

Befitting

Von Juju-Chan

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Kapitel 1:	.....	2
Kapitel 2:	.....	5
Kapitel 3:	.....	8
Kapitel 4:	.....	11
Kapitel 5:	.....	14
Kapitel 6:	.....	16
Kapitel 7:	.....	20
Kapitel 8:	.....	23
Kapitel 9:	.....	26
Kapitel 10:	.....	28
Kapitel 11:	.....	31
Kapitel 12:	.....	33
Kapitel 13:	.....	36
Kapitel 14:	.....	39
Kapitel 15:	.....	43
Kapitel 16:	.....	47
Kapitel 17:	.....	50

Kapitel 1:

To return from a battle won should be the most glorious feeling for a warrior. And the greater the battle, the more glory it meant for the one who had been victorious. In any case it was the sought for occasion to celebrate. But this time Thor didn't feel ready for any of that. Could it be honorable to have his own brother bound and gagged as prisoner? To take him back home like this, back into the sacred halls of Asgard? He avoided to even glance at Loki. The sight had seared into his very thoughts. His brother had looked so pathetic... it seemed to be true, once Loki's tongue of silver was shunned, there wasn't that much left of him. It was repulsing to bear the sight of such a tremendously weak god. The gates of Asgard should have remained shut seeing this weakness. ...at least that was what Thor would have been supposed to think, this he knew, yet he simply couldn't feel this way. It struck him, that his thoughts about his brother were by far less noble because he felt pity. Anger, yes, and also disappointment but all of these were nothing compared with his pity. It was impossible for Loki to sink deeper because only when anger and hatred had faded could pity exist.

One could have received the impression that the gods of Asgard had waited for this day to come. When Thor and his captive entered the great hall, they were welcomed by elation for Thor and dispraise for Loki. And while the latter followed Thor as if he was non-existing, Thor lead the way with his head held high. Still his face showed no sign of pride when they came to his father, their father Odin, who rested upon his throne like a statue. A small nod from the allfather was enough to end all speech and once it was silent, his voice roared like thunder from all sides.

"Thor Odinson, you have returned victorious. We all are proud of you, my son –" Loud cheerings followed, horns were held high just to be emptied a second later. Again a little sign from Odin was enough to bring silence once again.

"This celebration is for you, Thor Odinson. As far as you are concerned, Loki Odinson..." Here and there profanities against Loki could be heard, but this time Odin simply continued: "...for everything you have done, for all your evil and most wrong deeds you shall face a punishment befitting. However, we shall not stain this feast with this, thus you shall receive your sentence tomorrow. Until then you are neither to take off your seal, nor are you to leave our midst."

With this he turned back to Thor. "And now let us begin the celebration."

And the gods of Asgard needed no further invitation, in the end it was a celebration of Thor's victory.

Loki remained amongst them all as he had been told. It was obvious his punishment had already begun, subtle, but all the more cruel. The seal made it impossible for him to say a word or to even drink anything, so all he could do was staying near his brother, who showed no intend of letting him get away from him. Being forced to participate in the celebration of his downfall, and more so never leaving the side of the one who had caused it – yes, his punishment had begun. He couldn't bear hearing all the talks given on how great a warrior his brother was and none missed the chance to make sure to mention Loki for the worst. But Loki only listened, somewhat amused. He was called the trickster, the one who was incapable of sincerity, but it was the first

time he could hear so many hostile remarks against himself he wondered whether he actually was the one who was the least sincere one. He had known his habit of pranking and causing trouble wasn't too welcomed in Asgard yet he had never felt this much hatred against him.

At first there were only small remarks, but given enough time and drinking, these remarks turned to more concrete speech. And not one voice was raised to his defense. Well he would have been surprised, had anybody wanted to say anything for his cause, but even his brother remained silent and let all those insults roam freely. Behind his muzzle Loki laughed silently. Of course Thor couldn't defend him the way he had always done. Not after he had caught and bound him and stripped him of all the honor he could have had. Not after he knew that no bound of blood existed between them – Thor could deny it all he wanted, but deep inside Loki knew Thor just couldn't. No one in Asgard could. This was why he had been captivated in the first place. 'Loki Odinson' the allfather had called him, knowing how great a lie that was. He had never been a son of Odin, he wasn't even an Asgardian and thus there were no reasons for any of the gods to not speak freely what they thought about him. Not that he cared, though, he just sat there and listened.

The sun had risen high before the feast was over and only then Loki was allowed to leave. Or more exactly: Was brought to his chambers, which were sealed to prevent him from wandering around. It was a release for Loki to finally be back in the solitude of his rooms and after he had shed his clothes on the floor, he allowed himself to simply fall into bed. When his glance met his clothes, he noticed how dirty and rugged they looked and it pained him. Maybe he was just tired or worn out, he tried to calm himself.

Soon Odin would reveal his punishment and Loki would have lied again, had he told he wasn't afraid. His racing mind showed him countless possibilities of sentences. He would be cast out, this was sure, even more since he wasn't even asgardian – why keep someone bothersome if he didn't even share your blood? But where would his banishment lie? Back in Midgard maybe, stripped of all his powers, forced to live as an ant amongst ants. Would Odin be cruel enough to leave him his memories or would he have mercy enough for the one he untruly claimed his younger son? Would he be permitted to maintain his current form and be left for the human's revenge or would he be changed to lose sight of whom he was completely?

He sat up, his heart pounding hard in his chest when another, even more plausible location crossed his mind. Joutunheim. In the end he was Loki Laufeysson and therefor prince of the frostgiants. Actually king, he corrected himself mentally, since he had killed queen Laufey himself. As far as he knew Laufey had only had one son – him. He stared at his own hands, unbelieving, when he noticed the faint blue glint. He had killed his actual mother, the former queen and had tried to eradicate all of Joutunheim. Surely the frostgiants wouldn't take kindly to a king who had killed his predecessor, either. Especially not when this person would have wiped them all out as well, had he not been stopped. And surely they did know it was his doing... Joutunheim would be his certain death or at least it meant lifelong prosecution.

Gnawing his lower lip he fell back into the cushions. Maybe Odin wouldn't cast him out completely? There would be so many other possibilities and wouldn't the most cruel one be to allow him to remain in Asgard but stripping him of his powers? Without magic, what was he? Without thinking about it he grasped both sides of his muzzle with his hands and tried to pull it down but to no end. They couldn't make him go

without food and drink for eternity, no.

He saw himself, blood running from his mouth, dripping down onto his lap, where his tongue was lying. They wouldn't, never. At least he hoped. Needle and twine he envisioned, shutting what was supposed to be open, preventing any speech from being made.

Deeply lost in his thoughts, Loki hadn't even noticed when he had fallen asleep, taking the images his mind had created for him into his dreams. All of his futures flashed before his inner eye, but none was kind. They kept him captivated, a prisoner locked in his dreams.

Unnoticed someone had entered his room, watching him in his sleep with soft, caring eyes. It was Odin's wife, Frigga, his mother.

"My dear son, Loki...", she whispered, "No matter what is to come for you, you should know, I will always be your loving mother."

She approached his bedside and stood there some moments, smiling sadly at her younger son.

"Please forgive us, for we have wronged you. We never wanted to hurt you, never."

Her hand almost touched his face, but she withdrew it. There was no need to disrupt these moments of calm sleep. She left.

Little did she know, that Loki's sleep was far from being calm. His dreams consisted only of nightmares, both from real memories shattering in the light of what he now knew he was and the future he dreaded.

Kapitel 2:

They were children – how many thousands of years ago was it? Both he and Thor were outside in the fields surrounding Asgard. It was summer, a warm but gentle summer. They had snuck out even though their father had forbidden them to leave the palace. It had been Thor's idea to get some distraction from the ever so same days they spend inside the walls. Sure, Loki hadn't disagreed, given he himself was a rather curious boy and he seldom disagreed with his older brother. Back then he had adored him, the one who was the perfect picture of what he was not. Even as children it was obvious that Thor was a born warrior whilst Loki remained seemingly fragile, no matter how hard he tried to become like his older brother.

"Hey, Loki, come over here!" Without even looking back, Thor had begun to climb one of the high trees standing at the edge of the field. It didn't take him but few moments to reach the top. Loki tried to be as fast, but it took him longer to get himself next to his brother, who was laughing at his somewhat clumsy moves.

"You know, little brother – sometimes I wonder how you turned out so weak." It wasn't even meant in a harmful way, but Loki hated it when Thor belittled him.

"I will grow strong when time comes, Thor." His eyes met his brother's. "I will prove to you I'm just as much of a warrior. Just... not yet. That's what mum always says and mum is right."

As if he wanted to apologize, Thor reached for Loki's shoulder and gave it a pat.

"I know. After all you are MY little brother."

The pride in Thor's voice caused Loki to smile. Yes, he was Thor's brother so it was only a matter of time.

He had grown older, but not stronger. By incident he had figured out that magic suited him more. He didn't like the idea, a man using magic was scorned, even though Loki didn't understand why. Wasn't his father, the almighty Odin one of the greatest sorcerers and the greatest warrior at the same time? It seemed unfair, but obviously he had inherited only the magic of his father, not his strength.

But Loki wouldn't have been Loki, had he not been able to adept quickly. In the end – wasn't magic the gift that was useful even outside of battle? And a great help to play tricks on those around him. At first his magic had been rather weak. He remembered clearly the first time he noticed it – he had held a glass with water, when suddenly ice crystals started to grow inside and outside of it. And since Loki had always like cold drinks the better, he had kept training this power, to be able to invoke ice even without water. He succeeded.

The next magic he discovered himself capable of was producing doubles of himself, which came in handy quite often, both for sneaking out and to cause mischief. And he caused mischief a lot.

But surely his most impressive power was his shapeshifting. It took him some time to master this art, but he did it.

All this time he could here the whispers behind his back on what a disgrace he would be for the house of Odin. A feeble sorcerer in a family of warriors, a prince not fit to defend his realm. The same time everyone praised his brother for his strength, his willpower and his ruthlessness when it came to dealing with enemies.

Loki seldom joined his brother on the battlefield and seldom was he asked to.

Again, thousands of years earlier, he was a child again. Loki couldn't sleep, nightmares of a realm made of ice haunted him. There were monsters living there, they called him, told him to come back. Their voices were deep and hoarse, coming from the deepest depths. They were hiding inside the ice, most of the time he only saw shadows.

These dreams came back so often, but Loki did not dare to tell his father or his mother. He once tried, but they only had shrugged it off, told him his dreams were just childish nightmares. And he felt judged by their looks. He couldn't tell them. And his brother would only laugh.

Something inside him pushed him to leave the security of his bed in order to go to another place where he could find peace. Taking his blanket and a cushion with him, he sneaked off to one of the towers, which was unused. Only he and his brother would come there. Nobody else, no-one in Asgard and surely no nightmare. He climbed the stairs, but then he slowed down: There was the light of a candle. He tiptoed closer and saw a familiar figure with blonde hair.

"Thor, you are here...?"

"I should ask you the same thing, Loki."

Loki sat down next to his brother.

"I... I couldn't sleep, that's all."

His brother nodded and laid his hand onto Loki's without saying a word for several moments.

"Were you having a nightmare?"

"...yes."

Loki felt ashamed to admit this to his older brother, but Thor's hand on his soothed him, allowing him to tell Thor what bothered him.

"It's the same one, all the time. All this ice and those monsters -"

"Don't worry, brother. I'm here, I will protect you from every monster, from anything that wants to harm you."

"...really?"

"Really. And now sleep."

With this Thor pulled his little brother closer, so he could sleep in his arms. That night, the nightmare did not return.

Somewhen in the future. His punishment. It was Thor who had been chosen to execute it. No mercy, not even the tiniest bit of regret tainted his gaze.

"Loki Laufeysson – hereby I shall put you to the punishment for your wrongdoings. First I revoke any ties that bound us, you are neither my brother, nor son of my father nor son of my mother. You are a stranger in the house of Odin and even more, a traitor. The first strike of Mjollnir is aimed at the traitor."

The moment Mjollnir broke his leg seemed to never end, even though at first there was no pain, only the terrible sound of ripping flesh and breaking bones. He screamed, didn't he? Loki wasn't sure and once the pain kicked in all his thoughts were gone.

"You are guilty. Guilty of having put Asgard in grave danger. You broke the treaty we had with Joutunheim and brought us to the edge of war. The second strike is aimed at the treaty-breaker."

This time Mjollnir destroyed his other leg and caused another flood of pain. And seeing Thor's indifference made it hurt even worse.

"You are guilty. Guilty of feigning your own death and of lying. The third strike is aimed at the liar."

His left arm felt as if Mjollnir had ripped it apart completely. His vision blurred, but he heard Thor's voice even clearer.

"You are guilty. Guilty of trying to take what wasn't yours, guilty of causing massive destruction and many deaths in Midgard. The fourth strike is aimed at the one who doesn't know his place."

Loki tried to prepare for the next strike. For a moment he only saw black when his other arm was crashed. How he longed for a blackout, anything to end this pain. With unchanged voice Thor continued.

"You are guilty. Guilty of being a monster, unworthy to exist. You caused us much trouble, but now your time has come. Prepare yourself, Loki Laufeysson, to meet your end."

He felt every inch the hammer worked into his chest, how his ribs bended until they broke, how one of them pierced his heart.... everything. The world stopped existing – or was it him?

Frigga's voice. "Thor, take care of your brother."

Kapitel 3:

"Thor, please go to him. I'm sure he needs you now more than ever." Even though Frigga tried her best to keep her appearance as ever-serene queen of Asgard, Thor could tell quite easily how sorrowful his mother's voice sounded.

"And what do you expect me to tell him? 'Let's just forget everything?' I'm sure it's not that easy, mother. Loki brought this upon himself. I did, what had to be done." He clenched his fists, uncertain whether he felt anger or something else.

"Everything else will be decided soon. I brought him home." Hearing this, Frigga shook her head and approached her elder son with a gentle, sad smile.

"My son... I know you are hurt a-..." Thor jumped up.

"What do you know? I'm hurt, is this what you wanted to say? Because I most certainly am not." He turned away, ashamed at his behavior towards his queen and mother.

"I'm sorry, mother. But I'd prefer to not see Loki." Not in the state his brother was currently in, he added in his mind. A moment of silence stood between them, before Frigga spoke, but it was merely a whisper.

"...we don't know to what end this all will come. It might become an eternity you won't be seeing him again. And maybe..." Her voice cracked and died. Some thoughts were never meant to be spoken out loud.

"Don't even think this way. Father wouldn't allow it." It felt like something heavy was weighing him down whilst he watched his mother's small figure leave. Even though Odin was king of Asgard, the council consisted of him and several other members, the elders of Asgard. And Loki had done things that were worthy of the most severe punishments.

Without realizing, Thor hurried to where he knew his brother's chambers to be. He didn't even hesitate to knock or ask for permission to enter. The room was sealed, Loki's voice was sealed – those of the royal family could enter at will, as did the guardians. Only his brother was prevented from leaving.

He found Loki asleep on his bed. It seemed aeons ago that he had watched over his little brother's sleep and it gave him a strange feeling of having been stuck when he recognized this wasn't his younger brother as he remembered him. Yes, sometimes the heart did shape memories of its own. He did know Loki was far from being a child, but something inside him had clung to this memory. But lying in this bed, exposed without cover, was a man he barely knew, somehow. What had driven this usually so prudent – or at least sensible – man to do as he had done? When had everything gone wrong? When had his own brother turned to a stranger whose heart was so deep in shadows, not even the light of Thor's brotherly love could allow him to have at least a glimpse of what was hidden inside. All these questions remained unanswered. The part of Loki's face that wasn't covered with the muzzle seemed blank, somewhat calm and gave him not the tiniest hint. How could he ever understand his brother again? Thor sighed. In his mind and more so in his heart there had never been any doubt that Loki was his brother, not even when Odin revealed to him Loki's true descent. The thought of repudiating him had never once crossed his mind.

But then there was his anger. His disappointment and also hurt. It wasn't over yet, this Thor knew, for Loki had stirred up things far too big for him to handle, not even with all his cunning. Asgard would give him one punishment, but he was sure somewhere,

someone else would wait for his chance to retaliate upon Loki for the loss of an army. For not getting the Tesseract. There were many interesting tales to be told by his brother and he would eagerly listen to his explanations. Even if most of them were probably lies anyway.

It took Thor a while to notice the glare that lingered on him.

"I see, you are finally awake, Loki." He noticed Loki's frown and shook his head.

"Well, I certainly hope you had a pleasant rest, brother. Mother asked me to look after you, but it appears you are not quite fond of me being here." Thor had no idea how true this was. The aftermath of his dreams had not yet ceased to effect Loki's thinking and for a moment he feared he was still there, shattered on the ground with Thor standing above him, ready to aim his last, fatal strike against him. He sat up with a sudden movement, not wanting to remain in the position he was in and opened his mouth to sneer back at Thor but found himself unable to produce any sound. The muzzle, it dawned on him. Yes, he was safe in Asgard. Well, safe given the circumstance his punishment was awaiting him.

"I'm afraid mother was wrong when she suspected you to want company. Well, I thought so. Maybe father will allow you to have your seal removed so you can eat and drink something. Until then it seems pointless to be here when you insist on being like this. I might come back soon." With this Thor turned from him and a split second Loki heard himself asking him not to leave him. Again no sound left his lips and the thought remained but a thought. In an instant, Loki wondered why he had thought this – of all beings in the nine realms, Thor was one of those he wished to see least. In the end it was his brother's fault he was in this condition. Thor had valued his love for Midgard and its weak creature higher than his so-called brotherly love. Again the muzzle proved effective in silencing Loki and keeping his verbal venom to himself. He heard the door creak when Thor opened it to leave, but suddenly the blonde turned around once more.

"Once you have this seal removed, Loki, you shall tell me all about your reasons. You will not leave out anything and you should not even dare to consider bending the truth."

And then Thor was gone.

It took some moments for Loki to let Thor's words seep into his consciousness. Had he actually just threatened him? He chuckled, feeling his whole body contract, unable to prevent this outburst, however inaudible it was. His brother had just threatened him. He couldn't remember the last time this had happened but he was sure it had to be millennia away. He pressed one hand against his shaking body and used the other one to brush aside the tears in the corners of his eyes. It was just too amusing. Thor had never been one given to threatening, especially not against him. Oh yes, he thought, this time I really managed to get him angry. This realization both amused and frightened him. Even though Thor had always been prone to irascibility it had never been aimed at Loki or anyone else of Asgard. But now... well, he wasn't one of the Aesir anymore.

Whilst Loki still tried to figure out what his realization practically meant, Thor wandered through the corridors of the residence. He wanted to calm himself before confronting his mother again. For a moment he had despised Loki's whole being, the way he had shamelessly displayed his vulnerable, bare figure, the look in Loki's eyes... every little thing about him stirred his inside and this distressed him. He had come to

Midgard to get Loki back to Asgard, to bring his little brother back home, not to start a grudge with him. Alas, in the end he was weary from the fight, exhausted from the long celebration... surely it was just a momentary aberrance in his mind. He sighed when he came to a halt in front of his mother's door and took a second before he knocked.

"Come in, Thor." He didn't even wonder she knew it was him. His mother had always known when he or his brother were in front of her door.

"How is he?" He shook his head.

"I can't tell. Irritating. Irritated. And for once silent." Before he even noticed it he grinned slightly. It was seldom for Loki to be unable to talk back so this condition was rather... exhilarant. Frigga lowered her eyes and nodded.

"I see... Odin was here. Loki's punishment is decided, it seems. He did not tell me what it was, but he wants both you and Loki to come to the throne room once the sunset starts. You shall escort him. Only you." So his father had frozen even his own wife, the queen out of the sentencing.

"Don't worry, mother." It was all Thor could say. It would take some time before sunset given it was only just noon. And this made him nervous. Why would Odin want them all to wait so long before telling them the decision the elders had made? He was torn between knowing Loki deserved the most severe punishment, his own anger, his wish to not see his mother sad because of what would happen to her younger son and also the part of his soul that kept reminding him painfully he, too, cared too deeply for his younger brother to actually wish for him to face the punishment he deserved.

Kapitel 4:

Dusk came too soon for Thor to feel prepared. It wasn't his punishment, still he was at unease. Loki did not know he was to be brought before their father, at least neither Thor nor Frigga had come to tell him. It wouldn't have made a difference anyway and Thor preferred to keep his distance from his brother as long as he could. Never had he felt any need to do so, but somehow he deep down perceived there was a crack in their bonds. At least he hoped it was only a crack, he couldn't tell. So once the afterglow came, blood-red as if it was to announce the end not only of the day, he readied himself in order to carry out the task assigned to him. Every little step towards his brother's chambers seemed a little bit longer than usual. Still, he felt unprepared when he opened the door. Behind the door Loki waited for him. And obviously he hadn't even bothered to get at least dressed again.

"Brother, I come to take you to father. It seems your sentence has been decided already." Even though Thor kept his gaze at Loki, he couldn't see the slightest hint of any emotional response. Loki simply nodded.

Indeed, for the time being Loki had resigned – there was no way to extricate himself from what was to follow, his magic was sealed, his voice silenced and the little strength he had was no match for his older brother. Not that he would just take whatever would be in store for him, no, but he was smart enough to understand the chance to prevent his dreams and fears from coming true had not yet come. All he could do was pretending he did not care and to act indifferent.

When Thor came closer, Loki couldn't help his flinching. *Don't touch me*, he thought and indeed, Thor stepped back.

"Get yourself dressed, Loki. It has never been a good idea to keep father waiting." Thor was right, Loki had to agree – once Odin was upset it was wisest to not irritate him further by keeping him waiting unnecessarily. Still his pride demanded him to hesitate for this one moment to make sure Thor knew he wasn't afraid. That he wouldn't bow down to anything. It was this one moment that gave Loki courage enough to go and fetch his garments. Usually he conveniently let them appear before himself, but given his magic was shunned he had to go and get them himself. Well, another moment won. And each second seemed to be crucial for Loki. Time to think. To figure out how to free himself. To not have to face the Allfather just yet. His hands were slightly shaking when he got out what he needed and somehow even the simple robe he had chosen felt too heavy, too much of everything. He needed to hurry.

"Are you ready, brother?" Thor sounded impatient, so Loki forbore from taking more time in order to make his appearance a little less wretched. He went back to his brother and signaled him that he was good to go. Well, as good as possible given the circumstances. Thor looked at him and without realizing, he smiled as if to encourage his little brother.

"Good. Now come, father is waiting." He needed not to remind Loki to not try anything as he was sure Loki knew himself it would be better to at least stick to the little dignity he had left. Besides – there was no way open for Loki other than the one leading to their father's throne. With a simple gesture Thor neutralized the seal that had prevented Loki from stepping outside of his confinement and led the way once more. Loki wondered, whether it actually had only been about one day ago they had arrived in Asgard for to him it seemed so far away already.

Although the way from Loki's chambers to the throne room was rather long, Thor did not once turn to him. He did not bother talking to Loki – Loki couldn't answer anyway – and neither did he bother to even make sure his brother wouldn't stop following him. He knew Loki wouldn't and in the end Thor was right, Loki was still close behind him when they reached their destination. Without announcing them, Thor stepped in. "We are here, father. I, Thor Odinson and Loki Odinson have come to hear your decision." He stepped to the throne and bowed before their father. Loki stood next to him, but he couldn't bring himself to do as Thor did.

"You may get back up, my son." The fatherly warmth in Odin's voice was like a sting for Loki's heart. He clenched his fist. In the end there was no reason for Odin to address him this way.

"As has been announced yesterday, Loki shall face the punishment for his actions." Loki bit his lip to prevent the trembling he felt inside from showing. I'm not afraid of you, Odin, he tried to convince himself.

"However, before we come to this, there are several other matters I, Odin, king of Asgard need to take care of." With a short wave of his hand Odin made the muzzle drop. Unbelieving Loki held out his hand to catch the cold metal, only to let it slip and fall to the ground where it landed with a loud clank. Then he touched his skin where the metal had been, feeling the dents it had left.

"I have released your voice, Loki, but not your magic. For the time being this will be enough. Even though your fate is already decided, you shall here and now tell us what the reasons behind your actions were." There was not the slightest doubt in Odin's voice. Loki bit his lower lip. It had always been like this, from the very beginning: Whenever Odin punished him or Thor, he would have decided already before even giving them a chance to explain. Well, Loki had to admit this time it might have been quite hard to explain everything. He had toyed with his brother, trying to both break and kill him, had led the Jotun on their march to Asgard where he himself had taken care of dispatching their soldiers and Laufey, it was his doing that Thor had smashed the Bifrost – and still Thor, knowing everything, tried to save him from falling. He had chosen to come to an end when he let go of his brother's hand when they both were hanging. He had recognized nothing he ever did would be enough for Odin. The only end that had been open for him was to fall into oblivion as prince of Asgard before anyone else would discover the monster he actually was. But even this simple deed he was unable to do. He had survived, somewhere, somewhen he had woken up to find himself between the realms and then *they* had raised him up and presented him an opportunity, not only to take revenge, but also to finally become someone. He had had to kill these vile Midgardians and, well, it wasn't as if he was exactly against killing such worthless creatures. He would have killed them all and in the end: **THIS** he did not regret. Nothing of it. Not the fights, not the manipulations, nothing, except he hadn't been able to personally send that wench Thor had fallen for to Hel. Midgard would have been his kingdom, had Thor not decided to meddle. *They* would have gotten the Tesseract and then...

"There is nothing to say about it, king of Asgard." The bitterness in his voice was only matched by his venom. He steeled himself for the next words, just a moment, and slowly raised his head in order to be able to look right into Odin's face.

"I'm ready to face whatever you have decided. I've died once and I don't mind dying again. But allow my... "brother" to be the one to slaughter this Jotun." Thor was one of the few Aesir he knew he might be able to trick into releasing him, should the need arise. And even if he wouldn't be successful, it still would pain Thor for the rest of his

life. But actually he was not nearly as confident as his words suggested. The trembling inside hadn't stopped and had he been alone he might have succumbed to his fear. All he had left was the pride to be able to face Odin, no matter what would come of it. And the grief he saw there both satisfied and hurt him.

"Loki!" Thor started, but was cut short by his father.

"Is this all you have to say, my son?" Even though Odin's voice was as lordly as ever, his eyes spoke unmistakably of the sorrow even he felt.

"I see, so it is. Your thoughts are filled with what you chose to believe, Loki. Where to has your mind wandered that you, a prince of Asgard, turned into such a wrecked being? Don't be mistaken, Loki, it is not only your mother who always believed in you. And we still do. This is why I prevented such a sentence from being decided, even though it would have been adequate to your doings." Slowly, he raised from his throne.

"When time comes, you will come to understand, both of you. It is never easy to be a just king and a wise judge, but I believe there is no punishment great enough for a father, who has failed." Odin had said this more to himself, but he straightened up as if nothing had been said at all.

"There are still things left for you to righten, Loki. Heimdall warned us about the dark presence awaiting you. But this time, Asgard will not be your shield. This is your first punishment, Loki Odinson: You will set things right. As you probably won't be coming back, you are allowed to take three days to prepare your departure and to bid farewell. Once you leave, your magic will be restored, until then it shall remain diminished. After you will have stepped out of this realm, you are no longer belonging to Asgard. Until you have dealt with the things you stirred up, you are simply Loki, the one without a home." Loki chuckled. He couldn't help it, it somehow amused him to listen to Odin's words. So his deathsmen were the Chitauri, that was what had been decided. Soon he would be not only Loki without a home, but also Loki without a life. Given the Chitauri would be kind enough to eventually let him die. There was no doubt they would find him.

"I shall accompany my brother."

Kapitel 5:

Unbelieving Loki gazed at his so-called brother . Thor wanted to accompany him? It was impossible.

"I do not wish for your presence, Thor. And it seems Asgard surely would prefer the heir to its throne to not depart with, well.. a convict." Even the bitter sarcasm could not completely undo the astonishment in Loki's voice, even though it was enough for Thor.

"This is not open for discussion. Neither for you, my brother, nor for anyone else. I will not have you go on this journey alone." Odin had remained silent, but now he spoke.

"I thought so. I hereby remind you, Thor, that you are being unreasonable. As heir to the throne you are to remain in Asgard."

"As heir to the throne? Father – what kind of king would I be, would I desert my own brother in time of need? I – ..." Odin held up his hand.

"No more. Loki, you are dismissed. You may go back to your chambers and prepare for your departure. Thor, you will remain here, I have things to discuss with you." Without saying another word, Loki left. Why did he suddenly feel so weak? As if every strength had been drained from him? The way back to his chambers seemed to have lengthened but that might be due to his legs trembling. Still he made it back, unseen, unbothered by anyone. He surely did not want to encounter anybody in Asgard, especially not now.

When he reached his door, he found the seal and guardians were gone. He was free. For three more days. His last grace period. He fell down on the armchair that was standing next to the window. Usually the view and the gentle breeze soothed him but not this time. Loki tried to figure out what had just happened. *Ok, he reprimanded himself, just calm down. So Odin has cast you out for good. You will go out there alone and maybe there is a way to put the pieces back together.* He did not delude himself, as tediously loyal and plain Thor was, there was no way for him to come along. Not as Odin's heir, prince of Asgard and especially not as his brother, which he wasn't in the end. No, this journey would be his own. Maybe it was better like this. But if he knew this, why was he shaking? Was it fear or helplessness... hopelessness? Up until now he had always found a way to turn things for the best, this time would be no different. It simply hurt to face the fact he had lost everything. *I never intended it to end like this. It's not fair, it is not fair ...* yet it was what the council and his "father" had deemed fit. And somehow they were right. He did not belong here, no Joutun should ever sully the sanctity of Asgard. How he despised to even think about these monsters. He was Loki of Asgard, not some worthless beast that crept through the icy nothingness of Joutunheim. Dumbstruck, he looked at his clenched fist. Blue. Blue like the sky outside. It was then he realized he had been crying the whole time.

The things Odin had wanted to discuss with Thor had been numerous and so it took him quite some time before he was dismissed as well. Odin had tried to bring him to yield to reason. It would have been so easy. Nobody would blame him for doing the right thing and the right thing was to remain behind, to let his brother go as had been verdicted in order to prepare for the catch up of his failed coronation. It was certainly not the time to leave for an uncertain period of time for a quest that most probably would end with both of them dead. Odin had been clear about this matter: No

warriors of Asgard, not one, would be allowed to absent himself from his duty to Asgard and it's king. *A wise king never choses a single man over his entire people*, he had said. *Asgard cannot lose both his princes , you are needed here, there is nothing you can do to help Loki this time.*

He was sure he could. No matter what it took, he would never let his younger brother down. Had not he been the only one to really understand him? Of course, their mother also knew Loki, but he and Loki were brothers. Loki's heritage was of no significance. True, it shocked him to hear Loki refer to himself as "Joutun" because he wasn't. Never had been. Loki had always been one of Asgard, hadn't he?

"Thor, you look agitated. Is something ill?" He looked up only to find Sif standing opposite him.

"I just had a talk with Odin. Loki's punishment is decided." The faint worry he saw in her face surprised him.

"So what is it? Is he... he is not....?"

"He will be cast out. Father wants him to righten the wrongs he has done." Sif came nearer to him.

"Will he be sent to Midgard then?" Thor hesitated a moment, then he shook his head.

"I fear it's by far worse. His redemption shall start elsewhere. To be honest... I don't know where to he has to go actually. All I know is the council expects him to never return." He clenched his fist even tighter. It angered him.

"...I see. Thor..." He cut her short.

"Don't worry, Sif. I won't allow it to come to this."

"You don't intend to go with him, do you, Thor?" He did not answer, both because he was unsure himself and because he did not even need to say a word for her to understand.

"Let us accompany you. The warriors three and I will be at your service, Thor." She knew that her comrades were always ready for any battle Thor led them to. Thor's hand suddenly touching her shoulder confused her.

"Lady Sif and the warriors three will be at service in Asgard, I fear. The allfather does not allow any warriors of Asgard to leave with my brother. Nor is the heir to Asgard's throne permitted to do so." She seemed taken aback.

"Why?"

"Because that's what the allfather has ordered. That's why." Thor left her like this. He was in no mood for further chitchatting. He needed some time to work out what to do and how to do it.

Kapitel 6:

No trace of Loki was to be seen during the next two days, not in the halls, not in the hallways... nowhere. Given the days were passing by faster than usually – at least to Thor they were – it surprised him. In the end it might well be Loki's last chance to bid everyone he held dear goodbye. Was his little brother ashamed of what he had done... or of his defeat? That would probably be it, he thought, he knew Loki well enough to understand. Even as children it was a habit he had always had. Pride. Pride had kept Loki from so many things in the past but this time was different, wasn't it? Their father had told them Loki was not expected to ever return. Thor sat down under one of the trees in the garden, sighing. The time was too short to come up with a good plan. Well, he had never been one given to planning it was his strength that had won every battle, not his great mind. He chuckled. Some time ago he had felt ready for everything, ready to become the king of Asgard, but what use was a king unable to even protect his own kin, let alone an entire kingdom? A king should never feel this useless and somewhat dull. This time there would be no victory, no way to not disregard one of his responsibilities. Odin was right, he was aware of this: As heir of Asgard he was not supposed to leave the kingdom alone when it might be at the brink of war, the peace with Joutunheim was everything but stable, the dark allies of Loki could decide to try to invade Asgard any time. He was to remain behind to protect his people, should they need arise. He clenched his fist and smashed it into the ground. There was something more important to him than the throne of Asgard. Loki had done many wrongs but he was still his brother. Would always be, no matter how much Loki denied it. As his older brother it was Thor's duty to bring him back on the right path, to protect him from the shadows that had crept into his heart and corrupted his soul. He was ready to give anything to get his little brother back and to roam the light with him once more. Letting him go to his demise, all alone... he was unable to do this. The price to pay for this selfish wish would be almost unbearable to pay, though: He would have to forsake his people, defy the order of his father and king and there was probably no way he would get back to Midgard in time... in time to see his friends again, to see *her* again. He had thought about it so much, all the time and he still had no clue which betrayal would weigh heavier on his heart.

Loki had spent the last two days in his chambers. He had no desire to see anybody. When Odin had proclaimed his sentence he had pondered whom he would feel the need to see one last time and somehow unsurprisingly he found there was none. Not one person in Asgard he had the desire to speak to and he knew it was the same with them. None had come to see him, either. Before everything had happened, he had considered Thor's friends his friends as well but now he knew he had deceived himself thinking that way. Why would they consider him a friend anyway, he was not a warrior even though he had fought side by side with them. *Some do battle, others just do tricks.* That was what Thor had said to him before he was supposed to be crowned. This was what they saw in him: A trickster, unworthy of either their respect or even friendship. That guy who would even lose to a maiden in an honest fight with weapons. He had been so blind, all these aeons he had been in Asgard, blind to the scorn and mockery aimed at him, unspoken but obviously stated in their faces. And now he had been let down by everybody he could see it clearly, he had heard it during

the celebration, their true thoughts. Asgard's true face was just as ugly as his own actual guise.

He went to his closet and opened a drawer filled with nothing but a small box he took out. In it was a lock of long, blonde hair. Some time ago he would have known whom he wanted to see at least once again before he went away. When he had been younger he had been fascinated by the maiden whose hair he had kept all these years. She had not yet been a warrior, no, she was simply one of the fairest maidens in this realm. Sif. But just like everyone else she had preferred his big brother and out of his jealousy he had stolen her beautiful hair. He reclined on the bed, the lock clenched in his hand. The hair was still soft and shimmered like pure gold. They had never been friends and after he had stolen her hair she hated him. Well, he had brought her a replacement but these hairs had turned ravenblack. Just like his own hair. It had been an accident, they had been golden in the beginning, but, well... it hadn't worked out. He had been the reason for Sif to start her path as warrior. Thor had been furious at him for his prank, everybody had been. He stroked the tress, smiling. He had been a brat. Especially since he had only wanted to be Sif's friend because she had been so unnervingly fascinated by Thor. He stood up. There was one visit he had to make and he had almost forgotten about it.

After he had gotten ready, Loki went to the stables. At least Sleipnir deserved his attention. He looked out for people coming his way and hid when they did. At least he knew almost every secret pathway Asgard's residence had and truly, he made it to the stable unseen.

"Tch, hey, Sleipnir, it's me." he addressed the magnificent stallion and as soon as he had heard him, Sleipnir was standing next to the door, neighing. Loki grabbed an apple he had plucked on the way and held it so Sleipnir could eat it.

"Sorry it took me so long. I'm sure you already know it. I'm here to say goodbye, my little one. I wished I could take you along, but... well..." Loki shook his head.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Sleipnir will understand." Loki froze. He hadn't even heard her enter.

"I thought you would come here at last, my son. You wouldn't leave without coming here." After a moment to retain his composure he turned to her.

"I thought I was alone."

"I know. But I had to see you, Loki. I had hope you would come... to me at least. Did you not wish to take your leave of me?" He looked down and licked his lips.

"To what end?"

"My dear Loki... to what end does a son grant his mother her wish to see him before he parts with her for an indefinite amount of time?"

"...I came here to see Sleipnir."

"Loki..."

"Please... I only wanted to see him."

"So you want me to leave?" Frigga asked, merely whispering.

"...yes. But promise me one thing...."

"What is it, Loki?"

"Make sure Sleipnir is fine. That is all I need to be certain of." Loki stroked Sleipnir's forehead affectionately.

"He will not lack anything. He never did, you know this." Loki nodded and hugged Sleipnir's head, burying his face in Sleipnir's mane.

"...leave me alone, please." Frigga hesitated, she knew what Loki's voice meant. It took him everything he had to not cry. She went to him and stroked his hair, just once,

before she turned to leave.

"I shall see you tomorrow at the latest ..." Frigga had been gone for some time, before Loki had enough strength to answer.

"Don't..."

"Thor! Thor" There you are..." The young woman ran towards the sleeping figure under the tree, her black hair swinging with every step she took.

"What are you doing, sleeping in the garden? I had to ask Heimdall to tell me where you are. Your mother wishes for you to come to her chambers." It took Thor a little before he was awake enough to understand who came there and disturbed his sleep.

"Uhhh... Sif? What are you doing here?" She stood there, her hands on her hips.

"Did you listen at all? The queen demands your presence. It seemed to be urgent. And... I also wanted to take my leave. Ours, actually. Volstagg, Fandral, Hogun and I are being sent to the dwarves." She offered him her hand to help him getting up.

"I shall hurry to her. And, well... a convenient timing, isn't it?" He took her hand and rose. Sif shook her head.

"I know, but it was the king's order."

"Sometimes I fear he knows us too damn well, right?" So his father was sending away the ones he knew they would have accompanied him anywhere. It was getting harder and harder to decide.

"The allfather knows everything, Thor. And he is wise, he knows what is best." Did he hear a tiny bit of frustration in her voice?

"So they say." He knew this was the chance to discuss his plans with one of his friends. Sif would understand him, he hoped. Or maybe not.

"...there is nothing we can do, Thor. Nothing you can do without defying Odin. You knew when you went to capture him, you knew it might... end like this." She was trying to comfort him, but there was no need to do so.

"He's my brother. And I did, what had to be done. I guess I always do what has to be done."

"Right now you really sound like a king, Thor."

"Oh, shut up, Sif!" He found himself laughing.

"Enjoy your time with the dwarves and look after the others. And make sure to tell me what happened once we meet again." Sif directly looked into his eyes.

"I promise. And now you should hurry to your mother instead of gabbing."

"You are right. Lady Sif... greet my friends and take care." He hurried off.

"I guess you are the one who should take care, Thor. Don't do anything you will regret."

When he reached his mother's chambers, he found her not alone, but in company of his father. He bowed before them.

"Mother, father. I was requested to come here?"

"Yes, Thor. There is something I want you to take to your brother... would you do me this favor? It seems he has no desire for my presence." She stretched out her hand, in which a tiny pendant on a silver necklace was lying.

"This is an amulet which has been in my possession for... a very long time. I want him to have this for his journey. It's a magical amulet." Thor opened his hand and felt the cold metal touching his skin when Frigga dropped it.

"I don't think he will be glad to see me either." Now Odin stepped forward.

"There is another thing I want you to do when you are there. A little errand. Take this

and make sure he will receive it as well. Do not tell him it was I who gave it, understood?" Thor nodded.

"I will."

"Then off you go, my dear son." Frigga smiled at him whilst Odin blinked.

The two things their parents had given him weighed heavier than expected. Cold and somehow he knew this was the magic they emitted, although he had no magical intuition whatsoever. No, he was glad to give them to his brother as soon as possible – but he found his brother's chambers empty.

Kapitel 7:

Loki had always particularly enjoyed the calm of the gardens a little farther from the residence. As child, he had been forbidden to go there, let alone go there without the company of at least Thor and his friends. Well, nobody believed a man walking a sorcerer's path to be capable of fending for himself, at least in Asgard. Not only was magic itself perceived as the weaker choice for those too powerless to use their own strength, a man choosing to become a sorcerer was considered effete. Even though the queen had been more compromising than most, she still seemed to have the same thoughts as she was the one sending Thor along with him whenever he wanted to take a simple walk outside. He crossed the invisible boundaries that separated the interior part of the residence. It tingled inside his very bones when he touched and ultimately passed the floating energy – it was weak enough to not hurt but he knew that should the need arise, this feeble energy could be turned into a deadly weapon of defense. Obviously he wasn't banned from leaving the residence as nothing happened.

Outside the warmth of Asgard's residence the true climate of this realm showed. It was not nearly as cold as Joutunheim but it was far from the mild, ever-lasting springtime that ensured the Aesir's comfort and gave them limitless harvests at any time. He suspected this kind of magic to be the king's doing yet nobody ever said anything about it. Maybe because it would be shameful to admit to their king being a sorcerer as well or maybe because they never thought about it, simply accepting this convenience. Loki relished to feel this change, the chill that suddenly caressed his bare skin. He did not dare to look down, fearing his magic might be too weak to stop his body from visibly adjusting once more. How he loathed this constant fear, ever since he had discovered his shameful descend. It had taken but one touch of one of those monstrosities to shatter the seal Odin had given him. One simple touch had bared the dark secret that had been hidden right underneath his skin, hidden even from himself. If only they had never gone to Joutunheim that dreadful day. If only the cold breeze stopped to whisper into his heart, not with the kindness it had always done when he had been a child but with the fierce loathing he suspected to be a reflection of what he was trying to keep inside.

Following the narrow path that had been treaded into the ground, he reached a small and meager forest. He could not recall having ever gone further than that. His companions, well, Thor's companions had never allowed it, claiming it to be too boring to even bother their feet walking there. Truth be told, he never had any intention to do so, either. The accounts he had read had been rather clear: Outside of Asgard's interior parts, this realm had not much to offer. Enough wild game for the huntings to entertain the bored warriors between wars and to sustain their beloved feasts where there were barrels of wine and mead and enough food for anyone to overeat. Loki smirked. Seeing it like that Asgard sometimes was a place fit for the dull and simple ones. He sighed and sat down to rest on a tree stump. It would be so easy to leave this all behind if only he would be able to get these thoughts from his mind into his heart. A movement not too far from him caught his attention: A stag was racing by and by the sounds that followed it Loki could only guess what it was running from. Wolves, a

whole pack. He stifled himself and used whatever magic he could grasp in order to remain unseen. They were no actual threat as they already had chosen their kill. It was still wiser to not make them change their mind, both his diminished magic and the small dagger he carried being unlikely to help him defending himself from a whole pack of wolves. And then they flew by, six magnificent white wolves led by an old grey one. Within seconds they reached their prey, digging their teeth deep into its side and biting through its throat. The fight was short and Loki caught himself watching it with tension as the stag's cries became quieter until they died away. And the hunters did not wait for the stag to perish, they began ripping out its flesh right away, turning it into a quivering bloody mess. Their furs were no longer white and it would probably take some time before they were again. *That's how it goes, little stag.*

In the meantime Thor was still trying to figure out the whereabouts of his brother, having searched all the places he could have thought of already and in vain. There were only few possibilities left and he chose the most obvious one.

"Be greeted, good Heimdall." The man did not turn around.

"I have waited for you, Thor Odinson. You are looking for the lost one." It was a simple statement, not a question.

"I'm looking for my brother. He is nowhere to be found."

"You are looking in the wrong places, future king of Asgard. The one you seek has chosen to transgress."

"He did what?"

"You will find him outside. Not far from the boundaries around us is a small forest. I think you know the one." Thor thought for a moment before he understood.

"Thank you, gatekeeper." He turned to leave but Heimdall's voice stopped him.

"He is veiled from your eyes, though. The king's gift might be of aid."

"I see. Thank you again."

Thor did know the wood, how could he forget it? It had been there they had started their adventures when they were barely old enough to leave without escort. His first sparring with Sif had been there, she almost defeated him and thus gained his approval as a warrior maiden. Just a little further was the glade where Loki had tried to teach him a little magic. He had laughed, a warrior needed no sorcery, even though he did admit the fire Loki made was agreeable and helped a lot to roast the hare they had hunted down. When they had been older and more versed in the art of fighting or, in Loki's case, the art of defending himself, they had used this area for training either fighting each other or looking for animals fit to be decent adversaries. How could he not have thought of this place? Well... once they had focused more and more on the fighting and got used even more to the warrior's path, they had ceased to take Loki along since Loki had chosen to increase his sorcery instead of trying to at least become a half-decent warrior, too. But when they asked him, he rarely declined, saying he preferred being out there anyway.

It took Thor some time to get to said forest and when he arrived the first thing he saw were the wolves with their bloodstained coats, still engaged in dismembering the already torn body of their prey. He automatically clasped Mjollnir's handle, ready to strike if necessary.

"You should rather stay where you are, Son of Odin." Loki slowly rose from his seat and withdrew the magic veil he had used to hide himself.

"Brother, I've been looking for you. You were nowhere to be found so..."

"You went to Heimdall and asked him to spy on me." With small, gracious steps Loki walked towards Thor, avoiding any sudden movement.

"The gatekeeper surely is a convenient... man." Loki looked back over his shoulder and found that the wolves did not care for either of them.

"Loki..."

"I'm here, Thor. So what is it you thought important enough to waste your time looking for me?"

"This bitterness does not suit you well, brother."

"I though I had made it clear already? I'm not what we thought I was, am I?"

"Can you not even find your peace for the last day you will spend here at least? ...just forget it, Loki." Thor did not want to hear any more of Loki's childish spite.

"Mother sent me to give you something from her." He held out the amulet Frigga had given him. Loki eyed it before he accepted it.

"Such a powerful amulet the queen is willing to give to a mere prisoner?" His fingers tightened around it.

"She will probably never get it back."

"Loki, you will return. You will come back here." Loki shook his head.

"You've always been an imbecile."

"You will come back to our mother...."

"YOUR mother."

"...to Odin, our father...."

"YOUR father."

"And to me, your brother, as prince of Asgard once more."

"You are not my brother. Can you not let this go, Thor? I've had enough with it – Why do you insist on forcing your delusions on me? You know what? I'm so glad I will finally be able to leave here without any reason to ever come back. I will never have to see you or your lying kin again and I am so grateful for this. I probably should have done what I did earlier to spare me some aeons of wasted time here in this hypocritical pretense of an existence." He glared at Thor, his teeth clenched, trembling. But Thor said nothing, Loki's sudden wrath had caught him off guard. He did nothing to stop him from leaving and only when Loki had left the range of his vision he himself moved again to return to the residence. His father's gift felt heavier than before and he could hear clearly the wolves devouring what little was left of the stag.

Kapitel 8:

"Loki! Loki, where are you?" His mother was searching him as were probably many more, but Loki was hidden. Even though he could hear her and only moments later see her, he refrained from showing himself. Loki simply stood next to Frigga watching her, wondering how long it would take her to unveil him. It was the first time he tried to use his magic in order to conceal himself from others. It had worked in his chambers when he was all alone. He had tried and it had worked so there was no reason to fear it would not work now as well. He held his breath as Frigga stepped closer.

"Loki, I know you are here. Where are you?" Just a little longer... he almost couldn't repress his laughter. Almost.

"Show yourself, Loki. Enough playing around." Frigga demanded, her voice both pleading and stern. He started to laugh and the second he did he knew his magic was wearing off and she could see him. And obviously touch him as well since he felt a tug on his ear.

"Loki!" She scolded him but not without a little pride showing through.

"Mother, let go of my ear, please..."

"No. We have been looking for you for long enough. I was close to asking Heimdall to tell me your whereabouts."

"Ouch. Heimdall is such a killjoy." He knew that Heimdall's power of vision was unrivaled in the nine realms and even surpassed that of his father.

"Stop talking like that, my son. We can only be grateful the Vanir allowed for such a valuable warrior and seer to come to us."

"I know, I know. I did not mean to... I mean... I would never..." He sighed and turned to his contrite face. And as planned, Frigga ceased to be angered.

"Alright. Now hurry up and get ready our guests will arrive soon."

Only when he was back in his rooms, he started to wonder how his mother had known him to be in this very room. Maybe his magic wasn't powerful enough yet. But it would be, soon. He smiled. And once it would be, he could do what he wanted without being constantly eyed by Heimdall. And just maybe he would be even powerful enough to hide Thor from his gaze as well so they would be able to sneak out together. Why did they all bother with this "coming-of-age" anyway? As long as he and Thor were together, nothing would be able to harm them.

Loki tried to shrug off this memory as it was somehow... embarrassing. Stupid. Irrelevant and meaningless. How often had he had to try over and over again until it finally worked the way he wanted to? Again and again until one day Frigga no longer found him when he hid from her. Neither did Odin but in the end Odin had never really searched him when he was hiding, no matter what he was hiding from. The final ordeal had been the day of Thor's coronation. He clearly remembered their conversation right before the coronation was supposed to take place. How Thor had been nervous but refused to admit it. Refused to admit Loki, too, was worthy. Refused to admit Loki had been the one who had enabled them to escape only to return to be victorious. He had denied to grant Loki even the tiniest bit of recognition. Even though Loki had looked up to him for so many years and had longed to be just like Thor.

"I never wanted to be like him." Loki reassured himself. The words felt hollow even on his lips. He had known there was no way to be like the great warrior Thor. He had

accepted this fact so long ago and hadn't accepted it at all, he realized. Thor was stupid, a dull creature barely fit to guide himself, let alone an entire kingdom. His plan had been successful, Odin had seen himself how his golden son had failed the crown. Still he refused to listen to him, not when he tried to defend Thor, not when he wanted to talk to him, never. And Thor was Odin's splitting image in every aspect. How he hated them both – they couldn't accept him but neither could they leave him be. Especially Thor always had to disrupt him over and over again. All he had left were the last hours here in his chambers, the one place he was at least relatively save from any of them.

Thor did not follow Loki right away as he had made quite clear he did not want to be bothered. He longed to be by his side, to comfort him and make him understand... understand what, he wondered. Thor did not understand his brother's wrath nor could he comprehend what had become of the one he once had known like himself. It was as if there were walls built around Loki and whatever he tried to get closer to him would only add new bricks to strengthen these walls. He pressed the gift his father had given him for Loki in his hand and a soothing warmth started to be emitted. The Loki he had known would have listened to him and would have understood him in a way no-one in Asgard did. Nothing had changed. Nothing and still his brother Loki was gone and replaced by this Loki he barely recognized. Everything had fallen apart but when? When had this happened? He tried to figure it out.

The day of Thor's coronation, they had talked. Loki started joking as he always did. He probably wanted to calm him, assured him he had waited for Thor to become king just as much as Thor himself did. Told him to never doubt his love for him. Had it been the truth or had Loki lied to him?

They had gone to Joutunheim together, his friends and his brother, to get the answers they needed. How had the frostgiants entered Asgard? Of course he wanted his brother to be along, what kind of brother would exclude his brother from the chance to finally have an honorable battle again? Loki had agreed, of course, he had said, of course he would come along to fight side by side with Thor. And they had fought together and, well, they escaped. Nothing had happened in Joutunheim, they had fought and then they returned with Odin. And Odin... cast him out. Thor heard Loki trying to say something for his cause but it was too late.

Once he was on Midgard he had met Loki again. King Loki... his brother had descended to see him and told him... lies. He had trusted him and Loki had lied, maybe to make his exile easier to accept, at least Thor had tried to see it that way. He had been grateful to see his little brother even though his message was everything but good. And then... Loki had tried to kill him. There was no denying this point, no misunderstanding possible. When Loki had sent out the Destroyer he had aimed to end him. And Thor had been unable to accept this he still had believed his brother unable to do this. Nothing had happened to justify this. He had wanted to believe in Loki's brotherly love when he had decided to face the Destroyer alone in his weakened, mortal form and Loki had not hesitated to give order to finish him off. And still Thor had wanted to believe in him so badly, he had refused to fight Loki, refused to hurt him. Only when nothing else was left to do he had been forced to act the way the future king of Asgard was supposed to act, in order to save Joutunheim from destruction he had raised Mjollnir against his brother. And then Loki fell...

Thor sat down onto one of the big stones next to the way and sighed. He still felt the shock he had felt when Loki had let go. Felt this part of himself falling into the nothingness. What had happened to change Loki? He never found an answer, no matter how hard he tried. He had been so glad when he met Loki again – alive and well... and even more twisted and malicious than before. His pleas to Loki to come back home had gone unheard, Loki had chosen war against Midgard, against his friends and especially against him, his own brother. There was nothing to not understand but somehow Thor felt, no, wished to be mistaken. He longed for the brother he had lost and the man he had found on Midgard was the only way to find him again, somehow. Given there was a way to get his brother back at all. He opened his palm and looked at the shimmering thing. Thor had made his decision. *There is always hope*, Heimdall had said. He hoped Heimdall was right.

In the meantime, Loki had tried to calm down. His anger would not get him anywhere and he did not wish for his last hours here to go to waste because of himself being unable to control himself. Everything he had wanted to do was done. He had seen Sleipnir one last time. It hurt him to leave his son here instead of taking him along but it was for the best for both of them. Never would he forgive himself should anything happen to Sleipnir and there were no meadows greener than those of Asgard. Destruction, chaos and pain were waiting for him should he be unable to evade from the ones pursuing him. His chance of survival were by far greater alone. He opened the necklace of Frigga's gift and put it on. It would be a helpful keepsake.

For the first time since his arrival Loki went to the hall to help himself to some food and drink. He wasn't exactly hungry, but he was reasonable enough to be aware of his need to be in the best condition possible. He would need his strength, physical, mental and magical. Everyone went silent when he entered. Well, he had expected this to happen and chose to dissemble. Without seeking any contact he silently took a seat somewhere alone and took what he needed. After some moments the hall was filled with voices again but all gazes were upon Loki, who seemed to not even notice.

Kapitel 9:

The next morning the court rose early in order to see Loki off. Most of them were only present because they wished to make sure the man would actually be gone, some still unbelieving this outrageous thing happened in the first place and there were also those who were simply curious. The royal family was first in line, at least the king and the queen were present. In front of them stood Loki, garbed in a simple leather armor. No chains indicated he was a prisoner.

"Loki, you are hereby exiled from Asgard and stripped of every bond that connected you with Asgard, the Aesir or the royal family. Until you either fulfill the task given to you or die in the progress you must not return." Odin held Gungnir in front of Loki, only for a moment until Frigga approached her younger son.

"Everything you will need in order to survive the first time out there will be in this bag I, queen of Asgard, give you." She handed him a small bag and seized the opportunity to softly squeeze his hand, unnoticed by the others, whispering so only Loki could hear her.

"Return to us, my son. I will always await you." The second she stepped back her warm, motherly expression faded and made way for the stoic mask of the queen. But Loki, too, did not show any emotion, only accepting anything said or given to him. It was as if he was not actually existing at all and only a mere puppet was standing there. The sharp voice of Odin finally got through to him.

"Is there any last thing you wish to say before you will depart?" Loki looked around, bewildered because someone was missing and he only then realized who it was.

"...Thor?"

"Thor Odinson is not present as you can see. Anything else?" The corners of Loki's mouth twitched. So Thor had finally abandoned him as well.

"Nothing... my king." There was so much he wanted to say, to scream into their faces. To make them understand so they would open their eyes. *Was it really my fault? Have you not separated me from you from the beginning? Lied to me, kept me from knowing the truth, held me down to feel better about yourselves? Why did you all insist on mocking me, calling me prince when I was little more than a relic stored here until need to use it arose? Was it my fault I have been unable to take this any more? Not one of you has ever cared about me. Especially not my so-called family. You Aesir are a bunch of lying hypocrites, stupid brutes who enjoy backstabbing just as much as you enjoy slaughtering anything the comes in your way.* He longed to tell them but he found himself unable to do so. For the first time he could recall a prince of Asgard was to be removed from his aesir existence altogether. And for the first time Loki was incapable to even spit out his venom against them.

"So be it. I shall now open the portal that will take you far away from here to the borders of Yggdrasil's domain. You probably know best where your path will lead you to. One day you might return here given the Wyrð-sisters are benevolent." Odin's voice was final: Everything that had to be said was said. It was over. Everything was over for Loki. He stiffened and forced himself to watch the portal's creation by the magical power of Odin. At first it was only a small black orb but it grew fast to unclosethe a view into the dark nothingness of eternity. Loki knew this darkness too well, he had been there before and he shivered. Willing everything he had to stop himself from showing any sign of his fear, he stepped towards it. He stopped, almost able to touch

it and turned to have one last look at his home. No, he reminded himself, he had no home – this was only the place he had lived for a long time. His eyes rested on Frigga, the woman he had seen as his mother his whole life. He could tell she was in sorrow but failed to understand why. There was no reason for her to grieve as she would have grieved a son. Or did he read too much into her expression? The small sparkle he saw in the corner of her eye could easily be nothing. And Odin... he looked like a king. But tired, somehow. Surely he had delayed his Odin's sleep in order to make sure he would depart as soon as possible, Loki thought bitterly. And this guy who had always boasted about how he would never let him down, how they were brothers no matter what... Thor hadn't even bothered to show up at all. How great a love was that to not even care about one final leave-taking. It pained him even though he had no idea why. What had he expected? For Thor to actually go through with his great words about how he would go with him? He was alone. He had always been alone so why would this change now of all times? None of the other faces he saw meant anything to him but he wasn't surprised to find Thor's friends hadn't bothered to come here either. Closing his eyes, he turned back towards the portal and steeled himself for the cold emptiness he knew would follow as soon as he stepped into it. But he had survived it once and there was no reason why he shouldn't survive it a second time. In the end he was free now... free to go wherever he liked, the only realm that was out of bounds was Asgard. So why did he feel so numb? And why were his steps so much smaller than usual, delaying the inevitable? He took one last breath of the sweet air of Asgard, air that smelled of spring and of splendor and of his own past. Another step – and it was gone, the cold kicking in right away but he did not yet fall down. Behind himself he heard a sudden commotion, loud voices and screams, scandalized, panicked. He made no effort to understand, nothing of this concerned him anymore. A sudden rush of warm air caressed his neck, making him shiver. One more step... and now he started to fall down, his eyes still closed, trying to blank out the sheer panic rising inside. The last time he fell it had been eternities. He prayed this time would be different. But he feared his prayer would remain unheard. Again.

Kapitel 10:

Falling into nothingness was something beyond words. The complete darkness made it feel dreamlike but the feeling of choking, the churning inside his guts and the cold were too real for this to be a dream. A nightmare, yes, but one that had turned out to never have been a figment of his mind only. There was no way to brace oneself for this, not even when there had been a previous time. Time and space ceased to exist, seconds turned to eternity without any means of grasping the time passing. It was by far more distressing for Loki this time. The last time he had experienced this had been in one of his darkest hours when he had thought he would welcome anything, even death, just to get away from the devastation and the turmoil inside. But he knew he would not die from this. Even though this thought should have soothed him a little, it made it worse. Where would he end this time? Probably near the place he had found himself in last time. He shuddered and forced himself to slowly open his eyes. It made little difference, really. Besides the faint light of stars far away to be seen ever now and again, only to be gone a second later, there was only the black darkness he saw with his eyes closed as well. Without thinking he gripped the amulet that had been given to him by his mother. No, he reminded himself, the queen. It calmed his heart a little and he hoped the little was enough to keep himself from losing his mind to the devastating nothingness once again.

How long it had been he knew not when finally he felt ground beneath himself again. It hurt and he was unable to move for some minutes, unable to tell above from beyond but he knew he better had not been lying there too long. He knew nothing about where he was and this was never a good start for resting in the open fields. Given he was in open fields. He looked around when the dizziness in his head allowed him to see again and was startled to find himself in the middle of a small clearing. surrounded by trees darker than the ones he knew from Asgard. There was something threatening about these woods, he felt it and struggled to get up. Once he was standing on his feet, he breathed deeply. He wasn't wounded, that was a good start. Still he summoned some magic to erase the last reminders of his fall and to increase his sight. It did not work nearly as well as planned, but for the time being it had to be enough. There was no sign as to which direction he would best be heading to, so he chose to get moving without knowing where to. The greatest dangers were waiting for those sticking to one place, especially when they did not have any strength in numbers. He passed the border between clearing and forest and found his first assessment mistaken: It was not a forest, at least not a typical one. The trees were not made of wood at all, they were grown from stone. He touched one of them and flinched when he felt a slight warmth pulsating inside them. He knew not why, but it made him sick to feel this, even though it did fascinate him. Given different circumstances he would have tried to get to know more about these living stone trees, but he had to be more than cautious as every mistake he made could mean his end. It might have been the easiest way out, but Loki had no intention to die yet, no matter how desperate he was, his will to live was by far stronger than a momentary weakness, he told himself. He hurried on. Maybe there was a cave or some other place to hide until he figured out what to do next.

The further he went into the stone forest, the more he had the feeling of being watched. Did someone follow him? Or were there creatures he did neither see nor hear? There had been no traces of any kind so far but he doubted this meant he was alone. A sudden noise made him jump around. Nothing. But he had clearly heard it, the sound of something crashing. His heart raced and his hand was closed around one of his daggers tightly. He could not locate where it had come from and looked around. Nothing was to be seen anywhere and he did not feel any presence either. But it had been there. He started to run.

How long had he been running? He had lost track of time once more. Well, more accurately he had not gotten it back since he had stepped into the darkness. He struggled to regain his breath, constantly looking around. Nothing. Had his mind started to play tricks on him? No, probably not. But this strange surrounding had an unwanted impact on him. He felt jumpy, his hand unable to let go of the dagger. He looked up to find the treetops preventing him to gaze into the sky. But he did see the dim light of two celestial bodies, one shining bright, the other one only viewable as an oversized whirl made of purple dust, surrounding a blood-red disk. It was nothing like any realm he knew. But hadn't the allfather warned him when he told him he'd be sent to the borders of Yggdrasil's reach? So this was... a realm which wasn't connected to the worlds tree. Loki had known this being possible, no, obviously it was the only possibility for a race like the Chitauri to exist. None of the nine realms harbored creatures like that. For a second he wondered how many more worlds existed out there, worlds not even the allfather knew about. He shook his head, he had not time to wonder about these things right now. The bright shine this sun-like orb made was starting to sink, it wouldn't take much more time until he would be left in the dark. Maybe this meant nothing here but deep inside the fear of old shone through. It was always worse in the dark. And he could sense danger here, even though there was no sign of anything alive here anywhere – excluding those strange tree-things, of course.

His surroundings were covered in a purple-red half-light that made it hard for him to see right. More than once he almost stumbled until he did find a small cavern only big enough to allow him to lie down. He dared not to light a fire even though it would have been easy for him, now that his magic was restored. But he used his magic to make himself feel warmer because the temperature had dropped significantly. If only there had been any way for him to take along one of his fur coats, maybe the one made from wolves' fur. But all he had was the bag Frigga had handed to him before he had left Asgard. 'Enough to last for the first time'... well, he truly was hungry and surely Frigga had not forgotten about this. Summoning a small flame, just enough to look into his bag, he rummaged around in it and got hold of some bread. It would suffice for now, he decided, unwilling to keep on seeking. And then he froze. Out of the corner of his eyes he had seen something move. It had been not more than a mere shadow, but it had been fast, too fast for him to really seeing it. He forced the flame to die so whatever it was wouldn't find him right away. Suddenly he could hear so many noises, it was as if the woods had come alive all of a sudden. And he was in the middle of everything, unable to figure out what there was around himself. Were they harmless animals or bloodthirsty fiends? Had Thor been there, he thought with bitter resent, he would have been out there already slaughtering each and every being out there that might threaten them. By now the sky would have been illuminated by Mjollnir's lightning, heavy thunder would have drowned any noise out. Why was he

thinking about that guy anyway? Thor was probably in his chambers right now or he was sitting with his friends, drinking their mead, completely forgetting about the one out there. In the end there was no reason for them to remember him anyway. Had he been Thor's brother... but he wasn't, never had been and even though Thor had denied this fact he had bowed to it eventually. Maybe one day there would be tales about Loki, the monster that had disguised himself as prince of the aesir.

A movement right next to the cavern's entrance shook him up. The thing came closer and telling from its size it was about as tall as a bear. Maybe there were bears in this realm as well, Loki wondered. He jumped forward to thrust his dagger into this creature and found himself on the ground only one second later, the shadow still lingering where it had been, undisturbed. Horror-stricken, Loki looked up.

Kapitel 11:

Loki stared at the thing that had approached his hiding spot. Still did so. It wasn't solid, this he could tell but this did not make it less of a threat, quite the opposite. It simply meant he would have no chance to hurt it with one of his daggers, which actually was his preferred way to fight. Even though his magic was strong and he had spent quite some time to enhance his sorcery in the field of attacking. But, contrary to his daggers, magical attacks drained him whereas physical attacks were likely to tire him only a little, as long as he was quick enough to finish his opponent before any greater struggle even began. His ability to conjure doubles of himself made it all the easier, protecting him from most strikes. Yet this time there was no such thing possible. The shadow slowly turned to him and he knew he would have to decide fast: Trying his spells and risk drawing more attention to himself or betake himself to flight, leaving his bundle behind. It was an easy choice to make, somehow.

He concentrated, feeling the power growing rapidly in his hands. Only a bit more before there would be enough to send his blaze to end whatever was opposing him. And he was relieved this thing seemed to have no intention of attacking him, still busy to turn around. Now! The heat he omitted and forced to find its way against the shadow was almost unbearable even for himself. For a short moment the surroundings were illuminated as bright as day but Loki did not turn around to have a better view of his surroundings, focusing on his target, watching it turn to ashes by his blinding flames. Only... it didn't. Once he recalled his flames the thing was still standing there, opposing him, finally facing him so he could see it in the small brightness he held in his hand, a flame that hadn't died yet. What it was he still was unable to tell. The size and the shape of a bear but nothing like a bear at all. Nothing like anything he had ever seen actually. It lacked anything he would have expected: No limbs were to be seen, neither was there a face or even something like a head. And he could see right through it as if it wasn't real.

"What are you..?" He whispered, more to himself than to the thing he faced. He expected no answer and got none. But he eyed the thing closely, not daring to let his gaze wander off. It didn't attack him. It didn't do anything but existing there. Neither of them moved, not even the noises Loki heard caught any of his attention. It was as if he was drawn into the shadow, enchanted and unable to do so much as blink. And without wanting it, he put forth his hand, brought it closer to the thing, the small flame emitting its soft light onto the shadow and where its beams reached it, it ceased to be viewable. Closer and closer Loki brought his hand until it was where the shadow would already have begun but had vanished due to the light.

"What in the name of Yggdrasil are you?" Loki tried again, this time a little more secure. In the end the thing had made no attempt of doing anything at all. He still didn't trust it, of course, but his fear was slowly fading and opened the way for his curiosity. A moving shadow that wasn't cast by anything and still vanished as soon as it was met with light. It seemed to be harmless so far. Of course he did not dare to turn his back on it, instead he took a step closer. Nothing. One more step. And one more. But nothing happened save for the thing becoming seemingly more transparent until he was so close it appeared as if he had only dreamt of it being there. And maybe it still was there, he reminded himself, only no longer visible. With a

quick jump he re-entered the cavern and turned around the very moment he did so. There were truly many more shadows wandering around and 'his' shadow was becoming visible once more. But somehow Loki no longer felt threatened by its presence. He was safe from those shadows as long as he had light, at least that was what he felt deep inside. So he lit up a small fire to keep him warm and to be his shield in the darkness. Loki sat down, his back to the cold stone behind him, his eyes firmly on the cavern's exit. How had he not noticed those manifold shadows before? And where had they come from? He couldn't find rest with all of his thoughts revolving around the things he saw just outside of his hiding spot. Had he not been so strained from his way here, he would have gone outside to learn some more about them, but he was tired and drained, a little frightened and desperate, yes, but most of all he was too tired to care. Not now, that he knew there was no imminent danger. He sighed gravely and found his hand resting on the amulet Frigga had given to him. Once more he felt himself relaxing. This tiny piece of metal somehow eased his mind and he noticed the small, sad smile that had managed to snuck onto his face. If only everything had turned out different. What would he be doing right now? Probably he would be sitting with his family right now, he guessed. Had he truly been a son of Odin... everything would have been different. Maybe even he himself would have been more like they had expected him to be and less of the monster he was. A fierce warrior like his brother Thor, they would have fought side by side. Alas, he had been neither son of Odin, nor brother of Thor and a prince of Asgard only by title. Had the allfather's decisions not proven his assumptions correct? It was one thing to banish a prince of Asgard to a realm within Asgard's grasp and with a way to redeem himself. It was something else entirely to cast aside one called a prince of Asgard, so far away from everything he had ever known, neither expected nor wanted to return. All he had been given to remember was the tiny pendant he so desperately clung to without even paying heed to it. He felt as if deep inside his heart a voice had begun to sing. He knew the one, he had spent aeons with her. And right now he felt as if he was back in his chambers, in his bed and his mother would sing him to sleep. Lies, all lies, he kept reminding himself. Still he became slumberous and the shadows outside became less and less distinguishable. With his last remaining alertness he conjured a barrier between himself and them, so they wouldn't get him while he slept. The next thing was blackness once more.

Kapitel 12:

Loki did not wake up again that night. He did not dream, either. When he awoke he could not tell how long he had been asleep. It angered and wondered him the same time. It had been far from save to be so careless. Sure, he had protected himself with a barrier but that was no excuse to drop his guard. He knew his magic to be strong in the worlds of Yggdrasil but this was not one of them. He had yet to discover how this realm worked, how its magic worked and what its inner foundation was. He sat up slowly and rubbed one of his hands over his temple. His body felt well but his mind seemed to be still a little clouded from sleep. Whatever the cause he did have a headache. But he knew better than using his magic to cur himself. Magical energy was quite a sensitive matter, one that differed from sorcerer to sorcerer. Only few were able to bring forth from within more than some feeble sparks, barely enough to sustain even the weakest of spells. There were those who used blood sacrifices to gain the power hidden in every exiting creatures blood, but Loki was not one of them. To take a life to increase one's own power tainted whatever was gained from it with the resentment of the sacrificed one and could lead the effects of spells cast into the wrong paths, weakening healing or even causing attacks to backfire if the sorcerer was not powerful enough to subdue the power inside. No, this kind of source was too delicate and unsure, not to forget about the lack of practicality – once a battle had started, it was unlikely there would be enough time to carry a correct sacrifice out. Other sorcerers drew their power from various sources, some lend it from animals, others from plants, some were rumored to be able to take what they needed from the wind itself. Loki had always wondered how he was one who could bring forth enough power in himself without needing a second source. This was something quite uncommon for an Aesir, only one race in the nine realms had specialized in this kind of magic – the Joutun. He had been ignorant to not notice this tiny link. Of course the Joutun had to adapt to the icy nothingness that was their realm, where neither plants nor enough other life could bloom. So they had grown used to be their own magical source – As was Loki. He had been so proud of that when he was younger. Had boasted about how he alone from all the Aesir was able to provide for himself whatever power he needed. Well, technically it had been a lie – his powers were limited when his only source was within himself, he borrowed the rest he needed from the realms themselves. He was not limited to one of the realms sources but he preferred the energy the ground turned out.

Sure, there was another possibility to drain magical power from another person, but he had never used that one as it involved a rather unpleasant manner of doing so. Or rather dishonorable. And even though Loki had indeed been curious about how this kind of magic would feel, he had never tried it. Even he had his pride and this pride barred him from even considering this step. He had enough other sources.

But now he wondered whether those sources would be available to him in this world as well. He still felt drained from the attack he had used the night before and the conjuring of his barrier. Usually his magic should have been restored by now but he still felt a part of it lacking. Not all he had used, no, but still enough to be noticeable. It bothered him and he suspected this lack to be the reason for the throbbing in his head. He opened his bag and now that it was day, he could see the things Frigga had given him. Enough to eat for about five days, given he portioned it accordingly. Two

skins, one of whom he assumed would hold water, the other one probably either mead or beer. Never would an Aesir be sent away without at least some alcoholic beverage. He smiled a moment until he realized he had once more thought of himself as Aesir. His smile died off right away and he hurriedly packed the skins back. He didn't feel thirsty anymore but he forced himself to eat some bites of the smoked salmon he found wrapped in linen. It seemed as if Frigga had not forgotten salmon to be one of his favorites as she had packed him at least two of them. He ate some bites and neatly packed the rest back. After a few moments of pondering, he overcame his childish pride and took one of the skins to at least a mouthful. Mead, so sweet and heavy as only the mead served in Odin's halls could be. He put the meadskin back and hoped the other one would indeed contain water and not even more alcohol. He felt a little better and got up, extinguishing his fire with a movement of his hand. It was time to go. Somewhere. Where to he would see on the way there. He clenched the bag and caused the barrier to collapse to release him.

There was no hint of the shadows he had seen the night before. The forest was quiet again, still too quiet for his own taste. A faint black trace of grime caught his attention. It was barely visible but he knew its origin right away. The shape... it was a remainder of his nocturnal visitor. He touched it and followed its shape with his finger. So it had not been a dream, it had been real. He shivered. Somehow he had hoped for this to have been only born from his imagination for this had left less questions open. But there was no denying the traces he saw, the black traces of this ... thing. He would figure out, what this meant, but not now that the only thing that confirmed it had been real were those faint traces.

He descended and it took him a moment to figure out where he had come from. So his way would be as far away from his starting point as possible. He hurried, even though there was no need to do so, he simply felt better that way. More awake, more alert to his surroundings. And after a while he heard a noise again, for the first time not from his own steps on the ground. It was a little distant but too close for comfort. The sound of something like.. steps? So this forest did not only harbor discarnate shadows but also beings of flesh and blood. He stopped. This time he would not run from whatever it was. Should the need arise, he still would be able to get away somehow. Still he tensed up and grabbed his dagger. Contrary to what most Aesir believed, Loki was ready to fight whenever he needed to. He simply preferred not to fight.

Through the trees he could see something approach, but it was unfortunately covered, so he could not tell what it was. It was big. Dark. And it seemed to be massive. He whistled to draw its attention on himself and it seemed to work. It ran – right through the trees, splitting them whenever one was in its way. So maybe trying to get the creature's attention had not been such a great idea after all, he thought, but now it was too late. He cursed himself inside for being stupid enough to refuse to just walk away. He quickly created a double of himself and hid behind a tree, summoning his all-consuming flames once more whilst commanding his double to get ready to 'attack' in order to distract his foe. The last tree between them was ripped apart by the sheer force. Loki saw the stone shatter to thousands of small pieces and a reddish liquid shooting out of the severed stump that remained. It was as if the tree was bleeding... and then he remembered the pulse he had felt. It churned his guts to think about it. He was far from being touchy but what he saw defied everything he knew. His thoughts had distracted him, the creature had reached his double and fortunately his double was able to act by himself or he would have been mauled already. From his hiding point, Loki could hear the thing breathe, he could smell the

strong stench that made him feel like choking. He sent out his flame, but missed, causing another tree to burst and sprinkling its red sap onto its surroundings. And it caused the creature to notice his whereabouts, altering his target from the double to the actual Loki.

Kapitel 13:

It was coming at him. Fast. Inexorable. There would not be enough time for Loki to take hold of his blaze once more. And he highly doubted his small daggers to be able to penetrate the skin of this thing that ran through the trees of stone as if they were mere illusion. It would only be a matter of moments until it reached him for now he could even see its cover. It was not fur and neither was it covered with bristles. It looked like a piece of earth had come alive and taken the form of what rudimentary reminded him of a boar. Simply less an animal and more of... well, whatever else it was. At least its approaching had made clear Loki did not face another shadow but a solid creature of some kind. He dashed forward, towards his attacker. It was a matter of timing – one second Loki was in front of it, a mere instant from being crushed, the next he had swung himself onto its back, trying to sink his dagger into the creature's body. It almost worked, he could feel the cover weaken but before he could make use of this weakness, he had to jump off again to prevent himself from being shook off without a chance to control his fall. And he had no desire to land under the claws that had only the aim to tread him down. The dagger fell to the ground, Loki had taken just one second too long to retract it. Immediately he grabbed his second dagger, memorizing where the other one had landed, so he could get it back once the opportunity would arise.

Magic. He needed it. Not his flame, though, this spell was powerful but too slow – and it drained him too much. Something lighter, a magic that came at a lower price. Within an instant he felt the blood in his veins turn cold and his heart slowed down... as did everything around him. The creature's every move he saw, decelerated so much he wondered why it had seemed to be so fast when it first approached him. A grin appeared on his face. He knew he would win because there was no way a dull creature like that would end him. It was coming back to him. Good. He clenched his fist and with a small movement straightened his arm once more. It would be his blade for now. Some more steps. He put his hand forth and frost mist was surging from the tips of his fingers, clouding his enemy, slowing him down even more. It was easier this time, his blade of ice cutting through his enemy as if there was no resistance whatsoever. A piece of the beast's front burst off, the frozen mass unable to bend enough the say together when he forced his blade into it again and again as if he was in rage. Truth was: He was calm. So calm he almost felt beside himself.

When he was done with the slaughtering, he examined the leftovers. Unlike the trees, this creature had nothing like blood inside. Neither blood, nor veins, nor entrails or bones. It was formed from a dark mass that felt like clay but firmer and dry. Loki dropped the piece he had picked up to look at it and cleaned his hand on the side of his cloak where it left a dark stain. He snorted discontentedly but the cleanness of his coat surely was the last thing he would worry about now. A small gesture made his double disappear.

There was something else he did worry about. He sensed how his magic had weakened even more from this fight and now he couldn't even use his prey for anything. He leaned against one of the untouched trees and remained there, even though the pulse disgusted him. It was calming and gave him the warmth he needed to bring the warmth back into his body. There was no need for him to look at himself to know he had slipped into his monster form. And there was no mistaking the icy

flow inside of him. He had not felt it that strong when he was fighting but now he was calming down it was so brutally clear, this feeling as if he had been tossed into a frozen stream somewhere in the nothingness. At least the cold of the night had vanished, it wasn't warm but it also wasn't so freezing cold anymore. Slowly his heart came back to its usual pace and with it he felt the change it brought upon his whole being. Back to normal.

He did not move for some time. He rested against the tree, whose pulse dictated his own one. Something was missing and he knew it was the feeling of his magic returning to him, however slowly it would do so. But there was nothing. The fight was over but his magic refused to return to him – could it be this world was so different from the realm he had existed in that his whole existence was shaken to the degree of refusing to provide him with his power? He would have to get behind this pretty soon because for the time being he did not dare to drain the power he clearly felt surrounding him, not as long as he was unable to determine whether it would nourish or rather destroy him further. A rustling noise, not far from him. Once more... he opened his eyes a bit, not too sure about what he had heard. Again, this time louder, coming from the side to his right. That was where he had left his dagger. Where he had – he opened his eyes wide in shock. That couldn't be... but when he looked at the remains of his enemy he figured his presentiment had been correct. The pieces were gathering together, what he had ripped apart grew back to become one once more.

"That's not true. What is this sorcery?!" He whispered to himself. Except it was not sorcery for he would have sensed this earlier. It made him wonder even more what absurd realm this was. He hurried to pick up his second dagger, maybe he could bring enough distance between himself and this creature to escape another senseless fight. Well, at least he now knew better than to underestimate the hostile beings that roamed this world. After one last glance at the thing he grabbed his bag and hurried off, listening to be warned should the thing follow him. And he almost had been sure he had outdistanced the creature when he heard the quiet noise of breaking stone far behind him but drawing closer and closer. Loki started running again, even though he knew he did not have the speed nor the stamina to outrun it. But he could at least win precious moments in order to form a plan.

The problem was: What was there he could do to destroy this thing for good? Ripping it apart obviously hadn't worked too well and his daggers were too weak to cause any harm, especially not of the kind that prevented this thing from growing back together. The variety of spells he had mastered seemed reduced to nothing for none appeared fit to have the effect he needed. Shrouding himself would not work either, he guessed, for the thing had no eyes and still 'saw' him. It could not be manipulated the way he would manipulate other beings. It needed to be crushed to dust and even further so it would not come back again. But he wasn't one given to this kind of destruction – that had always been his broth-... Thor's part. Where Loki was content once his foe was defeated for good, Thor would bring Mjollnir down again and again until there was nothing left of what had once been his enemy. But he could not rely on anybody but himself now for he was alone and nobody would come to his rescue. Not that he needed to be rescued, of course, but a little help with this thing would have been appreciated anyway.

The thing had almost reached him when Loki stopped dead and turned to face it one more time. Since he couldn't destroy it, he would at least keep it from following him around. He concentrated his cold in his hands as to hurl it at his enemy. One more second... something broke with a drawn-out noise and then his enemy no longer faced

him. Instead someone was standing in front of him. At least he hoped it was someone and not one of those shadows or creatures or whatever this accursed world housed. "I think you could use some help, could you not?" Loki wanted to deny it but he found himself unable to make use of this silvertongue of his to form another lie. Or truth. Anything...

Kapitel 14:

The person facing him was about Loki's height and wrapped in ragged cloth. Given the deep voice, Loki strongly suspected it to be male but then again it was hard to figure such things out in a world that kept on defying every bit of knowledge Loki had. He opened his mouth to answer the question, but the words wouldn't come out the way he wanted to. Maybe it was because of the other's sudden appearance. Or it was the mere fact Loki knew this kind of aura too well. He had dwelled in it for quite some time, it felt ages ago.

The ones who had picked him up when he fell through nothingness were simple wanderers in the eternal vastness that was the cosmos. Or so he had thought when they collected him, a broken, bruised and bitter nothingness himself, so far gone he no longer resembled the second princeling of Asgard. His fall had drained him, the nagging on his heart had ceased to hurt more than with a dull throbbing. But the beast had found its way into his very mind. The beast that went by so many names... loneliness, hurt, disgust, worthlessness, despair, just to name a few. There had been an instant he had felt regret for letting go. There had been one person who hadn't given up on him... his brother, Thor. And there was this one truth Loki had spoken that was by far greater than all of his lies. No, he had felt a stab of regret when he witnessed Thor crying out for him. But given enough time he figured out this memory was but a wish he had. Thor had not cried for him, he had cried for his brother. Not for Loki.

Step by step Loki had drawn nearer and nearer to so many truths. Most of them concerned himself, some of them concerned those he had thought of as his friends and family. And there was this one truth that was the most painful to bear for it was an absolute.

He refused to remember it.

Once they stopped his fall he was all theirs, his mind too far gone to care about them. What were the reality and the physical world compared to the things he had seen, had felt had been? But they nursed him back so he awoke once more. A shaking pile of nothingness and insecurity. But the fire deep inside had never vanished and they had fed the spark that was alive inside all this time. Because they knew him, knew who he was from the very beginning. He remembered their calls, how they called out his name long before they met. It had been destiny. And destiny had never been too kind to him.

"Are you alright, my son?" The man asked and brought Loki back to the here and now. How could it be this man was so similar to them?

"I... thank you." That was all Loki managed to stammer. The man seemed to be no threat, he had saved him even, but still Loki felt the urge to run away. This aura was too similar to the ones of his previous saviors. The man turned and he caught a glimpse on this face so unlike the fair ones of Asgard... old. He looked older than the allfather himself.

"There is no need to be afraid anymore, lost one from far away." The man twisted his

mouth in something that distantly reminded Loki of a smile. "Yes, I do know you. The cocoons have whispered your name but the ground spoke of your pain." Loki stepped back. Whatever this person said, it made no sense at all.

"What do you want from me?" He readied himself, yet once again. Would he ever be at peace here? But when he slowly brought his hand closer to his dagger, the other one raised his arm.

"There is no need to fight me as I have no intention of fighting you. I wanted to know how this disturbances came into this world and then I found you." He lifted the cloth that had been wrapped around his head and had veiled him from Loki. And now Loki could see him. He looked even older now, old and weak and so far from being threatening that it almost made Loki reach for his dagger again. But he saw wisdom as well and a knowledge he himself had not yet been able to grasp, even though he had been an apt pupil to every master he had had. The man's face was scarred beyond recognition and it seemed not to matter to him at all. He was bald and his dark skin seemed crackled like the ground after months of a draught. There was no trace of ears but a prominent nose, broad and short but still crooked. A very small cut in his face appeared to be his mouth and his eyes were sunken and dull, of a color like milk with a faint hint of a reddish glare underneath.

"What are you talking about, old man?" Loki wished for answers even though he had not been ready to find the questions he wanted to be answered. There were too many anyway. "Why do you talk as if you knew me when we have never met before?" Of course he knew this was no hinderance for some beings. Beings he had been associated with not too long ago for example. "How..." The other one interrupted him.

"I fear this is not the place to talk. The ground may be stunned but it will not remain so forever."

"The.. ground?"

"The one that followed you." So the beast he had fought with... had been the ground? Either that or this old man was slightly insane. Neither possibility was calming Loki. "I will bring you out of its reach. Once we are save we may continue and you may ask me whatever you want. But for now me should hurry." The man did not wait for Loki to say anything else but started walking ahead and after a second of considering the possibility of simply leaving Loki followed him. In the end the man had saved him so he probably did not wish for him to get killed right away.

It took them some time until they reached the end of the woods and entered a plain, grassless and without any green. But in the distance Loki could spot something like a small house. Or rather a round hill with small openings for windows and as a door.

"Is this your home?" He wondered and the other one took several steps before he answered.

"This is where we are save. The area of the cocoons is a dangerous one for those who do not belong." Loki decided to accept this answer for the time being even though it

made him wonder. More than he already did anyway. But that had to wait until they were inside this house.

The insides were just as plain and simple as the outside had suggested. There was a bench carved from stone and a table. Most things seemed to be made from stone, but, well, whatever suited them, he guessed. There were so many other things bothering him right now and the material of the interior was not part of these things.

"You promised me answers, old man. I suppose we are save here, are we not?" Without waiting to be asked, he sat down onto the bench. It was far from being comfortable, too hard for comfort, but it served its purpose well enough. "Tell me... who are you? And how did you know I was here?"

"My name is as unimportant as yours, but since you insist.. you may call me Thenaree. I found you because they whispered your name after the first crash." He wanted to continue, but Loki raised his hand to stop him.

"Wait... the first crash? So there was another...?" There was something like hope in his voice. He remembered the noise clearly, he had heard it soon after he had started to roam the forest. The old man smiled, this crooked smile that sent shivers down Loki's spine because it was obvious this mouth had not been made to smile. He took his time to answer.

"No, only this one. You arrived here and this crash was all... and its after-effect, of course. But there was only you..." There was something like empathy in his face but Loki wasn't too sure about that. In the end it was hard to read a face that was almost lacking. He wondered how much this man did know about the circumstances of his arrival. And how he knew this.

"I see. But why did you come to ... collect me? And how were you able to slay this beast?" This had been bugging him since he had witnessed this old and seemingly weak man finish the creature he could not slay with just one blow.

"The ground? You cannot slay them. The only way is to... well, shatter them and stun them for a while." He went silent.

"The reason, old man, I need it." Loki insisted and he did not care about him sounding rude and somehow demanding. Right now this was the thing he needed to know most: Why.

"I know these areas. They are dangerous but they called me to save the lost one. Because you don't belong there." Loki pondered about the things this Thenaree had told him. The answers were far from being satisfying but he could not tell whether it was because he wished for more or because his host hid something from him. But he obviously did not intend to give him more information about this point or maybe there actually were no more informations for him to give.

"You talked about cocoons earlier. What cocoons?"

"The cocoons are what this area is made of. These things, you saw them. The dark ones, the tall dark ones." It took Loki some thoughts to figure out what he meant. He clenched his fists as he remembered leaning against one of them. The warm pulse they had. It had felt like a heartbeat. It had disgusted him back then and it disgusted him even more now.

"You don't mean the.. trees? This forest... this damned forest is made of .. cocoons?!"

"Trees? Forest? Well... the cocoons are harmless, they really are. Never move as if they are stuck to one point and I suppose they are. Unlike the living ones they can't move around. But you seem tired, young one." Without having realized it, Loki had brought one hand onto his temples, rubbing them to stop this throbbing he felt. He needed some time to process these informations and to bring them together to form a whole.

"You might be right. Allow me to rest a while before we continue this." His host nodded.

"There is some space left in the next room." With this he gestured to a small doorway, barely big enough to pass through. But Loki did not care. He needed rest. And maybe this time his magic would return to him faster for now he did not have to uphold a barrier.

Kapitel 15:

This kind of rest had been exactly what Loki had needed. Not only because of the trouble he had had since he had arrived in this realm but also because of all the distress that he had had during his last days... back there. There was no dream, no emotions, no memories as if his whole existence had been switched off. Enough to allow his body and especially his mind to recover from the hardships. When he awoke some time later to a gentle light from outside, he felt better. His head no longer ached and he had the feeling even his magic had partially recovered but that could be wishful thinking. The fact remained: He felt better and prepared to take up where they had finished yesterday. At least he assumed a night had passed whilst he had rested. There was only one thing he disliked and that was the feeling of having been incautious. No matter how much he had needed to sleep, he had not actually intended to let his guard down in this way. In the end he did not know what kind of surprise his host could have had in store for him. He shook his head and swore to himself not to allow such improvidence to occur again.

"So you have awoken, young one from afar." The sudden speech startled Loki but he brought himself not to show it.

"It seems I am." He looked up to face the man who had picked him up and kept him save from this beast he had called 'ground'.

"I fear I do not know how to provide for beings like you but maybe the things I can offer are suited to nourish you." With a swift motion he gesture towards the room they had entered first when they had arrived there. So they had some kind of dining room even in a realm so far away from everything... a funny thought. Something so ordinary between all these things that made no sense whatsoever. But Loki had no intention to take a chance.

"I am grateful for your offer but I think I should stick to the things I have brought along. No offense meant, I simply prefer not to push my luck." He hoped he sounded as polite as he had intended. Nothing good could come from offending the only being in this realm that had proven not to mean any immediate harm to him.

"A wise choice. So be it." Not a single trace of any reaction was showing. Had Loki not known better, he would have suspected Thenaree had never actually expected him to accept the offer. But his last words got right under Loki's skin. Those had been his father's ... the allfather's last words to Laufey before everything started to fall apart. Thor's last words before he had given up on him. This short sentence's sound felt like a whiplash. He had to pull himself together, those memories belonged to the past now. They were no longer able to hurt him. He followed his host quietly. Had Thenaree noticed anything odd about him, he had carried it off well and refrained from mentioning it. Together they stepped into the entrance room and Loki sat himself down. No time to indulge in reminiscences, the here and now was by far enough to keep his mind from wandering off.

"May we continue now where we stopped yesterday?" Thenaree sat down at the opposite side of the table, carefully watching Loki.

"This is what we have decided when you retired yesterday. I assume the rest has set you up?" For an instant, Loki felt uneasy due to the piercing glance upon him.

"It has, indeed." He met the other's gaze with determination. There was no need to be afraid of this man but neither was there a reason to be rude or, even worse, dupable. Unfortunately it left him without possibility to inquire about the magic this realm held. "I believe I have understood some of the things you explained to me yesterday. But there is one thing you did not tell me... what is the actual reason you took me in? You said something about the cocoons whispering my name..."

"Well, Loki, they do." Loki swallowed hard when he heard his name vocalized by this man he had never introduced himself to.

"So you know who I am?"

"I'm far from knowing who you are. You can only know that which knows itself, can you not?" Another smile but this time rather unpleasant in Loki's eyes.

"Stop talking in riddles, old man."

"I know your name and I know you are not supposed to exist in this world. That is all I can tell you for that is all I know myself." Loki could sense no lie in this statement and he usually was able to tell a lie from the truth. He relaxed a little and chose to accept this answer. The guy would not tell him more anyway and there were other matters he could use some information on.

"What is it the cocoons are housing?" He clenched one fist underneath the table, almost able to feel this sickening warmth and the steady pulse inside of it. The red liquid they had shed when they were being wracked by this other monstrosity. The short moment of calmness when he had rested against one of them...

"I do not know. I only ever saw them exist like this." Loki once more missed something like emotion in this old voice but there was none, probably never had been.

"You never cared?"

"No." It was a simple statement.

"...I see." He did not. He did not understand this at all. Even someone who was not nearly as curious as he was would have been wondering, wouldn't they? Even an unintelligent, stupid oaf like Thor. Yes, even Thor would have wondered and once he would have been done wondering, he would probably have smashed the whole forest for the sake of destroying that which he was unable to comprehend. He would have destroyed the whole forest with all the might Mjollnir unjustifiably provided him with. But Thor was back in Asgard or even in Midgard to see this strumpet he had fallen for. There was no reason to think about him. "...have you ever heard of a race called

'Chitauri', old man?" Of course it was risky to mention them but maybe, just maybe Theranee knew something, anything, about them.

"... I have never heard of them." Had the man really hesitated or had Loki started to imagine things?

"Is that so?"

"We here know nothing about your 'Chitauri', Loki. There is nothing outside of this world that would be of interest for us." It was true but maybe only to a certain degree. Or he really was going crazy. There had to be a reason for Odin to send him into this world of all the worlds he could have sent him to. A faint rumbling outside distracted him for a moment. In the end it had been Asgard's wish for him to deal with the Chitauri. Or rather get dealt with by them – either way was desirable for them. So what reason would there be for them to purposely delay his meeting with them? He was brought back by Thenaree's voice. "May I now be the one asking you some questions?"

"I guess it would only be fair. Ask me whatever you want." But don't expect me to answer all of your questions truthfully, he added in his mind.

"You are not here because you want to. Why have you come here?" Loki brought his hand to the amulet he had around his neck.

"I came here.. to sort things out."

"With those... Chitauri?"

Loki nodded. "That's the plan." It wasn't exactly a plan. It was more of a suicide commando.

"You doubt it yourself. Even though you were given such a strong charm?" He gestured towards the amulet Loki held in his hand.

"This? It's only a memento of... a dream." The dream of being a prince of the Aesir, beloved son, brother and friend. The nightmare of betrayal. The other man stood up.

"Well, Loki... I wonder how long you will last running."

"I beg your pardon?" The man did not face him but all of a sudden his shoulders appeared to be broader than before.

"What you seek is in turn seeking you. And it appears as if you are about to be found within no time..." The old man turned to him. "They tell me it might be too late for you to run away." And then Loki felt it... how his heart convulsed in his chest. "Maybe it's for the best for you not to try at all. The plains do not hide you."

How could he have been found? How did the Chitauri know he was...? He looked at the man, shocked.

"So... you have sold me out to them? This was why you brought me here?!" Loki asked him calmly as if this was exactly what he had expected. But he had not expected this kind of premature end to his journey.

"There has been no need to tell anyone anything."

Loki jumped up, cursing. "Damn it all!" He was not ready to meet them just yet. Some more preparations would have been necessary. He had had no time to figure out how to get his magic to work in this realm. "Be warned, old man – I will come back to you and finish you off if I figure out you betrayed me!" The man had been right, though: the plains would not hide him and his sorcery would not be too helpful in its weakened state. But the noises he heard from the forest made clear that there was no time to waste now.

"You should just..."

"Stay here and let myself be caught? As if!" He quickly took his stuff and looked around. He only had to be faster than they were.

Kapitel 16:

How came they were that fast? Loki could sense them even clearer now... there was no way he would mistake this aura for something else: Those were the Chitauri. Probably scouts only, but still they could become a serious problem. He was unsure whether they did sense him as well but he had no intention to wait until he could figure this out.

"Is there another exit, old man?" Loki knew it was probably not the wisest move to believe anything this guy told him but it was obvious he could not just simply step out of the front door and expect to go unnoticed. The old man gestured towards the room Loki had slept in.

"There is another way out, which will bring you onto the path towards the bright stars. Following this road will bring you out of the cocoons area within a few days." Sounded like a plan, the only plan Loki had right now.

"Alright." He gave the man one last, warning glance. If there was one thing he would not take lightly, it would be being betrayed. Nobody betrayed the god of lies without paying dearly for it. Then he rushed to the back and found a small opening, a sad excuse for a window he guessed, and jumped out of it. It took him but a second to figure out which way to go... the bright star Thenaree had mentioned was in plain sight and for a moment he wondered whether they did have a concept of cardinal directions. There was no time to keep wondering, so he chose to keep running instead. He did not bother to look around, all he needed to know he could sense anyway: They were close and they got closer and closer with a speed that was far beyond what he had known them to be capable of. At this rate he would have to fight them. Damn it, he had hoped to get out of this without a fight, but at least he could head back into the woods where he wasn't in plain sight all the time. Attacking them from ambush would be the most convenient thing to do. He ran and ran but he could sense them as they were drawing nearer, not even losing his trail for a second. That could only mean they sensed him as well. Perfect.

When he finally entered the woods, he felt a sudden relieve that made him wonder. He was far from being safe but somehow the strange atmosphere surrounding him gave him strength even though he still did not trust this environment at all. Quickly he picked a hiding spot, his dagger at the ready, concentrating some of his magic in his other hand. With a bit of luck he would be able to finish them off before they got a chance to attack him. Given they sent their usual fighters it would be rather easy like this... they were sturdy when they attacked from the front but they had one disadvantage: They were cumbersome and unable to cope with fast blows. He had observed this during their fight in Midgard and even though he had been discontented by this observation back then, it played into his hands now. There they were... three of them. Two of them were the standard melee units he knew but there was one unit he could not recall... smaller, looking different from the others. It did not carry any arms. This would probably be the one he had to deal with last, after he had ended the other two. It was a matter of seconds now... and then he stiffened and

turned around. There was something flying towards him, a light of lilac and blue... he barely made his jump in time and felt how the light grazed his leg. A burning sensation of melting skin and flesh spread from where he had been touched by the light and turning around he faced three more of the Chitauri. At least he supposed they were Chitauri since they somehow resembled a mixture between humanoid and insect. No armor, no arms... and all three of them holding balls of this strange light in their hand. It wasn't magic exactly, this he would have been able to feel, it would have corresponded with his own powers... but it didn't. There was no emitted energy whatsoever but it kept on working within his wound, this he could tell. It corroded some more of his flesh and caused a kind of pain he previously hadn't known. He had to focus, his adversaries outnumbered him by far and there was simply no time to allow anything to distract him. Two melee units, four unknown units. The melee units would have to go first so they wouldn't bother him and since they were easy to overwhelm, he would start there. The other ones... he would have to see how he would snuff them out afterwards. And once he was done with those creatures, he would have to take a closer look at the wound on his leg because it was obvious the magic was starting to weave itself right into his flesh, eating and melting it away bit by bit.

Loki did not hesitate to leap forwards, against the two fighters, conjuring a light shield of energy around himself, hoping it would keep off any magical attacks aimed at him for the time being. Even though his leg started to bother him, he killed the first one with ease, slashing the small unprotected part of his throat with a well-aimed thrust. It sank down onto its knees, bleeding out and unable to do him any harm – that left one more. He turned and suddenly found himself lying on the ground, his shield broken. It had blocked an attack on him but the sheer energy had damaged it beyond renewal, he had to let it go to conjure another one, this time one with more energy that would hopefully withstand more than one strike whilst he eliminated the other melee unit. And to do so, he had to get past the strange one that had accompanied the two. He took a breath and dashed forwards only to collide with something. He hadn't even felt this thing had summoned a wall that protected its counterpart. Loki allowed himself to consider his situation for a second as he was stepping back. It would probably be the best to get rid of those other ones as soon as possible since there were some more energy-missiles aimed at him and it proved to be everything but easy to evade an attack from three sides – but he dealt with it with his shield only brushed. And when his eyes followed the movement of one of these missiles, he noticed something. It was just for the blink of an eye but the thing's wall did flicker and vanished when the energy hit it and its conjurer became kind of ... stiff? Motionless anyway and it dawned to Loki that this could be a chance for him. Was it possible that those things were weak against their own energy? It was a strange thought since usually being capable to exploit a special sort of energy also meant one adapted to it to a certain degree which led to a higher tolerance of said energy even if it was used against oneself. However, those things did not seem to be ordinary in any way so it was worth a try, wasn't it? It was risky but well, so was doing nothing with the delicate distinction that he could only lose if he gave up right away. Sometimes it was a good thing he always had been a sore loser, he mused, and for the first time in aeons he felt true bellicosity, something typically reserved for the actual warriors of Asgard... like his brother. Oh, how Thor would have enjoyed being outmatched by such strong opponents and right now Loki understood why: It was a gamble one could

either win or die whilst trying. And he had no intention to opt for the latter. It was a mere blink of an eye later that he could hear the almost silent hiss of another attack aimed at himself. He stood and waited until the very last second before he jumped out of the way, barely avoiding a second missile as he was too focused on what he had to do: As soon as the missile broke the shield of the single one, he shot one of his fastest spells against it to hold up a small crack which he used as a guide for his dagger. Even in motion his aim was unrivaled and the dagger buried itself deep into the things temple. And then the air around it started to change, as if it was soaking in its surrounding with his whole being, ripping apart the melee unit that had taken cover behind it. The hot breeze of a shock wave forced Loki backwards and then the thing was gone, leaving behind only the subtle traces of the unit it had torn to shreds, the stumps of its feet and something resembling a hand... everything else of both of them had vanished.

Kapitel 17:

Loki looked at the spot with silent amazement. Whatever kind of energy those things were using, they surely were not immune to it. The missile had broken the shield of a unit of the same kind. And a shield basically consisted of the same essence as the energy that was used to conjure it. And as their shields could not withstand their own energy, the units themselves wouldn't be able to do so, either. Loki grinned. He liked it when a seemingly difficult problem turned out to be so easily solvable. Sure, 'easy' was a relative judgement but at least he knew now what he had to do. And he had to do it fast so he could go back to healing this wound that kept on etching so painfully. He turned to keep an eye on the remaining three units and reached for his second dagger. Unfortunately he only had two, well, had had two, the first one had vanished alongside its target. So he had to think of something else to take care of them unless he wanted to lose his other weapon as well.

With a smirk he rushed into the center of the triangle the things had formed and stood there. He knew they would attack him right away and he had an idea on how to get rid of them and given he was lucky, this would help him to get rid of all three of them at the same time. It would cost him a lot of his scarce power, true. But afterwards he would have the time to figure out how he could replace it. He closed his eyes and felt his hackles raise. This foreign energy was heavy, a maelstrom of obscurity and it was both weaving itself deeper into where it had hit him and calling for this exact energy to retreat. It felt as if he was being torn apart on the most basic level but he could sense the energy's movement, even though this sensation was buried underneath the sheer pain it caused. All three of his enemies were concentrating, moving not their bodies but a more fundamental part of their existence in absolute synchronicity. And they were about to strike. He could feel it as if the world had completely slowed down whilst every sensory perception was sharpened: A breeze had sprung up and forced its path even to this place in the woods and it smelled of something bittersweet. There was something like a silent whisper murmuring things he failed to understand but that appeared to be either encouraging or to a certain degree even afraid, if that was the correct way to describe it. And then the air was pulled in three directions with him in the center. It began and just when the sizzling was about to reach him, he jumped, leaving behind a shadow double.

After that, everything happened so fast he almost didn't notice it himself, rather witnessing it from a dreamlike point of view: the energies missed each other by inches and crushed their creator's shields, and Loki used this to cause a blast of fire to quickly shatter the rests and he threw daggers made from ice to finish them the way he had finished the first one. He had always been dead on target had need been for that. And he fortunately was fast enough to use his remaining energy to conjure a strong shield that would protect him from the following happenings. It still felt as if he was torn apart, pulled in three directions before he was forcefully hurled away, crashing into one of the trees where he remained motionless. The fight was over and he had used up most of his energy. He would have to rest at least a little before he attempted to get up. With a sigh he looked at the smoldering debris of where he had fought. It

looked as if thunder had struck there with all its force. Grimacing, he straightened himself. No time to dwell on such thoughts – his leg needed his attention. The spell or whatever it was was still eating away at his leg, thankfully cauterizing the wound in the progress so he wasn't losing more blood than necessary. He carefully cut away the cloth and hissed when he had to pull it off from where it had stuck down to the wound's edges. It looked quite nasty but at least healing magic usually did not require too much energy. He concentrated the energy in his left hand – and frowned. Somehow it felt wrong. Loki shook his head and focused: he had to take care of his wound first. Hovering his hand right over his wound he released his energy, causing it to mend his flesh and skin. But it did not work properly, his wound did not close and he noticed that somehow part of his energy was sucked away. So this was the reason he was constantly weakened? He withdrew his hand, observing how the wound partially opened right back up.

He leaned against a rock behind him and tried to figure out what to do next. His usual healing spell did not work and something seemed to be taking away his energy. His enemies seemed to be indifferent to whether they caught him dead or alive, he had expected them to want him alive so they could thoroughly punish him for failing them. All he knew was that he had to go on to find a way to mend something that was broken beyond repair so he could return to a place that wasn't even home and where they obviously wanted him just as dead as the Chitauri did. And as *he* did.

He put forth his hand and summoned some green mist in order to at least check the one thing he could check right now. Just as he had suspected, there was a crack in his magic and he could observe how some of the green mist he had willed to hover over his hand was drifting off, away from him and closer and closer to the next cocoon in his proximity. And then it faded. So this was at least an explanation for his magic not returning to him: these cocoons seemed to feed on it whenever he conjured it and probably even when it was returning to him. So it would be wisest not to use magic as long as he was in these woods. Well, wisest would be to leave here altogether. He stood up and held his breath when he felt a sharp pain: The wound had opened up all the way now. Maybe he was lucky and the energy working within it would soon fade away but he wasn't too confident about that. He took a few steps and gathered his bag he had dropped where he had hidden. Its edges were a little scorched but it was intact. At least this little comfort he had. With stiff steps he went away. There was no time to waste for too many reasons. He would have to find a way to sort out those problems en route.