Intervention

by Asidian

Summary

Tony's voice echoed in the cavern, hollow against the walls. “Are you out of your mind? That thing's going to take your head off!”

The snake, however, did not move- did not even seem to be watching his teammate approach. And almost as though in response to his own voice, the sound from before came again, long and trembling- midway between a moan and a sob. This time, when his eyes darted in search of the source, the darkness did not block his sight: the naked figure of a man lay stretched beneath the snake, bound to an outcropping of rock. He was all ribs and sharp ridges of bone, all too-thin pale limbs, all open sores on top from the places the venom had splattered and on the bottom where the rock had rubbed away the flesh. The man's face, directly below the snake's mouth, had gotten the worst of it; it was raw and red, glistening with blood and exposed muscle and the slick of poison. The man shouldn't have been alive, much less moving, and yet he was- was thrashing weakly in his bonds, turning his head as far as it would go to avoid the white liquid as it dribbled down. It was not far enough.

Tony thought he was going to be sick again.

Notes

Author's Notes: So I have an ongoing fic I should be working on and five prompts I want
to do, and instead this gets into my head and won't let me rest until I write it. ___a I... I don't even know. This may keep going if I feel like it/ have time, because I have a lot more ideas for it, including the one that started me writing in the first place.
Discovery

It had been just over two years since the alien invasion that destroyed most of downtown Manhattan when the god of thunder appeared in Tony Stark's workshop, looking like he badly needed both a bath and a bed. His armor was tarnished and uncare for, as though he'd fought and then forgotten to clean it; his hair was wild and his beard untrimmed. The dark circles under his eyes made him look a little wild around the edges.

“Man of iron,” said Thor, without preamble, and the words were strained. “I have need of your knowledge.”

“Came to the right place, sparky,” Tony told him, straightening up and wiping his hands off on the greasecloth kept habitually on the workbench. “Studies show I'm a better source of my knowledge than 85% of the rest of the world.”

But that grim, haggard look didn't budge from Thor's face, and he shook his head, impatient. “I beg you, do not waste time in jest. I would ask a boon of you, and I would ask it done with all haste.”

“Rush job, huh?” Tony glanced over at the half-assembled robot on the metal countertop, gears exposed and legs unfinished. “Must be your lucky day. All I've got on my plate is Fury's homework.” He tapped on the tabletop to bring up a holographic menu, glanced down the list and made a selection. “Jarvis, store this one. Containment E.”

“As you wish, sir,” came the disembodied voice, genteel and efficient. The counter split open down the center, and the unfinished robot lowered itself out of sight.


The god of thunder neither smiled nor took offense; he only stared back with somber blue eyes and provided an answer. “I require a device capable of containing the foulest of venoms. By necessity, it must stand at least this height from the floor-” Thor lifted his hand to the appropriate height, and then lifted it again. “-but no farther than this.”

Tony eyed the estimates as he made them, called up a holographic grid to hover in the air. “More than five feet, less than eight,” he said as he input the numbers. “How big around are we talking, here? And do you just wanna hold this stuff?”

“Hold, aye, and divert it as well. The basin needs be as large around as a man is tall, on all sides.” Thor fell silent for a moment, jaw clenched, and the next words emerged scrubbed raw, thick with emotion. “None must be allowed to escape, nor any find a straight path to the floor.”

“So we're looking at a drainage system.” Tony looked the measurements over again- looked his teammate over again. “You know, this stuff's not really my area of expertise. Sure you don't want that helmet? I could stick some lasers in there for you.”

And it was alarming to be seized by the god of thunder, one hand on each shoulder, grip hard enough to bruise. The force in the man's voice, and in his eyes, and in his being as he shook Tony put an end to the rest of the teasing that had lain on the tip of his tongue. “Anthony Stark, this is not a matter to be made light of.” Thor took a breath in, and it was not entirely steady. “Please. You must grant me this favor.”
“Yeah,” Tony found himself saying, bewildered and a little freaked out. “Yeah, sure. Drainage off to the side.” He put one hand over Thor's and eased his teammate's grip free- turned back to the hologram and added a few sketchy ideas before stepping back to look it over. The draft was a bit like a very big, very solid basketball hoop with a pipe sticking out from one end. “Something like this?”

The god of thunder looked at the display, raised a finger to trace the hoop's stand. “Something lies beneath. The solid line here must be altered.”

Tony turned back to the model, and when it had begun to take on the proper shape with a few deft touches of his fingers, he saw Thor nod in approval from the corner of his eye. “Just so. And be cautious, when you select the material from which you will craft. The venom it must hold is damaging to the flesh.”

“Corrosive, huh? What are we dealing with, some kind of acid?” Tony frowned at the drain on the holographic display- frowned at the measurements, and the shape. “Just what the hell do you need this for, anyway?”

But Thor did not answer. He was already moving for the door. “I must not linger,” said the god of thunder. “Will your work be complete on the morrow?”

“Kinda pushing it. You came to the master, but I can't pull an H. G. Wells, here.” Tony flicked his fingers apart and the model tripled in size; he began tapping away at the dimensions larger than life in glowing green, narrowing in on the details. “It's gonna be a few days.”

He was so busy concentrating on the screen that he almost missed the way his teammate's brow drew together in worry, the way he lingered after saying he couldn't. “I have faith that you will succeed,” said the god of thunder. “Perhaps this H. G. Wells holds talent, but never have I known a craftsman of your like.”

Tony barked a laugh and shook his head. “Ah, screw it. It'll be like college. I'll make eighty pots of coffee and call out for pizza.”

For the first time since he had set foot in the workshop, Thor smiled- broad and grateful, but a complicated expression all the same. “I am in your debt,” he said, and inclined his head.

As he was turning to go, Tony wondered what it was supposed to mean when a god bowed to you.

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“Jesus Christ,” gasped Tony Stark, when he had finished puking in the pitch black of wherever the hell his teammate had brought him, “What is that smell?”

Whatever it was, it was the worst thing he'd ever smelled, close and cloying. It reeked of sickness and infection and shit, of damp and mold, of coppery blood and the weird, reptilian stink he usually associated with the zoo. He held a hand over his mouth and nose to try and block it out, but the combination of the sudden stench and the sleep he'd lost finishing Thor's drainage system left him feeling dizzy and a little nauseated.

If Thor had heard his question, he didn't respond, and just as Tony was thinking things couldn't possibly be any creepier, just as he was beginning to wonder whether his teammate had brought
them to the wrong place, a noise drifted out of the darkness in front of them. It was a long, low keening sort of sound, like an animal in pain. It raised gooseflesh on Tony's arms, and he tightened his grip on the piping for the drain, just to give himself something to hold onto.

“Hurry up with that light,” he muttered to Thor- and as the words left his mouth, the god of thunder finally succeeded with the flashlight and a stream of white flooded the cavern. Because it was a cavern- a great, damp, dripping cavern, the walls slick with moisture, the ceiling somewhere out beyond the flashlight's glow.

Tony's mind took in none of these things in the first several seconds, however. Instead, it found itself preoccupied with the sight of the snake that loomed, head larger than his full height, suspended from what must have been an outcropping far above them. Its flat reptilian eyes stared blankly, giving no sign that it even registered their presence; its gaping mouth was partially open, and a thin stream of drool, milky white, slid steadily downward, dripping from fangs easily the size of his forearm.

“Why didn't you tell me to bring the suit?” Tony was hissing in the very next instant- was drawing back instinctively as though to fire repulsors that weren't there.

But Thor was not listening. Instead, he was approaching the massive creature, walking toward it as though it did not concern him, broad shoulders a hard line, head held up as though going out to face a battle.

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Distantly, as though through smoked glass, he registered that Thor had taken one of the prisoner's hands in his own. “The man of iron has completed his work,” the Asgardian said, voice somehow hoarse and gentle at once. “It is as I promised. All will be well, brother.” He spoke with a slight waver, paused as though to steel himself- repeated the words. “All will yet be well.”

Standing in a cavern that was meant to be a final resting place, surrounded by the reek of suffering, Tony Stark was sick again.
“No, straight means straight,” said Tony, and his voice was rough with tension. “Hold it, for fuck's sake.” And Thor already was keeping the drainage pipes at a perfect right angle to the base while they were connected, but the whole situation was a little more demanding, now that he knew it was to keep someone's face from being melted off- now that the face in question was a bloody ruin no more than two feet from where he worked. It had been a long time since Tony Stark's hands had shaken while he was in the middle of a project, but they did now.

“There. Christ. Okay, put it up.” The god of thunder seized the finished drain in both hands and hauled, lifting it bodily until it stood upright. It settled over the top of the outcropping of rock, standing on a tripod that straddled it with the massive catch basin situated above Loki's supine form. Tony watched his newest invention uneasily for a moment, checking for leaks, for instability, for signs that he might have to make modifications. But it held, and the slow trickle of thick white venom from the snake's mouth made it no further than the drain, turned aside from its intended target.

On the rock where he was bound, Loki's thin form shuddered and then lay still. Tony tried hard not to wonder whether that had been in relief, because the thought roiled his stomach. Yeah, sure, this was the nutjob who had tried to help himself to the whole Earth, but there were some things that just shouldn't have to be lived through. And this? This qualified.

Mission accomplished, Tony rounded on Thor with sudden force; he was sleep-deprived, shaken, feeling way over his head, and he'd walked into this without so much as a heads-up. “Time to talk. Spill it, big boy.”

“What more is there to say than that you have my thanks?” The man had taken his brother's hand in his own once more, now that the drain was standing. The grip was oddly gentle for a god who usually seemed the embodiment of power.

“Well,” snapped Tony, “you can start with why you dragged me here instead of just hauling him out in the first place. Then you can keep going and tell me why you didn't bother bringing him anything. Any metal bowl would've worked until I was finished.” Food wouldn't have hurt either, because holy hell, the body stretched out beside them was emaciated, every bone present and accounted for, easily visible. Blankets, clothes, medicine, water to drink or clean those wounds- any one of them would have helped ease the wait until the drain had been finished, and yet none were present. Vaguely, Tony realized he was becoming agitated- that he was being put in mind of a different cave, a place where he'd suffered, himself- but he could not separate the thoughts from the situation at hand, and the reckless energy remained.

“Our father was most thorough,” Thor replied, and did not meet his eyes. “These are bonds I have not the power to break, and when I travel to this place, I am allowed nothing to aid him. Did you
not wonder that you must carry the whole of it yourself?”

But he had lost Tony midway through the very first sentence. “Wait, what? Your father?”

“He rules as Asgard's king,” said the god of thunder, as though that were explanation enough. “The sentencing of prisoners is his duty.”

A sneaking suspicion began to form in the back of Tony's mind. It settled there like the snake coiled up above them, just as poisonous. “You're telling me this is an official punishment?” He said the words slowly, as though tasting them; if they'd had a flavor, it would have been bitter.

“What other? Your eyes bore witness, much as mine did.” Thor looked up at last, and his gaze did not waver, filled with hurt but not resentment. “This is what my brother has reaped for his crimes against Midgard.”

There was a long pause as the information sank in and turned itself over. “That was two years ago,” Tony said at last, flatly.

The hand holding Loki's tightened its grip in what may have been a reassuring squeeze. “I am aware.”

“You're saying he's been here for two years.” The tone was the same as before, inflectionless and dry, a shield against the horror creeping up unbidden.

There was a nod, and again Thor looked away, no longer willing to meet his eyes. “The time has not been kind to him.”

“You don't say.” Suddenly, the disbelief had stretched too thin, and Tony exploded, throwing his arms out as though to shove the situation aside. “You waited two years to come and get me? Not so much as a, "Hey, Stark, my dad kind of made the garden of Eden without the trees or the apple or anything but the snake?" I could've finished this drain when he still had a face!” But even now, Tony thought he could see where the skin was trying to heal, the places at the edges where the weeping wounds were beginning to dry and scab. Small wonder he had lasted so long, with an Asgardian's power of healing- but perhaps the strain had damaged the ability, for it was progressing slower than he had ever seen Thor recover.

“You think I meant him pain?” All at once Thor was rising- and there was the god of thunder, concern eclipsed in an instant by tempestuous rage. “Had I only my own whim to attend, I would have come immediately. I would have been at your door ere the sun had set on the first day.”

The charged reaction was enough for Tony to take a step back, but not for him to back down. “But? And?”

“But my brother has ever had a way with words,” said the Asgardian, reluctantly. “His arguments were most persuasive.”

“You're telling me he was lying strapped down to this rock, getting his face eaten off, and he told you not to do anything.” The skepticism was back in full force, razor-lined with the churning of his stomach.

“He feared that you would bring grievance to the All-father if I were to circumvent the terms. He feared that I would be banned from this place.” By slow degrees, the anger faded from Thor's posture, from the tension in his fists and the line of his jaw. In their place remained only a tired sort of melancholy, a protectiveness that showed in the way he had unconsciously angled his body between his brother and his teammate. “I'd little enough power to ease his pain, but I did what was allowed me. I brought him candles and claimed that they were for my use, as I stayed by his side. I
whiled his hours away with talk, when no other would look upon him.” The god of thunder turned to watch what remained of his brother's face with eyes both guilty and tender. “He had little, man of iron. He was loathe to risk losing it.”

The memories rose up unbidden, one after the next. A mission run long, and Thor anxious in its wake, not waiting to celebrate with the others but claiming business elsewhere. The god's refusal to speak of his brother after Loki had been returned home for sentencing, gagged and chained. An offhanded correction to Steve's idle curiosity, and a black look that had made little sense at the time. “I go not to Asgard,” Thor had told them more than once. “I have other duties to attend.”

Tony was silent as it all slid into place, snapped and latched like a puzzle cube finally provided with the answers. “I'm an asshole,” he said at last. “But Jesus Christ. I'm not that much of an asshole.”

The confusion was genuine when it came, which made it all the worse. “The people he wronged were your people. You would be within your rights for seeking redress were I to intervene.”

“Oh, hey. Look at that. You did, and I didn’t.” Tony glanced at the figure that lay beside them, unmoving save for the slow rise and fall of its too-thin chest. Unconscious, he thought- and probably better off for it. “Look. You've got your drain, and I'm not about to tattle to daddy. The important thing is, we've got a loophole here, and you had better plan on exploiting the everloving fuck out of it.”

Thor followed Tony's gaze to his brother, a crease furrowed in the center of his brow. “I do not know the hole of which you speak, nor the loop that surrounds it.”

“Intervention,” Tony told him, impatient. “You just said it yourself. You can't bring anything in to aid him, but apparently I can. Other people, too, I bet. So you're going to march right the hell back to Earth and get Banner.” Tony Stark advanced like a man possessed, unwilling to think that perhaps the situation had struck a bit too close to home, in the areas of his own worst nightmares that he still overlooked when he was able. He refused to examine too closely the way his stomach declined to settle, or the fact that it felt like something sharp and unyielding had caught itself in his throat. He merely acted- seized the god of thunder by one wrist and hauled to get him moving. “You tell him what to expect, so he doesn't go green on us when he gets here. And you tell him to bring equipment. Lots of equipment.”

Thor hesitated, reluctant. “And if Banner seeks out the All-father?”

“No one's gonna run off to His Majesty de Sade.” Tony's stare was uncompromising. “Newsflash, buddy. Stuff like this? This doesn't fly on Earth. You want people who're gonna keep a secret, let me tell you: no one's gonna rat you out on this one.”

Thor spared one final glance for the fragile body lying bound beneath the serpent. “You will remain by his side?”

No, Tony wanted to say. Oh hell no. He didn't want to stay in the reeking, claustrophobic darkness with a monster poised above him and the shell of a man he'd hated chained beside him, in agony. But hatred only took you so far, and some things, Tony Stark had always believed, need doing- whether you want to do them or not. “I gotta make sure this thing's not going to leak,” he said at last. “He doesn't look like he can take a whole lot more.”

“Have faith, man of iron. My brother has ever been stronger than he seems.” Thor's smile was an odd mixture of despairing and proud both at once, and from a pouch within his cloak, he drew the small device he'd used to bring them here. He twisted an outcropping in the metal with broad fingers- and then he was gone, leaving Tony alone with the prisoner.
Well, he told himself. Business first.

So Tony circled the drain to check it from each side—made sure the piping was secure—backed away to make certain it was wide enough to catch all the stray drops. When he was done, he approached the prisoner's bound form again, unable to stop watching the rise and fall of the man's chest. It was shallow and weak, the kind of motion that didn't look like it could keep going for much longer.

“Hey,” said Tony. “You awake?” There was no response, but by the way Loki's lips had been eaten away, he suspected that might be because there wasn't much tongue inside any longer. Was it because his brother was no longer able to talk him out of it, Tony wondered, that Thor had finally come to him? If the venom had not done its work there, too, would this have carried on another year?

It was a thought he didn't want to have—and to shut it up, Tony stepped forward and dug in his pocket for a clean grease rag, one he'd brought for the trip but not needed. It wasn't much, but like Thor had said, it had been awhile since Loki'd had much of anything.

“Hold still a sec. Lemme see if I can get some of this off.” Then he began, as gently as he was able, to mop the poison from the god of mischief’s ruined face.
Time, Tony Stark had always believed, was a thing to be measured. Time came in minutes, in seconds; it had allotted lengths. Time was in the glowing green digital displays that greeted him in the morning when he woke and in Jarvis' calm voice telling him what hour it was when asked.

Time was not supposed to be like this, fixed and incalculable. It was not supposed to be marked by the steady drizzle of venom into the drain above him or the shallow rasp of tortured breathing. He had no clock with him, but he knew- it had been too long. Finding Banner ought to have been a simple task, and though gathering the necessary equipment might have taken longer, Thor should have been back by now. He should have been back some time ago.

Yet here was Tony, alone with the god of mischief, listening to the sound of his own voice as he talked about everything that could fill the silence. He talked about his business, about the Avengers, about Thor. He talked tech, modern jargon that probably made little sense to an Asgardian god. He talked hobbies- his own, at first, and then when that ran dry he went on to guess at Loki's. He talked about pets- he'd never had one- and girlfriends- he'd lost count. And when safe topics ran out, when topics he could retreat behind had been all used up, Tony talked about the things he probably should have said first. “Your brother won't be much longer,” he told the prisoner. “Banner's coming, too- bringing some things. We'll put in a couple of blankets, some pillows. It'll be like Better Homes and Gardens in here.” He paused- lifted his gaze deliberately toward the drain so that he wouldn't have to look at the emaciated body beside him as he continued. “Get you an omelet or something, too. Hate to tell you this, but you look like you could use one.”

Tony had wondered whether the man was conscious enough to be aware, whether the things he said were making any impact at all. But Loki reacted at this point, pulled weakly at the bonds, one hand opening and closing rhythmically as though grasping. For an instant, Tony thought he was asking for the promised food now, and irrational guilt reared up at the knowledge that he would have to be the one to tell him to wait. Before he'd worked up the courage to try, though, Thor's brother was moving again- was shaking his head, mindless and repetitive. It was plain he scarcely had the strength to do it, and yet Loki continued, back and forth, vehement in his refusal.

And it was a refusal, Tony realized. The moment of understanding spread through him like a sliver of ice dipped in poison: he wasn't asking for the food, but telling Tony no. He'd offered the man nothing more elaborate than a few badly needed creature comforts, offered him nothing more than he should have had anyway, and that offer was being turned away.

Tony had been trying not to look at the bloody wreckage that was the prisoner's face, but he looked now- noted that the raw wounds had begun to recede, leaving behind them the tender pink flesh of a newly-healed sore. When Loki licked at his lips, the tongue too had that delicate, freshly-recovered look about it. There was enough of a face to have an expression, and that
expression was tense, was wary and pained. The strange, hoarse rasping sound that came from Loki's throat was barely recognizable as human. It was, Tony reflected with the sinking twist of regret, probably what trying to talk sounded like when you've had your tongue and throat scorched out and haven't had any water in two years.

Tony forced himself to ignore the way his chest tightened suddenly, the way sympathy and guilt coalesced into something stronger than either. He reached out, almost casually, to pat Loki on a too-thin hand. “Look,” he said, “Maybe you were still out when I told Thor, but all this? Whatever we bring, whatever we do, your dad's not gonna know. Only us Earthlings, far as the eye can see.”

But Loki shook his head again, more insistently this time- made another sound low in his throat, rough and incomprehensible.

“Stop saying no. The right answer's yes.” The strength in his own voice surprised him- and the conviction. “If you think I'm gonna walk in here and see all this and walk right back out again, you've got another thing coming.” The prisoner's hand was not quite steady; it had begun to tremble, just a little. “You like tricks, right? Here's your shot. You get to break all the rules without breaking a single one.”

There was a moment's hesitation- a slight twitch that might have been the hand beneath his trying to pull away, or possibly to return the gesture. And then, slowly, Loki's newly-reformed mouth twisted up into a bitter farce of a smile. A different sound forced itself from the man's throat, even as the god of mischief continued to shake his head- not one harsh rasp but many, a pained staccato that ended in a dry, wheezing cough.

Not speech this time, Tony realized. Laughter.

“Yeah, yeah,” he told the god of mischief. “Laugh it up. Doesn't change that we're gonna re-enact Shawshank Redemption, here.”

It was not until some time later, after the prisoner had quieted and Tony had begun to comb chunks of dried blood from the man's matted black hair with his fingers, that he realized he'd promised an escape.

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“The hell took you so long?” Tony Stark demanded when, an interminable amount of time later, Thor reappeared with the small metal device in one hand. It was not Banner that stood behind him, as requested, but Rogers.

The god of thunder lowered his voice when he spoke- attempting not to disturb his brother, perhaps. “Banner was overwrought. The green one came to the surface, and time was spent in seeing him contained.”

“So Rogers.” Tony shifted his gaze to the soldier; he had a duffel bag slung over one shoulder and a ten-gallon water jug over the other, but he seemed to have forgotten both as he took in the scene. His mouth was slightly open, earnest blue eyes displaying the horror in real time as it started to dawn.

“As you say.” Thor inclined his head in agreement. “If this hole in the loop is the way you surmise, his ability to carry goods will rival any other's.”
Tony snorted. “More than rival. We could do worse, far as pack mules go.” He glanced his teammate over one more time, took in the way the duffel bag didn't bulge with hard lines or sharp angles. “Fifty bucks says he won't have half the tech I want in there, though.”

Thor regarded the bag thoughtfully. “I asked for those things my brother has need of, but if it is lacking, you may go yourself and find something more suitable.” The god of thunder began to walk, expecting with the unthinking pride of nobility that Tony would follow. He did, hooking a casual hand through the strap of Steve's duffel to tow him along. “How fares my brother?”

Tony indicated the prisoner with a flick of his thumb. “He's healing up. Seems like he knows what's going on around him, too.”

And the god of mischief was healing up. Already, where before there had been an anonymous mass of raw flesh, a face had begun to emerge. The mouth was fully formed now, the skin solid and unmarked; the nose up until high on the bridge had begun to heal over, and the forehead too, leaving only a wide swatch of skin around the eyes still slick with gore. The sores on Loki's top from the splattered venom had begun to knit together, rendering all but the deepest nearly mended. The ones underneath, where the rock had rubbed the flesh raw, didn't show the same progress— but Tony was willing to bet that as soon as they got something in there to cushion the weight with, those would close up, too. The god's breathing was stronger than it had been, and some of the tension had gone out of the frail form now that the pain had eased.

Thor drew up short at the sight of him, face some combination of genuine joy and reluctance to believe. Tony had seen that look before: it was the way hope looked, when it came out of hiding after too long. “Brother?” said the god of thunder. He reached Loki and took hold of his hand in the same motion, large fingers eclipsing the pale ones beneath them. “Does he speak the truth?”

The prisoner turned his head toward the sound of the question; the nod he gave was scarcely movement at all, but it was there.

“You have recovered much already.” Thor knelt beside the injured man, examined the places where the skin had begun to mend and then reached, with touching hesitancy, to trace the new flesh with his fingertips. “But fear not. We will yet restore you to full health.” The god of thunder lifted his gaze and cast it upon his teammates, an expression so full of pride and gratitude that Tony had to cross his arms and look away. “Father's restrictions do not hinder my companions in arms.”

“Oh, lord,” Steve Rogers was saying, somewhat distantly, as though the situation was just catching up to him. He could not seem to stop staring, face drained of color, visibly shaken. Remembering, maybe, Tony thought— remembering how close this came to things he'd seen before, back when it wasn't his ally that had slammed the door shut and thrown away the key.

But the experience of command was hard to shake, the need to act even in the face of extraordinary circumstances, and it wasn't long before Steve gathered himself and began to move, all purpose and good intent. He lowered first the water jug and then the duffel to the rock floor of the cave, unzipped the bag with a practiced hand. “Hang in there, soldier,” he told the god of mischief, and the tone he used brooked no argument. “Just hang in there. We'll have you out of here in no time.”

And maybe the duffel didn't have all the tech Tony could have hoped for, but it certainly did have a metal-cutting saw, one that was shortly in Steve's hand and working away at the shackle enclosing Loki's left wrist. Despite himself, Tony felt a grin steal over his face, narrow and wolfish, at about the same moment that he realized no one was saying anything like, “Hey, god who trashed downtown Manhattan here,” or even, “Fury's gonna dance on all our graves when he
finds out.

He wasn't sure when those things had ceased to matter, but there it was-if they wanted to keep the trickster contained, they could worry about it after they got him somewhere safe. He sure as hell wasn't going to be in any shape to run right away.

When Steve withdrew the saw a short time later and the shackle remained unscratched, Thor regarded the results with resignation but not surprise. “Did I not warn you, my friend? These bonds are not of ordinary metal. They are enforced by magic, and a simple tool will not undo them.”

It was Tony that answered, though-Tony who'd been struck with a sudden surge of inspiration. “If simple’s no good, guess we’d better make one with all the bells and whistles.” He stuck his hand out, palm up, and wagged the fingers. “Gimme the transporter, Mister Spock. I'll be in the engine room.”

Steve's mouth was drawn, and there was worry in the crease of his brow. Disappointment, too: he'd hoped it would work. “Think you can handle it? Magic's not really your style.”

“Maybe not casting it.” Tony leaned down toward the cavern floor- ran one hand over the surface until he found a small, flat rock. As he straightened, he tucked it into his pocket. “Breaking it I think I can handle.”

“Would that you can do as you say,” the god of thunder told him, solemnly, and handed over the device that he had used to transport them between locations.

“Since when do I brag and not mean it?” Tony scoffed- and with a twist of the metal knob, he was gone.
It was not in Steve Rogers’ nature to turn from a task, once he had decided upon it. He was a man who'd fought his way into the service of his country, pulled himself up hand over hand until at last they'd seen he meant what he said. He was a man who'd led charges against enemies that were nothing short of monsters, who'd faced down situations that ought by rights have killed him. He was a man who'd brought his plane down into the ocean and bid goodbye to the life he knew, never expecting to awake again.

He had stared unblinking into unfathomable danger more times than he cared to recall- and yet, as he fell to one knee beside the duffel bag on the floor of the cavern, he understood that the task he faced now was going to be a challenge of an entirely different level.

He was no stranger to what torture could do to a person. He'd seen the hollow cheeks and hopeless eyes in the faces of the men and women they'd let out of Buchenwald, had known the helpless feeling that came with watching the wreck that a once-healthy person could become. That same feeling reared up in him now, sharp and intrusive- the powerless need to make things right, mingled with the knowledge that this wasn't what he was trained to do. He was no doctor; he was no nurse. He excelled at combat, at orders, at decisive action. When it came to the end, to picking up the pieces and fitting them back together once more, his first impulse was to spirit the injured away, get the help so sorely needed, pass the task to hands more skilled than his own.

And yet here, in this dripping cave that stank of pain and terror, there was no one else. The cavalry consisted of an army captain and a warrior renowned more for brute strength than mercy, and between the two of them, they were going to have to suffice.

“Well,” Steve said, and he took a long breath in. “We'd better get started.” From the duffel bag he pulled a bowl, a bottle of antiseptic soap, and a handful of soft cloths. “What are the terms, exactly?”

Thor knelt beside him, began to aid in unpacking; a mug and a can of soup emerged. “Did I not tell you all?”

“You gave me an idea,” Steve said. He unscrewed the lid from the 10-gallon water jug, hefting it effortlessly up onto a shoulder so that he could pour some into the mug. “What I want to know is, now that this stuff's here, can you use it? I mean, you didn't bring it.” He pressed the newly-full cup into the god of thunder's broad hands. “You should be in the clear.”

It hadn't occurred to him; that much was plain in the slight widening of his teammate's eyes and
the sudden pleased determination that overran his face. “There is one manner only in which we might discover the answer.” Cradling the cup, Thor stood- and then paused before he could begin. “What of the tubes which carry nourishment? Did you not bring those, as well?”

“I took out the intravenous drip stuff after Dr. Banner lost control,” Steve told him, looking up to gauge the man's expression. “I don't know how to set it up, and I figured we'd better use the space for something we could handle.” He patted the bag of supplies as though to illustrate his point; the items clustered around it now were all decidedly low-tech. “I'll go back for another load when Stark checks in. If the doctor's okay by then, we can bring that, too.”

Thor inclined his head. “I also would be unable to make use of such things. It is as you say, Steve Rogers.” With that he continued on toward the prisoner- traced thick fingers over the recovered skin of the man's face with surprising tenderness. “Brother?” One of those powerful arms slid carefully beneath the back of Loki's head, angling it upward. “Do you yet remain awake?”

The nod that came in reply was scarcely there at all- the barest breath of motion- but Thor seemed to take comfort from it, if the warm affection printed plain across his features was anything to judge by. “There is water aplenty,” he said, and held the mug to his brother's lips.

Steve, in all honesty, had not given much thought to what would come next. The prisoner needed water, and they had water to give him; of course he would take it. Instead there was a moment when it looked as though Loki was attempting to turn away, mouth tightly closed. The combination of the restraints, Thor's supporting arm, and the trickster's evident weakness doomed the effort from the start, but he twisted from the offered cup all the same, struggling to avoid it. Steve paused in the midst of recovering the can-opener to frown at the response, unsettled by it. Thor must have taken note, as well, for he chided softly: “All will be well, brother. You need not deny yourself.”

But it wasn't until Thor tipped the mug up a little, letting the water slosh against Loki's mouth, that the restrained man parted his lips to accept it with a small shudder, as though a battle of wills had just been lost. Once begun, the prisoner's reluctance evaporated; his throat worked as he gulped, face lined with plain desperation.

Steve looked aside from the brothers, from this simple kindness with so profound an effect, and could not ignore the hot, sharp flare of sympathy that speared his chest. He fixed his gaze on the can-opener still clutched in his hand and ignored the burning at the corners of his eyes as he reached for the can of chicken soup. He could hear the sounds that Loki made- strange hitching noises between swallows- but worse yet was what came when Thor took the cup away. It was something that Steve suspected the prisoner would never, ever admit had been a whimper, if he spoke of this day at all.

“Peace, brother,” Thor was telling him. Steve caught movement from the corner of his eye as he began to work the can open and realized the Asgardian had set the mug down so that he could stroke his brother's hair. “Be still a moment, and more will be yours. I would not have you ill.”

The low, hoarse croak that came in reply, Steve realized with a start, was the prisoner trying to speak. No words were discernible; it was a string of rough noise, no more and no less, and Loki shook his head weakly where it lay cradled in the crook of his brother's elbow.

“It must be so,” the thunder god told him, and there was an apology in the words.

Steve peeled up the top of the can, twisted until the last thread of metal snapped, and stuck a spoon in it. He reached up to set it beside the cup of water, wishing there was a way to heat it. It would have been better if they had thought to bring something- but when it came down to it, Loki probably wouldn't care much either way. Whatever they gave him, Steve's mind was grimly
insisting, would probably taste like the best thing in the world. “Soup's on,” he said, and turned back toward the supplies so that he could scrub the back of one hand roughly over his eyes.

He did not watch as Thor allowed his brother more water, a bit at a time; he concentrated instead on working open a bottle labeled Tylenol PM, the text on the front promising pain relief and aid in sleeping. Three of the little blue pills he pressed between his palms, crushing them until they were powder. The results went into another cup with water; he stirred it with his finger and switched it out for the half-empty one from which Loki had been drinking. “It's supposed to help with pain,” he told Thor's questioning glance.

That finished, he concentrated on filling one of the larger bowls with water and liquid soap. Whether Loki healed quickly or not, the residue of that poison might still be on his skin, and as soon as the trickster had some sort of nourishment in him, Steve planned on making sure it wasn't.

As he dug in the duffel bag for more medical supplies- bandages and antiseptic cream, for the places where the rock had rubbed away the flesh and the shackles chafed at wrists and ankles- Thor set aside the cup and reached instead for the soup. He handled his brother with infinite care, as though he were a statue of spun glass, and his voice wavered slightly as he gave the simple instruction: “Eat now.”

There was a moment's resistance when Loki's mouth remained pressed tight shut, trembling- an attempt at refusal. Steve glanced up from what he was doing to take it in and found himself disquieted, wondering what it must take to prompt the sort of self-restraint that required. It took a repeat of the earlier tactic- a careful smearing of the soup across the trickster's lips- before a tentative tongue ventured forth to taste it. From there, the man needed no encouragement; he welcomed the mouthfuls with heartbreaking eagerness until, after no more than a handful, his body rebelled and he began to retch.

Thor rearranged his brother's head carefully to one side in case the soup came up- set down the can so that he could stroke Loki's shoulder until the moment had passed. But the heaves were dry, and the prisoner subsided shakily, the hard-won sustenance still where he needed it.

“Rest a time,” Thor advised him. “Let us see to your other needs, and when your stomach has become accustomed to the weight of food once more, there will be time enough to see you get your fill.”

There was no visible reaction to that; the prisoner lay limp, as though exhausted by the ordeal. Now was as good a time as ever, though, and Steve dipped one of the soft cloths in the soapy water, pausing to lather it. “Loki?” he said, and there was the slightest shift as the prisoner tipped his face in that direction. “I'm going to clean you up now, okay? You're kind of a mess, and that stuff might still be on your skin.” He had not expected an answer- had half expected dissent, after the aborted efforts to turn aside Thor's help- but instead he received a slight nod.

“Okay,” Steve said. And then, because he thought it fair to give the man some warning: “I'm going to start now.”

It was not an easy task. The prisoner's skin was caked with years of filth- dirt and dried blood, the residue of poison and the leavings of his own body. Steve was as gentle as he was able, and when his teammate joined in to help, Thor was equally as cautious, but still Loki seemed ill at ease with the contact. He alternated between leaning into the touches and shying from them, and Steve absolutely forbade his brain from trying to analyze that too much, because he was afraid he knew exactly what it meant.

Loki's back and buttocks and the underside of his thighs proved more challenge than all the rest combined. They were the places where his wounds had not closed- and they were the places most
difficult to reach, as well. After a brief discussion, Thor slid both hands beneath his brother's frail form and lifted him enough for Steve to clean the parts that had lain against the rock, careful not to pull him so high that the shackles caused undo pressure from the change in position. Steve cleaned the injuries carefully- wiped the skin until it was ghastly pale with livid red instead of mottled dark brown and black- and then he scrubbed the rock beneath as well, sluicing off years of accumulated grime. When he was finished, he toweled it dry- toweled Loki's back dry- and asked Thor to hold him a minute longer.

To apply the antiseptic and bandages, he had to kneel to peer beneath the trickster in order to see what he was doing, and the light was such that even then, visibility was poor. Still, he managed to cover the largest of the sores- and when he was done, he retrieved a trio of flat, square pillows from the duffel bag. They slid beneath the man's bound form, precisely as intended, and when at last Thor lowered his brother once more, there were no jagged edges. And if some of the tension went out of Loki's frame at that, if a slow, shaky sigh of relief escaped him when he realized what had been done, Steve couldn't really blame him.

Not much could be managed with his wrists and ankles; tight as the shackles were, cleaning beneath them was an impossibility, so Steve settled for running soapy water beneath them and rinsing it out again. While he did, Thor tended his brother's face. He made sure the jawline was clean and rinsed, wiped the back of his brother's neck and the creases in his ears. The area around the eyes, where the wounds were still raw and glistening, he tended to with ginger caution, reaching to take hold of his brother's hand when the pain of it caused him to pull away.

Then Thor filled a second bowl with soap and water so that he could wash Loki's hair, working free the clumps of blood with an attentiveness that Steve would never have imagined possible from his teammate before this day. And when at last they had finished, when at last the man before them was beginning to look more like a person and less like a maltreated animal, Steve knelt beside the duffel bag to search for a blanket- pulled it free and settled it atop him.

“There,” Steve told him. “Still some room for improvement, but that ought to hold until we get you out of here.” He reached out a hand to adjust the newest addition, tugging the blanket down to cover Loki's feet.

“My friend.” Thor was tucking a pillow beneath his brother's head, but his eyes were on Steve's face, and there was something both fond and troubled in his eyes. “I scarcely dare speak of how long I dreamed this possible. You have my thanks, from now until the end of days.”

“You don't have to say thank you for something like this,” Steve told him, somber and intent. “It kind of comes hand in hand with things like human decency.”

Thor nodded, but he glanced away, and Steve suspected the agreement wasn't necessarily understanding. After all, if you grow up in a place where your father's allowed to lock your brother away in a cave for a few years- if you grow up in a place where things like that are acceptable- a few words probably didn't go very far toward reassuring.

But that was okay with Steve. He'd always been better with actions than words, anyway- and so he reached for the can of soup that rested beside the prisoner. “You ready to try and eat a little more?” he asked Loki.

And this time, the resistance did not come at all. This time, the trickster nodded his assent.
Recollection

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Hoo boy. Sorry this one took forever. I had a bunch of things that needed my attention first come up. In addition, this chapter is not what I started out to write when I began it; it was going to be more in the present, from Thor's point of view, but then I realized that just jumping in with that didn't give enough background with where he was coming from, so... yeah. This happened. Sorry for things not progressing much. _._.a

The god of thunder had lived for thousands of years; he had crushed in the skulls of his foes with the might of Mjolnir, and he had stepped upon glistening entrails in the heat of battle, thinking nothing of it. He had seen his brother injured before, struck down in the midst of a fight or punished at Father's hand for whatever new mischief he had conjured.

And yet what had come to be these past two years- the slow disintegration of one who had once been more to him than all the nine realms combined- struck him in ways he dare not name, clawed at him inside until the unaccustomed ache of it had tailed him with every breath. Thor had been worshiped, once, by the humans of Midgard. He had been hailed as the mightiest warrior the Nine Realms had ever known. Nothing, it was said, could stand before him if he willed it gone- and yet this remained. This accursed cave, dark and foul. The thrice-bedamned serpent, whose neck he was not allowed to snap. His brother: clever Loki, brilliant Loki, with laughing eyes and a quick smile, with sharp tongue and witty pranks, with words of love before the madness had stolen him away. His brother, sealed from sight and forgotten, left to suffer until the layers of what he had once been were peeled from him.

Thor had ever been impatient- ever discontent to find that his actions made no immediate change- but these past two years had schooled him in futility. Father would not hear his words of plea; Mother, despite all his efforts, remained either unwilling or unable to sway the All-father to his cause. And so he had come, day after day, to this place of darkness. He had done what little was allowed him to keep the prisoner's pain at bay, had watched as he slipped further into need, further into the slow grip of ceaseless torment. He had spoken to Loki daily, words not of enmity but of comfort, of affection- and his task, he found, had been made all the harder when his brother had at last broken his stubborn silence and begun to respond.

In the beginning, the words that left Loki's lips had been horrors of spite and vitriol, sharp enough to cut. Where an opening presented itself, he thrust his attacks in, deadly as any dagger- and more than once the force behind them had driven Thor away earlier than he intended to go. Loki's tongue had ever been a weapon honed to a razor edge, and even now, bound as he was, it did as much damage as ever.

It was then, during the first few months, that the god of thunder had mentioned thoughts of turning to the Midgardians for aid- but the laugh that came in response was a terrible thing, jagged and brittle. “If you wish not to waste your time tending a prisoner, Odinson, you need not stage a breach of rules in order to be barred.” Loki's eyes had not been gone yet, then; they lingered on, damaged but visible, their propensity to heal not yet worn down by the exhaustion of years. They glinted in his face, vicious and triumphant all at once. “Simply go.”
But Thor had not gone. He had remained the entire afternoon, and each one consecutive for a week to follow. And perhaps he had allowed hope to lead him astray as so oft had been the case before, but thereafter his brother seemed more apt to lie still and listen, more apt to respond with words not angled to injure. The bladed replies were still as dangerous as ever, but Loki had, at long last, thought to see them sheathed.

The fight leeched away, day by slow day, until what had once been a battle could not rightfully be named such any longer. But in its place, nothing rose, and when he ceased to speak, the drizzle of the venom and the restless shift of his brother as he sought to bear the pain without crying out became unbearable. Thor found himself, in the silence, beginning to catalog every glistening wound that the foul liquid had inflicted upon his brother's form, counting the days since last food or water had passed his brother's lips.

And so he spoke: not in defense, as had become his wont since Loki's mind had wandered astray, nor even in declarations of brotherhood. He spoke instead of simple things—of things he knew his brother enjoyed, of places favored in their youth, of people he supposed his brother might ask after. There were times when Thor misjudged, when some harmless recollection or the mention of a name might stir the depths of whatever rage had fueled his brother's lapse into insanity, but more and more often, Loki allowed him to smooth the mistake over, to proffer an apology and carry on. Thor did not like to dwell on the notion that perhaps this was because his brother's suffering had weakened him too greatly. He did not like to consider that this acquiescence, this complacency may have come to be only because he had not the strength to make the protests more fervent. But he could not be rid of the thought, once it had planted its roots within his mind.

"Brother," Thor ventured again one day, when the worry had plagued him all the night, “will you not let me go to the man of iron? It will be nothing for him to make a bowl of metal to catch the snake's poison.” He had touched his brother's hand, then, for he had found that of late the attempt did not draw vicious insults in return. “His craftsmanship is not only hardy, but quick- and then you will be able to find some measure of peace.”

Loki had turned his head slowly in the direction of his brother, an act of habit only, for there were nothing but wet holes where his eyes had been. His voice was rough when he spoke, now— a harsh rasp. “You were in earnest,” he said at last, as though the idea had only just occurred to him. Thor set his jaw, stared at his brother's tortured form in the dimness of candlelight and willed him to agree. “Rarely have I been more earnest about anything.”

That thin, pale hand twitched beneath his. “Consideration of Heimdall's watchful eyes aside, what did you intend when your metal man turned to the All-father?” Loki paused and swallowed, licked at his lips in an effort to wet his mouth. There were not eyes any longer to watch Thor, thoughtful and calculating, the way he had so often before, and yet the thunderer felt the weight of his attention all the same. “Surely you've not forgotten I laid waste to their city.”

“Then we will ask another,” Thor insisted. “One who knows not your face.”

Perhaps the noise that followed was meant to be a laugh; it came out more than half gurgle, though, for Loki opened his mouth at precisely the wrong instant and some of the venom found its way inside. He coughed- retched- thrashed and spat, the pain in a place usually untouched rubbing raw against the layers of pain already stacked so thick. He subsided at last, breathing hard, before finally making his reply. “You would,” he began, but the words were liquid and strange, indistinct. He spat blood and tried again. “You would set some unsuspecting wretch in the path of the All-father's rage?” The ragged flesh around the hole that was his brother's mouth twisted upward, the mockery of a smile. “You are the one who claims to like the humans, are you not?”
“Brother, please,” Thor said. “I would that you allow me to try. If you care for them so little, surely you've no reason to protest.”

For it could work; this Thor knew. The device that enabled him to travel to this place was of Loki's own make- doubtless of the same magic that allowed him to slip undetected between worlds even by the all-seeing eyes of the Bifrost's guardian. He could convince Anthony Stark, given time. Perhaps he could even convince a stranger. His brother did not know the humans as he did, did not understand the way they made it custom to help those weaker than themselves. Father would never have to know, and thus any human to come to their aid would be spared.

What his brother suffered was justice, without a doubt- it had been decreed by the Father of Men, which made it so- but it would be punishment enough to remain here, would it not? The slow starvation, the bite of metal into wrists and ankles, the isolation, the immobility. Any of these things alone would be punishment enough, and surely any mortal could be swayed to think that these would suffice.

But Loki had grit his teeth to ride through a fresh wave of pain and shook his head, the slightest of motions. “Perhaps you've failed to notice, but I have little good will to squander. Provoking the All-father seems a poor decision.”

“That stands in your favor,” Thor insisted, and in his excitement he tightened his hold on the hand beneath his, squeezed it in encouragement. “You risk losing nothing, for you've nothing to lose.”

The answer did not come all at once; there was a pause, as though Loki weighed whether he wished to share his thoughts. “There is one thing,” he said at last, reluctant.

But try as Thor might to convince him, he would not say what it was- and nor would he be swayed.

It was not until near six months later, an eternity in which he'd watched his brother slip incrementally away, that at last he heard his answer.

Perhaps the strain while Thor had been away seeing to the threat imposed by the Doctor of Doom had stretched his brother thin. Perhaps being alone with the pain and hunger for near a fortnight had worn down his reserves- clouded his judgment.

Whatever the case, when again Thor proposed asking aid of his allies the mortals, Loki's response was immediate. He did not snap the reply, as he might once have, for it pained him to speak- but still there was a firmness to the response, a determined air. “Banish the thought from your mind,” he said. “It will bring nothing but ill fortune.”

“Loki,” Thor began, and moved nearer so that he might take the hand of the bound form. It brought some measure of comfort, he thought, and of late he had begun to initiate the contact more often. “Brother. It pains me to see you this way. Allow me to act. What can you possibly fear from Father? He's left you nothing.”

There was a pause, and when the words came, despite the rasping, unsteady quality, they were perfectly clear. “He allows me visitors.”

It was so like his brother, to work his way around it. So like Loki, proud and independent, to phrase it just that way. He could not say outright that he would lose Thor, could not make it something so sentimental. He chose instead to turn it into this, a listing of rights, as though he had other visitors, other people who came to tend him, others who cared to ease his suffering.

Thor had swallowed hard against the ache in his throat- swallowed again, and been glad of the
fact that Loki could not see his face. “Verily. He does, at that.” And a moment later, the
concession had come: “As you will. I’ll not speak to the humans.”

And yet he had. When the poison had finally taken his brother's tongue and all Loki could manage
was a shake of his head at the proposal, Thor had gone- had appeared in Anthony Stark's room of
creations and offered the most honest entreaty made in thousands of years of life.

And here were the results he had reaped: his brother, at long last nearly healed, lying restfully on a
bed of pillows. His brother, with blankets to keep him warm and food in his stomach, asleep
without the pain to wake him. It was more than he had anticipated. More than he had thought to
ask of the mortals, even in his belief that they would offer some respite. He did not know what it
was that made these men, his companions, so willing to offer a shield to one who had done them
wrong, but perhaps the reasons mattered not. For the moment, the fact that they had done it at all
was balm to the place within him that had not lain still since his brother's torment had begun.

The sense of peace that had come upon him did not last overlong, however- for the quiet in the
serpent's cavern was interrupted by the sound of Loki's voice, the first he'd spoken since his
tongue had been restored him. The words were crooked and broken, feeble as an ailing child.
“You think yourself clever,” he said, and it was scarcely a whisper.

“I think myself foolish,” Thor corrected. “Your counsel has been wise in many things, brother, but
I wish I had not taken it in this. Would that I had acted sooner.”

“Ah, yes.” Loki paused to take in breath. “Your humans, with their loops and holes. They think
themselves clever, as well, no doubt.” He licked at his lips, chapped but whole. Finally, blessedly,
whole. “But tell me, brother. What of Heimdall?”
“But tell me, brother.” Loki’s words were pointed, intent. “What of Heimdall?”

Silence flooded in, unreadable; in this world of enforced darkness, with no eyes to guide his way, nothing to help him gauge his surroundings, silence had become a bane the god of mischief had not known before.

While his brother spoke, there were cues for him to follow: hitches in tone, pauses and emphasis, hesitations. Never before had Loki been so attuned to the sound of Thor's speech, but in the endless hours of pain, he had grown to read it much as he had once been able to read the implications of his brother's expression.

“Do not jest of such things,” Thor said at last. And there it was, the gems of information that he wished to mine. Alarm, barely concealed. Surprise- had the question startled him? Perhaps it had been an honest omission, then. “Were Heimdall able to see through your magics, he would doubtless have summoned Father already. We have nothing to fear from his quarter.”

“Who's Heimdall?” came the voice, rising up from the place where the mortal Steven Rogers had settled himself. This one was harder to read, for Loki did not know the man as precisely, and he spoke like the soldier he was- all business, brusk even when he was gentle. And to Loki’s suspicion, the man had been gentle, moreso than ever he might have supposed. He had been accommodating and strange, as though a few extra moments of discomfort might break Loki where years of agony had not- as though a few kind words might smooth over the impending catastrophe. But if his question was genuine, perhaps he did not know what was to come, after all; perhaps he was in earnest.

“Asgard's sentry,” came Thor's voice, in reply. There was a pause- as he decided whether to add the rest, most likely. “He sees all and hears all. Nothing in the Nine Realms exceeds his reach.”

“But you think this place does?” The mortal was not curious, but efficient. Collecting information, the way a competent person might before acting.

“My brother's magic is the only thing known to turn his watchful gaze aside,” Thor told him. “The device responsible for bringing us here is of Loki's make.”

And there they were: all his answers, collected in one neat bundle. His brother, ever well-intentioned and thoughtlessly negligent both at once, had managed the combination again. It would have been amusing, had it not been enough to twist his stomach. For it was absurd that such a foolish assumption could cut so deep: he was Loki Liesmith, the trickster god whose plans held plans within them, and yet here he was, at the feet of the failure of the worst plan there ever was.
“That is what shores up the walls of your confidence?” Loki’s words were low and shaking, bereft of anything resembling Thor’s self-possession. And this, this was no act at all; he could not seem to make himself steady, could feel his limbs trembling to match his voice. “You might have asked me. I could have told you that the device is for travel only.”

“You mean to say that it shields nothing?” He could hear the shock in Thor’s voice- could hear something resembling the beginnings of horror. In another time, in another place, he would have taken pride in evoking that mixture of emotions, but here and now they only echoed his own.

“I mean to say,” Loki said, ignoring the ache that warned him of a throat too long parched becoming overtaxed, “that keeping hidden from the likes of Heimdall requires a spell all its own.”

The captain must have moved nearer. When he spoke, his voice was close at hand. “So, you think this guy’s going to tell your father we’re here?”

“I think nothing.” Despite his efforts, Loki’s voice still shook; he could not seem to keep it steady, could not bring it under rein now when most he needed to. “Merely to think it implies a level of doubt.”

He would have given much to know his brother’s reaction, but he could imagine it all the same- the way fear would settle in around the edges of one not given to fear much of anything. Thor had ever been poor at masking what he felt, and the grip of his fingers tightening over Loki’s own was sign enough even for one without eyes. “We will find a way to prevent the news reaching Father.”

Loki paused before he spoke, schooling himself to something more level, more controlled. What came out was thin and wavering, rough with the state of his body’s weakness, but firm all the same. “You would interfere with the watchman in the performance of his duty?”

There was no pause before the answer came. “I will do what it takes. I’ll not see you punished for my transgression.”

Loki felt his lips twitch in the beginnings of a smile. “And yet you’ve sent the humans away with your only means of leaving this place.”

There was a sound from the mortal soldier, then, not easily identified. An intake of breath, perhaps- surprise? He did not know the man well enough to guess at the response, and the sightlessness rankled, left him in uncertainty. “They’ll be back,” he said. “And sooner rather than later. Stark’s pretty quick when it comes to solving problems.”

“Forgive me for not being reassured.” He did not add: for not trusting to a man who has tried to kill me. He did not add: for being too cynical to expect such a simple solution. He did not speak them, but he thought them all the same.

He had snatches of memory of the metal man’s voice while he had drifted in and out of consciousness, barely aware of anything save the damage the poison had wrought. He recalled inane words spoken in awkwardness, a cleansing touch that brought a brief flare of agony and then the beginnings of relief. He had not been well enough then to attempt to determine the man’s motivations- had not, through the pain, even thought to try. But whether his aid was genuine or false, it did not change the simple fact that a spell crafted by the All-father would not be so easily set aside. The bonds were marked by potent magic; Loki at his most powerful would have been hard-pressed to undo the spell crafted therein. To assume a mortal could manage it, and manage it with time enough to keep this news from Odin’s ears was a jest that danced the borderlines of the preposterous.

But his brother was answering, as usual, without pause to consider the facts. “Steven Rogers
speaks true,” he said. There was force behind the words, as though by adding emphasis he might make them real, and the hand upon his own closed its grip in tighter, near hard enough to hurt. The pressure was not unwelcome. “The man of iron can do many things one would not think possible for a mortal.”

Ah. So it would be up to Loki, as ever it had been in their youth, to be the voice of reasonable doubts. It would be up to him to spell out for Thor the disasters that would come if the current path were to be followed to its end, as he had so many times when the crown prince had gone unthinking to some ill-advised adventure. The notion left an odd tightness at the back of his throat and in his chest, and when it occurred to him that this may be the last time he ever needed to do so, he tucked the thought carefully away once more. He had at last conquered the wavering of his own voice. He did not wish to invite it back.

“Even were I without question that your mortal could accomplish this thing,” he began, “could break a spell crafted by Odin’s own hand and intended to last into eternity- a human, without knowledge of magic, without training- even then, he must do so before Heimdall has brought the news to the All-father.”

Perhaps he had not been as successful as he had hoped. Perhaps there had been something in his voice- some small betrayal of the alarm that fluttered within him like night-moths- for there was a touch on his shoulder, not his brother’s large hand but that of the soldier. “He’ll get it done. He’ll make it back in time.”

More lies. Comforting lies, but lies all the same. “I only wonder at the fact that he is not too late already.”

“Brother-” Thor was touching his face, now, trying to ground him; the thick, rough pad of his thumb on the recently healed skin of Loki’s jaw made him acutely aware that the newly recovered flesh was more sensitive. When the venom came again, it would burn all the more.

“No. Silence. Nothing we say will make it one way or another.” His mind flickered ahead, ran through possibilities like water tumbling through a sieve, few of them palatable. Odin would bar this place, doubtless- would cast his brother and the soldier from its depths and seal it away, so that nothing remained but eternal dark, eternal pain, eternal silence. Mayhap he would devise some new torment to accompany the old, as well, would find a way to drive the situation that much further toward unbearable.

Loki swallowed and turned sightless eyes up toward the roof of the cave. There was nothing to be done. Nothing to be done but wait for one arrival or the next, and he knew which would have to come first.

“Brother,” Thor was telling him, voice low and earnest. “All will yet be well. You’ll soon be free of this place.”

They were only words. Empty words, meaningless words, words soaked in untruth until they dripped with it. Loki knew, for he knew all there was to know about lies, and Thor had ever been poor at crafting them.

The damage had already been done- had been wrought because his fool of brother had failed, as was his wont, to see the world the way it truly was. How very like Thor, to pin the future on a streak of brilliant optimism and let reality come to drown it out. How very like Thor, to leave his brother to pick up the pieces of what lay shattered in his wake.

He felt a smile twist his lips once more, felt the bitterness at the corners, took in the way it pulled at the damaged skin near his eyes when his face shifted. Soon, the damage would be everywhere
again. Soon, he would no longer have mouth enough to smile.

“Perhaps it is as you say,” Loki lied, to stop the argument from going farther. “Perhaps-” He broke off here, as though speech pained him. It was not much of an effort to pretend, for in truth it did; all that was needed for this little ruse was merely to drop the facade he’d clung to, to stop ignoring the raw, parched feeling of his own throat and tongue. He tried on a cough to make his point and realized it a poor idea when the action flew quickly beyond him—became a series of them, debilitating, wracking. When they subsided, Loki swallowed. The touch of his brother’s hand was on him still, and though he could not see with his accursed eyes not yet restored, he was willing to venture that he had garnered Thor’s attention.

“Have you no more water?” he rasped, and his voice was weak and strange, no pretense needed to make it so. As simply as that, the subject was changed, diverted from an argument that would waste what little time remained to him before Odin arrived to reinstate his punishment.

“Yes,” Thor told him. “Yes, of course. Forgive me, brother.”

What he wanted was his: the feel of the glass beneath his lips, sturdy and reassuring, and the cool spill of water, blessedly sweet as it trickled down his throat. This time, he had no need to deny himself; refusing it would not mend rules already broken, nor reassure the All-father, when he came, that one of them at least had been willing to keep to the terms. It was far too late for that—and so Loki merely drank, and reveled in the simple pleasure of it.

He had little enough time remaining to him. Before it was stolen from him, he intended to make use of whatever it might offer.
The world registered in snatches of consciousness, for something in the water that his brother had given him made sleep a welcoming prospect. He drowsed as the time slipped past despite his anxiety, woke to demand that Thor answer him, then drowsed again. The suspicion that he would wake to discover no answer at all lingered like a crouching demon within his mind— that Odin would come while he slept, would spirit away his brother and the mortal, would steal all they had brought and leave only the serpent behind.

And yet each time, his brother’s voice came to him. Each time, he was permitted a few mouthfuls of sweet, clear water and savory, delicious stew. Each time, the pain where his eyes had been grew a little less, until at last when he woke he felt a wet cloth against his eyelids and there was no pain to be had.

“Open your eyes, brother,” came Thor’s voice, near at hand, and the cloth made a final, careful swipe. “You look to be whole again.”

His eyes came open reluctantly, long unused- and in an instant he pressed them shut once more, closed against the light that speared them more surely than any blade.

Perhaps he had made some noise, some hiss of discomfort, for the soldier was speaking next: “Sorry. I didn’t even think about it. Lemme turn the flashlight.”

There was a shift, a rustle. The hand on his face must surely be Thor’s for he knew the size and roughness of it. “Try once more,” his brother said.

This time, the light was not so near- not so pressingly bright- and he could make out shadowy forms in the high arch of a cave that had become familiar to him long before he lost his sight. His brother’s face was near, plainly lined with concern even in the faint rays cast; behind him, the mortal stood as a silhouette against the mechanized torch that he had turned from them.

Even in these dim twilight shades, his eyes watered with unexpected use- but it had been long since he had last had light to look upon, and so Loki kept them determinedly open, told himself that there would be time enough for darkness after the All-father arrived.

“Functional,” he told the gathered pair, “though they burn with the light.”

A fair assessment- but while he lay yet awake, the need to see what damage had been wrought upon the rest of him occurred. It was a task he had not yet thought to confront, the results like as not to be difficult to bear, but now that he had recovered to a degree, it was no longer something reasonably postponed.

He had spent long in effort to ignore the pain, and to change his intentions now, to face it and catalog it, was harder than he had imagined. It was harder still for the strange, blissful lethargy had come upon him, a warm sensation as though swimming overlong underwater. In the first moments
of consideration, nothing at all seemed the matter. Had he not everything he needed, after far too long without it?

But that, Loki knew, was only the delusion of a body whose base needs had been met after a denial stringent enough to be cruel. That was his physical preoccupation with what he had as opposed to what he did not, and he wished facts instead of fancies. And so the god of mischief drew his mind around to that which it had become accustomed to blocking out: to the sores that lay beneath the shackles, still weeping, for they could not heal with the metal biting them continually open. To the burning pain in his left ankle, the place where he had yanked too hard in mindless struggle and broken the bone. That, too, had yet to repair itself, the position too awkward to allow it. His body remained skeletal, and every bite of food or sip of water wracked him with unbearable desire and set his stomach to roiling all at once. But more importantly than all of those, the cursed spell that sealed him into place, that stifled the magic thrumming through his veins, remained firm and strong.

The wounds and the ankle were trifles; even the hunger and thirst could be managed. It was this last that left him helpless as a babe, that stripped him of everything and rendered him powerless to escape. He thought that perhaps he had strength enough to shield himself, were the magics binding him removed. He thought that he had strength enough to run, to hide, to recover. He thought that he might leave this place, if the mortals could make good on their promise.

If. It was a foolish thought. A foolish hope. Had the All-father not taken so wretchedly long to reappear, he would not have entertained it at all, but each time he woke, half-conscious and certain that his brother would be gone, he allowed himself to suppose what might come to pass if the humans could in fact live up to their words.

And when his brother put a hand over his own, when the voice that had been the only voice he knew for two endless years spoke, he wanted very badly to believe it. “Sleep now,” Thor told him, and this time he could see the smile that accompanied the words, warm and reassuring. “Surely the man of iron will have returned when next you wake.”

He had been overrun with lies- been inundated with them- but each moment that passed without the All-father demanding his blood, he allowed his mind to wander a little further, to suppose what it was that had kept them from Heimdall's sight this long. Perhaps his brother was right, after all. Rare though the occurrence was, even Thor, with his simple idealism, had been known to predict correctly from time to time.

When he slept, it was with no less anxiety than before- but there was something else, as well, some spark that glowed like slow-burning wood within him, a yearning that he refused to name hope.

And when Loki woke, when his eyes struggled against the light to open once more and the cave was revealed to him, there were not two figures but three: his brother, the soldier, and the man of iron, kneeling beside the rock to which he was bound. In the man's hands was a contraption of what purpose he knew not, and his fingers moved like a gifted artist's on the strings of a harp, plucking here, adjusting there, complicated changes too fast for him to track while his mind was still slowed with medicines and weakness.

“Just about done,” Anthony Stark was saying, evidently unaware that Loki had awakened. “I mean, really. Not only is your dad a dick, he's kind of a presumptuous one. Sure we can't call lightning or anything flashy, but this was just asking for trouble.” The man looked up from his work, all confidence and competence, and half-turned to face Thor before noticing himself watched. Instantly, the self-assurance wavered- an unease that Loki would have made note of in any situation but this one, intending to exploit it. The human managed a facsimile of a recovery, a tight flash of a smile, before averting his gaze back to his work, pretending indifference.
“Welcome back, sleeping beauty.” He lifted a tool for plying, waved it back and forth as though he were a child with a favored toy. “Gimme another half an hour and we'll have you out of here. Kay?”

“Ah,” Loki managed. He intended to add more, but nothing else came forth, for an odd feeling rose unbidden, welled up like the heat of mulled wine on an icy winter's day. It settled into the back of his throat and refused to leave, a pressure tight enough to choke him. For a moment, it was force enough to leave him mute. “What manner of hole have you found in the loop, this time?” he said at last, after a pause far longer than he wished it. The words were strange and strangled, scarce his own at all.

It was Thor who answered, Thor with a broad hand on his own, Thor who had promised the impossible and somehow made it so. “He does not break the spell, brother. He merely works around it. Father did not pause to consider that the rock to which you were chained may be mighty, but not near so unbreakable as his magics.”

And so it was, for the human had switched on the device cradled in his hands like the tool of a master craftsman, and the slight whirring sound that issued forth intensified when what looked to be a small, spinning blade touched the rock.

“He intends to cut me out from under the All-father's bidding,” Loki found himself saying, tone all layers of wonder and disbelief. Had he been paying close enough attention, had he known what it was he wished to do, he might have constructed an angle, might have sought to sway the minds of the mortals who were his enemies- might have made a show of the very feeling which came to him, natural and unfeigned. But there was no time for it, nor ability, for he did not feel that he could have stopped the expression seeping across his face like the light that begins a sunrise, did not need to falsify that which was real.

“Our man of medicine awaits,” Thor was telling him. “A bed is prepared. It will not be long before your full strength is yours once more.”

Loki closed his eyes and listened to the low whir of a spinning blade, to the sound the rock that held him made as it sloughed to the floor in incremental pieces. A better sound he had not known, and he would have listened to it for as long as was needed, for it was the sound that heralded freedom.

He awaited the metal man's voice, announcing a completion; he awaited the moment when he might be able to strain upward against the shackles that bound him and feel them give for the rock beneath was no longer strong enough to hold them.

Neither came.

Instead, there was only the sound of a booming voice, echoing harsh against the cave's walls. It was a voice Loki knew well, for it had adorned the most important moments of his childhood. It was the voice that had told him his training left something be desired, that his efforts with a sword were not sufficient. It was the voice that admonished him for cowardice when trickery had saved the lives of both himself and his brother, lies that intervened when Thor's brashness ought to have seen them dead. It was the voice that had pronounced this very sentence two years ago, hard and unforgiving, and it shared the same tone now.

“What is the meaning of this?” It was Odin's voice, and never in all the many thousands of years of disappointments that it had foretold had it twisted his stomach with as much dread as it did now.
Reversal

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Sorry for how slow this one was in coming... the point of view gave me some trouble here and I ended up having to rewrite quite a bit. I also wanted to make sure I had a pretty good idea of where I wanted to take it from here, so that I could have the plot points I needed in place for later.

Sorry for... pretty much this whole chapter, by the way.

Once, long ago, when the humans of Midgard had been more apt to acknowledge their betters, Odin had been called Wayweary, been called Sage, been called the One Who Rides Forth. They were names apt in their choosing, for the Father of All had knowledge of many things, and among them was the knowledge to walk between worlds, to craft magic the way his adopted son had been able. And so it was that no sooner had Heimdall finished speaking, no sooner had the news reached his ears, than the spells were being crafted, being put to use, small notice paid to the power it required.

He stepped foot into the cavern rife with outrage- for in this place of solitude, of punishment, there had gathered two mortals and his eldest son, and scattered about the floor like a dragon's hoarde were treasures of comfort whose denial had been intended. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, and his voice filled the chamber, shook it, declared his presence.

A bearded man that cradled in his hands a contraption all of metal adjusted that which he held, and the whirring that came from out increased twofold. “Come on,” he said, “You've still got the one eye, don't you? You're the god of gods. You must be good at guessing games.”

He dared? In an age before games, before there was anything about which to guess, there had been the All-father. He had been present the first time mortals had come together to propose this childish fancy- had seen more with this one eye than the human that stood before him would begin to comprehend if he lived thousands of lifetimes. And yet the other mortal was raising a shield to stand before him like a warrior intent upon battle, and his own son stepped forward now to join the man bedecked with stars. “The mortal speaks true,” said Thor. “Our purpose stands clear to any who would see it.”

“Plain as the path of fate,” Odin agreed gravely. “No guile to hide your intent. No trickery to mask your way. Surely you must have known that when at last Heimdall chanced to mark your plans, it is I he would turn to.” No shame showed in the face of the mortal in blue; the other, hidden behind the bulk of the men before him, remained out of sight. And his son- so brave, so foolish, so stubborn- had set his jaw the way he might before a test of strength. “And yet I cannot fathom why I must intervene at all. This is a judgment pronounced for grievous wrongs, or have you forgotten?”

“We haven't forgotten anything,” said the human with the shield in hand. For all that he was mistaken, he displayed his bravery like a prized battle scar, standing shoulder to shoulder with the son of Odin and refusing to cow. “But where I come from, we've got lines you can't cross. This is one of em.”

Odin felt the dull throb of indignation well within him at the words. How dare this mortal, this
Odin felt the dull throb of indignation well within him at the words. How dare this mortal, this puling child, stand before him and insist that his tiny kingdom, with its laws mere centuries old, know better than the High One? “It is your people he wronged,” Odin reminded the man, single eye narrowed with displeasure. “You and yours are the ones that most benefit from an arrangement such as this. It is the reward for your triumph.”

“I always kinda thought triumph involved more confetti,” said the other human, “and less blood.” He was not visible where he crouched by the prisoner’s side, but his voice was raised enough to be audible over the incessant whine of his device.

“All-father. I wish it known that I did not gather them here.” This time it was the voice of the prisoner. That he, too, was blocked from view by the bodies of those that would keep him hidden was a blessing. Since the day that Loki had been brought before him, accused of atrocities for which he must answer, Odin had sworn to himself that he would not be swayed by what bonds of family had once lain between them. But even so, it was an effort not to look upon him and think him “son.”

Son or stranger, however, some things were so: that this man had killed many. That his tongue was like a serpent’s tongue, forked and sinuous. That it spewed lies like honey, and had since Loki had been a mere slip of a boy. “Silence,” Odin told him.

But he did not cease—continued speaking, words coming closer together, as though in a rush to finish them all. “I counseled your son against this action, for your wrath is all that I could foresee it succeeding in. I know not how many times I told him—”

It had ever been Loki’s way, to make lies so sweet that they sounded of the truth. To make lies so sweet one wished to believe them. And yet there were some tricks that become suspect the more they are performed. “Still your lying tongue,” Odin commanded, “lest I see it pulled from your mouth.”

Silence came so quickly that he could hear the sound of the prisoner’s teeth as they clicked together, and for an instant, looking toward the place where Loki’s form lay hidden from his view, he knew regret. How far he had fallen, this man once named “son.” Before, though his madness ate away at him like poison, though his deception knew no bounds, Odin had been able to see in him the pride of the boy he had come to love. Now, even that had gone, all courage fled to leave a shameful husk behind.

“Father,” Thor was saying. “Please. Can you not declare the sentence served? It has been two years. Can you not deem that his punishment is complete?” His son’s hands clenched and opened at his sides, like a maiden distressed, and Odin looked from the sight, for it suited the mighty god of thunder ill. “You are the Father of All. If you say it is so, who will argue with your word?”

“I can think of three,” Odin intoned, and drew himself up—looked down at the mortals and at his son, held great Gungnir beside him like a pillar of pure power. “Three fools at least, who dare to contradict what is decreed by the king of the gods.”

From behind his son and the mortal soldier, there was a muttering, as though words spoken in anger, too low for him to hear. There was a sound as of metal on stone, and the very distinct, muffled crack of something breaking. The creator of creatures of iron doubtless attempted aught—perhaps sensed what was to come. Let it be so. He could do nothing.

Odin tipped his spear forward, let the deadly point face those who would stand before him. “Stand aside,” he commanded.

But they did not. They remained before him like statues, his son and the mortal arrayed in the banner of his homeland, neither moving, neither flinching. In another time, he would have taken
pride in Thor's bravery, but now there was only the anger that surged up to sear his chest, a sudden slow burn at being not only disobeyed, but ignored.

If it came to blows, they would be as infants before him; this was certain. This was not an outcome that it took time to determine, for he knew that it was so. A winged insect could not hope to stand against the hand that crushed it, and so too would the mortals and his son fall if he turned this into a contest of strength.

But he would not give them the honor of combat. He would not allow them to fight for this, this breach of the justice that he had so carefully wrought. They thought that they knew more than the Father of All, believed that their intentions were loftier than he who had seen slow eons pass. He would not grant their assumptions credence by acknowledging them—would treat them instead as the ignorant children they were and banish them from their foolish notion of aid.

“As you will,” Odin said. He turned his eye from one to the other of them—let them stir under the weight of a gaze that had made the fire giant Surtur falter. “Let this place be barred from any living being,” decreed the All-father, “be they man or god, elf or dwarf, troll or giant. Be they any of the other myriad creatures that make up the wide reaches of the Nine Realms.”

“Father,” Thor had realized what he meant to do, for there was something like fear in the crease of his son's brow. “Please, consider what you say—”

The soldier was speaking, too, as though his input mattered aught in these proceedings. “Not going to happen, your majesty.”

Odin continued seamlessly, ignoring the words of both. “For all of eternity, let this place house only Loki Laufeyson and the instruments of his punishment.” The All-father closed his grip harder round the haft of Gungnir and lifted the mighty spear to a height with the crown of his head. “Let it be so.”

There were words of protest, but they died unspoken, for when the spear touched the stone of the cavern floor, the forms of his son and the mortals faded away as though melted in the heat on sweltering summer's day. Their goods went with them: the consumables and cushions, the cylindrical containers, the bag of cloth. The metal contraption suspended above the prisoner faded as well, and as soon as it had gone, the form bound below it strained and convulsed, wracked with pain as the venom drizzled down upon him. The only light that remained was the soft glow from Gungnir's blade.

“Father,” the prisoner gasped— and Odin might have wondered at the choice of word, at what it was that had driven the recognition of family from him after so long of acknowledging only title—but fledgling curiosity was stilled ere it had emerged, for one of the hands meant to be chained was lifted as though in supplication. The prisoner had raised it from where it lay upon the rock, the shackle still firmly in place but the stone itself carved free, cut away in neat lines as though by a tiny blade. The All-father felt a new swell of fury as the prisoner held it above his head, attempting to block the flow of poison— a wave of indignation at the fact that, not only had the mortals dared to intervene, they had nearly succeeded.

It would not do. He was the king of the Aesir; he was the god of gods. This had been decreed, and he would not leave it half-done.

Odin seized the newly-freed arm and pressed it down upon the rock, feeling scarce resistance though the prisoner struggled to pull away. He had no tools upon him, nor materials to remake the spell, but neither were needed. The All-father only pressed down upon the half-moon of the binding, and soon he felt the rock beneath it, the rock that had been cut away and now clung to the metal, begin to crumble. He pressed again, and this time the stone acknowledged his strength,
shied from him and began to give. It fell away as though it had been nothing more than clods of
dirt, leaving only the metal meant to encase the wrist, and Odin guided it so that the shackle
pressed firm against the bulk to which the prisoner was chained.

The butt of Gungnir served as a hammer; he lifted it high above his head and aligned the strike,
then brought his strength to bear, forcing the metal back into the stone. The second blow secured
it- and yet he feared that it would not hold, not for all of eternity, and so Odin summoned forth all
his might and let fly a final time. The third strike wrung a cry of pain from the prisoner as the
metal was driven home, near flush with the surface to which his wrist was now secured. The low
 crunch when bone gave was not intended, and yet all the same it assured the All-father that
his work had been sufficient. The prisoner would not free himself from the new binding; he would
not be able.

Odin stepped back, considering; things were as he had deemed them, the intrusion erased as
though it had not been. For a long moment, the one who had been his son had no words,
attempting only to test the fortitude of this new enclosure. He shook and thrashed, voice raised in a
wail that contained nothing sensible, but the hand so recently free held tight, immovable.

His time here had drawn to a close. There was nothing left for him to do- now, or ever in the long
future of nows. Odin had turned to go when the prisoner's voice reached him, harsh and uneven.
“All-father,” he gasped. “Hear me- hear me yet a moment.”

Odin did not turn back to face him- did not wish to look upon what had become of this child he
had once held such hopes for. And yet he lingered. He could spare this small boon, at the least. “A
moment only,” he said.

“This attempt,” said the prisoner, “was no doing of mine. I swear it. Surely you must know me
wiser than that.”

Odin closed his eye and took a slow breath in. “I know you to be many things.” There was a hiss
of pain behind him- a sudden jerking sound that signaled the poison had found its mark. “But hear
me well. This closure, this seclusion- that is a punishment intended for your brother. Not for you.”

He did not wish to imagine what crossed the man's face in the silence that followed, and nor did
he turn to behold it. “Will you not reconsider the sentence?” The words were intent- asking a thing
they did not truly expect to receive and yet driven to request it all the same. “Name it death and
carry it out yourself. None will ever need to know.”

Odin opened his eye once more. “I will know.”

“But none other.” Each word was harsh and brittle, as though the prisoner was biting off shards of
diamond. “Only you and I need have this knowledge. And if ever it comes to another, what
matter? Declare to all who would dare question you that the All-father, in his wisdom, has the
compassion to change his mind.”

He improved nothing by remaining here. There was no purpose to dragging this argument further
and granting false hope- and so the Father of All lifted Gungnir once more, the shaft thrumming
power softly in his hand. “You disappoint me,” he said softly, and found it to be true. “I did not
think you one to beg for mercy.”

With that he brought the spear down and faded from view as had the others before him, leaving
the cavern in darkness.
The room shimmered into view like a heat mirage on the road in Death Valley. It was innocuous in its sterility, in its ordinariness - in its ability to have Bruce Banner standing there by the prepared bed with its sheets drawn down, saying, “The IVs are ready. Just bring him over here.”

He was going to say more, but he turned around then and saw their faces, and instead he closed his mouth. Tony couldn't really blame him. He figured Thor's expression was probably promising gale-force winds, imminent flooding, and enough lightning to power New York into the next millennium. Funny thing was, a bit of a storm sounded pretty reasonable about now.

“Well, fuck,” Tony Stark said.

Steve, never-ending fount of optimism that he was, was reaching over for the magical device they’d been relying on for travel till now; it was exactly where it had been left, tucked into his belt after Tony'd given it to him to free up his hands. This time, when he twisted the little metal outcropping- first one way, and then the other- nothing happened. Nothing at all.

“We've got to find another way back,” said Steve, and his face was so earnest and intent, like some kid learning an instrument for the first time.

“Father will have disabled all magical means.” That was Thor- Thor with heartbreak all over his voice, slathered in it till it crept out the sides. And a heartbroken Thor, Tony Stark promised himself, was something he didn't want to see if he lived to be a hundred and fifteen, if he'd seen the seven wonders of the world and then made up some more just to pass the time.

“We hit a few snags,” he told Bruce, providing himself a convenient something else to focus on. His own voice sounded strange- like it had aimed for a smooth road but put out a tire or two rolling over broken glass on the way there. “Couple hiccups. Big cyclops of a hiccups with a beard, actually. Not to put too fine a point on it.”

Bruce looked at the bed, carefully arranged- at the room prepared to receive a patient. “So Loki’s, uh. Where, exactly?”

“Not coming,” Tony told him, in the same instant that Steve said, “Delayed.”

They exchanged a long look, and Jesus, what a soldier. He could have been a poster boy for Our Men in Uniform, for noble and true and mind-meltingly stubborn, and sometimes? Sometimes that was something close to admirable. Right now, it made Tony want to punch him in the face.

“Father has decreed that none shall enter the cavern to which he is confined,” said Thor, and there
it was in his voice again- the low thrum of despair and anger, like this was about to be the site of a natural disaster so big they'd need the Red Cross to get here in, oh, five minutes or so.

And what do you know, Bruce was looking a little green around the edges- a disaster of another scale incoming? Or was that just because he felt as sick as Tony did? Hard to tell. He didn't seem to be getting any bigger, though, looked kind of washed out and wobbly, the way he did sometimes after he'd changed back, so Tony figured they could thank the earlier thrashing for this moment of calm. “Not what I meant,” said Bruce, and crossed his arms over his chest- defensive, maybe, or just trying to hold himself together.

“What did you mean?” asked Steve.

“It's just that, well, the whole thing- the snake, the cave, the waiting till Ragnarok. It was all in the old legends.” The man's hands were cupping his elbows, and one thumb was moving back and forth across the fabric there, back and forth- and under any other situation Tony would have been telling him to relax. Here and now, though, there wasn't a whole lot to relax about. “Remember? We did some research after we ran up against Loki the first time.”

Tony remembered. He'd been there when Bruce had set the book down on the counter, relevant pages marked with strips of paper. “Yeah? And?”

“And it was all on Midgard.” Bruce's eyes were thoughtful but intent, the way they got when he was working on something important, and he was staring at Tony like he was waiting for something. “People on Earth could feel the earthquakes when he- you know, when he struggled. To get out.”

The epiphany came, spreading through him like a light coming on in a hallway you didn't even know there was a switch for- and the plan sprang into his mind fully formed. The soundtrack ought to have been angels singing Hallelujah, but instead he got the sound of the mythical god of thunder grabbing hold of a table of medical equipment and hauling it over sideways in a fit of rage. Glass shattered; the spare IV bags came open and spread their contents across the polished floor. The cry that he had unleashed, agony and fury and frustration, was the second-worst sound Tony Stark had ever heard.

“You,” Tony said to Bruce, and he was not surprised to find that his voice had grown steadier, “are a beautiful, beautiful man. And when all this is over, I owe you big time.” Now, finally- now that he felt he could look him in the eye without flinching- Tony turned to Thor. “I must have missed the memo. We get a recast? Since when is the Hulk played by tall, blonde, and alien?”

“Tony.” It was Steve, doing his best impression of a strict mother about to lay down curfew. “I don't think now's the time.”

Evidently, Thor didn't think it was, either. “You would mock of me? You dare, while my brother suffers on my account?” And wow, okay, yeah- having the full force of a legendary being's anger focused on you? Not on the list of things Tony wanted to experience ever. It was like being two seconds away from a shark attack- the sort of primal fear that something would, by nature's design, utterly decimate you. “Steven Rogers speaks true. If ever there was a time for jest, it has long past.”

Luckily, Tony had lots of experience handling things that wanted to decimate him. “You're right. It's no time for joking around.” He lifted his chin, met his teammate's accusing stare head-on. “It's time to get moving.” He could feel the weight of their eyes on him, now- anger muted by confusion from one, suddenly expectancy the next, approval the last.

“You yet intend an attempt?” Thor's hands had made fists at his side, and his teammate's face was
like someone had broken a mirror and then tried to shine a light through the shards. Like something bright was trying to claw its way through a pile of wreckage.

Tony found that he couldn't look at it for long, because it reminded him too much of Loki's face, when he'd realized the rock could be cut away. Thinking about that, though, and about what the trickster's face must look like now, alone in the darkness, spurred a self-accusation that came to the surface like oil in water. It involved timing, and success rates, and what might have happened if he'd done his job just a bit sooner, and Tony shoved the notion away so fast it got whiplash- left it in a cobwebbed corner of his mind to collect dust with all the other thoughts he made it a point to ignore.

Anyway, there wasn't time for that now. Like he'd said, they needed to get moving.

“No intentions,” he lied glibly. “I just think we're busy people. And busy people stay busy, one way or another.” He flashed a smile- reassuring, he hoped, but Tony'd never been very good at reassuring, so probably it came out a hybrid of anxious and manic. “It's a shame about your brother, but we've got other things we need to get started on, too. The Earth won't save itself, you know.”

The indrawn breath, the scandalized expression, the knee-jerk anger- yep, that would just about fool their long-distance spy, if he happened to still be looking. “It is more than mere shame,” said Thor, and the light around those mirror shards had gone out, left nothing but the sharp edges somewhere in the dark.

“Yeah, well. We gave it our best shot. It didn't work.” Tony shrugged, half expecting Thor's fist to make a crater out of his face at any second. He was kind of hoping that Steve was waiting for the same thing, that he might intervene fast enough to stop the famously capable brain of Tony Stark from becoming grapefruit pulp. Tony was a big fan of having a brain. “So now it's time to get back to what we do best.” He paused, as though in thought. “I guess it wouldn't hurt for you to give it one last try, though. Go and talk to Heimdall, see if you can't figure out why he squealed. You know, yell a little if you need to.”

The confusion on Thor's face was genuine- the drawn-down brow, the slight frown. “Heimdall had little say in this matter. It was Father's decree.”

“Yeah? Well, it'll still be good for you to get it all out.” Tony reached around to pat the man on his massive arm- felt the muscle beneath skin, coiled there like steel. “You can't tell me you don't want to give him a piece of your mind.”

Thor stared from eyes that brooded like the low rumble of thunder in the distance. “It is as you say,” he admitted at last, slowly.

“And you've still got a way to get back there, right? Now that that bridge of yours has been repaired?” He waited for the nod. “So go on and do it. A little self-indulgence never hurt anyone.” Tony forced himself to fold his arms and lean back, smile like a cat in the sun. They might have an audience, after all- and later, when he was telling this story to the god of lies, he planned to make sure it impressed. “Give it a little while, though.” His thoughts flickered ahead- traffic, speed limits, contact time. “Say, oh. Thirty minutes or so. Give you a chance to cool off a little, first.”

Not one person said, “You just got done telling him to yell.” Not one person said, “That's a very specific time, Tony.” Sometimes, Tony Stark appreciated his teammates.

“Perhaps,” Thor said at last, “it would be wiser to wait. I fear that if I go now, we may come to blows.”
“Hey,” Tony told him. “Great. Go and take a nap or something, kay? We'll wake you up.” It wasn't until the man had gone from the room with one final questioning glance that he faced Steve and Bruce. “So what's on the table? We've got about a hundred and fifty thousand things we need to get done.” He made a show of rubbing at his chin, thinking it over. “Hey, Cap. You ever see Doc Strange about that shielding system we talked about?”

And he didn't, bless his honest heart, reply with anything like, “We never asked Doctor Strange about a shielding system.” Instead, he said, “Not yet. I was thinking it was about time to get started on that.”


“Certainly, sir,” came the disembodied voice. “I shall have them waiting for you.”

Steve fixed him with a lingering look- a look that very clearly said, “You'd better know what you're doing.” Then he turned on heel and headed for the door, a movement so precise that Tony wouldn't have been surprised if a salute had preceded it.

When the sounds of his footsteps were fading down the hall, Tony said, “Bruce.” He clapped the man on the shoulder. “Buddy. How do you feel about helping me with my rock collection?”
Deception

Chapter Notes

Author's notes: As some folks might have noticed, I changed the timing for part of Tony's plan in chapter 9. This was largely because I opened up Google maps and discovered that the supposed address of the Sanctum Sanctorum is actually surprisingly close to downtown Manhattan. So, yes, that is intentional; Steve's arrival to talk to Doctor Strange should be coinciding with Thor's arrival to talk to Heimdall. Chapter 9 was altered accordingly. o7

Thank you again so much to everyone who has read and commented. <3

Thirty-two minutes. That was the amount of time it had taken Steve Rogers to find himself standing at the door of the Sanctum Sanctorum, its great round window looking out at the world like an asymmetrical eye. Doctor Strange met him at the door, cool and assured in an outfit that any five year old would have died to wear on Halloween.

Fifteen minutes. That was how long they had talked, Steve twisting his tongue into knots to say what he wanted to say without saying what he wanted to say. He'd done no more than greet the doctor before he realized that he wasn't going to be very good at this- that this sort of double-talk, the half-truths and insinuations, would be better suited to Tony, or even to Bruce. Thor's brother, he suspected, would have trumped them all handily, but Loki wasn't here. And that was the problem.

Two weeks. That was how long Doctor Strange had claimed he would need to construct and prepare a portable shielding device to keep their activities hidden from even the most powerful of prying eyes. That was how long it would take if he dropped every other project he was working on and focused his attentions exclusively on this. That was how long it would take if he pushed himself- and Steve had made it amply clear, while trying not to make it amply clear, that it was very much a situation that warranted pushing.

Three months. That was the amount of time it would take to get Avengers tower shielded in the same fashion, and Steve knew it wasn't going to be fast enough. He didn't know what Tony's plan was- hadn't started to guess at the edges of it, yet- but whatever it turned out to be, that was a hell of a long wait. He tried not to picture Thor's brother, trapped in the dark, the little headway they'd made in healing him eaten away by acid. Tried not to picture the man, more lucid than he had any right to be after what he'd gone through, lying there in pain and knowing full well what his father's words meant for him. It was hard not to remember that Loki had been sure- so very sure- that they wouldn't be able to get him out.

Steve would be damned if he was going to let anything prove him right.

So he had had told Doctor Strange, “Thank you.” He had said, “We'll need that started right away, please.” And when the wizard's eyes had fixed on him, thoughtful, Steve had excused himself and said he needed to be getting back.

Two days. That was how long after Odin had cast them out of that reeking pit of a cave that Bruce had arrived at his room in the early evening hours, hair mussed and heart rate monitor firmly in place. “You, uh. You mind doing me a favor?” he'd asked.
Steve Rogers had never been good at waiting. He had never been able to sit still and let others do his work for him. But here, there was no charge to lead, no enemy to fight, no difference to be made. There was only secrecy, only the need to bide their time, and he hated both just about equally. It had been edge-of-the-seat unbearable, not to do anything at all.

“What is it?” Steve had asked, a bit too quickly.

“Fury likes you,” Bruce had told him, and pressed a sheet into his hand. On it, there was a list labeled DESIGNATION NUMBERS, all in capital letters, neatly typed. “So, uh, if you think you can handle it, I need into Shield’s satellite system. These units, particularly.”

Steve had read down the list, and the numbers had meant nothing to him. The words tingled on the edge of his tongue, but he did not ask. Lately, questions had seemed like a bad idea. Instead, he said, “How long do you want them for?”

Bruce had thought about it. “Should take, oh, two days or so.” He’d thought some more. “Three might be better. I’d rather have some room for error.”

Steve had hesitated, then- known that he shouldn't press for more, but at the same time that there was information he would need to have. “Fury's going to want a reason,” he said, reluctantly.

The answer came as though it had been scripted. As though he'd been waiting for the question all along. “Tell him Tony's looking for a particular mineral. Unusually dense, very rare. Needs it for parts. Nothing he's tried so far is hard enough to take the kind of force the test runs have been put through, but he thinks this will do the job.” The man was cagey, slightly anxious- but then, he seemed to go through life that way, shoulders hunched, trying to stay out of sight. Any extra worry didn't show through the worry that was usually there.

“I'll tell him,” Steve said, and tried not to let it show in his face that he was impressed. Just in case. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.” The man reached down to tap at the paper with a thick, blunt finger. “If these designation numbers are in use, tell him we’ll take anything in a geosynchronous orbit, as long as there are at least eight and they're spaced no more than forty-five degrees apart.”

“Geosynchronous?” He tried the word on, turned it over on his tongue. It wasn't one he'd ever heard before. “You want to write that down for me?”

Bruce cast about for a pen- realized he had one tucked into his shirt pocket and pulled it free. “Uhm. Sure.” His writing was large and square, as neat as the type font. “And one more thing. We won't need any tech for the geological scan; tell him Tony’s got an MSDS.” On the paper, he wrote “Multispectral Scanner and Data System,” and Steve wasn't sure whether to be grateful or embarrassed that he'd done it without needing to be asked.

Bruce carried on, ticking off the list of answers to what were, presumably, questions he expected Fury to pose. “Yes, Tony's tested it with a satellite relay. Yes, it's his design. And, uh. No, Shield can't use it.” He recapped the pen and glanced up to see the look that Steve had fixed on him, eyebrows raised. “Sorry,” he added, ducking his head with a grimace. “Tony's decision.”

“No problem,” Steve had told him. “I'll see what I can do.”

And so he'd gone to Shield as an ambassador, talked minerals and satellites and usage terms, taken back a list of qualifications that he didn't understand. He wasn't sure about the assertion that Fury liked him- wasn't sure that the man liked anyone, truth be told- but in the end, Tony got to use the equipment.
That had been a week and a half ago. Which made it a week and five days since Thor's father had condemned his little brother to spend the rest of forever starving and hurt, alone in the dark.

And aside from that one, small thing, there had been nothing at all to do about it. It was too much for anyone- but for Steve Rogers, a man of action, of taking orders and getting things done, it was just about the longest two weeks he'd ever spent.

The worst part was that nothing seemed to happen- because, for appearances' sake, nothing could happen. They had returned to the semblance of normal operations- Tony tinkering, Bruce researching, the Avengers defending those in need. And if it was strange that Steve and Thor were handling all of the threats against the city so that the other two could remained holed up and working on their projects, well, that wasn't too much of a stretch. Not after Bruce had suggested early on that Thor needed to keep his mind off of things. Not after he'd had asked Steve so nicely to make sure he stayed busy, please.

So it was three hours. Three hours, just about every day, that he spent in the room of his Asgardian teammate. It had become a routine: he'd bring coffee to Tony in the workshop, to Bruce in the lab, and then keep the last two cups for himself and Thor, knock on the door and wait to be admitted entry. He knocked now, and the sight that greeted him was familiar, if not welcome.

The man was a wreck. There were no two ways about it.

He'd seen Thor after a battle- seen him caked with dried blood, face death-pale and lined with exhaustion. He'd seen him worried- caught up in the knowledge that what he fought for might mean people lived or died. But he'd never seen him like this, dark smudges beneath his eyes, drawn and ashy pale beneath his tan. Steve had known something like it before, in the faces of soldiers who survived when their whole brigade got killed. It was the hollow, haunted look of someone who keeps telling himself, “If only.”

Steve held out one of the cups of coffee. “Brought you something,” he said, as though the man wasn't expecting it by now.

“Many thanks.” Thor's big hands dwarfed the cup, folded it in like he expected it to get away. They'd gotten past the invitation stage; now the Asgardian just moved aside, and Steve came in and closed the door behind him.

But today, as he started to make for the chair set by the counter, Thor's words stopped him. “You need not waste time in entertaining me.”

Steve turned, halfway to his usual seat, and assessed his teammate frankly. “Can't very well let you sit in here all day, can I?”

“I have no desire of distractions, Steven Rogers.” Thor closed his eyes briefly, as though the words pained him. “My brother lies in torment, and I can no longer even reach his side.”

What could he say to that? It was true. And worse than that, he couldn't make the promise he wanted to make. He couldn't assure the man that in two days more, if he had any inkling of what Tony's plan might be, they could start to make their move. So he caught the first thing he wanted to say before it could leave his mouth- and then the second, and the third. He turned each reassurance this way and that, trying to decide what might give too much away.

“Distractions can be a help, every now and then,” he finally said. “Why don't we go see Tony later?” He reached out a steady hand, the one not clasped around the handle of his coffee mug,
and set it on Thor's shoulder. “He's just about done with that new project of his. Two more days, I think. Maybe he's got something we could lend a hand with.”

Thor opened his mouth and then closed it. There was something in his eyes that was suspicious and a little hopeful, and Steve took his hand back and glanced away, then turned around to go find his chair. Some moments were private moments.

And even if he hadn't said what he wanted to say, he thought that Thor had understood what he meant.
Dissolution

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Decided on something a bit different for the formatting this time, because I thought it might go a bit better toward describing Loki's state of mind. :la I'd also like to add a warning to this chapter, because it's a bit darker than most of the other chapters, so heads up for that.

As another heads up, I may have to slow down with output for a little while. I've been averaging one a week, but I just got a job (finally!) and I have a writing deadline for something original that I would really, really like to make by October 14th. So! I will be continuing this for sure, but if I slow down for a little while, that's why. Sorry, guys! You are all amazing, btw, and so, so supportive. Thank you everyone who has taken the time to comment. <3

Time was a thing with little meaning. This he had learned in the interim between Thor's visits, the endless stretches that might have been hours, or days, or weeks. The only measurement was the pause between one labored breath and the next, the space between the morbid pulse of his own heart and the chanting of his thoughts for it to end, end, end. He had gauged his life in these things, these meaningless tokens, and he had come to see that time was for people with places to be. Time was for crafting plans, for cultivating allies. Time was for schedules and duties, for expectations and hopes.

Time, Loki had come to see, was a thing out of place in the bowels of the earth, where it signified nothing and marked even less.

And yet the swollen threat of forever, the infection of it seeping through his every waking thought, had been mitigated somewhat. It had been kept at bay when at intervals his brother had come to break the mindless, helpless sameness.

Time was a thing with little meaning, but now there was one mark more to measure it by: his wrist made a vivid throb in time with his heartbeat, dull and steady. There were no colors- was nothing, any longer, save the dark. But the eye of his mind had decided upon a color all the same.

It was red.

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There had been a handful of promises, in the beginning. He had crafted them in his mind, chiseled them as though from marble, each careful curve hard and unyielding. They had been the lines he would not cross, the things things he would not do, the scraps of dignity he would not relinquish, not here where he had so little of it to spare.

“Do not tolerate Thor's foolishness,” he had told himself- and in the beginning, he had held to the words rigidly. But as the long nothingness crept by, he found that he had redefined tolerance bit
by slow bit. First he ceased interrupting his brother’s words, failing to skewer inane tales with the ridicule they deserved. Then he began to ignore the fact that Thor placed hands upon him, that his touch was unsettlingly welcome in this place where all else caused pain.

“Do not demand any boon, for you will receive none,” Loki had determined. And yet this promise, too, had been eaten as surely as his skin, sloughed off beneath the relentless trickle of venom. He had not asked Thor, which made the loss of this small scrap of pride all the more unbearable. He had asked the All-father, of any he might have begged—had thrown his pleas upon the ears of one who had once been known as the Maddener, as the Terrible One. He had asked for the most simple of mercies, the *oldest* of mercies, and he had been denied.

He might have known. He might have held his tongue.

He might have asked his brother to do the same, to end this, before the god of thunder was cast from this place.

“He might not think on things beyond these walls. It will yield nothing but pain.” He had fared no better here than at any of the rest, for the sound of voices in his prison, the sound of the mortals concocting their absurd plan, had reminded him that there was a place beyond these walls where all carried on with their lives. These people were affected not by the fact that Loki Laufeyson had been sealed from the world; they knew not of him, and cared much less.

He thought of other places often: the palace in Asgard, the hideaways he had crafted for himself on Midgard. He found that his suppositions became caught on small details, dwelt there and refused to be removed. A tree in the gardens where he used to sit when he was small. The smell of the library, filled with the spice of old books. The tasteful fall of silk that made the drapery in his newest place of residence. The All-father’s banquet hall, its table laden with legs of mutton, with smoked cured sausage, with poached cod, with meatcakes, with meringues and curved cakes, with sweet red cheese and coarse brown bread.

He told himself that they were weakling’s fancies, but he could not bring himself to stop.

And so he carried on breaking his promises to himself, one by one.

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The throb of his wrist was a living thing; when he shifted, he could feel the bone shift with him, shards of hurt. He was no stranger to pain, but this was a *new* pain, and so it preoccupied him, took his attention.

It consumed him, and as it did, as the incomprehensible darkness loomed above and his nerves began to scream with the unceasing sameness of it all, it occurred to Loki that perhaps the humans’ partial rescue had wrought him something, after all. For in this spot where his wrist was bound, the anchoring must be less stable than all the rest. It had been pressed in, not secured; he need only apply pressure the other way to remove it.

He began by twisting—by an attempt to pry it free. In this way, there was some leverage to be used, some force that could be salvaged from the rock. He crafted a slow pendulum, a blood-soaked clock— a steady rocking, back and forth, punctuated by sparks of agony as the bone ground together. The world was pain, bright in his eyes and sharp in his arm. His wrist grew wet, the forearm slick and warm.
He had nothing but time. He had only time, that meaningless thing, until the end of days. Had he been able to reach with his face, he might have rubbed venom upon his wrist- might have rid himself of the hand, if not the shackle. He might have sacrificed pieces of his own body, one by one, to be free.

But bound as he was, he could not reach.

He began to pull, when he felt that he could bear it no longer- straight upward, brute force of which Thor would have been capable. He had tried it time and again, when yet some strength remained to him- and then, as now, it was a gesture borne not of calculated reason but of the first creeping tendrils of panic.

He had learned, early on, that it was inadvisable to open his mouth without care. He had felt the acid take his tongue, eat at the soft, wet flesh inside him. And yet Loki yanked at the shackles that restrained him, mindless as any animal, and he opened his mouth to scream.

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Calm came when he had exhausted himself. Calm came, and with it a dull sort of lethargy that suffused his bones, slipped down within him like the serpent crouched above. His face was wet, and his arms and legs; his tongue burned, and swallowing felt as though he had a mouthful of glass. What remained of his lips were pressed together, now- locked against the intrusion of the poison- and Loki found himself hoping that his body would repair itself quickly, that he might at least be spared the creep of the poison down to his stomach.

He hated them to pass the time- hated them bitterly, with none of the focused intent, none of the planning that he had put into the task years before.

He hated Sif, with her golden hair gone to coal, with her superior glances and her mistrusting ways, with her mouth near his brother's ear, whispering ever what he most wanted to hear.

He hated the warriors three, one and all- vain, insipid Vandral, and cold, unfeeling Hogun, and dull, corpulent Volstagg.

He hated the woman who was not his mother, hated the gentle touches she had spared him in his youth, the caresses and words of encouragement, the way she had combed his hair when yet he was too small to do it himself. He hated that she had left him here, had done nothing to ease his suffering. He hated that, in the end, she had cared for him as little as all the others.

He hated the man who was not his father, the man who had consigned him to this place with not so much as a backward glance. The man who had left him here, denied him mercy, made no pretense at loving him any longer. He hated that the All-father had not admitted to the lie centuries before. He hated that the deception had gone on for so long. He might have prepared for it, had he known.

He hated his brother's mortal companions, so gullible, so incompetent. They styled themselves warriors, styled themselves heroes, and yet they rushed in, hoping blindly for the best. They might have taken the time to learn of the situation. They might have ceased when he tried to stop them. And yet they had not, and here he was now. They lay dead, near certainly; somewhere, their bodies bled upon the earth in payment for defying the will of the All-father. Somewhere, their life ran out in punishment for sparing an enemy undeserved kindness.
Foolish creatures. Foolish, compassionate, hopeful creatures. Loki would never understand why his brother favored them.

And finally Thor. Oh, how he hated Thor. He had years of practice doing it- years of practice hating his brother's perfect, golden form and his brash, good-intentioned stupidity. He hated the way the man's eyes had still looked at him reprovingly, as though even at the end, he might yet change his mind. He hated the unthinking strength, the unconscious arrogance, the off-handed tokens of affection. He hated how damnably gentle his brother had been in the time when all others had abandoned him to this place. He hated that Thor had not listened to him- not now, when it would have made more impact than ever before.

But more than all of those things, he hated that his brother was not here.

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There was a sound in the darkness, a rumbling noise both low and insistent, but Loki did not pay it much mind. He had begun to hear strange things, of late- snatches of voices that fluttered around him like moths' wings, too indistinct to form something coherent. They whispered through the cavern, filled the spaces where there was nothing at all, surged and faded in his ears like waves at the shore of the sea.

They could not be real. This the prisoner who had once been the god of mischief knew. They echoed in the darkness like fragments of a waking dream, his mind's way of providing for him something bearable in the wreckage of what reality had become.

They had come now and again when before his brother was away for an unusual stretch of time- had joined him there in the dark. They were tones he knew, cadences he knew, occasionally even the soft peal of laughter. They were his false family and his supposed allies. They were his brother's companions and his father's soldiers. Once in a while, he could hear Thor, voice confident and undaunted, somewhere in the distance.

They rose and fell at the edge of his hearing, and when he thought on them, he could not decide whether they were a comfort or a torment. They simply were- and when the new sound came to join them, unobtrusive and steady, he paid it no mind.

It was not long before the vibrations began to accompany it, and when they did, he wondered what other diversions his mind had yet to provide.
It was an amulet. Of course it had to be an amulet.

It wasn't even a tasteful one; it was on a garish gold chain, set with an opulent red stone that was bigger than any ruby he had ever seen. Cut glass? Some kind of crystal? A demon's heart? Who could say.

The setting was trimmed with carvings of eyes, tiny irises and pupils and lashes that stared lifelessly out at the viewer. It would have been creepy, had it not been the one thing they needed. It would have been funny, draped around the thick neck of the mythical god of thunder, had it not been the piece Doctor Strange had spent two long weeks in making. It would have been Tony wearing it, had it been big enough to fit around the armor's head- so at least there was that.

There weren't a whole lot of positives, here. He took what he could get.

“Can we not be nearer?” Thor asked him, for what had to be the twenty-seventh time.

“You heard your dad,” Tony told him. “Nothing living goes in. If there's some kind of mystical alarm system set up to tell him we're trying, the last thing we want to do is trip it by accidentally getting too close.” Inside the armor, his eyes flickered back and forth across the presented data, checking the angle at which the drill was cutting into the ground. “So just stand there and model your jewels. Soon as he's out, he's all yours.”

Beside him, the man folded his massive arms across his chest. It was the kind of body language a sulking kid might use, and Christ, there was something else that would've been funny in any other situation. “Doing naught to assist has long become wearisome. I find I have had my fill.”

“Well, you're gonna have to top off. We've got a bit longer to wait.” Tony paused, glancing over the geological scan data that Bruce had dug up for him. Mineral type and structure, the basic lay of the land- the works. He compared it with the information being routed to him from the construct currently out of sight beneath the rocky soil, gaze flickering back and forth between the two.

“Sir,” Jarvis told him, “Current readings report that an underground cavity is near at hand.”

“Slow the approach by sixty percent and scan for structural instabilities before we try and break through that ceiling. We'll take it down around the side if we have to.” The new data that flashed before his eyes reflected the changes, and Jarvis told him, “Very good, sir.”

To Thor, Tony said, “But not a whole lot longer, it looks like.”

The man was as easy to read as one of those signs all in pictures and symbols, just in case the person looking had trouble with things like words put together in phrases. The expression on his face was open and perfectly legible, was full of things Tony didn't like to think about long enough.
to put a name to. “Have you laid sight upon my brother?”

“We've got a cave coming up.” The HUD had broken down the structure of the ceiling for him, and the spots with cave-in potential were highlighted all in red, splatter-marks that showed up harsh and intrusive against the green. There were a half-dozen of them, splashed here and there like a mass-murderer forgot to pick up after himself. “Thinking it's what we're looking for.” Inside the armor, the expression hidden from his teammate's view, Tony frowned at what he saw. “Jarvis, bring us around to the right and slow us down another twenty percent. We're going in.”

It was like a video game - the nail-biting kind that are really well designed, those timed stages where you find your breath coming faster and your heart beating harder. The construct that was doing the digging wasn't one he had to control, not entirely. It wasn't completely remote-based, because from where he was, seeing what he needed to see in order to give the commands he needed to give was going to be tricky. Its sensors should take care of most of the snags, and if something catastrophic happened midway, he ought to be able to give the override and switch to manual control.

But if something catastrophic happened midway, Thor's brother might well end up a smear of strawberry jelly on the rock. The fact that that was better off than he was now wasn't much comfort.

In from the right came the drill, inch by inch, and Thor was saying something. Tony blocked it out - blocked everything out - in favor of concentrating on what was going on below them. There was no room for error in this. No room at all.

“Sir,” Jarvis warned, just as the red splash marks spread across the wall, like Odin was running some kind of haunted hotel in Earth's sub-basement.

“Shit,” said Tony.

“Is ought amiss?” said Thor.

The wall was coming down. The whole damn thing was coming down.

“Go,” Tony said. “Go. Screw slow and gentle, get in there now.”

“What has happened?” Thor was asking, but Tony didn't have time for that - not now. He was trying to calculate how long he had before their rescue mission got them back nothing more than a smear of meat.

It wasn't long. The place was falling apart, and even in his moment of crisis, even when the adrenaline had kicked him into high gear and his thoughts were racing at the speed of sound, even now his brain took a cynical moment to wonder if the man's dick of a father had picked this place for precisely this reason. Structural instability, no windows or doors. Charming way to make sure your prisoner stays for all eternity.

He was in override mode now, much as he'd hoped he wouldn't have to be, watching not so much the world around him as the interior of the cavern displayed on his HUD. The outline of the rock showed up in simple contour lines, physical properties listed in dry, matter-of-fact symbols and figures, and there was Loki in thermal display, the shape of his body nearly the same cool blue as the snake coiled above him. The oddity of that hardly registered, not in the intensity of the moment. He didn't have to tell himself to wonder about it later, because his brain was already pushing on to bigger and more important things, like making sure there was a later. Like trying to guide the construct in without taking down more of the wall. Like getting the man who'd tried to destroy Manhattan the hell out of that cave before this went any worse.
Consequently, he missed it when the mythical god of thunder lifted that massive hammer of his, slung it over his head, and spun it round and round, then let go. He wasn't paying attention when Thor stopped asking questions and ceased standing beside him. He didn't realize what his teammate had gone to do at all, in fact, until Jarvis said, “Forecast time remaining is now two minutes, sir. Presuming the current development holds, of course.”

The current development being that the crazy bastard had flown his legendary body-building physique in there was holding up the wall. Christ. Now Tony was going to have to phone Atlus and let him know his gig got swiped.

Inside the metal casing of the armor, Tony found himself grinning, a triumphant flash of teeth that came and was gone. He didn't waste any time- not when they had so little to spare- but guided the construct in past Thor's knee, straight over the rubble where it had fallen. He hadn't expected to need it, but the tank tread had paid off; the robot didn't stall or hitch, but only lumbered on, unconcerned by the jagged and oddly-shaped pieces of rock obstructing its path.

The buzz saw unfolded exactly as planned, and Tony watched the read-outs attentively, eyes flickering back and forth. This would be the most difficult part: cutting the shackles from the rock without, say, taking off the prisoner's arm in the process. He'd wanted to take this slow. He'd wanted to make sure he did it safely. It was looking like that wasn't going to be an option.

“One minute and thirty seconds remaining,” Jarvis informed him.

The saw bit into the rock, and Tony had never been more glad he'd had a sample of the mineral to work with than at this moment. It was tough, nearly level with rhenium diboride on Mohs hardness scale, but he'd had time enough to make sure his construct could handle it. It slipped in with what he was sure was a squeal of contact and a shower of sparks, and he said a mental sorry to Loki for the damage that was likely to do. Better a few burns than eternity chained up in a pit, though- and so he pressed on, moved from wrist to wrist, leg to leg.

“Forty-five seconds remaining.” Jarvis' voice was cool and collected, no more alarmed than it ever was.

The metal arms were based on human arms, of the same design as the ones on his suit but on a larger scale. They lifted the prisoner princess-style and the robot flipped into reverse, rolling backward over the debris that blocked its path. Probably, there was more coming down. Possibly, both Loki and the construct were taking hits in transit, but at this point there just wasn't a good alternative.

Still, they had it- they were in the clear. The construct was level with the hole drilled in the rock, and any second now, it would be clawing its way free, bringing forth a man who hadn't seen the light of day in two years.

Typically, it was no sooner than he'd had the thought that something went wrong, little blinking red symbols on the HUD that warned him: the prisoner was gone.

Dropped? Crushed? Who the hell knew. There was no data where there should have been, was no explanation, but whatever it was, it hadn't been meant to happen. There was damage to the joints of his robot- and Loki, after all this, was missing. Tony swore and gunned the jets, shot forward with the rush of speed that had become second nature to him.

The world sped by him in a blur, a rush of deep green pine trees, of low shrubbery and jagged rock, and then there it was: the hole that his robot had dug in the ground, and standing there above it like the painting of some old-fashioned virtue like Charity or Grace or Benevolence, was Thor, his brother cradled gently in his arms.
Tony pulled up short, arms stiff at either side so that the propulsion would allow him to hover. “Did you pry my robot's hands half off so you could have *dibs*?”

He was not, all things considered, terribly surprised at being ignored. Not when he could catch it out of the corner of his eye however much he tried not to look: the bloody raw-meat wreck that the prisoner's face had become once more. “Let us return, my friend,” Thor said. “My brother has not time for your jests.”

“Lucky him, they'll keep till he wakes up.” But Tony took the hint and opened up the com link, spoke briefly into it. “Hey, guys,” he said. “We're incoming.”
Patience. That was what he needed.

Patience and long, slow breaths, one after another. He closed his eyes and counted backward from ten, let the numbers ring out in his mind like the deliberate ticking of a clock or the rush of static noise. Like all the things he found calming.

“Bruce?” said Tony’s voice near at hand. “You okay there, buddy?”

He ignored the question. He ignored everything except the number eight, and then the number seven, and then the number six. He imagined a mountain somewhere, tall and majestic, tipped with snow. The snow was still coming down- was falling in little white flurries, and the whole world was hushed in the way it only ever got on frosty mornings in the dead of winter. Muffled, like nothing could intrude.

Five, and four, and three.

It was a good feeling, that sort of quiet. Insular. Like he could block out the nervous hush in the room around him, because even Tony- brash, confident Tony- knew not to poke too hard at the wrong time. It had taken him a few close calls, but he’d learned that lesson well enough.

Two. One.

And so he had silence. He had his winter-morning hush, until he took one final, steadying breath and opened his eyes once more. The room was exactly where he had left it, sterile hospital white, smelling strongly of antiseptic and medication. The IV stand remained where it had been when he let go to stagger against the wall. The patient lay in his bed, ghastly red and horrible pale against the starched sheets, and Steve and Thor, bless their hearts, had stayed by his side despite the near-disaster, struggling to get things put together.

It didn’t surprise Bruce, when he turned to look, to note that Tony was the only one still near him, expression somehow pointed and blank both at once. His eyes seemed to ask: Are we okay, here?

“I’m fine,” Bruce said, and ran a shaky hand up to wipe sweat away from his forehead.
And he was. He would be perfectly fine, as long as he could remember what he had been telling himself since they brought Loki in, a limp mass of too-pale limbs dangling from Thor’s arms.

As long as he remembered that it would do him no good to think of the circumstances leading to the patient’s imprisonment. It would help no one for him to consider the fact that it had been the man’s own father to consign him to this. And he absolutely could not allow his mind to draw the parallels, to remind him of the day, long ago, when he had first learned what people were capable of when they believed no one could stop them. He could not allow his mind to dwell on the one lesson, above all others, for which he had his own father to thank.

Now, the rational part of Bruce’s mind insisted, was not the time. It would help no one, were he to lose control: not his teammates, who would have to handle an outburst instead of doing what was needed; not his patient, who would have a rampaging monster instead of a level-headed doctor; not himself, who would pick up the pieces in the aftermath, as he always did.

Right now, he had to be Dr. Jekyll. Mr. Hyde could wait.

And the other half of him did wait. It waited as he crossed the room to get his first up-close look at the figure on the table. It waited as Thor moved reluctantly out of the way so that he could come in for a more thorough examination. It waited through the quantifying of the damage: large portions of the epidermis subjected to a corrosive substance; severe, prolonged malnutrition; abrasions and decubitus ulcers in the areas under constant pressure from the rock; a compound fracture of the left ankle and comminuted fractures of multiple bones in the right wrist, untreatable due to the restraints still in place above them; contusions over large portions of his legs and torso, deep black, that Tony admitted reluctantly must have been from the falling rubble. It waited as he attached the IV and started the drip. It waited as Tony and Steve allowed themselves to be ushered from the room so that he could work, and it waited as Thor refused. It waited as he cleaned the grime and acid from the wounds so that he could tend to them.

It waited until, several hours after he had been carried through the door, his patient at last lay upon the bed set up for him, clean and bandaged. Loki had been barely conscious when he arrived, awake but not aware, and the IV contained both analgesics and a sedative to get him through the worst of the pain. Now he slept, and the man lay still and waxy upon the white sheets, looking every bit a sculpture all of stone or a corpse laid out in the morgue. The steady beep of the heart rate monitor indicated, though, that despite the desperate state he was in, despite the unusually low thermal readings, the man was indeed still alive.

That in itself somehow made this all the worse.

Years of his life had passed in countries where medical attention was a dream for those without the money to pay for it, and Bruce had watched patients die when help had come too late. He had cared for those beyond the ability of any doctor to save them- and he recalled, in the nightmare flashes of recollection from the fevered times when his other half took over, the gore that came with the damage he himself was capable of inflicting. He had seen, he thought, the full range of extremes. He had seen all that a person could be put through and yet survive- but he had never seen anything quite like this.

Here was a man whose body had allowed him to go on far beyond the point at which he should have died- who had repaired himself, painstakingly, just enough to carry on. It was at once both awe-inspiring and deeply disturbing, for it was difficult to say how long he might have survived, had he remained in the situation. Perhaps, Bruce considered with a twist of unease in his stomach, it would have been as his father intended.

Perhaps he would have lasted forever.
“How fares my brother?” Thor was saying, crowding in close now that he had at last stepped away, now that he had crossed to the sink to remove the blood-streaked gloves from his hands and then wash them.

Bruce breathed in deeply through his nose, ignored the slow throb of anger, the low simmer of banked coals that sprang to life at the combination of thoughts: forever and his father.

“He’s in critical but stable condition right now,” Bruce told his teammate, and washed between his fingers, and tried not to think. He caught sight of Thor’s face as the soap got swept down the drain, and instead of enumerating the long list of what, precisely, the patient had suffered, he said only: “He’s going to be okay.”

“If we can keep daddy’s hands out of the cookie jar,” Tony pointed out from the doorway. He was leaning against the frame in a stance that was suspiciously casual, hands folded out of sight in a posture that told Bruce he was every bit as unhappy with the situation as the doctor himself. Without being invited, he let himself inside, Steve trailing in his wake.

“He’s really stable?” Steve was asking, looking doubtfully at the patient- at his pallor, at the white landscape of the bandages, at the machines helping to nurse him back to health.

“He is,” Bruce said, and ignored the remark about Odin. He did not want to think about that right now. He couldn’t think about that right now.

“I meant that,” Tony said, with his infuriating ability to find the weak spot and prod it, guileless and unrelenting. “All this is going to be about as much use as trying to get cell phone reception on Mount Everest if Caligula there comes knocking.”

Thor frowned at his brother’s side, took a moment to parse the response. He must have translated the meaning well enough without understanding the references, because when his reply came, it was: “Did Doctor Strange not promise that his amulet would keep my brother hidden even from the all-seeing eyes of Heimdall?”

“That doesn’t mean your father won’t see where he isn’t.” That was Steve, jaw set and face grim, every bit the hero in some old movie, the kind where heroes were still uncomplicatedly good. “He’s not stupid. He knows what we were trying to do. As soon as they notice Loki’s missing, they’re going to suspect we’re the ones that took him.”

And come looking, said the rest of the sentence, unspoken. Where would he put his son this time? Somewhere further away- somewhere they couldn’t reach? What would replace the snake, if it had been crushed in the cave-in?

A muscle in Thor’s throat worked, and Bruce knew that he was thinking the same thoughts. He wondered if the slow burn of his own other half, near and clamoring for attention, was anything like what the man felt- if he knew the rising crush of emotion, hot and strong and threatening to drown him.

“I fear the consequences, were Father to find him again.” There was a rough edge to his teammate’s voice, something raw and unfiltered, and a part of Bruce recognized it, reveled in it, greeted it like long-lost family.

Ten, his mind counted, and he lifted a shaking hand to his mouth. Nine.

“I’m, uh. I’m gonna sit the planning out, guys,” he managed. Eight, said his mind, but the number throbbed in time with the dark impulses uncoiling inside of him. “Get some fresh air.”

He was at the door before he reached seven, and the last thing he heard before he entered the
blessed stillness of the hallway was Tony calling, “We’ll catch you up when you’re done with the yoga and chamomile.”

And above it, below it, and all around, was the steady beep of the heart rate monitor.
Respite

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Another chapter that was difficult, if only because I am still overcome by Journey Into Mystery feels.

The impressions were dreamlike, strange and distant: sounds that seemed filtered, garbled and unsteady, images that came in flashes of too-bright white. There was a rough, warm touch upon his hand, there was grating pain upon his face; the air was sharp and astringent, filled with a smell unfamiliar to him.

Somewhere, as though from a far-removed realm, a voice droned, the low rumble oddly comforting. It drifted in and out of his mind as awareness came and went, made sounds that had no meaning. Consciousness wavered here and away, swelled and ebbed like the ocean.

Little came to him. Impressions of what had been seemed as though wrapped in swaths of silk, soft and thickly padded. Pain had ruled him; this he knew. There had been a great deal of pain, but it too seemed to have gone, left him only with a strange floating feeling and a vague, dull ache, somewhere beyond his reach.

That, suspected the part of his mind aware enough to think it, was cause for relief. He could not quite focus, could not quite arrange his thoughts to concentrate upon the pain that had been, but even drifting as he was, even in this strange half-place between waking and sleeping, he knew that this reprieve had been much longed for.

The voice was speaking again, quiet but very near. There was a brush of air that came with it, as though of breath upon his skin. It asked a question, perhaps.

But the words were senseless sounds, soothing syllables without meaning, and unconsciousness beckoned once more, made to draw him down to swim again through the dark. There were no answers for the voice to have- not now. Not yet.

And so Loki let himself slip away again to wander for a time in the darkened halls of sleep.

===

Weight was heavy upon him when at last his mind returned to awareness, a settled warmth pressed up against his side. His mind was disconnected, still- meandered where it would- but the world had been restored, it seemed, to its wonted place. Sense had been returned, and with it, recollection.

And so it came: the knowledge of what should be. It struck Loki more swiftly than any blow, and in an instant a ragged sound tore itself from his throat and he thrashed, railing against the bonds that held him. Had he eyes, he might have seen. Had he thoughts in proper order, he might have reasoned it through. But he had neither, and so he only screamed and surged upward- and for a
wonder, his body answered his demands, rising despite the bite of metal still upon his wrists.

The weight above him was displaced, and a tugging pain flared to life in his arms, and whatever surface lay beneath him gave with his movement. It was a strange impression—mercifully, wonderingly yielding against his skin.

“Brother?” Thor’s voice was thick and bewildered, as though roused from sleep. “Brother, calm yourself. There is nothing you need fear.”

A touch found his shoulder, a heat both solid and gentle. It was his brother’s hand, but it did not aid him in rising. Instead, it was urging him backward—forcing him down.

The instant of fear reared within him like a wild beast spreading its claws. It raked its talons through him and left raw, red meat in its wake. It disconnected all rational thought, shouted loud enough to override common sense, which might have insisted that he could not best his brother in a show of force even at full strength.

He did not consider any of these things. He did not have time to consider anything at all, but only moved.

He acted—fought like a creature half-mad, hissed and spat, twisted and tried to pry himself free of his brother’s grasp. He struggled until he could struggle no longer—until his limbs were leaden weights that he had not the power to move—until he shook like a leaf in an autumn squall.

Only then did Thor’s voice intrude, although perhaps it had been speaking all along. “—must lie still,” he was saying. “You will not be bound, brother—I swear it. The humans have devised a way to keep you safe even from the eyes of all-seeing Heimdall.”

But his limbs yet moved, vibrated with the force of his outburst and the exhaustion that had come in its wake—and, perhaps, with some still-lingering emotion. “Do not,” he said, and the words were a dry croak, scarcely comprehensible. “I will not allow—”

He could not say what he would not allow. He could not even begin to think it, that he might set it in words.

And yet that fragile phrase, incomplete and scarcely understood, worked more effectively than any ancient rune, than the words of any spell he had ever known. For with it came a cease of motion, and the weight that pushed him down, forced him backward, vanished like a shadow after dark. “You must lie still,” Thor said again, imploring this time, but he did not venture to see it done. He did not urge Loki to lie back at all, but instead held him aloft, cradled and upright.

As though there was a choice to be made. As though refusal held any sway.

“I will do,” Loki managed, “no such thing.”

And for a wonder, speaking so made it so. For Thor pressed him no further—merely balanced him there, where he would not long have been able to remain under his own ability.

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“Be seated, then,” said his brother, and a sound came from behind him, a rustle as though of cloth. Something brushed against his back, not rough but the curiously yielding touch of before. He was being shifted, being set down, but he did not fall—was caught, so that he could remain upright without aid, by something which held his weight. “But I beg you, brother, do not strain yourself.”

Loki had no answer for that—did not wish, in his moment of weakness, to betray himself further—and so he kept his silence. His fingers worked against what lay beneath him, sought a surface and discovered cloth, cool as water and smooth as smoke. Back and forth he brushed them, back and
forth, the texture like words he was beginning to learn for the first time. It was not at all what he had become accustomed to.

“What place is this?” he said at last, and his voice was a strange thing, cracked and barely audible. It would not have surprised him if his brother could not make sense of it- but Thor had ever been adept at making sense of him, even when none other could. Even when Loki did not wish it.

“The man of iron has more home than one to call his own.” There were hands on him once more, large hands, calloused and rough, but careful, so careful. They closed about him, shifted him as though he were a child’s puppet, arranged him so that he rested more comfortably before they let go again.

“You brought me forth?” It was not a question- was a statement of fact, for surely in his prison there were not the smells of medicine, this freedom of movement, the touch of what must be a bed. And yet a question was what it came to be, for his traitor voice was uncertain- as though it was a notion he could not fathom.

“Brought you forth,” Thor said, “and will not see you returned.” His brother’s voice was fierce- was low with promise. It put him in mind of a day centuries before, when two little boys had climbed trees in the palace gardens and the younger had slipped and fallen, broken his leg.

The wait had been long. Later, the woman he thought his mother would tell them, tearfully, that although they had been soon missed, they were not easily found. The morning had grown late and shifted to afternoon; the sun slanting through the trees had grown orange and golden. But his brother had stayed with him all the while, had remained beside him. Loki had called him foolish, for had he gone at once for aid- had he done as his little brother had bidden- help might have come sooner. But secretly, the younger of the children had been pleased. Secretly, he had felt a thrill of satisfaction that his brother, already much in demand among the court and their peers, was his and his only, just for this afternoon.

Thor had spoken in the same fashion that day, words brusque and reassuring both at once. There had been something protective in the boy’s stance, some hard line to his shoulders that did not often appear. He wondered whether it was there now- whether, had he eyes to see, he might recognize the tousled child from that garden.

His lips twitched. Perhaps it was a smile. Perhaps it was derision.

“You grow confident,” Loki accused, and licked at his lips. He tasted blood, felt them raw and cracked- and perhaps at the gesture his brother recalled that there was a need for it, for a cool glass appeared against his mouth to offer water. He drank without prompting, allowed need to govern him. It had not been long, by the standards of his imprisonment, since what was offered him in the cavern, but already the liquid was sweet as it poured over his tongue.

When Thor removed the cup again, it took him a moment to recall what he had been saying. He was dizzy with relief, throat no longer a wasteland, wretched and parched. “There are many a thing you lack, brother,” he remembered at last, “but confidence you have in overabundance. Do not burden us with more.”

A touch came, upon one shoulder. “And if it is deserved?”

Loki stared sightlessly toward his brother’s face. Of their own accord, his fingers reached once more to feel the fabric beneath them; his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, where unaccustomed moisture lingered still. He swallowed- turned aside. “See it done,” he told his brother, “and I will be the judge of what is deserved.”
The first time Steve ventured by the room they’d turned into a makeshift hospital, he found the supposed god of mischief still as the grave. Thor was crammed into a too-small chair beside him, looking harassed, and Bruce was in the midst of reattaching the needles for the intravenous drip. Loki had pulled them out, Thor told them, in an “outburst borne of dread.”

The second time he came, he arrived with coffee and pop tarts- pressed them into the hands of his teammate, who hadn’t left his brother’s side in a full twenty-four hours. Loki was going to flip his wig, Steve told the man, if he woke up to discover that his brother looked like a wreck, so he’d better take care of himself.

“You are mistaken, Steven Rogers,” the reply had come. “My brother’s hair remains his own.” In the end, with a quick idiom lesson, he’d gotten Thor to take his breakfast- but all throughout, the patient lay still and pale, unmoving. He left the soup he’d brought for Loki on the counter.

The third time he came, he found that Thor had fallen asleep in the little chair, lower half still seated and upper half sprawled across the hospital bed and his brother both. He shook his teammate’s shoulder until he awoke, weathered the protests that came at the suggestion he go find a bed of his own. It was not until he mentioned the sores on Loki’s back- and the fact that it was doctor’s orders that they shouldn’t be under any extra pressure, accidental or no- that Thor complied.

So Steve had gone down the hall in search of a guestroom, found several, hesitated to take a bed that someone might be using. Which meant it was off to see Tony about a replacement, at which point he was instructed to just take one, after all. He dragged it back to the make-shift hospital with minimal difficulty, hauled it into place beside Loki’s bed, and called it a job well-done.

The fourth time he came, Thor was sprawled across the guest bed, snoring with the robust alacrity of a chainsaw never before allowed to cut down a tree. And beside him, in the other bed, his brother was watching with newly-healed eyes, expression thoughtful. He remained unaware that Steve was in the room at first- remained in quiet contemplation of the man beside him.

The moment that he realized was something to behold, for that face, still mottled with browning scabs and the pink of freshly recovered skin, shifted in just the right ways, expression becoming equal parts exasperation and disdain. It was almost theatrical, orchestrated the way an actor might have managed a part. This was a man once rumored to be the god of lies, Steve reminded himself, and for the first time he saw why Loki had earned the title.

“Whatever incompetent imagined it a good idea to place me here,” said the man, “clearly wished
me no rest.” His eyes were dull and sunken, reflecting the battered ruin of his body, but still they were alert, fixing pointedly on Steve’s face. There was something knowing about that look—enough so that he began to wonder whether Loki had been awake during the previous conversation, after all.

He glanced at the floor and then up again, felt himself color with a flush of guilt. “That’d be me,” he admitted. “Thor wouldn’t leave, and I thought—well, you know. I thought you might appreciate some company.”

He didn’t add the why. He didn’t mention that he thought two years in a hole in the ground was enough alone time for anyone. He didn’t say that he’d dwelt on the outburst borne of dread that Thor had recounted, nor that he’d wondered what might have been, had no one been there to calm it. He probably didn’t need to, because the man’s eyes were on him, intent and strange, and Steve would have wagered that he knew.

“Splendid.” It was dramatic perfection the way Loki turned, dismissive. “For the future, we’ve established that you should never presume to know what I want.”

The invitation was as straightforward as though it had been written, presented in black and white on paper for him to read. “So what do you want?”

When the patient knocked the shackle against the headboard, the sound it made was harsh and heavy. “I would see your man of science,” said Loki. His voice was gravelly, still rough with disuse and dehydration, but it was beginning to recover, just like the rest of him. “I would have him bring his creature of metal, that I might yet be free.”

“I’ll see about getting him down here.” Steve took in the harsh angles of the man’s face, the narrow limbs. The time he’d spent in the cave, deprived of food, was still evident; every line was painfully prominent; every bone stood out in sharp relief. They’d put him in one of Tony’s old pairs of pajamas, a tee-shirt and sweats, for lack of anything else on hand— and Tony wasn’t the biggest guy in the world, but damned if Loki wasn’t swimming in it, like a kid in hand-me-downs from a much, much older sibling. “How about in the meantime?”

It wasn’t really a question that needed answering. He was moving already for the supplies they’d come to keep on hand, the food and water that Thor’s brother was supposed to be getting every time he was awake.

“I’ll allow you a few presumptions,” Loki said, and his eyes were tracking Steve’s path across the room—had darted ahead to the place where the soup was kept, perhaps unconsciously. “Provided that they’re less inane.”

The smile was an unexpected thing, a twitch of the corner of his mouth into something genuinely relieved. If after all that, the man was aware enough to make jabs, was conscious enough to know that he ought to put on a show, perhaps the incarceration was something he would be able to move past, in time.

Steve had known brave men before. He had known soldiers willing to lay down their lives for what they believed in— who gave up everything they had lived for in an instant, so that the cause might advance. He had seen fathers decide to leave behind children, husbands decide to leave wives, sons who broke their parents’ hearts because that, in the end, was what had been needed.

Steve Rogers was no stranger to bravery. He had known it in many forms— but never quite this one. Never quite in this way.

He had never seen the kind of bravery that allowed someone, at the end of a long, dark tunnel, to
pick up the pieces of their life and pretend it hadn’t been broken.

This was the man, Steve reminded himself, that long ago had been granted recognition as the god of lies- and for the second time today, he was able to believe it.

“Let me see what I can do,” Steve told him, and he felt Loki’s eyes on him as he moved about the task. The man’s gaze followed as he opened the soup and put it in a bowl, as he stuck the whole thing into the microwave that someone- Tony, most likely- had left on the counter. A lot of today’s technology still eluded him, but this, at least, he had mastered. Two buttons were all that was required, and Steve pushed them and watched as the bowl spun round and round within. Seconds later, a beep signified that it was finished.

“All done,” he said, and retrieved it. In went a spoon, and he crossed the room to the place where Loki was half-propped into a sitting position. He presented the soup with what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “Did I presume better this time?”

“Passing well.” Thor’s brother took the bowl in a single, shaking hand and nearly dropped it into his lap. Steve’s reflexes were all that averted the near-disaster; he got his palm underneath just in time, supported it as Loki lowered it to the blankets so that it could rest there without being held.

The display of weakness, so jarringly out of sync with the man’s casual, assured arrogance, put the façade of unconcern into sharp relief. Of course it was an act; of course it was a display. But until that moment, Steve hadn’t realized how much of it.

“I’m going to presume something else,” he found himself saying. “Okay?” From its place on the blankets, Steve lifted the bowl once more; he gathered up the spoon. “If I’m wrong, you can get mad at me later.”

It was like a peace offering, like the proverbial olive branch. The spoon hovered in front of Loki’s mouth, and those eyes- glazed and distant but still so very green, sparkling with pride and wounded indignation- lifted from it to Steve’s face. He thought he saw in that expression something of the man he’d faced in Germany two years ago. He thought, for an instant, that Thor’s brother would knock the food from his hands on principle alone.

The anger flickered, then, eclipsed by something more considering. Loki’s lips worked, as though he wanted to ask a question that he couldn’t quite begin to formulate. “If a definition of ‘inane’ was necessary,” he said at last, “you need only have asked.”

But he opened his mouth for the spoon all the same.
Removal

Chapter Notes

We're in the final stretch, guys. Thank you all so much for sticking with me and for the very, very kind comments. The response for this fic has blown anything else I've ever done out of the water. <3

It was like magic. Like those storybooks Tony’d always used to scorn as improbable when he’d been of an age at which most children lapped up fairytales.

It was like straw spun into gold, and pumpkins into horses, and the whatever the hell else turned into something better than what there’d been at the start. But this time, the transformation was flesh into flesh – the red, cratered ruin of a face, oozing and dark with grime, replaced by pale, fresh skin.

It was like magic.

It was magic, and Tony had never much cared for magic. It didn’t display well in the gallery where he hung the pictures of his view of the world. It made him uneasy, to have this gaudy red bauble draped around his neck, though he knew that Thor would be back soon enough to reclaim it. Magic couldn’t be quantified, or measured, or slotted into an equation. You couldn’t deconstruct it, or prove it, or make sense of it. It didn’t have an explanation.

He’d always felt, at his heart, that it was cheating, somehow. Magic didn’t play by his rules, and Tony Stark was a man who was used to winning every hand at every game table he sat down to.

Most days since the improbable had waltzed into his life and kicked its shoes off, he’d been happy to let magic go on its merry way. He’d been happy to see it move to Paris and never send letters. But he had to admit, looking down at the prisoner’s new face, at the places already healed, that magic- however nonsensical- had its uses.

So what if Loki still looked like one of those kids in a Sally Struthers commercial? So what if the needles were still stuck in his arm? He was in one piece again- and it might not be a fairytale ending, but it was progress, and let it never be said that an inventor didn’t raise a glass to progress.

“Hey, sleeping beauty.” Tony reached out and rapped his knuckles on the wall a few feet from the bed, knocking as though for entry. Mostly it was because he didn’t feel like his newly acquired houseguest waking up while he was in throwing distance, seeing his brother gone, and panicking. Because hurt or not, this was Loki they were talking about, and he’d been capable of a pretty mean tantrum at full strength. And maybe they had awhile before they crossed that particular bridge, but considering how fast the man had been repairing himself, Tony didn’t plan on taking chances.

He wasn’t being paranoid. He’d been there, after all- had had rough mornings, the kind where you woke up and swore you were gagging on water. He’d trashed a few alarm clocks, in his time.

“Hey,” Tony said again, and knocked on the wall, because he was sure Loki could trash a lot more than an alarm clock. “Rise and shine.” He tapped a tune. “Shave and a haircut-”
“Are you physically incapable,” said the voice of Thor’s brother, “of closing your mouth?”

It was a good act. One part half-asleep, one part irritated, all righteously offended. The expression matched the tone, even- except just there, where the lines by his mouth were too tight.

Tony might have missed it. He would have missed it, probably; they didn’t call this guy the god of lies for nothing. But he knew all about pretending to be okay. He’d watched his own face in the mirror enough times, checking to make sure there weren’t lines like those.

It was a good act- and even if it didn’t do what it was supposed to do, he could get behind what it was meant for. So instead of offering anything reassuring, instead of holding out comfort that wasn’t wanted, he said, “Already with the smartass comments. You must be feeling better.”

Loki sniffed, deliberate and dismissive. “Well enough to spar with mortals is hardly the pinnacle of glory.”

“Lucky you,” Tony told him, and held up the construct he’d carried with him to the room, an array of gears, blades, and sleek metal. “The glory days haven’t passed yet.”

The look he got in reply was blank- a perfect carbon copy of that moment of incomprehension Thor wore so often, when a reference didn’t compute. The resemblance would have been funny, if it hadn’t been layered with exhaustion and starvation, with something else better left unstirred. Tony’s brain tripped on ahead, and he found himself considering what the machine looked like, what kind of assumptions might be made, and how little Loki actually knew about the people who’d fished him out of a hole in the ground.

“It’s time to get those shackles off,” he found himself saying, hating that the careful, blank look had lingered so long. Hating that he needed to explain to get rid of it. “I kicked your brother out for it. He doesn’t mix well with tech, he’s been overprotective like you wouldn’t believe, and the last thing I need is tall, broad, and hammer-happy interrupting at a delicate point.” He tapped at the amulet around his neck absently with a knuckle. “Don’t worry, I’ve got the ward on me.”

Loki’s expression thawed with the words, a moment of genuine relief before it got ahold of itself and smoothed over the rough edges. “I hardly require a step by step account,” he said, tone stiff.

“The dive right in kind of guy. My favorite.” Tony sketched a salute and came over to lean one hip against the bed. He made sure that the little construct was at a visible angle- made sure that Loki could see when he flipped the switch to turn it on. “Hold still a sec.”

And the man actually did- which, all things considered, was pretty impressive. No jerking back, no uneasy fidgeting as the blade came closer. Just a steady, somewhat suspicious gaze, and every now and then a slight tremor. The rock shaved away in chips and powder, trickling down to the sheets, and Tony realized belatedly that he should have thought of that- that now he’d have to do laundry.

Ka-chunk went the first block of stone as he broke through it, and Tony flipped the construct’s power switch to off and set it on the bedside table. “One down, three to go,” he said, and reached out to take Loki’s wrist, working to free it with the same brusque precision he showed his machines.

He got a cry of pain for his effort, a hiss, a sudden jerk backward- but the joint wasn’t out of his grasp quickly enough for him to miss the sickening way the bone shifted under his fingers. “Shit,” he said, paling. “Sorry.”

Loki held the wrist clasped in the long fingers of his other hand, eyes closed, breath coming fast
through his nose. There was a tense moment of quiet before the reply. “This one will keep until the end. Tend the others, first.”

He was more careful, this time. The grating noise of saw blades on stone hummed in his ears, and Loki watched with wary eyes as the shackles fell away each in turn. When Tony had finished, when he had set the construct down for the final time, Thor’s brother held out the wrist still encapsulated in metal and stone.

“Be rid of it,” he instructed, and his voice was almost commanding. Almost even.

“I can get the doc if you want,” Tony told him. The thought of working the man’s wrist through, feeling the bone shift under his touch, made his stomach lurch uneasily sideways. “Give you something for the pain, or put you under.”

“Dithering,” Loki pronounced, “does neither of us favors.” He presented the shackle again, more insistently this time. “Be quick about it.”

And so Tony took the man’s forearm in his hands- worked it gingerly so that it was turned to face the right angle before easing it through. He did his best to ignore the unnatural way it felt beneath his fingers, tried to gauge what hurt too much by how Loki grit his teeth and failed to control his breathing. What felt like centuries after he started, the final piece of chain on the prisoner’s body came away, left him bare and exposed, the raw welts stark and red against the now-healed skin surrounding.

“Jarvis,” Tony instructed absently. “Let Bruce know we’ve got those shackles off. We’re gonna need him down here with some peroxide or something.”

The voice came immediately in reply. “I’ll inform him, sir.”

“Hey,” Tony said to the man on the bed beside him, and waved the scraps of metal his way. “You wanna keep these? Take a hammer to them, melt them down or something?”

The look on Loki’s face was a mix of too many things. It was like a kid who’s never seen an elephant before seeing an elephant for the first time- kind of impressed, but also kind of looking like those tusks might be as sharp as they seem.

“Keep them, if you would,” he said at last. “Use them to make more of your creatures of metal.” The man’s eyes were penetrating, were intelligent, and Tony could just about hear the clockwork running behind them, the gears working overtime to try and figure out the why. “You’ll not find any of their like on Midgard, I imagine.”

“Nope,” Tony told him easily, waiting for the question he knew was coming. “Probably not.” He crossed to the wall and tapped a panel, let it slide up to accept the shackles. In they slipped, as casually as though they were any other scrap, and a metal pane clanged shut behind them.

Silence hovered in the room, and the question loomed in corners, still unasked. It was coming any second now- Tony was sure.

But before he could be proved right or wrong, before Loki got the chance, Jarvis’ voice cut in. “Sir,” the AI told him, “I was unable to deliver your message. Doctor Banner insisted that it was a poor choice in timing.”

“Yeah?” Tony’s eyebrows crept upward. “What’s he got on his plate that’s more important than patching up our resident fugitive?”

“He has informed me that you have a guest, sir.” Jarvis’ tone was even, unalarmed. “I’m afraid
that my security has been bypassed.”

Loki was half out of bed before the sentence was finished, the sudden motion ripping the IVs from his arm, every too-thin limb shaking. He staggered, fell against the wall, fought to rise again.

“Jesus,” Tony said. “Get back in bed. You’re gonna kill yourself.” There was going to be more. There was going to be something meant to be comforting, because to hell with whether the man wanted it- he needed something to steady him, because that was pretty close to panic.

The reassurance died on his tongue, though, when Jarvis spoke again. “Your presence is also requested, sir. His Majesty Odin of Asgard is sharing tea with Dr. Banner on level three.”
Thank you so much to everyone who's read and commented. Your patience and your kind words are incredibly appreciated.

The good news is that I'm settled into a new job and working on an original novel. The other good news is that the end of this fic, Chapters 18, 19, and the epilogue, are now drafted and should be up within the next week or so.

I hope the end is worth waiting for - you guys deserve it. <3

The tea cups were Japanese style, a mottled green. On the side, painted in delicate brush strokes, a crane lifted its graceful wings and took to the sky. They had been a gift from Tony, in the style of all the man's gifts, careless and exorbitantly expensive – given a week late for Bruce's birthday with a flippant grin and an explanation: "They match you."

He'd never asked whether his teammate had meant the structured, intentional calm of the Japanese tea ceremony or the color of the cups themselves, but Bruce had kept them, and used them, and actually quite liked them. It had become a relaxing ritual for him: measuring out the tea, heating the water, taking tiny sips until the drink had cooled enough to enjoy. On his bad days, when the world throbbed in time with his heartbeat, and he wanted nothing more than to tear down the walls, it helped to breathe in tea-scented steam and feel the warmth of the cup held between his palms. On his bad days, the feel of the ceramic grounded him.

He focused on it now, on the tranquility he had drawn from the ritual so many times before. He focused on his breathing, a slow, even in and out. He said, "Now, isn't that better?" and he took his seat, and he tried very hard not to break the teacup in his hands.

"A drink of desiccated leaves," the father of the gods of Asgard proclaimed, "makes nothing of this situation more palatable. I will not dally while you make mock of my edict."

"Your Majesty," said Bruce, and noted how his hands shook around the teacup. "No one is making mock of anyone." He determinedly did not picture the way Odin's head would look, smeared across the wallpaper behind him. He deliberately refused to consider that it would fit neatly in the palm of his other self's hand. "Why don't you, uhm. Tell me what the problem is," he said in a tone of voice that was, all things considered, very reasonable.

The man's single eye was a baleful, gleaming sun. "I wish to treat with the lord of this manor, and I wish to see my son."

At the word "son," Bruce felt the cup crack. Droplets of tea and blood began to run, spattering, down to the floor. They were ruining the carpet.

"Tony's on his way," Bruce said, aiming for an even, calm inflection. He did not quite reach it. "Thor," he managed, feeling the word heavy in his throat, knowing without needing to be told precisely which son Odin actually meant, "is otherwise occupied."

The king of the gods moved to stand, anger on his face like the dark, roiling mass of an oncoming
storm. It was a look that Bruce knew well – a feeling that shifted inside of him, familiar as the haze of rage that hovered just beyond his rational mind, waiting to descend.

"Defy me, mortal," said Odin, "and you will incur a wrath never before beheld in the history of this world."

The carpet was saturated, red and brown. The thin stream had slowed, leaving only the soft drip of liquid. It beaded and fell as even as a metronome, so much steadier than the thundering race of his own heartbeat.

"You might be surprised," said Bruce, to the king of the gods. "This world's seen a lot of things."

Tony Stark was not the kind of guy who jogged.

He'd always felt that, if you didn’t turn heads as you drove by, there was a better way to travel. Hitting the accelerator trumped sunset runs on the beach. Walks in the park had nothing on slicing through the air in his suit.

And yet here he was, sprinting down the corridor like an NYC Marathon champion. He could just see it now: the cheering crowds, the papery finish line ribbon that broke so easily, the cameras flashing.

There might not be a trophy in his future, but keeping the building in one piece and all of them alive a little longer sounded like a pretty good consolation prize.

He rounded the corner so fast that his shoes squealed on the floor and reached the doorway with the air burning in his lungs. He didn't take the two seconds he would have needed to compose himself. He didn't wipe the sweaty hair back from his face, or catch his breath.

He pushed the door open, and he congratulated himself on the fact that he didn't burst in with a fanfare of whirring machinery and oiled joints. That he'd come without a scrap of armor to cover his very human skin.

"Your Majesty," said Tony, in the tone of voice he might have used to remark that his coffee had gone cold. He scanned the room, took in the crumbled tea cup on the floor, the ruined carpet, the way Bruce stood in front of his guest, trying hard not to shake and looking kind of green around the edges. "Is it okay if I call you Your Majesty?" he asked, casually, and crossed the room to touch Bruce on the shoulder. "Nothing more official? Your Royal Emperor of Everything?"

Bruce lifted his eyes from the spot where they'd been fixed on the floor. Tag team, Tony thought, and gave the man a little push toward the door. You're out.

"I care not what you call me," Odin told him, "but I will see my son." Tony spared him only half a glance. The rest of his attention was on the timebomb waiting to explode – not that this particular situation had any shortage of timebombs waiting to explode.

It was like waking a heavy sleeper. Bruce picked himself up like he wasn't sure he was all there, still, like there were a hundred different parts, and he had to make sure he got them all. "I'll, uh," he said, and pressed his bleeding hand to his mouth. "I'll, uh. Get another cup."
And with that he was making his way for the door, opening and closing it with a painstakingly gentle hand. When it clicked shut behind him, Tony was alone in a tastefully decorated lounge with a ruined carpet, a broken tea set, and one very pissed off god.

"Who," he said. "Loki? Might want to get in to see a doctor about that short-term memory loss. Case you forgot, he's sealed up in the ground like some Egyptian king." Tony picked up one of the remaining teacups. "Less jewelry, though. Not even a mummified cat."

He'd thought Thor was impressive when his temper ran out, over six feet of towering angry muscle, but he had nothing on his daddy. Sure, Odin was less physically imposing, but Tony Stark had brains enough to know that physical didn't count for everything.

The man was ancient, and it radiated off him like heat from a fire. Tony could picture it now: some tiny village circa 1100, packed in snow, sleepy and out of the way. No outsiders, not really, and then this asshole rolls up, one good eye spelling out bad news. He could see it, the way they might take him for a god. He could imagine how the sheer force of attitude, of confidence, of surety could shake someone.

Here and now, it was something he could have done without.

"If you seek to fool me with your lies, mortal, you will not find me easily convinced," Odin rumbled, menace behind each syllable.

Tony poured a bit of tea into the little green cup and took a sip – made a face and put it back down. "No wonder you're so cranky," he told the king of the gods. "Hey, Jarvis? Let's get some real drinks in here. Brandy. Vodka? Hell, let's do both."

"Certainly, sir," said Jarvis' voice, as though he served drinks for the All-father every day. The wall peeled back to reveal a tray extended on a mechanical arm.

"I will not be ignored," Odin was insisting, and Tony knew he was pushing it, just knew, but he swept forward to pour the vodka anyway.

"No one's ignoring anyone. We're gonna sit down and talk about this like reasonable men. That's all." He held the glass out and waited.

Odin hadn't come in here with all guns blazing, demanding a showdown at the OK Corral, so that had to mean something. They weren't all dead where they stood, either – and that had to mean something, too.

After everything, they might still be able to salvage this. Whatever the bastard had done, Loki'd been his son once. Maybe he wanted an easy out, a way to grant a pardon without losing face.

He'd said he wouldn't be easy to convince – not that he couldn't be convinced at all.

All Tony had to do was plant the seed of doubt. Loki had other contacts, too. They weren't people who had helped him, but they might have, given the right circumstances, the right lines, the right incentives.

If Doc Strange had got his spells right, Odin's fail-safe informer would have nothing for him on this break-out. There was no proof, if they'd played their cards right, and Tony was hoping they had. He was hoping they had a full house.

And so he held out the teacup, filled to the brim with vodka, like a peace offering.

After what seemed like hours, Odin's one eye fixed on him like it could peel back the layers of
It was not a good noise. It was a crunching sound, actually, the kind that comes when, say, a very large fist comes crashing through a very large section of the wall.

It was a noise that Tony was intimately familiar with.

He had lived in a tower with a man who turned into a gigantic green monster for just over two years. That sort of living arrangement encouraged a person to learn the warning signs – because the most reliable suicide method he could think of involved putting on a pair of headphones and blaring his music when Bruce Banner was in a bad mood.

Problem solved. Life over.

Since dying in the next ten minutes wasn’t on his to-do list, though, he said, "Shit," instead. Then he said, "Jarvis, Mark 58. Now."

Then he said, "Your Majesty, you might want to duck," just as a couch-sized section of the wall came spiraling lazily into the room to break itself apart against the floor.
Confrontation

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Almost done. Thank you all so much for staying with me!

The world thrummed. It pulsed in and out with the drumbeat of his heart, and that beat said, "Kill, kill, kill."

The man with only one eye would serve, that mewling weak thing that opened its mouth and gave commands.

A table was the closest thing to hand, so he caught it up in his fists and tossed it. It broke against the wall, in splinters. The one-eyed man was waving his stick, now, was yelling like he thought he was intimidating.

The Hulk bared his teeth, and he yelled right back.

This time, he peeled the door from its hinges. When it hit the yelling man, he stopped yelling, and he flipped end over end, and the Hulk bellowed again – louder this time, and in triumph.

===

It was not a bad room, all things considered.

He'd been in worse, that much was sure. It was just too fancy, that was all. In a lot of ways, Steve had never gotten used to it.

It had a personal training gym with all the expensive weights he could ask for. It had a high-tech television with too many remote controls and a low-tech corded telephone that he'd requested in place of the kind with the screens that you touched.

Tony Stark, for all his ego, for all his shortcomings, looked out for his friends.

Still, some days Steve looked around this room and expected to wake up in his narrow bunk back in New York, a skinny kid with hopes of joining the Army, to discover that everything to come since had been a dream. Today was one of those days.

And on days like this, hands clenched into fists inside his boxing gloves, he almost wished that it had been.

That kid had known right from wrong without question. He'd known that allies don't sentence people to die by slow degrees. He'd known that heroes didn't have to sneak around to see someone get a little help, that fights could be won with strength and endurance and will.

"Captain," said a cultured voice in his ear, calm and self-assured, as Steve pulled back his arm to take another swing.
He jumped slightly, glanced around – half-turned to check the door before he recognized the voice as belonging to Tony's mechanical man.

"Hi, Jarvis," he said. He took the time to wipe the sweat from his forehead. "Can I help you with something?"

There was no inflection to Jarvis' voice, no hint of alarm, but the reply sent him sprinting for the door all the same.

===

It was a scene out of a nightmare in the hall: flames licking, slow and languid, at the plaster on the wall as the sprinkler system overhead dumped its contents ineffectually in spurts, the pipes broken. Here there was a chunk of door, there the glass from what looked like it might have been a picture frame.

"Stark!" he called, to be heard over the crackling of the fire.

From around the corner, there was a bellow in reply – huge and deep, like he imagined a dinosaur must have sounded, when they still walked the Earth.

And then the wall was breaking somewhere new, shattering into a hundred tiny pieces as a massive green form came crashing through it.

The Hulk did not land on his feet. He did not catch himself. He hit on his side and skidded, like a vehicle out of control, taking out chunks of the corridor where his leg dragged.

Steve's first thought was: Stark's really made progress on that new armor design. Nothing else had managed to take Banner down so quickly, not even after the man had spent hours working on new concepts and attachments that might help to handle the unmanageable.

His second thought, when the plaster dust began to clear, was that he had been wrong. It had not been the armor at all.

Thor and Loki's father looked like he'd stepped out of the pages of some kid's book, the kind where the pictures are too scary for the legend it tells. He hovered in the air, effortless – perhaps unknowing – long white hair unkempt around him, single eye baleful. His spear was raised as though set to strike.

For an instant – just an instant – Steve understood how it was that people had mistaken this man for a god.

Steve clasped his shield tight in his hand, flexed his fingers. He'd dressed for battle at Jarvis' warning, but he hadn't expected something on quite this scale of magnitude.

"Something we can help you with?" Steve asked the man, shield half up. His eyes tracked back and forth, between Thor's father and the place where the hulking green form kicked to free itself from the wall, struggling to come upright.

"Reclaiming my prisoner," said the man who had once been hailed as the king of the gods.

"Sorry," Steve told him. "Not on the schedule for tonight."
Odin lifted the hand that clasped the spear to take in corridor and floor and ceiling. The fire had spread to halfway down the hall, sweeping in great waves to turn the décor to bubbling black. "Your tower cannot withstand my strength. Your man of iron lies wounded, and your beast fails to slow me." When he turned his head, cocked it just that way, so careless and dismissive, Steve thought he saw what he had been missing all along.

He thought he saw Loki in that gesture and those words. He thought he saw the casual, cruel arrogance that had been so much a part of their enemy mirrored here: not the imitation, but the genuine article.

He thought he saw how much more sense it all made now.

Steve took a long breath in. "We've never been very good at figuring out the odds," he said.

Behind him, the Hulk's kicking had become feeble – had slowed to something that served as no more than a token gesture. It was not a response he liked to see, not something that reassured him. He'd seen Banner take blows strong enough to bring a building down, smash through brick and stone and steel and come through unfazed. The fact that he was slowing now, was going still, was not something that Steve wanted to contemplate for too long.

"You need not attempt any calculations to see that you've lost," Odin told him. "Return to me the prisoner, lest I decide that those who would rewrite his sentence ought share his fate."

Steve flexed his fingers on the grip of his shield. He could feel the flames now; they beat hot on the back of his neck, and he wondered when they had spread behind him, wondered how close they had come. He did not dare to check.

"You're welcome to try," he said, "if you're willing to lock good men away for the sake of your own pride."

There was more that he might have added, more that went unsaid – but he thought, by the way that Odin's eye narrowed, that he'd heard what was only implied.

"I am willing to punish them for their parts in a breach of justice," came the response, a low, warning sort of tone, not a full boil but a slow simmer. "And to teach a lesson to those who would defy the will of the All-father." The flames cast strange shadows on the man's face, turned his haggard old features into something flickering and alive. "You forget, mortal, that I know all and see all. I have watched the world of Midgard grow from infancy to this tiny mewling child who thinks it understands what lies before it."

To one side, in the rubble, Banner at last went still. Those massive arms lay by his sides, the straining muscles and tendons relaxing. His eyes, usually bright with rage while he took his other form, had fallen closed. The fire lapped at the edges of him already, singed what remained of the scraps of his pants.

If he reverts back now, thought Steve, he'll be roasted alive. And then: if I don't get moving soon, I will be, too.

"Maybe I've got tunnel vision," he said. "But at least I look at what's in front of me." He hefted his shield, felt the familiar weight of it reassuring against his palm. "And I don't like what I see."

It flew like a discus, spinning through the air with a precision borne of practice. Despite the metal, the hardest substance known, despite the weight, it flew gracefully.

Had it collided with a human at that speed, it would have broken bones. Thor's father was most
certainly not that, however – for he reached up, almost absently, as though plucking fruit from a
tree, to catch the shield in mid-air.

Steve was on him, then, a flurry of blows one after the next. He aimed for the face, the throat, the
abdomen – vulnerable places, one and all, each struck with the strength of a man that had been the
pride of the Army. Odin did not flinch, nor step away.

He took each hit in turn, and he grasped Steve's arm when he closed for the fourth, seizing him
just below the elbow.

He felt the bone break as Odin heaved him, bodily, across the room. He felt something tear as he
struck the wall, and the fire leapt up to meet him as he crumpled to his knees. He tasted blood,
thick and coppery, spat it onto what remained of the floor.

He was just struggling back to his feet when the voice reached him: weak and hoarse with disuse,
but determined for all that. Surprisingly steady.

"Leave the humans," said Loki of Asgard, standing in a burning hallway, too-large pajamas
dwarfing his painfully thin frame. "Your quarrel lies with me, All-father."

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The smoke had served as the first inkling of something amiss – a thin tendril from whence he had
come, rising into the clear blue of the afternoon as though a crooked finger pointed to the sky.

It had been years since first Thor had come to meet his companions. They had not been idle years,
but full instead of the scheming of wicked minds. It was not often in this new city of York, he had
found, that smoke heralded some benign occurrence.

And so he abandoned the coffee he had ventured forth to gather at the man of iron's behest. He
was not unaware that his companions wished him well. He did not fail to understand the man's
reasons, the desire to keep him gone whilst his brother's bonds were severed. He knew, too, that
when he returned without the promised drinks, none would ask after them. They were a
distraction, nothing more.

Thor took to the skies, where the air offered clearer passage than that granted the cars beneath,
tiny glinting metal boxes that winked up at him, trapped in lines and unable to move.

The nearer he came, the more foreboding the smoke seemed to him, for the nearer he came, the
more closely it seemed aligned with the tower he had left behind.

From the air, he knew much sooner than he otherwise might have: that Stark tower burned, the
thick oily smoke pouring out that same narrow finger, now beckoning to disaster.

"Impeccable timing, sir," said Jarvis' voice, the instant his feet met with the balcony. "Assistance
on level three, if you would be so kind."

He did not deign to use the elevation device to move between the floors. He did not take the stairs.

He broke through the floor beneath him, and the one beneath it, down and down, until at last he
reached the place where the flames glowed hottest.
Here the man of iron lay, unconscious in his suit of metal, doubtless beginning to cook where it pressed against his skin. Thor hefted him in one strong arm, tossed him over a shoulder, and pressed onward.

Outside the smoke had been no more than a thin line, but here it was a choking veil, hot and intrusive. He sucked it in when he took a breath, coughed it out. He wondered at the health of his teammates, mortals all, built for this no more than a serpent for giving milk.

He wondered at the well-being of his brother, as well – resilient, recovering, and yet shaky as a newborn foal. Loki was scarce able to sit up in bed, could not yet feed nor dress himself. To leave him in the path of such a blaze as this would spell death, surely.

It was a thought that speared him through the heart, left him shaken and ill. To so much as entertain the notion -- that, for all his brother's efforts and bravery, he might die in a blaze just as he'd regained his freedom -- was a thought too cruel to hold within.

His brother was not meant to be here, on this level where his teammates had come to harm, but that did not mean it was not so. That did not mean that what had drawn them to this place had not summoned him, as well.

And so he called them with all the strength in his lungs as he forced his way through the debris. And so he found them, one by one, and one by one he pulled them from the flame: Steven Rogers, crumpled near the wall; Banner's battered form, apparel torn as though he had lost a battle against his other half.

With each the swell of dread within him grew, for there were few who might have done such damage in so little time. "Brother!" he called, voice near lost in the roaring of the flames. "Loki! Are you well?"

He was nearing the stairwell when he caught sight of them, if only for an instant. In the smoke they seemed half a dream: a tall man, broad of shoulder and chest for all his age, white hair spilling like snow above the only eye that yet remained him. The other was slighter of frame, harsh angles and narrow limbs, swathed in the bed clothes of a mortal of Midgard, cuffs of metal still about his wrists.

"No," said Thor, and outside, the beautiful blue sky had gone, swept away with thick, dark storm clouds that pressed together and pulled apart like waves within the deepest ocean. "No!"

Mjolnir was warm against his palm, and welcoming. He lifted it back with the strength of the sudden rage that swept him, brought it hurling forward with all the force of a wrathful god.

Beyond the walls of Stark tower, the storm broke; sheets of rain came sleeting down as forks of lightning split across the sky, dancing over rooftops. The thunder that cracked in answer rattled windows and set dogs to howling throughout the whole of New York.

"You will unhand him, or so help me –" Mjolnir flew. The hammer turned end over end, unstoppable, a deadly weight of destruction.

But when it reached the place where Odin All-father had stood, nothing there remained except for smoke and shadow.
Final chapter, you guys. Thank you so much for your amazing feedback and support and patience. There will be an epilogue, hopefully next week.

It had been a wonderful ride. Thank you all for taking it with me. <3

Bruce woke to the smell of stale smoke and the sound of wind howling. He wondered why it was so loud for an instant – wondered whether he'd forgotten to close his window – and then he opened his eyes.

There was no window. In fact, there was no wall. There were a few chunks of plaster, and a rain gutter that dangled at an absurd angle, and then, out beyond it, buildings tops and sky. The wind roared beyond the gap, and there was rain to go with it, great thick sheets of rain, like some mystical landscape above the clouds had decided to drops its waterfalls down to Earth.

"Well," he said, and tried to turn over, "that could have gone better." Everything hurt – his head, and his tongue where he'd bitten straight through it, and his legs most of all, near the knees on both sides. His throat hurt, felt raw and scraped clean, as though he'd been screaming. For all he knew – for all he remembered – he had been.

Beside him, the scorched outline of Tony's armor lay still and silent. Steve was just starting to stir nearby, black and blue and bloody.

Bruce swallowed against the bitter taste of bile, then swallowed again. It felt like something was lodged in his throat, pressing down, and he could not quite coax it free. It tasted like regret.

For an instant, he could not recall what had led to the transformation. There were only flashes of memory: the bright, hot lick of flame; the sound of something breaking, larger than life; the throb of his own heart; the all-consuming desire to tear the world down.

It was not until he caught sight of Thor, face haggard and drawn, eyes rimmed red, that the rest came flooding back: the visit, and the words, and a broken tea cup lying on the floor.

And perhaps for the first time ever, Bruce found himself wishing that the destruction that lay around him had been caused by his own hands.

He swallowed again, to keep from vomiting, and pushed himself gingerly upright. Everything ached, a deep, bone-weary ache that made him want to lie on the floor and stay there. "Your brother?" he asked, voice hoarse the way it always was after he'd completed a transformation.

"Taken." Thor's face was smeared with ash, but there were pale streaks through the grime. Mjolnir lay beside him; from the little chips of rock surrounding, from the dent in the floor itself, Bruce guessed it had been thrown aside in anger. "Loki is taken."

It wasn't time to sit on the floor, feeling sorry for himself. There never seemed to be time when he needed it.
And so Bruce ignored the nauseated churning of his stomach, and he forced himself into an awkward crouch. "Did your father give you any idea where he might be, this time?"

"He spoke not a word." Thor lifted a hand and rubbed at his face. For just a second, Bruce thought he looked his age; the weight of a thousand years stooped those shoulders.

Steve was beginning to sit up on his own, which was a good sign. He wouldn't be saving the city anytime soon, but he was conscious, at least. Tony, on the other hand, had yet to even twitch – and so Bruce staggered to standing and lurched the awkward handful of steps to his side.

He pulled back the visor with hands that still shook from the exertion of the transformation, and he said, "What about you? Is there anything you can think of that would help us narrow it down?"

"It is not like to be the same place, nor even the same punishment." Bruce slipped his fingers beneath the metal of the armor to check for a pulse. "If I've any inkling of my father's justice, what came before will seem sweetest bliss."

There it was: a faint throb beneath his fingertips, and Bruce let go of the breath that he'd been holding. "We'll look again," he said. "We'll find him."

Steve was groaning softly, was holding his head like it was trying to come apart in his hands. "How do you feel?" Bruce asked.

Steve's eyes were grim, to match his expression. He held his arm at an awkward angle, as though it pained him, and Bruce made a mental note to check it as soon as he finished his current examination. "Like we failed."

Bruce spared him a long look. He didn't think about the way Loki had been when they first got him back. He didn't remember the jumble of emaciated limbs in his brother's arms, or the way the flesh had been slick and raw, or the frightening thought that, had his body continued to repair itself, Asgard's god of mischief might have lasted there forever.

He closed his eyes, and he told himself that he had just had a lapse in control, and that the very last thing they needed right now was another. His other half would not help to clean up, or tend the wounded, or track down the prisoner.

Don't you dare, Bruce told himself. Don't you even think about it.

He felt carefully around the joints in Tony's armor, seeking for the manual unlocks that his teammate had been certain to show him in case of emergency. When he wedged his fingers beneath them, they slid out with surprising ease, despite the damage – pulled up smoothly to reveal the man beneath.

"He did not wish this," Thor was saying softly. His voice was rough and uneven, shaken in a way that Bruce had never heard before. "He did not dare." There was the ragged sound of an indrawn breath. "Since the moment I first raised the suggestion, my brother told me I acted the fool."

Tony's chest was whole, his breath steady. The soft, blue glow of the arc reactor did not flicker as he pulled away armor from the arms and shoulders, then the abdomen.

"We'll get him back, Thor." That was Steve, somber and determined.

The skin beneath the metal of Tony's arms was burned – mottled and pink, doubtless painful, but nothing that would not heal, given treatment and time. It would have to be seen to, one more thing in what was suddenly a long list that needed his attention, and Bruce took a slow, calming breath to brace himself.
"Would that I had listened," Thor told them, very quietly. "Would that I had spared him this."

"You couldn't have known," said Steve, in a tone that was steadfast and reassuring.

"My brother knew!" Thor rounded on him, pain eclipsed by sudden fury, tears standing in his eyes. "All along he knew, as though he'd seen the future laid before him. He counseled me true, Steven Rogers, and I heeded him not."

The breath that Tony took this time was deeper, came out with a cough that lingered, thick and heavy, before subsiding. He sucked in more air, coughed it out, and his eyes flickered open, blinking blankly upward until they had time to adjust. "Hey, doc," he mumbled. "What'd I miss?"

How to sum it up? How to explain that the man they'd spent so much time and effort to aid had been snatched out from beneath them– that even now he was suffering due to their attempt? How to say it, without paying attention to the murderous thread of want that was already clamoring to be unleashed?

Bruce could not think of any way at all.

"Nothing, uh. Nothing good," he said instead, and slipped his fingers beneath the legplates to unlock those, too.

"Odin took Loki back," said Steve. "Your tower's half gone, and we all took a couple of lumps."

Bruce almost missed it. He was busy checking for breaks, for burns, for whatever other damage could be perpetuated by the king of the gods. Consequently, he nearly didn't see the smile that stole over Tony's lips, wry and pleased. "Well," he said, "two out of three." And then: "Hey, Loki. Quit watching your brother cry. That's bad form."

It wasn't a gradual change. It wasn't like mist drifting in on a cool morning before sunrise, or leaves coming down from a tree in the autumn. It was more like someone had lifted back a curtain, and there behind it was something that had been there all along.

Loki looked half-dead. His skin was white as paper, the circles under his eyes dark and deep. The bandages covered more of him than they left bare, great swaths of white that swallowed up his wasted form. The weight he'd lost made Tony's pajamas hang off him, dwarfing the narrow lines of too-thin limbs, and his wrists were red and raw where the manacles had been.

He was shaking, though he sat propped against the wall for support, was trembling as though exhausted, or terrified, or both. But he was unmistakably alive – unmistakably not in his father's hands – unmistakably not in a cave somewhere, suffering untold horrors.

"What – " said Steve.

"How – " said Bruce.

Both of them were drowned out by the force of Thor's yell, however. "Brother!" he cried, and launched himself at the patient with no consideration at all for his injuries. Loki yelped when his brother's arms surrounded him, squirmed to escape the grasp – and then relaxed, allowing it, when Thor visibly relented, turning the embrace into something more bearable.

After a moment, Loki lifted one arm, cautiously, to put it about his brother's shoulders. "I imagine the All-father has discovered by now that an illusion screams as loudly as a true prisoner," he said, voice a soft rasp.
Bruce's mind picked up the pieces: the shackles that no longer covered the abraded skin at the man's wrists. "Tony got the wards off in time," he said, wonderingly.

"Sure did," said Tony, lifting his own legplates free. "And wouldn't you know, I'm a big fan of helping those who help themselves, so I figured it was time we let baby brother take a crack at it."

"Are you well?" Thor was asking his brother. He had pulled back far enough to examine Loki's face, to look him over as though searching for hidden damage. "Did he see you wounded, before you switched yourself for the other?"

It might have been a scowl. At least, Bruce thought that it was intended to be one, but on a face as weary as Loki's was, there was no heat behind the glare. "I'd time enough and more," said the god of lies. "Unlike some that I might name, I've the foresight to construct plans."

"How did you do it?" Steve's arm was tucked against his chest now, so very careful, as though the position might support its weight. Broken, Bruce thought, frowning.

Loki's long fingers dipped beneath the collar of his borrowed shirt, and for an instant pale skin and damaged flesh were both obscured. When he brought his hand out once more, Doctor Strange's amulet came with it, blood red and smooth as water, glimmering softly in the storm-light that spilled in from outside.

"By relying upon the most cherished tactic of one who excels in lies." He let the amulet dangle from its chain, watched as it swayed from side to side, slow and even, like a pendulum. The man sketched a bow, the slightest of motions, as though presenting himself at court. Perhaps it was meant as a mockery; perhaps it was meant in earnest, as one who has given an admirable performance. "I hid what truly was."

Bruce felt something loosen in his chest. It took confidence to form those words, confidence to deliver them. It was nothing short of extraordinary that Loki had any left.

And when Tony said, "What, you're gonna write me out of it? I wasn't the one who thought of the amulet or anything?" Bruce reached over to prod him none-too-gently in the ribs to make him shut up.

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Days came, and went, and came again – but here, beyond the reach of the dark, time had regained meaning once more.

When the sun dawned, its light reached him through the airy curtains that the mortals had draped above the windows. When it sank through the sky to near the horizon, when the clouds turned red and gold and vibrant orange, the light dyed the white walls and white sheets with its color. When the moon came up, a fat pale wedge that looked like the unfurled sail of a ship in the night sky, that too cast its light into his chamber.

It was comforting, this march of days – though at times the moonlight proved to be scant reassurance. When he woke, he thrashed against his sheets, certain that the darkness above him was the darkness of the earth, that nearby lay poised a serpent's fangs.

But when he willed his arms to move, they obeyed now without pain, and when his desperate fingers clutched at his own chest, searching, they found the amulet that had been crafted to keep
him safe.

Thor came often, to ply him with food and liquid, to beset him with insipid talk that Loki found himself willing to heed. It reminded him of lying upon his bed of stone, of the only voice that had reached his ears for time without end.

And yet it had ended. Loki had emerged on the other side, and he found that he no longer cut his brother's words short, the way he once might have. He did not scold, nor scorn, nor twist Thor's meaning against him, though it would have been the simplest of tasks, as ever it had been.

He found that he preferred his brother's smiles to the pleading, wounded look brought on by his barbs.

The others came as well, though not so often.

The beast that wore the skin of a man visited morning and night, to see that he was well. Loki had seen the destruction that this one had wrought, and yet the man's hands were ever steady, ever gentle.

The man of iron brought with him tales of little interest, senseless ramblings filled with what passed for wit. He told of the rebuilding of his tower, of the recovery of those unfortunate few who had been caught in the flames. He claimed, time and again, that the speed with which Loki's face was mending "could've got him the starring role in some evangelical laying on of hands scam."

The soldier sat beside him, asked often whether there was aught he required. It was near enough to spark Loki's ire – but for some reason he could not fathom, he did not drive the man away. It had been long since last any had asked the same of him and meant it truly. Perhaps he was loathe to see it turned so readily aside.

The morning of the sixth day came upon them bright but chill. Autumn had arrived; out beyond the walls of Anthony Stark's abode, the trees of Midgard would be fading to orange and red, the warm greens of summer washed away by the cold.

He was not hale as he had been. He'd not the strength for all he wished to do, neither in body nor mind.

Away in the dark, closeted in a prison without fresh air, an illusory man screamed for mercy, and Loki could not let him flicker nor fade. He must remain there until the end of days, lest the Allfather's watchful gaze be drawn once more to his true prisoner. He must be convincing, not just now but always – and though an illusion was a simple thing, a construct of magic he had learned before he stood waist-high against his mother, it was a trying task to keep one constantly formed.

He felt the effort draining him, a deep ache of exhaustion as though he had put in a hard day's labor. He felt it tug at him with every waking breath, knew the necessity to strengthen the spell before he slept, lest it come undone and give him away.

Yet for all that, despite the dread and uncertainty, he felt well. Blissfully, blessedly well.

He was not whole, and perhaps he never would be. His flesh had healed, though, had knitted closed and left him free of pain.

And if in the night the dreams came to him still – dark, close, dreams in which the ceiling was carved rock and the cavern was his world – he consoled himself when he woke that they were not true things. Not any longer.
The first time he'd seen it, it had struck him like the ending in some kid's book, where everyone lives happily ever after.

Tony had stood there in the doorway, watching Bruce take off bandages that weren't covering anything anymore. He'd stared at the smooth, pale skin, at the places where he'd seen wounds that any normal person would have needed stitches for. He'd wondered at the man's eyes, whole and functioning, at his glib replies, where before there had been no tongue.

A week ago, this man had had no face.

Now you'd be hard-pressed to prove it. It was like the whole thing was some kind of dream – the weird kind, where you find yourself sharing your house with an arch-enemy, and wonder when the universe turned out to be so much stranger than you thought.

And it was pretty strange.

Cause where before there'd been hard words, sharp enough to leave you bleeding out on the ground, now Thor's little brother had softened up a bit. He still sparred, still gave as good as he got, but he wasn't closing in for the kill anymore. When he lunged, his insults didn't take out your throat.

And where before there had been arrogance, the utter unthinking assurance of someone born into royalty, now there were moments when the god of lies faltered. He would miss a beat, or stare too long off into space after you'd called his name, or start to jerk away when someone tried to touch him.

There were moments when the act would fall through, and for just an instant, you'd see that the happy ending was a long way off, still, if it was going to come at all.

But the man was in one piece, and the damage that had been done was, physically, just about healed. Sure, he looked like a scarecrow, ragged and underfed, but he was starting to put on weight. He could get around the room on his own, could handle the stairs, had fixed himself breakfast yesterday morning.

Hell, that was more than Tony could do right now, with his still-healing burns.

The point was, Loki was proud, and he was independent. The longer he stayed, the more he insisted on doing for himself.

Consequently, on the morning when Thor barreled into his bedroom, hair disheveled and eyes wild with alarm, the words out of his mouth didn't come as a huge surprise.

"My brother," he said. "My brother has gone."

Tony thought about the way that Odin had been, tall and terrible, bringing his wrath down like an avenging god in some tale of old. He thought about Thor's brother, increasingly mobile, increasingly able to care for himself – always a prickly, proud sort of bastard. He thought of the amulet, the charm to keep away watching eyes, and how it was more likely than not around the neck of a certain god of mischief somewhere in the wide, wide world.
It wouldn't be protecting *them* from the All-father's view just now. It would be protecting him. "I know," Tony said, in his most apologetic tone. "I know, man." He cleared his throat – glanced pointedly upward, as though away into the distance. "But it's been a week, Thor. It's been a week with no leads." He reached out to set a bandaged hand on Thor's beefy shoulder, and he stared him straight in the eye, and he said, "You've got to let him go."

The mythical god of thunder recoiled as though struck. He sputtered, flushed with anger, and drew back like Tony was a rotting brussel sprout or a month-old unwashed sock.

But there it was, the moment he was waiting for: when thought trumped emotion, and understanding flickered in his teammate's eyes.

Thor stared right back at him, and Tony could see the wheels turning, one against the other, the teeth in the cogs clutching tight and pushing.

And then Thor's shoulders slumped. He didn't have to fake the disappointment, Tony was sure. He didn't have to worry about putting on a show for daddy and his watchdog.

Because that? That was real.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so, so much for reading and for commenting. Thank you extra to the folks who've been with me from the beginning. I promised you an ending. I know it's been a long time in coming, and I appreciate your patience. I hope you enjoy it. <3

It was three months.

Three months – and Steve would have taken a lot longer, if Tony hadn't come in one day, fresh from a battle in the air above Central Park, and said, "Anyone else notice the whole campaign-against-the-evil-that-menaces-New-York gig's been pretty easy, lately?"

He flopped back into his chair as he said it, a black leather piece three sizes too large, with a sleek back and poor design taste. "Not that I'm complaining," he clarified, staring over its streamlined, modern-sensibility arm to watch Thor's face. "Just thought I'd mention it."

And he was right, when Steve thought about it.

Lately, there seemed to be helpful anonymous tips when a villain had evaded them for too long. They came in phone calls and letters – they came from little boys and old women, from middle-aged men and teenage girls. They came from a public that had not always been ready to cooperate, not even with their own safety on the line. And for the first time ever, they came readily.

But there was more than that.

There were moments like when that old warehouse by the harbor, so damaged it was standing with nothing more than a hope and a prayer, held together just long enough for them to take out two Doombots inside. They had come out unscathed, and Steve had counted them lucky.

There was the fire that had broken out on 5th Street, when the Green Goblin's pumpkin bombs had smashed against the foundation, leaving no less than seventeen civilians trapped in the roaring fire. When they had arrived, every man, woman and child had already escaped via the stairwell. It stood on the side of the building struck with the bombs, but it had remained utterly untouched by the surrounding destruction, safe and clear. And Steve had counted them lucky.

There was the psychopath in a dress suit that had attended Tony's most recent publicity stunt – a well-dressed older gentleman, with a trim white beard, small wire rim glasses, and a gun hidden in a back holster. He'd drawn it just after Tony had toasted the anniversary of Stark enterprises, had aimed and fired a shot at an Iron Man without the iron around to keep him safe. But the bullet had ricocheted, had struck the wall harmlessly, and the police had cuffed the man and dragged him away. He went howling and raving, preaching to any who would listen about the moral depravity of the upper class.

No one could decide what exactly the bullet had ricocheted off of – but the police had shrugged their shoulders, washed their hands of it, and called it a job well done. They'd counted Tony Stark lucky.
There was the day when the photos had appeared on Steve's bed: black and white at first, then grainy color, then finally sharp digital things. They catalogued the life of a woman named Peggy Carter, agent and director of Shield – showed all she'd been capable of and all she'd achieved. And if Steve had cried a little bit, looking at them in the privacy of his room, they had also filled a hole that he had not known was empty. They'd given him a sense of closure he hadn't known he was missing.

Leafing through them, he'd thought they were something Tony had dug up, some keepsake of his father's discovered while cleaning out a box of junk in one of the mansions he called home. But Steve had never asked, and Tony had never brought it up.

Now, Steve wondered whether it had been him, after all.

He wondered, too, whether Bruce or Thor would have stories of their own to tell, little coincidences written off as luck.

But he only said, "No sense in looking a gift horse in the mouth. A little easier still means we've got plenty of things left to worry about."

He hadn't gotten good, in the last few months, at not saying what he wanted to say. It wasn't easy, sneaking around a secret that couldn't be spoken of. He felt as though he was playing a part in a movie, and that everyone had learned their lines better than he had.

And so Steve wondered, and recalled small details that he'd overlooked, and he did not ask.

===

Doctor Strange arrived on the eleventh of the month. He came in silks and velvets of black and vivid crimson. His shoes were polished black leather, his belt buckle an intricate design, swoops and whirls that looked almost like writing. On his neck he wore an amulet on a long silver chain, the gem polished smooth, the color of fresh blood. A matching stone, set in silver, adorned the ring on each of the man's hands.

He brought with him incense and crystals, candles and charcoal. From a carpet bag of black velvet, he produced the supplies, laying each item out reverently upon a small table of metal.

Then he ushered everyone from the bottommost story of Tony Stark's tower, down in the basement where the workshop was arranged. He closed the windows off to bar all outside light and settled down in the darkness to kindle his fires and hold his rituals.

When he was finished, he walked up the flights of stairs to the top of the building, ignoring the offer of an elevator. Here, too, he sealed the windows, blotting out the day with thick, dark fabric – barred the Avengers, one and all, from the entire floor – and performed his spell once more.

When he was finished, he shook Steve Rogers' hand. He advised them that the shield would hold, so long as they never destroyed both the ceiling and the basement floor at once.

Then he packed up his belongings into his velvet bag, wished them luck in their affairs, and saw himself out.
The mortal who knew the ways of magic had been gone not yet two days when Thor ventured forth into the kitchen of a morning, seeking the device from which coffee might be made.

Little was necessary, to encourage this machine to create the brew he favored. Most of the effort hinged upon the selection of a small cup, labeled with the variety of the beverage it contained. While most technology of Midgard evaded him still, this mechanical creation, at least, he had mastered.

He had just nestled the cup into the space beneath the lid, was turning to the cupboard in which the man of iron displayed his dishware, when motion and a flash of color caught the corner of his eye.

Green, it was, green and black, and Thor turned so quickly that one of the thick mugs from the shelf crashed to the floor and shattered, unnoticed.

And there, settled in one of the high-backed kitchen chairs, lounging with grace and a knowing smile, was his brother.

His limbs had filled out, since last Thor had seen him – and the hollows of his cheeks, as well. Where before, there had been the pink of newly healed skin, now all was Loki's accustomed pale, smooth and even, no sign of damage yet lingering.

He had taken care in his dress: a slim suit of the sort that men of business favored upon Midgard, deepest black, with a shirt of rich emerald and green stones upon each wrist, at the cuffs. A narrow cloth was tied about his neck, as was the human fashion, and he had brushed back his hair and slicked it, as had been his habit since days long gone.

Thor stared at him, at a ghost made flesh, at this man who had not been whole, been healthy, for longer than he cared to remember. For an instant, his wits left him without words, but he felt the grin begin upon his lips, creeping wide and then wider. "Brother," he said, and he took a step forward.

Before Loki could think to protest, Thor was laughing, was enclosing his brother's narrow form in a tight embrace. "You look well," he said, and forced himself not to hold as tightly as he was able, lest he crush the man against him. "It is good to see you well, brother."

"It is good to be well," Loki told him, and allowed himself to be held a moment more before he leaned away, lifted both eyebrows, and remarked, "Your drink spills upon the counter."

"I care not for drinks," Thor told him, though he turned to see that it was so. The coffee had dripped from its maker without a cup beneath, had formed a steaming puddle that served a compliment to the shattered mug upon the floor. "I would hear where you have been."

When Loki waved a hand, careless and dismissive, the gesture held all of the easy grace that Thor recalled from a childhood spent together – and so too from those days beyond, when his brother had become a bitter creature, half-mad with jealousy. He was not certain which the man before him was like to be, friend or foe, but Thor knew that it gladdened his heart to see his brother sound of body.

"About Midgard," said Loki, "making arrangements that I might remain in this realm." His brother smiled, and there too was an expression Thor knew of old, cunning and mocking both together, with something like affection underneath. His brother had ever been a master of lies – but this
smile, Thor hoped, was true. "There's more to tell, but the tale is long."

"I've time enough and more," Thor said at once.

His brother's gaze lingered – thoughtful, as though Loki sought the next move in a particularly challenging game. "And I," he said at last. He nodded to the place where the coffee was dripping slowly to the floor, leaving brown runnels down the doors of the cupboards. "But see to your drink, brother," he said. "I'll not vanish if you turn your eyes away."

And so Thor knelt upon the floor of tile. He picked up fragments of blue ceramic, and he mopped the spilled liquid with a towel.

When he finished, he made not one drink but two. Then he set a steaming cup of coffee before his brother, who had not vanished.

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