk, matching the creature in strength as they each tried pulling the other down in a primitive match.

The Avengers shot at the King, extracting blood and making him weak.

The Warriors Three were slashing and creating large gashes in the King's hide.

Thor didn't see Sif or Sigyn or Theoric anywhere. He didn't see Loki, either.

He placed a hand on the device in his ear to ask when an explosion sounded.

Thor watched in horror as the Avengers and his friends were thrown around like they weighed nothing and a blinding light erupted after, forcing him to close his eyes.

When he opened them, the King was gone and his friends were gingerly standing up.

He landed next to them, going to Stark, who was the closest.

"Are you..?"

"Where the hell did he go!?!" Tony lifted the mask and shouted. His eyes roved the scene. The King wasn't there.

There was scurrying behind him and Thor turned to see Theoric drag Simmons along. The scientist was half mad, grinning at them through the blood and gore on his face.

Tony took one look at him and advanced on him, metal hand raised.

"Tony, stop!"

Steve arrives just in time to halt Tony's mad rage.

"We need him"

"For what?!" Tony rasped "he is the reason this is happening! He did all of this and now ...!"

"Now we will not bow down and become one of them!" Steve said, relieved when Clint and Fandral walk over to help "He will tell us everything we need to know."

It took a few minutes, but Tony calmed down enough to relax.

"Thor"

Thor, who was watching the exchange, turned. Sif jogged up behind him, suddenly the center of
everyone's attention.

Her eyes were shining with tears and she looked like she was about to cry again.

Thor felt his stomach drop.

***

The world was small now, barely making sense. He heard sounds every now and then, he heard someone sobbing beside him but he didn't have the energy to move.

He felt his blood bubble from inside him to travel beneath him where he felt it cool. He swallowed and opened his mouth slightly, to help him breath.

Sigyn looked at her former husband's form, trying her best to heal him and coming up short every time. She was crying, tears falling freely down her face as another spell failed.

The Midgard Serpent was not feared by the gods without reason.

Loki made a soft gagging noise and looked on the skies.

It was beginning to rain.

Sigyn brushed his hair back "Do not worry, we shall fix you."

Her other hand held his wrist, checking his pulse. It was weak.

Footsteps gained her attention. She turned to see all the warriors sprinting towards them.

Thor was in the lead, his face a mask of terror as he ran closer.

"No" Thor gasped as he saw the limp form of his brother on the sidewalk "no!"

Mjolnir and his sword fell to the street with a dull thud as Thor fell on his knees beside his brother

"No, no no no" he kept muttering it, his tearing eyes not believing what he saw.

Sigyn ran to Theoric, her face crumpling as she cried.

Thor looked down at his brother, pain coursing through his heart "Brother?"

Loki’s eyes flickered as he heard the soft plea.

Thor crawled forward, bracing himself over Loki.

"Oh Stars ..." Thor held back a soft sob, biting his lips

Loki’s blood had wet his soft raven hair and formed a halo around his head. The god of mischief focused on Thor.

"Thor?"

Thor's felt his tears threatening to fall "Loki, please ..."

"I feel so weak" Loki's parted lips barely moved in the whisper

Thor let out a chocked sob "Brother, can't you heal?"
Loki swallowed painfully and opened his mouth again "Jormungandr's poison is far too strong ... Nothing rivals ... it. I believe ... it's better this way"

"No!" Thor said loudly, tracing a hand through Loki's hair, uncaring if his blood dyed his fingers "No, it's not brother, stay with me!"

Bruce arrived next to him, holding Loki's wrist "We need to move him quickly. Thor, you have to lift him and carry him back"

Thor nodded and moved to do as he was asked.

"Don't" Loki croaked.

Thor froze, eyes filling with tears as he looked down at his brother "Loki, let me help you. They will fix you"

"No" Loki swallowed painfully, the sound hollow in the dark "You ... you have to stop him ..." he gulped "kill him ... for me, brother"

"No, I am not leaving you, Loki" Thor sobbed, leaning over Loki "you are my brother and I - "

"Thor" Loki rasped "I warned you ... about sentiment .... nothing good comes from it ...."

Behind him, Thor heard another sob.

The Avengers were behind him, helpless in their grief as they watched.

"Stop ..." Loki croaked again "him."

Thor looked down at him, at his eyes that had lost their shine "Loki, please ..."

"Hush" Loki raised a bloodied hand and stroked Thor's cheek "my brother"

Thor turned his face into Loki's palm and closed his eyes, letting the tears fall.

There was a small sigh.

Thor's eyes flew open when he felt Loki's hand go limp. It fell on the ground beside him.

"No" Thor looked at his brother's face.

His features were calm and relaxed and his eyes were blank, staring unseen at the skies above.

"No!" Thor pulled back "Loki!"

He put a hand on Loki's shoulder and shook him gently.

"Come back, Loki!" Thor sobbed "Come back!"

Behind him Sif was wracked with heavy sobs and Fandral held her close, rubbing a hand over his damp eyes.

"Loki no!" Thor reached down and gently picked his brother's limp form up "No ..."

He hugged Loki to his chest, crying like a child.

"NO!"
Tony looked away, unable to take it.

Steve cried silently and Bruce had a hand over his bent face beside Thor. Natasha was looking at the ground, biting her lip. Sif was crying openly, as was Sigyn. The Warriors Three were silent, their gaze on the ground.

Even Clint wiped at his eyes.

Thor's heart breaking scream had been their undoing.

Thor sobbed uncontrollably as he held his brother's body, burying his face in Loki's cold neck.

"Please ... please ....please" Thor kept muttering in between his tears.

The rain fell softly around them, trailing away Loki's blood.

***

"Thor?"

He felt a hand over his shoulder. He looked up as he sat with his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them. He'd been sobbing in his arms again and his face was wet.

Tony was crouched beside him. He had a hand on his shoulder

"Thor, we need to go"

Thor felt his lips quiver and turned his head to where Loki was.

A few feet beside him, his brother was now covered in Thor's cape; a sign of respect for a fallen comrade.

"I just received a notification about the King's whereabouts" Tony said "He's heading towards the docks and I think he might have something like a plan B up his sleeve."

Thor looked at Tony then, swallowing "What?"

"There is a military warehouse there" Tony said "he isn't that far off, thanks to your lightning bolt but we can---"

"The King - " Thor suddenly said, realizing something "he's immortal"

"Yes, that's why I ... "

"My sword" Thor surged to his feet "Where is it?"

Theoric pointed to the general direction behind him. Thor lurched to his feet, wiped the last of the tears away and ran to his weapons.

"Let no one touch him" Thor commanded as he bent down to lift his sword and hammer "Theoric, you and the warriors are to remain here. If there is any danger, fight it off. Understand?"

"Yes," Theoric nodded.

The warriors stood beside him.

"Stark" Thor walked over "I am going to need your assistance"
"For what?" Tony asked a little warily.

"Keep Simmons alive till I get back"

***

The door to the door opened with a small whine.

Dr. Simmons glanced up to see Tony Stark walk in.

Simmons laughed "I was wondering when they were going to send you in."

Tony didn't reply.

Simmons remained in the bed he was chained to, unmoving as Tony advanced on him.

"I am only going to ask you this once" Tony said "What is the King planning?"

Simmons grinned at him but remained silent.

Tony slapped him. Not hard, just enough to irritate.

Simmons grunted at the sharp pain.

"Sorry, just checking to see if you were real" Tony shrugged

"You imbecile!" Simmons said "you will pay for this!"

Tony chuckled "Oh, I don't think so. See, you have managed to piss off a lot of people in these past months - all of them someone you wouldn't want to anger. Especially Bruce, no you wouldn't like him when he's angry."

Simmons rolled his eyes.

"Don't believe me?" Tony asked "Okay, I shall list them for you. First, there is Clint. Hawkeye, you can call him; a trained assassin bound to kill you with his bare hands if not an acid tipped arrow. Natasha will probably torture you first, seeing as how she likes it. Then there is the Cap, you know him, shiny shield, tights and spandex?"

Simmons scoffed "Are you trying to intimidate me? Because it is not working."

"Oh no" Tony clarified "I am not trying to scare you, please. I mean if I wanted to do that, I would have talked about the immortal Asgardians, trained to killing, warriors that have faced creatures you can't even imagine or I would mention the charming sorceress they have. You know, pretty, blonde, just my type? Anyway, she can make you explode then pull you back together and do it all over again and increase the pain every time, but you don't wanna hear that"

Simmons unconsciously leaned back when Tony loomed over him "You want to hear about the man who's brother you killed."

"I didn't ... "

"Oh yes, you did" Tony cut in "and did I say man? I meant god. The god of thunder, to be exact. The god of thunder who singlehandedly managed a giant snake all of his own choice. He isn't happy that you did what you did and I'm pretty damned sure that if I let him in like he wants to" Tony leaned forward "there won't be enough of you left to fill a shot glass."
Simmons gulped

"You killed Loki, Simmons" Tony said gravely "and Thor is out for blood, your blood. I won't be able to keep you safe forever and he is bound to get you. So I ask you to answer my question and I will tell him you co operated like the sane little man you are"

Simmons watched Tony, trying to decide if the man was bluffing or not.

***

"Head to the warehouse numbered 75" Tony's voice called "Simmons created a nuclear bomb that is set to go off in an hour."

"Roger that"

Natasha stepped on the gas of a stolen car, ignoring how silly Steve, Bruce and Clint looked stuffed in a mini.

She tore down the streets and her gaze lifted to the skies when Thor zoomed over them.

"This is going to be fun" Steve muttered "do we even have a plan?"

"We're Americans" Clint grinned at him "we don't plan!"

Steve rolled his eyes at the tiny car tore down the streets.

***

He was bleeding through the gashed those mortals placed on him but he wasn't healing himself. He needed to save his magic for something else entirely.

He maneuvered through the tunnels with extreme ease, having gone through this place for a while now.

His clawed feet made tiny clicking noises which increased with every step he took and he shook his head.

The wounds were making him lightheaded and that what he didn't need.

He needed to get to the tunnel directly under the warehouse and get the plan into motion. With Simmons gone, his army gone and his second in command gone, he needed to do everything himself.

He growled now, low in his throat.

That damned god had ruined everything. He should have killed him when he had the chance.

He refused to think about what happened, about how his army had been destroyed by a divinity not worthy of his station, how his plans had been foiled and how he was no longer feared, but opposed.

He growled.

Loki was going to pay for this. He was going to bring that no good piece of filth back to life and make him suffer all over again.

The King hummed when he reached his destination and started climbing up the iron rods meant to be
stairs. Soon, he would be pushing aside the drainage cover above his head and emerge into the warehouse where Simmons' weapon awaited him.

He was limping now, thanks to the humans and his own refusal to use his magic still, so the climb on the metal rods was slightly more difficult than it should have been.

The King finally reached the end of the climb and pushed open the circular drain lid with one hand. He was hauled out by his wrist and thrown callously on the cement floor where he skidded painfully to a halt.

He looked up to see Thor standing before him, his face contorted in a mask of rage.

The King laughed "Well well, if it isn't the grieving prince. Tell me, has your mourning not ended yet?"

Thor listened as the King stood on his feet. His rage was reaching a new height now as the clouds above darkened impossibly.

"You have far graver things to worry about, King" Thor rasped, unhooking Mjolnir.

The King sneered and took a deadly stance "Very well, if that is your wish"

***

"Okay, guys?" Iron Man called through their speakers "I'm gonna need you to not let Thor kill the Chitauri leader"

"I'm sorry, what?" Hawkeye asked through the comm "Please tell me you are joking"

"Yeah" Iron Man replied "No, I'm not. Fury wants to keep him in a secure facility - something about the council's decision as well. I don't know."

"Tony, you know that guy is immortal, right?" Black Widow asked "it will not end well"

"That's the order" Iron Man said "I just relayed it"

Captain America sighed "There is no way in hell Thor will listen to us"

"I know" Iron Man said "Like I said, I just relayed the order"

Black Widow smirked and pushed the gas pedal down. The warehouse was near and they could already see Iron Man flying to a window.

***

Thor fell back, blood leaking from his lip as he suffered another attack from the King.

The Chitauri leader lowered his arms, grinning at Thor "Tired already, prince? That's a shame. I could use a little spar"

"Hardly a spar" Thor stood and hefted Mjolnir "when you protect yourself from that shield, coward!"

"Coward?" the King laughed "hardly. Consider this an act of self preservation."
"It is cowardice" Thor said "like it was cowardice that made you hide behind a mad man and an army and a snake. You are nothing more than frightened, hiding behind others far braver than you and making them do all your work."

"You brother never minded" the King sneered "in fact he and I got rather close. Has he not told you?"

Thor felt his blood begin to boil. He gave a wordless roar and lunged forward, slamming the head on Mjolnir right into the King's chest.

The creature was thrown back, going through the wall of the warehouse and into the rain. He fell into the mud and water, dazed.

When Thor flew through the hole he made, the King roared and blasted him with his magic.

Thor soared through the building again, going back into one wall, then the wall opposite and landed ungracefully in the harsh road.

The King stood, shook himself off his wounds and advanced on Thor, claws extended and twitching to ram into Thor's jaw.

Two lasers, immediate in succession, slammed into his sides.

The King turned his head just as Iron Man plummeted into his side, tackling him into and all the way through four buildings before stepping back and leaving him in a pile of cement.

"That was for Loki"

He was thrown back a second later with an explosion so massive it crumbled the building. Iron Man flew back and landed ten feet away, groaning as the concrete hit him.

"Tony, Tony are you alright?"

"Worried, sweetheart?" Iron Man asked "if it's not too much trouble, get your spandex ridden ass down here!"

Captian America sighed

Thor groaned as he felt a headache forming where his head had gone through the concrete and sat up, debris and cement dust falling off his shoulders.

Somewhere, he heard yelling.

Thor stood and stumbled a little, going to where a battle was taking place.

He arrived in time to see Captain America's shield slam into the King's head and bounce back, doing nothing other than getting the creature's attention.

"Oh no" Captain America said, jumping aside when a ball of green blaze headed his way, burning the spot he had been standing on.

Iron Man's lasers hit the king in the face, making his hurtle a spell at the floating man of iron.

Natasha's bullets hit him a second after that, followed by lean arrows that embedded themselves into to the flesh of the King.
The Chitauri leader roared, pulling out the offending arrows and spraying the ground with blood.

"Yuck" Clint muttered and loaded his bow again.

There was no sign of Bruce.

"Friends, where is Banner?"

"Thanks for coming, guys. Grateful that your saving me, my friends" Iron Man's voice mocked

"Tony ..."

"In the warehouse, trying to disarm the bomb"

"Which I should help with now that you're here"

Iron Man sailed off, leaving Thor and the others to fight.

"Ah!" the King wiped blood off his face "Finally, a challenge"

Barton's arrow hit him in the leg electrocuting him.

The King screamed in pain, then whirled around to Clint.

"Oh shit" Clint scrambled off the turned over car he was perched on as the King charged at him with a roar.

As Clint headed to safety, a loud thunderclap sounded a second before the King was hurled across the street like a toy. He crashed through a window and the farther wall.

Thor landed next to him, looking down

"So brave, suddenly" the King said "with all your friends beside you, I am certainly outnumbered."

"Guys, the bomb needs a fingerprint to turn off"

"Get Simmons"

"Not enough time" Tony said "this is going off in ten minutes"

"Oh fucking awesome"

"You know you can express emotions without cursing, Clint"

"Thanks, Cap"

Thor ignored them and reached down to lift the King up.

Only to feel his sharp talons bury themselves into his flesh.

Thor grunted in pain and his grip loosened on the King. The leader fell to his feet, laughing.

"Oh my" the King said "Seems like I hurt you"

Thor replied with a vicious swing of Mjolnir that propelled the King straight into the skies.

Then, with his anger burning inside, his grief turning to rage, Thor followed him.
The thunder was at his command and as soon as he reached the first scent of ozone, the lighting did what he asked.

The King screamed in pain as lightning coursed through his body, arching it as the electricity charged through him, burning him, tearing him apart from the inside out.

He felt his blood begin to thick and he felt his magic start to seep away. He made a desperate grasp for it, but the pain inside him was too much.

Then he felt something else. He saw it, too.

His arms, shocked to the limit began to melt off, making his screaming as loud at the thunder around him.

***

"Oh, shit"

They turned to Captain America when he cursed, but he was staring at the blinding white sky, watching in horror at what Thor was doing to the King.

"What is it with these brothers and gore?" Clint asked.

Up above, Thor increased the voltage, relishing in the screams he tore out of the King, feeling the life drain from him.

Then, only when he saw his legs and arms were nothing more than charred flesh, dangling in the wind and clouds, only then did Thor finally reach to his side and extract the sword Loki had made for him.

Without a second thought, he plunged it into the King's chest.

***

Valhalla was beautiful.

It had magic, books, horses and the seclusion he always dreamed of, the smells he always loved.

It was perfect and he wanted to enjoy it.

But as soon as he set one foot ahead of the other, something pulled him back.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

And does everything really fix itself?

Thor roared in anger, increasing the velocity and intensity of the lightning bolt that went through the King.

He saw bits of flesh start to fall around, he saw veins burn and he could smell the scent of charred meat. He could hear him, the sounds of gurgling and screaming. The king's organs had begun to melt as his blood had reached an impossible level of heat. Thor could feel the heat that radiated through the body, could sense the electricity that coursed through the King's system.

The monster screamed but Thor had no intention of making it an easy death.

He put more force behind the lightning and he could see parts of the creature melt off now, like rubber when placed in too much heat. Smoke was billowing from the King's nostrils and Thor could see vapor release from his melting mouth as he shrieked in pain. His tentacles were on fire now, under the blinding white light, slowly shortening till the disappeared into the King's scalp which promptly steamed off.

Then Thor slowly reached to his side and removed the sword, he wielded it like the grand weapon it was and plunged it into the King’s heart.

The result was staggering.

If Thor could be hit by lightning, this was it.

The King howled as the sword was sunk into his side and when it became a conductor for the electricity. His insides exploded within him and he went limp.

A second later, the sword glowed and a gem, placed where another had once been, glowed white. Thor yanked the blade out and stopped the lightning.

He remained hovering as the King's body dropped from the hundreds of feet where Thor had held it by force. The body hit the ground and the street shook.

After the smoke and debris faded, the rest of the Avengers dared to come forward.

They all had a shocked or horrified expression on their faces as they saw the repulsive body of the King.

Steve turned away with the threat of retching when the King's jaw suddenly broke open and slid to the ground.

Thor landed next to them and they took an involuntary step back.

Thor sighed heavily "Forgive me, my friends I shouldn't have subjected you to that. It was disrespectful"
"Oh no, actually it was -"

"Guys!" Tony's voice called "I can't shut this down."

"What do you need, son of Stark?" Thor asked

"Well, from the top of my mind, a hand" Tony said, he looked like he was getting up

"We need Simmons' hand print this thing won't accept anything else" Bruce called

"You know this our second adventure where we have a nuclear blast to avert"

"Focus, Tony!" Bruce scolded "we have to leave"

Thor moved then, swinging his sword in one hand as he advanced on the King's body. He prayed for luck and relaxed slightly when he saw the King's hand relatively secure.

He lifted his arm and ...

Steve did retch when Thor ruthlessly chopped off the hand of the King and took to the skies a second later to land near the warehouse where Tony was.

Tony looked up, startled when he saw Thor walk in, looking every bit the death omen people feared. His helmet gleamed in lightning as his entrance was only heightened by the thunder. The humming of the machine got louder and Bruce looked up from where he was still trying to stop the explosion.

"Where do we place the hand?" Thor asked, his voice booming over a thunderclap.

Tony just gulped and pointed behind him "There"

As Thor marched over, Bruce jumped aside and headed to where Tony stood torn between leaving and watching whatever the hell Thor was doing.

There was barely a minute left.

Thor approached the device and looked down. He had stayed long enough for him to know what a pad was and what had to be done with it.

He threw a prayer above and placed the King's broken hand on the pad, pressing it down.

The large pad glowed green.

"Aha!!" Tony cried in shock "Holy fuck!"

Bruce jumped first, running over when he realized that Thor's crazy scheme had worked.

He tapped a few keys, gave a few commands and focused all his attention on his task.

Tony was watching with wide eyes, ignoring the questions of the other Avengers.

Thunder still roared above them and lightning still blinded the sky.

Thor watched, taking a few steps back, ready to grab Tony and fly to the skies incase it didn't work.

Bruce tapped a few commands

And the humming stopped.
The lights emitted from the device seized and the lights around it began to dim.

The tension of the entire situation was broken by Tony's awkward, shrill laugh.

***

Theoric was nervously watching the scaly side of Jormungandr, who was still unconscious. The creature hadn't moved in the time Thor had gone and Theoric couldn't help but wonder when the snake would finally awaken & 150; and what would become of them when he did.

He looked over his shoulder to where his friends sat.

Sif and Sigyn were still grief stricken; Hogun was nursing a shoulder he had injured while helping Stark take Simmons back to their temporary home. Volstagg was playing with a few rocks as he sat on the sidewalk while Fandral was leaning against the wall next to ...

Theoric looked away, unable to gaze at the pale figure wrapped in Thor's cape.

Had anyone told him a few years ago that he would be severely mourning Loki Odinson, Theoric would have laughed himself till he couldn't breathe.

Loki had killed him. Then he had married his intended. Then he had left her. Then he brought him back to life and handed him Sigyn.

Theoric remembered the day clearly.

It was like had taken a deep breath of air after being submerged in water for a long time. He had twitched and squirmed when his life had been returned and his limbs took on their duties. They were stiff and it had been painful for him to move them. He gasped suddenly, sitting up and looking down at his arms and limbs that should have by all rights been turned into dust or rot.

A small gasp alerted him and he looked up.

Sigyn was standing a few feet to the side. She rushed over to him, wrapping him in her arms as she sobbed. She kept saying his name and crying for him but he barely listened.

His gaze was on Loki, his prince, his murderer as he watched the pair with crossed arms.

It wasn't his imagination, Theoric would argue till his dying breath, when Loki blinked a thin sheen of tears from his eyes and a sad expression settled on his face a second before he realized Theoric was watching him. His face became impassive and the tears vanished, making Theoric think it was a trick of the light.

Much later, he tried asking why Loki saved him but the man deemed it unworthy of a reply.

A day later, Theoric and Sigyn married.

He idly traced the thick scar across his throat.

Loki had attacked him in the middle of a mission. Theoric was an excellent warrior, but even he had missed it when Loki stalked him then snuck up on him.

By the time Theoric turned, Loki had already lashed out with his dagger and cut his jugular with one lethal stroke.

The last image he had then was of Loki's retreating boots and emerald cape.
He looked over his shoulder again, perched on a piece of broken statue some distance off, his green eyes going slowly to the cape covered form of his Crown Prince.

He desperately wished Thor to do something and bring Loki back.

A dull roar came from somewhere and Theoric immediately glanced at Jormunganddr.

The snake hadn't moved but a second later, Thor landed on the street with enough power to crack the road.

Theoric and the others immediately went to attention as Thor marched to Loki's prone form.

Thor fell on his knees beside his brother, his attention solely on his intention. Somewhere behind him, he heard the others approach but didn't even turn his head.

Slowly, he reached over and gently removed his cape from Loki.

His heart broke when he saw the pale face, eyes closed as if he was in slumber, and the unmoving, broken chest.

Thor swallowed audibly and brought forth his sword.

His friends watched with wide eyes as he pressed out a gem. It glowed white.

Thor's immortality.

Taking a deep breath, Thor picked up Loki's limp hand, ignoring the blood coating the cloth and palm, and placed the gem beneath Loki's fingers. He gently placed his tapered fingers on the gem one by one, covering it completely.

"Elder gods, help me"

Thor crushed the gem in Loki's hands.

***

Loki felt like he crashed back on hard earth with a vengeance.

He gasped loudly, breathing in air as if he hadn't done it in a long time. His green eyes were wide and scared and he could feel a strange vibrating in his chest.

He looked down at himself and saw that his ripped chest beginning to heal, he saw the blood around his wounds remain and he felt the torn flesh within him join together, fiber by fiber. It was a strange feeling, the sensation of movement inside him, and it reminded him of the time he bore Sleipnir.

Breathing heavily, Loki levered himself on his elbows and looked around.

He was alone.

The pavement where he had lain when his breath was far too painful was isolated apart from his own form.

Gingerly, like he was supporting far too many wounds, Loki pushed himself to sit up, wincing when the movement inside him increased, till it became a soothing sort of buzz.

Rain still fell on him and as he sat up, he noticed the red cape around his ankles.
Loki thought of his bother then, brave Thor crying like a child when he saw what a state Loki had been in.

Then again, Loki hadn't been dignified, either.

He heard a brush of movement to his left and he turned his head.

His brows shot up when he realized that the large scaly body was his own son and that the group of people huddled around a hunched form was his team.

Loki stood albeit a little shakily, till he reached his full height. He could already feel his magic returning to him, helping him by healing everything inside almost automatically.

No one knew he had risen, he thought, because they were comforting Thor who, by the looks of things, had used Mjolnir to spend his anger and sorrow on the buildings and the like.

Loki reached down and lifted Thor's cape, folding it neatly in his arms.

Theoric looked up then and Loki saw his jaw drop. He raised a finger to his lips, signaling for silence.

The man obeyed him and looked back down, though it took him a lot of effort to keep his face still.

Although he could used his magic, Loki chose to walk stealthily to the people.

He heard them as he approached.

"Why didn't it work?"

Thor's voice was a sob as his head was buried in his arms that rested on his knees. He was sitting on the sidewalk with Sif crouched before him, running her fingers through his hair.

The Avengers gave him small responses.

"I'm so sorry"

"I know this looks bad, but things will be alright ..."

Loki rolled his eyes as he came up behind them. Since he gave the best reactions, Loki went up right behind Tony and placed a hand on his shoulder heavily.

Tony gave an undignified yelp and spun around, his face going into shock.

He opened his mouth to say something and Loki snapped his fingers.

Instead of words, bubbles came from Tony's mouth, causing Loki to smile and the others to stay silent in their shock.

Loki still placed a finger over his lips and walked forward, cutting a path from the bubbling Tony to Thor.

He gently nudged Sif aside, ignoring her surprised gasp and crouched before the crying Thor.

"How could I ...?"

Loki shook his head. He reached over and touched Thor's shoulder gently, his throat suddenly
feeling tight with the emotion he'd held back this long.

"Thor?"

Thor looked up sharply.

Loki saw his red eyes, his flushed face and the tears shining on his cheeks. A second later, Thor's face went blank in shock.

"Loki?"

Loki smirked "Who did you .... oof!"

Loki was cut off when Thor just grabbed him and pulled him close, crushing him in a hug so strong Loki felt his back pop.

"Loki you're alive!" Thor whispered, his face buried in Loki's shoulder "my brother!"

Loki felt a thin sheen of tears cover his own eyes and closed them, his arms reached up and held Thor's shoulders tightly, nails digging into his clothes.

"Oh, my brother" Thor kept murmuring

Loki's eyes snapped open and he stared at the darkened sky. Thor was crushing him

"Thor" Loki croaked "Let me loose"

Thor held on tighter, buried his head deeper till Loki thought he would snap in two.

Loki tried pulling back but Thor wouldn't let him go.

"Group hug!" Clint called then, much to Loki's irritation

Then he felt the bodies of Thor's friends envelope him.

Tony let a few more bubbles escape his mouth and though he was frowning, walked in and hugged the brothers like everyone else did.

***

Forgive me, Father. I knew not what I was doing. My actions were not my own after that mortal placed the strange device on me

"It's alright" Loki said, reaching out to pet Jormungandr's head. His hand stroked just over his crest as Loki sat on his head.

Father and son were taking a pleasant stroll through the city before Jormungandr had to go back to the center of the world and the people of the city were let in.

"I am aware you had no control over your actions, my child" Loki stroked his son's head as they slithered through buildings and came upon the setting sun.

"Not so high" Loki gave him a gentle pat when Jormungandr raised his head to peak over a building "you don't want to give the army a scare would you?"

The serpent's tongue flickered out Actually ...
"No" Loki reprimanded, hitting him gently again.

Jormungandr moved the tip of his tail forward to nudge Loki, making him stumble forward.

"Idiot" Loki chuckled and pet his head again "my boy, I wish to ask you something, is that well?"

Ask me anything, Father

"How did they get to you?"

Jormungandr turned his head, heading back deeper into the city. He made a small noise in the back of his throat and Loki knew his child didn't wish to answer.

"Jor?"

Hearing his nick name made him stop.

Father ...

"Answer me, my child" Loki commanded softly.

He told me he possessed means to take me to see you

Loki closed his eyes in pain. When he opened them, they were shining in tears. His expression didn't change, but he could feel his heart break.

Father? Are you cross with me?

"No, my son" Loki said softly, refusing to let the tears fall "I am merely the one to anger myself."

Forgive me

"No, forgive me" Loki ran his knuckles over Jormungandr's head again "I have far too much blame in this"

But..

"Hush" Loki said, stroking his head again "let us take a final stroll of the city before you have to return."

I shall miss you greatly, Father

Loki bent down and kissed the top of his son's head "Not as much as I will, my child"

***

Thor woke when a strange sort of tension grabbed him.

He suddenly felt far too warm and he found his breathing was highly labored. He had to voluntarily take deep breaths because his lungs were being crushed.

He was on his stomach and felt that if he turned, it would help.

However, no sooner had he thought it when a pale hand suddenly fell to his side and his sleep dulled mind realized his problem.

Loki was sleeping on top of him, head firmly placed on Thor's skull as the rest of his lean body
blanketed the thunder god's like the way it had done so many years ago.

When they were children, Loki would lie on top of Thor for three reasons. The first, Thor had always been unnaturally warm and Loki had been stunningly cold. Whenever Loki needed warmth, rather than getting an extra blanket or fur, Loki would simply curl up next to or on top of Thor. The second reason was simpler; Loki knew it irritated Thor to no end and did it deliberately. The third and final reason was fright. When something scared Loki badly enough, he would seek out Thor's heat and use it to chase the fears away.

Loki hadn't done this in centuries and the fact that he was sprawled over him now didn't bode well. Thor hoped it was a childish way to irritate Thor but he knew his brother too well to think that such intimacies were impulsive.

Sighing, Thor simply raised his head, just enough to get some reprieve, before pulling his pillow from under his head and placing his head on the cooler mattress.

Loki shifted on top of him, resting his fallen hand over Thor's shoulders to use as a pillow.

Thor shook his head lightly and rolled his eyes before closing his lids and falling asleep again.

When he woke some hours later, Loki was sitting on the thick chair in the room, going through a book.

Thor groaned in sleep and turned to face him "Greetings of the morn, brother"

Loki looked up and Thor was surprised to see circles under his eyes "Happy morning, Thor"

"Do you fare well?" Thor asked, sitting up in bed "you seem a bit under the weather."

Loki sighed and ran a hand through his hair, confirming Thor's fear. Something had Loki scared.

"Can I ask you something?"

Thor blinked. Loki never asked permission - ever.

This was definitely bad.

"Anything" Thor said

"If you had the choice of dying by anyone's hand" Loki asked him "Who would you pick?"

Thor frowned at his brother's strange question "What?"

Loki waited in silence, his look telling Thor that he expected an answer for the question.

"Um..." Thor thought about it, though it was something he never expected to think about "I guess if I didn't have an option to live, I would pick either Mother or you." He winced "Father has always seemed a tad bit unmerciful if you ask me"

Loki didn't laugh at the quip. He didn't even reply. He just went back to his book, though Thor could tell he wasn't really reading because his eyes weren't moving.

"Loki" Thor waited till he looked up again "Why?"

Loki took a few moments "I wish to die by your hands. Not Mother, not Odin, not even my own. It was one of the reasons I made myself your enemy though my fight was with Odin."
Thor got out of bed and stood "Loki, what is this about?"

"We have both died in the past months" Loki said "and not by the hands of those we wish our end be by. You were killed by a monster and I by my own child. I find myself filled with revenge and a desire to hurt - desperately - but I lack an appropriate outlet to vent my anger on."

"Brother, you make so sense ..."

"I wish to kill" Loki said clearly "I want to murder something or someone and I am asking if you would let me kill to take this edge off me."

Thor gaped at him

"Or kill me because I can't stand this!"

"Loki!"

Thor moved forward and grabbed Loki, lifting him off the chair "Don't you ever say something like that again! You have no idea what happened to me when you fell! You had no ..."

"Why did you save me?" Loki asked, looking intimidating even as Thor carried him "Why didn't you let me die when you knew it was what I wished?"

"What?" Thor asked, dropping him.

Loki stumbled but gained his footing "Don't think I didn't know you heard me. Yes, Thor I wished to die. That was why I let go of the scepter, that was why I brought war on Midgard, that was why I aligned myself with the Chitauri King and that was why I..."

Loki broke off, crouching on the ground and putting his head in his hands.

Idly, Thor stumbled upon his need to urinate.

This was the worst time for something like this. Thor sighed and moved over to Loki.

"Brother, why don't you start at the beginning?" Thor took Loki's shoulders and made him turn. He sat down beside him and pulled them both so their backs were to the wall. Gently, he pulled an arm around Loki's shoulders.

"Talk"

And Loki talked.

He talked about how hurt he was throughout their lives when Odin rejected him without reason, he talked about how he hoped Odin's rejection was unjust and didn't have a good reason behind it, that he didn't have some sort of flaw that made Odin so angry at him. How ironic, he said, that he had had spent his whole life trying to live up to Odin's expectations and always found himself wanting, never knowing that Odin had a first-class reason to hate him. He told Thor about how he found out about his heritage then shushed him when Thor began to question him.

Why didn't Loki tell him? Why did he keep something like that to himself?

He was banished, Loki replied, and far too arrogant. Besides, Thor killed frost giants for sport...

Thor swore he wouldn't have done anything to Loki.
Loki talked about his fall and subsequent capture.

They made him do it, Loki said, he didn't want to fight on Midgard, they made him a villain.

He tried reasoning with them but they ...

Loki didn't finish and Thor didn't push him.

Then he talked about why he fought Thor. Loki was going to die - he was sure of it then - and needed to push Thor away. His only regret was not dying by Thor's hands.

It was important who killed you because if someone other than a loved one did, it was murder - otherwise, it's a release. Loki wanted release, from the memories from the scars, but Thor didn't give it to him.

Instead he captured him and took him home.

Then he began to hate him. He hated that Loki moved about freely - he hated Loki.

He should not even bother to deny it because Loki knew. He could sense it in every glare, in every movement of Thor's form.

For a while he wondered if Thor had changed into him. A grave thought, that.

Then out of the blue, Thor had asked Loki to join them on a quest.

He had been thrilled, but hadn't shown it. If Thor hated Loki, then Loki could reciprocate the feelings well enough.

Only, Loki didn't want to. He loved his brother and wished to be in his good graces again. It was why he accepted the quest to the dark forest even though Thor's threat could have easily been done away with.

The trip hadn't ended well.

Then Loki was Crown Prince and Thor hated him even more.

It had killed him, Loki said, the way Thor hated him. But since it was a weakness to show his true feelings and become vulnerable, Loki had embraced his new title.

Here, Loki felt tears prickle his eyes.

So much hate, he had seen in Thor. So much loathing. Loki didn't wish to be around him in Midgard though Thor's animosity had lowered after encountering Jane.

He rushed over this part when he sensed Thor's anger.

Then they had met Thor's friends and Loki soon came to find that the King still searched for him. Still wanted him and still held the deal that Loki had struck with him.

Thor tensed when Loki told him the deal stated Thor as payment to the King for his help. Loki had been desperate and agreed to everything the King said lest he displease him.

He already had a plan to fail, anyway.

But things didn't go as planned and the King wasn't killed. The Other remained too, Loki was
terrified.

He sighed now "Things were no complicated, all I wished for was death. I had tried four times already but I never got it right. Pathetic, really" Loki looked at his hands "a god that has fought so many finds himself a coward when he should do the one thing that made sense. But now that I think about it, I never wanted to kill myself. I wanted you to kill me. And that was how I would die or I would refuse to die at all. I know what you must think. Why would I crave so much for death? Because it seemed like the only way. Then everything would be over, I wouldn't have debts to pay or crimes to my name; I would simply cease to be." He sighed and played with the fingers of one hand with the other "Valhalla is lovely, just so you know. It has everything I could wish for and more .... however, when I finally did die, when I felt the last breath leave me, I couldn't think of anything but of going back. I wanted to do things differently, I wished for more time.

"There were so many things I wished to say to you when I lay there alone. So many apologies I had on my tongue ..." Loki sighed again, looking ahead "now I find myself without a way to say them. I shouldn't have blamed you for everything. It wasn't your doing. You were just an easier target than Odin because there was still a part of me that wanted him to ...nevermind."

"What, Loki?" Thor asked gently

Loki sighed "Wanted him to be my father again"

The words were whispered but Thor heard them and pulled Loki in a one armed hug "You will always be his son"

Loki shook his head "No"

Thor exhaled slowly "You are blind of you think that, brother. Father loves you, is your crowning not enough evidence of that?"

"He did it to protect me from the Elders" Loki said "that's all. He'll probably find a reason to give you the throne when we get back."

Thor scoffed "I don't think so. He seemed pretty disappointed in me the last time I saw him. He called me angry and bitter."

"Only because I made you that way" Loki replied

"No, because I made myself that way" Thor rubbed his eyes with one hand "Loki, I owe you the greatest apology, brother. I have not treated you right for a long time and I ..."

Thor balked when bubbles started to erupt from his mouth.

He shot up straight, hands going over to cover his mouth as he gazed at Loki with wide eyes.

He tried to speak but more fizz came out. He clamped a hand over his lips again, staring at Loki like a stunned animal.

Loki had to keep his grin at bay when he spoke.

"Do not apologize to me, Thor" Loki said calmly, as if his brother sprouting bubbles was nothing out of the ordinary "I find it unnecessary"

Thor glared at him
Loki smiled "I have said all I wanted to, brother, except for one thing."

Thor listened carefully, making sure not to make a sound because even a loud sigh made bubbles.

"I fear I will go down a path of destruction again" Loki said, chillingly calm "this restlessness over me is causing me to grow violent and I think I will find myself doing something you will regret."

Thor watched him for a long while.

This was what had Loki scared, he realized.

The younger man was terrified that he will fall again to the wrong path and damn himself in Thor's eyes again. No, Thor wasn't going to let that happen. He had an idea, after all.

Loki looked up when Thor waved his hands in front of his face, then pointed to his mouth.

Loki pretended to think about it then shook his head, no.

Thor's lips tightened and he blew a streak of bubbles at Loki. The younger man laughed as Thor stomped off to get a paper and pencil.

He placed them on the floor and bent over to write.

Loki leaned over and read over his shoulder.

"Take .... the restlessness ....off ....Thor that should have two F's ..." Loki chuckled "That only has one, you are correct but the K looks kind of crooked. Yes, that's better ... with a sparring battle ... Two R's in sparring, brother ...Oh, that's really mature, Thor ...Stop it!...Thor, stop drawing that!"

They wrestled together as Thor kept drawing Loki trapped under Thor's hammer.

***

"Okay, so whose idea was this, again?" Tony asked as they walked into the facilities gym.

Thor, not speaking for some reason, handed him a crumpled paper.

Tony took it from him, a new forced habit; taking paper, and read.

"Take the restlessness off fuck you, Loki with a sparring battle" he squinted his eyes "What is - is that supposed to be Loki?"

Loki chuckled as he entered, snatching the paper from Tony "This is Thor's suggestion for me to work off my bloodlust"

Tony pretended he wasn't too intimidated "So what? We gonna have a tournament again?"

"Well," Loki said "nothing so tame. It's just me and my brother. You were invited to watch"

"We've already seen you fight" Natasha said, walking over to sit on a bench

"No, my lady" Loki said as he removed his elegant black vest "you have seen us dispute. Our brawling is far more intense."

"Really?" Steve asked as he crossed the room to sit next to Natasha

"Yes" Fandral, looking very dashing in his Midgardian attire of a blue polo shirt and beige trousers,
walked up "they are actually banned from fighting in Asgard. They haven't done it in years for fear for destruction"

"That doesn't mean we didn't do it" Loki said, he waved his hands and a blue orb lifted itself from his palm. It flew a few feet above before spreading to encompass the ring with the two brothers inside. Then it went transparent.

Thor, who was still quiet, walked over to retrieve Mjolnir from the ground.

Their eyes widened.

"Don't tell me you intend to use that" Tony said, his tone incredulous.

"Yes, Thor give some reprieve to a lesser warrior like me" Loki said, noticing Stark turning red

Thor cocked his head and raised a brows, telling Loki how little his words affected him.

But he dropped Mjolnir, anyway.

"Staffs, then" Loki smiled.

Two staffs, one as tall as Loki and the other as tall as Thor, appeared between them and both fighters grabbed the one closest.

"What's going on here?"

Bruce walked in, looking at the brothers

"Loki was bored" Tony said "so this happened."

"Are we competing?" Bruce asked

"Nay, warrior" Volstagg said "this is between brothers"

The bell rung, thanks to Clint, and the match began.

Thor started with easy blows that landed harmlessly enough around Loki or against his back or shoulder when he didn't manage to dodge them. The ill aimed hits landed on the soft ring with little force, a sign that Thor wasn't really into the match as yet.

As a result, Loki was twice as vicious. Thor received a savage beating that made the Avengers stand to intervenue more than once but with Loki's shield around them, they didn't get very far. Loki smashed his staff where Thor was weakest his knees, his skull, the back of his neck and eventually, Loki dodged a badly aimed attack and slammed the end of his foot right into Thor's nose, breaking it with a loud crunch. He kicked him when Thor was down, sending him sprawling on his back. Then he walked over. Breaking Thor's hand when he stepped on it, he flicked Thor's staff away with his own and swung his weapon ferociously, aimed to collide with Thor's face.

He stopped a few inches away and looked down at Thor "This was a warning, Thor. Fight like that again and you will lose"

Loki traced his broken jaw with his staff "Do you yield, brother?"

Thor pushed him off with is good hand and shook his head.

Loki stepped back as Thor stood.
The Avengers were stunned for the moment, frozen in their states as they watched the brothers.

Apparently Thor had taken Loki’s warning and now fought his brother more seriously. By the next half hour, Loki was the proud owner of a broken jaw and a few ribs. He grimaced slightly when he moved but that was it.

Loki didn’t speak, he couldn't, because of his jaw, but he could sneer at Thor, nodding to give him his best.

Eventually, the battle became savage.

The blows that were easy at first were terrifying to the point where the Avengers didn't know if this was a spar or war.

Thor swung his staff down right at Loki, who had fallen on his back. Loki raised his staff in both hands to deflect the blow but Thor's weapon broke through his and landed brutally on his face.

There was a crunch as Loki’s nose broke and Thor stepped back to allow Loki to sit up, his hands over his injury.

He tried getting up, but Thor pushed him back down, slamming his staff into his chest till Loki had no more breath.

Thor cocked his head in askance, blood dripping down his face. Yield?

Loki smiled, then shook his head.

Thor raised the staff to hit him, ignoring the cries of the Avengers and brought it down. Loki grabbed it with his hands, crying out when his ribs protested, and kicked Thor in the shin.

Thor went down, Loki threw him over his back and crouched, facing him. His eyes went wide when Thor's foot suddenly shot out, catching him in the nose again.

Loki flew across the ring, hitting the shield and bouncing back then lay still on his back.

Jaw broken and unable to move, Loki let out a stifled moan at the pain. His hands were over his bleeding face and he was pretty sure his nose had gone in a few inches.

Thor was at his side in an instant, eyes wide and mouth agape. He looked down at his brother as Loki rolled on his sides, trying to dispel the pain.

Unable to speak, Thor gestured with his hands.

Slowly, Loki raised a hand off his face, letting the other remain, and lifted a finger to Thor.

Wait

Thor nodded and sat back, nursing a few injuries.

The Avengers were shocked.

"What the hell is going on?" Tony asked Fandral

"Sparring" Fandral shrugged his shoulders "that's how we do it in Asgard. Or rather how they do it. Relax, man of iron. This only gets harsher."
And it did.

The blows that they both dodged were hard enough to crack skulls. More than once, they heard the crack of bone but didn't know who or what broke.

By the second hour of the match, Loki's arm broke; it now bent two ways. Tony actually winced when Loki moved the dangling limb behind him, his broken face not showing any signs of pain.

Thor was worse. Under Loki's attacks, the man had a broken ankle that he still put his weight on, an arm that had a broken bone ripping the flesh and standing out over his bicep. His face was a bloody lump of meat, matting his hair over his skull and his nose was visibly broken.

How they still fought, no one knew.

Then Thor lunged without warning, running over the bloody tarp towards Loki, staff raised.

Loki waited for the right moment before ramming his own staff in Thor's face so hard he fell on his back. When he tried sitting up, he slammed it down on his hand, crushing the bones of his other hand before hitting him viciously on the head, extracting more blood.

"Jesus Christ!"

But Loki wasn't done. When Thor tried pushing him off, Loki rolled him back and planted a knee right in Thor's throat.

Loki raised his brows as Thor looked at him.

Breathing heavily, harsh pain shooting up his body, Thor finally nodded.

Loki let him up and the shield dropped from around them.

The Avengers ran up, now noticing that the ring was demolished and helped the two brothers. Once the shields were down, Loki fell to the ground, rolling to where his arm wasn't broken and groaning loudly.

"Holy shit!" Tony gaped as he rushed over, followed by Bruce and Steve "Do you get sexual thrills from this?"

Loki didn't smile like he wanted to - it hurt too much.

The Warriors Three and Clint lifted Thor off the bloody ring and carried him to the infirmary, Clint being the only one cussing.

Loki was helped by Bruce and Steve and both of them cussed like anything.

Loki swallowed his own blood as both brothers were carried away. He had to admit #150; Thor's plan was flawless.

***

"LOKI!!"

His door slammed open with more force than needed as Thor walked in "Brother! Get up!"

He walked over and pulled aside the curtains to Loki's windows - to the dark skies.
"Brother Jarvis, make the morn if you please!"

Jarvis sighed and did as he was asked.

Loki curled up into a ball as if the sunlight burned. He groaned and pulled the sheets over himself.

"Loki, come on!" Thor walked over and snatched the sheets from Loki, making him curl up even more with a loud groan.

"Brother" Thor jumped on the bed and shook him "I have much - "

He broke off when Loki's foot connected with his face, sending him flying across the room and slamming into the wall opposite.

Sir, I think it would be wise to leave him. He doesn't seem to want to get up

Thor merely laughed, leaping at the bed to land on top of Loki.

"Aargh! Thor! Get off!"

They wrestled, Loki refusing to open his eyes, and eventually Thor had him pinned.

"Brother, I know you are awake, just look at me"

"Why must you be so damn awake every morning!?" Loki asked him

"I wish to tell you something" Thor shifted, sitting on Loki's stomach and looking down at him.

"Get off me!"

"No" Thor crossed his arms over his chest and remained where he was.

Loki exhaled angrily and finally opened his eyes.

Thor smiled "Greetings of the morn, brother"

"Why are you so cheerful in the mornings?" Loki asked him "It's disgusting"

Thor reached down and ruffled Loki's hair, gaining an angry cry "Because mornings are beautiful!"

"They would be if you didn't jump on me like an animal!"

"I didn't jump on you at all, Loki" Thor said "I am sitting on you"

Loki sighed and lay back "What would it take to make you leave? A treat?"

"No"

Loki put his hands over his face "Thor, what do you want?"

"Nothing, I am surprisingly comfortable." Thor said "You are an excellent chair, brother"

Loki levered himself on his elbows and looked at Thor "You know what I mean. Why have you disturbed me at this ungodly hour?"

"It's eleven in the morning"
"It's before noon"

"Loki!" Thor nearly whined "do not be a spoilsport"

"Then tell me what the hell you want" Loki growled

"Site seeing" Thor said "Stark had invited us to go through his city of Malibu and see what it has to offer"

Loki sighed and fell back "First of all, it's Malibu, you idiot, and secondly, I have no interest in seeing a hot city."

"Loki, please!" Thor began to jump up and down on him

"Stop it!" Loki said loudly "if you get off, I shall go!"

Thor instantly jumped off him "Good. I shall see you in the living area in ten minutes"

With that he was gone and Loki fell back on his bed, groaning.

He made Thor and the others wait a full half hour before deeming them worthy of his presence.

"Finally!"

Fandral was dressed in proper tourist clothes, complete with large sunglasses that covered half his face.

After their war was over, some three weeks ago, Tony Stark had told them of his abode in Malibu and how comfortable it was should they decide to live there. The Asgardian warriors had gone back the day after the war, Sif had spent a secret night with Loki, but came back every now and then whenever they could. So far, it had been every week.

The Avengers had gone their separate ways, coming together on weekends to stay with Tony. He had the best alcohol after all.

Right now they were here, staring at Loki with irritation.

Loki climbed down to them and walked ahead "Come on, do not dawdle"

Clint nearly lunged at him at this point.

"Okay" Tony said as they reached his massive garage "Since there are so many of us, we need cars. More to the point, my cars." He sighed gravely "I didn't want to do this, but I have been given no choice. Though I wish to drive them all, I can't so I need drivers. Good ones."

"Why don't we just walk?" Theoric asked "it would be better that way"

"Do you really want to face a hoard of grateful fans?" Tony asked

Theoric was confused so Tony continued.

"Clint, you take the Jag" he tossed him the keys "Nat, you have the" he gulped "Audi. Please be gentle with my sweetheart"

Natasha rolled her eyes and caught the keys
"Bruce, you take the Hummer and most of the Asgardian clan with you" Tony threw him another set
"and please be careful."

Tony gave his babies a worried glance before he whimpered and slid into his sleek car.

"Who rides with you, Stark?" Loki asked as the others loaded up.

Thirteen people in four cars.

Tony winked at him before pushing his sunglasses up his nose. He revved his Porsche "Pepper"

He roared off, leaving the others to hurry. The sports cars were eventually filled.

Natasha sat with Steve while Clint waited alone in his vehicle.

Bruce was ushering the Asgardian warriors on one giant car and came upon a problem.

"Guys, we have no more space" Bruce closed the door.

There truly wasn't, He sat with Fandral, Sif, Hogun, Volstagg, Theoric and Sigyn.

"I have room for one" Clint offered, revving the engine.

"Wonderful!" Thor bounded over and jumped it the car, shaking it.

"What of me?" Loki asked as Bruce drove off, leaving with Natasha and Steve.

"We are doing to the south beach" Clint called as he accelerated "Teleport there"

Loki narrowed his eyes as Thor stole the last ride and vanished.

His gaze went from the exit ramp to something else and a smile slowly spread on his lips.

***

"Where's Loki?" Tony asked loudly as they stopped behind him.

"He's making his own way there" Clint called and winked at Tony.

Thor laughed "My brother has many tricks, this one is on him"

Behind them, Bruce honked the horn when Tony missed the green light. Spreading his hands in a way to say 'what the hell?'

"Sorry!" Tony called, waving his hand in apology.

They were in single file, with the lane beside them empty.

So it was no surprise that Loki appeared there.

"Oh shit ..." Clint cursed.

The heavy roar of an engine was soon followed by a smooth black Ferrari that pulled up right next to Tony.

It took Tony a full minute to realize ...
"My baby!" Tony's eyes were wide as Loki saluted him and stepped on the gas, sending the Ferrari roaring through the street.

Cars screeched, along with Tony's screams, as the black car dodged the cars with maniacal frenzy.

Loki rocketed away, leaving them trapped behind a red light and angry drivers.

Tony was gaping, his hands holding the steering wheel in a death grip as he stared ahead. He looked like he was going to cry.

Clint pressed down on the horn when the light turned green, forcing Tony out of his trance.

The other man quickly moved his car, following Loki's path.

"Will he decide to kill my brother?" Thor asked as Clint maneuvered them through the stalled traffic.

"Nah, I don't think so" Clint replied, looking in the rear view mirror to see the others following "but it helps to be prepared"

He stepped on the gas and overtook Tony, who squawked like a crow, and shot off to where Loki was probably headed.

His phone rang.

"Yello?" Clint asked cheerfully

"He's heading for the south beach" Tony said "let me get him"

"Uh" still driving, Clint looked over his shoulder as Tony "no, I think that is not a good idea"

Tony gave him the finger "That bastard stole my car"

Clint looked ahead, blocking when Tony tried overtaking him "He won't harm it"

"How can you be sure?" Tony moved to the left and Clint blocked him again "damn it, Barton!"

Clint chuckled "Relax, Stark he - Holy fuck!"

Clint dropped his phone as he slammed on the brakes, screeching the car to a halt.

Loki had stopped as a red light and Clint hadn't seen him.

Clint looked up to see Loki smile at him through his rear view mirror. Tony was yelling at him. Behind Tony, Natasha rolled her eyes and Steve massaged his temple.

There was a closing of a car door and Tony was striding across to Loki. Probably to pull him out of the car.

"Oh, come on Tony!" Clint made to run after, but Thor was there quicker.

He needn't have bothered. As soon as Tony reached the rear wheel of the car, Loki sped off, running a red light and scaring drivers again in his frenzied escape.

"Son of a bitch!" Tony growled but it had no venom in it.

***
Turned out Loki didn't have to worry about Tony's wrath.

After he picked up Pepper, Tony was in a surprisingly good mood. He was also an hour late. It didn't take a genius to figure out why he was so happy.

Still, Thor had to ask - and blush when Stark told him in no uncertain terms that he was 'Peppering'.

After that, their beach trip was somewhat laid back.

Loki refused to swim, much to the disappointment of the women, and Stark couldn't - or wouldn't. They remained under a gazebo already set ahead for Tony while everyone else enjoyed themselves.

Natasha and Pepper had taken Sigyn and Sif shopping for swim suits while Loki had been asleep and after their initial hesitation, they had gotten dressed in them.

And promptly had every man stare at them till - and even especially after - they went into the water.

Tony waved at Pepper when she surfaced and rolled his eyes when she was hauled off by Clint who spun around and threw her into the water. He didn't mind, neither did Pepper because she was laughing and chasing him around.

"So" Tony leaned over and lifted two bottles of beer from the cooler "mind if I ask you something, god of lies?"

Loki looked at him, taking the bottle from him with a raised brow "Sure. Whether I answer or not remains to be seen"

Tony took a long swig from his, watching Loki do the same and he noticed his gaze linger on Sif.

"How long have you and Sif been together?"

Loki immediately began to cough as the drink went down the wrong pipe.

Tony slapped him on the back helpfully till he recovered. He looked at Tony with watery eyes.

"I assume your mechanical children helped you discover our liaison?"

"Actually, no" Tony turned to face him "it was Natasha."

Loki's eyes widened.

"Yeah, everyone knows" Tony took another swig, enjoying this small triumph over Loki's composure "We actually have a pool going ... "

"Everyone knows?"

"Apart from Thor" Tony grinned at him "We thought it cruel to tell him. We are waiting to see when he discovers, though ... and more importantly what he will do."

Loki raised a brow at him "You assume my brother will harm me?"

Tony shook his head "No, not at all. I think the exact opposite will happen."

Loki looked at him for second before his expression cleared "Ah. You mean I shall hurt him"

"Not that it's any of my business, but yeah" Tony took another swig "look, if I can find out, chances
are he will, too. Or one of his friends will tell him. Either way, it's gonna hurt him more that it will if you tell him."

"You're right" Loki leaned back in his chair and took a long swallow of his bottles contents "That is none of your business"

Tony rolled his eyes and lay back on his lounger "Whatever, pal. I was just helping. I don't want an episode of the Bold and the Beautiful going on here"

"The what?" Loki asked him

"Bold and the Beautiful?" Tony asked "Oh come on!"

Half an hour later, Thor walked up and saw both his brother and Tony talking intently about something. He overheard them as he walked up.

"So Brooke slept with her own daughter's fiancé?" Loki asked, his expression one of acute disgust "Tramp"

"That's what I said!" Tony said "and that's not all"

Thor groaned and turned around. He had heard Pepper and Natasha talking about the same thing a week ago and he still had to get over the complicated story.

***

They had a race coming back. Tony instigated it, Loki ended it.

The man of iron lost to his own Ferrari and Loki was a thousand dollars richer.

***

The next morning, Loki trudged up to the kitchen and found Thor already there. Last night, the warriors had gone back and Loki had not gotten a chance to give Sif a proper farewell. For some reason, it didn't bother him.

He had been exhausted after yesterday's adventure, where Stark had taken them everywhere it seemed. After a lunch at the beach, he took them shopping, then to a bar where the mortals got into a game with the Asgardians and lost, then he had taken them to the docks where a carnival stood and Loki won Sif a stuffed horse, evening they had spent in a club and dinner at a restaurant after which they danced with something called celebrities till five in the morning.

Loki, who had always hated useless carousing, dancing and feasting, had been exhausted mentally - but not enough to beat Stark at a race to his home.

So were the others for they headed on home instead of accompanying them to Stark's.

Now, Loki made his way to the refrigerator and extracted milk and bananas. He picked up a Corn Flakes box and sat next to Thor and his empty plate.

"Greetings and salutations” Loki droned, his bananas peeling and cutting themselves into his bowl. The corn Flakes and milk followed soon after.

Thor grinned at him, albeit lazily, and ruffled his hair. He laughed at Loki's angry growl and glare.

"Greetings in the morn, brother” Thor chuckled
Loki hissed at him, causing him to laugh once more. He began on his self-made breakfast.

"Brother" Thor said after Loki had eaten half of his breakfast "I wish a boon off you"

Loki looked at him, spoon pausing halfway to his mouth "And that would be?"

"I ..."

"Good morning, Vietnam!!"

Both brothers turned sharply to see Clint arrive, hands raised high and obviously still under the effect of drink.

"Barton" Loki said and took another bite of breakfast

"Loki!" Clint grinned, arms spread as he approached.

Thor snorted in laughter as Clint just walked up and hugged Loki, holding him tightly from behind and choking him.

"Did you miss me?" Clint cooed, looking at Loki's face and rubbing their cheeks together "Did you? Did you?"

"Have you lost your mind!?" Loki snapped, trying to get free

"Yes you did," Clint cooed, hugging him closer, his voice sickeningly sweet "Yes you did! Oh my sweet baby yes you did!"

Clint turned his head and kissed Loki lingeringly on the cheek "Mmmmuah!"

"Gah!" Loki pushed him off, slapping him when he pinched his cheek "You retard!"

Clint grinned at him, laughing. Then his face went blank.

"Alright, pay up"

Thor and Loki watched, stunned, as the other Avengers groaned and walked over, handing slips of money to Clint.

Loki's eyes narrowed when they laughed, Steve going red in the face as he attempted to control his mirth.

"That's one, two, three and....six hundred" Clint counted his money. He extracted a hundred dollar bill.

"One for you for being my lovely baby" he extended it to Loki.

The bill instantly caught fire.

"Ah!" Clint yelled, dropping it "What the hell, man? That was a hundred dollars"

"I wouldn't be worried about money, right now" Loki said as he stood and took the remainder of his breakfast elsewhere.

Clint raised a brow "What did he ...?"

Natasha gasped, a hand going over her mouth "Oh my God, Clint!"
Clint spun around to her and saw her glancing south. He followed her line of vision and...

"Mother!" Clint screamed.

The Avengers were sprawled on the ground, laughing hysterically when they saw Clint's crotch glowing a blinding white through his jeans.

Thor wiped tears from his eyes, attempted to control his mirth and failed.

"You ..." he gasped "You angered the ..." he dissolved into high-pitched cackles "Wrong god!"

Thor wheezed the last part, his arms around his middle as he bent over laughing.

"This isn't funny!" Clint shouted, as he tried covering himself

But try as he might, the glow only got brighter till he reached the intensity of a bedside lamp.

It seemed the proper time for Pepper to walk in.

"Guys, what is ...?" she broke off into a loud gasp "Clint, you're ...."

"I know!" Clint hollered, running when she too, began to laugh.

Their laughter followed him all the way to the bathroom, where he needed no light because ... well, his thing was glowing.

***

"I am not doing the dishes!"

They groaned at Tony's announcement.

"Don't look at me, I did them last week" Bruce crossed his arms over his chest "plus I have laundry."

"I'll do the laundry if you do the dishes" Natasha offered. She was still vulnerable because she had skipped her last turn.

"Oh no" Steve said "you got out of it last time, now it's your turn"

"I'll do it if Clint helps me" Natasha said

"No thank you, I prefer my solitude" Clint called from the couch.

His crotch was still illuminated and required two cushions to smother the beam that has reached the intensity of a car's headlight.

"His groin is still glowin'" Tony announced.

Loki snorted unwillingly as Thor guffawed.

Clint buried himself deeper into the couch "I hate you, Loki"

"Come on!" Natasha said "I hate doing the washing"

"We shall do it" Thor said, pulling an arm around Loki's shoulders.

"We will?" Loki asked, looking at him
"Yes" Thor said "if Lady Natasha gets the shopping"

"Done!" Tony, Bruce and Steve said together.

Natasha groaned and put her head back "Fine, but Clint comes with me"

"Like I said, no" Clint replied "I am not going anywhere while I'm ..."

"Turned on?" Bruce asked.

Tony choked on his drink, and bowed in chuckles.

Even Natasha snorted in an unladylike manner "Nice one, Bruce"

"Nat, this isn't helping" Clint said "and Tony? Go to hell"

The laughing didn't recede and eventually, Natasha took Steve to get groceries. It was around ten at night and they were pretty sure Natasha wanted to get something other than groceries as well.

Tony left with Pepper for something a late conference and Clint left to go home. His car was brightly lit as he drove off. Bruce went to the garage Tony had, looking for something to do.

So Thor and Loki started on the dishes.

Actually, since it was Thor's idea, Loki perched himself on the isle behind Thor and watched his brother do dishes, stacking them beside him after he dried them.

"So" Loki said as Thor handed him a clean dish and took a dirty one "what did you wish to ask of me?"

"That" Thor said, submerging the dish in water and scrubbing it "I merely had a favor to ask"

"I know, you already said enough" Loki took the dish Thor handed him and gave him a dirty one "do go on"

"Well" Thor washed the plate "it is in two parts and I think I find you will hesitate"

"Really?" Loki took the plate, then smiled when he saw Thor deep in thought "why don't you ask me and we shall see"

Loki handed Thor the dish he had just washed.

Thor took it and put it under the water "The first is a favor, the second a question"

He handed Loki the dish and waited for another.

Loki dried the same dish and gave it to Thor "Alright ..."

He didn't want to admit his nervousness.

Thor pushed the plate back under "My favor, brother, is that I wish to see Jane"

Loki blinked, taking the dish back. He wiped it and handed it back to Thor "Alright ...why?"

"There are some things I need to clarify with her" Thor began washing the dish again "a few details I must give"
"Ah" Loki took the fourth washed dish "I see"

Oh stars

Thor took the extremely clean dish, looking everywhere but at what he was doing "Things were unresolved and I wish to fix them, for my own self if not for her"

Loki took the dish and handed it back without drying it "Why, Thor? Surely she is better this way"

Thor scrubbed the plate again "Brother, I thought she loathed me. You do not know how that feels, when someone you loves despises you."

Too late, he realized what he's said.

Thor turned to Loki, scandalized "I'm sorry! I didn't mean -"

Loki raised a hand "Never mind. I understand what you mean. Put yourself at ease brother, I am not that delicate."

Checking his eyes to confirm he hadn't hurt him, Thor went back and took out the clean dish "I was angry at what you did, Loki. You had no right to erase her memory" he scrubbed "However, I understand why you did it"

Loki rolled his eyes "Pray tell me brother. Do not keep me in suspense"

"You were hurt," Thor gave him the plate "deeply. Because I had changed for a woman I knew for a moment while you tried to put me on the same path for centuries and I never listened. I'm sorry"

Loki blinked and remained silent.

When no reply or plate came, Thor prompted.

"Loki?"

Loki took a deep breath "Sorry. Um, what was the question, brother?"

Thor turned back, extending his hand behind him for the plate.

Loki licked the length of the plate before giving it to Thor. The god of thunder placed it in the water and washed it again.

"How long have you and Sif been together?"

Loki froze. He simply froze. Nothing moved within him other than his suddenly rapid heart.

He looked for an escape route, just in case.

"Loki?"

Loki swallowed heavily and licked his lips "Um - some weeks?"

"Loki"

"A month" Loki replied, looking down. His eyes snapped up when Thor moved a little.

Thor's eyes narrowed slightly "Did you - Are you afraid I will hit you?"
"Well I do deserve it" Loki muttered

Thor scoffed "That you do."

There was a long silence after which Thor went back to the dishes.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"That I betrayed you once again?" Loki asked, taking the impossibly clean dish from Thor and drying it slowly "Why do you think, brother?"

Thor turned and faced him again "You should have told me. I shouldn't have had to find out the way I did"

"Speaking of which, how did you?" Loki asked, still drying.

"I stumbled across you when you were both sleeping" Thor said "for the lord of Mischief, you are surprisingly inept in locking doors"

Loki lowered his gaze "Are you not angry?"

Thor shook his head "No. Hurt, yes. But not angry. I knew long before that this relationship was not going to last. Sif needs someone who has a future on his mind that extends beyond his next battle."

"And you do not?" Loki asked "Thor, you are one of the most adept planners I have seen. Did you not see a future with this girl?"

Thor shook his head again "Not her. There is someone, I do not know yet, but I shall find her and she will spend my life with me."

He turned and asked for a dish again.

Loki handed him the clean plate "Or it could be a he"

Thor barked in laughter as he scrubbed the dish "You should say that, brother when only this morning you were - why aren't these damned things ending?"

Thor lifted the dish and glared at it a second before the pieces fit into his mind "Loki!"

Loki laughed Thor finally got it. He yelped when Thor lunged at him, darting away with his brother at his heels.

Thor caught him and held him in a pin till he asked for mercy.

His victory was short lived, however, when one look from Loki told him it was merely out of pity that Thor got this small victory.

***

Loki took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

They were in L.A now, standing in front of an apartment that could rival Stark's penthouse.

"Do you have any qualms about me hitting a mortal?" Loki asked

Thor clicked his tongue in annoyance and glared at him "You have done enough, brother. leave this
"You can bring her memory back?" Loki asked, looking at Thor

Thor gave his a tired scowl "Just ring the bell"

Loki obeyed and waited.

There was movement inside and a few moments later, the door was opened.

Jane looked different. Her hair had long since grown and she now wore it in a ponytail on the top of her head.

"Hello" she said, looking at the tall, attractive men in front of her "may I help you?"

Loki rolled his eyes and waved a hand.

A small orb released from his finger tips and hit Jane gently in the face.

Jane blinked and frowned, confused "What did you ...?"

Thor moved forward when she looked as if she was going to fall, but she held herself against the door.

"Three ... two ....one" Loki said

Jane looked up, her face a mask of realization and surprise "Thor!"

Loki raised his eyes heavenwards as she jumped on Thor, her arms going around his neck in a tight hug.

"Oh my God!" Jane said "I thought you were... I mean I saw what happened in ..."

She broke off and finally looked at Loki.

"You!"

Loki bowed his head "I shall leave you to it."

He vanished before either Thor or Jane could do anything.

***

Loki swung his legs over the edge of the building he sat atop, glancing down at the world.

He had heard about Paris from one of his minions the last time he was here. He didn't remember his name, but he recalled how fondly he spoke of this place. Now, balanced on the Eiffel Tower, he could see what he meant.

It wasn't anywhere near as beautiful as Asgard, but it was pleasing.

A shame it was in a mudball like Midgard.

It was past midnight now, and Loki knew Thor would have talked well enough with Jane in the past time. However, he decided that a few extra minutes didn't matter so he stayed there, looking down at the bustling city.
Loki refused to think about how good his brother had been to him when by all given rights, he should have beaten Loki to a pulp.

Sif had been with Thor and Loki had betrayed him in the basest of ways. Yet Thor had done nothing.

He intended to ask his brother why, though. He didn't believe all that Thor had said. The man was hurt and when Thor was hurt, he needed to break.

Awkwardly, Loki wondered if Thor had gone to see Jane to beat her.

He laughed it off a second later and stood.

Whatever his brother had planned, Loki was about to find out. He blinked out of existence and appeared back in front of the apartment.

To find Thor sulking at the base of the building.

"Thor?"

Thor looked up with a mixture of relief and irritation "About time you arrived!"

Loki blinked "What happened? Why are you here? I thought you would be upstairs with Jane"

Thor stood and walked over "Can we just leave? Please, Loki I have no patience for questions right now. All I want to do is go home."

"Alright" Loki nodded "We'll be in Malibu in a moment"

He prepared to teleport when Thor placed a hand on his shoulder.

"No, Loki" Thor said "I wish to go home. To Asgard"

"Why?" Loki asked "I thought you loved Midgard"

"I do" Thor said "but there is nothing here for me. Not anymore"

Loki looked at him and decided not to ask - at least not yet.

"Thor, you know we can't go back unless"

"I know" Thor nearly snapped "I know and I forgive you, now can we please just go?"

But Loki wasn't listening. The second Thor said those words, the words he had been yearning for since he stepped on this pile of dung, Loki simply stopped functioning.

Thor forgave him.

They were going back home and the throne was going to be his! Finally, he was getting what Thor had wanted for so long!

Then why did he feel like he was just punched in the stomach?
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Where confessions are made and Loki becomes King.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thor listened as his brother talked about - everything.

He kept his surprise to himself, for he never suspected Loki to listen to him. The man never did.

He remained silent, taking in all he had to say about his childhood, about how he felt suppressed under Thor's greatness, how he had wanted Odin's praise, how he was always the 'younger brother' and nothing more, how Thor had unconsciously treated him - terribly on many occasions.

Thor tensed when Loki talked about Jane. Apparently Loki felt it too because he hurried over that part. Thor was angry when Loki mentioned his attempts at suicide. His fingers hand dug painfully into Loki's shoulder and the younger god had hesitated.

When he was done, Thor didn't know what to say.

All Loki ever wanted was to be noticed by his father, to have Odin look at him with the modicum of adoration he gazed at Thor with. But no, the man had only eyes for Thor.

He talked in between, trying to reassure him that no, Odin did love him but it was to no avail. Then he went on to the other topic Loki had said; Thor's resentment towards him.

Thor felt terrible and he was beginning to apologize when Loki cast a spell on him that made bubbles rise from his mouth.

This had been funny when it happened to Stark, now it was just humiliating. Pushing his own discomfort aside, Thor helped Loki try and overcome the restless within him by suggesting a sparring match.

It was brutal; just the way Loki liked it. The shocked Avengers and thr Asgardian warriors took them to the healing room and placed them on the tables to help them heal their wounds.

Loki waved a hand and both of them were well again.

Thor laughed at the expressions of the healers and gasped when he heard his own laughter rather than see bubbles ascend into the air.

"Proud, are you?" Steve asked from where he was leaning on the wall, arms crossed "You two are the craziest people I have ever met."

The Asgardian warriors shook their head. They had better things to do with their time. Turning, they followed Theoric as he went to the living room to watch the large box with moving pictures.
Loki rolled his eyes and sat up on the healing table "What happened, Captain? Too much fun for you?"

"Fun?" Clint asked "you call beating each other to a pulp fun?"

"Well" Thor sat up "yes"

Steve rolled his eyes "It's too early for this"

"You guys are insane" Natasha muttered, moving forward to touch Thor's bloody clothes "Christ, must be awesome to be immortal"

"And sustain magic" Loki cut in, waving a hand over himself to right any remaining flaws with his body.

Thor laughed "And that."

They sat for a while, comfortable in the healing room, and talked. The subjects were sparse and many, making every one easy.

They laughed when Clint related some of his tales, complete with dramatic motions and groaned when Tony began his own tales of invention.

Eventually, they realized it was time for dinner.

"How about we treat you to an Asgardian feast?" Thor asked, gaining a surprised look from Loki "there is nothing like it"

"How do you plan on doing that?" Tony asked, sipping a coffee he had brought "there are no Bligesnipe here."

Thor laughed at him patronizingly "We don't eat Bligesnipe, Stark"

"Yes" Loki added "we raise them as pets then train them to satisfy our sexual needs"

Tony threw coffee out of his mouth right on Natasha and Steve.

"Tony!" Steve cried, his face a mask of shock

"That's disgusting!" Natasha said, elbowing Tony as she left "you idiot!"

The others were laughing far too hard to notice both of Tony's victims leave.

"So" Bruce said as they sobered "what do you guys need for this feast?"

"Boars" Thor said before Loki "five of them, the largest you can find, seven pheasants, two sheep -"

"Whoa whoa whoa" Tony made a T with his hands "what the hell are you cooking? This is the 2000's, pal. We don't eat that stuff here"

"Yes you do" Thor countered "I saw you have pork rinds two days ago"

"What the hell are pork rinds?" Clint asked

"Bacon" Loki supplied. Then he turned to Thor "Brother, they eat more like ..." he thought "the hens of Asgard. Kindly lower your expectations of their stomaching the amount of food we eat."
"We?" Tony asked "and excuse you for calling us chickens, you eat less than Pepper, Ms. Moss"

"Miss Moss?" Loki asked "is that a new curse you are teaching me, Stark?"

"No, Moss as in Kate Moss" Tony waved a hand then "never mind. You can't call us chickens when you are one"

"I have lost track of the conversation" Thor said, standing.

"Not for the first time, brother" Loki said sweetly "he says I can't eat as much as I claim"

Thor guffawed, pulling an arm around Loki "My friends, my brother can match me in terms of eating. Do not be fooled by his maidenly consumption."

Thor yelped when Loki rammed stinging magic up his rear "Loki!"

Loki scoffed "Remember that the next time you insult me."

"I didn't...!" Thor broke off, taking a deep breath "Alright. Brother, why don't you tell them what we need"

"How about all of you get something you desire and we shall cook them as Asgardians do?" Loki asked

Tony clapped his hands and pointed to Loki "Consider it done, Jamie Oliver"

"Who?"

"Gordon Ramsey?"

"I am lost again"

"He probably names chefs, brother"

"Thanks, Loki"

"You compare us to servants?"

"Run, Anthony" Loki said "that would be wise."

***

Dinner soon turned into a contest.

Where Tony and Steve shared a roast turkey, Clint had lobster, Natasha had steamed chicken and Bruce chose a beef pepper steak, Thor and Loki had all of the combined foods placed before them - each.

Fandral had chosen a less extravagant chicken and leek pie, Sif and Sigyn wished to try out the steak Bruce had, Theoric had chosen a platter of seafood and Hogun wanted to sample Chinese dishes.

Volstagg had been strategically sent away by Loki to 'tend to matters in Asgard'. The fact that he didn't know about the feast was only a 'coincidence'.

"There is no way" Tony said as he eyed his huge dining table filled with so much food "that you can eat that"
"Au contraire" Loki spoke "we can finish this easily, and what's more, we shall have it before you"

"Deal!" Tony struck out a hand that Loki shook "loser washes the dishes"

Clint raised a hand "Note: Since Tony made the deal, he washes. Not us"

"Done!"

Tony had little choice after that chorus.

It didn't take long for Tony to realize he was losing. The warriors had long since finished their food and now watched the ongoing match, occasionally taking a few leftovers from the dishes much to the competitors' dismay.

"You can't help him!"

"That's cheating!"

"If you took his, take some of mine, too!"

Natasha was the first to fall; unable to eat the whole chicken in one sitting. Steve was next, pushing aside the turkey, ignoring Tony's indignant cry, to go lie down on the couch and begging people not to press his stomach.

Clint and Bruce took one look at each other and grinned.

"Damn" Clint groaned "I don't think I can have anymore"

"Clint don't you dare!" Tony said, pushing his fork into the turkey on his plate

"Sorry" Clint said as he stood when an exaggerated moan "Loki, I think I know how you felt when you bore Sleipnir"

Loki gave him a dry glare before leaning back luxuriously and slicing into his steak. His turkey was gone, his chicken was nothing more than a cage of bones and only the claw remained of his lobster.

Thor was eyeing the leek and chicken pie.

"Go ahead, brother" Loki prompted, taking another bite of his steak "it will work in our favor."

Bruce groaned and pushed his plate away "I give up"

Loki smiled at him.

Bruce eyed the cleanliness surrounding Loki. Even Steve, the most dignified eater, had managed to put a few crumbs on the table but Loki had eaten with an elegance that surpassed everything. Nothing had fallen from his plate.

And Thor was a mess.

Ten minutes later, Tony stopped "I concede"

Loki smirked at him as Thor slid off the chair and to the floor with a loud moan "Gather your strength, Anthony, you have dishes to clean"

"I hate you guys"
When they had changed for bed, Thor approached Loki slowly.

"Brother"

Loki, who was catching up on some reading under the lamp light, looked up "Yes?"

"I wish to talk to you"

Loki opened his mouth to speak.

"Please don't talk" Thor said and to his surprise, Loki shut his mouth "Just listen"

Loki put the book away and watched Thor. The man was clearly hard-pressed to say something, but he fought with himself at the same time.

"Loki, what you said this morning" Thor began "about your childhood, about Father, I knew not. I didn't know how my teasing affected you and how hard it must have been for you. And for that, I am truly sorry. For doing any wrong to you, for my unnecessary resentment, I apologize. You deserved better from me and I didn't give it to you. For my ..." he swallowed "jealousy at you gaining the throne, because I am not afraid to admit I was envious, I am sorry. I cannot go and undo the past but I can make a change in the future. I am sorry, Loki, I truly am"

Then, in a gesture of apology so old and grand that the whole of Asgard had forgotten it but Loki knew, Thor knelt beside Loki and extended a hand to take Loki's. He planted a kiss to the back of his hand and brought it to his forehead.

Loki was stunned. Not because Thor had apologized to him, rather the way he had done it, the route he had chosen for his apology. This apology was meant for kings and elder gods, no one else.

Loki swallowed heavily "Thor ..."

Thor stood and looked down at him "Might I assume you forgave me?"

For the first time in his life, Loki was speechless "I -"

Thor smirked "Stop gawking, you look like a fish"

That brought Loki out of it and a second later, Thor was rewarded with bubbles coming not out of his mouth, but his arse.

***

Sometime later, when much had been mended between him and Loki, Thor woke startlingly early to find himself alone in his allotted rooms.

He yawned, rubbed sleep out of his eyes and went to search for his brother after relieving himself.

The few rooms around the facility were empty or locked. However, when Thor went to a specific room, allotted to a specific lady, just to say goodbye in the sweetest way possible, he was stunned.

There, wrapped around Loki intimately, Sif slept with a slumber so satisfying Thor was surprised.

Pain lashed through him, a second before a wave of anger. He wanted to move over, grab Loki and
And what?

He already knew Sif had moved on without telling him so. He merely thought she had stopped trying to be with him, given up on their relationship so cold and - Thor had to admit - empty.

He closed the door and moved away. He was surprised to feel his anger dissipate.

He wasn't angry; not like he should be. He was ashamed to admit it, but he was slightly relieved.

He couldn't stand the notion of breaking Sif’s heart but he couldn't be tied with her when he felt no attachment - at least on in the way it counted in a relationship - towards her. He still thought of her as a friend and a fellow warrior, but that was it.

What else surprised him, was Loki.

He was the last man Thor thought to pair Sif with. Loki was a mage, not a warrior, he was stealthy not headstrong.

He was what Sif wasn't.

Thor shook his head and went to the kitchen.

They had both betrayed him, but Thor had yet to feel resentment towards them.

***

He could feel the tension within his brother, Thor thought as he stood beside Loki on Jane's threshold.

The events of the past few days, the death of all the secrets around them, had caused Loki to become more open towards him, more honest.

Well, as honest as the god of lies could be.

Loki rang the bell when Thor told him to and Thor saw Jane.

Her face was confused and it pricked him for the few moments it took for Loki to undo his spell.

Jane blinked, coming to her senses. She threw her arms around Thor and hugged him, never noting his reserve.

She promptly glared at Loki.

"You!"

Loki vanished, leaving Thor to face Jane's anger.

*Wise, brother*

Jane turned her head to him, her earlier joy somewhat dimmed "Do you know what he did?"

Thor bowed his head in shame "I am terribly sorry, Jane. I -"

She silenced him with a raised hand "Could you come inside, I think both of us have a lot to say"

Thor nodded and walked in, closing the door behind him. She leaned against it as it closed, putting a hand to her forehead and exhaling loudly.
There were so many memories clashing with each other that it had started a mild headache.

Thor walked ahead, admiring her new home. It was much better than the portable home she had, much welcoming too.

The house was decorated in browns and beiges of all shades and it was- warm.

"So" she said from behind him "could you start by explaining what happened?"

Thor turned to face her "Of course"

Jane walked him over to a couch, making some coffee as she thought over what she was going to say.

It would be hard, she knew, but it had to be done.

She brought over the cups and sat down across from him.

"Darcy is out" she said uselessly "she won't be back for a few hours so I think we have a good length of time for ourselves."

"Jane -"

"Why did he do it, Thor?" Jane asked "had he not hurt us enough that he had to wipe away my memories and make me hurt you?"

Thor looked away, suddenly unable to meet her gaze "I ..."

"I mean what have I ever done to him?" she asked, sipping her drink "I brought him into my home, gave him my food and ...and ...he" she sighed and put her mug away "Thor, I don't know ... I can't let him back in if he..."

"I am not asking you to" Thor said, reaching out and putting a hand over hers "Jane, I can only apologize so much for his actions. Had I known, I would probably have done something but ..."

"But I hurt you so badly you refused to think about it?" she asked

He looked away again "I'm sorry"

"Hey" she reached out and touched his face, making him turn back to her "you shouldn't apologize, he should. What I did, what Loki made me do, hurt you, that is something I cannot even ...I don't like it"

"I know" he placed his hand over hers "I know, but..."

"But what?" she asked "but you understand what he did? Forgive him?"

He shouldn't have answered, even if he knew it was true, Thor should have kept his mouth shut. Instead, he gazed right at her and said

"Yes"

Jane blinked "Yes? You forgive him for hurting you so easily?"

Thor looked at her and sighed. No one said this was going to be easy.
"Jane, I could be angry with him" he said "and for a small while, I was. But if you understand Loki, you understand why he does what he does. There is always a reason for his doing what he does, he never does things for the heck of doing them?"

Jane looked at him owlishly "You were angry with him?"

"Yes, I was but ...

"Meaning you knew what he had done, long before I did?"

*And that was why Thor couldn't be called clever*

"Thor?"

He sighed "Yes"

Jane nodded, her mouth a firm line "Okay, alright, I'll humor you. Why didn't you make him undo it the second you learned what he did? Why wait till now?"

"His magic was gone, Jane" Thor grabbed at the first thing that came into his mind "how could he?"

*That was why Thor lacked tact*

"The same way he cut off my hair, Thor" Jane said "the same way he revealed that you already had a girlfriend"

He should have backed down then, but something, probably some frustration stretching within him, made him talk back, defend Loki.

"Jane, he was trapped here, away from home on a hostile land with an even more hostile brother" Thor said "as long as I have known him, Loki performs these acts to make himself feel better, to let loose some anger in a harmless way."

"Really?" she said "there was nothing harmless about what he did in New York?"

"It was directly proportionate to his hurt" Thor said, then sighed "Jane, you have no idea what he had been through, all his life he has been hurt, by Father, by me and my friends. I know this isn't a justification, but it is an understanding. You can't label him as good or bad, just like you can't label me, you have to understand him."

"I don't want to understand him, Thor" Jane said "I don't want anything to do with him I just ... I just want ...

"What?" Thor asked gently.

She stood then, moving to go face the window "I just want us back. Things were so perfect with us before he ruined them. Don't you resent him for it?"

She wanted him back. That was all that Thor should have concerned himself with.

But he didn't.

"I don't" he said "I understand him. Please don't make this a choice for me. Don't make my resentment a balance between us"

Jane turned around and faced him "I wasn't going to, Thor. I was merely asking."
He relaxed slightly.

"But I want to know why he did it. Why did he cut off my hair and why did he erase my memories and Darcy's now that I realize" she said.

Thor sighed "Because you changed me in a few days when he had been trying for centuries"

Jane nodded and stayed silent as she digested everything.

Thor waited. He knew they hadn't been talking that long and that things were probably going towards a good end.

"Thor" Jane said after a while "I want us to be together, I really do, but I can't keep looking over my shoulder to see if Loki is there to do something or- I need your help with this"

Thor stood and walked over; he took her hands in his "Jane...."

"SHIELD is funding me" she said suddenly "I make a lot and have a comfortable life ahead of me, there is nothing much lacking." She looked up at him, eyes shining "I want to share it with you"

Thor gently pushed some of her hair back and looked down at her.

"But I don't want him anywhere near my life" she finished "he has harmed me, harmed us enough. If we are to go anywhere ahead, I want Loki out of the picture."

Thor looked down at her and found his next words startlingly easy.

"I can't" Thor said "I can't abandon him again, not now when I have finally made amends with him. He is my brother, Jane, and I cannot simply pull him into my life then push him back out. I just can't."

Jane sighed and looked up into his eyes "I am not asking you to do that, I only want some distance between him and me. I cannot stand the thought of him harming us again."

"He won't" Thor said, all the while thinking if he even wanted to be with her again.

"How can you say that?" Jane asked "he lies, Thor. What if you get him to promise but he does it anyway? What if the next time he lights my hair on fire?"

Thor's loud bark of laughter hung disbelievingly in the air. He wasn't laughing at her, he was laughing at the whole situation; it was hilarious.

Jane gaped at him.

Thor was horrified "Jane, I ..."

"Never mind" she said "for your sake, I am ignoring that. God knows I have ignored enough, this will be no different."

Thor frowned "What do you mean?"

Jane looked up at him "You do know what I'm talking about, right? The immortality, the superhero stuff, that isn't something a girl looks for in a man she wishes to have a relationship."

Thor shook his head "I do not understand. Do you not wish to be with me?"
"I do" Jane said, reaching up and touching his chest "I really do, but you - I'm sorry to say this - come with a lot of baggage. Never mind the psycho brother"

"Psycho brother?"

He didn't know where the anger came from; it was probably that frustration that he'd felt earlier, touched and reacting like an exposed nerve.

"Loki is not deranged, Jane" Thor said "he is merely confused."

"I know" she said brushing it off "I merely meant it as a joke, Thor"

He stepped back, away from her "No, it may have been a joke but I sense the underlying antagonism in you. You hate him and-

"Well, can you blame me, honestly?" Jane asked, annoyed at him "when he tried to destroy my world and then tried to destroy the both of us, can you really expect me to like him?"

Thor stood for a long moment, thinking it over. Then he shook his head.

"No, I cannot blame you" he said

"Good" she said "because there is something I wish to ask you"

"Very well" he didn't step closer

"If the choice was brought up" Jane began "Who would you choose?"

***

Thor was brooding outside Jane's apartment building when Loki appeared. He seemed surprised to see Thor and even more taken aback when Thor all but snapped at him.

He knew what Loki said was true, they couldn't go back unless one of them bent to the will of the contract.

Thor had already forgiven Loki, for everything, so it was no great feat saying those words aloud, admitting them to himself and Loki.

***

Simmons heard the door to his cell creak open.

He laughed, turning to the next man they had sent to break him.

But he wasn't going to break. His master was going to come back and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

His eyes widened when he saw the man before him.

Loki looked at him with unbidden fury.

"You ..." Simmons gasped "you're supposed to be dead, I killed you!"

"Yes" Loki drawled "how unfortunate for you."

Loki closed the door with a wave of his hand and stepped forward.
"You can't kill me" Simmons said "they will punish you."

Loki laughed softly "Of course they can't. I am returning to Asgard tomorrow so no one will be the wiser."

"My master is coming for me" Simmons said, backing away "he will kill you. He will catch you and do what he did before, you will be his again."

Loki's bark of laughter silenced him.

"Pathetic fool" Loki chuckled "your master is dead. My brother killed him, mercilessly so. But no matter, you will be joined with him in a matter of minutes."

"You lie" Simmons said "my master is alive and he will come for me. You are only saying this because I killed you, because you want revenge"

"No" Loki rasped, walking closer till he was barely a foot away from the man "my revenge is for another purpose, killing me only served to save me, you did me a favor and I hold it not against you." He stepped closer, his hand lashed out to grab the man by his throat and lift him clean into the air "but you dared to harm my child. That I will not stand"

Simmons whimpered and kicked gently, knowing his master wasn't coming after all.

***

Tony scratched his head lightly "Well, I can't say I won't miss this, you guys were fun to be around. Angst and all"

Thor smiled while Loki was busy making small talk with Banner "My iron friend, fret not, we shall visit you soon"

"We?" Loki asked, turning his head to his brother

Thor waved a hand at him dismissively "Nevermind him, he has never been good with farewells"

Loki raised his brows at him "Aren't I?"

"No" Thor grinned as Loki advanced on him, probably trying to get a hit.

"Alright, enough guys" Tony came in between them "You can have all the thorki love when you get back home. Right now is goodbye time"

Both brothers looked at him with confused expressions.

Ton rolled his eyes and spread his arms "Get in here"

Loki was about to roll his eyes heavenwards when he was suddenly surrounded. Tony wrapped him in a tight hug a second before everyone else descended on him in a bone crushing hug.

Loki croaked hoarsely "Ack! Enough!"

But they didn't relent. Loki had to stay there. Caught between Tony, Clint and Natasha till their affection remained.

He could have used magic, but one part of him - and he wouldn't admit it to anyone even in Valhalla - didn't mind.
After the group hug broke, Loki thought he saw Steve wipe at his eyes; he probably had something in his eye.

Thor was having a hard time, too.

"Norns!" Loki growled and grasped Thor's hand "enough already. We had a wonderful time here, and I am pretty sure Thor will visit again. Goodbye"

Just before they vanished, Tony caught Loki's mischievous expression and a second later, he felt a breeze in an area he hadn't really felt it before.

"Tony! Your clothes!" Steve balked at Tony's naked ass.

A second later, all the alarms in Tony's home erupted, screens lowered from the ceiling, playing all of their most humiliating moments - in HD.

***

Being in limbo, no matter the time, was uncomfortable.

It felt like every single molecule in his being was pulled away and pieced back together with agonizing deliberation.

There was nothing solid, nothing to hold onto other than your partner and Thor felt Loki was the only concrete substance around him.

Consequently, they arrived before Hiemdall a little closer than Loki remembered.

Thor was feeling dizzy and stumbled, leaning heavily on Loki and trying to make the lights stop <em>dancing</em> before him.

"Shove off!" Loki pushed him off, uncaring that Thor stumbled, and patted down his clothes.

Thor blinked and the dizziness was gone. He looked at Loki, who was holding his bag that had his belongings, dressed in his ceremonial armor. Thor's bag was nowhere in sight.

"Where's my - ?" Thor began

"Mjolnir is at your hip" Loki said "your remaining things are on Midgard"

Thor scowled, thinking about arguing but thought against it, mainly because when he looked down, he was in his full formal robes. His helmet popped on his head.

"What ...?"

"Really, brother" Loki smirked at him "did you really expect to make an entrance in those Midgard rags?"

Thor opened his mouth to speak.

"Heimdall!" Loki greeted, his smile appearing genuine "how fare you?"

The all seeing god looked at Loki "I fare well, Crown Prince. Your friends are arriving as we speak. I alerted them the moment I could see your arrival"

"Excellent" Loki said, looking back at Thor "Coming, brother?"
Thor, who was still disorientated, managed to nod "Of course, lead on"

Loki went past the gatekeeper and stood in wait for Thor's friends.

He didn't wish to admit it, but he was suddenly nervous - very nervous. Already he could see the change in Thor; he appeared annoyed and said almost nothing. He hadn't even greeted Hiemdall.

Loki knew the feelings going through Thor's mind; doubt, uncertainty, anxiety.

They were a match to Loki's own state of mind. His mind was frazzled, he couldn't even think of what he would say, what would happen. On top of that, there was the trickle of fear that Thor had begun to resent him again.

Loki shook his head, forcing his mind to stop talking. It was making it hard for him every second.

"Nervous, brother?" Thor asked, his smile indicating that he knew of Loki's discomfort.

Loki returned the gesture, albeit softly "Have you ever known me to be nervous?"

"Hmm" Thor pretended to think about it "there was that time in Nornhiem"

Loki felt so much worry drain from him the second Thor replied to his reference.

Loki laughed, much like Thor had so many, many years ago "That wasn't nerves, brother, that was skilful planning"

"Ah," Thor grinned "I see"

"How else would I have veiled us in smoke to ease our escape?"

"Hmm, as I recall, I was the one who fought my way through a hundred warriors and pulled us out alive" Thor said

Loki laughed at that "Yes, some are clever, others just do battle"

They both laughed at that, that memory, that closeness suddenly filling them both with so much warmth that nothing else mattered.

Then, before Loki knew it, he turned and pulled Thor in for a tight embrace. Thor was taken aback, stumbling before putting his arms awkwardly around Loki.

"I am so sorry, brother" Loki whispered "I shouldn't have tried to kill you. I should have brought you back home the instant I could and I shouldn't have ..." he swallowed heavily "I shouldn't have betrayed you"

Thor was speechless, stunned as he heard the words he never thought would come from Loki's mouth, he didn't know what to say, how to say it.

"So sorry for everything" Loki mumbled before letting him go and stepping back. His eyes were shining and he knew Thor had seen them.

Thor's mouth was hanging open as he tried focusing his thoughts. Loki needed an eloquent answer, something as grand as the apology had been.

"Huh?"
Loki laughed, his mouth curving into a grin as he chuckled. He placed a hand on Thor's arm

"Always so articulate" Loki smiled, "eh, brother?"

Thor smiled and nodded before reaching out and pulling Loki into a short hug. When he released him, he pulled off Loki's helmet and ruffled his hair.

"Thor!" Loki snapped, trying to take the helmet back.

Thor sprinted away, with Loki at his heels; both of them were laughing, both of them were back to the brothers they hadn't been a few years ago.

***

Odin told them to wait.

He had something of import to do, therefore his long lost sons would have to wait. A maid had already gone to fetch Frigga.

So they waited.

Loki had finally let his thoughts take over. He was looking at the floor as both of them were standing in one of the many lounges of the castle, his green eyes focused on the floor.

Thor was gazing at the skies, idly moving a cloud here or there as he refused to think.

"Why?"

Thor blinked at Loki's sudden question and turned "Pardon?"

"Why did you forgive me?" Loki asked "when you knew of the ramifications."

Thor blinked, taking some time to gather this sudden change in his brother.

"What?"

Loki drew himself to his full height "Thor, we were fighting like enemies, actually fighting some time ago, where I drew your blood and you drew mine. We were enemies, brother, trying to destroy one another and you suddenly forgive me? Why?"

"You apologized for it, Loki, I -"

"No, you forgave me first" Loki cut in, his eyes intense "you know what I am, my loyalty goes where I want it to, I betray and I lie. Why would you be so stupid as to forgive me?"

"Stupid?" Thor moved forward "Loki, you are my brother, my ally, my friend. Just because you had a folly, doesn't mean I should condemn you for all eternity. It wouldn't be right. You said you were sorry -"

"I could be lying" Loki said "I could be doing this to gain the throne as promised and then do what I want"

"You wouldn't tell me if you had that planned" Thor countered

"It could be a part of my grand scheme" Loki pointed out.
Silence fell for a moment.

"Is it?" Thor asked, walking closer "is this another scheme, Loki?"

Loki looked at him and shrugged.

"Loki," Thor stood before him "what worries you, brother?"

Loki looked at him, thinking of telling him something he wanted to hear rather than the truth.

"Don't lie to me" Thor said "what brought this on? We were so well only some moments ago."

Loki sighed and looked up to him "I am not your brother. I am not Odin's son. I may have the throne but I am still unwanted and unwelcome. When I take the throne instead of you, Asgard will despise me. To them, nothing has changed, I am still the liar and traitor I was years ago."

"You worry about our people, then?" Thor asked, putting a hand on Loki's shoulder.

"Among other things" then Loki sighed "but that is not what worries me at the moment."

"Then what is it?" Thor nearly growled "brother, you torment me with these evasions."

"I can't take the throne from you" Loki said "what kind of a brother would I be?"

Thor blinked, stunned, not knowing what to say to that.

The doors opened and Frigga ran in. She caught sight of them and gasped.

"My children!"

Everything was a blur of hugs and female emotions after that.

***

Odin looked old.

That was the first thing Loki noticed. The man was exhausted, slightly hunched over as he stood on the dais, looking down at them.

The second thing he noticed was the smile on the man's face.

"My sons!"

Loki stilled when Odin climbed down the stairs and grabbed them both in a rough embrace that required both of them to bend down.

"You have returned safely" he held onto their necks, pulling them closer till he felt them hug him back "you were greatly missed"

They straightened when he let them go.

Loki righted his helm "Were we?"

"Yes" Odin moved to Thor, pulling him down to kiss his forehead "your mother and I craved your return greatly"

He moved to Loki and repeated the gesture.
"Welcome back"

***

They had spent the whole day together, as a family.

Odin had handed over responsibilities to the minister, insisting that only matters of urgency be brought forth to him.

They had left for a picnic, of all things.

The lake they had chosen was one where Thor and Loki had played when they were very young. Odin and Frigga seated themselves on the ground, sitting on the large cloth Frigga had packed. Lunch had been a delicious collection of fruits, vegetables, meat, cheese and bread; something that Loki had dearly missed.

They talked for a long time after lunch, laughing and joking, before Thor decided to go swimming as they had done as children.

"Come, brother" Thor said as he pulled off his armor and cape "let us see who wins a swimming challenge"

Loki waved a hand at him and put a berry in his mouth "No, Thor you go ahead. I would rather behave like the mature adult I know I am"

Rolling his eyes, Thor ran over to a rock and looked down. Said rock was only a foot off from the deepest water, acting as a diving ramp for them when they were children. Thor pulled off his boots and touched the cold water with a toe. Then he grinned and removed his shirt and jumped into the water with a splash that almost reached the others.

Frigga laughed and Odin clapped, giving him ten points for the most ungraceful landing he'd ever seen.

Loki shook his head, waiting for Thor to surface, before drawing a big zero in the air with his magic.

"Oh that's mature" Loki muttered as Thor dived down again.

Frigga laughed and slapped his back gently "Come now, Loki. Have some fun. Let loose"

"Mother, I am having fun" Loki said "just because I don't behave like a child doesn't mean I am not loose"

"Clearly, not loose enough to enjoy yourself" Odin commented "you should have a swim, go."

Loki shook his head "Thank you, Odin but I'd rather stay on dry land"

"Suit yourself" Odin said, before reaching over to pull Frigga closer and kiss her full on the mouth.

Mortified, Loki looked away, willing the image to fade. Thor surfaced and looked over, pointing at Loki and laughing.

Loki made a face.

Half an hour later, while his parents' affection had thankfully waned, Loki registered something he
had been seeing for a long time.

"Is it me or has Thor been under for a really long time?" Loki asked.

Both Odin and Frigga looked at the steady, unmoving water.

Loki was on his feet a second later, running towards the rock Thor had jumped from. He fell on all fours, looking down into the water, searching for a large shape that was his brother.

"Thor!"

Odin and Frigga were at the banks, looking for Thor.

Loki stood, preparing to use his magic.

Odin nudged Frigga and she let out a relieved sigh, putting a hand to her mouth to stop her smile.

Thor had snuck a few feet behind Loki and put a finger to his lips as he stalked Loki.

Then he charged with a battle cry at Loki, who only had time to turn before Thor tackled him and threw them both into the water, Loki with helm and armor.

Loki emerged spluttering, helmet falling off his head as he gasped for air.

Odin and Frigga were laughing at them both.

"Idiot!" Loki growled as Thor surfaced, looking at him proudly "I could have drowned"

"Nonsense" Thor said as Loki swam to the edge and climbed on the rock to sit "you are a wonderful swimmer, brother"

Thor swam over and climbed next to Loki "You couldn't have -"

Loki shoved him into the water and Thor fell with a mighty splash.

Shaking his head, Loki put a spell on himself to dry his clothes and hair and made to stand.

Only to have Frigga push him back in the water.

The rest of the day passed in laughter, shenanigans and Loki using his magic on everyone as revenge.

***

Sif knew it was late. Much later than it was proper for company, but when the knock sounded on her door, she was the only one awake and went to answer it.

She slipped past her mother's door softly and grabbed a dagger, just in case. Taking a candle, she padded down the stairs and to the door to her home. Placing the candle on a table, she lifted her dagger and pulled the door open to find a heavily shrouded figure standing before her.

"Who stands there?" she demanded, raising her dagger.

Two elegant, gloved arms reached out of the cloak to grasp the edges of the hood and spread them enough to show the face of her visitor.

"Loki!" she smiled and ran forward.
He grasped her in his arms and spun her around before pulling her close and placing a kiss on her lips "That was not the greeting I expected. I was afraid your mother was going to answer"

He still had his hood on and Sif began to lower it.

"If that was the welcome she would have gotten, I dare say you had nothing to be afraid of" she grinned

Loki chuckled before lowered his head to kiss her again.

He laughed again, an hour later, when they both lay in her bed and Sif made a joke about what went on right under her mother's nose.

"How do you think she would react when she finds the prince at our breakfast table this morning?" Sif asked

Loki's laughter rumbled under her ear as she laid her head on his chest "I say she would be rather hassled by something other than me asking for breakfast."

"Who said anything about you getting breakfast?" Sif asked

Loki smirked "Ah, so I see how it is. You intended to use me to satisfy you then, chuck me out of the closest window"

"Who said I was satisfied?"

Loki growled and moved, moving to pin her on the bed and look down at her "You doubt me, my sweet lady?"

She laughed "Nay, my prince, I merely -"

Her eyes widened when she heard footsteps approach.

"Sif?" her mother called "are you alright? I thought I heard noises from here"

Loki scrambled off her, gathering his clothes and running into to closet Sif opened. She pulled the covers over till her neck and pretended to sleep.

"Sif?"

The door opened just as Loki pulled Sif's nightwear in and shut the door silently. Her mother looked down as her sleeping daughter.

Loki heard her move about as she talked to the 'sleeping' Sif.

"My dear, you worry me far too much, I hope you know" she kissed her daughter's head and stood to go back to sleep, pulling close her robes, and closing the door behind her.

As soon as she was sure, Sif jumped out of bed and pulled the wardrobe open, her face a mask of barely controlled mirth.

"I am so sorry" she giggled "I didn't know she would awaken!"

Loki felt his smile broaden "By the norns, if she caught me here, she would have insisted -"

He broke off as horror descended on Sif's face.
"That we be wed?" she asked, eyes widening "Odin that would have been terrible"

"Hmm" Loki's brow furrowed "does that bother you?"

She looked up at him, her face changing from shock to dismay "Loki, you ...didn't think we ...

"Ah" he sat beside her "I understand"

"Please" she put a hand on his shoulder "don't be offended, you would make a great husband, just ...

"Not for you?" Loki finished, looking at the floor

"I'm sorry" she touched his jaw

"Don't be" Loki said, taking her hand in his and kissing it "it was about time we came to the true nature of our liaison. Though this is wonderful ..."

"Wonderful?" Sif repeated "I am thinking this is the best I have ever had"

"Really?" Loki grinned at her, distracted "the best?"

"Ever" she enunciated

Loki smirked, pleased with himself "Well, I am a god ..."

Sif laughed and shoved him playfully "Arrogant"

Loki mock gasped "Arrogant? Me? The best you've ever had?"

She laughed and shoved him again.

"So now what?" Loki asked, sobering "where does this leave us?"

Sif sighed "Well, I don't want the best I've ever had to leave ...."

"You wish to continue?" Loki asked, brows raised

"For now" Sif said

Loki shrugged "Very well, then. Prepare yourself for the best you will ever have!"

Sif chuckled as he pushed her down and covered her with his body.

***

Loki was awakened the next morning be Thor, who shook him out of his slumber with urgency.

"Brother!" Thor said "Wake up! Something had happened!"

The last words threw away all sleep in him and Loki shot up, looking at Thor.

"What happened?"

"Father fell into Odinsleep" Thor said gravely "we need a king"

Loki's eyes widened and he shrunk away from Thor "No, I can't ..."
Thor was stunned "Brother ...?"

"You go" Loki said, "I cannot go out there, not so soon"

"Loki, you are the crowned prince" Thor said "you don't have a choice"

Loki shook his head "No, I cannot. I am not ready"

Thor moved forward and grabbed his shoulders.

"Loki, listen to me" Thor said as he pulled him in "you are the crowned prince, Father chose you! You can do this, brother"

Loki shook his head "I don't want it"

"You don't have a choice" Thor said, taking a hold of Loki's wrist and hauling him out of bed, despite his struggles "you have a kingdom to run, brother. You did it before, you shall do it again"

"Thor, let me go" Loki resisted as Thor pulled him to his bathing room

Thor shoved him in "Change or I will do it for you"

Despite his fear, Loki glared death at him and Thor smirked.

"You can do this, Loki" Thor said "I believe in you"

Those words, nothing else, gave Loki some strength to gather his wits and do as Thor said. He emerged a few moments later, relatively composed and dressed in his royal robes.

Thor waited for him outside his doors.

"I am to escort you to the throne room, brother" Thor said, waving a hand ahead.

Shutting out all thought, Loki walked ahead of Thor and made his way to the throne room.

The halls were deserted so they met no one. But when Thor pushed open the doors to the throne chamber, the roar of conversation nearly deafened Loki. His steps only barely faltered as he made his way up to the dais where Frigga stood.

The crowds fell silent the instant Loki stepped before her and Thor a few steps below.

"Loki Odinson" Frigga's voice floated to the farthest corners of the room, silencing what little conversation was left "my son. Odin's heir, kneel"

Loki swallowed heavily and did as he was told.

"Do swear to protect the Nine Realms?" Frigga asked, her voice loud and clear.

"I swear" Loki said, feeling a little light headed. *What was he doing!? He didn't want this!*

"Do you swear to maintain peace in all Realms?"

"I swear" Loki thought about releasing more giants into Asgard.

"Do you swear to serve the Realm Eternal till your last breath?"

"I swear"
"Thor, do something!"

"So be it. By the powers vested in me by Odin Allfather, the realm of Asgard and the Elder gods, I Frigga Allmother, name you, in the name of Odin's father and his before" Loki felt his helmet being taken off "Loki Odinson, sovereign ruler of all Asgard, protector of the Nine Realms, and" she lifted a heavy crown, placed on the throne, made of solid gold and embedded with rubies and placed it on Loki's head "our King."

Again, there was a stunned silence, broken only by the sudden whoop of Thor and his friends before a roaring applause filled the air, deafening and vociferous to a painful degree.

"Rise, your Majesty" Frigga said, laying a hand over Loki's shoulder.

Loki stood on shaking legs and turned around to see everyone screaming at the top of their lungs and clapping while looking at him.

His mouth hung open as he watched all of Asgard cheer for him.

Then from the sea of people, Thor rose, walking over to stand before Loki, a huge smile on his face.

"Your Highness" Thor said and kneeled before Loki "I pledge my allegiance to you, vowing myself to your service"

The Warriors Three and Sif followed, their faces the same as Thor's; proud and happy.

Loki felt his heart break then.

***

Thor had searched for his brother for the better part of an hour.

His newly named, week old King, had disappeared after a meeting with the council and Thor was looking for him since then. He had been to his royal chambers, situated on the top of their building; a massive room that took up the entire top floor, and found it empty.

He had gone to the library, the magics room, the practice room, the gardens, the Royal gardens and the throne room.

Now, he went into the gardens for a second time and was seriously considering asking for help when his gaze fell on the stables.

Reminded of how Loki had spent time with Sleipnir, Thor immediately turned to the wooden structure.

Sure enough, Loki had been here. Sleipnir's stall was empty.

Sighing, Thor lifted Mjolnir from his side and raised it to the skies.

He shot off into the air, looking down for a sign of his brother.

He found him, after a good ten minutes, sitting on Sleipnir as they both stood at the very edges of Asgard, looking down into the sea.

Thor flew towards them.

Loki turned when Thor landed behind him, the light glinting off his crown "Thor"
"Loki," Thor said, walking over "what are you doing here? I have been searching for you for so long"

"Sorry" Loki said without conviction

Thor stopped and looked up at him "Loki, what is the matter?"

Loki sighed "There is something I must do, as King and I find I need a little moment alone to gather myself before"

"You are not abdicating!" Thor snapped

Loki scoffed and looked down at him "Please, Thor, don't be so dramatic."

Thor relaxed "Then what, brother?"

Loki looked away "You shall see, in time."

Thor rolled his eyes "As you say. Now scoot over, I wish to return home"

Loki turned back to him, refusing to budge "You dare to command your king?"

Thor paused, looking at him uncertainly "I merely wish to have a ride back, brother."

Giving his hammer a meaningful look, Loki lifted his nose into the air and gave Sleipnir an invisible command. The horse moved forward "Such haughty behavior from a prince, don't you agree, my son?"

Thor narrowed his eyes at him.

"What do you say his punishment should be?" Loki asked his steed, his eyes glinting with mirth.

"Loki ..." Thor said

"A boon it is!" Loki looked at Thor "I wish a favor of you. I will ask it when I please and you shall agree immediately, understand?"

Thor waited a heartbeat "I understand"

"I understand ...what?"

Thor inclined his jaw "I understand, your majesty"

Loki grinned "Good, you are now free to accompany me on my horse"

Shaking his head, Thor walked over and jumped behind Loki.

"Hold my crown" Loki pulled it off and gave it to Thor.

"Why...?" Thor yelped when Sleipnir tore into a run, grabbing Loki for balance with one hand and holding the crown with the other as Loki and Sleipnir galloped like a maniac through Asgard.

***

"Open your mouth, brother" Thor instructed, moving forward.

Loki, who was gazing angrily at the ground, looked up at him and glared.
There it was, a device made solely for witches, gleaming in his hand, as elegant and metallic as Loki remembered.

He had been the one to make it, after all, and the enchanted shackles that bound his magic. They glittered on his wrists and held him chained to Thor.

Thor sighed "I do not do this for enjoyment, Loki, but this is a portion of your punishment. Now do as I say"

Scowling at him, but still refusing to speak, Loki stepped forward and opened his mouth. He felt the metallic tinge, saw the silver enter his mouth and trap his tongue.

Loki the god of lies was now without his most powerful weapons.

Thor snapped it shut behind Loki's head and arranged his hair around it in a brotherly fashion.

He stepped back and looked at Loki's lowered head.

"Forgive me, Loki"

Thor moved forward and gently grasped Loki's head, making him look up "Please forgive me"

He placed a kiss on Loki's forehead and guided him out before everyone so that all may witness his humiliation.

Slowly Thor opened his eyes, seeing that memory in a vastly different light than he remembered.

He hadn't noticed it then, but it was the moment Loki had changed. That moment when Thor had bound him so primitively, Loki had changed forever. Thor had turned his brother into the vicious, hard man he had become before they were sent to Earth. He had molded him with resentment since then, making him harsher than he had recalled.

Thor sighed, turning to get out of bed and start the day.

Some weeks had now passed since Loki got the throne and Thor wished to help him in any way that he could.

He had just changed into his robes when there was a knock on his door.

"Enter" Thor called, straightening his cape

A guard walked in "His Royal Highness, King Loki wishes your company in the Council Chambers immediately, my lord"

Thor furrowed his brow "Is all well?"

The guard nodded "I merely bring orders, sir"

The guard bowed out and Thor stood where he was for a few seconds, wondering what Loki could possibly want. Then he shook himself off, ignoring his growling stomach and pulled on his royal attire before going to the Council Chambers.

Loki was there, sitting on the largest chair in the room and looking down at everyone.

He smiled when he caught sight of Thor, gesturing him to enter "Come on in, brother, there is something I wish of you"
As Thor walked in, his gaze went to the council members, men and women his Father had trusted completely. They looked at Thor with a wide range of emotions, staring from, and not restricted to, anxiety.

"You requested my presence, your majesty?" Thor knelt before his brother, hand on his heart.

"Rise, Odinson" Loki said "it is not needed that you kneel"

Thor looked at Loki, hoping to see some sort of expression, something to let him know what was going on.

But his face was a placid mask; bored and expressionless.

Then an old council member spoke suddenly "Thor, you must make him see reason, nothing good will come of what he suggests"

Thor turned to him, surprised

There is something I must do as King

Loki's words hit him then and he glanced at his brother again "Loki, what is happening?"

But Loki was glaring at the man who had spoken "You question me? Your King?"

"It is madness" a woman said "you cannot hope to..."

"Silence"

Loki hadn't raised his voice, hadn't shouted, but the chilling calmness had a far more devastation effect and shut everyone up.

"I am well aware that though the council has a good enough power over Asgard" Loki said "it holds no authority over the King. Odin may have missed that little detail and I am sure you had no qualms about hiding it."

Loki glared at them, daring to counter his accusation. They didn't. It was the truth, Thor could feel it.

"But I have read through the laws and I am fully aware that I and only I wield power enough to change any law I see fit or wage a war if I wish to"

Thor felt himself grow cold all over. War?!

This couldn't be happening!

"Brother ..."

"Silence, I said" Loki told him softly.

Thor shut his mouth, more out of surprise than anything else.

What are you planning, Loki?

Thor nearly choked; a war on Jotunhiem?

He wouldn't be surprised.

"Now" Loki was saying "should we get to the matter at hand or do you wish to relate to me more
tales of how you pulled the wool over Odin's eyes?"

Pin drop silence fell in the room.

"Excellent" Loki turned to Thor "Brother, these kind ladies and gentlemen have agreed that I may get my wish if you agree to it. Though I hardly think their opinion matters, I find it will alleviate my desires. So, here I find myself looking to you, asking if I have you support on the matter."

"And what matter will that be?" Thor asked

Loki rolled his eyes "Such questions bore me. Tell me this, then, have you forgotten the boon you promised?"

"Loki"

"Have you?" Loki asked, looking at him with green eyes

Thor tightened his lips. Loki was starting a war and there was nothing he could do about it!

"No, my King" Thor said "but I will not agree to...

"Good!" Loki said "now answer this, and turn to those lovely men and women when you reply, as my boon. Do I, Loki Odinson, have your support in the matter I wish to pursue?"

Thor blinked. That was the favor? Thor had thought that for someone as clever as Loki, his boon would be used to manipulate him into agreeing. And here was Loki, giving him a choice.

There was only one answer then.

Thor turned to the council members, unknowing of Loki's scheme, and gave them a good, hard stare.

"My brother has my support on the matter"

Loki smiled.

The council members groaned in despair.

Thor felt his heart beat as he turned to Loki.

Loki looked down at him, his gaze shining. He hadn't been as composed as he had let on.

Loki nodded to him "Thank you, brother."

"Tell me what I have agreed to, brother?" Thor asked "do you wish a war on another realm?"

Loki frowned, confused "What? No, brother. You forget, I detest war"

"Then what is this, your majesty?"

Loki grinned "You just agreed to be King"

Thor felt the floor moved from beneath his feet "What? Loki you cannot renounce the throne, it is not done!"

"Actually," an old member said "your brother stumbled upon an old law of Asgard, one that stated the kingdom could have two Kings should the need arise. There have been many treaties signed with neighboring realms where their consorts have wed our royals. There have been two kings in a few
"occasions" he turned to Loki "but, your majesty, those were consorts. There are no rules about siblings sharing the throne"

"There are no rules forbidding it" Loki stated "I have held up my end of the bargain, you will hold up yours. Prepare Asgard for Thor's coronation in a day's time." He stood "that is all"

Thor was staring at Loki, his legs shaking "Brother....what ....why?"

"Accompany me to the throne room" Loki said, passing him "we can talk there"

Thor watched his King leave and looked at the council members as they left.

The old man, the one unable to hold his tongue, spoke again "Make your brother see sense. We would love to have you as King, my lord, but nothing good has ever come from two kings sharing the throne."

Thor nodded, far too stunned to do much else, then turned and followed his brother.

***

Thor's brain had never talked so much and all at the same time. He tried focusing on one thing but it culminated with another and soon, it felt like a smothering pain that made it hard to breathe.

As soon as they saw Loki, the guards rushed to open the doors and let him in. Loki didn't glance at them, or at Thor as he ascended the dais.

Thor waited for Loki to speak as he made himself comfortable on the throne.

"For Odin's sake, don't stand there gawking at me, sit here" from thin air, Loki conjured a thickly build chair beside himself "come on, I don't have all day"

Thor walked over but didn't sit down "Why?"

Loki looked at him "Because I am King, there are more pressing matters that I need to ..."

Thor slammed his fist on the throne's arm, warning Loki that he was in no mood for games.

"My, what strength you suddenly show" Loki said flatly "sit down and I will explain."

Thor took a hold on his temper "Forgive me, brother, I ..."

"Sit" Loki said sternly.

Thor sat.

Loki steepled his fingers before his lips, tapping them as he thought.

"Over the past weeks, I have been plagued with an idea" he began, looking ahead, his voice neutral "it has haunted me in my sleep and scarcely leaves me alone. It bites me, Thor, edging me on, making me see more and more reason to it." he turned to Thor "I have noticed that we are better together than we are apart. When we were on Earth, and fought together, we annihilated an enemy. Nothing could stop us and, if we continue this way, nothing ever will"

Thor looked at him, looking for signs of deception.

"You are my brother" Loki continued "my ally, my closest friend and I value you. I love you dearly,
brother and I would not see you hurt." He sighed "even by my own hands."

Thor blinked "What? Loki, you ..."

"Let me speak" Loki commanded softly "then you will have your turn."

Thor nodded, shutting up.

Loki swallowed before speaking, as if the words burned him "I hurt you. I hurt you physically and emotionally. I was a poor brother to you, bringing my fight to you because I couldn't take it to the one I wished to harm. You became my scapegoat, taking the brunt of my anger with a grace I didn't know you had"

Thor smirked lightly at the jibe.

"Then, when I decided to stop, to find a way to make it up to you, I was crowned" Loki looked away "you may say you are happy for me, I believe you and I know you are sincere in it, but that doesn't change what I see."

Thor looked at him, uncertain about what he should do.

"I can see hurt and betrayal in you" Loki said "You may not even know you exude it, but you do. In the twitch of your mouth, the wince you give just before smiling to welcome me, the stiff back you have as you walk away, I see it all the time and I cannot stand it. So, I offer you a truce"

Thor blinked when Loki turned to him.

"We share the throne" Loki said "as brothers, as Kings. We shall protect Asgard and take it to the greatest heights possible. You will respect me, and I you. We shall quarrel, but not let it interfere with our rule, we shall disagree but will make up for the sake of the realm and we shall reign supreme, brother, we shall be unstoppable."

Thor looked down when Loki extended a hand.

"Accept the throne, Thor" Loki said "rule beside me and be the king you deserve to be"

Thor glanced at Loki's hand, then at his face.

Loki felt gut wrenching terror within him when he thought Thor was going to refuse.

Then Thor stood and wrapped his arms around Loki in a tight hug.

"Thank you" Thor breathed "Thank you, my brother, my King"

"Nay" Loki hugged him back "your equal."

***

Epilogue

"So that is what I have been doing these past years" Loki finished "Thor still rules by my side and though we have our quarrels, but it matters naught because in the end, we both concede. Asgard was thrilled, you know, when he was crowned king. They screamed so loud and so long that the very walls began to shake. I was there, doing the best part. I placed the crown on his head; made of sapphires and gold, just like him. Then he stood beside me, Mjolnir in hand and the large crown gleaming on his head. I wish Asgard had those cameras Midgardians had. It was a perfect picture.
Mother was crying and when Odin woke up" Loki chuckled "he was stunned. Then he cried too, more of a sniffle because Odin doesn't cry, and told us that he was proud. After that there was a feast that lasted for days and to be honest, I do not remember most of it. But in the end, we both got what we wanted; a trustworthy person by our side and the Realm under our control. Odin was right, we were both meant to be Kings. We still have our issues, more so than the average populace and far more angst filled. There are many unresolved things between us, words that need to be spoken, but I know we will manage, we will prevail."

Tell me more, Father Jormungandr said that can't be all you did these four years

"Well, we did travel around realms, seeking entertainment" Loki laughed suddenly "One trip, we went to Vanahiem and got drunk. Thor found a club where they were having an org..."

He broke off, biting his lip.

Having a what?

"Never mind" Loki suddenly stood. The core of Earth was burning, scorching; just like his son liked it. Just like the incident he was about to relate.

He shook his head at his stupidity.

What's the matter, Father?

Loki grinned at him "Nothing, my child" he moved to run his hands over the serpent's crest "I have to leave, I just remembered. But fret not, I will be back before you know it."

His son nodded Give Sleipnir my regards. And the others, too.

Loki nodded to him then vanished.

He had a kingdom to run after all.

Chapter End Notes

The End.

Gosh, I can't believe how grateful I am to everyone that read this story.

Thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!