

CYCLE

'There exist in the world certain soft places where the fabric of Time and Space haven't yet been bent to the will of the indigenous people, where history and geography haven't yet been shaped by the dominant perceptions of mankind.

As the explorer pushes further and further into the unknown, so – consequentially – does the number of soft places decline. But some still remain, in the grey areas of the maps, where there be beasties, ready to ensnare the unwary traveller. Ready to gain their revenge.'

The Geography of Places That Never Were,

Mark Attwood.

Some Where

Some Time

In some ways, it was a cold and misty morning in the middle of winter, somewhere up in the Pennines. In some ways an observer could look down from the small range of hills – they weren't really large enough to be called mountains, in his opinion – and see Manchester in the twentieth century waking up to a cold new day. But Loki wasn't fool enough to believe what his eyes told him. He could just as easily look down and see medieval Manchester waking to a bright new day of Saxon raids and bitter poverty. Not that it was called Manchester, not then, but then it didn't really matter. Not to Loki, at least.

All that really mattered was that he was where he was, the grey mists swirling all around him, at exactly the moment at which he was supposed to be there.

Soon it would be all over.

Somewhere, a raven laughed overhead. As it had, before. As it should, now. It existed in that confused mass of tenses that he laughingly referred to as his memory. It didn't matter: soon it would all be over. Soon tomorrow would follow today, and the days events would be as new and fresh to him as . . . as . . . It had been too long since anything was new and fresh for him: he lacked the words to describe it. It would be a beautiful ecstasy, not knowing. It would be a fearful terror.

At his feet, the fire crackled, as he knew it would. He stared deep into its heart, knowing already what shapes he would see there.

'So,' said a voice, as he knew it would, 'this is the end, then.'

Loki looked up. Not because he needed to see the dark man before him, see the shaved head, the hook nose, the raven's gait. Not for any of that, but because he knew he had, so long ago. Now.

'No,' Loki said, 'not yet.'

The dark eyed man said nothing, for a moment, staring into the patterns in the fire. Loki briefly wondered what he saw in the red light, whether it surprised him. It didn't matter.

Quietly, Loki mouthed the words "And what will we do next" to himself, his eyes still in the fire.

'And what will we do next?' asked the hawk-nosed man.

Loki shook his head softly, grey locks whipping softly around his head. There was no reason why his hair should be grey – his appearance was his to choose, after all – but it suited his sense of self that after so many years, it should somehow show in his face. Besides, it would save confusion, later.

He lifted his eyes from the fire, fixed his companion with a glare.

'Go now, Munin. They're coming.'

'How do you know?' asked the dark eyed man, but never received an answer.

Seconds later, a large black raven cut across the sky, disappearing quickly into the mist. Loki was alone, again.

Then, floating softly out of the mist, the voices came.

'So where are we?' came the first: young, inexperienced, unknowing. How Loki envied him.

'Earth,' replied the second, a soft Scot's burr blurring the edges of the

words. 'Manchester. Late fifteen hundreds. Out of harms way.'

'And this is your perfect idea?' said Young indignantly.

'You'll survive,' retorted Scot's. 'A few hundred years growing up, and then we'll see what we can't do with you. And you'll still be able to visit the House, if you need to.'

And then they appeared, coming slowly out of the mist as if materialising, as if each individual atom was fighting against the soft place, asserting its right to live, to be real. Loki watched them from his fire: it wouldn't be long before they saw him, he knew. He looked at them, whilst neither had seen him, seeing the way the mud clung to the younger man's dark coat, the way the shorter of the two paced the ground with the tip of his umbrella. The way the mist clung to the both of them, as if unwilling to give them up.

A strange moment, a double vision: Loki saw the strangers through his eyes, and he saw himself through theirs: a powerful man in a uniform, red hair shaved right to the scalp, blue eyes piercing and cold.

'Who's that?' said Young.

The shorter man in the tweed jacket froze, his grey eyes fixing Loki with a steel gaze.

'Ah,' he said, as if his worst fears had been confirmed. 'Jötunson.'

'Doctor,' said Loki, evenly. 'Jacob.'

'Should I know him?' Young – Jacob – asked the Doctor, nervously.

The Doctor's eyes never left Loki, as if afraid he would suddenly uncoil from the fire, work some new evil spell on him.

'I seriously hope not,' said the Time Lord grimly. 'This is the . . . person

who killed me.'

'Killed you?' echoed Jacob.

'Of course,' said Loki, his voice measured, his heart pounding. He remembered each word clearly. 'Why else did you think your Loom decided to weave you?'

'Because . . . ' said Jacob, and stopped.

'Because one of the forty-five was dead,' finished Loki, softly.

And the Doctor stepped between them then, and so could not see the look in Jacob's eyes, somewhere between fear and awe, gratitude. He held aloft his question mark umbrella like some sort of sword, as if it could stop Loki now, of all times.

'What do you want, Jötunson?'

Loki shook his head, sadly.

'Not Jötunson, not now. Not for a long time,' he said sadly.

With barely a movement, the illusion of the barrel-chested soldier dropped away, as if it had been nothing more than a cloth held up to disguise the truth. Suddenly, Loki was revealed as he preferred to be: old, long haired, powerful, yes, but powerfully tired. He held his arms out, as if to show that he had no weapons concealed within them.

'Now I am Loki,' he said weakly, 'as I always was.'

And there it was, that flicker in the Doctor's eyes that he had never been able to read, no matter how hard he tried. And he had tried, for countless millennia. Perhaps it was recognition: perhaps the Doctor knew, perhaps had always known. He didn't know. He didn't suppose it mattered,

now.

‘It was a long time ago when we had our little games, Doctor.’

‘Not for me,’ said the Doctor, his face unreadable.

‘Even so,’ snarled Loki, ‘you should show me some gratitude.’

‘Gratitude!’ snorted the Doctor. ‘For what, exactly?’

Loki drew himself to his feet, feeling his burden evaporate with each word that left his lips. Not so many left now, not so many at all.

‘For what I have done, and for what I am about to tell you,’ he spat, forcing an anger he did not feel to bubble into his every word. ‘You are in the soft places, Doctor: you should beware. Where you are going may not be where you arrive. Be careful.’

‘Beware the Ides of March,’ mocked the Doctor, waving his arms in the air, ‘beware the ideas of Mars. Beware my terrible wrath!’

‘I am not threatening you, Doctor,’ Loki said, just a little petulantly. ‘Merely trying to give you advice.’

And Loki caught Jacob’s eyes, made sure he had his full attention as he intoned:

‘As I shall always be here to give you advice.’

‘I think I’m big enough to look after myself, Jötunson, thank you. Come on, Jacob.’

And the Doctor shepherded the silent youth away into the mists, the grey veil soon coming in to obscure all but their vague shape, a grey outline in the light of the fire.

‘You could at least be a little grateful,’ said Loki softly.’ I didn’t have to

bring you back to life.'

But already the two figures were gone, swallowed up by the grey.

Loki settled down to wait. It wouldn't be long now.

The fire burned, crackling to itself.

In some ways, it was a cold and misty afternoon in the middle of winter. In some ways, only a few hours had passed since the Doctor and Jacob had spurned his help. But Loki wasn't fool enough to believe that: he knew that in other, less vague, places time was passing with its usual velocity, its mad rush to reach its own oblivion. Just because the mist still clung tight, just because his fire still burned bright, it didn't mean that the world outside was unchanged. Oh no.

'How much longer do you plan this to go on?' asked Munin, impatiently kicking some brushwood into the fire. It caught almost instantly, shrivelling into nothing within seconds.

'As long as it takes,' Loki answered, even though he was entirely sure how long it would take: it would take until it was over, finally. Until it had begun.

Munin stiffened, his hawk-nose twitching this way and that as he scanned the grey horizon.

'Someone's coming,' he said nervously, seeming to tense for flight.

Loki merely nodded, saying nothing.

Out of the grey, stumbled a worn and dishevelled figure, a blade

sticking out from between his ribs, blood pouring from the wound. His hair was matted and greasy, his skin caked with dirt, but the eyes that fell on the fire were alive and bright. Had he not known, Loki would have been hard pushed to recognise Jacob, so much had he changed in the few hours since the Doctor had herded him away. But of course, Loki did know. There was no way he couldn't.

'You,' muttered Jacob, before his eyes fell on the other dark figure by the fire.

Loki was already moving, leaning Jacob down by the fire before he could fall, or run. His mouth was already working as fast as his hands, reassuring the injured Time Lord.

'This is Munin: he is nothing to be afraid of.'

'Unless you piss me off.'

'Who is he?'

Loki's hands fell to either side of the blade embedded in Jacob's ribs.

'In one sense,' he said cautiously, 'he is the herald of Odin One-eye, the Gallows God. He flies faster than memory, when the need takes him, leaving his master insensible and weak. In another, he is the projection of one of Woden's many future incarnations. Try not to worry about it.'

'What happened?' asked Munin, although whether he asked Jacob, or Loki, neither could be sure.

'They came from nowhere,' was all Jacob could say.

With one swift movement, Loki pulled the sword from Jacob's chest, it's rough edge slicing cruelly through his secondary cardiac muscle. The blood

flowed, deep purple seeping into the dark soil. Jacob groaned.

‘Oh God,’ he breathed.

And for just a second, Loki was tempted to leave him. The wound wasn’t particularly deep, but it would be enough, if left untreated. There might be another way, a new, unforeseen path. But even as the thoughts fell into his head, his hands moved to take Jacob’s shoulders: he had known the thoughts would come, as surely as he knew his own name. It wouldn’t change what had to be done.

‘Listen to me Jacob of Lungbarrow,’ he said, his voice soft and hypnotic. ‘You are dying. Your blood is spilt on this dark earth, and your regeneration will fail. You are not strong enough to take the change.’

‘Oh God,’ Jacob moaned again.

‘But there is another way. Look inside yourself, deep into your heart: see the individual fibres of your being. See them, and take them in your hands. See how easily they move and bend to your will. How easily you can knit them together, however you will.’

Munin snorted then, and Loki saw panic fire in Jacob’s eyes. But then they closed, and he could feel the man’s mind moving inward. Visions of cells and blood vessels filled his head, his breathing shallow as he felt the excitement – yes, the excitement – of taking his life in his hands and changing it. Munin was suddenly silent as he saw Jacob’s wound glow and burn, then suddenly buckle and warp completely out of existence. The young Time Lord seemed as astounded as any to see his chest smooth and unbroken, completely healed.

‘What . . . ?’ stammered Jacob.

‘You have been told before that your Loom holds deep secrets,’ Loki said softly, helping Jacob into a sitting position. ‘In you, they go deeper than most.’

‘Who are you?’ Jacob asked suspiciously.

‘Later,’ said Loki, light burning in his eyes. ‘First you should tell us what happened to you.’

And, despite his misgivings, Jacob did.

They had come out of nowhere, one minute nothing but trees and air, the next two burly villagers, swords in hand. It was his own fault, he realised as they struck him to the ground: he could blame no-one but himself for the kicks that thudded into his side, splintering ribs. He had become careless, he knew, had stayed too long in one place, had ignored the Doctor’s advice.

‘These are dangerous times,’ he had said grimly. ‘You should be safe as long as you keep moving. Don’t let them see how slowly you age. Don’t let them see how quickly you heal.’

Good advice. It had served him well for nearly sixty years: settle in one place, one small corner of history for fifteen, maybe twenty years, and then go: if you must come back, leave it a few years and pretend you’re your own son. It had worked before, kept him safe. It would have kept him safe for centuries more, he knew, until the Doctor came back to take him who knew where. But then he had met Mary.

He didn’t know what her real name was. He had met her in the

Americas on one of his infrequent trips there, trying to let the good folk of England forget who he was. He was Mr Jacob Renfield now, dealer in foreign goods, merchant, trader, and she was merely a slave, her true name taken from her and Anglicised for her new masters. A slave with the deepest, most soulful, chestnut eyes he had ever seen in his life.

It had been a relatively simple matter to free her, marry her and transport her home to England with him, costing Jacob only the merest hint of injury, the very minimum of blood shed.

And the day she had borne him a son was the very day he should have jumped back onto his boats and sailed away, never to see either of them again.

They called the boy Jacob Thete Renfield – after his father and the man who had brought his parents together respectively – although to his mother he was always Chile, simply their Chile. He brought Jacob more joy than he thought it ever possible for a Time Lord to feel, even a Time Lord who was partially human. He grew fast, and he grew strong, and – thanks to his mixed heritage – he stayed healthy: any wound the boy received healed within seconds. Jacob sometimes found himself wondering if a big enough injury would cause him to regenerate, and then found himself praying that he never found out.

He found a strange comfort in watching his boy and his wife grow older with him, waking each day just to see what new thing this world would show him. If he found cause to look in the mirror, then he wasn't too perturbed to see that he did not age as his wife and child did. It was only to be expected: he was not like them, after all. In short, he grew careless and stupid. It was

only a matter of time before trouble found him.

The rumours started without him even hearing about them: how strange it was that he never showed age despite, what? Twenty years in the village? How strange that no matter what afflicted his son, he was still to be seen the very next day playing with the other boys. Could it be there was something . . . unnatural about that family? Could it be the Devil himself had blessed him, in return for a steady trade in pure souls, no doubt stolen from the villagers children while they slept innocent in their beds? Could it be there was witchcraft involved? Could it be that Jacob Renfield must die, for the very safety of every man, woman and child alive in the village? It surely could.

And so they had come for him, the bravest, the drunkest swordsmen in the village. It perhaps said something for his reputation as a plaything of the Dark Prince that only two of them dared come at all. They were all the army they had needed, falling on him unexpected as he had walked home from the Harbour Master's house that evening. Their boots were heavy, crushing bone like shells on the beach, the woods resounding with a splintering crack that made him think of trees being felled. Their sword was not sharp, but it was sharp enough for the task at hand: it sliced clean through his clothing, piercing his heart clean through.

They had left him there to die, little thinking that he might have a second heart to keep him alive, if only for a few more moments. He had thought that the mist before his eyes was because of the blood that was slowly seeping out of him. It had been a long time since he had thought about the grey haired stranger up on the hills, a raging fire to keep him warm, a thousand faces to hide him from prying eyes. Instead, he thought of the

Doctor, thought of his wife, and thought of his son.

Who would look after them now, now that he was dead?

For a time, Loki said nothing, merely staring into the fire, his thoughts his own. Munin was pacing, bored already by even this most short of interruptions. Poor creature – even now, he didn't see the truth. No matter: he would soon. Jacob Renfield, nee Lungbarrow, had eyes only for Loki, seeing nothing else, not the fire, not the impatient projection, not the mist, the ever encroaching mists. He didn't even seem to notice the bitter chill in the air. No matter. It wasn't important.

'You said you'd be here to give me advice,' Jacob said presently.

Loki nodded, saying nothing.

'Can you help me?'

'I can do more for you than that,' said Loki, not meeting his eyes. 'I have done more for you than that.'

'Meaning?'

Munin snapped, kicking a large log into the fire, sending sparks dancing into the air. They soon chilled and died, falling again to the sodden earth. No matter.

'Meaning,' snarled the raven bitterly, 'that we've spent a good part of the last hundred years making sure that you were born.'

'I wasn't born.'

'Woven, whatever. It's down to him.'

‘Why?’

Loki shook his head, his meaning clear: it didn’t matter. He pulled himself to his feet, motioning for Jacob to do likewise. For a moment, his thoughts were on the future, on the betrayal that must come, of the freedom to follow. He wondered what it would be like, up there, beyond the stars. It would be blissful, he knew. It would be terrible, he knew also. But at least he would finally be free of that damned loud mouthed projection.

‘I can do anything for you, Jacob,’ said Loki steadily. ‘It doesn’t matter how, or why. I can. All you have to do is tell me what you want, and I will make sure you get it.’

Jacob paused: Loki could almost feel the thoughts flowing through him, leading him to the one, the only one.

‘I want to be with my son,’ he said, firmly.

And Loki nodded, as if he had known it all along.

‘When you walk back through the mist, you will find yourself exactly where you came from. Your son will be waiting for you.’

‘But the men who attacked me. They’ll –’

Munin spat into the fire suddenly, spinning around as he let out a cry.

‘Why’re we even bothering with him, Loki? He can’t even work out the simplest things!’

But Loki held Jacob’s eyes, calmly and firmly, speaking softly.

‘The same knowledge that brought you back from the dead can be used for other purposes. Such as altering your appearance. It is not regeneration: you can change yourself limitless times, renew yourself as often

as need be to keep simple minds from growing suspicious.'

And without another word, Jacob disappeared from in front of them. In his place stood a short but broad-shouldered black man, his long hair braided into a plat running between his shoulder-blades. He suddenly burst into a broad grin, a short burst of amazement leaving his lips, before he turned and ran back into the mists.

'If you change your mind,' Loki shouted after the retreating figure, 'I will be here, waiting.'

But he knew that he wasn't strictly speaking the truth. He should have said "when", not "if".

In some ways, it was a cold and misty evening in the middle of winter, but Loki wasn't fool enough to believe that. He knew only one thing for certain: that it would soon all be over. But, then, even that was some how untrue, because in other ways – just as truthful – it would soon be all beginning.

Munin, however, was not in the mood for such philosophical debates. He merely wanted hard and true answers, whether he was likely to get them or not.

'What exactly is going on here, Loki?' he snarled.

'You'll understand soon enough,' was all Loki would say.

He kicked more brushwood into the fire, watching it disintegrate in the heat and light. No matter how much he kicked on, there was always more to follow.

'I'm getting tired of you, old man,' he muttered, nearly to himself.

'And you'll be rid of me soon enough,' Loki replied, his eyes on the fire.

How many more speeches were there left for him to make? Not many, he knew. He could practically count the words off on his fingers, marking them off one by one. As he had most of his life. Soon it would be over, and the future would again be a blank page to him. Soon, but not now. Now he could see each action follow the next, as it must, see them almost before they happened. Like Jacob suddenly appearing out of the mist, for example.

Yes, just like that.

'You're still here,' said Jacob, suddenly appearing out of the mist.

'Thank God.'

'Where else would I be?' said Loki, mentally flicking down the finger of one hand.

'Oh great,' spat Munin. 'The idiot's back.'

Loki spun on the great dark figure, his eyes burning with an anger he only barely felt.

'Will you be silent, Munin, just for once?'

And, to his credit, the black eyed wretch did look suitably shame-faced and Loki towered over him, as if suddenly remembering just who was whose master around here. But then Jacob stepped between them, looking first to Loki, then into the two ebony eyes of the raven-man.

'No,' he said, his voice low, almost on the brink of tears. 'You're right. I've been an idiot.'

And Loki said nothing, merely letting Jacob fall to his knees by the fire.

The skies were growing dark. It didn't matter.

'What happened?' asked Loki finally, only because he knew he must.

And, shaking his head as if he could barely believe what he was saying, tears flowing as if every word was ripped from his heart, Jacob told them.

'I watched my son grow up,' he said.

Munin snorted, spun away again, as if that was all he needed to hear. Loki merely nodded, nothing more to say.

'At first, it was all I wanted. It was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me. I changed my appearance every few years, reintroduced myself to him and his mother – never letting them know who I was really, of course.'

'Of course,' interjected Munin, bitterly.

Jacob ignored the interruption.

'I watched as he stayed young, like I had. I watched them start to grow suspicious, watched them try to kill him when he came back from Naseby alive and well. Then I helped him escape, giving him the same advice the Doctor gave me. Keep moving. Never stay too long. And everywhere he went, I followed him, never letting him know who I was.'

Jacob paused, let out a quiet sob.

'I could hardly bear it! Over a hundred years and he never aged a day. And I followed him round like a faithful puppy, his ever loving father. And he never once knew who I was. It was like a living hell, this heaven of mine.'

Loki nodded thoughtfully, if only to hide the tear that was running down

his cheek.

‘So you thought it’d be a great idea if you told him. What did you do, visit him in your old shape? His dear beloved father, back from the dead?’

Jacob nodded, but would say nothing. Loki knew what he had to do.

‘What happened?’

Jacob kept his eyes on the fire, the tears rolling into the flames, dying there.

‘He didn’t remember me,’ he whispered.

And the only sound in all that misty landscape was the sharp retort of Munin laughing. It sounded like the harsh call of the crow.

‘What can I do?’ Jacob asked eventually, his dark eyes looking imploringly up into Loki’s.

It was all Loki could do not to laugh, not to leap up with joy and fling his arms into the air. He felt like screaming his name to the misty sky, grabbing that annoying bird Munin and waltzing with him across the hillside. He didn’t, of course, knowing that Jacob did not need that now, but it took an effort to control it. At last, after so many years, the moment was finally here. That moment he had thought would never come, no matter how much closer it crawled. He was so very nearly free.

‘I will tell you what you will do,’ said Loki, ‘and I will tell you what will happen.’

And both Jacob and Munin looked at him then, as he stepped forward

at took the crying man firmly by the shoulders. It wasn't so much what he said, but the way he looked as he said it. He suddenly stood straighter, all the pretence of age falling away from him, a young man at heart, despite the greying hair and the encroaching years. Jacob found that he couldn't move: he was frozen by the light in Loki's burning blue eyes. As he knew he would be.

'You will do what you have to,' Loki continued, his voice softening. 'You have had your last moment of freedom, until this time returns again. Now you will take the gift I have to give you – every piece of knowledge I possess, every memory I have left in me. You will take my gift, my curse, and you will know what you will do.'

And with that, Loki pressed a single finger to Jacob's forehead. Without a sound, the Time Lord sank to his knees, his eyes on the mud. He barely seemed to be breathing.

'You,' Loki said, turning to Munin. 'You will help him in one act, and then you will have your freedom, as I have mine.'

'What?' asked Munin dumbly.

Loki grinned. He just couldn't help himself.

'You will help him steal you from Odin,' he said, and then turned away.

He took a last glance down at Jacob, kneeling on the floor before him, taking in every word, not seeming to. He felt a sudden pang of sadness, knowing what lay ahead for the poor creature. He had thought his joy would be too great for that to concern him.

Then it hit him. He had been surprised. For the first time in millennia,

Loki hadn't known what would happen.

There was a broad grin on his face as he turned and headed into the mist.

'Where will you go?' Jacob asked quietly.

Loki smiled, feeling each word as they left his lips. They were the last words that he spoke from his script, the last words that had been lain down in stone for him all those years ago.

'The universe isn't big enough for the both of us,' he said. 'But then the universe isn't everything.'

And with that, he walked away into the mist. He didn't know where he was going, what he would do. It didn't matter: he liked it that way.

It was late night, and the mist was fast closing in around them. The fire was burning strong, but it wouldn't last forever. Munin was no fool, he could see that. Now his master had left him, leaving in the service of this . . . creature, for the time being. Then freedom would be his. He wondered what it would be like, briefly. Perhaps he would find out sooner than Loki had expected: the wrecked creature by the fire hadn't moved in over two hours, barely even making a sound. Munin wondered whether he was dead.

Munin pushed his shoulder with a tentative hand, trying to remember what the creature was called.

'Jacob?' he said quietly, only half sure he had the right name.

With a sudden snap of energy, the creature unfolded before him. He

stretched broad shoulders, planted heavy feet into the mud, shaking free a mane of burning red hair. The creature had changed its appearance again, then. Even though Munin knew he could do this, it still set his bones on edge as he saw it happen. Especially when Jacob fixed him with a burning blue-eyed gaze and smiled with brilliant white teeth.

‘Please,’ he said silkily, ‘call me Loki.’

With a firm motion, Loki kicked out the fire, and the mist leapt in.