Legacy

by Jezebot

Summary

This picks up immediately after the mid-credits scene of Thor 2, where Lady Sif and Volstagg deliver the Aether to The Collector.

Sif has a secret she can no longer contain. Loki knew all along and uses it to his advantage, calling her out and weaving her into his plan. Together they embark on a twisted journey of family, identity and love.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Cross Deception

The greater the distance put between Lady Sif and The Collector's museum, the more she questioned Odin's reasoning for trusting that time-old eccentric with a power so great and valuable. Were the walls of Asgard and its formidable warriors not protection enough for the Aether? Her surroundings were a contrary answer to her question as she navigated around endless debris and ducked under half-toppled columns that littered the corridor to Odin's Hall. She also recalled the condition the Kursed had left the prison cells in. Perhaps Asgard wasn't best suited at the moment to harbor a second cataclysmic power source, but it wouldn't be long before the shining city was restored to its impeccable glory. The ravages of war never hindered it before and she would be damned if she allowed some unsightly rubble to tarnish that reputation on her watch.

Upon returning to Asgard via the Bifrost, Sif had asked Heimdall to send a raven ahead of her informing Odin that she was on her way to see him. She never sought the All-Father's company without a direct summons from him, but too many questions and suspicions were burdening her thoughts. With Thor back on Midgard with his...beloved mortal, Sif felt there was none other fit for this duty than her.

Her footsteps echoed as she entered the royal hall and she felt the twist in her gut tighten. The massive room was so much more daunting when not filled with her brethren warriors and with Thor's booming voice.

"All-Father?" She took a deep breath as she beheld the illustrious throne, but immediately noticed something wasn't right with Odin's posture. He slouched to the side, his face half hidden behind the fist he leaned into. Sif hesitated briefly before she knelt on one knee and placed her arm across her heart. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

The king smiled then shifted to lean in the other direction. "I assure you, the pleasure is all mine." When he spoke, it was in a familiar tone that was not Odin's. It dripped of insincerity, even mocking. "What matter might stir thee to come without the company of your warrior kinsmen?"

"A couple of matters, my Lord. The first being the task which Volstagg and I have just completed." "How did that go?" Odin asked. "Was The Collector cooperative?"

"Yes," said Sif. "Very cooperative. And suspiciously eager."

"What is suspicious? I would be eager too if presented with a relic of that caliber." Sif made to speak but was cut off as Odin continued. "What other matters vex your thoughts, my dear?"

Sif was still brimming with questions regarding The Collector and found Odin's dismissal of the topic very, un-kingly of him. By right he shouldn't have to explain himself but he rarely had in the past dismissed the concerns of his highest ranking warriors. He usually let Sif or the other warriors speak freely on issues that bothered them. This behavior further convinced her that something wasn't right.

The first sign had been a couple days ago, when Sif had encountered Odin in the stables. She was tending to her Pegasus when he came to retrieve Sleipnir, and she couldn't help notice a difference in how the eight-legged steed responded to its master. Where the beast was normally very rigid in its subordination, this time he was relaxed, almost affectionate.

The second sign had been during the last few feasts when Sif saw Odin eating Idunn's apples. She
could have sworn he had vowed to abstain from them during his time of mourning. Not only that, but Odin looked just the same here and now as he did before eating the youth-granting fruit, bearing all the weathered creases in his face that he did at Frigga's funeral. None of it made any sense, and Sif was going to unveil whatever evils may be lurking beneath Asgard's royal surface.

"I haven't got all day, Sif," said the imposter. "Have you other matters to discuss or not?"

"Why aren't Idunn's apples having any affect on you?" Sif blurted.

Odin was aghast. "I beg your pardon?"

"I have watched you on multiple occasions partake in the apples yet your face remains haggard."

Odin narrowed his single eye and studied her. Sif held her ground despite the rush of fear chilling her veins.

"You dare come to me like this in my time of mourning?" Odin was incredulous, his words injured. "To discuss apples? To insult me!"

"I have even watched how you eat them, my liege, and your mannerisms are not of yourself." Her voice was starting to waver, her accusations weakening as she saw the fury blaze in her king's eye.

"And how exactly would you expect me to eat them? How should a king who has just lost his queen, his son, and nearly his entire kingdom, go about his routine? Unchanged, as if nothing has happened? Should I worry myself with something as petty as my appearance? Is that what you are doing to dull the pain of Asgard's loss?"

Sif's logic was just completely upturned. She opened her mouth to speak but could only gape, dumbfounded and speechless. She hadn't even considered how Odin's grief might be playing a role in the changes she had witnessed. Oh, why hadn't she sought the advice from the Warriors Three before barging in here? And why had she been so set on believing evil had compromised him anyway? Was it because she never saw the bodies of either Malekith or Loki? Surely she wasn't the only one who questioned their deaths. Their kind are not easy to kill.

Still that didn't justify her impulsive and disrespectful accusations here and now. "My King, please." She bowed her head low, touching it to the floor. "My intentions were-"

"Hold your tongue!"

Sif shrank as she heard Odin rise from the throne, shuddered as his leathers creaked with each unseen movement. She fought back her tears, assuring herself she had faced more brutal confrontations than this on the battlefield, that she didn't wish for the blow of giant's bludgeon or piercing of an elf's arrow over this. But Odin's silence was excruciating and the longer he waited to deliver a sentence on her, the more painful she knew it would be.

Odin had been nothing but good to her since she was a child. Never deeming her an unworthy companion to Thor, never criticizing her for choosing the life of a soldier over a maiden. She was even hearing rumors that she was his preference for Frigga's successor. But if Thor's Midgardian fancies didn't destroy that fantasy, this encounter was surely destined to.

The coldness of the marble floor spread across her forehead. She felt the chamber grow colder by each stretched second and she tucked further in on herself, her armor gouging her gut in a way that should be painful.

Odin began pacing and she held her breath. He never paced. She had truly upset him. A
millennium of loyal service, all for nothing. She breathed again when the pacing continued longer than her lungs could bear, and she awaited her sentence. The pacing stopped. The room went eerily quiet save her breathing, so she held it again. Then out of nowhere came the sound of a crunching apple followed by the unmistakable crackling of a magic spell.

Sif's eyes shot up to see Loki, smirking with a cheek full of fruit, traces of green magic dispelling the noble facade. She was on her feet in an instant, sword drawn.

"I knew it," she cried.

Loki spun the apple atop his fingers as he stepped down from the throne, closing the safe distance between them. "Is this the mannerism in which you speak?" He now made a show of it, spinning the apple in ways only magic could. "How keen your eye is, Sif. Odin would never play with his food."

One slice of her sword sent the apple flying in two pieces. "What have you done with the All-Father?"

"Wow!" Loki laughed, shaking juice from his hand. "Is this anyway to treat a fallen hero?"

"Treacherous devil, you are no martyr. You may have fooled your doting brother but your tricks do not fool me."

"They don't?" Loki cocked his head. "That was you cowering on the floor a moment ago was it not?"

Sif's nostrils flared. "Where is Odin?"

"Asleep. Again."

"Lies. He would not sleep again so soon. What have you done to him?"

Loki casually licked the apple juice from his fingers, taking his time in explaining his case. "You seem to forget our wise All-Father had awoken early from his last Odinsleep in order to rescue Thor from a crumbling Bifrost, and to cast me into a pit of despair. And then I heard he stayed awake to rebuild the Bifrost and sent you lot off to war. And once that was done he then sentenced me, upon my return, into another living hell. Then you factor in the...deaths in the family, and you know what? I'd be rather tuckered out too. All that hypocrisy and guilt."

"You disrespect our King."

Loki's eyes flashed red. "No less than he deserves."

"And what of the Aether? What deception have you forced Volstagg and I to participate in?"

"My intentions..." The change of subject restored Loki's composure. "Are nothing more than what is best for Asgard."

"Do not mock my intelligence. Your actions will only hurt us. They always have."

"It would appear that way to the short-sighted barbarians that populate our warrior class."

"I'm willing to bet your actions played a hand in Frigga's death." Sif didn't entirely believe that but if Loki was going to push buttons, she would push right back.

And pushing was exactly where her words got her, sword to dagger as she parried Loki's sudden
attack.

"You will be wise to leave my mother out of this," Loki snarled.

Sif shoved him back and fell easily into a comfortable battle stance, wielding her sword with both hands. She didn't regret leaving her shield behind, not in a duel with Loki. Her sword could deflect anything from that minuscule dagger, and Loki's physical attacks were always predictable. It was the magic she feared most. No shield she ever owned could deflect it and she never knew how it would come at her. The best she could do was keep a sharp focus, and to be prepared when that telling green aura reared its head.

He came at her with multiple jabs of his blade, all futile and only serving to warm her up and sharpen her wits. Her heart was racing, her veins heating with each swing, duck and block. She wasn't aware of the smile stretching her own cheeks until she saw Loki bear his teeth with that grin. She didn't like what that meant. His magic was gearing up for its grand entrance. No more games, she thought. She had to step it up.

Sif barely broke a sweat before she had him in a hold, sword at his throat, ready to slice at the first hint of swirling green dust. Both remained still save their pumping chests, each using the moment to catch their breath.

Loki laughed. "That is the closest your blade will ever come to hurting me."

Sif pulled his arms tighter behind his back and pushed the blade harder on his throat. "You think I won't do it."

"I know you won't do it." Loki's taunting smile flattened into something softer. He relaxed his back and turned his head toward her, getting comfortable in her hold. "You would never take the life of your son's father."

Sif's heart leaped and her gut wrenched as if pierced with Loki's dagger. She released his arms and withdrew her sword, backing off. "How did you..."

"You believed you had hid him from me all this time." Loki righted himself to a satisfied and seemingly towering stance, twisting his bracers back to their proper place on his arms. "But I am no maiden's fool. I smelled your lies before they even escaped your treacherous lips."

Sif was speechless, paralyzed by dread. She no longer heard Loki's words, her thoughts possessed only by what damage he might have already done, and how she wasn't there to stop it.

Loki continued, losing the smile. "You accuse me of treachery and betrayal but fail to see the hypocrisy of your actions. One more Asgardian denying me of what is rightfully mine, keeping me in the dark on matters entwined in my destiny. And why? Shame."

With a burst of magic, Loki knocked the sword from Sif's hand. She saw the green bolt, smelled the scorched skin on her hand but could pay it no mind. Loki's presence in the room was no longer in Sif's scope as she shoved past him and fled, running not for her safety but for her son's.
Reunion

Chapter Notes

Introducing Ollerus Lokison, aka Ullr/Ull in Norse lore. Ollerus is the Latin version of the name and I had to go with it because "Ollie" was too cute not to use.

Creative liberties taken with Asgardian geography. I needed to create a place where the Valkyries lived outside of Valhalla. In myth, it says there's a large tree just outside the gates called Glasir so I took that and ran with it, creating the Glasir Mountains, Valley and Forest.

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The journey to Glasir Valley had been endless no matter how quickly Sif urged her Pegasus to fly. A dread unlike any she had known drove her, a dozen horrendous scenarios playing out in her mind, including all the ways her blade could take vengeance on Loki if any harm had been done to her son. That silver tongue alone could do lasting damage. The only shred of comfort she had found over the half-day journey was knowing Loki could not come and go in the Valkyrie lands as he pleased. And had he been there, Eir would have surely known and would have informed her immediately.

The Pegasus alighted atop the hill which Eir's temple stood. Sif dismounted and headed straight in before her equilibrium had even registered she touched ground, stirring the attention of several apprentice healers as she went rushing by. They stared and whispered to each other.

"Eir!" Sif called out once reaching the central chamber. "Where is he, Elder? I need to see him."

Eir turned from her window, her brow furrowing with concern as she greeted Sif with open arms.

Sif embraced her with cold and limp arms. "Please. Where is Ollerus? When did you last see him?"

"Just moments ago." Eir motioned to her window. "He's here, playing in the mountains."

Sif dashed to the window and frantically searched the expansive view, squinting at the distant mountains. "Eir please, I need to see him."

"Okay, Sif, okay." Eir made a placating gesture. "Just calm down." She cast a magnification spell on the view which pulled the mountains in as if they were right outside the window. Sif immediately locked on to a form, not that of a boy's but too small to be a man. He was sliding down a snowy slope, using a shield as a single ski. He laughed and cheered as the snow sloshed around him, and Sif nearly collapsed at the sound of his voice. "Oh thank Yggdrasil."

"Sif, what in the nine realms is going on?" Eir asked.

"Can we go to him?" Sif grasped Eir's arms. "Please."

"If you insist." Eir knew better than to argue with a mother's desperation.

A moment later they were standing at the base of a hill in the Glasir Mountains, ankle deep in
snow. Just up the slope from them was a surprised adolescent, quickly closing the distance between them. Even while distracted, his balance on the makeshift ski was impeccable. He was beautiful, and by all mercies unharmed.

As Ollerus came whizzing by, Sif snatched him off the shield with an urgent embrace. They tumbled into the snow where she continued to hold him tight and hammer kisses all over his icy face.

"Mother, what the Hel!?" the boy cried, trying to free himself.

Sif needed a couple more squeezes and several more kisses before she found herself at ease again. She released the squirming body and cupped her hands over his long cheeks, which grew more and more defined with each of her visits.

"Oh, my Ollie." She gazed upon him, his pale blue skin radiant in the winter setting. "I love you so much."

Ollerus huffed. "Um, I love you too? But what are you doing here?" He dusted off the snow clinging to her bare arms, wondering why she wasn't bothered by it. Sif normally complained about the cold when they were in the mountains together. "I thought you were supposed to be helping to rebuild Asgard."

"I was," Sif said, smiling sweetly as her lanky son removed his cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders. Ornerly as he could be at times, he was still the gentleman she had raised him to be. "I just, wanted to see you again."

Sif could see the oddness of her behavior was twisting both Ollerus's and Eir's faces, so she found her composure. As scared as she had been for her son, she saw no need to cry wolf at the moment and worry him for nothing.

"All of Asgard is grieving for its heavy losses," Sif explained, "and I have been grieving with it, doing everything in my ability to help these past few days. It has been so exhausting and the king insisted I take a break. He granted me a holiday, recompense for my service."

Eir was clearly not buying Sif's story but she remained silent.

"Holiday?" Ollerus flashed a look of uncertainty before he found his smile. "I second the King's notion." He nodded and gestured toward his sled. "I can finally teach you how to ski. It'll be fun!"

"Ski?" Sif laughed as she and Ollerus pulled each other up from their indent on the snowy ground. "More like I'll teach you how to properly use a shield."

"Boring." The boy rolled his auburn eyes.

Sif gave him a playful shove. "Yeah, well you'll be wishing for boring if you find yourself in the shadow of a rock golem."

"Pff, whatever." Ollerus strutted to his half-buried shield. "That rock golem wouldn't know what hit him."

Eir shook her head at the pair's usual antics. She then held an arm out to each of them. "Shall we?"

"Gladly." Sif said. She and Ollerus grasped Eir's arms and were teleported back to the healer's hall.

The Elder Eir was a precious mystery. The Aesir argued about whether she was one of them or a
Valkyrie as she was both Odin's top physician and the Valkyrie's magic teacher. No one ever argued over the extent of her skill however, especially the soldiers who depended on her to patch their battle wounds. Sif lost count of all the times she was laid out in the healing chamber, feeling more discomfort from Eir's disapproving looks than whatever weapon was stuck into her body.

Eir lived at the edge of the vast Glasir Mountains, which separated Asgard from Valhalla. Her hall was strategically built atop a hill overlooking all of Asgard, the forest, and the mountains. On a clear day one could even catch a gleam from the gates of Valhalla itself. Sif knew first hand how the Valkyries' territory was a truly enchanted place for a child to grow up. She was eternally grateful to Eir and to the Valkyrie Queen, Brunhild, for taking pity on an orphaned child so many eons ago, and again on a confused and pregnant soldier.

The Elder Eir had been the natural choice in aiding Sif to raise her child.

Sif cherished any time she could spend with Ollerus. Her greatest joy that rivaled even the thrill of battle had been each time her Pegasus' hooves touched down in Glasir Forest and her mud-crusted child would come running, demanding to hear every gory detail of the frontline. She would embrace him and he would search her armor for the souvenir weapon from whichever realm she had just come from, and upon discovery of the new toy, he would immediately want to duel her so he could try out the latest techniques the Valkyries had taught him. Sif never refused his challenges, no matter how beaten her body was from the battlefield. She did her best not to refuse him of anything, the exception being the real truth of his father.

Ollerus had grown into a fine young adventurer. Despite not having a father or any masculine influence beyond what Sif could bring second hand via Thor and the Warriors Three, she had every confidence he could face the world as adult. He was clever, confident, and so ambitious. He accepted his frost giant heritage as a promise for even greater strengths and size as he got older. Fortunately, he never had to encounter Asgard's bigotry toward beings unlike them. Sif knew that day would come eventually though and she was doing all she could to prepare him for it. If she had her way, he would never set foot in Asgard, but she knew once he was cut loose of the Valkyries, he would go wherever he pleased.

The one thing Sif had never prepared her son for was the inevitable day he would meet his father. All Sif had ever told him about Loki was that he was a shape-shifting frost giant that roamed the nine realms, taking the form of an Aesir when she seduced him. "There was only the one night we spent together. I never even learned his name."

Sif hated lying to the boy. She had hated lying to everyone, claiming her nine month absence from duty was to receive specialized weapons training from the Valkyries. "What more could you possibly learn from those women that I cannot teach you here in the arena?" had been Thor's reaction, yet he still pulled all the necessary strings to get Odin's approval of her leave. Sweet, trusting Thor. Loki was clearly not as easy to fool. She should have known the Prince of Lies would see right through her attempts.

That had happened only thirteen years ago but it felt like a millennia of tricks and betrayals stood between her son and his father. How could she ever tell Ollerus the truth? After the heights he had built in his mind of who this mysterious sorcerer was, how would the sight of Loki rotting in a cell affect him?

Part of her had wished the story of Loki's sacrifice was true. That would have ultimately been the easiest truth to tell, the path of least resistance, even with the heartache it would bring. It would be better for a boy to mourn the loss of a hero than despise the life of a criminal.

Another part of her was relieved that she no longer had to imagine that body she once held close to
"Greetings, Heimdall." Sif's Pegasus touched down onto the opalescent surface of the Bifrost and she dismounted with urgency. She had only been able to mask her unease from Ollerus for a couple of sleepless nights before he started giving her funny looks. She had grown desperate for answers. Eir had reached her limit of council and had suggested Sif go to Heimdall before her nervousness permeated all of the healer's hall. "I seek insight only you can offer."

"I have been expecting you." Heimdall stood, hands crossed over his mystical sword.

"Then you know Loki is alive?"

"That is correct," Heimdall said. He was the only other Asgardian who knew about Ollerus and his lineage, and not by Sif's choice. It was just impossible to hide anything from Heimdall. "I saw his arrival several days ago but I know not how he traveled into Asgard. It was not by the Bifrost, that much I am certain."

Okay, it was impossible to hide anything from Heimdall, unless you were Loki. "Does anyone else know he is alive?" Sif asked.

"Only the two of us, and that is how it should remain. For now."

Sif was not satisfied with this. "Why?"

"Asgard does not need anymore upsets while it rebuilds."

"But the people have a right to know if harm has come to their king."

"They do indeed," said Heimdall. "But no harm has come to the All-Father. He has returned to the Odinsleep to complete its natural cycle."

"You mean Loki didn't..." Sif struggled to piece it together.

"I am uncertain what event was the final catalyst in triggering the Odinsleep. All I know is it happened around the time of Loki's return, and that Odin is unharmed."

Sif shook her head. "This can't be right, Heimdall. It's just too...convenient for Loki. Has he done something to you? This better not be another trick!"

Heimdall's only movement was to make eye contact with Sif, something he rarely did with anyone so as not interrupt his steadfast watch. His look told her everything. If he were a mortal, 'bitch, please' would be the appropriate words. Sif felt a little sheepish.

"It is not ideal that Loki wear the All-Father's guise," Heimdall shifted his gaze back to the celestial expanse, "however he has brought no harm to Asgard in doing so. He has, in truth, spared the people the news of another Odinsleep, which I am of a mind to think they're not ready for."

"You can't believe Loki has Asgard's best interest at heart."

"I believe Loki will do whatever it takes to stay out of his prison cell, even fake his own sacrifice. What his intentions for Asgard are, I do not know as of yet."

Sif hoped that Heimdall wasn't buying into Loki's alleged redemption the way most of Asgard was. "Do you believe Thor's story, about what happened in Svartalfheim?"
"I have not heard Thor's account directly. Fortunately, I am not at the mercy of his exaggerations to learn of the events."

"You saw it." Sif's eyes widened in wonder. "Tell me, please."

"You need only subtract a few dozen dark elf warriors from Thor's retelling, then watch the fallen prince rise to have seen it as I have."

The imagery brought another wash of relief over Sif. She quickly dismissed it before the emotion could take hold. "Does it not bother you that Loki has tricked his brother out of the throne again?"

"Thor is being denied nothing that he desires." Sif did not like the implication of that, especially since Thor was on Midgard with his mortal. Heimdall continued. "He was offered the throne before his departure to Midgard. He turned it down."

Thor had told Sif about this meeting with his father before he had left. Only now she realized it was Loki Thor had talked to, which meant Loki had been the one to offer up the throne.

"I do not understand any of this." Sif rubbed her forehead.

"Nor do I, but we will in time. Loki's plots are always short-lived."

"This one shall be no different." Sif attempted to simplify the matter. "He is a very unconvincing king. I immediately saw through his veil."

"I am of mind to believe he purposely raised your suspicion," Heimdall made eye contact again. "He is not so careless with other Aesir."

Sif blinked, her confusion robbing her of words.

"Your son is part of his plan," Heimdall continued. "That much I think we can be certain."

"No way." Sif spoke in threatening tone. "I will not let him lay a finger on Ollerus."

"Then you need to be more careful. Your attempts to hide the child from his father were futile from the start."

"What are you saying?" Sif grew fearful. "Does Loki know where he is?"

"He has always known. Fortunately he has never dared tread in the territory of the Valkyries beyond the forest's shadows and while not cloaked in magic."

Sif couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Heimdall, why did you let him get that close?"

The guardian's eye twitched. He was clearly growing impatient. "It is not in my duty to interfere in family matters." Sif protested but Heimdall continued. "Loki never intended to do the boy harm. He seemed merely curious. And as much as I wish him punished for each and every crime he has committed, I do not reserve that grudge in the case of a father's right to his child."

Sif felt almost injured by this, a knot forming in her gut that couldn't decide if it was born of insult or guilt. She did not want to succumb to guilt. She wanted to argue with Heimdall, wanted to bombard him with more questions about Loki and The Collector, but she knew, by the shift of his tone and the glint in his eyes that their conversation was over.

Unsatisfied, she forced a gesture of gratitude and mounted her Pegasus. She then left the observatory and returned to Glasir Forest, still convinced she had always done what was best for
Ollerus.

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Accompanying music: Mother and Child Reunion by Paul Simon
Sif's lies start catching up to her.

"Tell me again what I am supposed to be?" Sif asked the rustling leaves just above her.

"You're a stag going to the river for a drink," whispered Ollerus. Sif nodded, a little uncertain.

A hunting game had led mother and son deep into Glasir Forest. Ollerus had spent all morning showing off how stealthily he could travel by tree, leaping from branch to branch, and now he was desperate to demonstrate his skill with the bow and arrow.

"You're not going to shoot me are you?" Sif reached for her shield.

"Don't worry, Mother. These aren't actual hunting arrows. They only hurt a little."

That wasn't very reassuring but Sif could weather a little sting on her son's behalf. He was always worth it.

She made antlers with her hands and ambled down to the river, even grunted a couple of times to really feel the role. Thor and the warriors would piss themselves laughing if they saw her.

Sif's thoughts barely began to picture how she could beat those grins from her battle mates' faces before a sharp pain erupted on her backside. She yelped and cursed. She then twisted around to see an arrow stuck with sap to her left cheek.

"Got you!" Ollerus dropped from the branch and proudly slung his handcrafted yew bow over his shoulder. "Tonight I will feast like a king."

"A king?" Sif plucked the arrow from her rear. "Surely you will feast only as a noble. My rump is not that meaty!" She twisted more to inspect her body, nose crinkling at the sap still clinging to her pants.

"Whatever." Ollerus shook his head as he took his arrow back. "So, what do you think? I got good aim right?"

"I think," Sif fussed over her stained clothing a little more but still flashed her boy an impressed smile, "the Valkyrie's had better keep a close watch on Glasir's stag population." Ollerus smiled, satisfied with the praise. "Now," Sif clapped him on the shoulder, "how about we break for some lunch. Eir's students are learning how to cook with magic today, so the food should be interesting at least."

The boy's eyes lit up. "That's right I forgot!" He sprang back into the tree. "Race me back. I'll bet I —" Ollerus whipped his head in the direction of the river, distracted by something. Sif followed his gaze but neither saw or heard anything. Ollerus then shrugged and leapt into a neighboring tree. "Bet I can beat you without even touching the ground."

"I sincerely doubt that," Sif challenged. "But how about next time? I need to wash this sap off then
"I'll be right behind you." The boy was already gone, leaves falling in his wake. Sif smiled proudly as she knelt at the river to scrub her clothes clean, a task that was quickly proving to be a futile with water alone.

"You'll never get it off that way," came a familiar silken voice, accompanied by a swirl of green magic that lifted the sap from her pants. Sif gasped. A long figure then materialized in the river's reflection and Sif sprung to her feet, instinctively reaching for her sword. However, she did not draw it upon closer inspection of the figure's appearance.

Loki stood before her at the river's edge, cloaking spell dissipating from his body which was absent of his protective leathers. His thin tunic draped freely from his thin shoulders, collarbone peeking out at the loose neckline. To the untrained eye, he appeared harmless but Sif knew exactly how many blades could be hidden in his clothing. Plus, he was always armed with magic. She kept her hand hovering over the hilt of her sword.

"You should not be here," Sif warned, her heart racing. She wasn't sure what to expect but she also wasn't too surprised to see him.

Loki snorted dismissively. He cast a glance in the direction Ollerus had gone and forced a smile. "What an impressive youth..." He turned to look at Sif again. "And how lucky he was to inherit your golden locks."

His words were meant to hurt, to remind her of their past. Sif didn't need reminding. The raven strands at the edges of her peripheral were enough.

Loki continued, almost sincerely. "They look stunning against his complexion. I'll admit I am surprised you didn't have Eir mask his blue skin under a spell."

"There was no need." Sif kept an edge to her voice. "The Valkyries do not discriminate in the case of an innocent child."

Loki cocked his head. "Well now, that is refreshing. A shame I wasn't adopted by the Valkyries."

Sif was not in the mood for his pity games. "What do you want, Loki? You know the Valkyries are liable to kill you on sight." Which Sif assumed was the reason for Loki's casual appearance. The Valkyries were less likely to attack an unarmed man.

"What do I want?" Loki threw his arms up then flopped them down noisily at his sides, his face twisted in disbelief.

Sif might have felt bad about asking such a thoughtless question if she wasn't so tense. She cast her glance around the forest and kept her senses sharp, the fear was ever present that Ollerus would pop out of a tree any moment now. "You need to go."

"Tell me his name," Loki ordered.

"Please. Go." Sif's voice grew uneven.

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me his name." Loki didn't budge. "Do not make me seek him out and ask him myself."

Sif made a noise at the impossible threat, opening her mouth to argue but robbed of any words as Loki took a step toward her.

"Tell. Me. His name." Loki's hard, glistening gaze was penetrating, desperate, something Sif hadn't
seen in a long time.

A pang of guilt pulled her hand away from her sword. "His name is Ollerus."

Slowly, a corner of Loki's mouth curled up. "...Glory," he spoke the meaning aloud.

"Will you go now?" Sif pleaded.

Loki's smile vanished, his eyes going cold again. "Why did you hide him from me?"

Sif's heart leapt up and choked her. That was the dreaded question, and Loki was asking it, right here right now in Glasir forest. It wasn't a nightmare, wasn't her mind's rehearsal of this encounter. It was real and it gouged like spear.

"I could not risk his fate being decided by anyone but me." When words finally left Sif's lips, they were meek and pathetic.

Loki's mouth formed into the shape of a question but he didn't speak.

Sif continued. "I had finally learned the truth about your...offspring with that troll witch. And what Odin had done to them."

Loki winced as the memories stung him. His face then shifted to what should have been regret if it was on anyone else's face, but on Loki it was indecipherable. Sif always hated that she could only half read him.

"That troll witch, as so many refer to her," Loki finally spoke "was Angrboda, the frost giantess."

Sif didn't know what she was supposed to do with that information. Part of her didn't even want it.

Loki continued. "Why would you assume our child would be a monster? We didn't know of my lineage then."

"I was scared," Sif began, her voice finding strength in the relief that this secret could finally come out. "I wasn't ready to be a mother. When I discovered my pregnancy, I sought the wisdom of Eir. She told me of your history with the witch, how she bore you three monsters, each of which Odin cast into a dark fate. I could not risk that for my child, no matter what kind of beast I bore. I would not subject him to the judgements of the Aesir.

"You didn't answer my question." Loki's anger was cracking his voice.

"I was cold, Loki." Sif placed her hand over her womb. "Unnaturally so. Had I known at the time you were of Jotun blood it would have made sense, but to a frightened maiden it felt like a curse. A dark spell by a jealous witch."

Loki shook his head very slightly, pleading. "I still wish you would have come to me."

Now Sif was the one being stung by their past. "I almost did, but you weren't there. When I returned to Asgard soon after Ollie's birth, I asked of your whereabouts and they told me about Idunn's disappearance. How you were the cause of it."

"That is your reason for lying?" Loki was incredulous. "Because I played a trick?"

"You had crossed a line. That was a cruel thing to do."

"But did I not return with Idunn? Were my wrongs not righted?"
"You were different." Sif's voice betrayed the sinking in her chest. "No longer the—"

"No longer your preferred Prince," Loki interrupted, raising his voice. "If I recall correctly, that was about the time you took a fancy to Thor. He was the obvious choice now, the son all of Asgard favored. The one who would guarantee you the title of Queen."

"What?" Sif was blindsided. "I do not lust for the throne as you do."

"A convenient delusion." His voice darkened. "It's sad isn't it. You lost the chance to join the bloodline of Asgardian royalty because Thor would not lie with my leftovers."

"How dare—"

"So you strove to become the great warrior you are now because sharing the front line with Asgardian princes will eternally be the next best thrill to sharing a bed with them."

Sif struck him across the cheek. "Your words are cruel!"

Loki struck her back. "You denied me a son!" The words hurt more than Loki's hand. "A child free from tainted, bestial blood. An heir worthy of the throne, something even Thor does not possess!"

Sif held her throbbing cheek, shaking her head, wanting to shield her ears and block her thoughts from diverting down a hopeless path. "Asgard would never put Jotun blood on the throne."

Loki beheld her with a tortured look that stabbed deeper than she expected it to. She then realized what it was she had said and how it didn't only apply to their son.

She pulled her hand from her cheek and timidly reached it out to him. "I didn't mean—"

Loki took a step back, a single tear streaking his cheek, his teeth bared. "You're just like him."

He then vanished and all Sif could do was stand, stricken. She then fell to her knees and wept, convulsively, her stomach emptying itself, her tears subjecting her to thirteen years worth of denied regret.
In Which Sif Gets Loki'd

Chapter Summary

Sif better strap in tight because she's on one Hel of a roller coaster.

If you're not familiar with the Norse myths then I suggest reading at least the wiki info about Loki's children.

Thank you for reading and enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How can you be sick in a hall of healers?" Ollerus complained to a now seemingly permanent lump under the blankets.

Sif could only moan and pull the blankets in tighter. Healers had no cure for her condition. The apothecaries' concoctions only treated symptoms, dulling the thud behind her puffy eyes, calming the tempest in her empty gut. There was no herbal mixture that could undo the past, make her a better mother, a better friend, or lover, or whatever she had been to Loki. She didn't even know anymore beyond its beginnings when they simply got tangled in each other's sweaty company to burn off the adrenaline of the battlefield.

Those times had been so much easier.

Ollerus sighed impatiently. "Dinner is ready. Again." His voice now echoed down the hall. "Not that you'll eat it."

Yet those times also lacked a particular degree of challenge and reward.

Sif almost found the gumption to giggle at her son's familiar lack of sympathy for her ailments. It was the same treatment she had given him the last time he was sick. In war no one cared if you had a tummy bug, and the sooner she could prep him for the world outside the better.

Especially in light of recent events.

Sif moaned again, wishing it was merely a tummy bug that bound her to this bed. Not the incessant replaying and analyzing of everything that had happened these past few days. Not the dread of what was going to happen when Loki made a move to rightfully claim his child. And especially not the tease of hope that she could ever have an unbroken family, free of bitterness and betrayal.

That was a dream doomed from the start. Doomed by her own lying tongue.

"Sif." Eir appeared in the room, just in time to rescue Sif from another downward spiral of thought. "You need to eat." She set a steaming bowl on the nightstand and took a seat at the edge of the bed.

"What good will it do?" Sif grumbled.

"It will give you the energy to do what you need to do." Eir's voice was hard, lecturing, another
example of the distinct lack of sympathy in this temple.

Sif sighed, her tone petulant even through the muffle of the covers. "And what is it I need to do?"
She preferred to think that Eir didn't know the extent of her troubles, that the elder hadn't found Sif
doubled over next to the river in a mess of tears, mud, and bawling confession of her encounter
with Loki. That she was just as ignorant to Sif's failings as a mother as Ollie was.

"Go to him." Eir yanked the blankets down so she could pierce Sif with her most adamant stare.
"Apologize. Set the wheels in motion to mend your wounded family."

Sif squinted at Eir with an ugly expression.

"There will not be a better time," Eir continued. "Loki isn't lost, or exiled, or in a cell."

"But it's only a matter of time before he will be," Sif argued.

"That may be. But we don't know for certain. Perhaps being a father to a boy like Ollerus, rather
than a brood of demons, will be his redemption."

"No, no, no." Sif covered her ears.

"What is this childish display?" Eir barked.

"I won't believe that." Sif leaned her head in her hands, fingers streaking through tangled hair. "I
couldn't bear Ollie's heartache."

"You cannot protect him forever. It's better that you unite the two in a peaceful environment than
risk it happening in the courts, or on a battlefield."

"Why does it need to happen at all?" That was a weak argument and Sif knew it.

"Don't be daft." Eir made a grim face. "You know as well as I do this is the right thing to do, no
matter the unforeseen outcome. Ollie may indeed have his heart broken but let it be Loki that does
it and not his mother." She leaned in, placing her hand on Sif's and quieting her voice. "We've seen
first hand the detrimental effects of prolonged deception in a family."

Sif moaned again and pulled the blankets back over her head. Eir wasn't telling her anything her
own burdensome thoughts hadn't already driven in over the last couple of days.

"Eat your soup," the elder ordered, exasperated. "I'll give you one more night of self deprecation
before I call in the assistance of your warrior friends."

"No!" Sif shot up again. "That would be a disaster."

"Then I suggest you plan your trip back to Asgard in the morning." Eir stood up and made for the
door.

"Elder, wait." Sif called after her, desperately. Eir paused and turned around. "I can't see him. He
hates me right now. He slapped me across the face."

Eir raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "You did slap him first."

Sif growled and buried her face in her arms, muffling her voice. "You're not making this easier."

"It is not meant to be easy. Not when it is the right thing to do."
Sif couldn't argue against that but didn't stop her from making more fitful noises of protest.

"Will you desist this behavior already?" Eir was losing her patience.

Sif sighed and lifted her head back up. "What do I say to him? How do I even approach him?"

"That I do not know." Eir looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes grew heavy with a rare softness and when she spoke, her voice replaced its edge with something oddly weighed with nostalgia, and regret.

"Listen to your heart." Eir then left the room.

There was still so much mystery to old healer, the closest being Sif had to a mother, a woman full of wonder and intrigue.

However, at the moment, Eir's mysticism was really annoying.

"Are you kidding me? Sif grabbed the spoon from her soup and threw it at the now empty doorway. It clanged loudly and splattered broth on the floor. "Since when do you give advice like a bleeding-heart bard!?!"

"You're going to clean that up," came Eir's voice from the hallway.

"I know!" Sif hollered, gripping her scalp in frustration.

One more mess she had to clean up with no one to blame but herself.

Sif didn't wait until tomorrow to leave Glasir. She couldn't take another sleepless night or another of Eir's lectures. She knew what she had to do, and the sooner she got to it, the better off everyone would be. She hoped.

It was dark by the time she arrived in Asgard's shining city district, the illustrious gold statues and spotless stone masonry dusted with a fresh layer of snow that glowed and glistened under the starlight. The short winter days did nothing to diminish the city's splendor. Sif might even call it beautiful if it wasn't as cold as a Jotun king's ass on a frozen throne.

Sif quickly found her way to the fire-lit, revelry-fermented din of the pub. It was just past dinner time so Volstagg and Fandral would be there, a comfortable home base Sif could touch down on to collect her thoughts. She had gotten herself out of bed and into Asgard. That earned her a little pat on the back, right? And by pat on the back, she meant ale.

Sure enough, half of her crew were at their usual table, bare-cleavage broad occupying Fandral's lap (surprisingly only one this time), and bare-boned goat carcass nearly in Volstagg's. Sif claimed the empty seat next to the larger of the two men, flicking stray pieces of meat in his direction before resting her elbows on the table.

"Lady Sif." Fandral greeted from behind a mop of dyed red ringlets. "You look like Hel."

His gaudily-painted date giggled, giving Sif the elevator eye.

"Thanks," Sif sneered, well aware of her haggard visage. Perhaps she could have hidden the toll of the last few days behind some makeup.

"Where have you been?" Volstagg asked, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. Sif paid him her attention, the food clinging to his beard a more pleasant sight than Fandral's flavor of the week.
"Been training with the Valkyries." Sif avoided eye contact, still horrible at lying even though she's had so much practice over the years.

"Darling," Fandral said, pouring Sif a mug of ale, "you're supposed to use your time off to rest."

Sif was going to respond but paused when the cleavage with lips nearly swallowed Fandral whole with an interrupting kiss. Apparently she was to be the only 'darling' here.

"What, like you do?" Sif sighed. She then claimed the anticipated mug with both hands. "Training is restful for me." That much wasn't a lie. "How have you spent your time off?" The diverting question was directed to Volstagg. There was no doubt how Fandral was using his time.

"You're looking at it, luv." Volstagg tore a large bite off from a rib bone. Sif could have guessed just as much but she preferred her friend's reviews of the menu over making up excuses for her absence.

"That's not all you've been doing," Fandral chimed in, his lips now smudged with a shade of tacky pink. "Tell her about the ordeal those demon spawn you call children put you through."

Volstagg laughed heartily at the recollection and Sif smiled with intrigue. The shenanigans Volstagg's children put him through always reminded her of Ollie's younger days, and she loved being able to relate, even if she couldn't speak of her parallel experiences.

Volstagg took a serious drought of his ale then cleared his throat, prepping for the retelling. Sif propped her chin on her hand, readying herself to listen, that is until Volstagg opened his mouth to speak but instead sent forth the foulest of belches.

"For the love of—" Sif grimaced, backing out of the line of fire and fanning the stench away.


"Oh please." Volstagg was unapologetic. "That was only a tease of what the two of you are capable of."

The busty maiden looked at Fandral with a raised eyebrow.

"He's joking, my sweet dove." Fandral tried to explain but the girl was not convinced. Sif felt the corner of her mouth curl. She then drained the entirety of her mug with one tilt, and Fandral watched her do it. "Sif." The playboy grew worried. "What are you doing? Don't do that. Please don't..."

Fandral's pleas were unanswered as Sif unleashed a beast of a noise then shattered the mug on the ground. "Another!" she roared.

Volstagg and a few surrounding revelers cheered and applauded. Sif curtsied a couple of times and Fandral just sat embarrassed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Sif took her seat and slid a full mug to Fandral. "Am I to be the unchallenged victor?" She turned to Volstagg for back-up. He sat, arms crossed over his belly, a hard expectant gaze on Fandral. The maiden scoffed and turned to Fandral with an 'are you serious?' look. Fandral made a relenting face then glanced apologetically at the pink scowl before reaching for his mug.

The maiden shot up from his lap, insulted. "Get back to me when you grow up!" She then turned her vengeance onto Sif. "Who in their right mind gave you the title of Lady anyway?" She didn't
"I did!" Sif bellowed after her. Volstagg chuckled, clapping Sif hard on the back—and nearly knocking the wind out of her—while Fandral glared at them both from behind his tilted mug.

His attempt at a proper belch would have shamed his ancestors and Sif was awarded, with raised glasses and jolly cheers, the title of champion.

Champion of disgusting bodily noises...

She sighed and plopped back down in her seat. What in the nine realms was she doing here? This was no way to prepare for the inevitable. The ale would certainly help her apology along, but what if Loki were here, disguised, watching her carry on as if the last few days hadn't been a waking nightmare.

Sif excused herself from the table, much to her comrades' disappointment, and made her way through the unforgiving night air in the direction of the royal hall. It only took a couple inquiries to learn of the king's exact whereabouts, and the hall was just far enough away that she had time to organize her thoughts while she walked.

Well, organize as much as possible given her slight inebriation and the disconcerting fact that she had no idea what to expect from the night. Was it even Loki in kingly disguise she had been directed to, or had the guards merely seen an illusion? And if it was Loki, would even want to see her? She wouldn't blame him if he turned her away. How unfair was it that he had to come to her, risk his safety and his pride, to finally learn the truths of his son?

A wash of guilt chilled her more than the frosty air. She should have gone to him first. A dozen years ago, laid the truth out plainly. Criminal behavior or not, he had a right to know.

Her boot steps now echoed down a grand corridor occupied only by Odin's personal guards. They were faithfully stationed outside of Frigga's bedchamber. Sif stopped in front of the first guard.

"May I see him?" Her voice was shaky and her lips were uncooperative, still thawing from the walk. The guard gave her a strange look before entering the chamber, and Sif understood why. It was odd for anyone to seek Odin's company during off hours, especially while he was alone and mourning. Sif would never dream of interrupting his solitude under normal circumstances.

But these were far from normal circumstances.

The door clicked shut and not a word could be heard from behind it. Which was ideal for when Sif would be in there but not now when she wanted to hear the reaction to her presence.

The guard returned an eternal minute later with a look of surprise and opened the door for Sif. She stepped inside with a nod of gratitude then froze just past the threshold once she saw the facade of Odin seated across the room at Frigga's vanity. The door slammed shut behind her and she turned to look at it, briefly tempted to flee.

When she got a hold of her courage again, she turned back around and gasped quietly as Odin disintegrated beneath of sweep of crackling magic, replaced with Loki's slender form. He stood up, gaze cast downward, his eyes in shadow. He was wearing minimal leathers over a warm shade of white linen that almost gave the illusion of purity, a surprising diversion from his usual dark green. Sif shivered at the sight of him. He was underdressed for the drafty room that opened up, free and exposed, to a large balcony. Underdressed for an Aesir that is.

She swallowed tightly and stared as he crossed the room with long easy strides. She was unable to
formulate an appropriate greeting and regretfully unable to turn her eyes away. Despite all of his crimes, no one in Asgard could ever say the trickster prince wasn't beautiful to look at. She must have looked like a gaping fool.

He turned an elegant golden hairbrush over in his hands, Frigga's brush. Sif's heart sank for him, knowing intimately how close he was to his mother. Frigga had been his first teacher in the ways of magic, a shared passion that Sif imagined could create bonds as deep as blood. Sif felt a renewed gratefulness that the wars had never taken her from Ollie.

Loki's eyes were now fully visible, cool crystals set in deep sockets, growing closer by the moment. He stopped in front of her and handed her the brush. Sif inhaled the scents of him: polished leather and bathing salts.

"Mother would have wanted you to have this," he said somberly, lingering, his gaze curiously inspecting the dark circles and creases of Sif's own sleep deprived eyes.

Sif took the brush apprehensively and lowered her gaze. It was a gorgeous piece of Dwarven craftsmanship, made of intricately carved gold and fortified with magic. Frigga used to brush Sif's hair with it after a long day of battle training, claiming no other brush was worthy of her golden locks.

She ran her fingers over the bristles. "Thank you," was all she could manage. Loki inhaled deeply then moved past her.

"You reek of ale," he said as he helped himself to a glass of wine. Sif took a sharp, guilty breath and looked over her shoulder to where Loki had gone. There was an assortment of fancy bottles and colorful liquids on a small ornate table. "It seems I have some catching up to do."

Sif exhaled, relieved to be excused for her inebriation, which she couldn't even feel anymore. Loki quickly downed his first glass then poured a second. "Would you care for some?"

"No." Sif said automatically but questioned her reasoning. If Loki was drinking, why couldn't she? "Yes," she corrected. It would take the edge off.

Loki walked past her again, holding only his chalice. "Wine's there." Sif barely caught the hint of a smirk as he passed. She made an exasperated noise yet felt her body relax. His teasing wasn't unwelcome.

"Loki..." she began.

Loki circled around to face her, swirling the glass, impaling her with an expectant gaze that made her tense up again. She saw the moment as her cue, as did he apparently.

"I was foolish," she grit out. Loki took a sip of wine then nodded in agreement. "What I did to you was unfair." Loki kept nodding then gestured that she keep going. "And cruel?" He seemed satisfied with that but it was hard to tell.

He finished his wine and returned to the table for a third glass. Was that it? Was that all she had to say? Sif met him at the table and took the refilled chalice from his hand. She wasn't buying the relative ease of the encounter so far, but certainly wasn't going to risk it becoming more difficult by having to deal with both a bitter and drunken prince. Loki was notoriously a lightweight.

"What is this?" Sif gestured to the bottles.

"Spiced thimbleberry." Loki answered lightly. "Mother's personal stash."
"I mean," Sif struggled to keep her voice calm, "your complacency. The drinking. Aren't you going to yell at me or attack me?"

Loki smiled, seemingly entertained by all this.

"Because you can," Sif continued, resolutely. "And I won't fight back. Much."

Loki laughed. "How thoughtful of you." He then walked slowly away from the table, clasping his hands behind his back. "I don't want to fight you."

Sif took a deep, calming breath, quelling the frustration that always came with trying to communicate with Loki. She thought she knew what he wanted most of the time, but she never understood his method of asking for it. He always had to play these information fishing games.

She took a drink from his glass before speaking. "Loki..."

"Do I get to meet my son or not?" Loki cut in, twisting around.

"We need to handle this delicately," Sif countered. "Take it one step at a time." Her own words surprised her. What did she just imply?

Loki studied her with slitted eyes. "You still think I am a threat to him."

"I don't know what to think." That was the absolute truth. Loki had so far appeared to be harmless with his intentions toward Ollerus but Sif hadn't forgotten the strife he had brought upon Thor and all of Asgard.

"What harm could I do to him?" Loki questioned, arms held out. "He is my flesh and blood."

Sif shook her head. "You sent The Destroyer to kill your own brother. To kill all of us."

"If I wanted you dead, you would be dead." Loki said, breaking eye contact. "The Destroyer never stood a chance against Mjolnir."

"Then why did you..?" Sif was at a loss trying to grasp his reasoning. Thor hadn't been wielding Mjolnir, or any of his godly strengths, at the time of the attack. Yet that was the event that had earned him his power back. Could The Destroyer merely have been a test...?

Sif curiously studied the now fidgety prince. She then set the chalice down and moved toward him. "Loki, I want Ollerus to know his father, but I have to be sure you won't harm him, in any way. Or that you won't do something that leads to his exile or something worse."

Loki fussed with his tunic's sleeves, rolling them up to his elbows. His forehead glistened with sweat, which was odd since the room was so cold. It was probably the affects of spiced wine on his alien blood.

"I want only what is best for him, just as you do." A sweeping draft accompanied Loki’s statement, the sheer curtains of the canopy bed now swaying behind him.

Sif pulled her fur cloak tighter around her hunching shoulders. "I want to believe that."

"What will it take to convince you?"

"I don't know," Sif said, hopelessly.

Loki was clearly not satisfied with the direction of this conversation, having to prove himself when
he believed he was faultless. He deliberated for a moment, studying Sif hard while he searched the labyrinth of his mind.

"What if I take you to Fenrir?" he finally spoke.

Sif didn't see that one coming. "The...wolf?"

"My son," Loki corrected. "Ask him whatever questions you like about me, about my parenting. I did bring him up from a pup after all, remember? After Odin had thrown Jormungand to the sea, I begged him to spare Fenrir. I fed and nurtured him when all of the other gods were too frightened to go near him."

Sif nodded, reflectively. "I remember." It wasn't until Loki was away that a handful of gods had made their move on the oversize wolf, fettering and exiling him. Sif hadn't thought much of it at the time, believing the wolf to be only an exotic pet that had gotten out of hand. She shuddered at the thought of Ollie being torn from her protective care. "Will he..." she stuttered. "I mean, can he even talk? Or have visitors?"

"He speaks, when he wants to." Loki's tone began to lighten. "And the ban on visiting him is lifted now that I occupy the throne."

The image of meeting the dreaded beast brought a wave of excitement and intrigue. Fenrir was technically Ollie's half brother and Sif had no doubt the boy would thrill to learn of that. Was it too much to dream that the two could ever meet?

Sif's heart skipped and she retreated back to the table to drink from Loki's cup again. She couldn't get ahead of herself. One meeting at a time.

"I would like very much to meet him." Sif spoke against the brim of the chalice.

Loki breathed a satisfied waft of air. He then joined her at the table, taking back his cup and drinking from it. Their eyes immediately locked onto each others, intent, exchanging thoughts of...what? Forgiveness? Hope? The prospect of a shared adventure to Fenrir's isle? At what point had this encounter taken a turn for the better? Why wasn't Loki still angry at her? It must be the wine.

Loki pulled the cup from his lips, now stained a warm purple. Then in one smooth motion he set the cup down and took Sif's chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting her head to the side. Her pulse flurried through her stiffening body, and against her better judgement she closed her eyes and awaited his next move. She heard his lips part and smelled on his exhale the flavor of spices and silver tongue. It teased her senses with a forgotten spark.

She hung in the moment with youthful expectation, and then Loki spoke. "How is your cheek?"

Sif's eyes fluttered open to witness a flattened smirk. "My cheek?" She smiled clumsily and felt her face heat up despite Loki's cool touch. "It's fine." Was he kidding? He never even left a mark. "Yours is the one that was hit harder," she teased back, fumbling for control of the situation. Loki released her chin but she was not ready to end the moment. She reached up and pushed a lone strand of raven hair behind his ear, maintaining the small gap between their bodies, studying every last pour on his face. The wine had given his cheeks a wash of color and his skin was clammy to the touch. His hair was damp, like it always had been, a seemingly permanent feature, only now since they had learned of his lineage did she understand why. Ollie's hair was the same way, even though it shined with her warm golden hues.
Loki’s eyes draped closed when Sif’s fingers brushed his skin, his long lashes dusting the dark crescents beneath them. She continued to trace his hairline with the backs of her fingers, over his assaulted cheekbone, into the hollow below and finally stopping at his neck. She had no idea what she was doing yet she couldn’t stop. The absence of his gaze upon her seemed to give her hand free reign.

The moment could have stretched into dawn, until Loki opened his eyes. They were pained, to Sif’s unsettling surprise, and a little fearful. She stilled her hand, her thumb still daring to graze his cheekbone. Her heart pounded and her her eyes searched his for answers.

"We’ll leave tomorrow morning." He turned sharply from her, rejecting her touch, his body disappearing beneath a kingly disguise as he walked toward the door. "Meet me at the stables at dawn."

The mood shift in the room could have given Sif whiplash.

"Lyngvi is a full day's ride so pack accordingly," he now spoke in Odin's voice.

Sif allowed herself only a moment of shock, embarrassment, and insult before dropping her hand to her side and raising her chin. When he reached for the door, she was already upon it, yanking it open for herself.

"Stables. Dawn," she snapped, leaving the room, putting on a show of absolute composure for the guards and for everyone she walked past on the way back to the pub.

It wasn't until she reclaimed her seat next to Volstagg and wrapped her defiant hand around a full mug of ale, that she let out a proper growl of frustration. Her forehead dropped to the table and she began thumping it, much to her comrades' curiosity.

"Something on your mind, darling?" Fandral inquired, his lap filled with floozy again, a blond this time.

Sif groaned.

"Anything you care to talk about?" Volstagg asked. Sif didn't respond, merely lifted her head just enough to pour the needed ale down her throat. "Hmm, one of those kind of nights?" She nodded into her mug. "Very well then."

He took Sif’s now empty mug and smashed it on the floor. "Another for the lady! And bring me a goose as well. Looks like we're riding this night until tomorrow."

And what a tomorrow it was going to be.

Chapter End Notes

(If you're a soundtrack dork like me, go listen to "Rise Up With Fists" by Jenny Lewis and the Watson Twins.)
ALL the backstory! It just kept coming and I couldn't stop it. And this may be the last week I can keep a T rating. I think I'm pushing it a bit with this chapter...

Lady Sif's first time with Loki had been beneath the broad boughs of an ancient yew tree, very much like the one they were passing by now in the wilds of Asgard.

They were a only a of couple hours into their journey to meet Fenrir, having met at dawn as arranged and departing through the fog of the waterfall-misted city. It felt like longer than that to Sif though. Her head was pounding from her all-nighter in the Undercity, not to mention she hadn't slept properly over the last few nights. Loki's lack of stimulating conversation wasn't helping much either. He was riding lead, guiding them over forgotten paths that scored the city's surrounding mountains, which led down into a lush valley.

The ease and undeniable beauty of the ride was giving Sif's sleepy mind far too much freedom to avoid the fears and expectations that surrounded their meeting with the wolf, and to instead ponder over days past, spent beneath watchful trees such as this one.

As they passed by the old yew, Sif couldn't help but wonder what their tree would have to say about Loki's sticky back being shoved flush to her ragged bark. Or about Sif skinning her naked knees on the solid, plunging roots. She squinted at the tree, a challenge of sorts. The older arbors were fabled to whisper among themselves, and to the wood elves of Alfheim, prattling though their fractals of rooted networks, sharing insights that even Heimdall was blind to.

That day beneath the yew had been a blessed break from years of monotonous duty in a mindless campaign to protect the wilds of Asgard from encroaching troll squatters; Sif remembered it all too well.

She had been reassigned to the solo task of scouting and reporting back any found troll camps. It was a simple task any grunt could do, a downgrade from her previous assignment, and just an all around waste of everyone's time. She didn't need back-up to run off packs of vagrant trolls. Her battle cry and masterful twirl of her glaive were more than enough to get the job done, so that was how she had handled it. Her superiors, however, disagreed with her tactics, and once the captains learned of her reckless behavior, they decided it best to assign her a scouting partner.

It had been Thor's idea to pair her with Loki, figuring his brother's wits and Sif's physical prowess were well matched to keep each other out of trouble, but mostly Thor wanted Sif to keep an eye on Loki.

Sif hadn't been the only one misbehaving. The unruly prince had been neglecting his assignments for years, stealing away to Angrboda's dwelling instead, which was conveniently nestled near a troll camp. A select team of soldiers were eventually assigned to follow him, and upon discovery of the witch's hideout, they detained Loki and captured his beastly offspring. No one ever found Angrboda that day. She hadn't been at the house when they ransacked it. It was rumored that she returned to Jotunheim with Hel, the one child she didn't abandon.
Loki had been taken directly to Odin to account for his actions, which he did with surprising honesty. Still, the All-Father became furious that a prince of Asgard, his son, had both neglected his duty as a soldier and involved the bloodline with that of an enemy witch's. Gossip erupted throughout Asgard, fear mongering over the half-Jotunn beasts that were being held within the city. Odin was humiliated and saw no other option but to exile the serpent, sparing the wolf pup only because of Loki's pleas.

Needless to say—and by the magic of Thor's influence on his father's decisions—Sif had soon been partnered with a very forlorn, very brooding prince. Their first few weeks together had been conducted in bitter silence, conversation only at a bare minimum. Loki was severely soured by his father's actions and Sif, knowing only bits and pieces of what he had done, had no idea how to even approach the subject, so she avoided it all together. Plus they both resented the idea that either of them needed a babysitter.

But eventually and inevitably, the awkward silences thawed into small talk. Then came the lively arguments, which usually followed one of Loki's tricks. The missions had grown so boring with the troll's numbers dropping that the prince had sought other means of preoccupation, and Sif was the only victim around. While a lunch basket infested with frogs or a water pouch full of the bartender's most potent brew wasn't Sif's top choice of entertainment, it was a welcome change to the dredging routine their days had become, and it gave her a living, deserving target to practice on.

She had attempted a few tricks of her own but they always paled in comparison to Loki's, and he would always see them coming. He had tried to explain the workings of magic to her, but he might as well have been speaking Vanir. Magic just wasn't her thing. The only trick she had ever gotten him with was the one that pinned him against that tree, a situation that hotly escalated to a frantic fumbling over armor buckles and urgent tearing of linens.

They could have gotten into so much trouble that day...

Sif breathed sharply at the tingling memory, casting her gaze forward to the figure mounted upon a steed of eight legs. Once again, Loki was her riding partner.

She watched his stringy hair dance freely with the morning breeze, her eyes then drifting down slowly over the tapered body that held naturally a royal riding posture. Even steeped in mischief, the dark prince was always so cultured, so alien yet so uniquely enticing. Sif had never regretted that sticky summer day spent panting beneath the yew's swollen foliage, nor had she regretted the times that had followed in the foreign lands of their next campaign.

Odin had negotiated with the light elves of Alfheim, requesting they cease their expansion over their troll neighbors' lands, which had been the initial cause of the alien invasion into Asgard. The elves had reluctantly agreed, at least their nobles did, but it hadn't taken long for the poorer classes to carry on as they always had, seeking new lands to merely survive on, and once again drive the trolls out.

The drums of war had sounded again, this time in the eerily enchanted jungles of Alfheim to intervene on an Elven civil war.

The battles had been more treacherous than expected, the terrain unknown and the badgering fairies an incessant distraction. Even Loki, once squeezing them into confessing their spell's secrets, had grown weary of their pranks and teasing. All of the soldiers were exhausted at the close of each day and sought refuge in the villages of the allied elves. The pubs were the only source of relaxation and release, and that had grown old fast for a shield maiden and a rebel prince now bitten by Freyja's hunger.
They had quickly made a sport of finding the most exotic places possible to indulge their desires, from a grotto encrusted with gems, to a mermaid lagoon, even, on occasion, across enemy lines, just for the added thrill. They had been seen once by the enemy, but who caught who was still up for debate. The hapless elf was merely seeking his usual toadstool ring of refuge to partake, in secret, of his bootlegged Dwarven mead, which he had dropped upon seeing the grunting tangle of Asgardians in his spot. After his retreat, Loki and Sif hadn't hesitated to work the abandoned booty into their throes of pleasure.

That following morning had, regretfully, been an exercise in pain management. There was a reason Dwarven brew was banned from most realms, especially among the ranks of soldiers. It rendered a body ravaged, listless, a head reduced to a giant's kickball and a gut the habitat of the foulest of swamp ooze. Fortunately, Sif and Loki had been strategically assigned to the same mission that day by an empathetic prince of thunder, ensuring that misery indeed had good company. It was the easiest mission available, the kind usually reserved for those lightly injured in battle.

Funny how Thor had been repeatedly pulling the strings behind them.

Their assignment had them comfortably set up at the river just outside of base camp, filling water pouches and restocking rations for the soldiers doing the real work that day. Sif had lost count of all the dirty looks given to Loki by war-weary men, who would gladly sacrifice a limb to swap places with him, propping their bared feet up on supply crates, a dampened cloth draped over their forehead and eyes. The spoiled prince never even acknowledged those whom he was so royally pissing off.

 Luckily Sif's conscience had still been intact, and she saw each soldier off with an encouraging clap to their shoulder, a warm smile, and occasionally a good luck peck on the cheek. The younger soldiers would blush at that.

"You're insufferable," came Loki's bedraggled voice once the last of the soldiers had gone.

Sif looked at him, straight-faced, too tired to be insulted. "You're just jealous."

"That's it." A brow could be seen raising beneath Loki's cooling cloth, thin fabric betraying the sharp curves of his profile. "I'm immensely jealous that I can't use my girly charms to gloss over my neglect of duty." Typical Loki, going straight for her conscience. "Never mind that I could disguise myself as a shapely elf nurse, earning the praise of these subordinate grunts rather than their petty judgements."

"A wise tactic that should have been your course of action instead of this, laying about like, well, like the spoiled prince you are," Sif teased more than she advised. "If you're to one day be their king, you should be more thoughtful to their opinions of you."

Loki snorted, unamused. "Right."

"I'm serious," Sif had said, ignorant at the time of how she had deluded herself to Loki's bad reputation among the ranks.

"Sif..." Loki grew exasperated. "Can we please change the subject? My head has not the tolerance to think about this now." He breathed deeply, laying his head to the side. "I would much rather dwell on more pleasurable things, such as my memories of last night." He pulled the cloth from face, revealing a set of devious eyes that scanned the lengths of Sif's exposed feet and legs. Her boots were off and her pants were rolled up halfway up her thighs to keep from getting wet when she refilled water pouches in the river. It was a rare look for her, and a welcome one at the time given the humidity of the elven jungles.
Sif smoothed her armored skirt down, awkwardly, first blushing then smirking. "I'm surprised you have any memories of last night. Lightweight."

Loki cocked his brow. "I remember enough."

Sif gave him a sidelong glance then scanned the surrounding area, ensuring there wasn't another incoming platoon of parched soldiers. Hearing only the harmonies of feathered serpents and pygmy nymphs in the canopies above, she swayed over to the prince's long, lazy body, slowly pulling the cloth from between his fingers and wading into the river to re-wet it, acting like some kind of exotic siren. She still couldn't believe the of behavior he had summoned in her.

She trailed her now dripping hand over his hair and swung a wet leg over him, taking a seat in the crook of his wide-angled body. He made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a growl as she settled herself on his hips. She freed the drained cloth from her fist and began delicately dabbing beads of sweat from his face.

"You're so sweaty," she purred, moving the fabric down his neck and into the split of his tunic.

Loki lidded his eyes and took another deep breath, exhaling it with a low hum. "I hate this place."

Her brow furrowed. She continued to glide the cloth over his now curiously blotching skin. "We'll be home before you know it." Her voice lightened to the tone she had been using with the soldiers. "Everything will be back to normal."

Words spoken in vain. Things never had gone back to normal, for they had never known their routine in Asgard to involve each other so intimately.

It had been fun at first though, anticipation building up over busy weeks filled with post-war duties. They caught only passing glimpses of the other for too long, but finally the day came when their schedules had compatible gaps. She hurried through weapons training then sought him out in the library, her golden locks still dripping from her hasty shower. Clean was enough for her. She hadn't had the patience for stylish, not while he was awaiting her, pretending to engross himself in subjects she couldn't even pronounce.

They stole away to a dark nook in the grand architecture known only by him. And it was there, for the first time, and very much to Sif's surprise, that they made love. It wasn't a raw duel for control, or a heady contest of who could last longer, or even the cathartic simplicity of rushing to release after a trying day. It was a tender, exploratory exchange of gentle caresses and prolonged, dawning gazes.

It was unlike anything Sif had ever felt, and her eruptive cries rang out through the library's east wing. She melted onto him, muffling her moans into his neck when he peaked, his rigid body shuddering wildly before going limp in her hold.

The moment was true poetry, not the endless drivel on the shelves nearby, but the pure essence of what inspired those words to be penned.

Unfortunately, a moment was all they would ever share in it. For soon after, a frightening and relentless cold grew through Sif's body. She immediately went to Eir for answers, who had been in Asgard at the time. When Eir explained the known history of Loki's offspring, Sif soon found herself wandering the Undercity, aimless and confused, hearing only the gossip about Loki's cursed brood and the fate Odin had damned them to.

No one in Asgard could know about her child, especially not anyone in the royal family.
She had met with Loki one last time before taking a nine month refuge in the Valkyries' lands, stuttering out the hardest lies she had ever spoken.

It hadn't been a surprise to wake up a year later, her scalp robbed of its golden splendor, replaced with stubble as black as Loki believed her heart to be.

***Present Day***

After a long day under a shamelessly warm winter sun, the journey brought the weary pair to a semi-wooded meadow. It was lush and inhabiting, an ideal spot to camp, divided by a shallow but determined creek whose sunset-colored waters raced toward the sea, fleeing the halting onset of night.

"You'll want to gather as much firewood as you can find," Loki said, pulling his pack from Sleipnir's side. "The cold will move in before the sun has finished setting."

Sif removed her own pack and looked over at Loki, his hair and collar soaked with sweat from the onslaught of a full day's sun. At least one of them would enjoy the cold night. "Will you be alright?" She pulled a hatchet from her pack and stuck it in her belt.

"I'll be fine," he said, deflecting her concern. "Worry about yourself."

She sighed, throwing a rope over her shoulder and setting off toward a clumping of trees. He had been evading her attempts at conversation all day, rendering her exhausted of his complicated company. The sooner she could get this fire going and crawl into her knapsack, the better it would be for both of them.

The meadow was generous with its offering of loose dried branches, so it didn't take long to gather enough to last the night. She tied it all in a bundle and heaved it onto her shoulder, proud of the weight she could carry without assistance. Fandral would probably buckle under this load and then whine for Hogun to take it from him.

The thought of her friends made her smile, a pleasant distraction from the encroaching cold air.

When she returned to the creek, there were only the two steeds and their two packs, no signs of Loki. As she drew closer, she noticed his cape crumpled on the ground, then his boots next to it, then his jerkin, then his tunic, then his blades, even his socks! She plopped the wood bundle down and cast her glance around the camp.

"Is this a trick?" she called out to nothing, unamused.

"It could be." His voice came from the creek, barely audible over the sound of moving water.

Sif walked toward the voice, her jaw dropping when she saw him lying flat on his back in the shallow creek, wearing only his leather breeches, frantic water rushing over and around him. "You're crazy!"

"You're filthy." His mouth found its smirk, a small one. "Perhaps you should join me in here."

"Loki." Sif pointed at the creek. "There's ice forming at the edges."

"Frost giant."
She planted a her hand on her hip. "You didn't used to be this sensitive to heat. I've seen you spend entire days in the summer sun, no worse for wear than the rest of us."

"Suppose it's a mind over matter thing. Or perhaps ignorance is bliss."

She wasn't quite sure what he meant but she wasn't going to stand around and freeze to death while trying to translate his riddles. She fetched the firewood and unbound it from the rope, letting the wood spill with a ruckus at her feet. Loki flinched at the clamor.

"So, what does that mean?" Sif started picking the kindling out of the pile. "Knowing what you are makes it more real, somehow?"

"Somehow, yes." Loki's tone betrayed how much didn't enjoy talking about things he couldn't explain. "What about you?" And there was the diversion. "You didn't used to be this sensitive to cold."

Sif paused her arranging of kindling, wondering if he knew just how delicate a matter his statement was touching on. He always could cut straight to the chase.

She resumed her task with the firewood, voice growing distant. "That changed after I carried Ollerus. Eir says he lowered my body temperature to suit his comfort level, and it never fully recovered."

"Smart lad," Loki replied immediately, no trace of sympathy. "Instinctively knew to adapt his surroundings to him."

Sif was desperate to change the subject, too exhausted to handle this now. She looked over at Loki's drenched body and saw, to her surprise, his skin was turning blue where the water touched him, a more saturated blue than Ollie's complexion. It was unexpectedly beautiful.

"Why don't you stay blue?" she asked. "Now that everyone knows, why bother hiding it?"

Sif watched his bare chest rise and fall before he spoke. "Because Odin's spells are as stubborn as he." His voice darkened. "I can't tell you how many times I've tried to replace his with my own."

He didn't answer her second question. She decided not to push it. "How is it changing now?"

"The spell weakens when he is asleep," he explained. "Contact with extreme cold over time also seems to temporarily hide it, but never to this degree when Odin was awake."

"Then Odin truly does sleep," Sif's movements slowed with her realization. Had Loki actually told her the truth about his father's condition? "When did he fall asleep?"

"When I told him the news of my death," he said.

Sif did a double take. "Come again?"

"I was disguised as a soldier."

"Why would you do that?"

"I wanted to see his reaction." Loki paused, as if trying to get angry but unable to. "And when sleep overcame him, I assumed his image. I wanted to see everyone's reaction when I announced my own death."

"And when Asgard mourned you, labeled you a hero, a martyr, why did you continue the
deception?” Sif was trying no to get angry. "You couldn't bear handing the throne over to Thor, could you.”

"Pretty much."

His confession surprised her. "Oh." At least he was being honest. "What do you intend to do with it?"

"Exactly what the king of Asgard should do.” Loki’s voice found a lofty tone. "Look after her, and all of the nine realms.”

Sif wasn’t convinced. "How can you say that after everything you have done? The lives you've taken.”

He turned a sly smile to her. "Well, you always did like me best when I was at my worst behavior.”

"I-I do not.” She fumbled with the firewood. "Come on, I'm being serious.”

The playfulness left Loki’s voice and he turned to gaze up at the stars again. "I have seen powers greater than that of Surtr's outside of the nine realms. Cataclysmic magic beyond even the grasp of Alfheim's elder sorcerers.” Sif looked up, stilled by his icy sincerity. He continued. "I know what is needed to protect us from the prophecies. I have touched the necessary forces, felt them pulse through my very being.”

"The Aether?” Sif asked.

"And the casket. And the Tesseract.” Loki now spoke with longing. "No one in the nine realms understands their power as I do. No one is as fit to lead us into Ragnarok as I.

Sif quickly grew uncomfortable with all of this, prophetic talk. If he wasn't speaking with such stark clarity then she would have mistaken him for a lunatic, and that was too much for her exhausted mind to take right now. She should be grateful he was finally opening up to her, but it...it was just too much.

She shifted her attention to her pockets, searching for her flint and tinder, the silence between them dragging on awkwardly.

Loki took that as his cue to get up, his dripping, half-naked body now coming up the short bank that spanned between them. Sif couldn't help but watch him as he collected his tunic, turning his back to her and slipping the thin cloth over his body. The fabric clung to his wet flesh as he pulled it over his chest then stomach, covering the distinctly Jotun patterns etched in his skin.

"Ollie has those same patterns on his back.” Sif’s words tumbled out. The subject of their son wasn't as daunting to talk about anymore. "Until he was born, I had always assumed frost giant markings were tattoos.”

Loki turned around, glancing briefly at her before squatting to pick up his socks. "When did he learn he had Jotun blood?”

"As soon as he could comprehend what it meant.” Sif scraped steel to stone, sprinkling sparks into the teepee of wood.

Loki was pleased with her answer. He sat down across the would–be fire from her, drawing a knee up to put his sock on. "Was he ever ashamed of it?”
Sif shook her head, glancing up just in time to catch the last of Loki's blue skin fade behind an Aesir beige. She tried not to stare. "He's used to being different. Being a child and being a boy alone will single you out in the Valkyrie lands. The skin color didn't make much difference to him."

Loki leaned forward into his knee, one sock on, one still in his grasp. "How was he treated by the Valkyries? We're they cruel?"

"Are you kidding?" Sif laughed. "They adore him. Valkyries spend all of their time carting around dead heroes and serving the Einherjar, so they rarely get the company living, breathing children. Ollie is a treat to them, especially the younger Valkyries who he's now old enough to flirt with. The crones will pretend he's a bother, but I see them slipping him sweets and trinkets when they think no one's looking."

Sif had gotten so swept up in bragging about Ollie that she was doing a poor job of lighting the fire.

Loki watched the constant and useless spray of sparks, his mind wrapping around Sif's words. "He didn't have other children to play with."

Sif's hands stalled, her shoulders sinking a little. "No, he didn't." As much as she wanted to, she couldn't give Ollie everything. "But he watches, when the occasional child is carried to Valhalla. It's...morbid I know, but, well, he's just so curious. He found himself an amazing vantage point up in Glasir mountains to watch the heroes carried through the gates." She paused, resuming the scraping but still getting nowhere, Loki's eyes burned holes in her hands. "Oh for love of—if Ollie were here, this fire would already be blazing. He loves camping, especially in the snow." She flashed Loki a smile at that one. "He's taken up skiing, using my shield as a device to stand on, and he wants to teach me, but I don't know..."

Loki cut in. "Perhaps he can teach me."

Sif paused, the image freezing her hands in place. She didn't know how to respond to that, wasn't ready to accept that was yet a possibility.

Loki put his other sock on then sat up on his knees. "Pull your hands back." Sif blinked and did as she was told, half expecting what was going to happen. Sure enough, her fire came to life from a simple green flame conjured out of nowhere.

She put away the flint and tinder. "That's cheating." She smiled at him, unfurling her knapsack.

Loki rose to feet, lifting his cloak off the ground and shaking it out. He then bent over at her side, wrapping it around her shoulders. "I won't be needing it."

She was touched by the gesture. It was the same kindness Ollie had recently showed her. She looked up at him. "Not even to sleep?"

"I won't be sleeping." He backed off from the flames.

"What?" Sif argued, trying to ignore the smell of him on the cloak that the heat was making stronger by the moment. "Even frost giants need sleep."

He now stood at Sleipnir's side, running his hand slowly down the formidable steed's neck. "Goodnight, Lady Sif." He then led the horse to a patch of tall grass to feed.

Sif watched the pair as long as her heavy eyes would allow, warmth spreading fondly through her body as she climbed into her bed. She heard indecipherable murmurs coming from Loki and equine
snorts that responded favorably to him. That warmed her even more.

She closed her eyes. Her mind had only a moment to dwell upon the day's events before sleep consumed her wholly. The moment had been enough, however, to marvel at the vast contrast between their past adventures in the wilds and their current one.
"Not going to sleep, my arse." Sif stood over Loki's sleeping body, jabbing her toe into his ribs, a spot she knew him to be ticklish. Yeah, it was a rude thing to do but they had a big day ahead of them and they needed to get moving. The sooner she could meet Fenrir, the less time she would have to get anxious about it.

Loki squirmed then jerked awake into a sitting position, a small shank readied in his white-knuckled fist. His teeth were bared beneath a disheveled splay of hair.

Sif snorted at the sight. "Good thing I wasn't depending on you to keep me safe while I slept."

Reality dawned slowly onto Loki. He squinted at the harsh morning rays that beamed unmercifully around Sif's silhouette. Huffing, he pushed his hair out of his face and put his weapon away. "Since when do you depend on anyone for your safety?" His voice was as scraggily as the few remaining strands still hanging over his slitted eyes.

"Since...never." Wow, did he just compliment her? He must still be half asleep.

Sif squatted at his side, jiggling a small plate of nuts and fruits in front of him, making them dance wildly. Loki watched the chaotic little foods, brow furrowed.

"Eat these," Sif ordered. She set the plate on his lap then lightly swiped the lingering strings of hair off of his groggy face, revealing fully the sheer weight of his irritated squint. She countered it with a smirk. "They'll put hair on your chest."

Loki eyes followed hers as she rose from his side, his expression unchanging. "You seem to have confused which generation of Laufeyson I am."

Sif smiled over her shoulder then she began kicking apart the now smoldering logs of the spent campfire. It was weird to think of Ollerus as related to King Laufey, so she didn't dwell on it for long. She watched as Loki shifted to sit crossed-legged, adjusting the plate to the center of his lap. "I hope breakfast is to your liking," she said. "The salmon berries in particular are one of Ollie's favorites."

Loki sampled a couple of the tiny orange fruits, nodding thoughtfully as his jaw worked. "Did you
"pick these this morning?" He cast his glance around the camp, noticing how both steeds were already saddled and packed.

"I did," Sif replied, tossing a smoking log into the creek.

"I see you're still a morning pers—hey!" Loki jerked his plate away as Sleipnir's muzzle pushed into his lap. "No! My breakfast!"

Sif chuckled as she watched Loki's lanky body all but disappear beneath eight insistent legs, his voice straining. "She picked these for me, not you!" His long arm stretched out in whichever direction would hold the plate farthest from hungry horse lips.

A couple calling clicks was all it took to rescue the squirming prince. Both Sleipnir and Fylla—Sif's pegasus—came trotting over to eagerly claim the bunches of grass garnished with berries, which Sif offered in each flattened palm. Her hands were licked clean in an instant and she then presented two buckets full of the same delicacy. The brisk morning air quickly filled with a duet of hefty munching and happy tail swishes.

Loki righted himself into his prior sitting pose and quickly finished his breakfast before it could be interrupted again. "You must have awoken early to do all of this." He spoke between chews and swallows, abandoning all of his usual table manners.

"I awoke from a rather...vivid dream just before dawn." Sif bent over to retrieve Sleipnir's now empty bucket, the steed moving on to drink from the creek. "I couldn't fall back to sleep so I figured it wouldn't hurt to get an early start." She joined Sleipnir at the water's edge, cleaning the bucket out.

Loki rose from his makeshift bed of fur blankets and leather clothing, still wearing only his linen tunic, leather pants and silken, designer socks, which were soaked and dirty from having apparently been walked around in all night.

"What did you dream about?" Loki asked, now standing on the opposite side of Sleipnir fetching a clean pair of socks from his pack.

Sif looked up at him, surprised he would ask. "I only remember bits and pieces now."

"Tell me," Loki insisted.

She stood up, shaking excess water from the bucket. "Fenrir was in it." Loki eyes lit up. "He was...chanting. And there was this big storm creating massive waves in the lake." She laughed a little as she tied the bucket to Sleipnir's saddle, her dream sounding ridiculous now that it was put into words.

"What else?" Loki pressed.

Sif dropped her smile, her brow knitting as Loki's humorless eyes impaled her. "There was an ever-present cackling." She squinted as she recalled the details. "The voice was that of a young girl's."

Loki's eyes glossed over as he worked his mind intensely. He then returned to his bed, urgently, peeling off his dirty socks with a couple unbalanced hops and hastily strapping on his jerkin, buckling only the needed straps to keep it on his body.

Sif shook her head and shrugged. It was still too early to try and translate Lokisms. She retrieved the second bucket for cleaning, Fylla bobbing her head gratefully at her, stretching her wings in satisfaction of a full belly. Sif gave her muzzle a brief stroke before returning to the stream.
Loki was upon her again, kneeling at her crouching side with that same adamant stare. "Anything else? Were we in it?"

Sif gave him an odd look. "What does it matter?"

"Tell me."

"Yes." Sif raised her voice. "Probably. I know I was there watching it all happen."

"What about me?" He glanced down briefly to buckle his boots.

Sif shook her head slightly. "Loki, it was just a dream." She finished cleaning the bucket and rose to shake it out. Loki rose with her.

"It's never just a dream."

"You're starting to sound like Eir." She turned to head for the campsite. "She's forever trying to analyze and interpret—"

Loki spun her back around and grabbed her arms tightly. "You must tell me. What was my role?"

"Back off!" She tore out of his grip and shoved him back a pace. "I don't know your role. I don't remember seeing you at all!"

Loki just stood, staring, looking victimized and not speaking a word.

Sif sighed, her conscience now pinging her. She didn't have to shove him that hard. She tore her gaze away and began repositioning her layered silver shoulder armor, which his grip had shifted.

Loki turned away, crouching down and to began rolling up his fur blankets. Sif couldn't read him, couldn't fully see his face as he rolled his bedding up into neat and compact bundles. She wasn't entirely sure what just happened between them or what she should say next, but she had to say something.

"What happened to you?" Sif finally spoke, her voice softer than before. "In that...cheetah space. What did they do to you?"

Loki blinked, flattening his mouth into an almost smile. "I think you mean Chitauri Space."

"Whatever." Sif rolled her eyes.

"Do you even know what a cheetah is?" Loki laughed, looking over at her.

"I don't care, Loki. Talk to me." His moods were like a damned pendulum.

Loki's smile slowly backed down. He stood up and strapped his bedding onto Sleipnir's pack. "What did Thor tell you?"

"He said they they hurt you. Threatened you. Forced you to wage war on Midgard."

Loki lowered his gaze, thoughtfully. "That would be an easier truth for Asgard to swallow." His voice darkened. "That their prince was compromised by outside forces, and not by my own alleged family."

Sif studied him, particularly the creases forming around his eyes. "What really happened?" she asked.
Loki straightened his posture, prepping himself for memories of...what?

"The alliance was my idea." He spoke with an unexpected pride. "I made them need me. They possessed the power of the Tesseract, but I was the one in control. I chose to be a war lord rather than a prisoner."

Sif shook her head, wincing. Sometimes she wondered if she even wanted to hear his truths. "You didn't have to be either. Frigga had found you. Thor, all of us, we would have come for you."

"You would have been fools to involve yourself with them. You have no idea the power they wield." Loki's tone then lifted to something dry and sarcastic. "But your sentiment is noted."

"Do you even care that Thor still loves you?" Sif said. "After all you've done to hurt him, after all the counter arguments he gets from his friends, both of Asgard and Midgard, he still had hope for you."

Loki dropped his gaze to his hands, his thumb repeatedly smoothing over a strap on the saddle. That was a telltale sign that Sif was finally going to get the answers she wanted. That thumb in particular always went into fidget mode when the guarded prince was confronted with feelings he didn't want.

Sif intended to squeeze this moment for all that she could. "Say something."

She watched intently as Loki stilled his hand, knowing he gave himself away with its involuntary action. He kept his gaze down, balling his hand into a fist, his lips pinching then spreading into that wide grin, then pinching again, tighter than before. He seemed to be building up the courage to speak.

"Do you..." When he spoke, it was soft, and oddly timid. He lifted his eyes to meet hers, putting a glinting vulnerability on full display, solely for her. "Do you have hope for me?"

Sif felt each and every one of her internal organs flutter, some in unison, some taking turns, and some flat out battling each other out of utter disbelief. Even while vulnerable, he could catch her off guard, turn the conversation on its head, and just completely force her into a position she wasn't ready to be in. It wasn't a new question to her, but it was one she always asked herself in the privacy of her own mind, where she could make up answers that suited her mood and deny the ones that came with the Trojan horse of hope.

How dare he. How dare he put her in this position. To speak the plain truth. To expose her own weaknesses. Oh, why couldn't words be delivered with the swing of a sword.

She breathed deeply and walked a few steps toward him, meeting his gaze with a reserved tenderness. "I'm here aren't I?"

Loki smiled, softly, gradually. They lingered with locked gazes for a stretched moment until Loki moved, closing the distance between them. Without hesitation, he brushed the backs of his fingers over her hairline then placed a sweet kiss on her cheek. She inhaled sharply. The kiss was brief but long enough to savor the contrast of his cool lips with his warm breath. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out as the moment was already over, ending too soon. "Thank you," was all he said.

"We should get moving," was Sif's fumbling response, turning to hide the pink that was heating her cheeks. She winced, cursing internally. She could have just said 'you're welcome.'

Or she could have kissed him back.
Chapter Summary

They finally meet Fenrir and nothing goes down the way anyone could have predicted. But that's only the start of Loki's plan.

Warning: If violence against animals bothers you, do not read this chapter, or at least skip over the cave scene. I included all the gory details from the myths about Fenrir's exile. It's very, very dark.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They arrived at Lyngvi, Fenrir's fabled isle, which was seated lonely amid Lake Amsvatnir. Loki had created an ice bridge that Sleipnir could cross and Fylla had simply flown Sif over the expanse of water.

They dismounted and led their steeds to a row of wind blown deciduous trees that lined the inner woods. "We'll leave them here," Loki said, patting Sleipnir on the neck. "The ground is uneven, full of jagged rocks. Their hooves cannot take it."

Sif nodded, rubbing her hand beneath Fylla's strong, folded wing. "Look after each other, okay?" She looked deep into the creature's eyes, soulful black jewels set in sleek white fur. "We'll be back shortly."

Sif honestly didn't know how long this meeting would take, but time was irrelevant to Fylla when there was an entire island full of edible grasses. For all the animal cared, Sif could take all week.

Loki led the way deeper into the island and Sif followed closely behind, eager to get this meeting underway. With each footstep that crunched the dried leaves beneath them, her anticipation grew wilder. Her instincts were trying to suit her with a healthy layer of fear, but she ignored them, the same way she ignored them when she leapt full boar onto the Destroyer's back, or when she took on six marauders at once. One cursed, and probably very begrudged wolf was hardly enough to prickie the hairs of a great warrior's neck.

Yet, upon approaching the cave, a sinister portal that marked the entrance of Fenrir's prison, Sif felt her neck hair raise in utter defiance of her reputable and formidable fearlessness. She lifted her chin in response.

"Scared?" Loki looked over his shoulder.

"I don't get scared." Sif stepped up next to him.

Loki beheld her with a look that concerned her, but she couldn't pinpoint why exactly. She squinted at him. "What if I told you that I was?" he said. "I have no idea what to expect." His shoulders inched up in a small shrug, playing at innocence.

Sif blinked. "But you said he would talk." She then argued. "That I could ask him anything."
"I say a lot of things to get what I want." That was his defense, complete with lopsided smile. She could have gutted him. He then turned and took the first step into the cave, the shadows almost completely engulfing him.

Sif promptly followed, her frustration now stronger than her fear of the unknown. "You bastard. You tricked me into coming here with you." Her voice echoed down the black narrow corridor.

"Shhhh, not so loud," Loki whispered. "I did not want to trick you. I just...didn't want to come here alone."

"So," Sif grabbed Loki's arm, spinning him. "The whole 'ask him whatever you want' deal isn't going to happen?"

"It's highly unlikely." Loki shrugged a single shoulder. "I don't imagine he'll be much in a talking mood."

Sif threw her arms up. "Wonderful." The entire reason for the trip just tossed out with the swine slop. "So what happens now?"

"Truthfully, I do not know." Loki didn't appear to care about Sif's frustration, too caught up in his own thoughts. "In your dream he was chanting. But whether that is an incantation or sheer madness..."

"An incantation." Sif didn't like the idea of that. "Is he a sorcerer, like you?" If that was the case, Sif now had one more reason to call this whole thing off. She didn't like enclosed spaces. She hated fighting magic, and she especially didn't want to deal with both at the same time.

"He does not wield magic like I do, but he is not without it," Loki explained. "He was conceived with dark magic. That is why he is cursed. I..." Shame crept into Loki's voice. "Well let's just say I've learned a great deal more about magic since then."

'Conceived. With dark magic.' That was not, by any measure, what Sif wanted to hear, for multiple reasons. "By the Great Tree, Loki." She breathed deeply, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Please tell me there was no magic present during Ollie's conception."

Loki's expression lightened. "There was magic." He then smirked, sweetly, something only he could pull off. "It just wasn't born of a spell."

It took a moment for Sif to figure out what he meant. When it finally landed, she couldn't decide whether she wanted to punch him or strangle him. She sighed. "That was smooth."

"You like that one?" His smile broadened. He didn't know when to stop.

She couldn't help but smile in response. She nodded, regretfully then gestured to the dark path ahead of them. "Shall we press on?"

"We shall." Loki turned to survey their path, finding not a trace of light to guide them. "Once we can see." He then cupped his hands together, as if he just caught a bug in slow motion, and stared intently at them. Sif watched curiously as a moment later, green light began to leak from between his fingers. When he opened his hands, there was a levitating globe of green light, like a firefly, only brighter and steadier in its movement. It illuminated the space around them, sending frightened creatures skittering along the walls.

He moved onward and the globe followed, hovering just above him.
"Why do you think Fenrir was chanting in my dream?" Sif had to ask, even though she still believed her dream was no more than a purge from her exhausted mind.

"I can't quite say." Loki replied.

"Well," Sif pushed, needing more. "What can you say?"

There was a pause, which meant Loki had something worthwhile to say.

"He will be angry," Loki confessed. "He has every right to be. But if he has gone mad," he then turned a fearful, green lit gaze to her, "we need to be prepared for the worst."

She drew her sword. She could handle angry. "We have nothing to fear."

They journeyed further down into unknown depths, the cave's circumference shrinking as they went until their heads nearly grazed the ceiling. The skittering lizards that had been avoiding their light were now resigning themselves to watch curiously, that is until Loki impaled one with a dagger. It shrieked and the others fled frantically.

"What are you doing?" Sif whispered.

"He will be hungry," Loki said.

She jumped as a sudden spell-born sheet of ice ripped down the cave walls, freezing multiple creatures in place.

Loki spoke as if shooting out deadly ice spells was no big thing. "His appetite exceeds even Volstagg's."

"That's...," she blinked. "Impressive."

"Gather those up," he directed. "We'll present them as a peace offering."

Sif broke the ice with her elbow and cringed as several limp bodies dropped to the ground. She crouched down, shaking her head and feeling her breakfast dare to surface as she skewered multiple dead lizards onto her own dagger. "You owe me for this. I'm talking golden swords, jeweled armor, a proper set of skis for Ollie..."

"Quiet!" he ordered, squatting down next to her. "Do you hear that?"

Sif stilled her movements and listened, carefully, past the steady sound of dripping water, past the wind whistling through narrowing spaces. And then she heard it. Heard him.

_The sound of cat's paw. A woman's beard._
_The roots of a mountain. The sinews of a bear._

"Is that...?" Sif whispered, at a loss.

"He's chanting," Loki cut in with a dark voice.

_The breath of a fish. Spittle of the birds._

"Come on." Loki crept down the path and Sif followed, fighting back fear and feeling utterly removed from her element.

Had her dream truly been a prophesy?
The passageway opened up into a large but enclosed space, ceiling covered with dripping stalactites, a stream cutting down the middle. Everything was illuminated unnaturally by an odd gold light, which shown from behind a large mound in the middle of the cavern, a large, black, wiry-furred mound. That was him. That was Fenrir.

Loki straightened as he stepped into the cavern, hesitantly, and beheld his offspring, the beast's heap of a body rising and falling dramatically with each breath. Loki took a deep breath himself. He then held his arm out to her, signaling her to stay back, his eyes shifting with emotions she couldn't name. She nodded in response. Once Loki turned away from her, she readied her hand over the hilt of her sword.

Loki moved slowly toward the beast, purposely making his footsteps heard so as not to alarm him. "Fenrir. It is your father, Loki."

Not Loki of Asgard, Sif noted, just Loki. She figured the beast cared not to be reminded of the place he once lived, where he was allowed to roam free.

Fenrir stirred. There was a deep moaning growl that came from the pit of him as he pulled each leg underneath his body and began shifting the weight from his mass to his paws. He actually started to look like a wolf then, his tail peaking out from behind. The last thing to shift was his head.

"Fenrir?" Loki took a brave step closer.

Finally, the beast turned its head and neither of them could have prepared for what they saw. For the cavern's light came not from a crack in the wall where the sun could leak in, but from the wolf's very mouth, which was gruesomely propped open with an enchanted Asgardian sword, the tip stabbing into the roof of his mouth.

The stream flowing through the cave was over a dozen years worth of hunger-born drool. Sif covered her mouth to keep from making a sound, and Loki could only gape, horrified.

"What did they..." Loki reached out to the sword, which glowed and crackled with a spiraling golden spell, Odin's spell. "How could he..." He stepped closer to inspect the spell, but Fenrir recoiled violently.

"Please," Loki whispered. "Let me look at it. I would never hurt you." Loki reached out again, but again Fenrir pulled away.

"Please!" Loki now begged, forcefully, keeping his hand stretched out. "I only want to help."

Fenrir took a breath in through his nose. When he spoke, it was unlike any voice Sif had heard. It filled the enclosed space with a thrumming, heart stopping resonation. "Father..." The voice didn't come from his mouth but seemed to bleed from his very being.

"I am here." Loki's voice was pained. Sif couldn't imagine what he must be feeling; tried not to think about how she would feel if Ollerus was a victim to even a fraction of this torture.

Loki raised his hand and touched the sword, allowing the guardian spell to shock him. It caused him to double over, grabbing his hand, but he didn't back away. He needed only a moment to recover. When he lifted his head again, his eyes were lit with revelation, hope even.

"I can undo this," he said.

Fenrir began chanting again. "Sound of cat's paw. A woman's beard..."
Loki turned to look at Sif and signaled her to come over. She did so, never one to back away from a challenge, yet still approaching hesitantly.

At the sight of her, Fenrir jerked his body up, roaring and thrashing as much as his fetters would allow, his blood red eyes bulging in fear, his drool flinging out wildly. Sif halted her approach, but drew her sword, heart racing the way it did on the front line.

"Asgardian!" The wolf cried, with warning, as if Loki wasn't aware of her presence. "She has followed you here, Father."

Loki held his arms up in a placating gesture and cried out over the din. "She's not here to hurt you! She is my ally. We came together, to help you."

"How..." Fenrir ceased the thrashing but still stood in an attack stance, despite how it tightened the enchanted ribbon around his neck, "can you trust one of them? After what they did to me. To our entire family."

"The Lady Sif had nothing to do with that," Loki's assured. "That was Odin. And his cronies!" Loki paused to keep from getting worked up. "I can break Odin's spell on the sword, but I need her help."

Sif squinted, not ready to involve herself until she had the details.

"My magic can weaken Odin's enchantment," Loki continued, "but I need her strength and sword to break it."

Now breaking something with her sword, she could do.

Loki turned to Sif. "I trust your aim to hit only the sword, and not his mouth?"

"You trust wisely," Sif replied confidently, meeting Fenrir's impaling gaze with both strength and sympathy.

Fenrir took several deep breaths, his fetters gaining slack on each exhale, the moment stretching. Finally he spoke. "You may proceed, but do not presume to have my trust, Asgardian."

Without hesitation, Loki closed the gap between himself and the beast's mouth, unfazed by the drool he stepped in. His hands began a peculiar and beautiful dance, and from them drifted his signature swirling green magic.

"Come here, Sif," Loki said without breaking focus. She approached slowly, captivated by the intrusion of Loki's magic over that of Odin's, the green ribbons weaving and taunting around the white hot crackling gold. Sif remembered what Loki had said about Odin's spells weakening while he slept the Odinsleep, and she concluded that was the only reason Loki believed they could break this one.

As Sif drew closer, Fenrir tensed up. When she reached Loki's side, Fenrir jerked up with a roar, breaking Loki's spell which caused Odin's spell to fight back with a jolt to Loki's body. He hollered and staggered back, clutching his chest. He would have fallen if Sif hadn't caught him, wrapping a strong arm across his torso.

"My son..." Loki forced patient words through gritted teeth, leaning into her as he recovered his stance. "Please don't do that again."

Sif's eyes were locked on Fenrir, her sword drawn and shielding Loki. Fenrir stared back at her, a
wordless showdown. That is until Sif spoke, fearless. "If you hurt him again, I will not hesitate to strike."

"That's no way to make friends now is it, Sif?" Loki teased, weakly, forcing her hand down that gripped the sword. His hand was strangely warm, perhaps from the magic? He turned to her. "But I appreciate the gesture."

Sif glanced briefly at his eyes, which were a breath away, before looking back to Fenrir, noting that nothing was escaping his attention. That could be the reason he was relaxing again. Perhaps he found just enough trust in someone willing to fight for his father.

Loki began his incantation again, the second time around going quicker since he had done it before. Again, his magic infiltrated Odin's, and the golden spell sparked and crackled defensively. Loki grit his teeth and planted his feet into the ground, pushing with the same might as Sif had used in the past against pressing axes of lumbering foes.

"Ready your sword," Loki strained, sweat beading his brow. Sif followed his order. "On my signal, I want you to slice with all your might. Try to cut it in one attempt."

She readied her sword, gripping the hilt with both hands. "Is there any other way to cut?" Her eyes must have glinted something devilish because Fenrir narrowed his at her.

"Ready..." Loki looked like he was on the breach of collapse, veins bulging everywhere, sweat covering his face. "Now!"

Sif lunged in as Loki fell away, her steel clashing brilliantly with the offending sword, slicing it in half as intended. Its two pieces went flying in opposite directions. Fenrir roared wildly, freely. Odin's residual spell struck aggressively down Sif's sword, electrifying her hands and forcing her to drop her weapon.

She stood, in shock, barely maintaining her balance, flexing her hands open and shut to work out the lingering gold sparks. She hated the feel of magic, so alien and unpredictable, and it stung. She vaguely saw in her peripheral Loki scrambling to his feet and felt his hands grab her and pull her back. The sudden jerk to her body pulled her back into the moment and she gasped at the sight of dripping jaws coming at her.

"Stop!" Loki shouted, shielding Sif with his body. Fenrir's nose halted just shy of Loki's chest, whether by will or because his chain held him back was anyone's guess.

Fenrir now stood on four strong legs, repeatedly opening and closing his mouth, working neglected muscles, mimicking the act of chewing. "Hungry," he spoke with gravelly murmur, the voice still not coming from his mouth.

Loki turned to Sif and gestured that she hand something over. She knew exactly what he meant and dove into her belt pouch, retrieving the dead lizards, which Loki took hastily and offered to the living jaws. A mighty tongue swiped them from Loki's hands and pulled them into a seemingly insatiable abyss.

"That isn't enough," Fenrir growled.

"We can get more," Loki offered.

"No!" The wolf's voice shook the cavern, causing dust and pebbles to fall from the ceiling. "It will never be enough until Gleipnir is broken."
Gleipnir, Sif recalled, was the name given to the enchanted ribbon binding the wolf down. She had only ever heard stories, none of which reflected the horrors of what she was witnessing here: the cold, cruel acts of her own people.

"I cannot break the binding," Loki stuttered, his voice cracking.

"Try," Fenrir pressed, his mouth still close enough to feel his breath.

Loki stepped to the side of Fenrir's head and held his hand out, illuminating a thin sparkling ribbon that wrapped tightly around the thick, furry neck. Gleipnir was only visible under the touch of magic.

"It is wound too tightly around your neck," Loki said in a defeated voice. "To even try to break it will put your life at risk."

Fenrir turned his head to his father and bowed it slightly. "I am already dead."

Loki winced, his creased eyes pushing back tears. He then lifted his hand to stroke the dense fur on Fenrir's cheek. The beast didn't pull away. "I am so sorry," Loki whispered. Fenrir responded with a deep, almost grateful groan. "But I will not put your life at risk."

Fenrir then jerked his head from Loki's touch. "Then you are no better than your father who bound me here!"

"He is not my father!" Loki retaliated in a voice harsher than he probably intended. "I will not risk killing you," he continued, lowering his volume, "because it is your destiny to slay the All-Father. I will not take that from you."

Fenrir narrowed his eyes. There was a long pause before he did anything else, and then a row of prickled fur lowered on his back. "How much longer must I be bound?"

"I do not know," Loki said. "Only Odin can break Gleipnir. When he awakens, I promise you, I will do everything in my power to free you."

"You promise..." Fenrir was not satisfied by that. "And I am to trust your infamous tongue? To build hope on empty words?"

"What must I do to earn your trust again?" Loki whispered.

"Feed me," Fenrir replied on an exhale.

"I will bring you more animals at once," offered Loki.

"No!" Fenrir raised his voice and turned a chilling gaze to Sif. "I want her."

Loki stepped urgently into Fenrir's line of sight. "That is not an option."

"She is pure Aesir blood, like Tyr." The wolf licked his teeth. "A hand is only an appetizer."

"I will bring you the rest of Tyr!"

"Loki, no!" Sif finally had to intervene. She would not let Loki sacrifice a good man to this cause.

"Tyr is not here," Fenrir continued, pushing Loki aside with his nose so he could get a full view of Sif. "She is."
Sif assumed a battle stance, readying herself to make a dive at her sword, which was merely a stone's throw away. "If he dares attack me, I will defend myself."

Frustrated, Loki retrieved Sif's sword and threw it toward the cavern's entrance. Sif glared at him. "That won't be necessary," he said. He then moved to Sif's side, urging her in the direction of her sword. "Go," he whispered. "I will catch up to you."

She was about to argue but stalled her words upon close inspection of Loki's face. His cheeks were streaked by tears, his eyes tortured and lacking any of their usual spark, be it of mischief or hope. She reached for his cheek but he shook his head, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. "Please," he said. "Go. I will be right behind you."

He released her and turned back to Fenrir. She did as told, stopping only to pick up her sword. Once she was just far enough outside of the cavern where she couldn't be seen, she stopped. She could hear Loki speaking to Fenrir, and she had to listen.

"You have my word," Loki said, "I will do everything in my power to release you."

"What power do you even possess?" Fenrir was doubtful.

"More than I have ever possessed before." Loki's conviction was chilling.

"These are all merely words to me," said Fenrir, trying to mask the glimmer of hope that crept into his voice. "And words do not fill my belly."

"Then if my words aren't enough to assure you," Loki said, no emotion spared, "trust my love."

Sif's heart sank, and a great, dawning relief washed over her. That was it. That was the reason she was here. It was the same reason they set out on this journey in the first place, whether Loki planned it that way or not. So she could witness, first hand, a father's genuine love for his son. That despite Loki's history of betrayal, despite his crimes against loved ones and the devastation brought upon on the innocents of Midgard, at the core, Loki was—

She gasped as a great, icy force ripped past her, completely obliterating her train of thought and shooting up the cave's passage with a vengeance, leaving spikes of ice along the walls and her body. She shivered and patted herself clean of it. The patterns of ice on the walls were the same as Loki had used earlier to kill the lizards. That force had to be him.

What had just happened? She thought he was having a moment with his son. He told her to go ahead of him, that he would meet her. Something clearly didn't go according to plan.

Sif didn't waste any more time questioning and immediately launched herself in pursuit of Loki, pushing off the cave walls for momentum, crunching ice beneath her boots and slipping every few steps, but recovering quickly. She was guided by the faint speck of light that signaled the cave's entrance and barely illuminated the glassy ice.

Finally she reached the outside but there was no Loki. She took a moment to catch her breath and noticed a dark layer of clouds that hadn't been there before. The skies had been crystal clear when they entered the cave. She began to recall her dream and the storm front that had been present in it, but she couldn't dwell on it long, for before her, was more ice. An entire bridge of it, stretching down to the distant beach below, completely bypassing the hiking trail they had taken to reach the cave.

She was so confused. So frustrated. She squinted to try and make out Loki's form on the beach, but couldn't see through an encroaching fog. All of this sudden weather, it had to be him. Had to be his
magic. What the Hel was going on!? She needed to get down to that beach now!

She was tempted to call for Fylla but ruled that out for fear of the changing weather. Fylla couldn't fly with wet wings. Trekking back down the trail would take far too long, so there was only one option. Sif gathered her courage and tested the ice bridge with one foot. It was really more of a slide than a bridge. Sturdy, but by no means safe. Ollie would love it.

She took a deep breath, deliberating no more and stepping fully onto the narrow ice passage. It creaked beneath her weight but it held, so she took another step.

And then her traction went, and the sliding began.

She had never trained for this, and the more speed she picked up, the harder her heart pounded. She pictured Ollie on his ski, how he crouched low, using the strength of his legs for balance. She could do that. Her legs were strong and she had impeccable balance. Her speed picked up. Trees whizzed by. She wobbled a lot but she was doing it. And it was almost fun.

The beach started coming into view, and then she saw Loki, or at least a silhouette. It had to be Loki. She abandoned all concentration on balancing to try and make out his form, and quickly regretted that decision as one leg flew out from under her, then the other, then her rear crashed through the now melting bridge.

She hit the slope, tucking into a ball and rolling down the remainder of the hill. It wasn't very far but it was far enough when every tumble greeted her body with a bruising stone or a stabbing twig. She finally hit the sand with a thud, breath knocked from her body.

She lay there on her back, her body erupting in a symphony of aches and stings, her hair feeling like it collected half of the forest floor. One thought pounded over and over in her slowly recovering head. "I'm going to bloody murder him!"

She then heard his voice carried on the wind. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but the sheer desperation of it erased all of her ill thoughts toward him. She sprang to her feet and followed the voice, moving blindly through the ever-thickening fog. The wind picked up drastically and it began raining, a light sprinkle escalating quickly to a downpour.

Just like in her dream.

This was all too weird. Sif had no training in dealing with anomalies in nature, and prophesies, and sorcerers with their hungry children. This is not what she signed up for when she agreed to this outing. But she pressed on regardless, following Loki's voice, which grew clearer with each step into the unknown.

Finally she could see him. He was planted on his knees in the sand, facing the lake, his arms stretching to the living waters of the lake. As she drew closer, she could see that he was conducting the rising waves, creating even more unrest in all of the chaos. His body was glowing in a green aura.

"Loki!" She called out, now only a few paces away.

He didn't seem to hear here. He kept shouting into the rain, and Sif could finally make out what he was saying.

"...heed my call! The time is now! We will have our vengeance! Come to me, my son!"

Sif slowed as she approached him, a chilling reality striking to her very core. Loki was losing his
mind, completely this time. He hadn't been prepared to see his son in such a state of suffering. It must have been too much for him to bear. How could anyone prepare for that?

She stepped closer to him, still unsure if she should make her presence known to him. Would he even recognize her? She had to at least try.

"Loki!"

Still no change. He kept shouting his insanities.

"I need your help! Your brother needs your help! I am your father, Loki of Asgard! All have felt the fury of my rage! Help me now to unleash it fully on to him that banished you! Take your vengeance! Heed my call!"

That was just about all Sif could handle of his crazy talk. And of the pelting wind and rain. It was frightening, infuriating, and maddeningly cold. And her hair was now a stringy swamp of mud and dead leaves. She wanted to go home. She wanted to hold her son. To curl up with him next to the fireplace and listen while he read from one of his favorite books.

This little field trip with Loki?...Was over.

Sif struck the back of his head with her shield, hard, hoping to knock him out. He yelped and fell to his hands and knees, his green glowing aura washing away in the wind. He never fell completely though, never lost consciousness. Sometimes his strength astounded her. She had hit him really hard, hard enough to make Thor unconscious, at least for a minute. She contemplated hitting him again but scratched that idea when the storm began to back off and the lake calmed.

Loki remained on all fours, fingers clutching the sand, body retching with each vocalized breath. She couldn't see his face past the stringy hair falling around it, but she caught glimpses of bared, gritted teeth.

"Loki?" Sif whispered. He didn't respond. She cast aside her shield and dropped to her knees next to him, gently placing her hands on his shoulders. "Are you going to come back to me?"

Finally he began showing signs of comprehension. His breathing calmed and his body relaxed under her touch. He reached for the back of his head and turned a wincing expression to Sif. "Ouch," he said.

Sif burst out a laugh, washing over in relief that he was showing signs of normalcy. "Why did you...?" he stammered. "This isn't funny."

She shifted to face him fully, now grabbing his shoulders from the front. "Loki." She shook him a little. "What in the blazing...balls of Surtr was that?"

Loki beheld her wide-eyed, looking as bad as she felt. His skin was drained of all color and his jerkin was torn in multiple places. Perhaps his trip down the hill wasn't any easier than Sif's. His sunken eyes softened the longer he held them locked with hers. He then drifted his gaze to her hair and reached out to pull a leaf from just below her ear.

"Sif," he said, weakly. "What have you done to your hair?" He kept picking debris out of it.

Sif rolled her eyes and growled in frustration. "I hate you so much." She then slapped his hand away and pulled him into an embrace. "Don't ever, ever put me through something like that again."

Loki's arms didn't hesitate to wrap around her in return, and he clung to her more tightly than she
was to him. She blinked in surprise but continued to hold him, feeling how desperately he needed it. When was the last time he had embraced anyone? And been held in return?

"I'm here," she whispered tenderly. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and she felt him shudder. She repeatedly combed her fingers through his hair, down the length of his neck, which was tense. She pressed her cheek to his temple and they hung there, an eternal moment of need, comfort, and lingering horror of what they had witnesses in the cave.

It was quickly becoming what Sif might dare call a perfect moment, until the lake began to stir again.

"Loki..." she said, pulling away to look out over the lake. He paid no mind to the rising waves and pulled her back, cupping her cheeks in his damp hands and pressing an urgent kiss on her lips. She froze and made only one small noise of protest, before kissing him back, deeply, fully, handing herself over. It was familiar but new. Hot and cold, forceful and timid, comfortable but searching. He tasted just as he always had, mysterious and refreshing.

She was just starting to really get into it when a large wave pounded the shore and distracted her from his lips. She tore away, beholding the lake with fear.

"Loki, stop!" She ordered. One of his hands still held her cheek, and she then noticed her arms were still wrapped around his neck.

"It's not me," he said softly, innocently. He brushed his fingers one last time through her hair before making to stand. She stood with him. They helped each other up.

"Loki..." Sif was now pleading, shifting her hard gaze between him and the raging lake. "Tell me what is going on."

"He's here," Loki said with a glint in his eye, his arms still holding onto Sif's for support.

Sif shook her head, at a loss. "Who is?"

"Jormungand. My son." Loki looked fondly at the lake as another wave crashed down. "He's taking me to my daughter."

"In Helheim?" Sif couldn't believe what she was hearing. She grabbed his arms tighter. "Loki, you are not well."

"This has to happen." Loki looked at her in a way contrary to her accusations. He was more collected than she was. "For Fenrir. For me. And for all of us."

"But it's Helheim," she argue meekly. "You'll die."

"I won't die," he said. "I have connections."

She couldn't argue with him. She knew she would lose. She could only shake her head in both confusion and painful realization. "You planned all of this, didn't you." Another wave crashed around them. "Bringing me along, summoning this storm...this is all part of your plan to...what?"

Loki smiled. "I didn't plan the kiss."

"Answer my question." She wouldn't let him charm his way out of this one. "Why do you need me? And how does Ollie fit into it?"
Loki closed a little of the distance between them. "It's really quite simple, Sif." His hands found her cheeks again and he stroked them with the backs of his fingers. His touch was so welcome, reason be damned. Maybe it was okay to let him charm, a little, while he explained himself. "I only want my family close to me." He placed a small kiss on her cheek. "My real family. My future. They're all that I have left."

Sif closed her eyes and breathed him in, hoping beyond reason that was the truth. "How long will you be gone?" she whispered.

"Hard to say." His voice found a little edge. "Depends on my daughter's mood."

Sif opened her eyes and immediately found his. She still had so many questions but she could sense their time was running short. "What about the throne? What about Odin? I will not lie for you—"

"Don't worry about it," he cut in, his voice calm. "I have it covered. Go back to Glasir. Be with your son."

"Our son," she said against his lips, which she felt stretch into a smile. She then kissed him, weaving one hand through his hair and snaking the other behind his back. He mewled deeply into her and she pressed the whole of her body to his. He was everything she shouldn't want. He was a traitor. He was a criminal. He was self serving and power hungry. But somehow, through all the lies and insanity, he was proving himself to be a decent father.

And let's not leave out that he was an immaculate kisser. By the might of all the gods, she could have swallowed him whole.

But instead she broke this kiss, and awaited his next move. She still couldn't pull from the embrace.

"You will know when I have returned," he spoke against her ear. He touched his forehead to hers before slipping out of her hold and moving past her. She felt instantly chilled.

As if on cue, Sleipnir came trotting up to Loki. Fylla could be seen further in from the shore, not daring go near the crashing waves. Loki stroked the muzzle of the steed then patted his neck. "Look after him while I'm gone," he called out to Sif.

She watched him turn from the horse and wade out into the furious lake.

"What are you doing now?" She threw her arms up. She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

Loki didn't say anything, just smiled over his shoulder and lifted his arms in the air. He now stood waist deep in the water, which crashed mercilessly around him.

Sif was about ready to go in after him, concluding he truly had lost it, but she stopped when the lake erupted with a giant, reptilian head rising high on a thick scaly neck. She gasped and nearly lost her footing. The creature appeared right in front of Loki, who didn't even flinch. Sif could only watch helplessly as the beast unhinged its mighty jaws and unleashed a whip-like tongue. It shot straight out, wrapping several times around Loki's torso and yanking him into the depths of his mouth.

It plunged back into the lake, sending one final wave hurdling onto shore, crashing into Sif's weakening legs, causing her to fall to her knees. The lake then calmed as if nothing happened, an almost insulting gesture. How could anyone be calm at a time like this?
When she truly believed nothing else could surprise her, she was proven wrong again as an ice bridge formed across the lake, connecting island to mainland, and Sleipnir helped himself to it, trotting across, happy to play along with Daddy's precious little plan. (or was it Mommy...?) She didn't want to think about that now.

Sif dropped her gaze and her hands into the shallow wake, wet sand quickly filling around her fingers and knees. She thought she even heard herself laugh, briefly. She could still taste him on her lips.

What. What had she gotten herself into?

Chapter End Notes

Accompanying song, The Bottom Line by Depeche Mode
Blue Jean Baby King

Chapter Summary

Darcy has a cameo and takes us away from Sif's pov for a while. Enter Thor stage left. Sif is still ready to pull her hair out. Heimdall is kind of an ass for no reason other than forwarding the plot, and Volstagg and Fandral are still adorable. Also, more Ollie. And Eir. ALL THE CAST.

Chapter Notes

Props to anyone who can name the song whose lyrics inspired this chapter's title. Hint: I'm a shameless retro music pimp.

"I still don't understand why you must obtain a new one," Thor pondered, strolling alongside Darcy as they navigated through crowds of holiday shoppers. Well, Darcy had to navigate, avoiding the bumping elbows of bag laden people. Thor just seemed to part the seas wherever he went, and he wasn't even watching where he was going, too engrossed in Darcy's malfunctioning GPS device. The idiot was enamored by it. Said its voice reminded him of Jane, whose company they had just left mere minutes ago.

"She works fine," he beamed. "Listen."

"Buckingham Palace will be on your left in fifty feet," Siri—the miniature computer in Thor's grasp—informed in that oh-so-happy-to-oblige monotone.

Darcy sighed. "We're not in England anymore, doofus. And that's Parfait Palace on the left, not..." she trailed off, giving up. She didn't even know why she bothered explaining anymore. Thor had barely been acknowledging her presence since she gave him the GPS as a joke gift.

Siri went on, totally uncaring to Darcy's frustration. The little computerized dame was probably just as taken as any human female would be if held that close to Thor's arms. "You are now arriving at Billy's Adult Arcade and Skee Ball."

"See?" Darcy argued. "Your new girlfriend's lost her mind. She can't even connect to the web. She just spits out stuff in her memory...which means..." Darcy narrowed her eyes at Thor. His face was mostly hidden beneath the brim of a baseball cap and by the golden locks falling forward. As annoying as it was to be second most interesting to a malfunctioning computer, Darcy was at least grateful his downcast focus was hiding his identity from the public. She hated having to rescue him from drooling teenyboppers.

What she didn't hate, however, was that she, of all the small town nobodies of this world, got to be the one to taser him. That she was chosen by the gods, on that pivotal night in the desert, to be there when Jane ran him over. Twice. Thor's coming had changed her life forever, which had been in desperate need of changing ever since she decided to major in political science. He was a true hero.
But still, as much as she loved the oaf, he could also drive her really fucking banana-balls at times.

"Which means," Darcy continued, "somebody actually went to Billy's?" She now beheld Thor with a look of disgust. "You realize that place decorates with the skeevy bodily fluids of dirty old men?"

"I was in a gaming mood," Thor boomed without remorse, looking up at her. "And I am an adult."

That was debatable. "It's not that kind of arcade, dummy!" Darcy said, flailing her arms.

Thor just blinked innocently at her. "Are you telling me Skee Ball is not a game?"

"Whatever. It's Jane's problem, not mine." Darcy washed her hands of the matter, and hoped to the gods (or Thor's ancestors or whoever) that Thor had washed his hands, literally, of that place.

"What are you going to get her for Christmas?"

Thor actually tore his attention away from Siri, probably at the mention of Jane. Or perhaps it was the Victoria's Secret window he was now ogling.

"Wow." Darcy gaped at him. "Can you not be a perv for like, two seconds?"

"Well duh, Casanova." Darcy rolled her eyes. "But did you ever stop to think that's a gift she should get you, not the other way around?"

"Fandral would approve of this place as a gift haven for the fairer sex."

Darcy grabbed Thor's arm and tugged him out of the store, just before he could be swamped by over zealous 'can I help you?'s from every angle. "Yeah, well, how many dates does this Fandral get?" Darcy's voice strained as she tugged his mass. "None, right?"

She tried to ignore the inhumanely dense bicep both of her hands had wrapped around, which was shamefully hidden beneath a plaid flannel layer. No, Darcy, no. Bad imagination. This was Jane's toy, not hers.

"Hey, wanna go get our picture taken with Santa?"

Thor let himself get dragged along but wasn't sharing in Darcy's enthusiasm. "Not particularly."

"Come on, it'll be something cute to give Jane that doesn't—" Darcy was cut off by a tinny ruckus screaming from her pocket. It was We Three Kings in the tune of gangster rap. Thor gave her an odd look. "Hang on," Darcy said, pulling the phone to her ear.

"What do you want?" Darcy barked at the phone while the Thor meandered beside her, listening curiously. "No. No. Yes. Christmas shopping with Thor. No, not the pharmacist's son, The God of Thunder. Don't worry about it." She hung up and stuffed the phone back into her pocket, making an exasperated noise.
"Who was that? Thor inquired.

"My mom." Darcy rolled her eyes. "I used to think she was just a basket case, but now I realize she's a whole, shipping container...full of...things woven from straw that are way crazier than a basket."

Darcy had no idea what she was even saying anymore so it was no wonder Thor's brain looked like it was about to spring a leak.

"Darcy." Thor gave up trying to translate her analogy and placed his hand on her shoulder, suddenly becoming all Mr. Serious. "You should show your mother more respect. For one day, before you're ready for it, she will be gone."

Darcy was not going to have this conversation right now. Instead she averted her attention to Santa's hut where a crowd had gathered around two guys in costume who were most certainly not from the North Pole. "Whoa!" She pointed in the direction of the spectacle. "Looks like your buddies are stealing Santa's spotlight."

Thor whipped his head at the scene and immediately lit up at the sight of Volstagg and Fandral. "Come on!" he commanded.

The crowds of bedraggled parents—complete with their dressed up children and pets—had shifted to line up for the Warriors Two instead of for Santa, smart phones sticking out in every direction to capture the unexpected newcomers. Thor and Darcy jogged up to the front of the line, ignoring complaints from the people they bypassed.

Volstagg stood in a face-off with the middle-aged, gaunt man dressed in padded red and white and sporting a pathetically fake beard. Both of the men crossed their arms over their bellies and sized each other up.

"Show me your contract!" said the Santa in a very not-jolly voice. "This here mall is my turf. Ask the bosses!"

Volstagg could only shake his head and look down his nose at the man. "That is, by all measures, the most unimpressive girth I have ever seen on a mortal." He was about to poke the man's Poly-Fill belly but stopped when Thor exploded onto the scene.

"My friends!" The golden prince held his arms out.

"Good morrow, Odinsson!" Fandral greeted him with a manly embrace. The playboy's attention then slid quickly and curiously to Darcy. "And a warm welcome to you, fair Darcy of Lewiston." He brought her hand to his lips and placed the most charming of kisses upon it.

She laughed stupidly, face heating up. "I have an intern," she blurted before she could cross check her words. "He's a boyfriend." Fandral winked at her.

Darcy then regained her senses and eyeballed their very Asgardian outfits. "Seriously you guys, you're in a mall. How hard would it be to change into Earthling clothes?"

The pair hardly had time to defend what they believed was a very dashing and practical sense of style before security finally ditched their eggnog latte frappuccinos and bustled onto the scene to get matters under control. They urged the three Asgardians to take their charades elsewhere, and Thor, knowing it was customary to oblige to men in uniform, convinced his Shakespeare-In-The-Park friends to let security escort them outside. Darcy had no choice but to follow, trying to shield her face from onlookers as she did. Puente Antiguo was a small town. She could get a lot of crap
"What brings you to Midgard, my comrades?" Thor asked the Two. The four of them now stood on the sidewalk in front of a variety store.

"It's your father," Volstagg responded in a concerned voice. "He's disappeared."

Thor's face lost all of its color, and his voice all of its mirth. "What?"

Fandral chimed in. "He has not been seen in three days." He placed a consoling hand on Thor's shoulder.

Thor's eyes fluttered as he tried to comprehend this. "When was the last time anyone saw him?"

"Some townsfolk saw him at the stables early one morning, three days ago," Fandral said. "And others claimed to see him ride out of the city with Lady Sif. We didn't bother to worry upon hearing that news, trusting Sif was keeping him company in his time of mourning. But the following evening, Sleipnir had returned to the stables and there had been no sign of the All-Father's return."

"Where is Sif?" Thor asked with urgency.

"We believe she went back to Glasir Valley," said Volstagg. "She has been spending a lot of time there."

"Have you talked to her?" said Thor.

Fandral glanced shiftily to Volstagg. "I'm...not going near the Valkyrie lands."

"Nor I." Volstagg glanced down, ashamed.

"As much as I enjoy a feisty woman," Fandral explained, "a line must be drawn."

"Enough!" Thor barked impatiently. Darcy shivered, and not from the cold. "What about Heimdall?" Thor continued. "What did he say?"

"Very little." Volstagg looked apologetically at Thor.

"This does not make any sense." Thor punched the closest thing to him, which happened to be a big plastic reindeer. It now had a big hole in its back. "Father would not simply disappear."

"Some think he may sleep again," Fandral offered, capturing Thor's attention. "The door to his bed chamber is locked and sealed with magic. No one can break it down."

"We were hoping you could," Volstagg said, eyeballing the weapon that peeked out from the draping flannel at Thor's waste. "That Mjolnir could break the spell."

Everyone stood silently for a moment, shifting questioning glances to each other while Thor processed all the new information with a spectrum of emotion.

"Wow." Darcy interjected. She hated awkward silences. "This is some heavy stuff."

Thor turned to Darcy, lightly grabbing her upper arms and laying on her the saddest set of puppy dog eyes she had ever seen. "Darcy, I have to go. Tell Jane I'm sorry."

Breaks screeched in Darcy's brain. "Whoa, whoa, time out." She made a T shape with her mittened
hands. "No way, Prince Come-N-Go. You can't leave at Christmas."

"I must," Thor insisted. "Father needs me."

"At least tell her goodbye," Darcy pleaded, dreading another bout of comforting Jane over too many nights of cupcakes and Star Trek marathons.

"Explain my reasons to her, Darcy. She will understand." Thor's voice was pained and Darcy had no choice but nod in acceptance. She did so with the biggest, guilt-tripping frown possible though. Thor cupped her cheeks and place a grateful kiss on her forehead. It felt so stupidly good, in that primitive way her body liked to respond when gorgeous bohunky men slathered her in attention—which happened like, never—that she milked the moment for all it worth and threw her arms around him, pressing her cheek to his chest.

"Don't be gone long, Blondie." Darcy's voice was muffled in flannel. "You know Jane's wrath rivals even your psycho brother's." She felt Thor's body twitch and tense up. Oops. She shouldn't have said that, what with Brother Blitzen being dead and all.

"I will do what I can, good Darcy." Thor finally peeled her from his body stepped in between the Two, casting his gaze upward. "Heimdall! Take us home."

Darcy stepped back and clutched her beanie as the wind quickly picked up. She looked upward as an explosion of light split the night sky open and a freaky but familiar shaft of Beam-Me-Up-Scotty stuff overtook the three most interesting dudes in New Mexico and sucked them up into the expanse of stars. And just like that it was over. Thor was gone again.

Darcy sighed and kicked some loose gravel on the sidewalk. Here she thought today was going to end much better. That once she dropped Thor off at Jane's house (see Jane's mom's place) she was going to have a naughty and nice time with a certain sexy intern, playing Strip-Cards Against Humanity. But how could she do that now that Jane was going to be all depressed?

She turned to go into the variety store, deciding she'd better stock up on comfort foods for Jane and peppermint schnapps for herself, because that was the only way to watch endless hours of soap operas on spaceships. She stopped momentarily before entering the store, however, swearing the store had all nine big stupid plastic reindeer on display when she first walked up with the guys. She then shrugged it off and went inside.

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A godly column of light dispensed three formidable Aesir into Heimdall's observatory. The golden guardian then retrieved his sword from the center fixture of the great dome, bringing its powerful spin to a slowing stop. Thor, Fandral and Volstagg passed by Heimdall with grateful nods and intent strides, aiming straight for the three horses that were stationed on the Bifrost. Heimdall furrowed his brow curiously when he saw a colorful fake deer-like creature tucked under Volstagg's arm.

Volstagg shrugged at Heimdall. "For the kids."

Heimdall shifted his attention to Thor. "Welcome home, my King."

Thor halted before mounting his horse. "King..." he echoed softly. He then turned to Heimdall. "What has happened to my father?" Thor was in such a hurry to try the might of Mjolnir on his father's enchanted bedroom door, he hadn't stopped to consider questioning Heimdall.

"He has returned to the Odinsleep." Heimdall spoke calmly.
Thor exhaled in relief but still cast a worried glance to the Two. "When did this happen?" he asked Heimdall.

"I am uncertain," replied the watcher.

"You are supposed to see everything." Thor raised his voice. "How could you miss—"

"The All-Father's power exceeds my own." Heimdall interrupted, his voice still calm, which only further frustrated Thor. "I have no control when he chooses to block my watch over him."

Thor stepped up to Heimdall, his blues eyes glistening. "He is old and grieving the loss of half of our family. Someone should have been watching him."

Heimdall merely looked past Thor with a mysterious and unacceptable coldness. "Then perhaps you should have stayed in Asgard."

Thor scowled, hurt and insulted, turning away from the elder he thought his confidant and making for his horse. "Summon Lady Sif at once!" He barked the order over his shoulder. "I want her in Gladsheim before the night is over."

"As you wish," Heimdall replied dutifully.

***

The gathering room at Glasir's hall of healers was warmed with a flickering glow from its grand fireplace. The hearth was constructed of the finest marble and carved masterfully with designs inspired by the many plants of the outside forest. It was the centerpiece of the large, high-ceiling room, which was usually filled during the day with apprentice healers, curled up on couches and in various nooks, reading from one of the many books that graced the towering shelves. This evening, however, saw only two beings occupying the space, cuddled around one large book, their backs leaning against the mighty hearth.

Sif sighed as her son's heat bled into her side, the color of his blue skin misleading of the warmth it absorbed from the fire. Thankfully, Ollerus didn't mind the heat the way his father had grown to, his half-Aesir body knowing to appreciate a good thing. Sif wrapped her arm around his shoulder—which was on a fast track to overtake her own in height—and combed her fingers through his golden hair.

"You fought in this Elven Civil War didn't you?" Ollerus asked, completely absorbed in the history tome flattening his lap.

"Sure did," Sif said, relaxed, leaning into the boy, her legs curled to the side. She glanced at the picture on the page, recognizing instantly the foliage of the jungles they had fought in. It immediately made her think of Loki, in ways she didn't want to think about him right now. There was nothing that couldn't make her think of Loki since he left her on Lygnvi, but she at least preferred not to focus on their...wilder of past times. Since she had returned to Glasir from their journey, not a moment had passed that she didn't worry about Loki, or wonder if she had made the right choice in helping him. She was still trying to process what had happened, what she had seen. Each morning she would wake up hoping it had all been a dream, but that never happened. It was all very real. The magic. The monsters. The horrors.

The kiss.

Sif closed her eyes, cursing internally, not ready for another heart-sinking round of longing and regret.
"There's something I don't get," Ollerus blurted in merciful distraction.

"What's that, my love?" Sif breathed, opening her eyes again.

"If the war was between the elves, why did the Aesir get involved?"

"Because," Sif explained with very little thought, essentially parroting everything her captains had told her. "The problems on Alfheim were forcing trolls into Asgardian territory. So we went over there to fight on the side that was opposed to expanding over troll territory."

Ollerus tilted his head, his brow knitting as his mind worked. He didn't appear satisfied with Sif's answer. "But didn't the elves need to expand in order to make room for their crops, and their livelihood?" He argued. "You're basically saying you fought against innocent farmers."

Sif blinked. Was her own son trying to guilt trip her? "Innocence is lost the moment one takes up arms, be it sword or shovel." That was a quote from one of the generals, made to keep the soldiers from questioning too much.

Ollerus was not in the least appeased. "You wouldn't have had to take up arms at all if you just learned to live with trolls."

Sif laughed. "Now you're talking crazy."

"Why?" Ollerus shot back, unamused.

"Because they're trolls." Sif rolled her eyes.

"So?" Ollerus would not let up.

"Have you ever met a troll?" Sif pulled some hair from the boy's eyes and stared intently at him. "They're crude, and uncivilized and—"

"So they're different," Ollerus interrupted, auburn eyes staring back even more intently."

Sif blinked again, dumbfounded, floored by her son's impressive mind. He certainly hadn't inherited it from her.

Ollie's eyes then shifted to something sadder. "Will Asgard ever allow other species to live with them?" he asked, hope creeping into his tone. "Like frost giants?"

Sif's heart plummeted. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his head, pressing a loving kiss upon it. "I believe they will, one day." She had no choice but to believe that. She couldn't let Ollerus and his father be the only ones with that hope.

Ollerus squirmed and shoved her affection away, awkwardly, and in good fun. He could only handle so much sentiment at one time. "I sure hope so." He closed the book and stood up, walking over to the shelf it came from. "What shall we read from now? he asked, putting the book away.

"Your choice, darling." He could read subjects as boring as basket weaving for all Sif cared. So long as they were here together, she was content. She just hoped he didn't put her on the spot with any more tough questions.

"Do you think my father's in any of these books?" Ollerus asked, cranking his neck up to a row of books covered in dust. Sif felt the color rush from her face and she quickly glanced to the row Ollie was staring at. One of the books was titled 'Helheim and the Underworld'.

Sif closed her eyes, wincing. "Quite possibly." Every moment she spent with Ollerus was one moment closer to the time when she would finally have to come clean with the truth about his father. There would be no avoiding it.

Fortunately, now would not be that moment, for Eir entered the room and spared Sif the backlash of her past deception.

"I just received an urgent message from Heimdall," Eir said. "Thor has returned to Gladsheim and he is requesting your presence immediately."

"My presence?" Ollerus shot a cheeky grin at Eir, who merely responded with that raise of a brow that signaled her lack of amusement.

Sif felt her heart pick up its pace at the mention of Thor. "Immediately-immediately, as in right now?" she asked.

"Yes," Eir said. Ollie's shoulders slumped. He turned from the bookshelf and laid a heart wrenching look on Sif.

Sif sank in response. "I'm sorry, my dear."

Ollerus then shook off his disappointment with a revelation. "Can I come this time? I want to meet Thor so badly!"

Sif stood up and promptly crossed the room, placing her hands on his shoulders. Her action alone answered his question and she felt him wilt a little under her touch. Oh, how it tore her up to disappoint him. "You will one day, my son."

"But not now," Ollerus murmured to the floor.

Sif lifted his chin so their eyes met. "I promise you," she gazed sincerely at him. "Things will change very soon."

Ollerus managed a small half smile. He then motioned for the door. "Go already. The prince has need of you." The boy couldn't mask the pride he felt in knowing his mom was the right hand of the mighty Thor, and hearing that pride filled Sif with an indescribable honor.

Sif kissed his cheek before leaving his precious company and meeting Eir in the doorway. She looked over her shoulder at him one last time before she and the elder left the room.

"Did you send one of your students to fetch Fylla?" Sif asked Eir as they walked briskly down the hall toward the exit.

"There was no need," replied Eir. "Heimdall will summon you."

"That urgent?" Sif wondered something. "Is...Thor the only prince that has returned?"

"Yes." Eir halted at the door and pinned Sif with decisive look. "And Thor is now the king so long as Odin sleeps. Which means, in the best interest of the king, and of his decisions for Asgard, he should be told the truths of his family." Sif lifted her chin, not expecting nor wanting to be lectured right now. "Of his entire family," Eir continued with irritating conviction. "His father. His brother. And his nephew."

"I know what I have to do." Sif snapped, stepping away from Eir to make room for her transport.
They didn't wish each other goodbye, simply faced-off in a silent duel of wisdom and pride before Sif was engulfed by the onslaught of ferrying light.

Sif was greeted shortly after the light dissipated around her by a similar guilt-tripping stare, this one from Heimdall's narrowing eyes.

"Thank you for the summons." Sif passed by him, keeping her resolve steady. Just because Eir and Heimdall knew all of her secrets didn't mean she had to cower before them. She would get around to revealing her truths to the appropriate people, but it was going to be on her terms. And as far as her elders were concerned, Sif knew exactly what she was doing. Even Heimdall's all-seeing gaze would not see her regret her recent outing and unexpected behavior with Loki.

She headed straight for the palace, speeding through town on the horse provided by Heimdall at the observatory.

In their brief passing, he had told her to meet with the king at once but that she wouldn't find him on the throne. Thor was instead taking refuge in his personal feasting hall. It was like a clubhouse for him, the place he had always gathered in the company of those closest to him when matters pressed hard on his mind.

Sif entered the hall quietly, respectfully, and found Thor humbly seated on the two steps leading to the spanning balcony. His gaze was cast outward in vexing thought and he picked at his stubbly beard. She made her boot steps plainly heard as she approached him, and he rose instantly, greeting her with a strong, intimate hug.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"Of course." She embraced him tightly in return. "It's good to have you back."

Thor separated their hug and held her at arm's length. His eyes were sunken, tired. "I only wish my return were under better circumstances."

She squeezed his shoulder. It was covered by an odd Midgardian cloth instead of his red cape, and upon his legs was a faded blue cotton of sorts. It fit his form very handsomely. "Everyone in Glasir mourns your loss, and we pray for the All-Father's health."

"Thank you, my friend," Thor said, his eyes scanning Sif's attire. She was dressed down as well, wearing only a red linen tunic and comfortable brown breeches under her thick fur cloak, which she was rarely without during the winter months. "As you've probably heard, my father is locked behind an enchanted door which even Mjolnir is unable to break."

Sif nodded, feeling herself tense. "It is Odin's magic upon the door?"

Thor gave her a strange look. "Name another whose magic has the power to withstand the might of my hammer?"

Sif became choked by a truth desperate to get out.

"I have a question I need to ask you," Thor continued, turning to the grand table. Sif took the opportunity while his back was turned to breath deeply and attempt to collect herself. Thor started picking at some cheeses while he picked through his thoughts. "Some townsfolk claim they saw you ride out of the city with my father. And some guards tell me you met with him multiple times after I left."

Sif's heart tightened in her chest and it became hard to breath. Talk about cutting right to the chase. Was she to have any comfortable camaraderie with her dear friend before having to spill her guts with the truth?
"I can't tell you," Thor said with a mouth full of bread, "how much it means to me that you were looking out for him." He smiled sincerely over his shoulder. "And spending time with him. You are a true friend, Lady Sif."

"He...hasn't been well," Sif stammered, feeling like she dodged the first blast of cannon fire. "Y-you, said you had a question?"

"Yes." Thor closed the distance between them again, casting his gaze down to a piece of bread he held in fidgeting hands. "Sif, do you...do you think it irresponsible of me to have left for Midgard at a time when father needed me the most?

Sif felt like collapsing in relief. "I..." her mind worked quickly to change gears, knowing how hard it must have been for Thor to ask such a question. She wanted to answer as sincerely as possible, yet she didn't want to cast judgement on him. She had no right to. "I can't answer that for you."

Thor sighed, clearly ashamed of himself. "I am a fool. My heart's desires overpowered my common sense and my duty." He still couldn't make eye contact.

Sif took his chin in her fingers and lifted his heavy gaze to meet her very sincere one. "It happens to all of us."

Thor's eyes saddened. "He may still be awake if I had stayed."

"That's not true, Thor," Sif responded adamantly. This was one truth she could speak easily to him. "Don't you dare blame yourself for the Osinsleep. Your father lost nearly everything in that battle against the dark elves. Even a king can only take so much." She softened her tone. "The sleep was inevitable."

Thor now gave her a pleading look. "I needed to be with Jane, please understand. I too have suffered great loss. And Father had grown distant, insane even. It was too hard to be here."

Sif's heart split and she wanted to burst with the truth to relieve at least half of his pain, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Not yet. Curse her cowardice. "I understand. I too left Asgard. I went back to Glasir." She pulled him into a hug so she wouldn't have to look at his eyes. "I grieve too, my friend. My brother."

"Brother..." Thor echoed as he wrapped strong arms around her. "I like the sound of that."

"I do too," Sif whispered, both honored and scared by the multiple layers of calling him that.

"So what do we do now?" Thor asked after an extended and comforting moment, the pain ebbing out of his voice.

Sif could sense it was time to lighten up the mood of the room. She separated from the embrace and gathered herself with a smile. "I think you're supposed to do kingly stuff."

Thor smiled a very exhausted smile and rolled his eyes back, overwhelmed. He clearly did not want this role. Sif had to wonder if this was what Loki had intended when he said he had the responsibilities of the throne covered. By covered, had he only meant he left Asgard abandoned to discover their sleeping king then be forced to call on poor, over-burdened Thor? Some plan, Loki. He really did master the art of being a complete ass to his undeserving brother.

"What sort of kingly stuff?" Thor asked reluctantly.

Sif decided to perk things up with a little humor. "First you need to practice your stoic look, like
when we play cards, only meaner." She made a charade of this, lifting her chin and drawing her mouth down in a grimace. "Like this."

Thor chuckled. "Okay." He was quick play along, trying to lose his smile and assume his father's frumpy face.

Sif moved to the table and flipped a chair around to face outward. "Next, you need to sit with really good posture, and look down your nose at all those who approach your throne." She took the seat with all the mannerisms she had just described. Thor joined in immediately, grabbing a chair and doing his best Odin impression, which was quite impressive.

"You got it!" Sif encouraged. "But don't forget, there's the gesture."

"What gesture?" Thor asked, intrigued.

"That," Sif made a quick shooing gesture with one hand, rolling her eyes as she did so, "flick of the wrist. You know. The signal that a king cannot be bothered with your trivial matter."

Thor slapped his knee with a laugh. "Of course! The dismissal flick." He then did it perfectly.

"That's it!" Sif now laughed.

"He would do that," Thor explained with a chortle, "whenever Loki and I came to him with our petty squabbles, arguing over a toy, or which one of us had grown taller, or..." His smile then faded with his story, and his shoulders slumped. "I miss him, Sif." He shook his head, hopefully. "I-I don't know how to mourn him a second time." Sif's smile faded too. She hadn't known how to mourn a second time either. "I know you and the Three think it better that he...died a hero, but I, I just can't..."

"I don't think that." Sif leaned over and squeezed his knee. This was another truth she could easily tell. "I miss him too, Thor. I hurt everyday."

Thor looked up at her, surprised at her confession but also finding consolation in it. He hadn't expected her to say that. Neither did she for that matter.

"It pleases me to know that the years apart, and all the crimes committed within, have not completely hardened you to him." Thor placed his hand on Sif's and offered her a grateful smile.

She was now screaming internally. Her silence dishonoring the best, noblest friend she had ever had. Sweet, trusting Thor. A constant pillar of support since her first day in boot camp. Someone she once considered for lover: a silly girl's delusion during a dark and confusing time. She would never be good enough for Thor. He deserved someone truthful. Someone untainted from years of betrayal and secrets. Someone who had the courage to finally come clean with him about everything.

Someone whose heart didn't foolishly belong to his reckless brother.

"I...try to dwell only on fond memories of him." Sif picked her words carefully. Concealing the truth was bad enough, but she refused to outright lie to Thor. "I see no reason to harbor the hurtful ones any longer."

Thor inhaled deeply, his chest so brutally weighted by his grieving. He then pulled Sif into another hug, seeking a familiar comfort. She closed her eyes and held him back, letting her arms console where her words couldn't. Sif wished she could spill the truth about Loki right now, to relieve Thor of that particular pain. But she couldn't because she didn't know what was going to happen with
Loki. When or if he would even return. She couldn't get Thor's hopes up. Her hopes were already raised more than they reasonably should be. The truth could wait so long as Loki was gone. And upon his return, if it was to happen, let events play out as they will. And if he didn't return, let disappointment strike down the futile hopes of only the Lady Sif, the one deserving of it. Let Thor only be burdened now with a distantly familiar grieving, and not with fanciful illusions of a loved one redeemed.

That was Sif's burden to bear.
Welcome to Hel

Chapter Summary

Loki has finally met his match.

Chapter Notes

A/N: A few things to clear up any confusion that my integration of Norse myth may have caused. (I am very new to the myths and still learning as I go =P)

Sleipnir is indeed Loki's son. If this seems bizarre, then plug Svadilfari into a search engine. It won't make it any less bizarre but at least it'll make sense in context. ;)

Lastly, I took major creative liberties with the appearance of Hel and of Helheim's architecture. Hel's characteristics are taken from a variety of sources: Azula from Avatar (for her voice), Monster High (for her attire), and Cartoon Rasputin for her darker ambitions. Helheim is inspired by the Court of Miracles from The Hunchback of Notre Dame, only covered by a deep freeze.

Physical pain was nothing new to Loki. The many colorful experiences of his life had made him grow accustomed to it. He had no choice, really, when growing up beside a pair of very expressive fists that reacted mercilessly to each and every trick played upon their wielder, or when defending himself against onslaughts of foes on countless battlefields. Being a prisoner of a barbaric alien race would also build one's pain threshold, as would a one-on-one encounter with Midgard's Hulk. And let's not forget what giving birth to an eight-legged horse can do to a body.

Yes, physical stresses and throbbing aches typically came hand-in-hand with the Trickster Prince's plots, such as the kinks and bruises he was feeling now as he peeled his body from the iced-caulked cobblestone and rose to stand on wobbly legs. He took it all in stride like he always did. What Loki couldn't stomach, however, was the gelatinous bile clinging to his body from head to toe, permeating his fine leathers with an ungodly odor and slicking his hair even more than normal to the back of his neck. He refused to believe such a foul substance could have come from the digestive track of something born of his own body. Jormungand must have received the heaviest dose of dark magic during his conception in order to have mutated Loki's genes so extremely.

Loki shook some slime from his hands, resigning himself to accept the price one must pay for a free, living passage into Helheim, and hoped the realm had the courtesy to offer him a bath.

He cast his glance around the frozen courtyard which the monstrous serpent had deposited him in. The architecture was reminiscent of French Baroque, masterful craftsmanship (for mortals at least) rich with carved embellishments and roof peaks that reached heavenly heights. A false symbol of hope perhaps for a realm populated by the damned? It was quite an impressive setting, especially since the eaves were weighted with deadly-sharp icicles, and the mortar holding all the masonry together was also ice. The interwoven translucency of the design was a rather brilliant choice. The integration of ice allowed what little light the realm received to bleed into the nooks and crannies
through warped refraction. Hel always had a flare for style, something she no-doubt inherited from her father.

The façade of Helheim changed frequently, based on its Queen's ever-changing interests and moods, but there were always elements that remained static, or so Loki had read about. In all his travels, he had never actually been here before, solely because an Aesir's trip here was typically one-way.

Fortunately he wasn't a typical Aesir.

The unchanging elements of this cursed realm were laid out above and all around the misty court. Bordering the cobblestone streets were a couple of steaming rivers, the heat from their boiling waters in perpetual combat with the neighboring ice, therefore creating the permanent layer of fog that hovered just off the ground. The both flowed from one source, the central spring, which pulled its heat from the unforgiving lava core of Muspelheim.

Loki knew if he followed the rivers to their source, he would find his daughter's throne. However, he would follow the rivers a safe distance away from their flesh-searing steam. Just because he had a high tolerance for pain, didn't mean he intentionally sought it out.

Another familiar landmark was one of primordial and eternal nature: the very roots of Yggdrasil which snaked along the cave-like ceiling of this peculiar realm. Helheim knew not the expanse of sky and the heavens the way other realms did. It only knew enclosure, darkness, and subzero temperatures. It was lit dimly by the flickering of flame, borrowed from Muspelheim to offer the bare minimum of visibility without melting the ice. The Great Tree's roots were the only sign that the realm even existed beyond the tortuous memories of those life-starved souls who resided here.

The entire realm had always been widely open to speculation. It was the final resting place of all Aesir, Vanir, and a few select humans, who died of natural causes rather than valiantly at the hand of another's blade, martyrdom the ultimate act of nobility. But one had to wonder why illness and old age were undeserving of a rewarded afterlife. Was it truly a mark of poor character if one stricken by disease or lameness abstained from the front lines? Loki had always felt the system of judging the afterlife was highly biased and flawed, and once he was crowned King, that would be something to change.

He may even dare to open the gates of Valhalla to deserving giants and elves, not only for the sake of himself but for anyone worthy of an afterlife rich in culture and expansion of the mind. Segregation would only ever breed ignorance. Why not grant a broader variety of humans passage as well? Loki had met a few deserving ones recently. That archer he enchanted, Hawkeye, was a indeed a worthy soul. There was also that Stark character, a foe Loki was still trying to wrap his mind around. That man alone could provide years of entertainment in the afterlife.

Loki refocused his thoughts as he passed under an archway, entering a tunnel that led to the royal court. His mind needed to be on his daughter. He could see the colors in the distance, of what looked like liberally draped tapestries and gold-embroidered banners. Hel was really taking full advantage of her title of Queen as far as decorating went. He would expect no less of her.

She was the least cursed of his offspring with Angrboda: the only one to maintain a bipedal form despite her fetal exposure to dark magic, and the only one Odin actually bestowed some mercy on. Granted, an eternity in the realm of the dead is still exile but at least she was able to succeed its former monarch. Odin had always claimed that was his intent for her, as if Loki should have been grateful or something. Never mind that she was only a toddler when torn away from her home with her mother in the Asgardian wilds, to be subjected to this place! And why? Because that one-eyed, short-sighted tyrant took one look at her diseased, skeletal legs and assumed the worst, warning she
was compromised by dark magic and her disease would spread to the Aesir if she was left in their realm.

She was only a little girl.

Loki bristled as he continued down the tunnel, picking up his pace. The sooner he could strike this deal, the closer he would be to taking what was rightfully his from that slumbering, wash-up of a king, and undoing all of his blunders. It was an insult to Asgard to keep him on the throne after Mother's death. She was the only reason Asgard wasn't a war-torn wasteland like Svartaflheim. She had been the ever-present calm to his tempest of bloodlust, cruelty, and prideful decrees.

Even Thor would make a better king than a widowed old fool.

Loki's boiling thoughts carried him to the final archway, and he hesitated before stepping into the court. He had to collect himself. He hadn't seen Hel since she was barely taller than his knees, gazing up at him with curious and suspicious eyes. It had been her crowing day and Odin allowed her a day away from her exile to celebrate and visit her father. There were no feasts held in her honor, though, no long list of invited nobles to pay homage to their outcast princess. It had only been a party of four who were present when Loki placed the delicate silver crown upon her raven hair and pressed a bittersweet kiss upon her forehead. The other two attendees were Mother, of course, and Thor, surprisingly. That was one action Loki could always credit Thor for.

It has been over a decade since that crowning day. Hel would be a young woman now, just slightly older than Ollerus. Loki had watched her grow over the years, his magic creating temporary windows to her world. She had flare for ruling, or at least no shame in bossing around her underlings. Her slaves were the Nybling dwarves, the only living beings in Helheim beside its Queen. But alive did not mean free. It was their duty to serve Hel, a punishment for letting their gold lust overtake their common senses.

Speaking of the little wretches, there were some of them now, emerging from the shadows of Hel's royal court. Loki's presence must have alerted them and about of dozen of their pale hairless bodies were now upon him, circling around his legs, sniffing and poking at him. The were pathetic beings, standing no taller than Loki's waist, garbed in threadbare loincloths and stripped of their prided beards. Loki would have mistaken them for goblins if he didn't know any better. If their very existence didn't discourage regular dwarves from falling into the addiction of gold lust, then Loki didn't know what could. These were the lowliest of lowly creatures.

And they kept touching him! Yanking at his clothing, pulling and shoving him toward the center of the court. Loki couldn't see through the dense mist where they were leading him, but he knew what was going on. They were guiding him to his daughter. He did not fight them.

"What in the me are you doing here?" came a silky and impish alto through the thinning mist.

Finally the throne came into view. It was constructed of ornately woven ice and bones, and perched upon a platform that sat just in front of the great spring which parented the two rivers. Steam rose in great billows from behind the throne, strangely not melting its ice. The Nyblings forced Loki to kneel, for upon the throne sat their queen.

Loki studied her appearance curiously as she beheld him with a narrowing eye. Her skin was as white as ever, which always baffled him since she should, by the laws of nature, wear the blue of the Jotnar. Loki could only assume Odin's masking spell upon his own skin had an effect on her genes. She wore the color very beautifully though. It was the perfect contrast to their shared raven hair, which she had styled in a 'punk rock' fashion. It was long in the front, covering half of her face, but cut short in the back. She certainly did favor Midgard as a style reference.
"Why did you interrupt Jojo from sailor-haunting duty?" she asked with a hint of whining.

'Jojo.' She must mean Jormungand, her brother. The two had stayed close over the years, which was fortunate for Loki. Otherwise he would've had to devise another, probably more difficult (albeit cleaner), means of passage here.

"That's my favorite thing to watch these days," Hel mused, tilting her head to glance upward. Hanging just above the throne were several viewing screens, constructed of magic and very reminiscent of the command consoles in Stark Tower and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s helicarrier. Their function was the same as simple windows to other worlds yet she designed them to look like tech from Midgard. Quite the creative one she was.

"You look well," Loki offered, rising to his feet now that the Nyblings had scattered. "Happy even."

Hel gave him the elevator eye, her expression unreadable. Upon her head was the crown he had placed there years ago, but it had grown, embellished with the skeletons of animals carved and assembled to look like giant snowflakes, the original silver woven in artfully. It was brilliant in beauty and design, and a far cry in style from what she was trying to play off as a royal gown. It looked like someone had raided Queen Victoria's closet with India ink and scissors. 'Gothic Lolita', Loki recalled, was the name given to the look. Humans did love to bastardize perfectly good art forms and redefine them with silly postmodern labels.

"You look gross." Hel crinkled her nose. "And you reek horridly." She then fanned the air around. "By Surtr, Jojo should see a healer about that." "Tell me about it." Loki lifted his arms to put the extent of his grossness on display.

Hel cringed, tearing her gaze away. She then snapped her bony fingers and a small heard of her underlings came crawling out of the shadows. "Clean him up," she ordered.

The Nyblings surrounded Loki again, this time climbing onto each others shoulders in order to give their stubby little hands access to more of him. They started undoing the buckles of his jerkin and yanked off his cloak. Loki was going along with it, knowing it was ultimately leading to a cleaner state of being, until one of them went for the buckles on his breeches.

"Do you mind!" he protested, twisting his hips away from their reach.

"They really don't," Hel countered with an entertained smile. She snapped again and gestured something to a couple of the Nyblings. They hobbled off and returned quickly with a purple and gold tapestry, which they held up to shield Hel's eyes from her soon-to-be-indecent father.

The Nyblings made short work of Loki's breeches, then boots, then socks, then undergarments. The air of Helheim was cold, even on his skin, which he could feel was bluing from exposure. This was so humiliating, not at all what he had intended when wishing for a bath. He could only close his eyes and suffer through it though, hoping Hel had some cleaning spell that would make the process go quicker.

She didn't, for all of a sudden, Loki's body was blasted by an onslaught of river water. Steaming, boiling river water, transported by Hel's magic. He hollered and clenched his fists, the blue of his skin scalded away and replaced with a rare pink. He hadn't seen it that way since he was a child, when Mother's air-headed handmaidens would draw his bath too hot. Fortunately, the burn was only superficial, something his body could quickly repair. He was just going to assume Hel knew that about him rather than suspect she intended to cleanse him with third degree burns. He glanced
at her over the top of the shielding tapestry, noticing that she had shifted to sit sideways on the throne, seeming entertained by all of this, her cursed legs dangling over the arm rest.

Hel's legs were the stark evidence of her curse. A horrific sight by Asgardian standards. The last time he had seen her, they were merely discolored and skinnier than normal, as if frost bitten. She had worn a long gown to hide them from the Aesir on her crowing day. But now they were worse. The skin had completely rotted off in spots, exposing fully the bones beneath. What remained of her skin was a nightmarish texture, haggard, blotchy browns and deep reds with bulging purple veins. Oddly she made no effort to cover them besides a couple pieces of fishnet stockings. She wasn't even wearing shoes, although he really couldn't blame her for that. Only one foot still had flesh on it. The other was fully skeletal. He imagined the feel of raw bone on leather would be an unpleasant one. Still, the option of a longer, more concealing skirt was always viable.

"Isn't your skirt a little on the short side?" Loki said as the Nyblings wiped the last of the water from his body.

Hel didn't answer, just tilted her head to look upon her skirt with pride, running her hands over its ruffles. Her legs dangled freely down the side of the throne. Loki had to admit that despite his distaste for this particular fad of hers, he was pleased to see her so carefree, so comfortable in herself.

The Nyblings began wrapping the tapestry around him, much to his indignation. They created a toga of sorts then scampered off to avoid a very deserved wrath. Loki must have looked utterly ridiculous. He would almost rather be back in the slimed-caked stink of his leathers then be dressed like a primitive Greek.

Hel burst into laughter. "You look like you're going to a frat party!"

Loki sneered and turned his back to her, re-tying the tapestry into a simple, long wrap skirt. It was the least offensive style he could come up with. Frost Giants wore armored skirts into battle. He would just sport the look of a Jotunn...vacationing in the islands.

Hel's voice slide down from its cackling into something conversational. "You still haven't told me why you're here."

Loki turned to face her again, ringing his hair out before it froze, and attempting to reclaim his dignity. "I need your help."

Hel scoffed out a giggle. "So much faith you put in the loyalty of your neglected children."

Loki took a deep, calming breath. He had a feeling this was going to be a battle. "It was not neglect on my part that separated us."

"Right," Hel drew the word out. "One more thing to blame Daddy Odin for."

"He is not my father!" Loki blurted, instantly regretting it. He couldn't let her get to him so quickly.

Hel crossed her arms and stuck her nose in the air. "And you are not mine."

Ouch. That was a first. Loki felt a genuine hurt in those words, an emotion he could always use to his advantage. "You've let yourself become poisoned by your mother's bitterness."

Hel rolled her eyes. "Oh, you mean the truth? How you used her for her mastery of magic? How you fucked her and seeded her with your corruption."
"My corruption?" Loki was aghast. "She was steeped in dark magic. Chained to it like an addict. It was her mishandling that laid the curse upon you and your siblings."

"Wrong, wrong, wrong!" Hel balled her fists and thumped her feet in alternation against the throne. "You are so deluded and dumb."

Loki blinked in surprise. He had been called many things in his life, deluded one of them for sure, but never did anyone dare call him dumb.

"It wasn't Mother's magic alone that cursed us," Hel continued. "It was yours. Or Odin's, or...whatever it is that conceals your true nature. Don't you see?" Her voice took on a pleading tone. "Between the cocktail of magic, and your own staunch belief that you were an Aesir, our poor little embryos didn't stand a chance of normalcy with all those...twisted illusions infused into us."

Loki felt something turn in his gut. He had often wondered if his mistaken identity had played a role in the cursed conceptions, but he never wanted to analyze it thoroughly. Probably out of fear he'd learn something he didn't want to know; something else that could be tacked on the long list of how Odin's deception destroyed his legacy.

"You cannot solely blame me for the misfortune upon our family," Loki said, his tone lingering between pride and pity. "Your mother played a part. Not all of my children are cursed."

"You don't think an eight-legged horse is unusual?" Hel raised her brow.

"I'm not talking about Sleipnir." Loki held his ground. "And I would hardly call him cursed. The speed of his doubled legs made him fit for a king."

A veil of sadness fell over Hel's features. "Yes. We all know how wonderful our half-brothers are."

Loki winced. "That's not what I meant."

"No please," said Hel, "tell me all about your pretty little Valkyrie boy with his blond hair and perfect life. He came out smelling like a rose didn't he, despite being convinced he was a bastard."

"I beg your pardon," Loki said, "but I am sure you know that your mother had a great deal of influence over your upbringing."

"She began laughing. "Boy, that's some honorable dame you ditched Mother for. She doesn't even know how to tell a proper lie."

"Hela." Loki closed his eyes, calling upon his patience. "I will not play these games. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Why should I help you?" she snapped. "I am the last person besides Mother that you should ever expect to help you win back the heart of that, barbarian woman."

Loki pinched the bridge of his nose. "That is not why I am here."

"Then spit it out already," Hel ordered. "Let's hear your infamous silver tongue in action."

Loki collected himself, working the kink out of his neck. He had forgotten how difficult Hel could be. "I would like your assistance in staging my...heroic return to the living world." The silver speech came in the form of truth this time, often a reliable tactic in furthering his plans. "I need Asgard to believe I went to the underworld by mistake. That I should've gone to Valhalla since I was slain by Malekith's henchman in the midst of saving my brother. And that is why I was given life again, because you, my loving daughter, took pity on me."

Hel's single eyelid fluttered, probably in disbelief. She then exploded with the most irritating assault of shrill cackling that Loki had ever heard. He cringed at her in response.
"I haven't seen," Hel managed between gut-grabbing laughs, "or heard from you in years and you come to me asking for a resurrection? Like its no big deal to break the number one rule of my queendom."

"It is not a resurrection," Loki stated. "I am not dead."

"You don't know that." Hel's face was split by a wide, cockeyed smile.

Loki made to argue but was silenced by an encroaching fear. The implication of her words muted him with a regrettable oversight. He lifted his arms into view, noting his skin was as naturally blue as it could be. Death would indeed break Odin's spell. He brought his hands to face, feeling for anything unusual, then worked his way down to his chest and arms.

"How do you know you survived the journey through Jojo's bowels?" Hel added playfully. "No one else ever survives it."

"He said he wouldn't hurt me," Loki whispered, in shock, feeling an unwelcome chill course through his veins. He sank to his knees, defeated, dropping his head. How could let himself get killed? That was never part of the plan.

"I can't believe you took him at his word. Or hiss, or whatever." Hel prattled on gleefully. "You. The God of Lies, trusted a snake born of your very own insincere flesh and blood."

Loki could only sit, hunched over, eyes squeezed shut, fists clenched tight enough to puncture his palms. When he spoke, each word was a hurdle. "I hadn't realized Jormungand despised me as much as you do."

There was a pause. For once, Hel didn't have some witty comeback in a holster. Loki was grateful. He needed the silence to figure out how he was going to get himself out of this mess. He only ever faked death, and avoided it. He's never had to combat it.

"I can't," Hel finally spoke. She was laughing again. "I can't do it anymore." Loki knitted his brow and lifted a baffled gaze to her. "Get off your knees you sad sack of gullible, I was only joking. Jojo idolizes you. He has ever since you terrorized Midgard. He would never kill you."

Loki beheld her with disbelief, his body overcome with a contrary mix of heated rage and cooling relief. Of humiliating embarrassment and redemptive joy. Emotions he had never felt in conjunction before, and why? Because he just got Loki'd. In way that made his anger and his pride join together in a beautiful waltz. If it were anyone else that pulled this on him, they would be struck dead in an instant, but because it was his very own cunning daughter, he nearly found himself laughing along with her.

"So," Hel spoke with a promising 'let's make a deal' tone. "You think if I eject you from here, in a spectacular way that only I can do, your people will be tickled by my performance and thrilled to see their martyred prince returned to them?"

Loki nodded as he rose to his feet, approving very much of the images conjured in his mind.

"And then what?" Hel continued. "They'll throw you big parties with balloons and karaoke?"

Loki smiled. "Something along those lines, yes."

Hel drummed her fingertips on the armrest while her mind worked. "What's in it for me?"

That was the inevitable question, which Loki absolutely had an answer for. "With my people no
longer my enemy, and with Asgard's throne within my reach, I will be in a position to access three of the six infinity stones." Again, he offered her nothing but the truth. "With that power, I can spare you this fate. Give you a normal life."

Hel blinked, unimpressed. "What is a normal life? Feasting? Fucking? Whiling the days away in boredom while awaiting the inevitable. I'll only end up right back in here. Although, going out with a bang in battle doesn't sound so bad. I always wondered what Valhalla was like. Do you know if it has a cable?"

Loki frowned. That was the second time she used vulgar Midgardian speech. Had she no class? "Watch your mouth, young lady."

"Spare me." Hel rolled her eyes. "Of both your lectures and your pity. I don't want your help, nor do I need it."

"You must want something." Loki's voice found an edge. "Everyone always does."

Hel smiled, in a conniving way that told Loki she knew exactly what she wanted. "You're right," she said darkly. "Only what I want is not for myself." Now she had Loki's undivided attention. "I want Mother's dignity restored. And I want it in the form of revenge. Her revenge."

Loki chewed the proposition over in his mind. It was one he hadn't expected but certainly one he could work with. "You wish her to slay me?" He'd like to see her try.

"Hardly." Hel chirped. "As if you deserve admittance to Valhalla."

"Then what?" Loki was at a loss.

"I want Mother to have the honor of delivering to me your shield maiden. Conquered by the tip of a poisoned dart."

Sif. Of course, they wanted Sif. What was the saying? Hell hath no fury like woman scorned? Or in this case, Hel hath no fury like her jealous mother.

"Very well," Loki responded with no trace of emotion. This wasn't the first time he bartered the life of someone close to him. And it's not like he bound himself to his deals anyway. "Angrboda can have her petty squabble if it wins me my redemption."

Hel shook her head in pity. "Well, at least you consistently betray the mothers of your children for the sake of your ambitions. I would hate to see you break character."

Loki winced. "Enough already. Let's get on with this."

Hel was only half right. This time around he wouldn't bring suffering upon his lover. Sif would pose a formidable challenge to however Angrboda chose to come at her, and Loki would like to see her even try to take on Sif's sharp senses and deadly swordplay. He could only hope the witch wouldn't get herself killed in the process, for the sake of their children. Yes, Angrboda was demented by dark magic and apparently riddled with jealousy, but she was still mother to his offspring, and he did not wish for her to die by Sif's blade, regardless of how honorable a death that would be.

Hel swung her legs off the armrest and rose from her throne with a satisfied air. "Prepare yourself, Loki of ASSgard, for to escape the bonds of my realm you must suffer the tortures of death and the unnatural strain of resurrection." There was a glint in Hel's eye that bothered Loki. "Your body will be stripped, beaten and burned. If want your people to believe you died, you must look the part."
Loki should have expected this much. "I will do whatever is necessary," he said with a lifted chin and feigned calm.

Hel stepped down from her throne's platform and closed the distance between them. "You had better hope you have friends in Asgard," she poked his bare chest with a sharp finger, "for when I release your body back to that realm, it will only stay alive for a matter of hours if not given the proper care." She then circled behind him, tracing his Jotunn markings with that same finger. Her touch produced a very unwelcome chill. "And if your beloved Aesir do not come through for you," she continued, "then I will take you back and we can have a good ol' family reunion." She circled back around to face him. "For all of eternity."

"How sentimental of you." Loki smiled. The little imp would never have him. Family or not, he was no one's prisoner. "One question before we begin." Hel lifted her brow in intrigue while Loki steeled himself. This wasn't an easy question. "If I had truly died on the barrens of Svartaflheim, slain as the martyr they say I am, would I have been claimed by the Valkyries?"

Hel broke out in that awful cackling again, only this time she really made a show of it, throwing her head back then doubling over on herself, arms wrapped around her stomach.

Loki took a deep breath and rolled his eyes. "Okay. I get it. The answer is no."

He didn't have time to get upset about it before Hel flipped herself upright again, totally composed. "I actually have no clue if they would or not. I'm Queen of Helheim, remember? Not Valkyrieheim or Valhallheim..."

Loki held his hand up to silence her, his patience at an all time low. He couldn't remember anyone he had ever met that tested him to this extreme.

"Valhalla is for the Aesir and Vanir anyway." Hel didn't stay quiet for long. "You're a frost giant. When you die, you'll either end up here or go to...Jotun-halla. Most likely here."

Loki shook his head, regretting he ever brought up the subject of his afterlife with her. She was still a mere child. "Will you stop making up ridiculous place names? You sound like an idiot when you do that."

"So," Hel scratched her head, easily riding along with his change of subject, and sparing no sarcasm. "You're implying I'm not an idiot, yet you chose to convey that message by calling me one." She then plastered her face with a fake smile. "Thanks for the compliment, Dad. You always make me feel so special."

"Hela," Loki pleaded, placing his hands on her shoulders. He was at his wits end. "Enough with the games. Can we please get on with the plan?"

Hel frowned, beholding her father's very intent gaze with one of disappointment, even sadness. "Fine," was her clipped response. "I understand. You're in a hurry to leave, just when I was starting to have some fun with you. You come to me only because you need my help. You have no interest in spending time with me."

Loki felt his heart pang at that. She had truly mastered the guilt trip. "That is not true." And neither was what he just said. He had only come here for her help. Spending quality time with Hel was never an option he considered, not while she resided in the afterlife. There was only so much he could do for his family.

Hel pulled herself from his touch, one shoulder at a time. She saw straight through the lie. "You do
realize that in order to fool your precious Aesir in believing you died, you need to look the part?"

Loki nodded, hesitantly, wondering why she was repeating herself.

"Good," she said, mood lightening. She then snapped her fingers in the air and immediately the padding of several pairs of dwarven feet could be heard around them.

Loki looked over his shoulder to see what they were up to, catching in his peripheral vision the moment just before several Nyblings thrust a spear-sized icicle into his back and out through his chest. He made a choked sound, the shock of their action seizing his body more than the actual pain did. He fell to one knee, reaching a shaking hand to the glassy barb sticking out of his chest.

Hel stepped up to him, lifting his chin with a single digit so their eyes met. "By your brother's account, you should have a pretty severe scar on your chest and back." She then winked.

"You wretched little bitch!" Loki spat, fighting each wave of pain with gritted teeth and angry growls.

"Ha! Now who's being vulgar?" Hel spun gleefully away from him, gesturing more commands to her subordinates. Loki's eyes widened at that, realizing this was only the start of the process. She wasn't joking when she said she'd bring him near death. He breathed deeply, knowing he had to be prepared for the next round. Using all the strength he could muster, he began conjuring a heating spell, his intent to melt the icicle spear and cauterize his wound.

But he wasn't quick enough. The Nyblings came at him with buckets of scalding water, searing his arms and chest and making short work of melting away the impaling spear. The combination of boiling and freezing water on his wound was mind numbing. He fell to other knee, then down to his hands.

Blood drained onto the cobblestones, his blood, spilling from his chest. He knew the wound was not lethal to his body, but it was still debilitating. He couldn't move, couldn't conjure, couldn't even plot a defensive action. All he could do was endure the next round of attack. Then the next, and the one after. It all blurred together after a while, to the point where he couldn't even tell what kind of weapons they were using to slash and sear his flesh. The only constant throughout the entire barrage was that Hel hadn't lifted a single finger against him. She merely stood back and conducted it all.

Loki finally let himself fall completely into a bloodied heap, but he didn't allow his consciousness to leave him. He wanted to remain aware of the entire process, in case Hel tried to pull anything. He could barely make out her cadaverous feet moving toward him. He then heard the rustle of her ruffles as she knelt down.

"Now," she offered in the most civil tone yet, "you look like a martyr."

It was over, by the grace of Yggdrasil, the torture was completed. The pain came in waves still, most of which he weathered but some of which induced tears. Loki had to admit he was impressed. The wrath his daughter had orchestrated could rival even what the Chitauri had subjected him too. That was information he would stow away for future use indeed.

He pushed a smile across his scalded cheeks and peeked up at her from behind a splay of wet, bloodied hair. "I suppose a thank you is in order?"

"Nah, don't bother." She made a dismissal gesture, as if he was actually going to thank her. "You won't be feeling so grateful when I take back my tapestry."
Loki laughed, despite how it wrenched his gut to do so. "I actually will be grateful for that."

"Why?" Hel crinkled her brow. "Don't you like my fashion sense?"

"Your taste in textiles has something to be desired," he rasped out, sparing no sarcasm even with such a weakened voice. "I'd sooner wear the skin of a Nybling then this gaudy purple monstrosity."

Hel shook her head, insulted. "You are such a snob. Now I'm glad I didn't grow up in Gladsheim. I'd sooner off myself then be like you."

"Well then," Loki reasoned, laughter bleeding into his speech. "If that is the case, you are exactly where you want to be."

Hel nodded acceptingly, then shrugged. "It could be worse. I could be in your shoes." She then stood and barked orders to her servants. "Fetch me my spell book. The big, dusty one."

Loki closed eyes and tried to remain collected. He knew what was coming. The torture had only been the first phase. A magical charade of resurrection now lay before him, and he imagined it wasn't something a living, conscious body was meant to endure. He breathed deeply. This was all new territory in the realm of physical pain.

But it was too late to turn back now.

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Musical accompaniment: Only Makes Me Laugh by Danny Elfman
A Beautiful Lie

Chapter Summary

Because shopping with Thor had to happen again. /fangirl

"What is the story with Fenrir? Sif asked, gazing thoughtfully at the large stock of meat in the butcher's inventory. She and Thor had decided to visit the Medina's open air market, something they always had enjoyed doing together when duty wasn't calling.

"That that came out of nowhere," said Thor, giving Sif an odd look as he ripped a bite from his jerky.

Sif dropped a few coins in the butcher's hand, smiling at the blood-stained man. She then turned to Thor, making only brief eye contact. Fenrir's condition was one of many thoughts weighing heavily on her.

"I've been wondering about this for a while now," she said as they moved on casually to the next vendor.

"Is this the reason your mind has been elsewhere since my return?" Thor strolled alongside of her. His extra-large jerky piece was already half eaten. "The reason I am able to pummel you repeatedly in the training grounds."

Sif's pride prickled at that. She narrowed her eyes at him and tore a vicious bite from her jerky. "The only reason you keep winning is because I have switched out my glaive for a sword." She spoke confidently while chewing the toughened meat. "I have a bet going with Fandral that I can outmatch his rapier with, what he calls, 'a clumsy cutlass,' but I need to practice before I can do that."

"Of course," Thor teased. "The old handicap excuse." Sif sneered at him but decided to let it go. The competition between her and Fandral wasn't news to Thor and he always put money down in Sif's favor. This time around wouldn't be any different. He smiled at her. "Be sure to let me know when you face off. I wouldn't want to miss that." The rest of the jerky disappeared into his mouth, a piece big enough for two or three bites reduced to one. "What was that you were asking about Fenrir?"

Sif understood 'asking' and 'Fenrir' from Thor's meat-muffled question. It was enough though. She swallowed the remainder of her bite before speaking. "I don't understand why he was exiled. What did he do wrong?"

Thor sucked the last flavors of jerky from his fingertips. "Fenrir was exiled for the same reason his siblings were. The prophesies claim they will become our enemies." His voice was lacking its usual conviction.

"You do not sound convinced," Sif pondered, gazing curiously at him. "Do you truly believe the prophecies?" She never put her faith fully in philosophical speculation. There just simply wasn't enough tangibility to it.
"I used to," Thor replied somberly. "Before Father banished me to Midgard."

"Yoohooo, your highness!" a nearby vendor sang out. It was the baker, a round, jolly man. His booth was always filled with bread baked into fancy shapes. "You must try a free sample," he beckoned, bustling out from behind his counter, curvy body gracefully weaving around his artful displays of edible sculptures. He presented Thor with a golden biscuit that resembled a ram. "Please, my King, I insist."

Thor brightened at the gesture. "You are too kind, good baker." He took the offering and immediately bit its head off, smiling stretching his now bulging cheeks. In Thor's mind, there was no gray area between food and art. If there was something edible in his grasp, especially something gifted to him, the obvious way to appreciate it was to stuff it in his mouth.

The baker didn't seem to mind. He was too enamored by Thor's presence to care about formalities. Too transfixed to even notice anything else around him, namely Sif. That was how it was everywhere lately, all eyes glued to their new king. Thor typically captured the bulk of attention from Asgard's population, but now that he was king, Sif may as well been invisible. Her social status had apparently been demoted to just another of Thor's warrior companions, plus it seemed the novelty of being the only woman in her ranking had worn off. It wasn't a lowly status by any means, but it wasn't what she was used to.

She couldn't help but wonder is this was the feeling Loki had been constantly burdened with when growing up.

"Your highness," the baker drawled. "Now that you are king, I expect you'll be throwing a feast or two in the near future? And if so, won't you need to hire a—"

"Thank you for the gift," Sif interrupted, subtly tugging Thor back onto the main thoroughfare. She was not about to let them be snared by the baker's lengthy catering proposals again. Thor gave the man a firm, grateful nod before rejoining Sif on the street.

"You were saying," Sif resumed their prior conversation, "about how you have lost faith in the prophecies."

"Yes," Thor replied through a mouthful of doughy ram body. "While on Midgard, I met many mortals who live without the weight of a prewritten destiny upon them. Most do not bind themselves to the teachings of their ancient prophets, at least not beyond the moral guidelines." He paused, swallowing one cheek full while chewing over a thought. "Steve was the exception there. He did not take kindly to my title of god. But Jane, Dr. Selvig, Tony, Dr. Banner, even Darcy. All of them see the future as a blank slate, something they have the power to influence." He swallowed the rest of the bread, nodding with conviction. "I respect that."

Sif was pleased to hear this confession, relieved to learn she wasn't the only one skeptical of the old beliefs. However, it also meant Thor was becoming more distanced from his father. "This...is not something the All-Father would be pleased to know."

"No, it is not," Thor said, giving her a brief glance of gratitude for her understanding. "He believes a king should base all of his decisions on the prophecies." Thor shook his head. "That is not something I can do. I refuse to believe Ragnarok is our ultimate demise. That is the same as conceding defeat."

Their conversation had made them pause in front of a cart draped in textiles of all colors and sizes, so sure enough, out popped the vendor from behind. She was a sweet, withered up old thing, draped liberally in her own wares.
Sif smiled at her but was not ready for their conversation to be interrupted again. "Then you believe we will survive Ragnarok?" she asked Thor.

"I don't believe Ragnarok has to happen at all," Thor said, smiling at the woman as she tried to tempt him with a regal green and gold cape. "Thank you elder, but green is not my color." She nodded, ordering Thor with a gesture to wait while she disappeared behind her cart again. Thor continued where he left off. "I think if we follow down a path assuming it will destroy us, then we will have crafted our own demise."

Sif absorbed his words with appreciation. It was nice to hear someone finally speak these concerns aloud. She was about to tell him this, but the old woman returned, this time with a bright blue piece of candy. Thor's eyes lit up.

"You always were a smart lad," said the woman, placing the candy in Thor's palm like it were a precious relic. She then pulled a red candy from her pocket and placed it in Sif's hand. When she spoke again, it was directed at Sif. "Ragnarok is just a bunch of superstitious hooey dreamt up by mead-drunken gods." Sif snorted, popping the candy in her mouth. This old commoner had some gall! Sif liked it. The woman turned back to Thor. "No disrespect to your father bless his sleepy little heart."

There was nothing but disrespect to Odin in her previous statement! But Thor was ever kind and gracious "No offense taken, elder," he said sweetly. "Your honesty is always appreciated."

Ouch. That statement caught Sif off guard. She still hadn't revealed any of the truths to Thor that she had been withholding, hoping for just the right moment.

"I'm sorry, Sif," Thor said as they journeyed further into the market. "You had asked about Fenrir and here I am pounding you with my philosophies."

"No, don't apologize," Sif said, meeting his eyes. "This is a side of you I rarely get to see." Her gaze then lowered to his mouth, which the candy had dyed a deep blue. Lips, teeth, tongue, the whole works, all blue. She snickered, knowing that meant her mouth was bright red, and that was the reason Thor was chuckling right back at her.

"Harlot Red lips are a side of you I don't often get to see."

"Shut up!" Sif slugged him in the arm. He shoved her in defense so she punched him again, even harder. They were quite the insufferable pair, forgetting in the moment that it was indeed Asgard's king behaving like a child in a busy public place. No one really seemed to care though. This was the ease of the Medina, Asgard's undercity, where the residents were the most hospitable and least judgmental Sif had ever met.

A comfortable enough environment to finally tell Thor her secrets, away from the eavesdropping gossips in the palace.

"My feelings toward the exiles of Loki's offspring has changed over the years," Thor continued as they approached a hatter's booth. It was filled with all manner of headwear from the silly to the downright ridiculous. "I did not question Father's decisions at the time, trusting he knew what he was doing. But I see now his judgment was poor, compromised by fear." Thor specifically picked out a helmet that sported a large, feather Mohawk, and shamelessly put it on. He then turned to Sif. "A king must not be a chicken."

Sif couldn't help but laugh. There never seemed to be a dull moment with Thor. She sought out a hat for herself, choosing one made of wiry black fur that had a pair of pointed ears on it. She pulled
"Fenrir is prophesized to be the All-Father's slayer."

"Aye," Thor replied, swapping out his feathered helmet for very wide-brimmed hat. It looked like something Fandral would wear.

"But you don't believe that?" Sif was still clutching wolf hat.

"Not any more." Thor spoke with confidence, striking a pose for Sif. "Am I dashing?"

"Quite." Sif commented halfheartedly.

Thor huffed, disappointed at her divided attention. He disappeared behind another hat rack for moment, then popped out on the other side, plopping an oversized winged helmet upon Sif's head.

Sif drew her gaze up to the gaudy silver brim that was now sliding down over her eyes. She sighed, regretfully not feeling the playfulness. She couldn't keep putting off what needed to be said.

"Sif, you are most certainly vexed by something," Thor complained. "I expected you to be force feeding me that hat by now."

"Thor...," Sif began. Then her words failed her. Her mouth was open but nothing could come out.

Thor tilted her helmet up to fully see her eyes. He was giving her an odd look. Her heart sped up its pace. He was now suspicious, which meant there was no turning back. "Yes...?"

Sif cursed herself internally then turned away from the booth, desperate to collect her thoughts. Thor had to snatch the helmet from her head and toss it back on the rack to keep her from accidentally walking off with it.

"Sif!" Thor caught up to her, blocking her path. "Please tell me what is troubling you."

Just then, a petite old man came shuffling up to Thor, offering him a juicy and succulent sample of goat meat on a stick. It smelled divine. Sif was even tempted to take it.

Thor didn't even glance at it, just made a polite gesture of refusal, keeping his gaze fixed on Sif. The vendor shrugged then shuffled off. Sif inhaled deeply. There wasn't going to be a more opportune time than this. "I have...something I need to tell you. A few things actually."

"You can tell me anything," Thor assured.

Her body went rigid. "Do you remember, back during the Elven Civil War, when you kept partnering me with Loki, sending us on the same assignments?"

"Of course I remember," Thor spoke with fondness. "I wanted the two of you to keep each other out of trouble."

"Yes, well..." Sif's eyes were everywhere but on Thor. "I think we got more into trouble than out of it." She felt her cheeks heat up.

Thor laughed, much to Sif's surprise. "I figured as much!" He then teasingly shoved her shoulder. "Did you think I was blind to it?"

"No, Thor..." Sif was starting to get exasperated. "I'm not talking about just that, but what
happened afterward."

Thor’s smile faded but he remained in good spirits. "Sif, please don’t burden yourself with this. I
know why he cut your hair. I do not begrudge you for breaking his heart. Loki was..." Thor paused,
his shoulders dropping. "Not an easy soul to be close to."

"There’s more to it than that." Sif was now impatient, desperate to get this truth out. "Loki and I
had a ch—"

Sif’s voice was overtaken by a sudden cracking of massive thunder. It shook the entire market,
rattling dishes and knocking items off their shelves. Everyone was startled and a great wave of
reactionary murmurs began filling the market air.

Sif beheld Thor incredulously then shoved him hard in the chest. "That's not funny!" she shouted.
"I was trying to tell you something important."

"It wasn’t me!" Thor blinked innocently at her. Another crash erupted in the sky, this time with
lighting, a strange, alien lighting. Green in color and branching out across the entire sky.

Thor took it all in with awe and wonder, but not a trace of fear. Storm clouds moved in unnaturally
fast, consuming the clear winter skies and bringing a torrent of rain with them. The vendors ducked
under cover of their booths, some even diving under tables. This storm was not an ordinary
occurrence. Sif had only seen clouds form that quickly one other time in her life. And it happened
only a week ago, right before Loki’s descent into the abyss.

"We need to be at the seashore," Sif ordered with urgency, eyes locked onto Thor. "Now! Get us
there." It was a simple deduction. Loki traveled to Helheim via sea serpent, why not travel from
Helheim in the same fashion?

Thor didn’t stop to question why before he started swinging his hammer, trusting the intensity of
Sif’s gaze. He pulled her to his body before thrusting Mjolnir into the air and propelling them both
upward. Sif held on tightly, her fingers hooking into the gaps in his armor. This wasn’t the first
time she had traveled this way but it happened so infrequently that she never got comfortable with
it. She didn’t like her lack of control in the situation.

But that was the least of her worries at the moment.

"Which shore are we going to exactly?" Thor shouted while rain pelted him hard in the face. He
took them to the top of tall spire, one with barely enough flat space to stand on. Sif surveyed the
expansive view, still holding onto Thor to keep balanced. The city was divided up by several
bodies of water. There were a multitude of shores to choose from. Thor could only glance
questionably between Sif and the stormy city.

Sif narrowed her focus onto the largest body of water, the shore they had held Frigga’s funeral at.
That one had the most direct connection to the great waterfall, the one that dropped into lower
realms.

"Sif look!" Thor pointed at the same body of water, specifically the arches of a serpentine body
poking above the surface. The sight made Sif’s heart leap. Sometimes, she hated being right.

"Get us down there!" she hollered.

Thor spun up Mjolnir and they were quickly airborne again, aiming directly for the wide, crescent
shaped shore. Sif squinted at the pelting rain, struggling to keep the serpent in her sight. He was
moving toward the shore last she saw of him. As they drew closer, she could see the wake where
the beast had been, but there was still no sign of him.

Thor began slowing their descent as the shore drew closer and it was then Sif spotted a body. She didn't wait for Thor to land and released her hold on him, dropping twenty feet or so down and tumbling into a controlled roll upon landing. The body was washing onto shore at that point. She recognized it instantly, the long limbs, the pale skin, slightly bluing from the chill of the water. She lunged for him, heart pounding frantically. He looked like a corpse...

"Sif!" Thor called out from a jog down the shore. A wind gust had carried him, putting distance between their landing points.

Sif was upon the body now. Upon Loki's body, on her hands and knees, unfazed by the chill of the wake splashing around them. She beheld the dark prince with horror, seeing all the wounds and scars that hadn't been there before. He was completely nude, seemingly stripped of everything, even life.

"Loki..." She turned his head to face her. Then she saw his chest rise, taking in breath. Her own chest collapsed with relief.

"Sif!" Thor called again, quickly closing the distance between them.

Loki moved his head on his own, coughing. He then slowly opened his eyes and immediately founds Sif's, which were looking upon him with a surge of emotion.

"What have you done to yourself?" she whispered, holding a shaking hand above his severe chest wound. "Your wounds...they're real. You reckless idiot!"

Thor finally caught up to them and approached slowly, becoming more stricken with each step. "It can't be..."

Loki tried to laugh but it degraded to a cough. "It's good to see you too, Sif." He still managed to hold his grin.

That was all the convincing Thor needed, for he dropped to his knees on the opposite side of Loki, his mouth gaping, his face draining of all its color. Sif's heart stung at the sight, at seeing Thor's eyes welling up in tears. She pulled back, sitting upright and allowing Thor access to his brother.

Loki looked up at Thor with an unreadable expression. He had lost his grin, but Sif could swear she saw a glint in his eyes, confessing a hint of joy in this reunion.

"Loki..." Thor grasped Loki's face with a firm yet loving grip, his eyes taking in the whole of the improbable sight. "By the grace of the Eternal, you've come back to us."

"More like..." Loki's eyes fluttered as a grew increasingly uncomfortable. He tried to hide his feelings with a smirk. "...the wrath of family."

Thor knelt over him and pulled him into a strong hug. "It is truly you, Brother."

Sif could see Loki's face wincing over Thor's shoulder, the Thunder God clearly not taking his brother's wounds into account. She caught Loki's gaze and smiled at him, expressing her relief to see him again. He responded to her with a forced expression of suffering.

"You smell as though you've eaten half the market again," Loki complained to Thor with a strained voice.
Thor finally broke the hug but still held Loki up at arm's length. "How is it possible that you are here?"

Sif could see that Loki was struggling to stay conscious at this point. There were also crowds of townspeople starting to gather, all reacting with various levels of shock and disbelief, probably much to Loki's unease given his bared and vulnerable condition. "Thor," Sif intervened, placing her hand on his shoulder. "We should get him to a healer."

"I second that," were the final words Loki forced out before fainting.

"Loki!" Thor eyes widened in worry. He then looked up to finally notice the encroaching crowds. The waves of gossip had already begun:

"Loki's alive!"
"Is it really him?"
"This could be trick of his."
"Could Valhalla have rejected him?"
"He died with honor, you know."
"Look at that scar on his chest!"
"Has he returned to break the Odinsleep?"
"He's so pale."
"Is Frigga coming back too?"

Sif stood up and moved toward the crowds, ordering them to keep their distance and assuring that Thor had everything under control. The people obliged but still strained to gape at every detail. She couldn't blame them, really. It was a miracle after all.

At least to those who didn't know any better...

Sif looked over her shoulder to see Thor detach his royal red cape and wrap it around Loki's battered body. He then gathered the long, limp form in his arms and lifted it out of the water. Sif's heart swelled at the sight. Thor was the absolute picture of protector as he carried his beloved kin up from the shore then into the crowds, parting the onlookers with his commanding presence and expressive, watery eyes.

The people grew quiet as they beheld the scene. No one dared break the impact of the moment with a careless word. Thor carried Loki all the way down the long, spanning bridge that led into the palace. He didn't use Mjolnir to fly, didn't demand a horse be brought to him. He just walked, and Sif could only follow behind, dutifully. She wanted to argue at first for a quicker means of transport, but decided against it, trusting that Thor knew what he was doing. She was painfully moved by his gesture to draw out what could possibly be the greatest and most unexpected joy of his life.

Damn you, Loki, Sif thought. And damn your brilliant performance. How was she supposed to tell Thor the truth now? That his brother's miraculous turn toward redemption...was all based on a lie.
Oh, the complexities and mood swings! I wouldn't have my 'ships any other way.

Sif leaned over Loki's unconscious form, gliding her fingers lightly over the raw flesh of his cheek. She lost track of how long she had been sitting at his side, lost in the image of his scarred but serene features. She tried not think about how he got those scars. Nor did she dwell on all the complexities that lay beneath the surface of the pale skin stretched across his brow. She only wanted to be in the moment. To touch him, to watch over him, to press the heat of her lips on the cold line of his mouth.

She felt the tingling warmth of his exhale on her cheek, and it made her smile, like she was getting away with something. A sleeping Loki couldn't spoil the moment with a snide remark. Nor could he cower away from her affection, which she was regretfully anxious to smother him in now that she finally had him to herself.

Sif had waited hours for this: Waited patiently while Thor carried his brother's broken form into the palace, through the great halls and into the healing room. Waited anxiously while Eir and her apprentices had treated his critical injuries. Waited faithfully at Thor's side as the King addressed the city's populace, informing them of their prince's mysterious but miraculous return. Waited silently outside of the healing room—no one was allowed in while Eir did a follow-up analysis—while Thor paced and responded to Volstagg and Fandral's questions with shrugs of ignorance.

Finally she had him to herself. It was merely a small window of time before Eir would return to continue treating him, but it was enough. She only needed a few stretched moments to feel the silk of his hair between her fingers, to watch the gentle rise and fall of his bandaged chest. His body easily filled the length of Eir's table, bare heels perched at the very edge. The healers had dressed him in simple linen pants with a draw string top, beige in color. Loki would surely hate it upon awakening and demand his dark leathers, but until that moment Sif was going to appreciated the façade of innocence that lay before her.

She was postponing all of her questions, all of her frustration and all of her anxiety, to simply be here with him. There would be ample time for pressing concerns once he woke up. She was just happy to have him back, to check his well-being off of her worry list. He wasn't exactly well, what with the hole through his chest, plus all the lacerations, burns and bruises, but he was alive and he would recover, just as Sif had always recovered from her grave battle injuries.

She lowered herself to a grazing distance from his lips again and just hung there, closing her eyes and breathing him in. He was so at peace like this, so beautiful and powerless when his torrential mind was at rest.

"How dare you," Sif whispered. How dare he lure her like this again. How dare he play such a crucial role in her life, and in the lives of those closest to her. How dare he play with his life so recklessly when there were so many who cherished it...even those he has yet to meet.

Sif stole one last kiss while she had the chance, hearing Eir's footsteps in the hall outside, drawing closer. She drew the kiss out to the very last moment, and then a second longer. She couldn't help
"Do be careful not to suffocate him," Eir said flatly upon entering the room.

Sif sat up rigidly as the elder immediately went to work, pulling up an array of sparkling charts that mapped Loki's body. Sif rose from his side and took a step back, allowing Eir enough space to work. She didn't mask her awe at the healer's skill, watching wide-eyed as delicate hands worked through layers of data indecipherable to a warrior. Eir was truly the master of her craft.

"Do you see this cavity?" Eir asked, highlighting what Sif could recognize as the wound that spanned from Loki's back to his chest. Sif nodded. "It is not an illusion. It is very real and it would have killed him if left untreated."

A chill shot down Sif's spine, even though this wasn't news to her. She could see at first glance, when she had found Loki's body on the shore, that his wound was real, and could only deduce one reason for it being there. "It is there to confirm the conditions of his death," Sif said quietly, "as Thor had reported it."

"I know why it is here," Eir spoke with an edge. "It is part of his deception."

Sif dropped her gaze, guilty.

"It's clever enough to fool Thor," Eir continued, manipulating the charts so only the cross section of the wound was visible. "To fool you if you didn't know any better, to fool the All-Father when he awakens, even to fool my apprentices who lack proper experience in these matters."

"I get it," Sif said impatiently. "You're not fooled."

"Look at this," Eir ordered, highlighting only the projection of the wound so it stood out. She pointed to the middle of his back. "The spear entered here, traveled up at an angle breaking these ribs and puncturing a lung," she traced the path she was describing with her finger. "It then pierced through his chest, cracking the sternum."

Sif shrugged, blinking at Eir. "Okay?"

Eir continued, clearly displeased about something. "Heimdall had told me that Kurse impaled Loki on a sword, and that is what killed him. The same sword that Loki had first run through the monster."

"That matches up to Thor's report," Sif added, wishing Eir would get to her point.

"Not taking into account the angle of this wound, the point of entry, or how this type of injury would have taken hours if not days to kill even a stunted frost giant..." Eir blew up the image even more, specifically highlighting the shape of the entry wound. "Look at that."

Sif looked. The wound on his back was a gaping hole, a near perfect circle. Not the kind of wound a sword would make.

Sif crossed her arms. "Elder, please just tell me what you're getting at."

With a strong swipe, Eir made all of the charts vanish. She then stared at Sif with a piercing disappointed. "You have involved me in this deception."

Sif shrank. "What?"
"I have to document every detail of these injuries," Eir explained sternly. "It is my duty to accurately describe the cause, the weapon, and the time at which the injury occurred. Not one of these factors coincides with Thor's account of Loki's death. All anyone would have to do is read my report to know that."

Sif could only shake her head, at a loss. What was she expecting her to do about it? Alter the past?!

"Don't you realize the position you have forced me into?" Eir gave her a pleading look now. "By failing to tell Thor of Loki's tricks, you have passed that burden onto me."

"No!" Sif blurted. "You can't."

"I will not compromise my duty for this."

Sif believed her. It was Eir after all who had taught Sif at a young age about the importance of duty, and the integrity of honesty. "Please, just give me another day."

"You had a week to tell Thor the truth." Eir turned and created with magic a small window. In it was a live feed of Thor, who was in his feasting hall with the Warriors Two. "Thor," she spoke to the window and Thor turned to look at her. "Please report to the healing room." She then closed the feed by disintegrating the window, not even waiting for Thor's response.

"What are you doing?" Sif barked, insulted. "I have this under control. I do not need your intervention."

"Under control," Eir echoed, unconvinced. "All of Asgard believes Loki to be a resurrected martyr, transcendent of the prophesies, returned to us for some great and unknown purpose."

"Is that..." Sif dared. "Is that such a bad thing?"

Eir shook her head. "Do you even hear yourself?"

"This is his chance for redemption," Sif argued weakly.

"It is not redemption if it is founded on a lie." Eir didn't budge an inch. "I did not bring you up to behave this way. You have let yourself fall victim to..." she gestured at Loki, who seemed to sleep through this entire ordeal. "His enchantments."

Sif straightened her stance and lifted her chin. "I know what I am doing."

"Then do it already." Eir commanded. She then turned to the table behind her and slid a small vial out from a row of bottled ointments and tinctures. Her voice softened, thankfully, signaling the lecturing was done. "Have Thor help you move him to his bedroom. He needs plenty of rest. And apply this balm to his wounds once a day. It will speed up the healing process. Do it once you two have moved him."

"Yes, Elder," Sif sighed.

Eir moved around the table then placed her hand on Sif's tensed arm. "Be angry at me all you want. It won't make it any easier." She then left the room.

Sif shook her head and cast her glance down to Loki. "You should be the one to tell Thor, not me."

"Tell me what?" came Thor's booming timbre from behind. "Is everything okay, Sif?" He cast his glance around the room. "Where's Eir?"
"She um..." Sif took a deep breath. "She left."

Thor was perplexed. "But she just called me in here."

"She wants us to move Loki to his bedroom." That was where Sif will tell Thor everything. In the comfort of a space that will remind him of their childhood. That should help cushion the blow right? And with Loki in such a helpless state, how mad could Thor actually get to learn he had been deceived, again. Multiple times. In multiple ways.

Sif winced.

"Okay." Thor looked at her strangely as he moved to the opposite side of Loki. "So, we each grab an arm?" He bent over and wrapped Loki's limp arm around his neck.

"Yes." Sif awkwardly followed suit, lifting Loki's other arm and ducking her head under it. "Support his torso when we lift him. The wound is still fresh. We don't want to worsen it."

They both lifted Loki to sit up, their arms supporting his body. Loki's chin dropped to his chest, hair falling forward and masking his features.

"On my count, we slide him—Wait," Thor interrupted himself. "What do mean the wound is fresh?" He gave Sif a quizzical look. "It happened weeks ago."

Sif blinked, returning Thor's stare with a shifty one of her own. She really wasn't making this easier on herself. "Right. The wound is fresh because..." She paused. This was not where she wanted to begin the story, telling Thor right away that Loki's death was a lie. She had to ease into that bit. "Because..."

"Because wounds do not heal in Helheim," came a faint but smooth voice from beneath Loki's stringy locks.

"Loki!" Thor said excitedly, lifting Loki's chin until he could see the dark, sunken eyes. "Brother, you..." It took a moment for Loki's words to sink in. "You went to Helheim?"

Sif breathed a long sigh of relief. Thank the Eternal, Loki had spared her of this burden.

"I'll tell you all about it," Loki said to Thor, "once you remove me from this dreadfully hard operating table."

"Of course!" Thor assured. He and Sif did as Loki requested and slid his body off of the table. They then carefully moved him into the hall, supporting his weight but letting him walk minimally on his own, his bare feet dragging on the cold marble floor.

"Tell us, Loki," Sif spoke up, looking Loki deep in the eyes. He looked so drained, she almost felt guilty for pressing him like this. "Why were you in Helheim?"

Loki squinted at her. "I don't entirely know..." He then smirked. Sif started to get an uneasy feeling, like she was trusting a snake to sprout legs and walk itself out of the shadows.

They reached the grand staircase that led to the royal family's private chambers. Each step was a challenge for Loki but he pressed on. He didn't want to be fully carried. "I can only assume," Loki continued, his words labored, "my Jotunn blood split upon Svartalfheim was enough to confuse the Valkyries." He then turned to Thor. Sif could feel her burden of regret growing heavier. He was only digging them in deeper. "As far as I know, they don't allow frost giants into Valhalla."
Thor was not pleased with this information. "You were raised an Aesir," he argued in Loki's favor. "You died as nobly as all Aesir warriors before you. What possibly is there to confuse?" Thor looked to Sif. "Did the Valkyries speak of this to you?"

Sif opened her mouth and shrugged, clueless how she was supposed to answer that. Then Loki cut in. She shouldn't have let him.

"My questions were the same as yours, Thor," Loki explained with a brilliant act of innocence. "As I woke up on the frozen grounds of Helheim, surrounded by those wretched Nyblings who proceeded to ravage my flesh, one thing kept passing through my mind." Loki paused as they stopped in front of his bedroom door. "Where is my daughter?"

Thor searched Loki's eyes, cross-checking him for the truth. Sif couldn't see Loki's face but she could picture the severe puppy dog eyes he was probably laying on Thor.

"Brother," Thor said, squeezing Loki's shoulder. "As grateful as I am for your return, I intend to have a talk with the Valkyries."

"You mean," Loki teased, "in preparation for the next time I am slaughtered on your behalf?"

"Let's get him into bed," Sif interrupted, opening the tall, heavy door and leading them into the room. She couldn't let Loki keep lying. It would only hurt them both in the long run. Plus if neither of them came forward with the truth soon, then Eir or Heimdall would, and that would only injure Thor even more to have heard it from an outside source.

"So little Hela brought you back to life?" Thor asked in disbelief, helping Loki into the over-sized bed while Sif pulled back the covers. The bed had been recently made by the servants, by Sif's request. In fact, she had asked they tidy his entire room. No one had slept in it since Loki's fall from Bifrost. She wanted Loki to feel at home, as if years hadn't passed since he last slept in his own bed.

"If it wasn't for Hel, I would not be here," Loki replied to Thor, wincing as he adjusted his back against the headboard. Sif grabbed a pillow and carefully wedged it between his body and the board, giving him disapproving looks every time he caught her eye. Physically she wanted all his comforts met, but she wasn't ready to ease up on his conscience.

"Why did she take so long in sending you back?" Thor asked skeptically.

"My daughter is..." Loki paused and a genuine sadness fell over his features. "A very troubled soul." He then lowered his gaze and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Thor," he pleaded. "I can't talk about this now. I'm just too...tired, and—"

"Loki," Thor cut in, placing his hand on Loki's knee. Loki looked up at him with glistening eyes. "You don't have to."

Sif sighed. So much for Thor's skepticism. Although she had to admit, that was a pretty convincing display on Loki's part. For all she knew, that bit about Hel was true.

"Thor?" Sif spoke up. "There's a small vial of balm in the healer's room, one Eir mixed especially for Loki. Would you mind getting it? I left it on the counter."

"Of course." Thor nodded agreeably. He then left the room, not even flinching at the fact that he was King and shouldn't be ordered to fetch anything. He was such a good soul. Sif was surely going to burn for deceiving him for this long.
"No more lies," Sif declared once Thor was gone. She took a seat at the edge of the bed and impaled Loki with a decisive look. "This deception has to end now."

Loki snorted. "Now is not the time for double standards, Sif. You've managed to lie to everyone for the last thirteen years, by your own will. What I'm asking of you is hardly out of your comfort zone."

Sif bristled at that, her fist clenching with a need to retaliate. She held it back only because Loki's body was already broken. "I am through lying to everyone," she spoke resolutely. "I'm going to come clean to Thor, and Ollerus, which means I want them to know the full truth of your actions."

"If you do that, everything I just went through will be for nothing." Loki's weakened state certainly wasn't hindering his ability to argue.

"Then you should have let me in on your plan."

"You would have tried to stop me."

"Damn straight I would have!" Finally, Sif thought, he was starting to talk some sense. "You're only digging yourself in deeper, and your dragging me down with you. Plus you nearly got yourself killed!"

Loki paused, studying the worry that must be showing in her eyes. "Give me time," he spoke with a softer tone. "I will make it right. But...let me have this homecoming. Allow Asgard time to warm up to me, so when I finally tell them the truth, they will listen openly."

Sif took a deep breath, shaking her head. "I don't like this."

"You know I've never been given a fair shot at winning the people's love." Loki now tried the puppy dog eyes on her. "I've always been kept in the shadow."

Sif wasn't falling for it. "You could have stepped out at any time. You chose to stay in shadow."

"Shut up," Thor barked, kneeling onto the bed and pulling Loki into a mighty hug. Loki groaned as Thor wasn't taking his injuries into account. Again. "It's good to have you back." He attacked Loki's head, planting a kiss on one side and completely disheveling his hair on the other.

Thor's presence then interrupted what had become a contentious stare down.

Loki didn't take his eyes off of Sif. She must have seriously struck a nerve, a small victory on her part. "What took you so long?" he asked his brother.

"Do you have an idea how many bottles of balm there were in there?" Thor complained, handing the vial to Sif from across the bed.

Loki squinted at the label as the bottle passed over him. "Yes, but how many have 'For Loki' written on upon them?" He rolled his eyes.

"Shut up," Thor barked, kneeling onto the bed and pulling Loki into a mighty hug. Loki groaned as Thor wasn't taking his injuries into account. Again. "It's good to have you back." He attacked Loki's head, planting a kiss on one side and completely disheveling his hair on the other.

Loki was defenseless, much to Sif's satisfaction. She could see by the shiftiness in his eyes that he had no choice but accept the affection, and to hug his brother back. His battered arms lifted feebly then curved over the royal red cape, the long fingers splaying over thick folds of fabric. Sif was touched by the sight, flooded by memories of earlier, more simpler times of the three of them together. It melted away some of her current frustration at Loki.
Loki's voice strained over Thor's shoulder. "You really have no concept what my body has endured."

Thor finally released him and scooted back off of the bed. Neither brother could make eye contact for a few moments. Through the wane of Thor's warm smile, Sif could see his own internal debate with his feelings for Loki. She imagined he faced an even greater conflict than she did, what with everything that had happened since Loki's fall from Bifrost.

The silence stretched on, so Sif figured it would be a good time to start applying the balm to Loki's wounds. With subtle movements, she scooted to the foot of the bed, twisting the cap off of the vial and scooping a small dollop with two fingers. She started at Loki's feet, waiting for somebody to say something.

Thor broke the silence. "Loki, I am in your debt."

"Or the score is even," she interjected. She couldn't help herself. She would not have Loki feed off of Thor's misplaced guilt. "Have you forgotten about the events on Midgard?"

Sif felt both sets of eyes upon her now. Thor shifted his stance to address her. "I thought you said you weren't dwelling on unpleasant memories."

She glanced at him briefly. "I'm not. But you should." She didn't look at Loki but she could feel his glare.

Thor turned back to Loki, his tone teasing. "And here I thought The Lady Sif had grown more forgiving."

"It appears you're wrong," Loki griped, twitching his foot to make Sif's job more difficult.

She grabbed the defiant foot with a stilling grip. "I think I've shown adequate forgiveness." She finally met Loki's eyes. His glare was both chilling and pleading. She raised a single brow in response, deciding then to back off, at least for the time being "Otherwise, you would not trust me to treat your wounds."

Thor smiled, shifting his glance between the two of them. "Loki, if I hear you whine about your condition again, I will sew your lips shut. You do not realize how good you have it."

Sif felt her cheeks threatening to redden. Thor continued, "I trust you to take good care of him Sif, for once he is well, there will be a feast in his honor. He needs to look his best."

Loki looked at Thor, unimpressed. "Is that the extent of your kingly decrees so far? Feasts and revelry?"

"How...?" Thor canted his head. "How did you know I was King?"

"Father has yet to show himself to me," Loki explained coolly. "I can only assume he sleeps again, given the recent events he has suffered."

It was both infuriating and impressive to Sif how easily Loki had talked his way out of that slip.

"Yes." Thor dropped his gaze, buying into every word. "Father's grief was too much for him too bear."

There was another stretch of silence save for Sif shifting her seat at the edge of the bed. She had finished with Loki's feet and lower legs and was scooting up in order to address his arms.
Loki watched thoughtfully as her thumbs spread the soothing balm over the raw skin of his seared palm. When he finally spoke it was directed at Thor. "How does the throne feel?"

"Overwhelming," Thor replied. "However the people have changed their tune since your return. Demands for reduced tariffs have become cries for celebration. The entire kingdom wishes to honor the return of their courageous prince."

Sif felt Loki's muscles tense under her touch. "Is that really the talk of the town?" he asked skeptically. "Or merely the voices in your head?"

"Do not underestimate your people's opinion of you, Loki." Thor spoke genuinely, his patience for Loki seemingly infinite. "Asgard is not the same place it was during your brief reign of it."

"I certainly hope not," Loki countered. He then eyeballed Sif. "Insurrection was running rampant then."

"I regret nothing," Sif defended, her words a sharp contrast to her gentle touch upon Loki's gashed forearm."

Thor chuckled, looking fondly upon them both. "It appears I have stirred the hornets' nest. Perhaps I should make my leave now before my words do more harm than good."

"Trust me, Thor," Sif spoke with little thought, "your tongue is the least offensive one here."

Loki shook his head and Thor laughed. "All the more reason for me to leave the room," Thor said with a wink then moved toward the door. "See that you allow him rest, Sif."

And then he was gone, leaving Sif vulnerable to Loki's assumed amusement as she blushed profusely.

"It didn't take him long to play matchmaker again," Loki said, surprisingly civil. "You must have spoken very highly of me while I was gone."

"I did not slander you." Sif didn't meet his eyes, instead focusing on treating the blistering burn across his shoulder and neck. "Even though I should have."

She expected Loki to retaliate with some clever jab but he stayed quiet, growing distant despite the small distance between them. He was so hard to read, his mood shifts so unpredictable. Sif could only figure that whatever had happened to him in Helheim must have left marks deeper than his flesh wounds.

She moved to the head of the bed, urging Loki to shift down and allow her access to his back. He did so and she scooted in behind him, folding a leg beneath her. Her breath hitched at the horrors upon his flesh, lacerations blistered by burns, and that wasn't even the worst of it. Beneath the bandage was the lethal stab wound, the actual torn flesh and not just a fancy diagram of it. She closed her eyes as a shudder coursed through her.

"What's the matter?" Loki looked over his shoulder. "Surely you have seen worse on the battlefield."

Sif collected herself with a deep breath. Loki was right, she had seen much worse carnage than this, too much to keep track of. But in those cases, she had always known the blows were dealt by a known enemy. It was an entirely different story when mystical creatures and dark magic were at work, and when beings who were supposed to be Loki's family allowed this to happen to him. Even though this had all been part of his plan, Sif found herself pitying Loki.
"Lean back," she whispered, placing the balm aside on the night stand.

Loki looked questioningly at the vial. "Aren't you going to—"

"Just lean back," Sif insisted, urging him with a gentle pull on his shoulders. Loki did as he was told but remained tense. She pulled her leg out from under her and angled it at his side, creating more surface of her body for him to lean back on. Once their bodies became flush, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, supporting his weight, and tilted her head to lean into his. She then exhaled out any remaining frustration and just held him, waiting for him to relax.

Loki's muscles relented very slowly, one at a time. She could feel each one move, first his stomach, then his shoulders then his neck. When he finally resigned himself fully to her embrace, was when she chose to speak.

"What was she like? Your daughter."

Loki breathed deeply. "Where do I even begin? he spoke somberly. "She's the perfect choice to rule the underworld."

Sif knitted her brow. "What do you mean?" Her lips uttered the words gently just above his cheek.

"She takes delight in torturing the living," Loki said. "Yet she shows mercy to the damned, using her magic to...decorate the realm. She's really quite gifted."

"At decorating?"

"Decorating..." Loki lifted a timid hand and placed it on Sif's forearm, which spanned across his clavicle. "And torturing." Once his fingers settled, his thumb kept moving, petting her skin with a small motion.

There was a hitch in Sif's breath. "She did this to you."

"I was admittedly impressed." Loki attempted to make light of the situation, but his voice remained dark. "It's going to take me days to heal."

"Why would she do this?"

"She's very bitter," Loki admitted. "She blames me for her curse and assumes her mother spotless through it all, siding with her completely."

These tragedies were all beyond Sif's comprehension. She couldn't imagine, even having been raised an orphan, how such a broken family would make her feel. She had no verbal response, only this show of affection which she hoped told him to keep confiding in her, and know he could trust her. She tightened her hold on him, dropping her lips to rest on his bare shoulder.

He tilted his head, just enough to see her eyes. "Sif," he said in a near whisper. "I need to...confess something to you."

"You can tell me anything," she assured, her words murmured into his skin.

His eyes shifted in response and he stalled. His mouth opened as if to speak but he couldn't find the words.

Sif angled her gaze up at him. It was actually a endearing change of pace, the silver tongue stunted, his mind too exhausted to function at full capacity. She then found herself growing more concerned
with his condition than what he had to say. He had literally been to Hel and back and badly needed to rest. She could see it in his reddened eyes. Whatever it was he was trying to confess was clearly taking a toll, on top of all his other injuries. He didn't need to tell her anything now, she decided. It could wait until tomorrow, or the next day. All she wanted from him now was one final...something.

She lifted her head to line up with his then closed some distance between their mouths. She wanted him to feel her words more than hear them. "Don't worry about it," she whispered. She then kissed him, deeply, pulling him as close as physically possible. He kissed her back, responding with a short noise, and then an eager tongue. He tasted alive and intense, despite his condition. Her body ignited with both a nostalgic lust and a dawning desire. She was liable to ravage him into critical condition, yet their imbalance of bodily strength kept her from doing so.

She could feel him quickly withering in her hold, physical limitations consuming him before she could. Regrettably, she needed to let him rest.

Taking his face in her hands, she slowly separated their mouths, stealing a couple more kisses before shifting out from behind him. He had closed his eyes and it didn't look like they would open again anytime soon. She moved her hands down his torso and guided his body to lay flat, tucking a pillow beneath his head. She then knelt at the bedside and pet his softening features with an undeniable longing. As quickly as she knew he could heal, it wouldn't be quick enough. She wanted to climb onto him in this very moment. Explain to him with her untamed body just how crazy he made her. Punish him for how deeply he mystified her, and how complicated he had made her life.

"How dare you," she whispered on an exhale meant to collect herself. She continued to stroke his hairline.

He managed the faintest of smiles, despite teetering on the brink of unconsciousness. She could tell he had one last thing to say, always had to have the last word, the cheeky snake. Sif watched with anticipation as his lips parted. She never would have predicted what up came out.

"Thank you, darling Sif."

Accompanying song: Can't Help Falling In Love, Elvis cover by Bono
Loki closed the spell book by its back cover. For the five-hundredth and seventy-third time, or something close to that. He could recite it contents backwards by now, while asleep, every spell a part of his fabric as much as blood and bone. He could recite every book in this room for that matter, perhaps even rewrite them into scripts for tacky vampire love stories, then go live off the fat of the land in Hollywood. That was how one truly became a king on Midgard, he now realized. How dreadfully dull.

Yet, still a scenario more appealing than spending another night staring at the four walls of his childhood bedroom, driving himself to the brink of insanity wondering where one of his wood carvings had disappeared to. He had always had three, lined up side-by-side on the bookshelf, carved by his own daggers and juvenile hands: a falcon, an otter, and a salmon.

And somebody has bloody ran off with the otter!

Loki tossed the book on the floor, creating a loud thud amidst the quiet night air. He was so bored. He couldn't take this anymore. His mind was not meant to muck about with petty quandaries and novice conjuring. He needed a challenge, needed some excitement. He was liable to raze all of Gladsheim and take full credit for it just to watch on in amusement as Thor's face turned a temperamental shade of pink. That would surely occupy his remaining recovery time with a laugh or two.

Unfortunately, outright chaos was not an option at this point in time. Loki had to win the hearts of the people, not skewer them. He was already most of the way there, what with the buzz he kept hearing about the banquet being held in his honor. Apparently they were bringing in the finest talent in Asgard to supply the food and entertainment. He even heard there was to be dancing, a real black tie affair as they say.

He was actually looking forward to this banquet, and not only for the mischief he could arouse in it, but for the subject matter. Finally, Asgard was learning how throw a proper party. Perhaps he would wait until the post-ceremony reveling to spike the mead barrels with his signature—and very much undiscriminating—aphrodisiac spell. It would be more preferable that people actually have their wits about them while he gave his speech. Then after that, they could stagger off to go make passes at the livestock, as they had done in the past.

Mother always had a laugh at that one.

Shame she would miss this party, the homecoming she had always hoped for Loki. He could picture her now, adorned in resplendent silks, sparkling with her finest jewels as she looked upon him with a unique fondness, a pride designated only for him...

A creeping ache spread into Loki's heart, a pain more severe than a sharp inhale across the mending flesh of his lung. Not this again. Not another spiraling detour into grief when he should be
focusing on more progressive thoughts.

Such as, he cleared his head, how he was going to keep Sif from spilling everything she knew to Thor.

Loki could tell she was at a breaking point with their secrets. Despite his pleading, it would only be a matter of time before she talked. She couldn't help it. It was in her nature, a trait both irritating and admirable. If only she understood that the truth would come out eventually, but it must be timed appropriately when dealing with Thor and the mindless masses. Nobility and politics were forever a tricky balance.

And then there was the subject of Ollerus. He was a precious gift Loki had yet to unwrap, the one secret he would leave in Sif's hands, what with it being hers from the start. She would know when the time was right to unite them. Loki could only hope it was soon.

"I know that look," came an intrusive and impish voice, belonging to the other teenager lingering in his thoughts. Loki's eyes shot to the window where he watched a swirl of green dust materialize into a semi-translucent projection of his daughter. She was using the same spell Mother had used to visit him in his cell.

Loki wasn't surprised to see her. She was sat casually on the sill, decrepit legs crossed in front of her, picking loose threads from her fishnet gloves. "It's one of hope," she continued. "A refreshing sight. A rarity in my realm."

"Hela..." Loki steeled himself. "Have you come to gloat over the wounds you have bound me with?"

"Oh, Loki..." She sang, lolling her head to the side to meet his gaze. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

Was not addressing him 'Father' supposed to upset him? She would have to do better than that. "Shall I answer you honestly?"

Hel laughed. "There's some ironic comeback just beyond my reach about you and honesty and Helheim freezing over.

"That's because you haven't fully grown into your old man's wit," Loki quipped. "Perhaps that's the reason for your visit? To gain instruction from my fount of cleverness."

"Instruction you say?" she countered. "Are you giving lessons on how to properly throw your lover under the bus? I'll admit that's one I haven't learned yet."

So it's hardball she wanted to play. "You must first obtain a lover before you can betray them. And given my high standards for approval and your lack of charm, it could take you a while."

"Shows how little you know," Hel defended with an obvious lie. "I've lost count of lovers already, what with all the hottie dark elf boys occupying my realm. They're the best kissers you know. They got those extra long tongues, and—"

"It seems you need instruction in liesmithing more than anything," Loki cut in, shielding his thoughts from the images she was trying to bombard them with. These imagined dark elves should be grateful they don't exist. No being who stuck their tongue down the throat of a Lokisdottir deserved even a cursed reality.

"Okay," Hel played along. "But only if you teach using recent examples, such as the lies you're using to string along your war goddess. Or should I say, my war goddess..."
"Is that the purpose of your visit?" Loki asked coolly. "To remind me of our bargain?" He was suddenly struck by a fear that Hel hadn't come alone.

"Someone give the man a prize."

"I assure you, I have not forgotten." Loki swung his legs over the side if the bed, bare feet planting on the pleasantly cold floor. It hurt to stand up but he did it anyway.

Hel watched him curiously. "Nice pants." He was still wearing simple draw string linens which regrettably only came in shades of white.

"It's funny you should mention The Lady Sif." Loki began taking feeble steps toward the door, keeping a lofty resolve despite his limp. He refused to use the cane Eir left for him. "I was just about to visit her." He pulled the door open and stepped into the hall.

Hel followed him, as predicted, her illusion levitating directly behind him.

"Seeing how," Loki continued calmly, "I could lose her any day to your mother's pettiness, I should really get as much enjoyment out of her as possible."

Hel scoffed in disgust as she drifted up to Loki's side. "I have half a mind to believe you're not putting on a show."

"Then you're only half the fool you appear to be."

Hel blinked, her nose crinkling while she deciphered his meaning, or at least believed she deciphered it. "You're despicably loathsome."

Loki's smirk flattened to a satisfied smile, a flawless performance.

"Was Mother nothing more than a cheap romp under the sheets too?" Hel said, her voice wavering. "I almost feel sorry for this warrior. She knows not the depravity she accepts into her bed."

Loki stopped upon reaching the doors to Sif's bedroom. "Well, here we are." He looked innocently to Hel and gestured at the doors. "Perhaps you would like to inform her personally of my lowly character. But please be advised that I will spare us no modestly simply because you are in the room."

Hel's jaw dropped. "You are sick," she scolded. "Twisted in ways even I can't comprehend."

"I will take that as a compliment." He reached for the door handle. "What will it be daughter, in or out?"

Hel's face became the picture of tragedy. "Through my veins pumps the blood of pure villainy." She made her departure as melodramatically as possible, her illusion distorting as it faded, her words echoing in her sparkling wake.

Loki sighed, his chest sinking while he dropped the act. He found no satisfaction in tricking his daughter, but he had no choice. She couldn't know the extent to which he cared for Sif. He would rather Hel despise the very core of his being than believe Sif's afterlife was a worthwhile bargaining chip. He wanted Angrboda's vengeance directed at him where it should be, not at his lover.

 Granted, he still had faith Sif could easily defend herself against any threat, what with the sword now held at his throat.
"Is this how you greet all of your visitors?" Loki asked the sliver of Sif he could see through the cracked door.

Sif exhaled and lowered her sword, opening the door wider. "Why are you talking to yourself outside of my bedroom?" She crossed her arms and leaned into the threshold. "You should be in bed."

He had to play this cool. "I am going stir crazy." That wasn't a lie. "Does it have to be my bed I recover in? Won't any bed suffice so long as I am resting?" Loki smiled.

"You wish to sleep in my bed?" Sif became puzzled. "Did you have a nightmare? Become scared of the dark?"

"Something like that." He raised his brow, suggestively. Seduction was a good enough cover.

Sif eyed him suspiciously, taking in the entirety of him with contemplation. "And what if I refuse?"

Loki flattened his palm to his bandaged chest. "Then I shall return to my quarters, a victim of both insomnia and heartache."

Sif rolled her eyes and snorted, taking his cheesy line for exactly what it was. She then bit back a smile, dropping her gaze to the floor. "I really hate you sometimes," she confessed, opening the door wider to allow him in.

Loki entered, pleased, his eyes scanning her body as he drew closer to it. The slip covering her flesh was whisper thin, merely a tease of modesty as it peaked out from beneath her fur cloak. One might mistake her for a damsel in distress.

"You look lovely," he offered, pulling her closer with a hand to her hip. The silk of the gown may as well been the warmth of her skin. This would be a most pleasurable means of distracting her while he conjured a protective spell to encompass her bedroom.

Sif shut the door with a strong flick of her wrist, then her sword clattered to the floor. She glanced down at his hand on her body before her eyes met his, her head tilting. "Your body hasn't a chance at recovery if you continue along this path."

"We clearly have differing ideas of recovery." His other hand shoved the cloak from her shoulders. It fell into a squash of thick folds at her naked feet.

"Is that how it is going to be?" Sif locked a set of sultry eyes upon him while she loosened the drawstring at his waistband. She then helped the linen's fall from his hips to his ankles, the exposure to the night air an immediate caress to his skin.

He stepped out of his pants, bringing their bodies flush. His hand slid down from her hip over the curve of her form, one of the few areas of her body that wasn't chiseled by lean muscle. He clenched a handful of flesh and fabric. His other hand toyed with the tiny strap of her gown, but it did not displace it.

Sif's breath hitched. She glanced down at their imbalance of modesty. "Aren't you going to retaliate?"

"I like this," Loki said, tracing the gown's neckline with gentle fingers. "I never get to see you this way. You were always fully armored, or not at all."

Loki must have said something right for he suddenly found himself hauled onto her bed, straddled
at the hips, and blinded by a kiss surrounded in the curtains of her dark, wavy locks. There would be no secretive spell casting now until she had finished with him, but he was okay with that. Both of their senses were sharp enough to detect a threat, even while bombarded by a wanton ache, pulled from the raw grinding of her dampening heat on his now hardened cock.

His hands dragged up the length of her body, from bare thighs, into the dip of her waist, and over her perfect handfuls of breasts. She moaned into his mouth and rocked her body into his hands, offering herself freely. There was still a layer of silk between them from the waist up and that is how Loki wanted to keep it, the press of hardening nipples into his palm an elegant sensation when veiled by a façade of modesty. It suited her well.

With a strategic lift and angling of her hips, Loki found himself enveloped by her wetness, a slow and clenching massage from tip to base. He threw his head back, making some kind of untamed noise. She attacked his neck and he laughed blissfully. She was amazing, knowing exactly where to scratch, bite and bruise where there hadn't been an injury before. Her breasts only ever grazed the bandage across his chest while her hips seemed intent on devouring him fully.

He ached for her in all of the right ways, his pulse scalding through his wounds and throbbing deep inside of her. The flesh on his thighs became raw from her friction, yet their bodies moved as one. It wasn't long before she ripped a climax from him, his body still too weak to draw out the spiking ascent into momentary nirvana. He heard himself growl as pained pleasure coursed through every tensing muscle and stinging wound.

He then made another noise, drawn out, one of descent. His arms limply wrapped over her back and his fingers roamed through endless falling locks. She cried her own song of release against his mouth, her teeth threatening to claim his upper lip, and then she sank softly into his hold.

Loki's body burned with a life he hadn't felt in years. He hummed, satiated, as he pressed his cheek to her forehead. She had slide to his side and settled their sweaty mess of limbs into a comfortable cuddle, her face nestled into his neck.

"I haven't felt like this since...well, it's been a while." Loki could only confess so much at once, never one to wallow in sentiment. "I wasn't allowed any conjugal visits in my cell."

"It hasn't been that long," Sif teased in a husky voice, muffled by the flesh of his neck. Fortunately she wasn't was one for gushing pillow talk either. "I have no doubts you found some mortals to feed on before you were apprehended."

"When in Rome," Loki replied. "Or in my case, Germany, New York, even New Mexico now that I think about it."

"Why am I not surprised," Sif droned. "I dread to think of the mortal bastards you have left in your wake."

Well then, that was blunt. "I haven't a single one."

"That you know of."

"I am sure of it," Loki said confidently. "Mastery of magic allows one to...control the spread of their legacy." Probably the most sensible spell he ever learned. "That and most of the mortals I bedded were men."

Sif lifted her head to give him an odd look. "You're not joking are you."

Loki smiled, putting his complete lack of regret on display. "You think I am perverse?"
She seemed conflicted. "I probably should..." She then smirked, her eyes scanning hungrily over his mouth and neck. "But am instead getting turned on."

"Oh dear," Loki chuckled. "I regret to say I have not the strength for another go."

Sif tilted her head, her expression softening. "We shall see."

Loki found that response disconcerting. Was it a tease or a warning? He truly had not the strength to take her on again. Fortunately, it seemed he wouldn't have to, for she had settled her head back into his neck.

"What of yourself?" he asked. "Surely this libido has ravished unsuspecting soldiers over the years."

"Yes," she replied lightly, awkwardly. "I got a little here. A little there."

"You are a horrible liar." Loki didn't know whether to laugh or feel pity. He instead yelped, for Sif was now pinching his one exposed nipple.

"And where was I supposed to find time?" she griped. "I am committed to both my duty and my child. I had not the freedoms of a rebellious prince."

He bristled at that. "Do not expect pity from me for raising our child alone. That was your decision, just as it had been my decision to...oh, how did you phrase it, stay in the shadow of my misfortunes?" He wouldn't forgive her for that one, not yet. She had no right comparing her experiences to his own. She was an orphan dropped on the doorstep of serendipity, raised by the ferocious skill of Valkyries, shaping her perfectly into the life she desired. She never had the burden of a shrouded identity.

"I will cut you." Her head lifted again, this time with a glare. "Are we really going to talk about this now?"

"You tell me," he countered.

"No, we are not," she spoke adamantly, not hesitating to claim the control he was handing her. "You will subdue your bitterness. For tomorrow I am going to tell Thor about Ollerus."

He didn't see that one coming. Yet it pleased him to hear it.

Sif continued, softening her tone. "I want to start making arrangements to move him into Gladsheim."

There was a twist forming in Loki's gut, feelings of joy and fear combating each other. "Will I...?"

"Of course," Sif assured. "I will bring him to you first."

Loki could only respond by connecting their lips in raw sincerity, the safest show of gratitude he knew. He cupped her cheek with one hand and drew out the kiss with a passionate hum. Sif accepted his affection at first, yet broke the kiss before he was finished.

"He will not meet you under your pretense of redemption." She spoke only a short distance from his lips, her gaze resolute but her voice pleading. "You too will bring an end to your deception, your actions from here out proving to him and to everyone, what is in your heart."

Loki blinked, silenced by her...faith? Her hope? The undeniable weight of both her body and words
that allowed him not an inch of wiggle room? She knew not what she asked of him, for she would never regard him this highly if he revealed all of his secrets, namely the bargain that jeopardized this idealized life she pictured for them.

Which reminded him, he'd better get to work on conjuring the detection spell. It should have been cast already had he not been...distracted. Fortunately, he needed only his mind to cast the spell—he was just that good—freeing his hands and his tongue to respond to her appropriately. "I intend to, Sif." He stroked her cheek with his thumb. "I truly do. And soon. My son will be granted the truths he deserves. That any child deserves."

His words flowed easily even when his mind was conjuring, just like they had when Thor knelt over him after the battle on Svartalfheim. It was a shame that true nobility repeatedly blinded itself with idealism. It was also a blessing, however, for without hope's naivety, Loki would not be here at this very moment, entwined in a loving tangle of sticky flesh.

He put the finishing touches on the spell. It was designed to alert him when anyone approached Sif's bedroom, and present him with the option to allow the visitor passage or to shock them into paralysis. It was a brilliant design, the same Eir had constructed to protect Ollerus at night. Very few magicians could boast abilities comparable to the great Valkyrie elder's. Hel and Angrboda were truly foolish to think they had a chance against his magic, especially when teamed with Sif's complementary battle prowess.

They would never have her, for she clearly was meant to be his.

"We will make it right," was his lady's response before she captured his lips again.

He purred with a smile, his mind now at ease and letting him fully kiss her back. There was none quite like Sif. She would be both his redemption and his damnation, irresistible honor wrapped in the skin of an untamed beast, hungry for his touch and brave enough for his mysteries. No one desired his mischief quite like she did. For even in love, Sif sought a formidable challenge, a foe worthy of her courage.

And that was why Loki knew he loved her in return.
"Are you certain you don't want me to join you?" Loki asked from across the room, propping himself up on an elbow. The sight of him in her bed was strange in the daylight, unnatural. Rarely in the past had they spent entire nights together. This was all new territory.

And it was exciting!

"I am certain." Sif pulled the chain mail shell over her head, letting it fall around her form with a rippling jingle. "Thor should be relaxed when I break the news to him. That won't be the case if you are in the room."

Loki shrugged. Even he couldn't argue with that. "Are you relaxed?" he asked.

"I am ready." Sif pulled her chest plate from the rack and collected her greaves and bracers.

"Ready for war, apparently." Loki watched with intrigue as she suited up, her hands working deftly over buckles while her eyes remained on him. She could armor herself blindfolded. "Is all that steel and leather necessary for a confession?"

"I am going to the training grounds after I meet with Thor." Sif crossed the room, greaves in hand, and took a seat on the bed. "No thanks to you, I missed morning practice with Volstagg and Fandral."

Loki seemed proud of himself for that. "Routines are made to be broken."

Sif shook her head, bending over to fasten the armor over her boot. "I could say the same about your body." She cast him a sidelong glance. "Just because something is enjoyable to break, doesn't mean it should be."

"Speaking of my body..." Loki moved across the bed, pulling himself up to sit beside her. He still hadn't put any clothes on, his modesty saved only by the sheet covering his lower half. "Who will apply my balm this afternoon if you will be training?"

Sif eyed him up and down. "One of Eir's apprentices. Be nice to her."

Loki scooted in closer, a devilish look flashing in his eye. "I make no promises." He began pulling free the pieces of her hair that were caught under her armor, his fingers grazing her face and neck wherever possible. "When did you stop wearing a pony tail?"

Sif almost protested being fusssed over, but then her skin reacted with a warm tingle to his cool touch. She soaked it all in, keeping a soft gaze on him. "After your fall from Bifrost. I wore it down for your memorial. And then it just stayed that way."

Loki's movements slowed. He studied her eyes, searching, skeptical. He hadn't expected that response from her.
"That's the truth," Sif continued. "It comes out much easier than you would think." She then smiled.

"Is this practice for meeting with my brother?" He seemed awkward now. It was cute.

"Does it have to be anything other than what it is?" Sif leaned in.

"I suppose not." His eyes fluttered. She then took him by the neck and kissed him, deeply. His muscles gave and he melted into her, hands cupping her cheeks to keep her close.

Every kiss with Loki felt like a mad scramble to make up for lost time: hot, urgent, and bittersweet. As if despite their differences, their clashes, and their past sins against each other, the connection of their lips should have never been denied. Sif didn't pretend to understand it. She only knew it felt right. A soldier learned first off to trust their senses, even if they overruled conventional battle tactics.

Sif was never one for convention.

She broke the kiss but stayed close, meeting his shifty eyes with calm assurance. "I'm glad you came to me last night."

Loki smiled, biting down on words that she wished he would just let flow. "I am too."

Sif got up to leave but still had to steal one more quick kiss. She swore his lips were some kind of magnetic force. Finally she moved for the door, pausing only to toss him the linen pants he had abandoned on the floor.

"Wish me luck." She smiled over her shoulder.

"I believe I just did." Loki watched her with a fond gaze. "How will you approach him?"

Sif opened the door, pausing again to meet his eyes. "Truthfully." She then lifted her chin and left the room.

Her boots echoed confidently through the palace as she ventured onward. Today was going to be a good day. Thor may get upset but her actions would ultimately be for the better and she trusted him to see that. Too long had she drawn out these lies. It was time to bring an end to the thirteen-year long battle against her own better judgment. Finally, the burden would be lifted, a prospect that elated her.

Or perhaps she was just giddy from getting laid. Regardless, she was ready to bring about change.

She found Thor in his feasting hall, just as the guard had informed.

"Lady Sif!" Thor welcomed, stepping in from the balcony.

"Good morning, my King." She stopped just short of the two steps and curtsied.

"Please Sif, no formalities." He met her at the base of the steps. "In this room, we are equals."

She smiled at him. Making confessions to a friend was much better than making them to a king.

"Why weren't you at training?" Thor asked.

Truth. That is why she was here. "I was with Loki."
"Ah." Thor didn't seem as surprised as he should be. "Now he's got you neglecting training to play nurse maid? I will have a talk with him."

"He spent the night with me."

Thor blinked, now appropriately surprised. He then shrugged, his mood shift difficult to read beyond the odd look he was giving her. "What...do you wish me to say?"

Sif felt a small jab in her chest. She had hoped he would react more fondly than this, what with all his past attempts at playing match maker.

"Does this not please you?"

She watched Thor's chest sink, a very disconcerting sight. "I don't know how to feel about it. You did just spring it on me."

"You appear disappointed."

"Possibly." He was searching his own mind.

"Were you not encouraging me to spend time with him upon his return?" A creeping worry was now swaying Sif's confidence.

"I was." Thor became conflicted. "But I have to confess, the romance of my brother's return has diminished. I am happy to have him back, and I will always be grateful for his sacrifice...but he is still Loki."

Reality was truly the master of ambush. Sif felt her resolve crumble all around her. "So you disprove of my actions."

"I have always supported your decisions, Sif," Thor said. "But I don't know how to feel about this." He wasn't making this any easier. "I do not want to see you hurt."

"I can take care of myself," Sif attested.

"Then you do not need my approval." Thor placed his hand on her shoulder, a calming gesture. "Truthfully, I want what is best for both of you. But what I want and what I think possible are no longer in harmony."

It was oddly comforting to hear him say that. Not for her own situation but for the truth Thor would eventually learn about Loki's death. His intuition was sharp. That would help cushion the blow when Loki came to him. "Then leave it in my hands."

Thor squeezed her shoulder. "Guard your heart, Lady Sif."

"I always do," she said, restoring some confidence. She knew what she was doing, knew who she was dealing with. She had been the one to journey to Lyngvi with Loki after all, not Thor. She was there to watch his heart break over the torture of his child. And she was there, upon his return, to see the pain he harbored for his daughter. She also watched, last night, the joy that glistened his eyes when he learned he would get to meet their son.

Thor did not know, or at least not remember, the side of Loki that was a father. Sif did.

"Thor," Sif said. "There's more I need to tell you," She then opened her mouth but her words were hijacked by the boisterous entrance of Volstagg and Fandral, their boot steps thudding, their leather
creaking, their booming voices regaling the morning's battle training.

Thor shifted his gaze between Sif and the warriors, his mouth spreading with an uncertain smile. "Good morrow, friends," he greeted with only half his usual volume.

"Thor! Sif!" Volstagg snagged a handful of dried fruits from the table as he approached them. "You both should have been there this morning."

Sif widened her eyes at Thor, making a frustrated noise only he could here.

Fandral poured himself a glass of wine. "Where were you, Sif?" Thor tried to cut in but Fandral kept talking. "We had a new challenger this morning. A real brute, you would have loved him. He had a mace as big and ugly as he was. Some claim he was half troll. He certainly smelled like it."

Leave it to Fandral to distract her from her purpose. "Was he actually a challenge?"

"Fandral wouldn't know," Volstagg said with a mouthful. "He refused to go up against him. Said a clumsy mace was no match for his rapier."

"Tis true." Fandral nodded assuredly. "I will not lower my standards for an easy win."

"It is not the weapon that is clumsy, but the wielder," Sif argued. She couldn't stand Fandral's snobbery at weapons. "I intend to prove this to you at our next duel."

"I anticipate it," Fandral countered. "It is time you were taught what happens when you neglect specialization and spread yourself thin with boorish weapons."

"Thor," Volstagg pleaded. "Can't you use your power as King to shut them up? It's the same old debate, over and over."

"Yes, I shall," Thor commanded, eyeing Fandral and Volstagg. "I'm afraid I have to ask you two to leave us. The Lady Sif and I were about to discuss—"

"That won't be necessary, Thor," Sif interrupted, resolutely. "You are all my kinsman and you should all know the truth." They were going to find out anyway. What did she have to lose by confessing to them all.

The mood in the room mellowed, awkwardly. Fandral looked to Volstagg who could only shrug. Then both of them looked to Thor who shifted his eyes to Sif. She steeled herself, meeting all three sets of eyes and taking a deep breath.

"I have been keeping a secret for a while now. I am not proud of myself for it but that is simply how circumstances played out." She now met Thor's eyes alone. "I have a son. His name is Ollerus and he lives in Glasir with the Valkyries. He is Loki's."

Both Volstagg and Fandral's mouths dropped. Sif could see in her peripheral the looks they exchanged, trying to decide if someone should say something. Their reaction wasn't Sif's focus though. Her eyes were on Thor, who was reacting in the way she had most feared. He looked hurt, confused, and betrayed. He turned from her and moved slowly toward the balcony.

"How old is this boy?" Thor asked somberly, his back turned to everyone.

"He is thirteen," Sif replied

"Thirteen," Thor echoed. "You have kept this from me for that long."
"Thor, please." Sif needed to explain herself.

"Perhaps it was my mistake to partner you so often with Loki," Thor's voice cracked. "You have learned his art of deception."

Sif's shoulders sank with her chest. "Let me explain."

She began searching for appropriate words when she felt a set of warm hands on her upper arms. Volstagg turned her and engulfed her into a hefty hug.

"Finally!" His voice had an exaggerated mirth. Sif could tell he was trying to lighten the mood of the room. He was the only one who could since Fandral had retreated into his glass of wine. "I am no longer the only family man among us." He broke the hug and held her at arm's length, his fuzzy mouth stretched in a genuine smile. "This is truly wonderful news."

"Is it?" Fandral chimed in from across the table, refilling his wine glass. "If I recall, fate doesn't fondly embrace the offspring of the Trickster Prince."

"Ollerus is not cursed," Sif defended. "He is not a beast, nor is he ill or corrupted. I raised him to be pure of heart. He grew up among the nobility of the Valkyries."

Fandral contemplated her words. "Why not raise him here?"

"Because he has blue skin," Sif said without a trace of shame.

Thor turned around at that, eyes locked on Sif. "You have known since your son's birth of Loki's heritage yet you kept it to yourself?"

"No, Thor." She was relieved to hear him speak. He sounded hurt but his temper was kept at bay. "When Ollie was born I thought he was cursed. I believed we were both afflicted by Angrboda's witchcraft and jealously."

"There's a name we haven't heard in a while," Fandral added.

"Let her speak," Thor ordered.

"I didn't know what to do besides return to Glasir," Sif continued. "The All-Father had just banished Loki's other children. I feared if I had the child in Gladsheim, he would have suffered the same fate."

Thor took a deep breath, absorbing it all in. "So you, the Valkyries, and Loki, you were all part of this secret." He shook his head. "Heimdall must have known too."

"Yes, he did." Sif paused. This was the part that was hardest. "But Loki did not. At least not by my confession."

For the first time this morning, Sif lowered her gaze. She could see in the corner of her eyes all three sets of shoulders drop. Even Fandral could sympathize for a father being denied his son. That just wasn't something that was done among the Aesir. "He found out by other means. He saw through my lie. That is why—"

"That is the reason he cut your hair," Thor said, defeated.

The room went painfully silent, everyone thinking the same thing. Could Sif have played a role in Loki's fall? Was her deception a catalyst in his madness? It could have been, but Sif refused to be
burdened by that worry anymore than she already had been. She had shed her tears of guilt. It was time to move on, to right the wrongs. Loki will always be responsible for his own actions, regardless of what pain she, or Thor, or the All-Father may have caused him.

Sif's chin restored its comfortable height. "That is the reason. But that is in the past. I have made my apologies and now I intend to unite father and son."

Thor and the Two took a few moments to exchange questioning and thoughtful glances, wordless communication among her comrades that Sif was still learning how to translate, unspoken understanding among men alone. It was moments like these that reminded her why there was no such title as Thor and The Warriors Four.

"When will this reunion take place?" Thor asked. "At the banquet?"

"After that," Sif said. "Once things have settled. The sight of Ollie's skin will be a shock to our people. This needs to be handled delicately."

"Indeed." Thor nodded. A slight dread twisted his features. "What is this boy like? You say he is without curse."

"His name is Ollerus," Sif repeated with emphasis. Whatever doubts Thor had to her son's worthiness were about to be squashed. "He is everything to me. He is smart, brave, gifted with the bow, and the most noble soul."

"Gee, I wonder which side he took after," Fandral murmured into his glass.

Sif pretended not to hear him and continued. "To meet him is to fall in love with him. He is adored by the Valkyries. They see not his blue skin or Jotunn markings. I have faith he can win the heart of any he meets."

"I get the feeling you think rather highly of your b—hey!" Fandral was cut off by a hefty shove from Volstagg.

"Desist the commentary, my verbose comrade."

Thor ignored the Two, focused on Sif and her words. His mood seemed to be lightening. "A boy raised among the Valkyries..." He scratched his beard thoughtfully. "How very intriguing."

"Is it really so different from a maiden raised by Valkyries?" Sif challenged.

"I suppose not." Thor nodded, even smiled. "I look forward to meeting this b— To meeting your Ollerus. My nephew..."

Sif returned his smile. "He is certainly anxious to meet you. But he will first meet his father."

Thor dropped his gaze, hiding his reaction. He clearly had his doubts.

"This calls," Volstagg announced, moving to the table and snatching the wine bottle from Fandral, "for a celebration." He filled three wine glasses and handed one each to Thor and Sif. He then claimed his own and lifted it high. "For my children have just gained a cousin."

"Ease up a moment, oh rotund one," Fandral spoke up with concern. "Am I the only one here who worries for this boy?"

"What sort of thing is that to say?" Sif snapped. "Am I not his mother?"
Fandral was taken aback for a moment, seeing for the first time the ferocity of Sif's maternal nature. Of course it didn't stop him from speaking. "You are about to introduce Loki into his life."

"Would you rather a boy never meet his father?" Sif defended. Fandral had no rebuttal.

Thor stepped up next to Sif who was now standing opposite Fandral at the large banquet table. "For all of my brother's imbalances," he said calmly to Fandral, "I have seen how he behaves in the presence of his children. It is his most sincere of moments, comparable with his devotion to our Mother." He then turned to Sif. "I trust you know what is best for Ollerus."

Sif studied Thor carefully. She could detect apprehension behind his words. She raised her glass to him anyway. "I thank you for your support."

Thor raised his glass. Volstagg raised his higher. Sif glanced at him with gratitude. Then the three looked to Fandral, whose glass was still lowered.

"I think you all are entirely too trusting," Fandral said.

"Do not mistake hope for trust," Sif countered.

Fandral squinted at her, studying her, the corner of his mouth curling after an inquisitive moment. "You have taken him back as your lover haven't you? I can tell by your glow."

Sif's cheeks immediately went hot. "What business is it of yours?"

Volstagg groaned, swirling the contents of his glass and staring hard at it.

Sif shifted her glance to him. "If you have something to say on the matter, by all means, say it."

"I just..." Volstagg said, treading lightly. "Think you might be rushing into it."

"I agree," Thor added.

Sif whipped her head in his direction. "What happened to supporting my decisions?"

"My support does not come without concern," Thor said. "It has only been a few days since Loki's return. It seems you are making rather large decisions with very little deliberation."

Sif's shoulders knotted up around her neck. She hadn't considered what all of this looked like on the outside, how everyone believed she had only been interacting with Loki since his return. They knew not of all the prior conversations, the apologies, the confessions, the haunting journey to Fenrir's isle. These were all events she was depending on Loki to reveal.

Sif was regretting that choice now, for what could she say from here out that wasn't a lie but also didn't overstep her agreement with Loki? Where did her loyalties lie?

She took a deep breath. She knew exactly where her loyalties lied, and it wasn't in a bed with a liessmith. That was where her love was, a different love then what she had for her comrades. For her King.

Sif steeled herself again. It was time for more truths to come out. If Loki objected then she would deal with him. He should have never expected her to remain quiet this long.

"You are right, Thor." Sif lowered her glass but lifted her chin. "It would appear that way to anyone not knowing what I know."
Thor became baffled, as did the Two. "What?"

"What the infernally noble Lady Sif is saying, Brother," Loki's voice slide intrusively onto the scene, "is that I never actually died."

All four heads jerked to the entrance of the room where Loki now stood, dressed fully in his dark leathers, hands clasped behind his back. The first gaze he met in return was Sif's, which explained his forced smile. She met his eyes with a genuine smile, one of relief and admiration. She didn't care at this point if he would be upset with her later. Finally, things were being set right.

But first there would be Thor's reaction...

He wasted no time in advancing on his brother. "Why am I not surprised."

Loki's eyes only betrayed a glint of fear before he made advancing steps toward Thor. Granted it was a pained limp but still impressively brave.

"Explain yourself quickly, Loki," Thor ordered in a darkened voice, stopping once he breached Loki's comfort zone.

Loki accepted the challenge. "What you witnessed on Svartalfheim was an illusion." Loki spoke with a misplaced pride. "My death, my resurrection, all a trick."

Sif shut her eyes, wincing. Loki had the ability to break the news smoothly, the gift of words that could ease Thor into the truth, but was he going to use them that way? Clearly not. It's like he wanted Thor to shove him violently into the closest column, which is exactly what was happening now.

"Admit it, Thor." Loki's voice was pinched by the tight grip Thor had on his neck. "It was my best show yet."

"Why!?" Thor growled.

"Because it was exactly what you wanted!" Loki's tone and intensity now matched Thor's. "My sacrifice saved you the burden of my execution."

"I only threatened to kill you if you betrayed me again!"

"Then here is your chance, Brother." Loki's eyes lit up. "For I have indeed betrayed you."

Thor tightened his grip on Loki's neck and slammed him harder into the column.

"Thor, no!" Sif called out. She watched his hand reach for Mjolnir. She was about to intervene but Volstagg held her back.

Thor's hand merely hovered over his weapon. He did not grab it.

"You let yourself be fooled," Loki strained, "because the image of a martyred brother reflects much better on the Mighty Thor's reputation, than that of a villainous brother who terrorized the world he is sworn to protect."

Thor was incredulous. "How dare you think me so petty."

"Prove me wrong," Loki would not back down. "You know as well as I do that sword would not have caused my sudden death."
"You died in my arms!"

"That wound would have taken hours to kill me. What if I merely fainted?"

Thor began faltering. "Your skin changed color. It dried up, as do frost giants when they die"

"So now you're an expert on Jotunn physiology?"

"What would you have me do?!" Tears welled in Thor's eyes.

"Anything but leave me to rot!" Loki's face streaked with his own tears. "Admit it, Thor. You wanted me dead."

The room became eerily silent. Thor loosened his hold on Loki's neck and backed away, shaking his head. He cast Sif and the Two only a quick glance, a disturbing one, before storming out of the room. In retreat.

Loki had won that battle. And it appeared he may have won it with truth.

Sif met Loki's eyes as he propped himself up weakly. It looked like he was about to collapse. Instead he spoke. "Are you happy now, darling?" He peeled his body from the column with a groan, grasping at his chest. "No more secrets. No more lies." He then limped out of the room, leaving Sif and the Two to decipher exactly what it was they had just witnessed.

Sif collapsed into a chair, one hand clutching a fistful of her hair, the other pounding the table.

Volstagg and Fandral had to exchange several glances and attempts at speaking before one of them finally spoke. Of course it was Fandral.

"Perhaps you should rethink the timing of your boy's visit, seeing how his uncle is on the verge of slaughtering his father."

"Is that what you got out of that?" Volstagg countered. "Because I saw something entirely different."

Sif sighed. "What a mess."

"That," Fandral added, "is something we can all agree on."

Now Volstagg sighed, disappointed. "I suppose Loki's banquet will be cancelled now." He shook his head. "Such a shame."

"You only cared about the food," Sif said flatly, her voice drained.

"At least he's being honest," Fandral said, reclaiming his wine glass. Sif glared at him. "What?"

Volstagg claimed the seat next to Sif, throwing his massive arm around her and tugging her to his side. She didn't resist him. It was a welcomed, and a very much needed embrace.

"It is a fine mess indeed you've got yourself into, Luv," said the jolly man. "But don't think for a moment you have to face it alone." He then shifted an expectant gaze to Fandral. "Right?"

Fandral sighed, relenting. He then raised his glass. "Right."

Volstagg raised his glass. "To our newest family member, Ollerus Sifson."
Sif couldn't help but laugh. No one ever called him that before.

"Ollerus Ladyson?" Volstagg suggested.

Sif reclaimed her glass and lifted it. "To Ollie. The boy with the greatest uncles in all the nine realms."

"Here, here," the Two said, and they all clanked their glasses.

Music: Some Nights by Fun
Calculated Risk

Chapter Summary

A short chapter in which Sif deals with the aftermath of everyone's confessions.

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up, I'm going to switch from weekly to bi-monthly updates from here out. With spring just around the corner, my to-do list is growing and chewing into my free time. I would rather delay updates than write them in a hurry.

And in case anyone is wondering, I do have the story arc planned and mostly outlined. There is an end and it will happen...sometime...this summer?

Thank you again for reading and reviewing. Your feedback is so appreciated and welcomed. I hope you stick around for the ride! I promise to keep bringing the unexpected twists and turns. And songs. Gotta have the songs.

The target dummies never stood a chance at remaining vertical and intact. Sif's glaive made certain of that. Each one's demise was designated for each matter pressing on her mind: each regret, each fear, each victory. Unfortunately, there weren't enough dummies. Not counting herself.

Sif fell back against the wall next to the weapons rack, out of targets, out of breath. She then slid down to sit among the spilled dirt and strewn hay of her victims. She was alone. She made certain of that. It was one of the smaller practice areas, the one she typically claimed as hers alone in times like these. The lower ranking soldiers knew when to give her space, unless they sought instruction in humility.

That was a lesson Sif could have afforded before barging in on Thor yesterday with her very haphazard confessions. Confidence and courage were no substitutes for strategy. She should have taken Loki up on his offer to accompany her. At least that way she would have been somewhat prepared for what happened between the brothers.

As much as anyone can prepare for Loki's tactics...

"I thought I would find you here," came a deep feminine timbre. Sif glanced up to see Eir closing the distance between them with unseen steps, her long flowing skirt collecting the debris in her path. Her presence was welcome, unlike that very constant and chaotic presence in her heart.

"Good morning, Elder." Sif watched as Eir moved a crate next to her and took a proper seat. She would never sit in the dirt.

"Volstagg has informed me about what happened," Eir said, her softest tone still stiff in nature, a stark difference to the nurturing manner Frigga had always approached Sif with. "Would you like to talk about it?"
She met her elder's eyes, their warm brown flecked with green in the morning sun, a lovely complement to the rich auburn curls she kept pinned in a neat bun. It appeared she may have neglected a few strands this morning, that or the breeze pulled them loose. Regardless of the cause, it was nice to see even a little of her hair dance freely for a change.

Sif released some tension in her shoulders. "Neither brother will talk to me." She began absently drawing patterns in the dirt with her glaive. "Thor is upset that I didn't tell him about Loki sooner. And Loki is mad because I took it upon myself to tell Thor everything."

"You made the right decision," Eir said, sweeping off the hair stuck to Sif's sweaty forehead. "Your timing has allowed even more truths to be revealed than we expected."

"One very ugly truth," Sif said lowly. They were both referring to Thor's unspoken confession.

"They come in all varieties." Eir always had her follow-up wisdom. "Does it bother you to learn of Thor's...intentions?"

"Of course it does," Sif said. "But it doesn't surprise me. Loki's past crimes wounded Thor very deeply, scarred his heart in a way...that only love can." Sif paused while her own heart sank. "Their battle in, what was it called...New York. It changed Thor, hardened him. It wasn't his brother he brought home in shackles. I believe he saw only an animated corpse."

Eir was silent, contemplating. She looked upon Sif with a rare intrigue, like she does with anyone whose offering her new insight.

"Thor's heart merely seeks closure," Sif continued, speculatively. "I think mourning Loki had become a simpler, easier solution than living with him. Where we once shared hope in Loki's redemption, I see now that I am alone in that."

"You know your friend well," Eir said thoughtfully. "He will not stay angry with you. He is lucky to have you. They both are."

"Are they?" Sif wasn't feeling it. "What if my hope for Loki is nothing but detrimental to us all? Putting my heart on the line is one thing, but when it comes to Thor's and Ollie's...is it a risk worth taking?"

Eir met her eyes again with a look that made Sif tense up. She was going to ask one of those questions, the kind that would spill out Sif's guts the way a blade could.

"What does your heart tell you?"

Did Sif ever call that one! And sure enough, here came the twisting in her gut and a flutter in her chest.

"I know you want what is best for Ollerus," Eir continued, "but what about you? What does bringing Loki back into your life do for you?"

"It ignites me." Sif's quick response surprised even her. She blinked, wondering what exactly she just confessed.

Eir cocked her head, her lips parting. She looked like she wanted to speak but held back, choosing instead to fix an expectant gaze upon Sif.

"Right. You want an explanation." Sif sighed. "But I don't have one for you, Elder. How does one explain it? It has no anatomical charts, or tactical guidelines. There's no rule book. It just happens,
and I feel it," she tapped her fingers on her breastplate, "right here."

Eir smiled something sweet, and then it shifted to something tragic. "That is explanation enough."
She then placed her hand on Sif's and squeezed. "Love never said it was rational."
A Warrior's Heart

Chapter Summary

Poor Sif. She knows she might just be delusional yet she keeps powering through it all. The forward momentum of a warrior's heart cannot be slowed.

Sif was fed up with waiting. She had not the time to make amends on Loki's schedule, not while their son resided patiently in Glasir, descending rapidly into adulthood, ignorant of the life-altering truth awaiting him. She refused to leave for Glasir until she and Loki were on speaking terms again, and he should know this. It was foolish of him to keep avoiding her, prolonging something he had admittedly longed for, and why? Because she forced him into a premature confession?

Granted his confession shed a light on Thor that she hadn't expected, but truth was truth and no matter how ugly it could get, and it belonged in the open. How many times had she told Loki of her unwillingness to lie for him? He shouldn't have expected any less of her in regard of her duty to Thor. This silent treatment he had been giving her for the last two days was completely undeserved and she was through letting him get away with it. For all his acquired knowledge, and all his boasted experience from traveling in and out of the nine realms, Loki could be a bloody child at times.

Her boots clicked disruptively through the great halls of the public library. She knew she would find Loki here now that he was well enough to move about. He always took refuge among the towering bookshelves. She had to ask a librarian to his exact whereabouts given the enormous floor plan of a building she seldom visited, but it was no difficult task to find the brooding prince tucked away in a private corner, ignoring the nearby whispers of curious teenagers who gossiped about the awesomeness of their martyred prince. The kingdom was still in the dark to what their king had just learned.

Sif passed by Loki's fan club, halting their whispers with her sizing-up stare. She was in full armor and knew exactly how intimidating she could be. The adolescents gathered their books and fled, allowing Sif the privacy she wordlessly requested. She then cast her glance to Loki who was obviously ignoring her unmissable presence, pretending to remain engrossed in some tattered tome which lay before him on the table.

Sif veered down an aisle that hid her from Loki's view, drawing closer to him but masking her budding smirk. She could play games too. She noisily sifted through several books, sliding them on and off shelves and flipping their pages with far more force than necessary. The annoyed sigh she heard from the opposite side of the shelf only encouraged her. She began humming and making other nonsensical noises in feigned interest at whatever literature she held, even dared read a few lines aloud.

It was only a matter of time before Loki would object.

"Quite pretending to be literate."

A jab. That was a good sign. Sif took it as her invitation to reveal herself again, rounding the bookshelf and approaching him with a challenging smile. She plopped her book down on his table, its thud echoing throughout the entire philosophy section. She then kicked the chair out that his
were feet propped on and planted herself directly in front on him, half seating herself on the table.

Loki sighed and rolled his eyes, refusing to acknowledge her expectant gaze, which she wouldn't let up on. Finally, after his overly dramatic show of offense, rapping his fingers on the table and looking everywhere but at her face, he met her eyes.

"Have you no concept of how to behave in a library?"

Sif crossed her arms across her breastplate. "Have you no concept of how to behave in general?"

Loki continued to strum his fingers, holding her gaze with a very unimpressed look. "You will now judge the very action you tirelessly spurned me to do?"

Sif raised her brow. "You know as well as I there were more tactful ways to break the news to your brother."

"None of which he deserved." Loki's stare became cold, unblinking.

Sif sighed, dropping her gaze, along with her dominating approach. She didn't come here to lecture him. Even if she had, it was clear he would have none of it, especially on the topic of Thor. "I'm leaving for Glasir in the morning."

Loki responded with less of an edge, closer matching Sif's tone. "You're to leave me alone while your barbarian kinsman decide my fate?"

"I'm going to tell Ollerus the truth." Sif met his eyes again. "It is time the two of you were united."

"That may just happen through the walls of my prison cell."

Sif shook her head. "I won't let that happen."

She gazed at him with softening eyes. Her body then slid from the table's edge, nearly acting on its own accord, and dropped smoothly onto Loki's lap, her legs folding parallel at one side of his thighs. She brushed the backs of her fingers over his now awkward expression, his eyes darting around to see if there was anyone watching. There could be. At this point Sif didn't care. Nor did she care how he tried to deflect her affection.

She continued, "Your resurrection may have been a trick but your selfless actions on Svartalfheim are still in Thor's consideration. Or so the Warriors inform me." That captured Loki's undivided attention. "They are the only ones Thor has talked to since our confessions."

Loki relaxed a notch. "They are not upset with you?"

"No," Sif said. "They support me. They want what is best for Ollerus, which means they are in favor that I unite the two of you."

Loki's eyes fluttered. He seemed hesitant to accept the ease of this news. "When do I get to meet him?"

Sif's hand lowered to Loki's shoulder, followed by her gaze. "I'm not sure." Her fingers began toying with his collar, smoothing leather that did not need smoothing. "It all depends on how he reacts. He's going to be upset with me." Her eyes shifted alternately between his eyes and her hand. "However, he knows of you. He reads all of the books about Asgardian royalty."

Loki drew his brows together in concern. "Which books?"
"All of them," Sif repeated. "When he talks about you, it's always in awe and intrigue about your magic tricks. You're," she smiled, "one of his favorites."

"One of..." he echoed, a touch of worry glinting his eyes. "Do you think he'll be pleased to learn I am is father?"

"Yes, I do," Sif stated. "But like I said, he'll probably be upset with me." That was the part that worried her most, and the main reason she needed Loki's forgiveness before confronting the boy. She couldn't allow Ollerus to meet Loki when they both harbored a grudge against her.

She lowered her gaze again, not holding back a display of her worry. "That is something you'll have in common with——"

Loki cut her words off, shaking his head and pushing his fingers to her lips. He then sat upright, replacing his fingers with his lips.

Sif inhaled sharply, surprised, but in a good way. She could work with this. Her lips parted to allow him full access, forever relishing the taste and massage of that gifted tongue. She would be lying to say she hadn't hoped for it.

He hummed into her and she cupped her hands on his jawline, fingers splayed over his cheeks and neck. Oh, was this was her kind of reconciliation, their writhing mouths hard against the other and Loki's hands sliding up her thighs, beneath the layered armor of her skirt.

What a spectacle they must be making. If those teens were seeking gossip material then they surely had it now: the Prodigal Prince and the War Goddess publicly behaving with no more class than the rebellious peers of those who watched and giggled from the biological sciences section. Again, Sif didn't care. Let them watch. Let them giggle. She didn't know how long she was going to be in Glasir. It could be a while before she was able to indulge in Loki again. She needed this.

One scurrying walk back to the palace, prompted from the ejection by one very disapproving librarian, found their bodies urgently slammed against Sif's bedroom door. Steel and leather couldn't be shed quickly enough. Lips separated only when clothing was being ripped over heads. Blankets and sheets were a bothersome tangle, and pillows were pushed violently out of the way.

Loki's strength was almost fully restored and he made the most of it. He had her pinned multiple times, refusing her the dominance she always fought for (and usually won). She pretended that it angered her, her growls of protest drawing out his satisfied grin. He was allowed to win every now and again.

He pinned her one final time before they cried out in release, bodies tensing through the unified songs of need and of want. When he melted onto her, it was as though every part of him bled into her. His long limbs constricted her with a sticky desperation, his lips still devouring her own, despite the rawness and gasps for breath. His fingers disappeared in her hair, and hers curled the back if his neck.

It felt like they would never be able to separate. It was so wonderful.

The hours drifted by with lingering caresses and whimsical noises. Occasionally there was small talk: small teases and superficial praises, the adoration of each other's bodies. It was all so easy, so comfortable. When their bodies were connected, the outside world fell away.

Night fell with hardly a second glance. Now the moonlight filled her room, replacing the warm hues of sunset on their skin with icy blues. Sif shivered, the dried sweat and Loki's damp skin a
force she couldn't compete with. She didn't want either of them to move, however she didn't protest when Loki got up to collect the blankets and retrieve her fur cloak. He wasn't gone very long and once he returned, it was sweeter than before. He wrapped the cloak around her shoulders then layered the blankets over her. A thin sheet is all he covered himself with. Their severe difference in body temperature wasn't ideal for spending the night together in balanced comfort, but somehow they managed. It was only a trifling matter when confronted with their bodies' desire to be intertwined through the entirety of the night. Some things just weren't meant to be over analyzed.

Loki fell asleep before she did. She envied him for it, but not so much that it disrupted her peace. Part of her didn't even want to sleep, her feelings too lifted to subdue with unconsciousness. Come morning, this would be the perfect serenity to spring from before traveling to Glasir and confronting Ollerus. She would carry with her the aura of forgiveness. Of beauty and affection. Of sincerity. When she talked to the boy, let her words of truth spill over lips which still tasted of Loki. When she spoke of her lover, let her hope in his tempestuous heart not be her folly but instead a boon to the very flesh that was created by the unification of their bodies.

Let her final confession, no matter the heartache it brought or the betrayal it revealed, be the unique form of healing that only the bonds of family and love can bring.

If only for a little while.

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The pale blue boy plopped the book onto the table with an incredulous thud then flung open the pages to a very familiar, dogeared chapter. "He," Ollerus said, pointing with disbelief to an image of Loki, "is my father?"

"Yes," replied his mother, resolutely. Ollerus stared at her in bewilderment. She had been acting nothing but weird since she got home this morning: awkward, yet happy, but also nervous. He had to wonder just how much mead she had to drink during her visit with Thor.

"Prince of Mischief?" Ollerus pressed, making certain they were talking about the same Loki. "Brother of Thor? Son of Od—" He cut himself off, flipping ahead to the most recent account of the figure in question. "Son of...King Laufey?"

"Yes," Sif said again, this time with a wince.

Ollerus studied her, his heart beating in a way he didn't know it could. This wasn't a joke. She wasn't drunk or ill or doped up on one of Eir's concoctions prescribed for her battle wounds. She was telling the truth. A very unexpected, alarming, weird...but awesome truth.

This answered so many of his questions! Yet, it also raised so many more...

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Ollerus heard his voice crack.

"I am so sorry, my love." Sif said. "I only wanted to protect you. I made a mistake."

"Protect me?" Ollerus didn't get that. "From what?"

Sif dropped her gaze. "Loki is an unpredictable soul. For many years I was...confused."

She was obviously still confused. "Is?" Ollerus corrected, flipping to the last page which showed Loki's fall from a crumbling Bifrost. "How about was?"

Sif tilted her head to look at the page in question, her brow furrowed. "He is not dead."
Ollerus poked his finger at a very specific line of text. "It says right here 'all of Asgard mourned their fallen Prince.'" He knew his mother wasn't an avid reader but seriously, how could she not know this? She lived it!

"Your book is out of date," Sif said matter-of-factly.

"Oh." Ollerus scratched his head. He hadn't considered that. "Did he survive the fall?"

Sif nodded and Ollerus felt an urgent shift in his chest. It was a whole new wave of excitement. "Where is he?"

"He is in Gladsheim as we speak."

"Does he know about me?"

"Yes." Sif smiled. "He wants to meet you."

Ollerus felt another hop in his pulse, and his stomach tightened. He couldn't process all of this quick enough.

"I can't believe my father is Loki. He's a—," Ollerus paused, flipping back a couple pages in the book. "He's the best sorcerer in Asgard. And he fought in the wars." His gaze lifted back to Sif. "With you. Is that when you...?"

Sif nodded, her eyes shifting away for a moment. That was clearly a story he would get out of her later. But first...

"Is he in trouble?" Ollerus asked. "I mean, after what he did to Thor, and how he nearly destroyed Jotunheim."

"They're," Sif chose her words carefully, "working it out."

"Holy Hel, my father is Loki!" Which meant his father was a criminal! Ollerus always assumed he was of a seedier nature, a con artist of sorts, what with the description his mother always provided: the shapeshifting frost giant who tricked her into believing he was an Aesir.

A sudden pang hit Ollerus in the chest, catching him off guard. It was a realization. "You have lied to me my entire life."

Sif responded with a wordless noise, her hand running over her mouth. Guilty. When she spoke, it was a pathetic whisper. "I am not proud of how I handled this." She sounded like she wanted to cry.

Ollerus didn't want to focus on this part of the news right now. He didn't know how to.

"When do I get to meet him?" he asked.

Sif met his eyes. Ollerus saw evidence of tears, for there was a wetness dampening her dark makeup, leaving lines down her cheeks. She had to clear her throat before speaking. "We're working on that. You know how Asgard reacts to blue skin."

That was something Ollerus never got. It's not like he was some kind of monster threatening war. And what about Loki?

"My father is there now," he challenged. "And he's a frost giant."
Sif sighed, rolling her eyes a little. "Loki is eternally the exception to the rule. Plus he still has Odin's spell that makes him look like an Aesir."

"What if Eir put a spell on me?" Ollerus suggested. "Could I go to Asgard then?"

Sif shook her head. "You don't want that."

"What if we bring Loki— I mean, my father, here?" The more this truth sunk in, the more Ollerus couldn't wait to meet this man: this wizard, prince, frost giant, rebel...his father! He was already imaging all the things they could talk about, the questions he would ask, the magic he wanted to learn.

Sif didn't respond right away, didn't shoot down his suggestion. That only fueled Ollerus's thoughts. He locked hopeful eyes onto hers, searching for the answer he wanted to hear. It looked as though he was going to get it, for her mind was clearly working out a scenario.

"Perhaps," Sif began, much to Ollerus's delight, "you could work your charm on Queen Brunhild. Convince her to allow Loki into Glasir for a few days."

"I can do that," Ollerus proclaimed. "Should I give her the look?" Oh had he mastered the look. He lost count of all the treats it awarded him from the elderly Valkyries.

"Absolutely." Sif smirked, wiping the streaks from her cheeks. "Lay it on her."

"You bet I will," Ollerus laughed. "But wait..." There was something he hadn't considered, something that wasn't sitting well with him. "What do I tell her? Does she know about Loki? Do they all know?" Just how many people had been hiding this secret from him?

"Brunhild and Eir know," Sif said. The shame had crept back into her voice. "They have always known."

That pain was coming back. The one that threatened Ollerus's joy, weighing his chest down. Was this what betrayal felt like? "Eir knew?"

Sif let out a pained sigh. "Do not hold them accountable for my deception." Her voice became shaky. "It was always my decision to hide the truth from you."

Ollerus shook his head. "Whether by words or omission, you all lied to me." Now his chest was really starting to hurt, and he felt his skin heat up. Eir was the one who taught him what lying by omission even was, and how he shouldn't do it. "You kept something very important from me," he began, shaking his head. "The most important thing to me. I have had a father within reach and you have denied me that, for my entire life. Why would you do that? After all the lessons you both gave me about honesty... How could you keep this from me? What dangers could the truth have possibly put me in? You say Loki is an unpredictable soul, but what about you?!"

Sif had been reduced to a heap on the table at this point, each of Ollerus's words cutting her down slowly. He watched it as it happened but it didn't stop him from speaking. He watched her tears flow, watched her scrub her face then bury her head in her arms. Part of him felt like he should pity her, but part of him didn't. The words kept coming. He had no room for sympathy with everything else he feeling. Let her cry. She could handle it. She could take an axe to the gut and walk away with a cool story. Big deal if he was making her cry right now.

"I want to meet him as soon as possible." Ollerus had to fight back his own tears. "I'll go talk to Brunhild, like you said. And then you'll bring him here, right?" He saw Sif nod through her sobbing.
"We will handle this however you want to." Sif peeped up at him through strings of hair, pleading. Her makeup was all over her face. She looked wretched.

His throat tightened. "I want to be alone until he comes here."

That hurt Sif even more, but she still nodded in understanding. "You'll go to the mountains?"

"Yes." Ollerus could barely look at her. "Don't worry, I'll be safe."

"I know you will," Sif said, her voice managing to express pride even through her sniffling whimpers. "Oh, my Ollie... I don't even know how to tell you how sorry I am."

"Then don't." He didn't want to hear it. Not now. And besides, her actions were enough. She was a mess. "We'll talk after you return with my father."

"Deal," she said after a hefty sniff. Her face was all fluids, a sight that almost kept him from rounding the table and wrapping his arms around her neck.

Almost.

She cried more at the embrace, her arms cinching him tight, her tears getting all over his hair and tunic. That was enough to send a single tear down his cheek. Just one. There were more but he only allowed one for her right now. He imagined there would be more to come. Things weren't going to be the same with them anymore, he could feel it. There would be more pain. He had to pace himself.

"I love you, Mother," he murmured into her hair.

She made a husky noise of relief before speaking. "I love you too, my son." Her arms wrapped tighter around him. "Do not ever, ever question that, no matter what." They lingered like that for a moment until she unwound her arms and gripped his shoulders, her eyes sharply vivid, despite the puffy redness. "Even fools, liars, and tricksters, in all their sins and poor choices, even they are capable of love."

Ollerus nodded. He then wiped the single tear from his cheek and released her, turning away and leaving the room. He had heard enough. He grabbed his bow and left the healer's hall, crossing the courtyard, his mother's final words persistently playing over in his head. It wasn't until he reached the forest's edge that he realized what she had meant. She wasn't only referring to herself with that statement. She was talking about Loki too.

She was preparing him.

Ollerus took a deep breath, inhaling the living scents of forest surrounding him, attempting to find a workable balance with everything his heart was juggling. It was so much to take in. This was going to be his wildest adventure yet, no question about it.

And he was ready for it. He had been ready his entire life.
Thor cast his glance around, his hands curling into fists. Heimdall was not in the observatory: one more thing to add to his list of frustrations. Granted, this one didn't make top ten with the ones that began with an L and ended with a fist through a wall, but it was enough of an irritation to dent the intricate celestial pattern of the gatekeeper's dome.

Thor sighed, rubbing his knuckles, regretful. Heimdall probably saw that. A childish display of why Thor was not fit to be King, another impulsive action that did nothing but cause destruction. Would he ever learn? Could this temper ever be contained? Were these fists the very reason he has lost his brother to madness, which in turn cost the lives of so many on Midgard? Had there been one punch to many that punished Loki for his boyhood tricks?

No. Thor would not blame himself for his brother's actions. That is exactly what Loki wanted him to do, to feel guilty. Always with the guilt trips, as if he couldn't be bothered to take responsibility for his own selfish ambition. Thor would not feel guilty, not even for what happened on Svartalfheim. If he had it to do all over again, he'd have done the same thing. What, was he supposed to carry Loki's body around in their pursuit of Malekith, in hopes that he might still be alive?

He probably could have at least carried him into a cave, out the elements, then asked Heimdall to send someone for him. Even dead, Father would have wanted Loki returned to Asgard for a proper funeral. A martyr's funeral, like Mother's...

Thor winced at the image, not of Mother's funeral this time, but of Loki's, conducted in the same fashion, a hero honored for selfless acts of bravery. The idea made him ill. It was difficult enough to stomach Asgard's reaction to Loki's death, where Thor had stood at the royal balcony pronouncing his brother as the martyr he believed him to be at the time. He hadn't expected the people to mourn as they did, to actually shed tears for the same prince that tried, multiple times, to murder their Prince of Thunder then proceed to terrorize Midgard.

But what do Asgardians care about humans? They are merely ants to some, weaker beings who depend on technology to show any real strength.

Most Asgardians see not the strength of heart in humans the way Thor does. Even Heimdall, who has watched them over the millennia, does not see them in a proper light. One can only see so much from a distance. Thor could only hope that Jane's short visit to Asgard, a human up close and personal, was enough to plant seeds of altered perspective in his people. Eir had certainly been impressed. As was Mother. But Father, the Warriors, and Sif, they were not. Too proud and too stubborn, which is unfortunate given the power they have over popular opinion.

Sif especially did not seem to grasp the magnitude of Loki's actions on Earth.

Thor's thoughts were about to veer down this particular frustration, but he was interrupted when a
hot circle of light swallowed him up, and his feet then sank down into what felt like lush grass. He equipped his hammer. This was not Heimdall's magic.

When the light dissipated, Thor found himself in Idunn's orchard and before him stood Heimdall and Eir. It was Eir's transporting spell that brought him here.

That was a relief. He was in no mood to deal with whatever snakes could be lurking among the apple trees.

"Heimdall. Madam Healer," Thor greeted with a nod, tucking Mjolnir back under his belt.

"My King," replied Heimdall, his helmet tucked under his arm. "You wish to speak with me?"

"I do," Thor said, shifting his glance to Eir. She looked relaxed for a change, the color of her dress one of spring instead of a drab grey, her red hair still pinned up tightly yet shining radiantly under the sun's rays. The lighting in the healing chamber never did it justice. Thor also noticed a few less wrinkles on her face than last time he saw her. She must have been eating the youth-granting apples, something she did seldomly so as not to mislead her students or her patients to just how many millennia of experience she carried with her. That was the reason Father limited his intake as well.

Heimdall, on the other hand, did not care how his youthful appearance contrasted with his true age. No one ever questioned The Watcher's wisdom. It could exceed that of Father's in some areas, which was the very reason why Thor was seeking him out now.

"Do you wish to be transported back to the observatory?" Eir asked Heimdall.

"If it pleases our king, I would prefer to walk back," said Heimdall, glancing at Thor.

"It is fine. I apologize for interrupting your leisure time." Thor knew these moments were rare for the committed guardian and the chief physician, and he felt a little guilty, but his matter was too urgent to keep putting off.

"It is of no concern for a king," Heimdall replied coolly. He then turned to Eir and gave her a more intimate bow then one would with a mere acquaintance. Eir smiled and touched her fingers to his cheek before vanishing behind a wave of light. Rarely did anyone get to witness an exchange like this between these two. Thor felt rather privileged.

Heimdall met Thor's eyes with slightly harder features than he had with Eir. "Walk with me?" He took a step toward the trail before them.

"Certainly." Thor fell in step alongside him, taking in the whole of the orchard as they walked. They passed by a couple of Idunn's handmaidens, lovely young nymphs with massive baskets balanced on their heads. They blushed when Thor smiled at them, so he shot them a wink. That probably wasn't appropriate behavior for a king, but he couldn't help himself.

This was nice. In fact it was ideal. His temper couldn't compete with an easy stroll through the sun-sweetened orchard. He needed this.

"What vexes you, my friend?" asked Heimdall.

Friend. Not King. That was better. More familiar.

"I need you to tell me everything I, as King, need to know." He tried not to make it sound like an order.
"That may take a while," Heimdall said before Thor could elaborate.

"I mean," Thor almost heard himself laugh. "Everything about Loki. What is he scheming?"

"I cannot see beyond his actions," Heimdall said. "I can only speculate."

"Tell me."

"He wishes to restore his reputation. That much is obvious. Whether for his son, for Sif, or to earn the throne, I do not know."

Thor kicked a rotting apple that lay in his path. It exploded into a multitude of pieces, splattering droplets of juice, some of which the wind blew back into he and Heimdall. That was not his intention.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner of his deception?" Thor wiped the juice from his cheek.

Heimdall flicked a fragment of fruit from his bracer, pausing before he spoke. "Because you had relieved yourself of duty at that point. Midgard had become your priority."

"Loki had claimed the throne," Thor defended. "He put on my father's face and tricked me in the worst of ways."

"And had he disturbed the peace, you would have been the first to know."

"He has disturbed my peace." Thor hardened his tone. He then had to take a deep breath. "No more secrets, Heimdall. As King, I am to know everything my brother is doing."

"As you wish," was all Heimdall said in return.

"What happened between my departure and Loki's alleged resurrection?"

"He revealed his deception to the Lady Sif, as well as his knowledge of their son." Heimdall answered dutifully. "He then convinced her to accompany him on a journey to Lygnvi, island of the wolf. They visited Fenrir and attempted to free him."

"Fenrir," Thor echoed, contemplatively. "That is why Sif inquired about him."

"Loki then traveled, via the belly of his serpentine offspring, to Helheim, where I assume he recruited his daughter's aid in staging his resurrection."

Thor blinked, his mind tripping on the image of Loki in Jormungand's belly. Let no one ever claim his brother was predictable.

"You assume?"

"I could not see or hear him when he was in the presence of Hel. That is part of her magic, a shroud to grant privacy to the damned. She uses it when she speaks with anyone outside of her realm as well." Heimdall paused, his voice finding an edge. "Loki has a similar spell. He has used it quite liberally in the past."

Thor scratched his chin, fingers raking noisily through the course hair. Loki was clearly on a path to reconnect with his offspring, but why? "Could he be plotting something with his daughter?"

"It is hard to judge. When he entered Helheim, his body was untouched. When he left, he was critically wounded."
Thor knew little Hela favored the company of her mother over her father. That much Loki had confided in earlier times, when they could still speak to each other as brothers. Perhaps things hadn't gone as planned on Loki's visit to Hel. Perhaps his daughter upheld her duty to punish the wicked, no matter the familial relations or the fact that Loki entered her realm by his own will. Had Loki expected nepotism from her? Had things finally not gone according to his schemes? Part of him hoped so.

He fought back a smirk that was shoving at his cheek, bothered by the satisfaction he was finding in Loki's possible misfortune. He couldn't entertain these petty thoughts. Mother would be ashamed of him. Asgardian royalty does not wallow in vengeful fantasies. The Avengers could, some especially more than others, and they would have just cause, but Thor refused to. He had no choice now that he was King.

"I do not know what to do with him, Heimdall." Thor scrubbed his hand over his face. "I will never again trust him."

"It is a difficult position to be in." Heimdall's tone was soothing, empathetic. "The dungeon is the same as torture to him. Exile is too generous. And execution—"

"Is out of the question," Thor interrupted. "I could never forgive myself. Sif would never forgive me. She wishes to unite her boy with his father, and I cannot in good conscience interfere with that."

Heimdall nodded. "The Lady Sif is making arrangements with Queen Brunhild. They wish to bring Loki to Glasir." His eyes then refocused to a place beyond the path ahead of them. "Actually, it appears Ollerus is making such arrangements. He seems to have inherited the gift of manipulation."

Thor sighed. "Do you understand my frustration at all of this? Even if I wanted to punish Loki, or at least put him on trial and let the people decide what to do about him, I can't. Not now that there is an innocent child in the picture. I will not be the one that keeps Ollerus from meeting his father. However, I worry for the boy."

"No one should keep him from meeting his father," Heimdall stated. "If Ollerus can convince the Valkyrie Queen into allowing the Prince of Mischief into her lands, just imagine the influence he could have on his own flesh and blood."

"But what about the influence Loki would have on him?" That was Thor's biggest worry for the reunion.

"If Sif is not worried, then we shouldn't be either." Heimdall clearly wasn't worried. "She is closer to Loki right now than any of us. Her judgement is what we must trust."

"Sif's judgment," Thor heard his voice ratchet up, "is unreliable right now. She has been deceiving me since my return. She has taken Loki as her lover again. He has her under...some sort of enchantment."

"Sif has not been compromised by anything outside of her own will. If she were under a spell, Eir would know and she would inform us."

Thor opened his mouth but he had not a response. As much as he wanted to he couldn't argue with Eir's judgement. No one was closer to Sif, or kept a closer watch on her the way the Elder did. She was essentially Sif's mother and she loved her like a mother loves a daughter, which made her like a grandmother to Ollerus. She too would want what was best for both of them.
Thor sighed again. "Does Eir not worry for this boy?"

"Of course she worries," Heimdall answered. "In the same way your mother worried when Odin insist she keep the truth of Loki’s heritage from him. She fears the ramifications of a prolonged deception on a developing mind."

"What about you, Heimdall?" Thor understood why the guardian was defending Eir, and he wasn't entirely doubting Eir's judgement, but he wanted to hear what Heimdall specifically felt about this situation. Not what was best for Sif, or Ollerus, or Loki. "How does this infectious forgiveness for my brother make you feel? He attacked you when he was King. He forced me to destroy the Bifrost. He eludes your watch any chance he—"

"I am aware of his transgressions against me," Heimdall cut in, his eye twitching slightly. "And to tell you it does not sting my pride to see him move freely about Asgard would be a lie. However, it is my duty to act in accordance with what is best for the nine realms, even if it conflicts with my feelings, and I have yet to see Loki’s integration back into Asgardian society as a threat to anything but his own dark designs. That is the enemy I wish to see conquered. Not the son of Odin and Frigga. Not the brother of The Mighty Thor. Not the father of several lost yet hopeful children. But the shadow that was cast upon a soul who was denied a proper identity."

Thor felt a sinking in his chest, deepened by each of Heimdall's words. Just when he thought he could feel no more pain for the memory of his brother, when he believed he had mourned himself dry of that particular emotion, someone always managed to prove him wrong.

"You are clinging to a hope that I've found best to simply abandon."

"Best?" Heimdall countered. "Or easiest?"

Thor stepped into Heimdall's path, halting their stroll, insulted. "There is nothing easy about what I have suffered at the hands of Loki."

"I know." Heimdall remained at ease. "That is why I never faulted you for giving up hope. Even you cannot be expected to win every battle."

"What are you saying?" Thor was trying not to get angry but Heimdall was making that very difficult. "That by abandoning hope I concede defeat?"

"Not defeat." Heimdall's voice remained calm, despite Thor's threatening tone. "Self preservation. You carried the burden of hope for Loki when few of us could. I wanted only revenge while the Bifrost was being rebuilt. Your father hardened himself to keep from returning to the Odinsleep. Lady Sif was not ready to risk the heartache again. Frigga had sent you to retrieve him because there was none other fit for the duty. It was your hope that brought him home alive, and now it is time for those of us to step up where we couldn't before and relieve you of the burden."

Thor stared hard into the seer's eyes, each of his words striking a chord, beckoning him to back down. As always, Heimdall knew his heart, knew exactly what to say to contain the wildfires. His wisdom was as infinite as the heavens reflected in his eyes. Heimdall had watched everything that happened to Thor on Earth, the exchanges with Loki, the alliances formed with the humans, the lessons learned, one very important one in particular. The power of teamwork. If being an Avenger has taught Thor anything, it is the importance of delegation, and of admitting that he alone could not win every battle awaiting him.

Thor placed his hand on Heimdall's shoulder, an act of gratitude where words could not suffice. Heimdall accepted it with a nod.
"Have you made a decision regarding Loki's banquet?" Heimdall asked, easing them gracefully out if the moment.

Thor nodded once, not an answer but a sign of yet another problem that weighed on him. He turned and began pacing, wringing his hands together.

"The people still believe Loki a hero," Thor began. "All they can talk about is his feast, how Asgard is overdue for a proper celebration." The people seemed to abandon all common sense for the promise of free food and drink.

"You will deny them this?"

"I will not perpetuate a lie."

Heimdall nodded, slowly, thoughtfully. He then motioned for them to continue walking. They were nearly at the end of the orchard's path. Thor could see up ahead where it became paved and led into the city. It was nearing dusk and a wash of orange light blanketed the distant spires, casting sharp shadows over neighboring structures.

"Let me ask you something," Heimdall offered as they assumed an easy stroll. "What if the people kept on believing Loki to be a hero?"

Thor shook his head. "It would be a lie."

"On Svartalfheim, did he not save your life and Jane's?"

"It was all for his own gain."

"Which is?" Heimdall asked.

"To trick me into believing he cares about anyone but himself."

"For what purpose?"

Thor felt his frustration returning. "Heimdall, please. I am in no mood for interrogation. Make your point."

"What is the harm in allowing Loki to be praised as a hero? Why not give the people what they apparently want?"

"We would be subjecting the entire kingdom to not only a lie, but an inevitable disappointment."

"Possibly," Heimdall mused. "But I have to wonder about something. Much of Loki's behavior, dating back to his boyhood, is reflective of what is expected of him. What if those expectations shifted him into an heroic light?"

Thor slowed to a stop, casting a contemplative gaze upon Heimdall. The seer stopped a couple steps ahead and turned to meet Thor's gaze, his stance unwavering. The fleeting sun's rays were catching his armor, creating magnificent reflections and highlighting the bold orange of his eyes, putting the hope Thor had abandoned on clear display, making it almost tangible again.

He felt his heart flutter. It frightened him, yet, in an acceptable way, bringing clarity. Not only could he delegate hope to his closest friends, he could trust it in the hands of the entire kingdom.

"I suppose," he couldn't believe he was saying this, "we'll just have to wait and see."
Fools.

That was what they were. The whole lot of them. With the possible exclusion of Sif. She had a valid reason. A very awesome reason that was learning the truth of his parentage this very moment. But the rest of them were idealistic morons that abandoned common sense at even the faintest whiff of hope.

And that was exactly what Loki had himself hoped they would do.

Really, what kind of bleeding-heart buffoonery allowed a repeated-offense criminal, a warmonger, a frost giant, to roam freely through the streets of Asgard? To smile at the townsfolk he passed, wave at their children, partake of their food and wine? Who would allow such insult to the structures of law and order? A realm ruled by Thor, that was who.

Loki couldn't believe it when the raven delivered the message about his banquet. How it wasn't cancelled! He had already been devising new strategies for winning the hearts of people, but now, thanks to his soft-skulled brother, he wouldn't have to. Oh, things were back on track. Better than before in fact now that Sif wasn't burdened with harboring his lies. Her nagging on the issue had become tiresome, even more tiresome than the strength it took his healing body to satisfy her physical demands. By the Great Tree she was an animal.

And he adored it. He craved it. She had only been gone a day and half but he already ached for her.

He was now counting down the days until his banquet where she would be on his arm, adorned like a true lady, capturing the desiring eyes of all those unworthy of her. He would then claim her on that dance floor for all of Asgard's best to witness, summon her untamed affection for him and then confirm publicly with a wordless act from his lips all of the rumors that had been circulating since their recent display in the library. Gaining the reputable Lady Sif as his known lover would put him one more step up the ladder to rightfully gaining the throne.

But first, there was the matter of Hel and Angrboda. He very well couldn't have them claiming Sif for themselves. That was no way to start a relationship with Ollerus, having to explain how his mother was kidnapped and damned to live among the damned. At least that's what he thought Hel's plan was. He couldn't quite remember how she said she was going to come at Sif. Parts of that entire meeting with his daughter had become a blur.

But it was no matter. They would never get past Sif's sword, or his detection spells. He had them planted all over Asgard now, everywhere Sif frequented and beyond, designed specifically to alert him when a hostile being drew close. It was a brilliant work of sorcery: cloaked energy fields designed to read mood and intent of those who passed through them, undetectable by all but him and engineered to alert him the moment a being with criminal intent came within striking distance of Sif. It wasn't perfectly fine tuned to his specific enemies, but if he happened to catch a few petty criminals around the city, it would only prove to bolster his reputation.

Asgard couldn't even fathom the extent to which it needed Loki, not yet at least. Criminal detection was only a tease of what he was capable of in protecting her. Thor, Odin, the Warriors, all of the top generals, none of them understood what it took to be the realm's true king. Loki hadn't even understood it during the short time he had sat upon the throne, but that all changed after he harnessed the enlightening power of the Tesseract. The Chitauri were yet another band of fools that allowed him to roam freely through his ambitions. Not only had they furnished his escape, but they had equipped him with the very knowledge it took to defeat them.
Pity that Earth's Mightiest Heroes hadn't wiped them out completely. It was only a matter of time before the Other amassed a new army and invaded Asgard in pursuit of the Tesseract. This time they would hit hard. Harder than they had in New York. Harder than Malekith had hit Asgard. They would strike with the force of Ragnarok, ally with Surtr if the opportunity arose, fulfill every dark prophecy that no one, not even Odin, understood fully.

Loki was the only being who had the extended wisdom to defend against what was coming. He knew the preparations to make, the alliances to forge, the weapons to build. And he would do it all from Asgard's throne, supported by his people, praised for his brilliance of ruling, and then ultimately loved for the legacy he would leave behind when death finally claimed him. Loki of Asgard would be the king who started a new era across the nine realms, and no one was going to stop him.

Of course, there were always those who would try to hinder him. Try to slow him down the way they always had. He was staring at a pair of them now, dreading whatever asinine reason they had for summoning him to the Undercity's most seedy pub.

"Look who's finally gracing us with his presence," Fandral drawled, swirling the dulling liquid in a chalice too elegant for its contents. There was no way this dive served anything but classless piss. Appropriate that the prattling playboy should suck it down so eagerly. "I suppose a thank you is in order for showing up only fashionably late?" If he was any less sincere, he may just attain levels that would leave Loki mildly impressed.

Loki crossed his arms and shifted his gaze to Volstagg, who was dabbing his greasy beard with a napkin that had clearly mopped up a banquet's worth of food. Disgusting. Although he should at least give the ogre credit for even using a napkin.

"We have some pressing matters we wish to discuss with you," Volstagg said, clearing his throat of whatever slop still clung to it. He then shoved a chair out with his foot, the signal that Loki was to, indeed, join them in this foul pit of revelry.

"Wonderful," Loki responded, claiming the chair without resistance. He figured if he complied, he could get this over with more quickly. "Let me guess," he began. "You are concerned about The Lady Sif and the well being of our son."

Fandral leaned an elbow onto the table, trying to be what? Intimidating? "She is not herself as of late."

"What would you know about it?" Loki snapped to call over a barmaid. He was already bored by this meeting. "How well do you even know her to assume she needs the two of you looking out for her?"

Volstagg huffed, which was actually more of a grunt coming from his gut. "This may be a difficult concept for you to digest, mischievous one, but friends and family look out for each other."

A shapely barmaid appeared at Loki's side, her head an explosion of tight blond curls, her breasts two shimmies away from splitting her blouse wide open. She tilted her head and raised a brow. That was apparently how one said "what'll it be?" in an establishment run by the socially graceless.

"A glass of whatever aged mead requires you to climb on a stool to fetch" Loki said. "In fact, why don't you just bring the bottle." He had a feeling he might need it.

The barmaid slid her glance to the Two, gesturing at their glasses. "'Nother round?" So she could actually speak. Barely.
"Yes, please," replied Fandral with what was supposed to be a charming wink. Gross.

The woman gave Fandral the elevator eye before drifting off. Loki waited until she was gone before resuming the conversation where Volstagg had so pompously left it.

"You speak of family, Volstagg?"

"Aye," replied the bearded beast.

"Of course. You think you're the expert among us on such a matter." Loki shook his head with a scoff. "You have no right to lecture me about family. Not until everything you hold dear has been torn from you shall you even approach a place where you can judge me about family."

Fandral rolled his eyes. "Forgive us if we are fresh out of sympathy for your familial misfortunes. Betrayal can never be justified in my book."

"Your book?" Loki lightened his tone. "I wasn't aware you knew what those were."

"Enough!" Volstagg thumped his fist on the table. "Let us cease the banter and get to point."

Loki threw his arms out in an accepting gesture. "By all means."

The barmaid then returned with their drinks and dealt them accordingly. She brought the bottle of mead, as Loki requested, yet the idiot woman didn't bring a means for him to open it, or even a glass! Typical.

"We know Sif is in the process of uniting you with your son," Fandral said, eyes cast down to his full glass.

Loki dug a dagger out from beneath his tunic and stabbed it into the bottle's cork. "What business is it of yours?" He began twisting the cork out.

Fandral ignored Loki's question but wasn't ignoring his handling of the bottle. He too noticed that there wasn't a glass brought with it so he offered Loki his first glass, the one that should, by all proper table manners, be shattered on the ground.

Loki accepted it, but gave no trace of gratitude. Big deal, a dirty chalice. He shook out the remaining drops of whatever bile Fandral called wine then wiped the brim clean where it had touched whoring lips. The Ancients only knew what communicable diseases dwelled in that body.

"Thor has just informed us of some rather interesting news," Volstagg said, flinching when Loki popped the cork from the bottle. His suspicious eyes never left the dagger. "It seems the Valkyrie Queen is going to grant you passage into Glasir Valley so you can meet your boy."

Loki was about to pull the cork from the dagger when his hands froze. His whole body froze for that matter, save for his eyes, which fluttered in disbelief then lifted to meet Volstagg's glare.

"You heard me right," Volstagg grumbled, breaking their gaze and retreating to his mug.

Loki shifted his gaze to Fandral for verification, which he received the moment the blond goatee stretched with a forced smile then disappeared behind his own glass.

Loki smiled and he felt a leap in his chest. It was unheard of for any man besides Odin to be allowed into Glasir Valley. Well done, Lady Sif. She wielded not magic or the art of manipulation yet she somehow accomplished the impossible. Loki was impressed.
And, oh, how this must be infuriating these two, especially Fandral. To be granted access to Valkyrie lands. All those single women...

Loki filled his glass, smile holding, then offered to fill the Warriors’ glasses since they drained theirs so quickly. Funny how charitable he could become when things were going his way. The Two reluctantly accepted, pushing their glasses forward but averting their eyes of Loki’s smile, which had spread to a grin at this point.

With a proud chuckle, Loki raised his glass. ”Such pleasant news is deserving of a toast don’t you think?”

Fandral and Volstagg halfheartedly clinked their glasses to Loki’s, still avoiding eye contact. ”Cheers,” they murmured in unison.

”Cheers indeed.” Loki laughed again then took a hefty pull from his glass. It tasted okay, drinkable at least, probably due to his lifted mood, which only heightened when a pair of sighs came at him in stereo. He had to draw this moment out. ”You have heard the news that my banquet is still on, correct? Reason enough for a second toast?” He raised his glass again.

Neither of the Two lifted their glass.

”Let us know when you've finished gloating,” Fandral griped, ”so we can move on to the next topic.”

”There's more?” Loki's eyes lit up.

”Yes!” Volstagg blurted. ”We're putting you on trial.”

Loki lowered his glass, as well as his smile. ”Come again?”

”You heard him correctly,” Fandral added, reclaiming a little smugness.

Loki watched in both confusion and in budding anger as his elevated mood slide away like the mead sliding down the Two's throats.

”A trial.” Loki spoke the word as if it were a childish thing. ”You're to put me before judge and jury. By whose authority?”

”By our own, of course.” Fandral was really enjoying this, as was he enjoying the mead. Loki now regretted sharing it with him.

”Stop wasting my time and explain yourselves,” Loki ordered. He would not let them draw this out like a game.

”You are to be tested,” Volstagg explained, ”by all three of us. We cannot, in good conscience, allow our King, our comrade, and our nephew to be compromised by you without our consent.”

Nephew. How dare they lay claim on his family. His blood! ”They do not need your consent.”

”Oh, but Thor and Lady Sif have always respected our counsel,” Fandral added before finishing his mead and grabbing for the bottle. ”You don’t mind do you?” He refilled his glass before Loki could answer.

The mead was the least of his concern. The only use for the bottle now was to smash it over Fandral’s pretty head. Oh, how tempting that was, but that would be a foolish tactic. Unfortunately,
this drunkard was right. Thor and Sif did respect their counsel, which meant Loki had no choice but to play their games if he hoped to step foot into Glasir. Sif could still change her mind.

"What manner of tests have you in mind?" Loki asked, attempting to lessen the edge in his voice.

"Pop quizzes. Multiple choice," Fandral teased. "And a few word probl—"

"And if I refuse?" Loki interrupted, refusing to be mocked.

"Then we will assume you're hiding a darker purpose," said Volstagg, "and we will advise our King accordingly."

"Why not simply ask me, here and now, what you wish to know?" said Loki.

The Two burst out in a duet of laughter. Loki sighed.

"You must take us for utter fools, Silvertongue," Fandral sang through his laughter. "Do you truly believe we will take you at your word alone?"

"Actions always speak louder than words," Volstagg added.

"Precisely," said Fandral. "And until we see you in action, we reserve every right to distrust your intentions."

"Tell me what games I must play to satisfy your simple minds," Loki murmured into his glass. There was no avoiding this.

"That will be revealed at each encounter," said Fandral. "You will first meet with Volstagg who will escort you to his place of residence."

Wonderful. They already had it planned out. "When exactly will this all take place?" Loki asked.

"Meet me at the stables at dawn's first light," said Volstagg. "You will be mine until dusk, where you will then meet with Fandral, here in the Medina."

"Dawn?" Loki griped. "As in tomorrow?" What, they just assume he has nothing planned? He didn't, but he could have!

"You got it, my friend," Fandral chirped. "And then the following morning, you will travel by your choosing to Vanaheim, where Hogun will conduct your final test."

Hogun. Loki didn't like the idea of that at all. Hogun was his least favorite of the three, which often felt strange given he was the quietest, but that was the exact reason why Loki didn't like him. The Grim One was the hardest to read, the only one he hadn't figured out yet. The exotic warrior's stoicism was indeed his most disarming tactic, something he nearly found admirable. Loki felt a chill course down his spine, and not the pleasant kind of chill. This third test was going to be, by far, the most difficult. He wished he could just skip to it. The first two would undoubtedly be a joke to his talents, a mere charade with a side of exercising his patience. These two were no match to his wits, but Hogun...

"Very well," Loki said. "I will play your petty games." He then rose, tilting the remaining mead down his throat and smashing the glass on the floor. "Another bottle for these two gentlemen, please!"

The Two exchanged glances, sharing both their surprise and suspicion.
"We are," Fandral began slowly, "happy to have your compliance."

"We thought we may have to drag you kicking and screaming." Volstagg laughed. "I suppose those days are in the past."

Loki was not amused. How could this swine make light of the incessant bullying he had suffered at his meaty hands.

"Whatever it takes to keep your vile tongues from spewing poison at my son, all because you feel an entirely misplaced and undeserved sense of loyalty to him." Loki kicked his chair in with unnecessary force. "You are no more his family than you are mine."

He didn't wait for a response, just turned and made for the exit. Unfortunately, Fandral's voice followed him.

"Yeah, you may want to talk that one over with Sif."

Bastard had to have the last word, as always. And oh, for the love of...he was still going!

"Stables at dawn," Fandral called out. "Do not be late."

Loki shoved through the stumbling crowd and tore open the exit door, desperate to escape the pair's laughter, an unsettling echo from the past. Nothing ever changed with them. They were the same barbarians that mocked him in his childhood, always getting a laugh at his expense. Their laughter was always present in his mind, even with the distance put between his past and the pub.

Fools. That's all they were.

And Loki knew exactly who was going to have the last laugh.
The Trials of Loki, Pt. 1

Chapter Summary

This chapter was a blast to write. Loki gets to shine as the tricky BAMF he is.

Warning: I slipped in a little slash. How could you not with these two? Also profanity.
Fandral's inner thoughts apparently like dropping the f-bomb.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for not meeting my Friday deadline. A friend is in town from Chicago plus Seattle's comic con is happening now so my writing time has only been in stolen moments. I'm really surprised how easy it's been to write in the midst of convention chaos. Where I thought I'd be too distracted to get in the zone, I'm finding the fan energy is instead really enabling the creative process. Good vibes all around!

Rarely did Volstagg return home to his unruly brood without bringing them something new to play with. He loved surprising them. It was one of many joys in his life: the wide-eye excitement that gathered around him, the grabby hands that tugged him down to their level, the screams of delight upon discovering a new treasure, and ultimately the cries of war when such treasure was inevitably broken. This was the routine at Volstagg's family compound. However, on this particular morning, the new toy came not from his pocket or a pack on his steed's back, but in the form of a Prince of Asgard.

"Children," Volstagg called out to the disheveled five who halted in their charging tracks, piling up on one another and staring with intrigue at Loki. "I am relying on you to make our Prince feel at home in a way that only you can."

The children exchanged glances with each other, their eyes lighting up, the little wheels in their heads cranking at full speed whenever they were struck with a new idea. Volstagg had forewarned them of Loki's visit, and he may have dropped the words 'test' or 'trial' as inspiration for the kids' planned activities with their guest. He knew that was all he needed to say for the kids to take control of the situation.

Loki regarded the children with an fearful twitch in his eye. He stayed mounted upon his steed where he apparently thought he would be safe.

The children rushed at Loki with a flurry of introductions while Volstagg dismounted with a satisfied chuckle, making his way inside where the waft of Hildegund's cooking lured him like a honey-glazed siren. He greeted his mountainous wife with a peck to the cheek and snatched a plate from the cupboard behind her.

"Do not leave that slippery serpent alone with our children." Hildegund gazed out of the window, arms crossed over her girth, watching as Loki was dragged reluctantly into the backyard. "Flosi is quite impressionable to smooth talkers, especially royalty. Look how she's already taken to him,
trying to hold his hand." The woman shook her head in disgust.

"Worry you not, my voracious Valkyrie," Volstagg said, piling his plate high with lamb roast and turkey legs. "Our children are a force to be reckoned with. Loki won't dare try any tricks if he knows what's good for him."

Hildegund shot him a fiery glance, clearly stating her dissatisfaction at his lack of concern.

Volstagg sighed. "I will watch over their games."

There was no arguing against this woman, not when the state of his dinner that night depended on being in her good graces. He gave her another kiss on the cheek before snatching a chair from the dining room and heading into the backyard.

The children hadn't wasted any time in starting their games. They had set up a mock-up courtroom on the lawn, having taken this whole trial thing literally. Volstagg laughed as he walked past Loki, who had been ordered to take a seat on a tree stump the height of a toddler's chair. He was already chest deep in humiliation, for upon his head were a set of colorful plastic antlers, mere fragments of the reindeer statue Volstagg had snagged from Midgard on his last visit. The children had somehow kept the antlers intact enough to fashion a helmet out of them. It sat crookedly upon the crooked prince's head, covering one eye completely. Behind him stood Flosi, the poster child of nine year old puppy love, braiding whatever strings of Loki's hair she could free from beneath the helmet.

"Turkey leg?" Volstagg thrust his plate under Loki's nose.

Loki grimaced, lifting a glare up with his one visible eye. "I'd rather be drawn and quartered by a heard of Bilchsteim than consume the flesh of a beast."

Right, Volstagg recalled. He was a vegetarian. Sworn off meat ever since he mothered Sleipnir. Weird.

"Suit yourself," Volstagg said, planting his chair down in what he believed was the courtroom's public seating area.

"Will the defendant please rise and state his full name," commanded Gundran, the smallest of Volstagg's three girls and also the one with the largest voice. She had apparently nominated herself into the role of Judge.

"I am Loki of Asgard," Loki stated, rising as directed once he politely suggested Flosi return to her jury box (see sandbox). Volstagg was surprised at the trickster's willingness to play along. Had he been subjected to a charade such as this in his younger years, he would be putting up petulant fight indeed. Volstagg was quite curious to see how these events would play out.

Their morning together had started out civil enough, their ride from Gladsheim more pleasant than he had anticipated. Loki had actually asked him about his family, inquiring about their names and ages and what it was like to juggle duty with parenting. Volstagg confessed that it was indeed Hildegund that did the bulk of the work—which she reminded him of on a regular basis—and how lucky he was to have her.

"It is unfortunate that Lady Sif chose to hide your boy from you," Volstagg had said, offering some sympathy.

"She had her reasons," Loki replied.
"You are not angry about this?"

"What purpose would my anger serve now?" Loki spoke with a rare sincerity, a calm even. "Fortune has smiled upon me that Sif should accept me back into her life. I would be a fool to jeopardize that with a stale grudge."

He had answered all of Volstagg's questions right, the silver tongue never ceasing to impress. However Volstagg had learned over the years to recognize Loki's words for exactly what they were: mere words. The ultimate test was what was being played out right before his eyes at the mercy of his formidable offspring.

"May I beg the court's indulgence for a moment?" Rolfe said, thoroughly enjoying his role as prosecuting attorney, which he no doubt claimed after Hildy—always the devil's advocate—volunteered as Loki's defense. Rolfe and Hildy's favorite hobby these days was arguing with each other.

"I call your attention to Exhibit A," Rolfe continued, gesturing to a golden apple set upon an upturned bucket.

"A is for Apple!" squealed little Aleric from the juror's box.

"Members of the jury," Gundran interjected, "you are instructed to remain silent during the prosecution's opening statement." She shifted her attention back to Rolfe. "Please proceed."

"May the record reflect," Rolfe said, gesturing to the apple, "that Exhibit A is an accurate reproduction of the fruit in which the Lady Idunn was robbed of on the night of—"

"Objection!" Hildy sprang up from her client's side, who seemed now to be more entertained than tested by the proceedings.

Hildy continued, "Mother is going to be furious when she learns that you took one of her Apples of Youth."

"Sustained," Gundrun said, shooting Rolfe a disapproving look. "I call a short recess while the prosecution gives mother her apple back."

Volstagg seconded that motion. Nobody wanted to deal with Hilddegund when she woke up with crows feet but not the means to remedy it. Rolfe made his way inside with a grumble.

"Yay recess!" Aleric cheered, bounding out of the sandbox and dashing to Loki's side. "Do a magic trick!"

Loki repositioned the antler helmet so it didn't cover his eyes, glancing to Hildy as if to ask for permission to grant Aleric his request. Hildy just smiled with intrigue.

"What sort of trick would you like?" Loki asked Aleric.

"A cool one!"

Loki smirked. "Very well."

Volstagg set his plate down and readied himself to intervene if necessary. He never trusted Loki's magic, especially not when preceded by a smirk. He watched intently as Loki's hands danced around each other and Aleric bounced in anticipation. Aleric then burst with laughter when a snowball appeared and Loki offered it to him. Hildy clapped and giggled, and Volstagg relaxed,
finding his own amusement at the trick. Loki had literally made something 'cool.'

"Objection!" Rolfe hollered once returning to the scene, the apple in his hand replaced with a pine cone. "The defendant is attempting to bribe a jury member."

"Overruled," said Gundrun, who was also enchanted by Loki's conjuring. "We were still on recess."

Rolfe huffed, setting the pine cone on the exhibit bucket. "May I request that we get back to the proceedings?"

"We will proceed when I say we can proceed," Gudrun stated. "Okay, Game on!" She gestured for Loki to rise from his seat. "Will the defendant please approach the bench?"

Loki did as commanded, approaching the doghouse which Gudrun was seated atop of. He squatted down when she appeared displeased by his towering height.

"Do you swear," Gundrun began, "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you Odin?"

Loki winced, then forced a smile. "Is there not a book of the ages for me to swear on?"

"The court requests that you use your imagination," Gundrun replied.

"Ah." Loki held his hand out, palm down, a sparkling illusion of a book appearing beneath it. "Then I swear."

A commotion stirred in the juror's sandbox as the children were tickled by the magical display. Even Rolfe was taken by it, and momentarily broke character to express his fascination.

Gudrun was not so easily charmed this time. "Order in the court!" She hammered the doghouse roof with her makeshift gavel—one of the reindeer's plastic legs. "I suggested the defendant use his imagination, not magic. If the defendant continues to behave defiantly, he will be held in content of this court."

"My dear," Volstagg has to speak up, "I believe you mean 'contempt' of the court."


Loki couldn't help but laugh and Volstagg threw his hands up in surrender.

"Moving on," Gundrun continued. "Will the prosecution please cross-examine the defendant."

"Objection, your Honor," Hildy proclaimed. "Why does the prosecution get to cross-examine first?"

"Because that's how it works, dummy," Rolfe defended.

Hildy was about to unleash what would have been a storm of an argument but was cut off when a snowball went flying past her nose and splattered directly into Rolfe's face. She burst out laughing, along with Aleric who had thrown the snowball.

"Order in the court." Gundrun's hooved gavel came banging down repeatedly. "Order I say."

The pigtailed judge's cries fell on deaf ears for Aleric had rushed over to Loki and demanded another snowball, which Loki did not deny him. Hildy and Flosi were overtaken with laughter.
Flosi hopped out of the sandbox and demanded her own snowball, and Loki did not disappoint. Nor was he biased, apparently, for he furnished Rolfe with an armload of ammunition as well.

Chaos erupted once each of the three girls were struck, the final ascent being Gundrun's reaction to an assault on a judge. She stormed down from the doghouse and equipped herself with a snowball per hand, nailing both her older and younger brother. At this point, Loki was creating snowballs by the dozen, stacking them up and just all around pleased with himself for making a disaster of his trial. Somehow, he had not been tagged in the crossfire, so when a stray snowball came rolling up to Volstagg's feet, there was nothing else to do with it but nail Loki directly in the side of the head.

Volstagg could not have predicted what happened next. The children all froze mid-throw at the sight of Loki. Not only was he glaring daggers at Volstagg with a look of utter insult, but his skin had turned blue where the snow had hit him, and one eye was now red. The kids had never seen a frost giant up close before. They were both stunned and fascinated.

The children all dropped the snowballs from their hands, watching as Loki removed the antlers from his head, setting them on the doghouse, then casting his gaze over all of the children. His skin began fading back to normal and his eye restored its familiar green. He then removed his cloak and then his bracers, setting them next to antlers. The children were exchanging glances and shrugs with each other. Rolfe and Flosi seemed frightened while Hildy and the little ones were in awe and slightly confused.

Loki rolled up his sleeves to his elbows, a crafty smile now broadening his mouth. He lifted a snowball from the top of a stack, holding it out for everyone to see. He then began blotting it over one arm, creating blue polkadots on his skin.

Flosi's fear instantly melted away into enchantment. She giggled and hopped over to the snowball stack, snatching one up, her eyes beaming with delight. Loki greeted her with a nod, the wordless granting of permission for her to paint his other arm if she pleased.

She went directly for his face, smearing snow above his eyes to simulate an overabundance of blue make-up. Loki flinched but did not resist her. Volstagg even swore he heard Loki's laughter mixed in with Flosi's. The other children were quick to join in, crushing snowballs onto Loki's skin and reacting with amazement when they discovered the patches of skin that hid Jotun markings.

Volstagg could only sit back and watch with his own amazement. Never in a hundred millennia could he have expected such a scene to unfold in his backyard. Besides his surprise in the trickster prince's patience and tolerance with the little hellions, Volstagg was touched by his children's fascinated acceptance of Loki's true lineage. And all because he conjured them up a few snowballs.

Perhaps all of Asgard could take a lesson from these kids. Acceptance was the only path to peace with Jotunheim.

Hildegund emerged from the back door, planting a flour-dusted hand on her hip as she took in the events. Even she was taken aback, and not in the 'oh dear Ymir run for the hills you've upset your mother' type of situation, but in a good way. Loki was indeed passing his tests with flying snowballs, but the trial wasn't over.

"The lot of you demon spawn wash up and coming inside for lunch," ordered Hildegund, "frost giants and bearded children as well."

Loki's final test was yet to come: Hildegund's cooking, which to any reasonable soul, be it an Aesir, Vanir or Jotun, should be a delectable delight, but to a finicky fruits and berries nibbler, it was going to be interesting.
The children stampeded inside, leaving Loki standing in a slush-filled witness stand. He collected his cloak and bracers, his skin still blotchy and his hair a mess of snow and braids. He looked pretty pathetic but was somehow keeping his spirits up.

Flosi double back upon reaching the door, deciding Loki needed to be led inside by her blushing escort. She took him shyly by the hand. Volstagg approached the two, giving Loki a goodhearted slap on the back, which knocked the remaining snow from his body. His skin was slowly reclaiming the color which Odin's spell had forced it. Volstagg noticed an uncomfortable shudder in Loki when that happened. He couldn't imagine what it felt like to live under the guise of magic for ones entire life.

"I should forewarn you, Mischief Maker," Volstagg said in a friendly manner, "to refuse my wife's cooking will bring greater harm upon your body then to break your dietary oath."

Loki didn't say anything, just beheld Volstagg with a sickened expression. Was his face going to turn green now?

"Unless you enjoy a beating from a wooden spoon," he continued, "then by all means fill your plate only the flora."

Loki groaned as Flosi led him through the door. Volstagg followed right behind them.

He had a feeling he was going to enjoy this.

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The pub was alive with a hospitable revelry. The live music was catchy but not overwhelming, the wine was smooth and went down all too easily, and the maidens, well, Fandral hoped they too would be smooth and go down too easily.

But that was a pleasure to abstain from until his...drinking partner arrived.

The louse had better arrive on time. Fandral only had so much resistance after so many glasses of wine, especially on a night like this when, oh how should he phrase it, the apples were ripened to pick. The girls were all so beautiful, all in their own way. Some long, lean and elegant, sure to seduce with a sultry word. Some petite, sprightly, very energetic, and guaranteed to make him laugh. There was a girl to suit each of Fandral's moods it seemed, whether he was exhausted from a day of battle and needed pampering, or when he was feeling extra lively and needed someone to toss around on the dance floor.

They were a fascinating species, the nymphs of the nightlife. Strange how morning light always had managed to shine off the veneer, though. It's not like he planned to be the Master of the One Night Stand, it was just that, well, he always had someplace to be at dawn's light, like the training grounds. He very couldn't leave Lady Sif and others waiting now could he?

Not the way His Royal Slyness, the Tardy Trickster, was making him wait—ah, finally. There he was.

Fandral caught his eye with a forced smile, beckoning him to the empty seat at his table. He watched as Loki weaved through the crowd, the light catching his casual attire in passes. He was wearing that green linen shirt with only his gold bracers for armor, what Fandral recalled was his most comfortable clothing. He had to admit it was attractive, the way the tunic split at his neck to show off the pronounced collar bone, but that didn't mean he wore green half as well as Fandral wore it. Loki should just change up his wardrobe already, quite bringing shame to a perfectly good color. Green was a symbol of life anew, and fertility, but when Loki wore it, all one could see was...
poison and envy. What Lady Sif saw in him was indeed a quandary.

Loki fell into the chair with an exhausted sigh, leaning his head back and hugging his arms over his stomach. "Wine," was all he said.

Fandral raised a brow, pouring the bedraggled prince a glass. "I take it my comrade's hellspawn really put you through your paces?"

"The children were manageable," Loki said, tilting the entire glass down his throat. "It was that woman's cooking that was unbearable." He slid his glass forward for a refill, which Fandral granted him. The more sauced he could get Loki for this encounter, the better chance he had at making him fail his test.

"What on Asgard are you talking about?" Fandral said, refilling his own glass. "Hildegund's culinary prowess is one to be praised, even by the standards of stuck up royalty. Her boar roasts are divine, blissfully seasoned and cooked just perfectly so the center is sweating with bloody—"

"Enough," Loki barked, now leaning forward and going more pale than usual. He needed a moment to breath deeply before he disappeared behind his wine again.

"Right," Fandral sipped from his chalice, "no more talk of food. Not when there are..." he paused to catch the eyes of a pair of maidens, "more interesting topics to engage in." One tilt of his head called the pair over, the two he had made prior arrangements with. They were to be all part of the trial.

Loki glanced up in suspicion when the maidens arrived. The red head slid easily onto Fandral's lap, flopping one arm over his shoulder and helping herself to the wine in his hand. The second maiden swayed up to Loki's side, her appearance exotic in comparison to Asgard's fairer skinned selection, her complexion the color of enriched ale, her hair the blanket of midnight, sprinkled with tiny gems that could have been stars. Fandral had figured Loki would prefer her of the two, black hair being his thing and all.

"My Dashing Darling," said the darker woman with an indecipherable yet alluring accent, "aren't you going to introduce me?" Her fingers were already combing through Loki's hair while she circled behind him, checking him out. Loki just watched her from the corner of his eye, stiff and still suspicious.

"Of course, my enchantress," Fandral said, smiling in response to Loki's narrowing eyes. "I'm sure you recognize our renowned Prince, the immortal Loki of Asgard?"

"Mmmhmmm." The woman coerced Loki to lean back and eased then herself into his lap. "I know royalty when I see it." Loki's eyes fluttered as she continued to toy with his hair and traced her decorated nails down his cheek bone.

"Loki, I'd like to introduce you to Aetta," Fandral said while topping off Loki's glass. He could barely see where he was pouring with all the affection being slathered upon him by the soft young thing in his lap. She threw a cheerful wave in Loki's direction, bouncing when she spoke.

"And I'm Gerti."

"Sweet, sweet Gerti," Fandral purred, snaking his arms around her cinched waist.

Loki didn't even acknowledge Gerti, too preoccupied with what was in his lap. He was clearly drained from his adventures with The Volstags, just as Fandral hoped he would be. That was all part of the test: wear him down, get him drunk, skew his judgement. If Loki wanted to commit to
Sif, he would have to learn the hard way what that entailed. He would have to abstain from certain pleasures if he was to be deemed a worthy lover.

Fandral knew he wasn't the only playboy among them. Loki too had his game, his cravings. Fandral had witnessed it on multiple campaigns in foreign lands, the Vanir and Elven women Loki had seduced into his tent over the years.

The crafty sorcerer was no novice in the field of the fairer sex, although he was no novice to cheating either, using his magic to enchant where his words failed him. That was the only rational explanation why those two sword vendors in Alfheim had favored Loki's company over Fandral's. They were not in their right minds, clearly. Loki wasn't half the artisan with a blade that Fandral was. No other force besides a manipulative, unnatural magic could have lured those two into Loki's company instead of his own.

Fandral glanced in Loki's direction, fighting back a very unwanted twinge of envy. From the back, Aetta could be mistaken for one of those Women of the Blade: tall, muscular, irresistibly forward. Come to think of it, she could almost be confused for Sif if one didn't see her darker skin beneath all of that hair. It wasn't the same texture but the length and color were close enough. She was a the finest goddess-for-hire Fandral could find.

So why was it that Loki was playing hard to get?

"More wine, My Prince?" Fandral offered, urgently, not waiting for a response before topping off his glass.

"Aww, you're so nice," Gerti cooed, tracing her finger around his goatee. Fandral could only half return her affection, to caught up in watching Loki.

"I don't wish to be rude," Loki finally spoke up, easing Aetta off of his lap as he stood, "but I really must go wash up before I proceed with these...activities." He forced a smile then disappeared into the crowd.

"Wash up?" Aetta blinked at Fandral. "Is he serious?"

"Worry not, my tigress," Fandral assured. "He spent the day in the wilds, playing games with children. He truly could use a wash."

"He should have done that before he came here," Gerti added.

"There are many social graces Loki should do that he does not," Fandral explained with his best attempt at a silver tongue. "But that is all part of his charm, right?"

"Whatever." Aetta claimed Loki's chair, as well as his wine glass. "So long as you still pay in full, he could stay in the washroom all night for all I care." She drained the glass then smashed it on the ground. "Another!"

Fandral didn't mind a little break in the trial. He could occupy himself with Gertie's lips, enjoy her sweetness. She was a peach in flavor and in feel. So cute. So irresistible. He broke the kiss only when he heard the the glass Aetta had shattered crunch beneath someone's boots. He assumed Loki had already returned.

He looked up. He was wrong. It wasn't Loki. It was Sif.

"Ladies, if you please," Sif ordered, "I need a word with my comrade-in-arms."
Fandral blinked, surprised. Her tone was not one to be trifled with. He signaled for the escorts to excuse themselves for a moment, which they did with shrugs and eye rolls. He didn't even watch them walk away, too focused on Sif's highly unlikely presence.

"Sif, darling," he said, offering her Loki's chair. "I thought you were staying in Glasir for a while."

She refused the chair, just kept standing at his side, strangely close, enough that he could smell her leathers. She was dressed down, wearing only her chain mail shell over a thin sleeveless shirt and her armored skirt. He rarely got to see her muscular shoulders without their plated armor, or the curves beneath her breastplate, which metal links exaggerated so...femininely. She looked beautiful.

"I have an urgent matter to discuss with you," Sif said, her gray eyes appearing a warm hazel in the pub's fire lit ambience. She had them locked intently on him.

"You wish to speak with me?" said Fandral. "Not Loki?" He wondered if she even knew whether Loki was here.

She took a step closer. "Yes, you." She then claimed his lap, those luscious eyes lining up directly with his. She was close enough that he could feel her exhale across his lips.

"S-sif. What are you...W-what's going on?" Fandral forgot how to formulate sentences once her fingernails began combing through his hair. His hands had somehow ended up on her hips, obviously acting on their own accord. He wouldn't have put them there. This was Sif for Odin's sake!

"It's always been you," was what she whispered before she connected their lips.

Fandral's hands weren't the only thing out of his control. His entire body had become defiant. His lips accepted her fully, his voice mewled into her, his heart raced wildly and his...um...well...the rest of him was already 'up' for the occasion. Probably because of Gerti. He would stick with that story.

Gerti, Gerti...who was Gerti again? Who was any other woman when the Lady Sif was devouring him whole. By the Great Tree could she kiss. Did that surprise him? Not really. She was gifted with how many other physical masteries? Too many to count. Too many for her own good. How many times had he told her to pick a weapon class and stick with it. Fuck it. Why was he thinking about that now? He should be worried about Loki's reaction to finding them lip locked, her hands making a ravished mess of his hair, his hands slyly working their way under the chain mail, a thin tease of linen separating them from her skin.

This was so wrong. All while being so right. She smelled divine. Like honey, specifically a honey glaze. She must have just come from dinner. In fact, Fandral was certain she had, because she tasted like honey-glaze too. Honey-glazed lamb shank to be exact. That was a dish signature to Hildegund's cooking. Sif must have gotten the recipe. Wait, why was he thinking about recipes when Sif was slipping her tongue into his mouth!?

This was so right. And yet so wrong. With her probing tongue came even more questionable flavors. Was that...the same wine he had been drinking? Sif never drinks wine. She's strictly an ale girl unless it's an emergency situation. Had she come from an emergency? Was she not in her right mind? That would explain this behavior. He should probably ask her if everything was okay.

But first he would...comfort her just a little longer. She obviously needed it, what with the urgency of her lips, the scratching of her fingers, and the tensing of her abdomen, which he felt beneath his
massaging hold. And what a tensing it was. Her muscles felt like they were expanding, and the weight upon his lap increased. Everything was changing for that matter, the temperature of her skin, the texture of her lips, even the clothing upon her body.

Something wasn't right.

Fandral's eyes popped open. Staring back at his were a pair of vivid emeralds, Loki's eyes. He heard himself make a shocked noise as he shoved the imposter off of his lap.

"What in the blazing balls of Surtr are you doing?" Fandral leapt from his chair and began alternating between wiping his mouth and spitting. His outburst had pulled the attention of everyone in the pub, including Gerti and Aetta, and they all watched in tickled amusement.

Loki righted himself, smoothing down his tunic and wiping his mouth only once. He wore a smug smile as he too watched Fandral battle the shade of pink he was turning.

"Now those two boys spending the night together," Aetta chimed in, "I would pay to see."

Fandral pretended he didn't hear that. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Long ago." Loki grinned.

"Why would you do that?" Fandral was now fussing with his hair, as if he could shake out the feel of Loki's fingers. He felt dirty. Used. Violated! He wouldn't be able to properly make out with a woman for at least a week now.

Loki's air of satisfaction was nauseating. Fandral watched in disgust as he poured himself a glass of wine and sipped it like it were his victory cup.

"Looks as though you've failed," were Loki's departing words, his hair whipping around as headed for the exit.

"I failed?!" Fandral called out after him. "I wasn't the one on trial. It doesn't work that way. You're not allowed to do that?"

His cries were futile. Everyone could see it. Loki had gotten him, and he had gotten him good. How utterly embarrassing.

"All's fair in love and war," a man offered with a clap to Fandral's back. He didn't see who it was, still too stricken.

He fell back into his chair and took a long pull from the bottle—not even bothering with his chalice—trying to piece together what had just happened. Technically, Loki failed the test. He didn't abstain from physical pleasure after all. Yet, it wasn't exactly a story he could approach Sif with as ammunition to dissuade her from Loki's side.

"Hey Sif," Fandral imagined himself saying. "Stay away from this guy. You can't be with him because I made out with him, because I thought he was you."

Yeah, no. That would never fly.

Fuck it, Fandral sighed, connecting his lips to the bottle again. So Loki passed his first two trials. Good for him. He would need the ego boost for his final trial. Hogun was not one to be easily enchanted. Fandral could only hope the Third Warrior didn't put himself in a situation to get kissed. That may be Loki's greatest secret weapon yet. He almost couldn't blame Sif for falling for
him now.

Wow. What a tongue.
I leave this Sunday for a 2-week vacation in Panama, and in preparing for this I have had very little time to write anything but a tease of this chapter. So here's a little snippet! The plan is to complete and post it while abroad, even if I have to abandon all structure and post in sporadic chunks. That just may be the fate of my following chapter as well because really, who needs structure while on vacation? =P

Thanks again for reading.

Loki had had it all wrong. It should not have been his third trial he was dreading, but instead the first two.

What a nightmare yesterday had been. He could still feel the animal flesh crawling through his organs, still taste the residue of indiscriminately cheap thrills upon his lips. Walking away from his second trial without purging his first trial all over the floor was a trial in itself. Yet, another that he had passed and that will undoubtedly prove more challenging than third, which was now revealing its very anticlimactic reality to him.

Alighting upon a rocky platform just large enough for his skiff, Loki scanned the expanse of Vanaheim. It was familiar from his books. He had traveled to Hogun's home realm countless times but never to this particular elevation, which the warrior's provided coordinates had led him to. It was typically off limits to tourists, even rogues like himself, protected by the magic of Vanir shamans. These were the grounds they specifically reserved for their people's vision quest, a silly coming of age ritual which their adolescents must endure. A joke of trial if that was indeed what Hogun had planned for Loki. How simple, myopic, cliche even. Apparently grimness sapped one of creativity.

What a waste of his time. It was insulting that Hogun deemed this a worthy trial for Loki of Many Questionable but Esteemed Titles, none of which included Prepubescent Vanir. At least the setting was pleasant enough though, towering rock formations reminiscent of Midgard's wild west only washed in grim blues and dressed in Vanaheim's signature clinging clouds. There were arches tall as titans silhouetted in the distance, and rocky outcroppings that seemed to float, shrouded by mist. It was a breathtaking view, even to one who was quickly preferring Volstagg's backyard over whatever menial psychological games were awaiting him.

Loki stepped out of the skiff for a lack of anything else to do. The pillar he was directed to did not connect to anything, no paths or bridges, not even a vine within reach to swing on like a bipedal primitive. There were no other life forms either save the occasional V of passing birds, their cries bouncing haphazardly off the surrounding natural monuments. He didn't know what he was supposed to do but he knew he was being watched. He could sense the foreign magic thick in the air, studying him, muting his own magic. This was the first test. And by the gods was it boring.

Loki turned, making to step back into the skiff but was thrown to the ground when the entire pillar began rumbling. He watched as the rock beneath his vessel cracked and crumbled, halving the safe surface area and sending the skiff to a falling fate. Loki clung to a small shrubbery, it's little roots offering just enough strength to anchor him while the platform shook and swayed. An unwelcome
fear came over him. He wondered if this was not a trial at all, but a set-up. An assassination staged to look like a flying accident. Could a member of Thor's noble entourage sink to such conniving depths? It was hard to say with Hogun. He was a wild card.

Loki's fear shifted to anger, his knuckles white around the stems in his grip. He may be stripped of his magic, his vehicle, his equilibrium, but he was not defenseless, not while he had the might of mind and voice. Releasing the plants he rose upon gradually stabilizing legs, claiming a strong footing and enough balance to stand just shy of his full height.

"If you intend to murder me then at least spare me the plot of the coward," he shouted over the quaking din. "Face me like a true warrior, Hogun."

His voice was absorbed into the dust and mist, not even allowed the dignity of an echo. He awaited a response, riding the now predictable shifts of the platform, adjusting his weight as needed. The entire scenario called back memories of Chitauri space: the unstable alien surroundings, the isolation, his plays for even a glimpse of control. What was next? Interrogation? Threats? Torture? What could Vanheim possibly confront him with that he hasn't already endured and conquered.

"I grow bored of your child's play," he taunted, arms held out expectantly. "Either drop me into the misty abyss or present me with something to hold my interest."

His request was heard this time, for another wave of rumbling overcame the platform, forcing Loki to a crouch as the rock under his feet rippled and multiplied, birthing a walkway that grew stone by stone and stretched into the mist. He watched wide-eyed, unable to deny his fascination in Vanir sorcery. The old tribal shamans were true masters of their craft.

He was already advancing down the path before it had finished completion, before the quaking ceased, his patience only reserved for special occasions. The mist ahead was inviting, the promise of a delicate caress to his beaded skin. He was dressed in full armor, the same set he had worn on Midgard, regal, empowering and, unfortunately, quite warm, especially with the cape. Perhaps one day he would face his opponents as the Jotnar do, unabashedly half-naked. But until that day he would just have to endure a persistent perspiration and seek relief wherever he could get it.

The mist was indeed a relief and it mercifully thickened as he went on. Visibility was limited but the drop in temperature and the sound of rushing of water told him he was entering a grotto. He stepped through a cooling curtain of a waterfall without hesitation, slicking his hair off his forehead, allowing the water to creep in beneath his heavy layers, sooth his skin.

He opened his eyes. When he emerged on the other side of the waterfall, he found himself in Germany.
Parallels (or The Trials of Loki, Pt. 2.2)

Chapter Summary

Loki is put to the final test in a way he can't predict.

Chapter Notes

This is so late. My apologies. I did a little bit of writing while on vacation but I couldn't complete this chapter while mere steps away from some of Central America's finest surfing and snorkeling beaches. Fun in the sun and deep dark Loki feels don't mix very well. It took a couple weeks back in gloomy Seattle to find the muse again. I don't know if it's any good but I feel good to have finally completed it and now the doors are open for all the fun and fluff that awaits these characters in Glasir Valley, something they've worked hard all winter for.

This time the museum was empty, and it was light outside. He was dry, despite having just stepped through a waterfall, and he felt the soft cling of his tailored designer suit, or at least the mock feel of modern Midgardian style produced by a very elegant spell that was not his own. He eased down the steps, no cane in hand, and slowed by a lack of purpose. Waiting at the base of the staircase was a man with thinning close-cut hair, a smart tuxedo and an eye patch.

"Are you supposed to be the All-Father?" Loki asked, unimpressed.

The man blinked, slightly offended. "Don't you recognize me?" He spoke in German. His eye patch was small, sophisticated, much like Director Fury's only made of brown leather from the skin of a young, possibly endangered cloven hoofed creature. "Do you not remember taking my eye?"

"Dr. Heinrich Schafer," Loki laughed. He couldn't believe this was the crime, of so many he had committed, that they were confronting him with. He hadn't even killed anyone at that party. "Be grateful you're still alive."

The doctor's expression shifted, the way most arrogant ones do when they realize they aren't going to get any sympathy. It was then that Loki realized the mystics were somehow tapping into his memory, violating his thoughts. How else could they account for this level of detail without physically being at the scene.

"You enjoyed taking my eye," the doctor said. "I saw it in your face."

Loki stopped at the bottom step, leaning into the bannister. "You saw what I wanted you to see." He conceded to play along. "What I wanted them all to see."

The doctor stepped up to his level. "Why would you insist on being the monster that you are not?"

"You have no idea what I am."
"Neither do you," said the doctor. "But I think we can both agree you are not the devil that took my eye."

"I'm sorry to disappoint, but you are wrong."

"The Chitauri possessed you."

Loki laughed again. "They empowered me. They were fools."

"They were your allies. Partners in genocide. Are you suggesting you had tricked them?"

"Now you're catching on." Loki smiled.

"Why?" The doctor was not amused. "If you wanted passage back to Asgard, you could have had it. You didn't need to start a war."

Rolling his eyes, Loki switched which elbow to lean against. "Does anyone ever really need to wage war?"

"So it was chaos you sought." That wasn't a question.

"Am I not Loki?" He then grinned something crooked.

The doctor could only shake his head, his one eye sad. Had he been hoping for a confession of guilt? He should get used to disappointment if that was the case.

Loki gazed with satisfaction at the man's expression, which did not budge. Not even while the flesh and mass of it morphed and condensed, not even when the walls of the museum closed in, becoming darker, cracked, impoverished. He watched as the being before him became a raggedy little girl wearing what was once a vivid purple and orange striped dress before the colors were dulled with dust and dried blood. He tilted his head, curious, deciphering her age at about 6 earth years.

"And who are you supposed to be?" Loki asked, patronizing. The girl sat hugging her knees on the cement landing of a reeking stairwell, almost level with his standing height. Loki finally recognized their surroundings as a low income apartment building, starved of fresh paint and natural light.

"I lived here with my family before the alien dragon wrecked it." The girl looked up and around as she spoke.

Loki followed her gaze with partial interest. "Where is here?"

"Harlem," she said. "The walls fell down and the floor broke under our feet. Daddy could only hold my hand for a little bit before I slipped."

Loki forced a smile, understanding the purpose of this girl. Again, the mystics were trying to guilt trip him. They would have to try harder.

"Casualties are a way of the universe," Loki said. "Fairness is a luxury for the limited few. You are not the only one who's slid through their father's grip."

The girl blinked slowly, changing tactics. "You let go."

One of Loki's eyes twitched. "He released his grip the moment he concealed my true self beneath this spell."
"Daddy didn't mean to lose his grip on me." She looked up at Loki with rich brown eyes lined with thick lashes. "He only lost his balance."

Loki sighed. "You cannot compare your misfortune to mine, little girl."

The girl dropped her gaze to her lap, her hand attempting to rub away the stains in her dress. "He survived, but he was hurt. Broken bones and a broken heart." She then reached up and slid her hand into Loki's. It felt coarser than he expected. "I'm sadder for him than I am for falling. He probably blames himself. He shouldn't."

"He could not hold on," Loki said, staring at their joined hands. "He should absolutely blame himself."

The girl tightened her hold. "I forgave him."

Loki shuddered and yanked his hand back, shooing her away. "Be gone, apparition!" The image of her distorted and drifted up the stairwell, dissipating like a puff of smoke.

"You're not fooling me," Loki called out. "You'll have to conjure more than a little girl to break me. Your magic is weak. Antiquated. Cowardly!" He then rose and the facade of ravaged New York faded away, as did his suit, putting him back in his water weighted leathers, surrounded by weeping rock walls. His senses once again filled with a refreshing mist.

"This trial is pathetic, Hogun." Loki stepped onto a thick fallen tree that spanned the grotto and the next towering platform, his arms held out with expectation. "Why don't you face me in the flesh? Quite hiding behind your witch doctors."

There was no response.

Loki dropped his arms to his sides. "This is a waste of my time. You know not the danger you put our realms in by keeping me a prisoner here."

More silence. Loki could feel his impatience creep in like a madness, pounding in his temples, flaring his nostrils. He was about to step off the log and hopefully force the next event via falling but he felt a walking frequency resonate beneath his step. The silhouette of an ancient soldier then darkened the mist in front of him.

"The only danger I see stands before me." Hogun's exotic monotone bled through haze. His details weren't apparent until he finished speaking.

Loki waited until each and every braid and buckle were visible before responding to him. "Spoken like the true ignorant."

"Enlighten me." Hogun didn't budge in body or mood.

"I have not the time for that scale of undertaking." Loki drew his daggers. "I know why you're really here. So let us get on with it."

Hogun may have just smiled. "So be it."

Taking his sparring stance, Loki readied his pride to be wounded. Hogun was the worst to duel with, he always had been. Where he lacked in conversational skills he made up for in weapon mastery. All weapons. Even daggers, which was what he chose to wield now, just to show off. Loki didn't stand a chance and Hogun knew it, and he knew that Loki knew it, but regardless, Loki would not show it. He would not give the grim but gifted warrior that satisfaction. So he went
through the motions, delivering slices and jabs that were met with parries or air, growling and
grunting, bearing his teeth, trying not to laugh when he actually managed a successful dodge. He
must have hesitated in a surprised state of gloating at that small success, for the next moment
quickly found him dangling from the log, fingernails clawing into loosening bark.

"Satisfied?" Loki growled, straining in an attempt to pull himself up.

"No," was Hogun's last word. His figure was then replaced by an old man with an eye patch,
another one! This one growing strikingly familiar as the mist parted around him.

"Your illusions are pathetic!" Loki's voice was little more than a rasp.

"Take my hand, my son." The figure squatted, steadying himself with Gungir and reaching for
Loki.

"I am not the son of Odin!"

"Loki," Odin said, calmly, patiently. "Please."

Despite the cheapness of the mystics' tactics, Loki begrudgingly connected with the outstretched
arm and let himself be pulled to safety. Falling was failing in the eyes of these trials. Loki could not
fail for the sake of his son, no matter how desperately he preferred the unknown void to the All-
Father's company, even just an illusion of him. He released Odin's hand and smoothed down his
leathers. The pair walked off of the log.

"My skin feels cold, but I always sweat," Loki heard himself say as the walls of Gladsheim grew
around them. His voice was a relic of the past, innocent, unburdened by bitterness. "Thor does not
have this problem."

A younger, taller Odin walked alongside him, his hair still holding on to warmer hues. "Remember
when you were but this tall," Odin flattened his palm at thigh height, "and you asked me why you
have black hair in a family of golds and reds?"

"You said the eternal made me different for a reason," Loki responded with a lost optimism. "That
they had plans for me."

"That remains my answer to your physiological questions."

"But," the boy deflated, trying to make eye contact with his father who kept his gaze fixed forward,
"when am I to learn of these plans? When will the others learn? I am different and everyone sees
it."

"You set yourself apart," Odin said, his words heavy on Loki's thoughts, weighing down his hopes
and clashing with his instincts. He opened his mouth to speak but he didn't know how to counter
his father, didn't know what words had a chance of getting through.

The pair encountered Frigga on the veranda overlooking the training grounds. She greeted them
with a warm smile, which was not returned by her husband.

"You should be joining your brother down there," Odin continued, "not hiding behind spell books.
When they knock you down, do not retreat to the library. Get up. Face them again. And again. Do
not show fear."

Frigga lost her smile.
"But they outnumber me," Loki said, meekly. "Four to one."

"The odds are not always in your favor," said Odin.

"They're never in my favor," said Loki.

"Use your tricks, my love," Frigga intervened, sliding her hands over the boy's shoulders. "You have a mystical edge on your brother and his entourage." Her touch was like a healing balm, her voice a harp's chime. "Magic does not cow to might."

Odin shook his head and walked away, muttering some disheartening disapproval. Luckily, Mother always knew what to say, how to encourage where Odin could only spit out impossible ideologies. From that point on, Loki had been able to hold his own in combat, gripping tightly to his magic with the fierceness that Thor gripped his steel weapons. Mother was more gifted with the mystic arts that many believed her to be, but she veiled nothing for Loki, teaching him everything she knew and equipping him with the ability to exceed even her skill.

How appropriate was it that he had used magic to take vengeance upon her murderer.

"See you in Hel," came a monstrous voice.

Loki whipped around to see this very murderer, his victim, standing before him, only he wasn't the monster of his memory but the dark elf that preceded a cursed makeover.

"That is what you said," Algrim continued, his white hair and icy eyes a stark contrast to the brown of his skin. "Yet you came not to see me on your last visit."

Loki blinked, confused. "I believe you misunderstood my words of damnation." His body had reclaimed its present age and his voice its proper edge.

"See you in Hel, monster," Algrim quoted. "What is there to misunderstand? If you weren't going to see me on your visit, then when? In the afterlife?"

"That was the implication." Loki gave him an odd look.

"You do not deem yourself worthy of Valhalla?"

Loki laughed, casting his glance around to the indecipherable limbo that had become their surroundings. "Would you?"

"She does."

Algrim then disappeared.

"She who?" Loki prompted, finally interested in what the elf had to say. "Sif? Mother? Hela?...Not Hela. No one is that forgiving." Loki's voice attempted to follow Algrim but was uncertain which direction to go. "Who, dammit? Tell me."

He spun around, yanked into a stride that found another younger version of himself—but this time grown—burusting into the throne room, charging up to his father.

"Why have you sent the guards to seize my daughter?" His volume filled the entire royal chamber. "Was it not enough to banish Fenrir and Jormungand, now you must take her?"

Odin cast a disconnected, single-eyed gaze down at him. "If left under the care of that witch, she will become our enemy."
"Then let me care for her." There was a desperation in Loki's demands. "She is mine. I will raise her."

"She is cursed. Diseased. She cannot be allowed within these walls. She could infect us all."

"She is merely disfigured, not contagious."

"You do not know that," Odin said, somewhere between calm and exasperated. "When was the last time you visited her? How do know that deranged woman you bedded has not further riddled her body with dark magic. She belongs in the realm of the damned."

"You base your sentencing on mere speculation."

Odin sighed. "The prophesies—"

"Are open for interpretation," Loki cut in. "Please Father, let me have her."

"You are still but a boy." Odin would not budge. "How can you be trusted to father a lost soul when all you have fathered lately is chaos. You are fortunate to be spared the dungeon after your affair with a Jotun and after that stunt with Idunn. And now, I am hearing you have even assaulted the Lady Sif. You let jealousy dictate your actions, selfish, childish ambition."

"I cut her hair," Loki defended, his voice cracking. "It is hardly an assault."

"Why did you do it?"

"She...assaulted me first." Loki shook off the issue of Sif entirely, unable to process that particular pain in tandem with his current one. "Father, please. Let me have my daughter."

"No Loki. She will be the apprentice of Mephisto. Her name will be changed to Hel for she is to become mistress of the underworld."

"Mephisto? Helheim?" Loki couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Father, no. That cannot be her fate. She cannot keep the company of the death and decay."

"They are her kindred spirits."

"She is not a monster! You cannot judge her soul by her haggard flesh."

Odin paused, taking a deep breath. "You see only what you want to see. I see beyond the superficial."

"As do I." Loki wouldn't back down. Not this time. "She is a good child."

"Forgive me that I do not trust your judge of character."

"Father, please." He was now abandoning all pride, letting his tears fall. He would do whatever it took, grovel if he had to. "Do not do this. I beg you."

Odin lowered his gaze and raised his hand in small, kingly gesture. "Guards."

"Please!" Loki cried. "You know she is not evil. Why won't you listen to me? What is it you're not telling me?!"

Odin didn't say anymore. The guards had to force Loki out of the throne room, his cries, struggles and pleading no match to Odin's command for his dismissal. Out of the corner of his eye as he was
being dragged, Loki saw his mother approach the throne and attempt an argument on his behalf, but her pleas were ignored as well. Odin could not be reasoned with.

A torrent of emotion, both old and new, tightened Loki’s gut as he stood surrounded by mist again. He nearly forgot where he was, too racked with wondering how many more children had to slip through their fathers' grip before truth was allowed to reign again.

Frigga's voice echoed in his head. "I asked him to be honest with you from the beginning."

"Cowardly woman," Loki snarled, his bared teeth stretching his wet cheeks. "Too weak to stand up to him, to go against countless decisions you knew to be wrong. You let his poison infect you, and now you're dead! You always made excuses for him. You bent to his will, served him unconditionally, and he couldn't even protect you. I should have let Laufey, my true father, slay him while you watched. Reap his end of the bargain in what could have been a beautiful atonement."

Each of Loki's words built a weight beneath his ribs that had now grown too heavy to support with a strong posture. "Oh mother, what am I saying." Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to wither, to curl in and wilt as much as possible while still remaining on his feet. "His poison infects me as well."

The shifting of light told him the surroundings were changing again, but he didn't open his eyes to see how. He didn't care anymore. There was nothing else the mystics could throw at him that could strike as deep as his hatred for Odin. They would have to threaten his life to get a response now. He was done playing their game. They could fail him six ways to Svartlheim for all he cared. He just wanted this to be over with.

He felt his body shift, but not by his own doing. It seemed his feet weren't connected to solid ground anymore either, at least until they were, very abruptly, and with a final flash of light that disappeared as quickly as it deposited him into a new environment. He opened his eyes, finding himself in a setting of tranquility. It was a romantic courtyard manicured lovingly with lush gardens and spotless white arches, ornate stone benches and even a trickling fountain that audaciously thought it could summon calm in his soul. How trite. Was all this peace and beauty supposed to set the mood for a particular test? Was Odin going to appear again, this time in the spirit of future possibilities, and beg for Loki's forgiveness? The very thought made him ill.

"Loki," came a surprising voice from behind him.

Loki spun around, his heart catching when he laid eyes on Sif. She was seated on a bench, relaxed, draped in flowing silks from her hair to her robes. Her eyes picked up the warm and muted gold of her dress, a soothing color that enticingly complemented the rich darkness of her hair and lashes. She was beautiful beyond description. She also looked tired.

"Why are your clothes wet?" she asked in a voice he wished he could curl up in.

"To fool me into believing this is real."

A lock of her hair fell against her cheek as she tilted her head. "This is real."

Loki closed his eyes with an exhale. He didn't know what he was supposed to say.

"Loki," she spoke again. He then heard her rise, close the distance between them, and connect him with the aura of her sweet perfume that he wished was not so easily accessible in his memory. Was nothing sacred to these mystics? "The trial is over. Hogun's message said they would deliver you
here once they finished with you."

"Can we please skip to the part where I am to confront the All-Father again?" Loki opened his eyes, hoping (oddly enough) to see Odin before him but was greeted instead by his lover's hand on his cheek. Her touch was warm yet he shivered. It felt too real, the timbre of her voice, the smell of her skin, it was all exactly as it should be, yet she wore not a single piece of armor, not even a fashionable breastplate or leather corset. Her body was draped only in silks, loosely fastened with knots and cinched with braided rope, impractical as it was beautiful, the slits in skirt not conducive for hiding weapons. This was not Sif. She would never willingly render herself so exposed. This was an insult to them both.

Loki stepped back, pulling out of her reach, refusing to play along anymore. They crossed a line this time.

"I will not be seduced by your ever-cheapening tactics."

Sif's eyes widened with a very convincing display and then everything whited out for the hot moment her hand struck his cheek.

"Ok, that was real." Loki's senses realigned as his cheek throbbed.

"Of course it's real, you idiot," Sif said, sounding very much like Sif. "The light show you just materialized in wasn't your imagination. Heimdall transported you out of Vanahem, just like Hogun said he would once the trial finished." Fixing the sleeve that had fallen off her shoulder, she took a step closer, her eyes never shifting away. "You're in Glasir Valley. This is...my home. Ollie's home."

Her eyes saddened at her last words, no amount of makeup or stoicism able to hide her pain. Loki studied her intently as it was a familiar sadness, a real, tangible sadness, one he just played out in a memory. It was the look of a parent unable to be with their child.

Perhaps this was actually Glasir Valley. Her casual attire could be explained by the comfort of being at home. Which meant...

"Sif," he said with an encroaching worry, "where is Ollerus?"

"He's..." she lifted her chin, attempting to hide the quiver of her lip. "He's gone off on his own. To the mountains. Like he does sometimes, to hunt, or ski." Her voice weakened with each word, her eyes glistening despite her efforts to keep them dry. "Only this time it's different."

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Her chest was now heaving and her face was twisting in every way possible to keep her tears from falling, a sure sign that was indeed, the real Sif. No one could fake the extremes she was stubbornly willing to go to in order to keep from crying in front of others, especially him.

"Sif," was all he could utter.

"I lied for so long," Sif said with an uneven voice. "I've never seen him so angry at me, never seen him look so wounded or betrayed. He said he loved me but I don't know if he'll ever forgive me."

"I don't deserve to be forgiven. The truths I withheld were the very core of his identity, and now he's hurt and confused and can't even look at me or be around me."

Loki watched as she covered her face with her hands, sobbing, breaking beneath the weight of her shame. It was a rare spectacle but all he could do was watch. He couldn't speak, couldn't move, could hardly even process the surrealism of the situation. He was hearing words he had longed to hear since he learned of his lineage. He was seeing tears fall in confession, driven by guilt and self
actualized error, yet this was not the person he had hoped would shed these tears.

"He will forgive you," Loki said before taking a moment to plan his words, surprising himself.

Sif's sobbing paused. She lowered her hands to reveal only her eyes, which were also surprised despite the pools of makeup drowning them. "Do you really think so?"

"No," he said honestly, regaining control of his words. "How would I know what he is and is not capable of? I've never even met him, thanks to you and your lies." Loki's words were harsh, he knew, and Sif was on the edge of another outburst, but he kept his tone soft. "I don't know whether he's going to forgive you or not, but he should. By all...rationality, he should not stay angry with you. You obviously regret what you did. And clearly you love him.”

Now Sif could only stare, paralyzed, her hands still covering the lower half of her face, her eyes revealing a very dazzling blend of conflicting emotions. He curiously watched her watch him, noticed the shift in power when her warrior's doubt and defensiveness eventually lost to the strength of her maternally driven hope. He had never seen her exposed to this extreme before, both physically and emotionally, not even in their most intimate moments together. He closed the distance between them and wrapped her in a consoling hug that he wasn't quite certain he could pull off.

She responded with a noise that sounded like gratitude. He did pull it off, this act of empathy that may not be an act, for her arms snaked tightly around his torso and her makeup began smearing all over his shoulder and neck. He lidded his eyes and inhaled her fragrant hair, which he began combing his fingers through. He could feel with each deep breath her heartache bleed into his chest, felt that weight again of a distant, hurt child. It was a pain he was used to, the hurt he felt for Hela, something that was easier to confront than a disturbing parallel that kept flickering in the dusty catacombs of his reasoning.

"Thank you for forgiving me." Sif murmured into his neck, a confession he wasn't expecting at all.

"Forgiving you?" Loki questioned. "For what?"

She pulled back, meeting his eyes. "For creating a legacy of lies in your family. I couldn't bear to unite you with our son if you both held a grudge against me."

The flickering parallel he was trying to ignore just blossomed into a wildfire, and he felt sick to his stomach. The trial made sense now. It was clear why they deposited him into Sif's arms after bombarding him with his past. It was a test of forgiveness, one which he just passed without even realizing. He had to forgive Sif for the same crime that Odin had committed against him. How disgustingly ironic. Still, he could forgive Sif without having to forgive Odin. Their lies were only minimally comparable.

Loki pulled Sif to him again, holding her tighter than before. "Like I said," his words were a struggle this time, despite having said them moments ago. "You're obviously sorry for what you've done." He fought the waver out of his voice. "And I know you love him."

Music: Skin by Oingo Boingo
Embrace the Moments

Chapter Summary

This picks up right where the last chapter ended only now it's Sif's perspective. There's fluff. There's a tour. There's a little Sif backstory. And finally, there's a meeting.

Sif couldn't speak so she simply continued to hold and be held in return. She was soaked through at this point, an entire morning's worth of preparation lost to an embrace. Her tears had carried her make-up everywhere but where it should be, and the wetness from Loki's clothes was ruining the silk gown she had donned for his arrival. She should probably be bothered by this, considering the ridiculous amount of time it took figuring out--without Eir's assistance--how the gown tied on, but she wasn't. She didn't have the capacity for it, not while long white fingers combed through her hair, not while she placed intermittent kisses along an elegant and clammy neck, and especially not while her son was a mere heartbeat away from meeting his father. This was one of those moments that Sif felt like people wait lifetimes for, a transition into the unknown, suspended by fear and hope, hungry for what happens next but afraid all the same. She wondered if Loki was feeling the same way. It was hard to tell. He was clearly exhausted, having just come from what she imagined was his most challenging trial. The vision quests of the Vanir, according to stories Hogun had told her, were not something to be scoffed at. Loki probably needed rest, needed time to collect himself before Ollerus returned.

Or perhaps he was looking to even further exert himself since the ties of her gown had become half undone and a hand found its way beneath the scoop at her back.

"Not now." Sif tried to squirm away as his cold hand slid down her flesh. "Ollie could show up at any moment."

"He's thirteen," Loki murmured against her hair. "I'm certain he is aware of the process which brought him into this world."

"Still," she giggled as his lips discovered the flesh of her neck and earlobe, buried under layers of hair. "I hardly think it appropriate this be his first impression of you."

"I disagree."

"You would," she sighed. She then gave in, rolling her head back, allowing him temporary access. After the nightmare she had been living since Ollerus had left, after the isolation of the last few nights, Loki's touch was a godsend, a preview of simple and medicinal acts that could dull both of their pain. Images of their flesh entwined began creeping into her thoughts. That was when she had to wedge her arms between them. "As much as I want to tear these wet clothes off you, we should get you changed in a more, modest fashion."

"Where's the fun in that?" Loki arched a brow. He then sighed. "I'd actually rather keep them on. They keep me cool. Glasir is warmer than Asgard."

"Spring does come earlier here than on the mainland," Sif said, playing along with his excuse. She knew he would rather be dressed in his royal armor than the whimsical frocks the Healer's Temple had to offer. He wanted to make a strong impression on their son.
"You said Ollerus went into the mountains?" He asked not waiting for an answer. "How is it he can show up at any moment?"

"This morning I sent a raven to inform him of your arrival." Sif's hands still lay upon his chest, her fingers tracing over seams. "He's anxious to meet you. He's also owed a favor by one of Eir's students who just learned a transportation spell. Do the math."

Loki’s eyes flickered with worry. "Are you not concerned for his safety when he's alone in the mountains?"

Sif shook her head. "Not anymore. His survival instincts are strong. And he's a gifted archer. They are hardly any predatory beasts to worry about in Glasir anyhow."

"Forget beasts," Loki said, unconsolled. "What about your enemies? Families of those you have slain in the battlefield."

Sif blinked, puzzled. "Are you joking?"

"Do I look like I jest?"

"Frequently you do." She studied him, finding no trace of insincerity. He was genuinely worried. "There have been exactly four non-Valkyries allowed passage into Glasir lands over the millennia: Odin, Ollie, myself and now you. Anyone who tries to sneak in gets—"

"I wasn't caught on my prior visits."

Sif paused, a forced smile stretching her cheeks. "You are eternally the exception to the rule."

Loki relaxed after a moment of contemplation. "That's what you like about me."

"Sure," Sif teased, inching herself closer to that damned smile. "I'm going to love explaining to our son why his father is allowed to get away with crimes that should've have him in the dungeon."

His lips met hers only briefly before they spread into a grin. "Won't be any harder than lying to him about me."

Her eyes widened. "You're lucky I'm unarmed right now."

"I know," he countered. "It's nice. Your appearance actually matches your title."

"I have half a mind to rip one of these trellises apart and gut you with it." She pushed him away, crossing her arms. She should have known a romantic setting like this would only encourage their natural tendency for hostile foreplay. "I think it's time I give you a tour."

Loki didn't reject that idea and they somehow managed to peacefully join arms and leave the garden. The Healer's Hall of Glasir Valley was renowned to sorcerers realm-wide for its magical offerings. Sif figured that Loki had been anxious to see it inside out, take full advantage of his privileged visit. The very ground it was built on had a strong mystical aura, forces Sif couldn't explain yet knew were a boon to spell casters of all levels. It was the ideal place to learn, a gift Eir had only intended for Valkyries when she built it, which made it forbidden fruit to any magic wielder outside of Glasir. Loki knew his presence here was a rarity.

They walked with arms around each other. She took him down the long, open air corridors, beneath arches that each boasted a unique relief carving regaling tales of ancient Valkyrie wizards. Loki would pause at each one and study the tale with a silent wonder, his eyes twinkling with a boyish
curiosity as each story revealed itself to him. Sif knew all of the stories on a basic level, recalling the many trips Eir had taken her down this path in hopes she would gain magical inspiration, but it was a futile hope on Eir's part. Sif just didn't have the aptitude for magic, a fate which Loki was quick to remind her of given the comical irony that she, of all Asgardians, got to grow up here.

"Such a waste," he said with feigned tragedy.

"Oh shut up." Sif rolled her eyes. "I've heard it all before. It's one of the Valkyries favorite laughs to have over their wine. The Asgardian child dropped on the doorstep of mystical greatness by impoverished parents, abandoning their daughter on the hope she will grow into more than they could ever raise her to be, a powerful sorceress or a wise healer. Turns out she hasn't a magical bone in her body."

Loki listened, half smiling. Rarely did she bring up her real parents in any discussion. "You don't appear bothered by this."

"Because I didn't need magic to be great." Sif spoke with an easy confidence. "Battle training with Queen Brunhilde's best is just as reputable as Eir's teaching of the mystic arts. Whoever my parents were, they should've been proud regardless."

"Were?" Loki tilted his head. "Are they dead?"

Sif was starting to get uncomfortable, regretting that she brought the subject up. "They never sought me out. Either they're dead or they're not worth knowing." Those last words tumbled out awkwardly.

"If Asgardians aren't allowed into Glasir, how did your parents reach the temple's doorstep?"

"I don't know," she answered in a juvenile tone. "Maybe they were caught and slain by the Valkyrie Watch for their crime of trespassing. Maybe that's why I never met them."

"You don't actually believe that."

"Can we drop it already?" Sif said, avoiding Loki's penetrating gaze. "Tell me about your trials. I've only heard bits and pieces about your visit with the Volstaggs. I heard you actually ate meat."

Loki sighed. "I do not want to talk about that."

"What did you think about about his children?" Sif was set on the subject change.

There was a pause before Loki answered. He needed a moment to accept that storytime about Sif's childhood was over. "I like them."

Odd. No one likes the Volstagg brood but the Volstaggs. "But they're animals."

"That's why I liked them. They're wild. Uninhibited."

"That's the kind way of describing them." Sif smiled with a realization. "If wild is a trait you like in children, you're going to love Ollerus."

"I don't doubt that." Loki returned her smile.

They passed under the final anecdotal arch, pausing so Loki could hear its tale, then continued on to the next building. It was the gallery of ancient herbs and medicines, a high-walled structure with vines cascading down its outer support pillars. Inside, there was a large assortment of dried and
compressed plants, framed and hung on the wall, categorized by the realms they were native to. There were also several glass cases displaying Eir's collection of delicate bottles and clay jars, nothing Sif hadn't seen a hundred times before but enjoyed seeing Loki's reaction to. He probably never imagined Eir was this much of a fanatic for her craft. He was fascinated by it all.

They left the museum and strolled arm in arm down a corridor with nothing of particular interest in it. Loki was quiet.

"Tell me about the trial with Fandral," Sif felt the need to ask.

Loki's contented smile vanished. "I don't want to talk about that."

"Why?"

"Fandral's an idiot."

"Ok..." So much for that conversation topic. "What about Hogun?"

"He's an idiot too."

"I mean," she gave him a light shove, "tell me about the trial."

"It's too soon." Loki sighed, slowing his step. "To be honest I'm still processing it all."

Sif slowed with him, seeing the exhaustion painted under his eyes, accepting that he was in no mood for interrogation. She then twined their hands together and kissed him, perhaps out of sympathy. She did not envy being run through a gauntlet involving Hogun, witch doctors, and hallucinogens. "I'll take you to the library," she spoke softly. "Maybe you can get some downtime before Ollerus returns."

His eyes lit up. "I would like that very much."

Sif led him by his hand, deciding to take him through a classroom that was a shortcut to the library. There was no class in session but there were several students pulled from their novice spell casting at the sight of Asgardian royalty passing through their little world. All eyes were glued to Loki, some of the girls enamored, some fearful, and one lingering uncertainly in between. She was the one Loki chose to target, curiously eyeing the healing stones that were timidly levitating in front of her. They came tumbling down the moment he approached her.

"You're thinking about it too much," Loki said to her. Her eyes fluttered, puzzled, alternating between him and the stones. "And now you're thinking about thinking about it too much." He squatted down next to her and the stones lifted from the ground, floating smoothly up to eye height. The students all watched in awe. "Magic is something you feel. It's driven by emotion, not intellect. Which is why it still baffles me that Sif can't learn—ouch!" Sif kicked him in the thigh.

"Quit showing off," Sif barked. "Eir wouldn't like you interfering with her curricul—ow, hey!" The stones suddenly shot at her, pinging her in the chest and shoulder.

"Take note, girls," Loki rose to full height with satisfaction, "on the battlefield, magic can be used as a weapon. Your physical pain becomes your method of defense, even bolsters it. Fear becomes power, wounds are fuel—"

"Loki," Sif cut in. "These girls are in an introductory class. And I'm pretty certain it's basic healing techniques." A couple students nodded to confirm this. "They aren't going into battle anytime soon. Now can we move on to the library?"
"Very well," Loki conceded, moving toward the doorway Sif was urging him to, "but remember ladies, a sorcerer can turn a disadvantageous scenario in to a victorious one if they are in control of their emotions."

"Oh for the love of..." Sif muttered as she led him through the door. "Eir would loose it if she found out you were lecturing her girls on emotional control."

Loki looked over his shoulder. "What exactly are you implying?"

"Drop it," Sif ordered, opening the door to the next room. Whatever quip Loki was gearing to make was muted when he was forced through the doorway and greeted by walls of towering, bloated bookshelves. His reaction was what Sif always imagined it would be: enchantment, infatuation, an instant magnetism to the shelf containing the spell books.

"This is magnificent," he said.

"I thought you would say that." Sif smiled, taking in the whole of the library with a renewed perspective.

Loki ran his fingers over a row of colorful but dusty spines. "A collection untouched by Asgard's censorship."

Sif moved to his side, noticing he had paused at the controversial imports. "As a teacher of magic, Eir wouldn't have it any other way."

Loki began thumbing through an older book, written in the ancient tongue of the Jotnar. "Does she teach what's in these pages?"

"Not the spells." Sif squinted at a page Loki paused at. There wasn't a single letter she could recognize from the alien alphabet. She only knew what the book was about because she overheard Eir telling Ollerus about its history. "But she gives her students an overview of the dark magic practiced in the outer realms. She refuses to shelter them from it. In the event they'll ever have to combat it, she wants them to be prepared."

"She's absolutely right." Loki's brows shifted to reveal a worry in his eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." He responded too quickly then tried to divert, shelving the Jotun book and exploring its neighbors. "Some of these books are outdated."

"Loki," Sif pressed, lightly touching his arm, "tell me."

"It's nothing, really, it's just, well..." His eyes darted back and forth several times before they finally met Sif's. "There was a spell in that book that reminded me of Hela. Where is Eir, by the way? Is she still in Asgard?"

"Yes," Sif replied, slowly. "She has been assisting Heimdall in counseling your brother."

Loki nodded. "He needs all the counseling he can get."

"The throne burdens him," Sif defended.

"Because he has no idea how to manage it."

"He is doing his best. What do you want with Eir?" Sif would not let him divert from what was
bothering him.

"It's nothing, darling," he took her hands into his, "really. I only wanted to ask her a question."

Sif sighed. "About what?"

Loki brought her hands to his lips, using the time it took to kiss them to formulate his response, the clever snake. "If I told you, it would ruin the surprise." He smiled, sweetly.

"Fine," Sif said. "Perhaps I don't even want to know."

"Has Eir been updating you on the affairs of Asgard?" Loki pulled her in close enough to slide his arm around her waste. "About my banquet? About how I am going to take you in my arms and whisk you across the floor while your show-stopping gown trails us like a comet's tail."

Sif gave him an odd look but didn't reject his embrace. "This is something you've clearly been thinking about."

"Please tell me you will go," he said, tilting his head endearingly.

By the Great Tree could he lay it on thick. "I will go but I will not dance."

"We will see."

"I do not dance."

"You say that now."

"I say it now and I will say it then." Sif would not bend on this. Loki was about to keep pushing the issue but was cut off when a third voice entered the room.

"Trust me, you don't want her to dance in public."

Sif and Loki's heads jerked in tandem to see Ollerus standing in the doorway, gaze locked onto Loki. "Ollie," Sif said, pulling out of Loki's hold and closing the distance between them. She reached out to touch him but he avoided her, barely making eye contact and moving further into the room. She bit back a noise of hurt. He plopped his pack into the nearest chair. Loki remained still but transfixed on the boy. Sif watched them study every inch each other, watched Loki's eyes travel from the stringy blond hair, over the sleeveless leather jerkin and defined arms, across the strap of his quiver and the handcrafted arrows it housed, down the linen trousers with holes in the knees, paying only quick attention to the weathered boots before drawing his gaze back to a stunning blue complexion, which always looked its best after Ollerus had come from the snowy mountains. He was dirty and rugged but he was as beautiful as always. Sif's heart was both aching and palpitating.

"Hello, Ollerus." Loki's voice finally surfaced.

The boy only smiled in response, pulling his quiver over his head and setting it next to his pack, which he then opened and retrieved a book from. It was modern history book, specifically about Asgard's royal family. Ollerus was making it clear, without words, that he knew exactly who it was standing before him.

"I see you enjoy reading," Loki added. Sif could tell he was getting nervous. She wished Ollerus would say something. Anything. But he didn't. He instead crossed the room and threw his arms around Loki, much to everyone's surprise.
"Hello, Father."

Loki was stunned, but he still managed to return the hug with hesitant arms. Sif brought her hands
to her face, hiding the quiver of her lip that blossomed into a gaping grin. The sight of them melted
her heartache away. It no longer mattered if Ollerus was angry at her, at least not in the moment.
He had a father now, one he could embrace, one he was embracing. She had longed to see this
happen since Ollerus first learned what a hug was, first learned what a father was. It was an
unbelievable sight. She wished she could bottle the joy that was overtaking her and save for when
the pain returned.

Loki caught her glistening gaze only briefly before Ollerus broke the hug and turned to look at her.
"Can we be alone?" the boy asked, solemnly, snapping her out of the moment.

"Of course, my love." Sif's voice was weakened whisper. She turned slowly, and left the room,
wishing she didn't have to. She wondered if there was some invisibility spell she could coax out of
an advanced student, enabling her to follow them around, absorbing every exchanged word,
reveling in every new discovery, and cherishing every precious moment. She left the library door
cracked, her descent down the hall sluggish, silent, afraid her footsteps would drown out her son's
voice. He was talking to Loki, to his father, asking him why his clothes were wet, the same
question Sif had asked Loki upon his arrival. The apple doesn't fall far. Loki then answered,
something about a waterfall. Sif continued to tip toe along, drawing her exit out as long as possible.
It was Ollie's next question that froze her place.

"Do you love my mother?"

She held her breath. She felt her eyes widen and her cheeks warm. Part of her wanted to flee, to
spare herself a contrived answer engineered to appease a young mind, yet she stayed, paralyzed.
Damn Ollie and his bluntness.

"Yes I do," came Loki's faint but very decipherable answer.

"I know you lie a lot," Ollie said. Sif squeezed her eyes shut.

"When it suits me, yes," Loki said.

"But you're not lying now."

"No, I am not.

Sif let her breath go, louder than she intended. They probably heard her because they went silent.
She didn't care. Loki's words, which she oddly believed, left her elevated, as did Ollie's question.
He still cared enough to ask. A double dose of proof that she was loved. She closed her eyes.
Elation took control. She drifted down the hall, allowing them their privacy, quitting while she was
ahead, while her heart fluttered and her worries subsided. The reunion couldn't have gone any
better even if she had planned it. This was a day to be remembered, if only for this moment, when
everything was aligned and seemingly impervious to the threat of chaos. Nothing would ever steal
this from her, even if everything went to Hel tomorrow.

*** Musical Interlude: The Angels Hung Around by Rilo Kiley ***

They had been gone for hours. It was dark and it had been dark for a disconcerting amount of time.
Sif had worked her way back to the library where she planted herself in wait of their return. She
had tried to read a book about Glasir's wildlife for the past few hours but not a word sunk in. Her
mind was a flurry. At least the book had pictures so her attempt at embracing a scholastic hobby
wasn't a total loss, but she wouldn't be able to report much about canopy fauna beyond the obvious
fact that most of them could fly or climb, and then Ollie would give her "no duh" look he had
mastered. Oh, but none of that mattered now. She was beyond the pursuit of stimulating
conversation and fully switched over to mom mode, ready to bust heads for breaking a nonexistent
curfew that she should have set before leaving them alone together, before she let her son go
romping through heavily guarded Valkyrie lands with Asgard's infamous troublemaker.

Finally, footsteps echoed in the hallway, the padding of her son's boots. She slammed her book
shut and sprung to her feet. "Ollerus?" She called out. The boy peeked around the threshold, his
face displaying unmistakable guilt. Her eyes narrowed. He then entered the room, alone. "Ollie,
where is your father?" Ollerus dropped his gaze. Sif felt her heart catch. "What's wrong?"

"It's," Ollerus began, unable to make eye contact, "kind of a long story."

"Then condense it. What happened? Where is Loki?"

"Okay, so," he took a deep breath, "I was going to take him skiing, and we got halfway up the
mountain, to the point where you can see the gates of Valhalla. And then we changed our plans.
He, um..." He finally made eye contact. "He talked me into going there."

"To Valhalla?!" Sif's jaw dropped.

"Yeah."

"Ollerus, you know that is forbidden! Why did you—"

"Because he really wanted to," the boy interrupted with a cracking voice. "His mother is there and
he misses her. Besides, I thought Queen Brunhilde was okay with having him around."

"In Glasir, Ollerus, not Valhalla. I'm not even supposed to go near the gates, let alone..." Sif trailed
off as she fell back into her seat, scrubbing her face. "Just, tell me happened. What did Brunhilde
do with him...or to him?"

Ollerus paused before speaking again. She could hear him fidgeting. "He's um...well. Oh, mother,
I'm so sorry, but he's..."

"He's what!?" Sif shot her glance back up. "Why are you smiling!?"

Ollerus burst out laughing. "I can't keep this up." He turned his voice to the hallway. "Will you get
in here already. She starting to freak out."

Sif blinked, ready to burst with...she didn't even know what, with freaking out just as Ollie called
it, especially as it dawned on her that this was all a prank. Loki then entered the room. He wore a
grin that could very well lead to his demise. She was on her feet instantly, bounding toward them
both, mainly Loki. "Are lies and trickery the first thing he is to learn from his father?"

Before Loki could defend himself, Sif was blindsided by a hug, from Ollerus! It rendered her
speechless, confused, yet she instinctively hugged him back. "Trickery," Loki chimed in, "and
forgiveness."

Ollerus broke their embrace and smiled shyly, the awkwardness that always came when he had to
be sentimental. "Thank you for bringing him here," he said to her. He then looked to Loki, as if
seeking approval. Loki smiled at him.

"Y-your welcome," Sif spoke in a small voice, wondering just what had happened on their outing.
What could Loki have said to him? What magical words could have possibly melted Ollie's bitterness? This was too good to be true.

"Wonderful." Loki started unbuckling his jerkin. "Now that that's done, can I finally relax?" Sif hadn't even considered what Loki was feeling now, too distracted with how she wanted to smother him in gratitude. She hadn't noticed his battered state when he first walked through the door. He looked as though the Valkyrie a Watch had indeed caught him loitering outside the gates of Valhalla. Not only were his leathers still soaked through, but they were torn in spots, revealing patches of blue skin that she couldn't decide were bruises or or his natural color. "I have wounds in need of licking."

"And I'm out if here. I'd rather not witness that." Ollerus spun and exited with a wave. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight darling," Sif replied absently, her voice trailing him down the hall. "Um, thank you?..." She wasn't ready to part with him yet but she knew she had to. "My sweet child," she echoed softly.

"How utterly sappy," Loki added with muffled sarcasm, struggling to peel clinging leather from his body. Sif helped him pull the jerkin the rest of the way over his head, still floating in a state of disbelief. That is until she noticed his torso was completely blue and covered in patterns and blotches. He shivered and moved closer to the fireplace. "I may have overdone it with wearing wet armor in subzero temperatures."

Sif ran her hand down his back. He was ice cold. "Are these Jotun markings or bruises?"

"Those?" He looked over his shoulder, faking a smile. "Those are bruises. Ollerus took me skiing. He seemed to think I could manage the steep runs, never mind the fact that I've never skied before and that his equipment is hand-carved and entirely too short for me."

"Did he take you on the runs with—"

"Lethally large rocks? Yes those were the ones. They hurt. I think they're in league with the Hulk, plotting over the complete mutilation of my body."

Sif eased them both down to sit at the hearth. It didn't take long before the warmth began restoring Loki's artificial skin tone. "What else did you guys do?" She ran her fingers along Jotun patterns while they were still visible, avoiding the scar in the center of his chest that was still fresh. "Did you get a chance to talk? You must have considering..."

"Yes." He shivered again, this time in a different way. Odin's spell was merciless while resurfacing. "We talked at length actually. He's quite the ball buster, a trait he clearly acquired maternally."

That wasn't news to Sif. "What did you talk about?"

Loki bent over and began unbuckling his boots. "We devised a lifetime's worth of tricks to play on you."

"I'm serious." She pulled his boot off with more force than necessary and flung it behind her.

"We talked about everything." He removed the second boot himself then tossed it to where the other had landed. "History. Family. He's a brilliant child. So fearless. Confident. Words blunt as a Dwarven mallet," he smiled, "but a mind sharp as your glaive."
Sif smiled too. That sounded like her Ollie. "You had a good time then?"

"Considering I went straight from back-to-back trials to tumbling down a mountain with an infinitely energetic adrenaline junkie, and I'm not feeling the urge to commit another genocide, I would say yes, I did have a good time.

She scooted closer to him, resting her hands on his legs, which were still covered with damp trousers. "Tell me everything."

"Sif, darling." He ran his hands up her bare arms. She hadn't bothered changing out of the gown. Loki liked her in it. "I'm beyond exhausted. Can it wait until morning?"

She blinked slowly, enjoying the feel of him, absorbing the warmth of the fire, and resigning herself to wait. She couldn't expect him to answer all of her questions in one day, and there wasn't a need to rush. This was only the beginning of his stay here. "Fine."

He could barely keep his eyes open. The heat from the fire was draining what little energy he had left. "Where are my quarters that I might die blissfully for the duration of stars' unveiling?"

She laughed. "Yeah, we need to get you to bed now before you get overly dramatic."

"Very funny," he said, straining back to his feet.

Sif rose with him. "A couple of the girls made up a guest room for you..."

"But," Loki cocked a brow.

"Formalities," Sif shrugged a single shoulder. "There's nothing wrong or unwelcoming with my bed."

Loki breathed deeply, contentedly. "Take me there."
I haven't made an entry in quite some time. It is not for lack of events to report, just none I've cared to relive in detail beyond haunting memories. That is not the case here in Glasir. In the Temple of the Healer, grounds I could not trespass until now, I would be a fool not to document all I have seen and yet to experience. There is time to take a few notes before the students arrive.

I had always heard of the aura surrounding the temple. It is a mystical force, born of the land it was built upon, which enhances the workings of magic, a forbidden fruit always beyond my reach upon my prior, cloaked visits to Glasir. Much like my view of Ollerus, I could only ever see it from a distance, the glimmer of the temple's golden spires as untouchable as my son's golden hair. But no longer are they unattainable. I now feel this oasis of magical energy course through my body, reinforcing my power, even strengthening my muscles and sharpening my mind. It is truly enchanting. Everything I see, breath and touch brings a tranquility that I didn't know I could feel. It is like a dream, the kind I do not awake from in a petrified sweat.

Sif had led me through these grounds—her home—with a childish ease, twining her fingers in mine as I absorbed it all. My jealously for her fortune of upbringing came out as teasing, taking jabs at her intelligence, playful and comfortable conversation—punctuated with her retaliating shoves and punches—behavior reminiscent of times past, long before my 'fall' as they call it. She knows I don't really believe her mind inferior, I see it in her lupine grin. In fact, I doubt anyone sees just how sharp her instincts are the way I do, how admirable her wits and cunning.

It occurred to me, even before my slip of tongue as we stood over the Jotun spellbook, that her senses are attuned to my treachery. She is aware of the bargain I struck with Hela, not to that specific of detail, but leery of a dark cloud hanging over us. Beneath the sadness she felt for Ollerus's absence, beneath the smiles my kisses pull from her lips, there is an expectation that chaos is impending. I've seen the same weary resignation in Thor's face.

I had attempted to divert her suspicions with talk of dancing, a charade which she saw right through and probably would have called me on had my son not entered the library then. We hung in a moment of shared paralysis until Sif was drawn to him. I remained still. The boy avoided Sif's attempted embrace and I caught a glimpse of her heart breaking a little more. Ollerus then crossed the room with confidence, his gaze hard upon me, my heart palpitating. I greeted him and attempted to find common ground but he said nothing. He had established control. He has lived a mere breath of time compared to me and yet he had attained dominance of that moment. I was impressed.
What he did next, I did not anticipate. He embraced me. He addressed me as Father. His arms held me tight, squeezing my ribs, sparking a pain in my chest wound. There was a longing there, within both of us, present at least a dozen years, a need satiated with the simplest of actions. My eyes became cloudy. They would. My arms limply held him, despite what my heart told them to do. They would. Of all times for my traitorous body to make a coward of me.

Time had slowed and I glanced at Sif. She was dumbstruck with a heartrending joy. Her tears weren't as hesitant as mine, for once, and she tried to hide them beneath her hands. I wish she hadn't hid her smile. I adore her smile. I could see by the slits of her eyes that her face was split joyfully in two. That is until Ollerus ended the hug—as quickly as he initiated it—and spoke to her, essentially asking her to leave, which she agreed to do with only momentary hesitation. At the time I wish he hadn't, not only for her sake but for mine. I needed her moral support, someone to clue me into what I was supposed to do next. I had no idea what to expect.

Once Sif had left the room, the boy's eyes critically scanned me, studying every inch, and I did the same to him. I haven't seen eyes like his before, intense hybrids with rich auburn irises and only a hint of orange around them, not saturated enough to be considered devilish by the Aesir. His complexion is lighter than my true color as well, softened by his mother's paleness. And then there's that hair: a resurrection of Sif's former splendor, golden as dawn, radiant, begging to glow through the weight of melted, dirt-laced snow. I have never, in all of my travels, seen a more complementary combination of skin and hair coloration. Sif and I have created a masterpiece with this child, and that isn't even considering his capacity for magic in tandem with his mother's physical strengths. There is so much I want to learn about him. And teach him.

I was about to speak to him—about what I do not recall—but he spoke first, asking me a most petrifying question. "Do you love my mother?"

The nerve of this boy. "Yes I do." My words tumbled out quickly and without grace, but not for lack of sincerity. I knew I was being truthful but was worried he didn't. I also had a sneaking suspicion Sif wasn't out of earshot. What did she make of my confession?

"I know you lie a lot," Ollerus then said. He had done his homework, that was obvious by the history book he brandished.

"When it suits me, yes." I wanted to be as honest as possible.

"But you're not lying now."

"No I am not."

His next question was nearly as unexpected as the first. He asked if I wanted to go skiing! Said he had extra gear for me, said some student named Svala will transport us there immediately with her magic. I was initially reluctant to put the spatial displacement of my body in the hands of a novice sorceress but my son's insistence convinced me otherwise. He said how he does it all the time and that Svala could be trusted because Eir taught her the spell and Eir doesn't let any student use her spells willy–nilly without proving mastery of it. I couldn't have argued with the boy even if I wanted to. So, we went skiing.

There isn't much time for talk when one is strapped to a pair of planks and fated for a quick and painful death via impact with a boulder. It had taken all of my focus to stay in one piece and I wish I could say my efforts were executed with grace and style. I had lost count of the times I toppled, my skis mercilessly twisting my legs around, my face bluing by the repeated planting of it into the snow. If Ollerus was hoping for a father gifted as him in adrenaline stoked hobbies, he was going to be disappointed. Fortunately, he seemed more intent on showing off than judging my skill. Plus
the look on his face at seeing my blue skin was well worth the pain involved in creating the moment. He is the first one who hasn't flinched at first sight of my true form. He even touched my cheek, fascinated.

"Feels like Fylla's saddle," he said, as if it was a compliment. "No wonder frost giants don't need full armor like other warriors. You have it naturally."

He certainly put a positive spin on it. I smiled and touched his cheek in return. It felt like Sif's skin and I told him that. He smiled and proclaimed how it's taken him only a decade to toughen his skin whereas she's been at it her entire military life. He makes Jotun skin sound like a badge of honor, not a curse to be concealed. Odin could afford to take some lessens in tolerance from this boy.

Then, in an act of pity, Ollerus removed my skis—a set he informed with great pride had been hand carved for me in anticipation of my arrival—and we began our journey back to the valley, a walk that would occupy the remainder of the day. Conversation began lightly and pleasantly. He asked me about many things and I answered him with carefully hand-picked truths. He was eager to hear about Midgard (fortunately not about my latest visit) but about various points in history I had visited and what I thought about notable events he'd read about. He also asked about sorcery: who were my teachers after Frigga? what spells do I use on the battlefield? did I realize Sif was magically challenged before I fell in love with her? (that one made me laugh) I said I did, and that was part of her charm, along with the animal-like noises she makes while charging into battle. Judging by the quirk of his brow, he didn't get my sarcasm.

"Why did you try to destroy Jotunheim?" he then asked, out of the blue, words that slapped the smile from my face.

"You certainly don't beat around the bush," I replied. "I can't decide if I like that or want to sew your lips shut."

"I just don't get why you would do that." A sadness had tinged his voice. "You don't seem like the bad guy my books make you out to be."

"Don't believe everything you read." I dreaded to think of which books he had been subjected to. "Every word ever penned or spoken is shaped by someone else's bias."

"I know that," he sighed. "But there isn't much room for interpretation over the recorded fact that you tried to murder an entire realm."

There was no skirting around the issue with this boy. I was forced to speak plainly with him, something I've grown out of the habit of doing. "I believed destroying Asgard's enemies would deem me worthy in the eyes of the man I used to call father."

There was an eternal pause before he responded. "That's taking it to an extreme."

"It was," I continued, speaking truths both convenient and sickening, "but that was the way I was taught. Elimination of what was different, and frightening. I thought I was doing exactly what Odin wanted, based on his history of poor choices and violent resolutions, and I truly thought my actions would impress him. I was wrong. Nothing I could have done would have impressed him. He cast his opinion of me the moment he beheld my blue skin."

Ollerus paused again, his face shifting through contemplative expressions that were becoming difficult to read. He then asked, "What will he think of my blue skin?"

The question chilled me. "I don't care what he thinks."
The boy blinked. "You're more honest than I expected you to be." He then smiled.

"I have no reason to lie to you the way your books do."

Ollerus then slowed his pace, turning to me with a look I cannot place but will never forget. It warmed my heart and filled me with an unfamiliar pride, perhaps a feeling reserved only for fathers. I will cherish it always. I think he wanted to speak but he could not find the words, so he instead let the moment dissolve naturally, his eyes shifting down to behold the very unnatural paleness return to my flesh.

"You can let your blue skin show here," he said, "The Valkyries don't care."

If only Asgardians could learn from the Valkyries. "I...wish I could. But you see, I cannot control the magic altering my appearance. It is Odin's spell."

"Is Grandfather's magic stronger than yours?" He said and I flinched

"Laufey is your Grandfather," I corrected. "The All-Father is merely our king. And yes, Odin's magic is more powerful than my own." One day that will change.

"The All-Father is king, when he is awake," Ollerus added, correcting me right back. "Thor is king now. I asked Mother if I could get a spell that changed my skin color too, so I could go to Asgard and meet Thor and the Warriors Three." I rolled my eyes. "She said I wouldn't want that but she didn't explain why. There are a lot of things I wish she would explain but she doesn't."

"I cannot speak for her but I imagine she discouraged your change of appearance because she wants you to be comfortable in your skin, literally." I was pleased to hear that Sif wouldn't allow him to be subjected to an identity crushing veil. "You don't need a disguise to visit Asgard and you really shouldn't feel an urgency to meet my brother. The Medina is far more fascinating than the palace, and unlike the well-to-do of Gladsheim, its people will accept you as you are."

"What's the Medina?"

"The Undercity." I smiled at the curious twinkle in his eye. My diversion from the subject of Thor had worked. "Beneath the city's pomp and frivolity is the engine which fuels her: the workforce, the artisans, and the nightlife. It is a bustling commerce that attracts anyone looking to profit from the excess of the upper class."

"Are there frost giants there?"

"There are beings from all realms, mostly elves and dwarves but I have seen goblins, trolls, and the occasional giant. It is not uncommon for giants to be in the troupes of street performers, their size an attractive novelty." He was utterly fascinated by all of this, and explained to me how his books never mentioned Asgard's multiculturalism. I went on. "The best breweries are Dwarven, not to mention some of the best blacksmithing, although you will encounter heated debates between drunken soldiers about whether the dwarves or light elves are better sword smiths. I personally think a blade should be made Elven and a blunt weapon Dwarven. That is one of the few things your mother and I agree upon." I felt like I had begun to babble but Ollerus didn't seem to mind. "You could visit the Medina with no problem. Your looks will turn a few heads but most likely you will be mistaken for a mixed elf. I see them from time to time."

"A half light half dark elf?" He asked and I nodded. "How would people react if they learned who I really was?"

I had to contemplate that for a moment. It's not as if I hadn't thought about it before, it's just I hadn't
considered how my currently vacillating reputation would effect the people's opinion of my offspring. "Well, to be honest I really don't know what the people will think. They are a fickle kind, Ollerus, opinions fluctuating with the fads like an anchorless skiff in capricious waters. If they have any common sense, they will adore you and recognize you as heir to the thro--"

I cut myself off, realizing I was speaking my thoughts too openly.

"Heir to the throne? Me?" With a crinkle of his nose, Ollerus regarded me as if I were a lunatic. He then laughed. "You must be smoking the plants Eir tells me not to touch if you think Asgardians will make me King."

I was both relieved and disheartened, a strange dichotomy of feeling. I didn't want to promise him an impossible future yet I also wished he wouldn't write off his birthright so carelessly. "Yes, I must be..." I spoke absently as I questioned the extent of what he should know in regard of my hopes for his future. My plan all along has been to bring him into my life so I could condition him into my successor, to craft him into the caliber of ruler Asgard is in desperate need of, but with each word we exchanged that day, each set of footprints we carved in the snow, I was starting to doubt my intentions.

I see now that Ollerus is not a soul to be tethered by anyone else's plans but his own. His freedom is the essence of his character, his very lifeblood. This he had revealed to me in the mere blink of an afternoon. Yggdrasil alone knows the extent of his wonders and potential. I cannot risk stunting this. He is my only child unbound by Asgardian law and prophesy, and he needs to stay that way unless he chooses otherwise. I would be no better than Odin if I were to start shaping him with my speculative ideals. I, of all Asgardians, should recognize the difference between a child and an asset.

"Ollerus," I began as the Valkyrie village starting coming into view. "Where will you go once you are grown? I cannot imagine the Valkyries will shelter you in manhood."

He snorted. "Even if they did I wouldn't want them too. I'm going to travel to the other realms. Hunt game I've only ever read about. Ski mountains I've only seen in pictures."

His enthusiasm was inspiring. "Does your mother approve of this?"

"Yeah, but even if she didn't I wouldn't care. She can't tell me what to do anymore now that I know she's a liar."

Such a familiar bitterness. "Can you ever forgive her?"

He began kicking up flurries of snow with each step, clearly irritated by my question.

"Should I take that as a no?"

"I don't know," he said petulantly. "I'm really mad at her. I don't get why she lied. I mean she said it was to protect me, but from what? Sure you tried to kill all the frost giants, but that was well after I was born, and it's not like she hasn't killed Jotun warriors in battle. She could have told me years earlier. She should have told me as soon as I was old enough to understand. She tells me all of the gory details of the wars she's fought in. She let's me go off on my own into the forests alone, for days at a time, hunting large animals. She gives me Orcish maces as toys. Why would she possibly think you would be a danger to me and not any of that other stuff. It doesn't make any sense. She doesn't make any sense!"

It took all of my self control to prevent his pain from rousing my own. Our circumstances are much
different but the emotion is the same, the confusion and frustration that comes from being betrayed, the heartbreak in learning that words cannot be trusted simply because they wear the guise of love. If my bitterness had taken control of my tongue, I could have caused lasting damage, driving the wedge deeper between mother and son, but it didn't. I am not certain what drove me to respond to him the way I did but I am grateful for whatever force was at work. Perhaps it was nothing more than my instincts grown weary from familial grudges.

"Your mother was justified in her decisions because she was always acting out of love, and the one thing we can trust to be consistent in love is its irrationality, especially in a creature as passionate as The Lady Sif. Love will perpetually drive us to make stupid mistakes, to act out violently or to lie. It will wound deeper than any weapon, disease, or large green behemoth can. However, just like physical wounds are healed in time by our own bodies, our minds can repair the damage caused by love. That is the act of forgiveness. I know you hurt now, Ollerus, but I promise you the pain will subside. It will be powerless against the strength of your mother's love for you. You will grow to understand why she made the choices she did and you will forgive her. You would be a fool not to."

I hadn't a clue whether or not my words had sunken in. I wasn't certain I understood them or even cared to. Everything we had discussed from that point on was focused on the the trick I suggested we play on Sif (why not follow up a lesson in forgiveness with one of mischief?) That had become a more familiar and comfortable subject.

It wasn't until we returned to the temple that Ollerus had confirmed he had taken to heart my most long-winded speech. He wrapped his arms around Sif with a sentiment neither of us had expected. It left her both elated and baffled. She never imagined I would be the one to help alleviate her heartache, and neither did I for that matter. It was an odd feeling, knowing I could take credit for their reconciliation, being the catalyst of a positive and healing event rather than an upheaval of chaos. It felt oddly fulfilling.

I have no memory of being taken to Sif's bedroom. I was too exhausted from two day's worth of back-to-back trials. I have no memory of seeing her undress or feeling her slide beneath the covers and envelope me in her warmth. My next memory was simply waking up that way, her limbs draped across my body, her breath humid on my cheek. It was the confirmation that the unlikely events of the day before were not a dream.

I turned my head and kissed her. When she kissed me back I could practically taste the curiosity in her, the anxious wonder over what exactly I had said to soften Ollerus's heart. If I had been feeling mischievous, I could have withheld everything but a few key words that aroused suspicion but explained nothing, cast her into a cerebral whirlpool of maddening assumptions. But I did not. I instead kissed her again, cupped the back of her head and hummed into her an assurance that she would get the information she sought.

I recalled to her much of what I have recorded here, leaving out the parts that would induce unnecessary arguments. She listened attentively, responding with sighs, laughter and the occasional kiss. Only once did she threaten to cut my throat, a relatively unprovoked gesture that I believe was done more to save face than anything. We were both acutely aware of how far removed we were from our usual antics, and yet neither of us acknowledged it, not wanting to spoil the mood. It felt as though we were on holiday and we basked in it, putting the inevitability of my departure from Glasir in the backs of our minds.

After a very drawn out and delightful awakening, we were unavoidably dragged out of bed and into the dining hall by our impatient son who came to deliver an important message he had just received from Eir.
"She's not coming home until tomorrow and won't be able to teach her classes today. She's asked if Father would substitute for her."

Sif burst into laughter, nudging me with her elbow. "Didn't take her long to make you earn your lodging."

"That's hilarious," I said, unamused. Apparently, there was no such thing as leisure time in the land of the Valkyries.

"She also said," Ollerus continued excitedly, snatching a handful of berries and slamming them in his mouth, "that I could sit in on the beginner's class. Can you believe that Mother? I finally get to learn magic!"

Suddenly the teaching gig became less of a chore and more of a privilege. I had hoped this opportunity would arise soon, to teach my son the art which my mother had taught me. Sif, however, didn't seem as enchanted by the idea. There was a hesitation in her response. "That's wonderful, darling."

"I'm going to go tell Svala and Ingrid," he said as he dashed off, unaware of Sif's concern. "See you in class, Father!"

I waved even though he didn't see it, still processing everything just assigned to me. Sif waited until she heard the front door slam before she spoke. "I feel uneasy about this."

"You don't say..."

She crossed her arms and tilted her head, a stance she could always make intimidating even while wearing a silken robe. "This means a lot to him, Loki. You can't take this lightly. Learning magic is a big step."

"You don't think I'm aware of that?" I sighed, closing the distance between us and placing my hands on her shoulders. "Don't worry, Sif. I can do this. I want to teach him, as badly as he wants to learn."

"I don't know..."

"Trust me." I smiled.

She rolled her eyes. "Ha!" She then narrowed them at me. "Fine. But no dark magic."

"Do I look like an idiot?"

"Sometimes," she said childishly.

"How rude! Just for that I will teach him a dark spell or two."

Her eyes widened. "Do it and I will cut your tongue out."

"Oh Sif," I laughed, snaking an arm around her waist. "How am I supposed to teach if I cannot talk?"

"You'll get creative," she said with a smile, warming to my touch now that she got her threat in.

"Very well," I leaned in, grazing my lips over hers and flicking them with the tip of my tongue. "But you can't cut it out until you catch it first."
"At least make it a challenge for me," she smirked, nipping at my grin, ready to go in for the kill when we were interrupted by the clearing of someone's throat. I looked up to see who I presumed was one of Eir's students standing in the doorway."

"Um," she began awkwardly, "I'm supposed to show you, Prince Loki, where the Elder Eir's teaching books are."

"My dear young lady," I said, "you have no idea the fate you have spared my tongue."

She blinked in confusion. "I'll just um..." she then gestured down the hallway, "I'll just meet you in the library."

Sif shook her head and waited until the girl was gone before speaking. "Discretion is something Eir wants her classes to be taught with."

"Pity we all can't get what we want."

"Loki." She went dead panned. "Promise me you will neither instruct our son in dark magic or toy with these girls in any way. Eir has no tolerance for mischief in her classrooms."

"Then why in the nine realms would she ask me to—"

"Think of it," Sif cut in, "as your final trial."

I sighed. "Out of the boiling pot and into the frying pan."

"More like the fires of Muspelheim if you botch this up."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence."

Do you promise?

"Yes," I relented. "I promise."

She then kissed me sweetly on the cheek. "Good. I'll go get your leathers. We can't have you wearing my nightrobe to class now can we."

I don't see why not," I said with a smirk as she turned to leave. She rolled her eyes at me one last time. She was so beautiful, especially when she was on the verge of strangling me.

How lucky I am to be here. With Sif. With Ollerus. And now with the Elder Eir's trust in me and my capacity of our shared craft. I have to constantly remind myself that this isn't all a dream. I'm not used to the tides turning this much in my favor. It is one thing to have everything go far better than I ever could have planned it, and it is another thing entirely to be able to ignore my master plan in preference of this interlude of enjoyment. The throne of Asgard, the Infinity Stones, the Collector: these matters can all wait while I get acquainted with this alien feeling of belonging, and of happiness.

Music: Life is Long by David Byrne and Brian Eno
The Justified Lie

Chapter Summary

Oh my, I packed a lot into this one. Shifting POVs and head canon galore! I hope it all makes some bit of sense. I also wonder whose side I'm on about the issue of lying by omission when good intentions are the motivator. Eir and Loki both have a strong argument...

Class would be held outside, Loki insisted, for magic was not a subject to be enclosed by four walls. The courtyard was ideal. It was the perfect blend of influences, from the bas relief-wrapped columns—a reminder of the greats who mastered the art long ago—to Glæser's expansive views, which should stand as a symbol to the mind's expansive capabilities. The only downside to being outside—at least for beings born in the eternal winter of Jotunheim—was the sun. Curse the ancients for making the sun so hot! By the time the students had all congregated and claimed their seat on a bench, Loki had given up on making an impression with his princely garb and abandoned the heavy cape and long jerkin to a royal heap on the ground.

He paced in front of the dozen or so pairs of curious eyes, rolling up his linen sleeves to the elbow. Scanning each and every student, he took note of how the girls ranged in age from just shy of a decade to mid-teens. Ollerus fit right in age-wise but stood out like the blue-skinned boy he was among his peers of browns and beiges. Fortunately he didn't seem bothered by this, having grown accustomed over the years. Loki smiled when his eyes met his son's, which were beaming at him from the back row. The lessens hadn't even started yet but he could already feel the pride welling in him. Ollerus was such a gifted lad. Loki could only wonder what marvels magic would unlock in this child.

"I see you all have your history books," Loki began and several students raised theirs up proudly. "Let me see that," he said to girl in the front row and she handed him her book.

"This book here," he held it up for everyone to see. "It's rubbish. Nothing but pompous drivel." Stillness fell upon the class and the books that were eagerly held up slowly began sinking. "These pages would serve better as goat food then as an education."

"But Father," Ollerus spoke up without hesitation. "It's the history of magic. I thought you liked history."

"I love history," Loki replied lightly. "But magic's history is irrelevant to the process of learning it. You see, documenting the history of an entity such as magic is like describing the history of energy, or of love. It's a waste of time. We all know it exists and that it's always existed. It has no birth, death or timeline. It just is. All these books do is tell the stories of those who have used magic in the past. It does nothing but offer preconceived limitations on how it is to be used, which is insult to the craft. The best way to learn magic is to get your hands dirty, or more appropriately, your minds."

Some of the girls giggled. Loki continued.

"Magic will reveal its secrets to you in time as you work with it. Like any craft, you learn by doing. And the more time I spend up here blathering about, the less time you have of learning it. So, let us
"But," said the girl sitting next to Ollerus. "I thought we were feeding it to the goats."

"Not before we get at least some use out of it," Loki said, checking to see that everyone had their book open. "Have you all found a page? Good, now tear it out." He demonstrated, ripping out a page. He's met only with blank stares. "Am I speaking Vanir? Tear out a page." Ollerus is the first to do it. Then the girl next to him, then another then another until the air filled with the sound of literary destruction.

"Now," Loki instructed, "wrinkle it up." He wadded up his page and everyone followed suit, exchanging glances with each other like they were getting away with something. "Put it in your mouth, and chew, like so." Loki stuck the paper in his mouth without shame and began chewing. The class did nothing of the sort. Some girls giggled and some just stared. Even Ollerus was scratching his head. "Come on," Loki urged with muffled speech and a bulging cheek, "pretend you're a goat."

Ollerus was the first to do it again and slowly the girls, with knitted brows and crinkled noses, relented to follow.

"Okay, good," Loki nodded in approval. "Everyone's chewing, chewing, chewi— no, don't swallow it, you silly girl." A student in the middle turned beet red. "For the love of," Loki shook his head. "Tear out another page and try again, without ingesting it."

"What's the point of this?" blurted the eldest girl through her cheekfull.

"Patience my dear," Loki smirked. "One cannot rush their first lesson in magic."

The class began making faces of displeasure as they chewed, looking to each other for reassurance and finding only the same confusion and reluctance.

"Prince Loki, sir!" The older girl spoke up again. "The ink is starting to taste gross and it's turning our mouths black." The rest of the class made noises of similar protest yet keep on chewing.

"That's because your taking too long," Loki said, snatching a wooden bucket off the ground and approaching each student with it. "Go on, spit it out and try again with a fresh piece. If you aren't achieving a desirable outcome, then you're doing it wrong."

"What desirable outcome?" asked the girl who swallowed her first page. "Are we learning how to make paper taste like candy?"

"If I tell you," Loki replied, setting down the bucket, "then you will have learned nothing."

"This is stupid!" barked the eldest girl, shooting up from her seat. "I'm not going to keep eating my textbook. This is nothing more than a trick! You all know he's called God of Mischief don't you?

Loki laughed, clasping his hands behind his back. "Congratulations, my dear. You have passed your first test. What is your name?"

"Um," the girl blinked, softening her voice. "Ingrid?"

"Well done, Ingrid." Loki then addressed the rest of the class. "Look to the eldest, class. Let her be an example. She took a stand against me. Made a judgement call based solely on her instincts. The rest of you trusted me, against your better judgement. You know paper is not food, yet you still ate

not dilly about." He cracked open the very book he had just lambasted. "Open your books. Any page will do."
"Because you told us to," shrugged a younger girl.

"I thought you were teaching us to transmute food," Ollerus defended, wiping ink from his mouth.

"Transmutation is advanced alchemy," Loki explained. "You won't be able to learn that, or any sort of transfiguration for years."

"So this was all a trick to make us look like a heard of dumb goats?" Ollerus said.

"It was indeed," Loki said. "But it was also a lesson of listening to your body. Your inner voice is your strongest guide, not only in magic but in everything. Your body, literally your gut in this case, was saying via the foulness upon your tongue, that it did not desire ink and paper."

"Well then why do we need teachers if our bodies will tell us everything?" Ingrid sassed more than she questioned.

"Because you need to be taught how to listen," Loki said, pointing to his ear. "Which is why the first and most important lesson in magic, is the art of meditation. Your homework is to go to a place you find most peaceful, alone, and do nothing but breathe. Think only about your breath. Do this as long it takes until it is no longer is boring. Then, will you truly understand what your doing." He paused for dramatic effect. "You are dismissed. Feeding your book to the goats is optional, just promise me you won't read a word in it until after you've properly meditated."

"Breathing?" Ollerus whined over the din of fleeing students. "Really?"

Loki approached him. "It's about focus, my son. The power of mind over matter. No sorcerer ever wielded Light magic without meditation. Go to your favorite place of solitude. Not somewhere that will distract with its sporting prospects, but one of calm, of minimalism, and just be. Sit, stand, hang like a monkey from a tree. Whatever, so long as your mind is focused on the singularity of breath."

"Fine," the boy sighed. "If you say so."

Dusk cast its warm hues over the stables, painting vibrant peach stripes across the white wings of the steeds inside, and on the shield maiden who attended to them.

"I listened in on your class today," Sif confessed as she picked twigs and leaves out of Fylla's mane.

"Am I supposed to be surprised?" said a lazing prince from his elevated seat at the edge of a stall. "You believed yourself hidden behind a column but I knew you were there. Columns do not sneeze."

Sif rolled her eyes. "I suppose I should be grateful then that you didn't blow my cover to Ollerus. He wouldn't approve of Mother spying on him."

"Mmhmm," Loki turned his gaze from the fiery ball of sunset. "You're welcome."

Sif met his gaze, the orange rays bringing out the warm tones in her eyes. "You surprise me, Loki. Meditation is the last lesson I thought you would be teaching."

"It is essential in learning magic."
"Then why have I never seen you do it?"

Loki broke their gaze, turning his head back toward the sun. He had to shield his eyes. "I don't need to. I draw my strength from other sources."

"I don't believe that." Sif snatched a brush from a nearby shelf and went to work on Fylla's tangles. "Eir still meditates regularly. It's not a practice for beginners alone."

"It is not necessary for those who wield dark magic."

Sif paused her brushing. "What- What do you mean?"

With a simple hand gesture, Loki levitated a berry out of a nearby bucket and transformed it into burgundy-colored butterfly. "Dark magic can accomplish nearly everything its counterpart can, so long as it's used properly." The butterfly flitted by each steed, leaving a trail of shimmering green dust, causing the animals to snort and stomp in agitation. "Of course creatures born of pure Light, such as the Pegasus, are not so easy to fool."

Sif had to stroke Fylla's nose to calm her down. "But...why use dark at all?"

Loki dropped down from his seat, out of sight for moment before he appeared at the front of a stall. "Because I have to." He leaned against a wooden post, his face falling into a somber shadow. "I find comfort in it. It is the one connection I have left to my cursed children."

Fylla was still nervous so Sif gave her one final stroke then urged Loki away from the stables. They walked together toward the river. "Dark magic is what deformed them," Sif said, looking on Loki with concern. "Aren't you afraid that your body will—"

"There is no harm magic can do to my body that it hasn't already done." Loki's tone grew darker, matching the shadows slowly creeping across the wild grasses. "From the day I was born, I was cursed. And then Odin came along and made it worse."

Sif shook her head. "You're wrong. Odin saved you."

It took all of Loki's will to keep his anger under control. "Do you truly want to know why I use dark magic? Because it is all I know. It is what Frigga taught me. It is what Odin used to alter me. And it is what has spared my life, multiple times, since I was cast out of Asgard. It is the one consistency I can rely upon."

Sif sighed, not out of pity but of weariness. "No it isn't." She then closed their distance and slid her hands over his shoulders. "Have you ever tried using Light magic?"

Her touch helped him relax. "I tried once as a boy." He spoke softly but there was still that edge. "It hurt. It felt like it was boiling my blood. At the time I didn't understand but I cared not do it again. I was content with what Mother was teaching me."

"Could Odin's spell have been interfering with it?"

His neck tensed again. "Yes, probably."

"So why don't you try again?" Sif tried to massage the tension away. "Now that you know who you are."

Loki sighed. "I did, shortly after learning I was Jotun. I submerged myself into icy waters, suppressing Odin's spell as much as possible, and the same thing happened. Only this time the pain
was worse. Again, I didn't understand. Jotun wizards can wield both Light and dark. There was no explanation."

"Then why don't you try again?" Sif repeated, edging up her tone. "Now that you know who you are."

Loki narrowed his eyes. "What makes you so certain that I do know?"

"What more do you need to know beyond what's in front of you?" She brushed her fingers over his cheek. "You are a father. A son. A prince." She then kissed him, briefly but sweetly. "And a lover."

Loki allowed himself only a moment to relish the taste of her. "A lover..." His voice then hardened. "Tell me, Sif. Why do you love me? What is it exactly that you love about me? If I wasn't father to your child or the son of royalty, what would be left to love?"

Sif beheld him with injury. "How can you ask such a thing?"

"I sent the destroyer to kill you. I am a war criminal in multiple realms. There are things I have done that should have my blood spilled upon your blade, crimes you don't even know about." He took a step back, pulling out of her hold. "I betray everyone who has ever been close to me. Which means you betray everything honorable you stand for by claiming to love me."

Sif shook her head. "This disproves nothing of what I feel for you." She stood tall despite the hurt threatening her resolve. "It only goes to show how little you understand of love. Perhaps that is why you're unable to learn the ways of Light."

She left him there by the river, disheartened but not angry, saying nothing more for the rest of the night. She left her bedroom door cracked but he never came to her. She doubted he even slept.

Loki barely made it to class on time.>

"Who are you?" he asked upon entering to an older girl standing at the front of the class. She hadn't been there yesterday.

"That's Svala," Ollerus said from his same seat in the back. He had a cheekfull of berries that were turning his lips a bright red. "She's the one who transported us to the mountains."

"Is that so?" Loki droned. "Well done. You have achieved what few other have been capable of." Transporting spells were limited to only advanced users of Light. Loki didn't want to admit that he envied her.

"Thank you," Svala nodded.

"Now leave us," Loki said with a shooing gesture. "You are clearly too advanced for this class."

"She's the student teacher," Ingrid interjected. "Duh."


Svala did as she was told but not without a sneer. Elder Eir would never treat her with such disregard.

"Shall we begin?" Loki addressed the class absently, his voice tired. "Going down the line, front to back, left to right, tell me what each of your learned from your meditations."
The students shared their experiences in the order requested, the younger ones speaking up first as they tended to gather in the front rows. Their reports were dripping in innocent wonder, recalling how they heard bird songs they never heard before or saw new colors in butterfly wings. As the older girls spoke up, the topics became slightly more pertinent but still not what Loki was looking for. One girl claimed she made a chronic allergy go away and another found the will to forgive a friend for gossiping.

"All very well in the world of breakthroughs and personal growth," Loki interrupted, "but what did you feel that was born of magic?"

The students all exchanged confused glances. Svala then spoke up. "These are all magical events, Prince Loki."

"Ollerus." Loki said, ignoring Svala. "What did you learn?"

The boy was eager to share. "I learned that if you take down a boar with your bare hands, they scream a lot more than simply piercing their heart with an arrow."

Gasps and whispers spread like wildfire through the class.

"Silence," Loki ordered, trying to erase image from his mind. He couldn't stand the thought of suffering animals. "My son, that has nothing to do with medita—"

"No, but it does," Ollerus defended. "See, I was sitting in a tree, being really still like you said, keeping my breath shallow and quiet, so quiet that the boar had no idea I was even there, so he came walking right below me and BAM, I dropped down and nailed him."

"Was this a breakthrough in hunting?" Loki ventured, hopeful.

"Not really," Ollerus shrugged. "It was just the first time I killed a beast without a weapon."

"And what were the benefits of this tactic?" Loki glanced at Svala, noting with concern her wincing reaction to Ollerus's story. "Did the animal suffer less?"

"Nah," Ollerus spoke too casually. "The opposite. Like I said, it screamed even more, probably scared away every other beast in the area, which would have been bad if I was on a hunting excursion."

"I'm," Loki felt a muscle tense in his neck. "I'm not understanding the magical connection here."

"I did something I've never done before," Ollerus shrugged again, looking to the other students. Just like how Reindal heard a bird call for the first time, and Ingrid finally found a cure for her headaches."

"Ollie," Svala spoke up, gently, "What Ingrid and Reindal experienced was the result of quieting their minds, and of attaining a focus outside of the usual clutter of our thoughts. A clear mind is the canvas which magic will paint upon. What you did to that boar...was not magic."

Or at least it wasn't Light magic, Loki thought. Killing a boar bare-handed is no easy task. He had seen men twice the size of Ollerus boasting such feats and showing off the tusk wounds to prove it. The boy had barely a scratch on him. This could only be the work of dark magic.

"What are you saying?" Ollerus got defensive. "That I can't learn magic?"

Loki felt his stomach turn. He promised Sif he wouldn't teach him dark magic. But if dark is what
he is prone to, then there would be no magic at all to teach him, and that felt unacceptable. Does he break his promise with Sif, risk the health of their son for the chance he could master dark as Loki has, or does he lie to the boy: make him believe he is magically inept.

He had to say something. All eyes were on him for an explanation. Lying suddenly seemed like the right thing to do, but for the first time in...well, ever, it did not come easily. He pulled Ollerus aside, and requested Svala take over the class for him.

"Your brutality as a hunter," Loki began once they were away from the class," is the same I've seen in your mother on the battlefield. You are both gifted with physical strengths that negate the need to learn magic. Perhaps that is what's intended for you, to take after her more than you do me."

"What does that mean?" Ollerus didn't want to hear this. "I can't learn magic?"

Loki took a deep breath. "It...appears that way."

A sadness washed over the boy's face, one Loki couldn't pinpoint but feared was a sign that his lie didn't stick. Ollerus was bright and intuitive. He very well could see through a lie that Loki wasn't comfortable telling.

In a scene oddly familiar to the one just last night with Sif, the boy turned away in silence, retreating in disappointment and leaving Loki alone to question why his paradise here is Glasir, was all crumbling beneath his feet.

The first place Eir would look for Loki would be the library. After everything a near-pouncing Svala had reported upon the elder's return, and given that mother and son were sitting at the river's edge without the company of their father, it was the most logical deduction that the Dark Prince was taking refuge among the ancient scholars, something he had always done as a boy during troubling times.

"My girls inform me that you have a rather interesting but effective approach to teaching," Eir said upon entering the library, finding Loki slowly pacing, lost in a thick tome.

Loki glanced up. "Welcome back, Elder." He apparently had no comment about his teaching methods.

Never one for disorder, Eir immediately began collecting books strewn around on tables and chairs. "I can teach these girls the most complicated of spells yet I can't seem to teach them how clean up after themselves."

Loki smiled, distantly, reverting his gaze back to the book. Eir had limited patience for small talk and felt it was time to address the elephant in the room.

"You made the right call," she said.

"It is a lie," he responded softly. "I have led my son to believe he takes after Sif, when in fact he may be more like me in ways I wish he was not."

Eir continued to shelve the stray books, pausing before speaking. "What happened to Ollerus in your classroom today was very reminiscent of what happened to Sif in her first and only magic class."

That snared Loki's full attention. "Tell me."
Eir hugged the stack of books to her chest, taking a deep breath. "The details are unimportant. What matters is that her brush with magic yielded only destruction and brutality. That is when I told her to forget about magic, that she was unable to wield it, and turned her over to train under Brunhild's army."

"Then you lied to her," Loki said, "the same way I have to my son."

"I did what was necessary. She was born to be a soldier."

"No." Loki's volume rose. "You should have told her. She had the right to know what she was and wasn't capable of. Just as Ollerus does."

"I used to believe that too," Eir kept her voice calm, confident. "Long ago, when I had taken on my first fledgling sorceress. I was impressed by her quick advancement with Light. I hadn't seen anyone wield it as masterfully as she had since, well, since I was in training. I saw great potential in her. So, I introduced her to the dark arts, knowing that when used sparingly and properly, it would only bolster her talents in Light. I trusted her to use that knowledge responsibly. She did not. She chose the dark path, favoring its effortless benefits, letting it consume her. Everything I had taught her about balance and moderation had become moot."

"What became of her?"

"She is now on Midgard, pulling the strings behind whatever war criminal or crooked politician she can sink her nails into."

Loki's eyes lit up as if he just solved a puzzle. "Amora..."

Eir began shelving books again.

"You blame yourself for her decisions," Loki said, setting his book down.

"She would have been a remarkable healer," Eir said with a rare remorse.

Loki narrowed his eyes. "So you think Sif would have chosen a dark path as well, had she be told the truth. How little faith you had in her."

"The truth, Loki, is that we're all susceptible to dark magic. Every last one of us, from the dullest troll to the most honorable Einherjar. Sif was incapable of learning Light therefore she wasn't meant to wield magic at all. The same is apparently true of your son. It is all part of the balance. Dark magic can consume anyone who embraces it, it does not discriminate. It has taken the lives of many will continue to do so, which is why I have found ignorance to be the best weapon against it. If one believes they are not intended to wield magic of any kind, then they will never invite it in."

Loki was incredulous. "How is it I've worked with magic my entire life and have never known this?"

"Only a select few of us know."

"Odin? Heimdall? My mother?!"

Eir nodded. "Only those of us who need to know."

"Why would you tell me?" This was a puzzle Loki couldn't solve. "Did you learn nothing from Amora? What makes you think I won't take this information to Midgard and raise an army of mindless dark magicians?"
Eir arched her brow. "Would you?"

"I could!"

"But you won't."

Loki backed down, realizing Eir could not be intimidated so easily. "I've already unleashed a dark army onto Earth." He smirked. "Where's the fun in doing it again?"

"You jest very inappropriately." Eir could not be charmed easily either. "The reason I have shared this information with you is because I trust you with it. You've seen firsthand how dark magic can ruin lives. You watched your lover deteriorate into madness."

"Ex—lover," Loki corrected, "and you are a fool to trust me."

"Am I?" Eir's resolve was unbreakable. "I'm telling you, Loki, because I want you to make the right decision for Ollerus."

"Right decision," Loki scoffed. "You want me to perpetuate a lie."

"It is hardly a difficult task for you."

"It's different when we're talking about my son!"

Eir sighed, finally relenting a notch. "I am not one to condone lying but in the case of dark magic, exceptions must be made."

"That's a fine justification," Loki spat. "Is that what relieves your guilt from lying to Sif? Is that the logic you used before you both lied to my son about his lineage?"

"Your guilt trips do not work on me because I harbor no guilt that can be exploited." Eir hardened her tone. "Unlike you."

"Nice try but I have no guilt and I'm not about to create any by continuing to lie to my son."

Eir shook her head, disappointed. "You stand here and you lie so fluidly to me, yet you will not withhold potentially damning information from your own flesh. Your grudges cloud your judgement."

"Ha!" Loki's face split with a gaping grin. "Your double-standards are monumental."

"Loki, please." Eir had to change tactics, putting the well-being of Ollerus over her pride. "Your boy is highly intelligent and dangerously curious, just like Amora was. You risk losing him to forces beyond your control."

"You know nothing of my control," Loki boasted. "If dark magic is so all-consuming then why am I standing here, in Glasir, on the holy grounds of your temple. Me! God of Lies, Mischief and Chaos, allowed to instruct your precious, innocent students."

"I trust the Light in you."

"There is no Light in me! Frigga only ever taught me dark."

"That," Eir was taken aback. "That can't be true."

"It is! Face it, Elder," Loki challenged, "I have control over dark magic in ways you can't even
comprehend. As did my mother."

"No." Eir stepped up to the challenge. "You don't."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because you wouldn't be standing here." She took a step closer. "In Glasir." Another step. "Arguing with me about the honorable thing to do for Ollerus." She was now breaching his comfort zone. "If you were truly devoid of Light, you would still be rotting in your prison cell."

Loki stepped back, insulted and without rebuttal. "My son has a right to the truth," he blurted while retreating to the exit.

Reeling from his stand-off with the elder, Loki had to walk off some aggression before he was to approach his son. He couldn't risk losing his temper. He had to be calm. There was no telling how Ollerus would react to his confession, which he going forward with, despite Eir's advice. What did she know...Just because she helped raise the boy she thought she knew what was best for him? She knew nothing, the pompous old bat!

Loki did a lap down to the stables and back, finding the cool light of the moon relieving to his frustration. He then bumped into Svala who said Sif and Ollie were at the river's edge and in good spirits. That came as a relief considering the moods Loki last saw them in.

"Uh oh," Ollerus said as Loki came into view. "Father won't be pleased to hear the news." Loki approached them at the river, a knot forming in gut despite the serenity of the scene. They were both seated casually next to the rushing moonlit water. Sif was wrapped up in her fur cloak and Ollerus was tending to the small campfire he had made for her. "Will you tell him so I don't have to?" the boy asked his mother, avoiding eye contact with Loki.

"Tell me what." Loki was almost afraid to ask.

Sif eyed Loki head to toe. "You tell him," she responded to Ollerus. "It was your idea."

"Tell me what." Now Loki was growing impatient.

"We're all going on a hunting excursion tomorrow," Ollerus said with a timid smile. "I heard reports of a heard of bilgesnipe moving through the lower plains. I know you don't like seeing animals suffer, but bilgesnipe aren't exactly friendly, and the Valkyries use their hides and antlers for all manner of things."

"I told him he could only do it under supervision," Sif added. "They are vicious creatures."

"I've seen worse," Loki commented. He then took a deep breath. "Ollerus, there's something I need..." Loki suddenly found himself tongue-tied by the whole situation. "Well, I thought...To be honest, I'm surprised to see you're not upset with me."

The boy shrugged. "Why should I be?"

"I have failed you as a teacher," Loki confessed.

Ollerus's spirits instantly lifted. Was he not harboring a grudge? "It's not your fault that I can't learn magic. Besides, hunting bilgesnipe sounds way more fun than meditating."

"So..." Loki hadn't expected this at all. "That's it? No more magic?"
"Please don't be disappointed in me." Ollerus stood up from the bank to make closer eye contact. He was only a head shorter than Loki, so close to being a man. "I know you don't like skiing or hunting, but those things to me are like, what magic is to you. I'm just going to stick with what I know I'm good at."

Loki was at a loss. He had wanted to set everything straight, to furnish his son with complete truth so he would never have to question his potential or who he was, but as the boy stood here and demonstrated an impressively strong sense of self, unfettered by the lie, Loki was robbed of all rehearsed words.

"Oh," Ollerus went on. "I'm good at wood carving too. And you know why?"

"I..." Loki faltered. "No."

From a vest pocket, the boy pulled out the otter figurine that had mysteriously disappeared from Loki’s childhood bedroom. "Mother gave me this a couple years ago, said it was carved by my father. It inspired me. Because of this otter, I can make all of my own gear, plus I've made some figurines for Valkyries in exchange for stuff. When I'm older I could probably open my own store in the Medina, don't you think? Then we could see each other all the time. And maybe you could put enchantments on the stuff I make, to make it more valuable?"

"I..." Loki still didn't know what to say. But he was nonetheless touched. "Yes, why not."

"Alright, darling," Sif intervened, rising from the grass. "That's enough. Off to bed. I think your ambitions have broken your father's brain."

"Fine," the boy sighed, stuffing the figure back in his pocket. He gave Sif a quick peck on the cheek. "Goodnight." He then turned to Loki and smiled. His eyes glistened with relief, with adoration, and most surprisingly, with trust.

"Goodnight," was all Loki could manage, and then the boy was gone. Clearly, if Ollerus was to ever learn the full truth, it was not meant to happen tonight.

Sif inhaled deeply, an expression of her pride, then stepped closer to Loki. She obviously wasn't as upset as she had been last night. "Quite a day we've had," she said, like a peace offering.

"Sif..." Loki began, his head full of questions. "What did you say to him to cheer him up so?"

"Not much." She shrugged. "I mean you heard him. He's content to pursue what he knows he's good at. I simply told him that if you dabble in everything you master nothing. The exception being, of course, weapon mastery. There it's okay to branch out, try new things. Fandral refuses to see my point of view on this, but how many times has Fandral been bested by an opponent who wielded a weapon he was unfamiliar with. How many rapiers has he gone through because they could withstand the crushing blow of a mace? He doesn't listen, to me or to Hogun, and now that Hogun isn't around beat his arse down in the training grounds, it's up to me."

"Sif!" Loki's head was spinning. "I don't care about any of this. Tell me what else you said to Oller —"

"I'm getting there!" She cut him off. "Your Royal Rudeness. Anyhow, I told Ollerus he could come to Asgard to watch me duel Fandral—more importantly, to watch me win. I also told him he would finally get to meet Thor. That cheered him right up."

Loki sank. "So it's taken nothing more than the allure of barbarism to take his mind off magic."
"Would you rather have him moping around feeling sorry for himself?"

"I'd rather he not give up so easily."

"There's nothing to give up, Loki." Sif kept a softness in her voice. "You told him yourself, he takes after me. His strengths are better utilized in his physical talents."

Loki looked at Sif, specifically her eyes, noting the way they gleamed when she was at peace. She had been wary of Ollerus's introduction to magic, afraid perhaps that it might distance her from her son, but now she no longer carried that worry. She glowed with pride, relishing the unique bonds she has with the boy, full of faith he would only grow stronger in the absence of magic, just as she had. She was filled with the sincerest joy, and who was Loki to take that away from her. Who was he to gamble their son's future with the unpredictable whims of dark magic, all because he was on this specific crusade of truth.

Truth was not the solution here. And if anyone understood the benefit of a lie, it was surely him.

"Loki," Sif said. "What is it?"

"I worry that he will become more enchanted by my brother and lose his interest in me." That was really more of a diversion than a lie. "If I cannot teach him magic than what good am I as his father?"

"Are you kidding?" Sif laughed at the irony. "Loki, he was more worried that you'd be disappointed in him than he was upset over his failings in magic. He only wants you to be proud of him."

"What a foolish gesture. Of course I'm proud of him. I'm proud of all my children, no matter the hand life has dealt them."

Sif blinked, touched by his words. "Then it appears I have misjudged you. You are no stranger to love, at least not when it comes to giving it away."

"But." Loki knew there was a catch. He wasn't getting off that easily after the things he had said last night.

"But," she wrapped her arms around his waist. "The next step is allowing yourself to be loved."

"The next step?" Loki played at resistance. "What is this, a detox clinic? Another trial? Am I to be —"

Sif shushed him. "It's your lesson in magic. For there is no greater magic in the nine realms," she moved her lips to where her finger was, leaving just enough space to talk, "than what I'm about to do to your body."
Mysterious Confessions

Chapter Summary

I introduced the idea in the last chapter that Sif has a streak of dark magic in her that she isn't aware of. Here, we see it at work in very interesting and naughty ways, much to Loki's intrigue.

Chapter Notes

This chapter fully takes advantage of my M rating. It's graphic and sticky and a little violent.

Sif resisted the urge, mercifully, to tear the linen shirt from Loki's body. He had a limited wardrobe in Glasir and this green tunic seemed to be his favorite choice for the warmer climate. She didn't want to upset him, at least not in this way. She instead pulled the shirt up over his head and arms, pressing her body to his as she did so, her breath hitching at the sight of stringy hair falling onto pale naked shoulders. His eyes became wild. With a force she wasn't expecting, he pulled her into a rough kiss then shoved her to the ground. Her heart raced. She recovered quickly, sitting upright on her knees and shoving her cloak from her shoulders, awaiting his next move. He stepped closer to her, towering menacingly, the grass crunching beneath his step. Her body flared with feral anticipation, one that could burn even hotter if rendered more exposed, so she ripped open her blouse down to the leather corset, spreading split fabric to barely cover the tender flesh which hardened at the invisible touch of the cool night. He inhaled deeply. A tiny smirk tugged at her lips and she moved her hands down her body, spreading her knees and gazing up at him with taunting invitation.

Loki met her smirk and dropped down in front of her, attacking the laces of her corset and tearing her blouse off one shoulder until her breast was exposed. She rolled her head back as he indulged in her flesh, her fingers digging into his back when his teeth pinched, her exhales going vocal when his tongue then caressed. She grabbed his hair in handfuls and hugged him to her chest, craving more, her thighs pinching him like a vice. His hand ducked beneath her bunched skirt and up her hip, seizing her thin undergarments with a hot, supernatural grip that reduced them to ash. The heat resided on her body, specifically raw, wanton flesh that now pulsed harder from the teasing singe. She ached for him to maddening degree.

One simple shove sent him to his back and she made short work of his pants, peeling them down the long lean legs and over bared feet. She couldn't recall a time since his arrival that he had been wearing his boots. Must be a Jotun thing. She began crawling up his naked, ready body, aiming to mount him but he held her back, sitting back up on his knees and pulling her onto his lap. It appeared he wasn't relinquishing all control this time. Sif was okay with that, the fierceness of his bared teeth making her heart palpitate. He yanked off each of her boots as he wrapped her legs around his hips, and she hiked up her nuisance of a skirt. Despite the clothing still clinging for life to her body—laughably one of her more conservative ensembles—Sif's most sensitive of skin was pressed flush to Loki's sticky and hard flesh. She rocked her hips upon his lap and relished the
They moved in unison as he slid inside her. Her grip tightened on his hair and he squeezed a handful of upper thigh. Their lips resonated with a hungry, vocal song and their bodies melded into an unhurried dance. There was no need to rush. The pressure that usually drove Sif into a primal race to the finish was simply appeasing itself by rocking on easy thrusts, a far cry from past times with Loki when their unions were rushed through borrowed time and teetering on the fear of being caught (which sometimes added to the excitement). But now, ever since Loki's return from the grave, and especially here in Glasir, there was nothing but time to enjoy him: to bask in his flesh and gorge upon his mouth. To hum sweetly into him and cup his moonlit face in her hands. To experience the beautiful landscape of her childhood in a new and enchanting way. The night breeze wasn't even a bother after the campfire shrunk to embers, not while her legs were wrapped tightly around his sweating body, and not while his palms roamed possessively over her shoulders, back and breasts. His touch was icy yet it was his signature cold that could never chill her, not even after learning his veins pumped with the blood of frost giants. That knowledge only heightened the thrill of him.

Such a strange creature Sif has allowed full access to everything she holds sacred. Nobody could truly understand the reason for this either, not even Sif until recently, when she admitted to herself a guilty pleasure which she had to suppress for the last thirteen years. Loki's crimes, which he had claimed were an insult to her honor so long as he was her lover, were actually a damnable turn on. She didn't, by any means, condone them, but in some delusional twist of logic, she felt like each time she conquered Loki in this manner, she was rightfully punishing him. She was proving to him that his very life was at her mercy and that each time he slid away, alive, from her naked, satiated body, it was only because she was allowing him a shot at redemption.

Sometimes Sif wondered if she should get her head checked. But only sometimes. Most of the time she imagined taking Loki while he was in the midst of his worst behavior, being there on Midgard when he was apprehended. Being tasked to watch him, privately, while Thor and his team attended to other matters. And how many times had she been tempted to visit him in the dungeon. How many fantasies had she conjured of the raw and forceful show she could put on for Loki's cell mates, the lessons she could teach by dubiously consenting acts. Sif had a dark side she was still learning to understand.

Embracing it, however, came too easily.

With a strong, controlled movement, Sif tumbled their joined bodies down the slight bank and into the shallow river, pinning Loki on his back and into the icy waters, all while keeping him seated inside her. He blinked in surprise but he knew not to resist her, glancing down at her legs and skirt which were submerged right along with his body.

"You're going to get chilled," he noted, propping himself on his elbow to keep his head above water, "and then you are going to whine."

"Shut up," Sif said, wild-eyed. She couldn't even feel the cold. "I want you to turn blue. I want to feel your true skin against mine." She shoved his head under, repeatedly, pulling it up only to allow him breath but not words. His commentary was not welcome now. She wanted only one thing from him. "Show me your true nature."

"It's not like," Loki gasped as he finally allowed space to talk, "I have voluntary control over—" he then cut himself off upon seeing his chest change color and the patterns appear. Lifting his hand out if the water, he put his transformation on full display, clenching his fist open and closed and wincing as oranges and reds bled over his eyes. "Happy now?"
Sif became speechless as the once soft flesh hardened into leather, as alien motifs—the kinds Sif often regarded as targets on the battlefield—spread across the torso between her thighs, and as sparkling emeralds became fiery slits. She then gasped when she felt a distention deep inside her, caused by a curious and throbbing push, a delightful secret unfolding. She beheld Loki breathlessly and he simply shrugged with a sly smile, one that was devilish enough under his Aesir veil but now seemed spawned from the very fires of the underworld.

She couldn't hesitate any longer.

With a bestial noise she ripped the remaining rags of blouse from her chest and hauled his cold and coarse body to her needy flesh. She then began rocking, urgently, digging her nails into his back, scratching hard but barely breaking the surface.

"You," Loki breathed out between thrusts, "are an animal."

She could only confirm his comment with grunts and other nonsensical sounds that cried out in want with each penetration that rubbed her flesh to a raw tingle. Never had she felt friction as rough, as chilling and as searing all at once. She wouldn't be able to walk right for days but she didn't care. Not when a mind numbing pressure was driving her to euphoric insanity, stretching time as she stretched her body. She could have floated in this state forever, soaring on a strangely supernatural bliss, fueled by pleasurable pain. But then a coarse grip upon her breast pushed her over the edge, electrically, loudly, and with a fierce clenching of limbs and body.

She descended into a light-headed haze. The moment her body went limp Loki seized control and pinned her into the muddy bank, bodily, still inside her, still thrusting only slowing down, drawing it out, friction that became more painful each second. She didn't have the strength to resist.

"Loki," she pleaded, out of breath.

He slowed his movements even more. "Am I hurting you?"

"Yes."

"Would you like me to stop?" His voice had an edge. He didn't want to stop.

She paused to catch her breath, letting her body restore some of its strength, listening while it told her what it wanted. To her surprise, it didn't want him to stop either.

"No." She grabbed his flexed ass and forced him fully inside her. "I told you, I want you to show me your true nature." Sitting up on an elbow, she then nipped at his blue lips and taunted the silver tongue. "Lie to me."

Loki beheld her questionably, slightly taken aback. He wasn't expecting that, but neither was she for that matter. He then resumed his pace, starting slowly at first then building to grind her body into the rocky mud and sand, grunting with each unmerciful, searing thrust that made her cry out, nearly regretting her request. Finally, he ascended into climax, a blessed wash of cooling release that calmed her flaring flesh.

As he melted down upon her the lie finally came out. "I have never betrayed you."

She went still, suddenly feeling the chill of her environment and his body upon her. She asked for his true nature and sure as Hel did she get it. She shivered.

Loki lifted his head from her shoulder, pushing the hair off her face, meeting her eyes with restored emeralds which she couldn't quite read. They could be sad. They could be relieved. It was hard to
tell. "May I speak the truth now, my darling?"

"Please," she whispered.

"I love you."

Her breath caught. She then replied, "I love you too."

If only she fully understood why.
Ollerus was up with the sun, packing his quiver with only the sharpest and sturdiest of arrows. Today he was going to kill his first bilgesnipe, possibly two if his mother and father permitted it. His heart pounded with excitement as he strapped his supplies to the back of Glimmer—the young Pegasus the Valkyries allowed him to ride on special occasions—and collected the bags of feed and water bladders from the stables. Sif had said it was okay to pack some extra weight on the steeds since they wouldn't be flying. Apparently none of the Pegasi would allow Loki on their backs—something about a spell and a butterfly—and they had to get Heimdall to beam over a regular horse for him. Ollerus shrugged it off. Sure it would slow their travel time but at least they were all still going. He wasn't about to complain, not when this long-anticipated hunting expedition just happened to occur at a time when his father could come along. It was going to be a great day and he wouldn't let some stupid picky Pegasi spoil his mood.

"Ollieeee," Sif called out as he walked the steeds up from the stables. She was fully armored and holding his most heavy duty set of leather gear. "You need to wear more than just that vest for protection. Bilgesnipe's antlers have been known to pierce even metal chest plates."

Ollerus groaned as she handed him the gear. "But I get too warm in those. And I can't move my arms as freely."

Sif only raised her eyebrow, in that argue-with-me-and-I'll-toss-you-in-the-Valkyrie's-practice-pit look.

"Fine," he sighed. Sif smiled and tousled his hair, planting a kiss on his cheek. She was in an obnoxiously good mood, rising earlier than Ollerus as usual and actually managing to get Loki up then too, which was odd since Ollerus knew they both went to sleep really late. He learned quickly that his father was not a morning person and preferred to sleep in, so the fact that Loki was up with Sif and he was laughing at her dorky jokes while they fed each other breakfast berries—wait a minute. Reality just dawned on the boy. Ew. He wished it hadn't.

He was glad that they were making each other happy though. They both deserved to be happy and Ollerus had always heard that was most important part of love, even if it did make people act like blubbery drunks.

The ride out of Glasir and into the lower wilds was slow on the ground but nice all the same. Ollerus didn't get to leave Glasir territory very often so the less familiar territory was fascinating and distracted from their wingless pace. Every now and then they would come upon a clearing that offered a distant view of Asgard's city district, shimmering, alien, and, as always, inviting.

"Won't be long now, right Mother?" Ollerus looked back over his shoulder. Sif was riding directly behind him while Loki had assumed the lead, claiming he knew some shortcuts. "I'll finally get to
see the city up close. Walk through the streets, ride a skiff through the canals, stand at the feet of those giant statues."

Sif was about to respond but Loki spoke first. "Trust me, you'll quickly bore of the gaudy structures, especially the statues which are in desperate need of repair thanks to your uncle's poor piloting skills."

"Don't start," Sif warned Loki, trotting up to ride alongside Ollerus. "Once your father returns to Gladsheim and straightens out a few matters with the King will you be able to visit."

"Oh really." Loki stated without looking back. "And what sort of matters are so pressing to keep my son, a rightful Prince of Asgard, from entering his own city?"

Ollerus straightened his posture and shot Sif a proud smile, raising a single brow. "Yes Mother, do explain why royalty is being denied what it desires."

Sif rolled her eyes. "You're both insufferable." She then caught up to Loki's horse, as close as Fylla would allow her to get. "You know damned well which matters I speak of."

Ollerus sighed. "If you two aren't acting dopey around each other then you're fighting. Can't you just act normal?"

"My son," Loki began, slowing his pace until he rode at the boy's side. "You have much to learn about adult behavior."

"Much I don't want to learn," Ollerus remarked. "What matters are Mother talking about that keep me from visiting Asgard? I thought my blue skin wasn't an issue anymore now that the people know you're a frost giant."

"There will still be some intolerant nobles put off by your appearance," Loki paused, deliberating, "but they are not the issue at hand." Sif fell back to ride on the other side of Ollerus, giving Loki an encouraging nod. He continued. "Ollerus I...have many confessions I need to make to both you and the people of Asgard before I can bring you there. There are truths you must hear first hand that haven't been tainted by rumors and speculation, the first of which involve my crimes that are not yet documented in your history books."

"You committed more crimes, even after what you did to Jotunheim?" Ollerus asked.

"I did," Loki confirmed. "Upon Midgard. Plots that its people label Acts of Terrorism, genocide, and warmongering. It's nothing they haven't been guilty of themselves since the birth of their kind, but they like to paint me up as an even bigger threat than any of their own because I am technically an alien. And I also unleashed an alien army onto one of their most beloved cities."

"You say that as merely an afterthought," Sif said with a sadness in her voice. "It's as if you harbor no guilt."

"What's done is done, Sif," Loki said, looking straight ahead. "The lives lost to my actions would be much greater if the Chitauri invaded without my intervention. They might have just won."

"So," Ollerus said, trying to piece it all together. "You pretended to be a bad guy so the good guys would win?"

"Well, yes," Loki replied lightly.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple, Ollie," said Sif.
"It can be that simple," Loki argued. "I see no point in complicating the matter, not when the truth is so evident."

"What truth?" Ollerus asked.

"That my alleged offenses against Jotunheim, against Midgard, and against my brother, have only contributed to the betterment of those I have offended."

The boy turned to Sif, confused. "Is this true, Mother?"

Sif sighed in exasperation. "In a very convoluted way, there...might be some truth to that." She didn't seem totally convinced.

"That is not how Odin or Thor see it, of course," Loki added. "They will tell you I'd gone insane, allowed myself to be controlled by our common enemy, driven by a desperation for power. But they do not see the bigger picture. Too bound by simple laws and antiquated prophecies."

"Without simple laws in place," Sif stated, "the realms would be lost to chaos."

Loki smiled. "You say that as though it is a bad thing."

"It is."

"I disagree, my darling."

Ollerus was about to get whiplash from their argument.

"Without chaos," Loki explained, "our worlds will fall into a weakened complacency, growing stale and unchallenged, stunted in their evolution. Without chaos, we will not survive."

Ollerus nodded, attempting to grasp his father's philosophy. He remembered reading something similar in a book about controversial theories. It was a topic very ripe for debate but certainly full of solid arguments, ones he hoped Loki would eventually elaborate on.

Sif, on the other hand, did not appear as open-minded. She beheld Loki with a pitying expression, shaking her head. "You truly see no wrong in your actions."

"No." Loki met her gaze confidently. "I know what I did was wrong, by all measures of the law. I just don't burden myself with guilt over it."

"Is there no wrongful action you will take responsibility for, if only for the sake of our son?"

"Um, Mother?" Ollerus spoke up. "I'm right here you know." He hated when she talked about him like he wasn't there.

"There is one," Loki said, his resolve starting to crack. "And when the time comes that I must take responsibility for it then I will. But until that time, I will deal with the matters at hand, such as Thor's insistence that I come clean to the people about my staged resurrection."

Ollerus blinked. Loki's last two words just painted the most amazing visuals in his head. He didn't even need to ask for an explanation before his father started telling the story, obviously spotting the intrigue on his face. Sif attempted to argue, pinching the bridge of her nose, saying that the whole scenario wasn't nearly as admirable as Loki was describing, but Ollerus preferred Loki's version of the story, which was full of magic, gore and gruesome creatures. He apparently put on quite the elaborate show to keep himself out if the dungeon, and to restore his reputation with
Ollerus could understand the logic of resorting to deception in this case. Loki's list of sins were too
great for anything but martyrdom to wash away, and had he done everything according to the rules,
he would still be in the dungeon, which meant he wouldn't be here on this hunting expedition.
Ollerus knew that his father's crimes were wrong, even if he didn't feel guilty about them, and he
hoped to the Eternal that Loki wouldn't ever repeat such atrocities, but he also believed in second
chances and letting criminals learn from their mistakes. Thor was guilty of war crimes against
Jotunheim, and he was now the King. Why couldn't Loki be given the same treatment, especially if
he intended to tell the people of Asgard the truth at this big banquet he kept hearing about that he
wouldn't be allowed to go to. At no point since Loki had arrived in Glasir has he given Ollerus the
impression that he wasn't deserving of a second chance. Sure he had his dark and weird moments,
and yes, the Pegasi are scared crapless of him, but these are hardly reasons to ignore the good that
Ollerus has plainly seen.

Everything Ollerus has read about Asgardian fathers and sons is how the fathers always want their
sons to follow in their footsteps and do the things they do, and not because the fathers wanted their
sons to be happy but because they want their attributes passed down to future generations, and that
is what will make the fathers proud of their sons. That always sounded good on paper but it
couldn't be farther from the truth in the case of Ollerus and his father. By those rules, Loki should
be angry and disappointed that Ollerus couldn't learn magic, or that he preferred skiing and hunting
over meditating and making rocks levitate. He wasn't. Loki was encouraging, even through all the
cynical remarks about the barbarism of hunting and mindlessness of physical feats, Ollerus had
seen the pride glisten in his father's eyes when he flawlessly landed a jump or when he nailed a
bullseye. He felt loved for being exactly who he was, not for some preconceived standard of who
he should be.

Loki was even the one to first point out the herd of bilgesnipe traversing the valley beneath them,
setting aside his personal biases against the sport they were about to engage in in order to help
make this an unforgettable day for his son. Ollerus felt like the luckiest son in all the nine realms.

"Oh wow, look at them all," Ollerus marveled at the sight, squinting to make out details through
the herd's kicked up dust. "They appear to be stampeding. Could something have frightened
them?"

Sif wasn't as infatuated with the sight and spoke with an unease. "They are the most frightful
creatures in these plains. What would possibly have scared them?"

"Size and ferocity do not make up for wits," Loki said, gazing across the valley. "A scurrying
rodent could send these beasts into a frenzy."

Ollerus pulled an arrow from his quiver and readied it in his bow, practicing his aim. The creatures
were still too far away but they wouldn't be after long. They were running really fast.

"There's something odd about this," Loki noted, straining to see more details of the herd. "They are
traveling in a very unnatural formation, almost as if—"

"Trolls," Sif blurted, instinctively inching closer to Ollerus. "They are being ridden by trolls. We
need to back up slowly and quietly so as not to be detected."

"Um," Ollerus said, his heart suddenly pounding, "I think it's too late for that."

The herd had shifted its trajectory and was now heading straight for the bluff they were on. Each
bilgesnipe had a troll rider and there were a dozen or more of them, equipping various weapons and
"Ollerus," Sif ordered, pulling her glaive from her back, "you fly up as high as Glimmer will let you and you stay there until I come for you. Do not, for any reason, come back down."

"Are you intending to fight them?" Loki asked, worry flashing across his face.

"You have a better plan?" She slid down off of Fylla.

"We could retreat," Loki suggested, turning his horse back toward the forest.

Sif slapped Glimmer on the rump and signaled her to fly upward, not even waiting for Ollerus's pitch of why he would be useful in this battle. The last thing he heard as his stomach dropped and the ground grew distant was Sif, assuming her battle stance and stating that she does not retreat. Loki then dismounted his horse, sent it running into the forest and assumed his battle stance next to Sif.

Glimmer continued to rocket upward and Ollerus growled in frustration. How dare his mother treat him like some helpless child, in front Loki no less. He could take on those stupid trolls. He could easily snipe them from above, so long as Glimmer didn't get spooked and jerk around too much. He tried to steer the beast off of its strictly vertical path but it was no use. Sif had given her an order and she was bound to follow it. Useless animal.

Fortunately, Fylla was a short distance behind him, no doubt also sent away by Sif to avoid getting hurt. Fylla was no stranger to battle though. She was a seasoned war Pegasus and from the stories Ollerus heard about her, she would be the perfect vehicle to snipe from. She just needed to get a little closer...a little closer, and now! Ollerus leapt from Glimmer's back, falling in the general direction of Fylla who he knew would catch him. Both steeds cried in disapproval at his stunt but Fylla did not fail him and he clung to her neck once their bodies connected. He righted himself upon her back and wasted no time in steering her back toward the ground.

As they approached the battle came into view, and it was spectacular! Ollerus never doubted his mother's prowess as a warrior and he had watched her countless times battle the Valkyries in the practice pit, but never had he seen her take on real enemies. She was a beast. Each swing, twirl and jab of her glaive, each block from her shield were masterful, as if she choreographed it ahead of time. For every troll she sliced, stabbed, maimed and flung off of their mount, there was a bilgesnipe she had to deal with too, and she did so effortlessly. Bilgesnipe weren't like horses that would run off in fear once stripped of their rider. They were out for blood and they didn't even care whose. Ollerus saw one attack a troll that Loki's ice blast had knocked off his mount, but that was only one. Sif still had plenty to contend with and she made it look so easy, a simple duck, roll and upward stab into the belly, the one spot where they lacked scaly armor.

Ollerus momentarily forgot about his sniping intentions because of the sheer awesomeness he was beholding below. Loki was a one man army, literally, what with his cloning spell, and every attack he did something different. First it was a sheet of blockading ice that a bilgesnipe slammed into, breaking its neck. Next he dismounted two trolls with two knives, thrown at the same time, then he proceeded to freeze their bilgesnipe in place with a dual ice blast. One of those trolls got up quickly though, hardly slowed by his wound and taking advantage of Loki's distraction. He yanked the knife from his hairy belly and made to attack Sif with it, who was too busy with her own set of trolls to see him coming. Ollerus gasped and readied his arrow, trying to line up his shot and command Fylla to hover at the same time. He was failing miserably. He needed to get closer but by then it would be too late. He was about shout out a warning when a large spear of ice pierced the back of the troll's head and came out of his face.
The monster fell to the ground, practically at Sif's feet. She didn't even notice how Loki just saved her but she did notice how Loki was being quickly overtaken by too many foes. She promptly mounted the riderless bilgesnipe which she was about to gut, and plowed it into the trolls bearing down on Loki, impaling one on the beast's lethal antlers. Loki looked impressed.

The pair were an unstoppable force. Sif slid down off the creature, gutting it in the process, and strutted up to Loki who appeared to thank her with a smirking remark. They both behaved like this was nothing, smiling and jabbing at each other while they stepped over the entrails of their conquered foes. By the Great Tree did Ollerus have the coolest parents.

That is until they kissed, not even caring that their faces were covered troll blood. Gross.

Ollerus was about to fly back up to where Sif had told him to stay, fearing the punishment she would dole out while in battle mode, but then he saw another herd in the distance, a bigger one, at least twice the size maybe three times, closing in fast. Sif and Loki had noticed them too and their smiles were long gone. They now exchanged worried glances, their chests heaving anxiously, but they still readied themselves for the next wave. Ollerus readied himself too, positioning Fylla in an ideal hover behind some tall trees, the perfect spot to snipe.

This next batch didn't stand a chance. He would just keep telling himself that. Their ugly tribal tattoos only served as targeting points. They didn't scare him.

Ollerus waited until his parents engaged in battle before taking his first shot. The chaos of battle cries and clashing weapons were the best auditory cover for a whistling arrow and the skull it cracked through. No one would suspect him. He chose his targets strategically, taking out the ones who were closest to landing a blow on his parents. They never saw what hit them. It was almost too easy, surprisingly. The trolls had no strategy or no military training. They just charged in with some crudely crafted weapon and seemed to think the more noise they made, the better chance they had at winning. Boy were they wrong. And it was costing them their lives, one arrow at a time.

The trolls still had strength in numbers and Ollerus could see how that was taking its toll on Loki and Sif. They were starting to look tired and the few blows the trolls had got on them were slowing them down. Sif's attacks were less precise and it was taking multiple swings to take down a foe rather than just one. Loki's spells were weakening as well, some of his ice spears shattering upon impact instead of penetrating. The bilgesnipe he had frozen into place were now breaking out and he didn't have the magical energy to recast the spells.

The animals went berserk in their frost-bitten confusion, trampling anyone in their path and headed directly toward Sif and the three trolls surrounding her. Loki cast several projections of himself in an attempt to lure the rampaging beasts away but it was no use. Ollerus repeatedly shot arrows into the scaly bodies, but half of them bounced off the natural armor and the ones that stuck were hardly a hindrance. Loki then appeared to drain all his remaining magical energy into one large spell, planting an ice wall in front of the herd of three. The action left him open to attack from a troll's bludgeon and he was knocked to the ground. He scrambled to get up but it wouldn't be quick enough before the troll could land his finishing blow. Ollerus put an arrow right through the assailter's nasty unibrow.

It was no mystery to Loki who his hero was in that moment, but he didn't have time to express his gratitude while Sif was still greatly outnumbered. Both Ollerus and Loki shot their glance in her direction, seeing a crumbled ice wall, a couple of trolls trying to fend off an angry bilgesnipe, and, to their horror, a circle of trolls all closing in on what could only be Sif.

Ollerus grabbed for an arrow but he had run out. Loki yanked a knife from a nearby body and sent
it into the back of a single assaulting troll, but it was too little too late as the other two trolls were still causing serious damage, kicking, scratching and ripping away plates of familiar silver armor. In desperation, Loki kept grabbing any weapon he could find and throwing it at the trolls, charging limply as he did so. He was liable to get himself killed in his wounded state, so Ollerus, as a last resort, steered Fylla toward the fray and swooped down to do whatever he thought he could do.

Just as he was about to throw himself onto a troll, another Pegasus halted Fylla in her dive. Upon that Pegasus was Reginleif, captain of the Valkyrie Guard, fully clad in her battle armor and looking frightfully fierce. Ollerus was so glad she was on their side. She hollered a command and the battlefield sang out with death cries from the remaining trolls and bilgesnipe. The Captain then led Ollerus to the ground where a battalion of warrior women were scouring the bodies for any signs of life, eliminating all threats. There would be no escorts to an honored afterlife for the slain here, not by these Valkyries.

Ollerus nearly stumbled to where he had last seen his mother, finding her surrounded by Valkyries who stood where the trolls had been. He shoved between their metal clad bodies and gasped when he saw Loki kneeling next to Sif's battered body supporting her head on his lap and pushing blood drenched locks off her face. His stomach clenched into a painful knot and he felt sick. He had never seen his mother this gored before, the battlefield wounds she had returned home with in the past with only paling in comparison.

"Can she be moved or shall we call for a healer?" Said one of the Valkyries.

"I--I don't know," Loki said with shuddering voice, a tone that only compounded Ollerus's worry. Sif was slashed, bruised and broken from head to foot. The blood on her arms matched the red of her skirt. Half of her armor had been ripped off and the flesh beneath was scratched and torn. She writhed upon the ground, fighting waves of pain.

"Sif," Loki said, cradling her cheek.

"I'm fine," she finally spoke, her voice weak and choked. "Where is Ollie?" Sif opened her one eye that wasn't swollen shut and lifted her head to scan the area.

Ollerus fell to her side and gently took her hand in his, afraid of moving it too much and causing more injury. "I'm here, Mother. I'm okay."

She exhaled in relief and then smiled. Through all of her obvious pain she actually smiled, and lifted her hand to his cheek. "My darling boy," she whispered, wincing at the effort to hold her arm up. "I'm sorry I slaughtered all the bilgesnipe before you had a chance to. Maybe next time?"

Ollerus snorted and exchanged glances with Loki who was relieved to hear Sif talking like herself. They both wordlessly acknowledged that it would take more than flesh wounds from mindless monsters to break the Lady Sif.

"Well, actually," Ollerus confessed. "I did get a few shots in, and I lost count of how many trolls I took out."

"You what?" Sif said, ramping up to lecture about disobeying her until Loki cut her off.

"Will you please conserve your energy. The boy doesn't need a lecture, rather a medal of honor. He's a hero. If he hadn't disobeyed you, we'd both be dead."

Ollerus was rendered speechless by the honor just bestowed upon him. His father just called him a hero, to his mother, who was lying victoriously in a pool of her own blood, showing off her wounds
like they were badges to the Valkyries that bandaged them. Ollerus wasn't the hero here, it was everyone else. He wanted to say something equally flattering to Loki, and to Sif, who were a million times the hero Ollerus was, but words alluded him, stolen by the exhaustion that was now sweeping over his body.

The intensity of everything was finally catching up to him. He now had a whole new appreciation for the toll a battle could take on the body and mind, and he wasn't even fighting on the ground. He hardly noticed when Heimdall's luminous spell transported them back to the temple, barely registered his father's embrace and instructions to wait outside the healing chamber, vaguely felt Svala's hand entwine with his and offer a supporting squeeze after Loki disappeared down the hall. He only knew everything was going to be alright. That Elder Eir would fix his mother up good as new, that he would have all new stories to tell the girls, and that his father was not only proud of him, but considered him a hero.

Everything was going to be alright. All the signs were pointing to that. Elder Eir was the best healer ever and he could still hear Sif giving her grief while she patched her up. From what he could hear of Eir's responses, she seemed to be acting a little odd, but she was probably just mad at Sif for getting so beat up. Sif was going to be okay. Never mind that Loki just ran across the courtyard and into greenhouse. He was probably just fetching one of those rare magical herbs for Eir that sped up the healing process. Eir only used those in special cases, like when a patient lost a lot of blood and she needed to replenish it faster. That's what was happening now. Nothing too unusual.

A terrifying scream echoed through the hall, shattering all of Ollerus's assurances. It was Sif's scream.

Loki burst out of the greenhouse and ran with a fury back into the healing room. Ollerus's heart leapt and he was about to follow him but Eir emerged from the greenhouse, shivering and brushing shards of ice from her arms. She was moving as quickly as her obviously weakened body would allow, using the wall as support. Ollerus was baffled. He intercepted Eir as she headed for the healing room.

"Elder what happened?" He helped support her. "I thought you were in there treating Mother."

"I-I was at-tacked," she said with a shiver and Ollerus felt a horrible sinking in his gut.

"You--you're freezing cold," his voice betrayed all of his worry. "Did...my father attack you?"

"No," Eir said, "he freed me from the ice. I was attacked by-"

A dreadful cackling erupted from the healing room, followed by an enraged growl from Loki and the crashing of thrown objects. A mysterious apparition then floated out of the room, carrying the cackle with it. Eir stepped in front of Ollerus and her hands began crackling with a vicious white magic, but the threat dissipated and vanished before it could be attacked.

Eir and Ollerus stood frozen, uncertain what to do, until Loki called for help, his voice desperate. "Go," Eir said and Ollerus ran ahead with a pounding heart, skidding around the corner gasping in horror when he found Loki on the floor with Sif, cradling her, trembling. Sif was still conscious, barely, speaking, trying to explain what happened.

"Poison. She...injected me with poison." Each word was a hurdle, but she kept going. "Disguised herself as Eir. She said it was a painkiller. I...I didn't see it coming."

"Who did?" Ollerus cried.
"Angrboda," Eir said upon entering, bracing herself on the doorway. "She was the one who attacked me in the greenhouse." She looked down and went pale the moment she saw Sif. "Oh no..."

"Eir," Loki said, tears now streaking his face. "She's been poisoned. If you don't help her, she will die."

"Poisoned..." Eir echoed, trying to comprehend it all. Ollerus has never seen her so frightened before.

"Eir!" Loki pleaded. "You are the only one who can save her now. You need to pull it together."

Eir took a deep breath, gathering her strength and kneeling down at Sif's side, immediately pulling up the magical image of Sif's anatomy. Sif jerked, startled by Eir's proximity, and the sparkling image faded.

"Keep her away from me keep her away!" Sif wrestled in Loki's hold, finding some impossible reserve of strength to do so.

"Sif, stop." Loki tried to calm her down. "The imposter is gone. This is the real Eir. She's going to help you but she can't if you keep struggling."

Sif wasn't convinced but she didn't have anymore strength to fight. She instead glared with a single, bloodshot eye in Eir's direction, wincing as waves of pain coursed through her body and a tears streaked through the blood on her cheek.

"How do you know?" Sif spat. "How do you know its not Angrboda?"

Ollerus was at a complete loss. He didn't understand what was happening. "Who's Angrboda?"

No one answered his question. Filling Ollerus in with details wasn't a priority. Loki was focused on Sif, holding her still, trying to calm her down. He was also apologizing, repeatedly, stricken with a strange kind of fear that Ollerus could tell was different from the kind he was feeling.

"The witch is gone," Loki assured. "She retreated like the coward she is. I tried to stop her, but I failed...Oh, Sif. I am so sorry."

"It's not your fault, Father," Ollerus offered. It was the least he could do.

Sif finally calmed down enough so Eir could examine her. The sparkling map of her body appeared overhead again, glowing red where her flesh was rend and pumping with a sickly green where the poison was. It was everywhere. Eir battled her own emotions as she isolated and magnified a cell of poison, breaking it down into an identifiable substance. This was the point where she usually figured out what it was and would then concoct an antidote, sometimes sending Ollerus outside to collect a specific plant.

"Can I help, Elder?" Ollerus said. "Fetch an herb or something from the greenhouse?" He wanted to help. Wanted to do anything but stand there and watch his mother writhe in agony, conquered and helpless. It was so wrong. She was never supposed to look like that.

Eir swiped the illusion away then bowed her head, defeated and ashamed.

"Well, what it is!?!" Loki was frantic.

"There is nothing we can do for her here," Eir said. "My antidotes will not work on a body so
badly injured. They will only kill her faster. The only power that can offer her a chance at this point is Odin's, and he is asleep."

Loki shook his head. "That can't be. You are supposed to be the greatest healer of our time. What do mean there's nothing—"

Loki was interrupted when Sif stopped writhing, her pain seeming to subside enough to allow her to reach for him. She crept her blood-crusted hand up his chest then upon his cheek, her split lip stretching into a smile.

"My darling," she whispered, shaky and weak. "Look after Ollerus."

Ollerus felt a sharp pang in chest. Sif was drifting away quickly, not even realizing he was in the room, talking as if she was about to die. He wanted to say something to her but he didn't know what. Words only tangled in his throat. Any expression of sentiment would equate to a goodbye, and he wasn't about to concede to that. He could only share a glance with his father, and allow his tears to fall as they would.

"Sif," Loki said with a cracking voice, "do not speak in this manne—" She shushed him then brushed her finger over his lips.

"Tell him how much I love him," Sif ordered, putting an intimidating weight to her words despite her weakened state. "And know that I love you."

She slipped into unconsciousness in those last words. Eir immediately checked her vitals, going though all of the motions Ollerus had seen her do to mortally wounded Valkyries, except this time her hands were shaking. She checked for life signs, readied magical bolts in her finger tips to spark into her heart if necessary, and she squeezed Sif’s hand, alternating kisses between it and her forehead.

"Mother?" Ollerus finally spoke, fearing there was no hope left to cling to. This was it. It was time to say goodbye. He wasn't sure he could manage that.

"She's..." Eir said, sitting up, her face a picture of disbelief. "She's slipped into a coma."

Ollerus had to take a seat, dropping his head into his hands. He wasn't sure he could handle anymore of this.

"You said Odin's magic can heal her?" Loki spoke with a despaired whisper.

Eir gave him a questioning look. "There's a small chance it can."

"Then I will awaken him." Loki then looked up at the ceiling. "Heimdall, take us to Gladsheim!"

Music: Scaretale by Nightwish
Despair, Hope, and More Despair.

Chapter Summary

I don't know what to summarize that isn't a spoiler. A lot happens in this chapter: three sections, three POVs, all the cast. What I can say is that I had way too much fun writing parts of this!

It looks like I'll be wrapping this up in November, a year from when I started it, assuming I keep posting every other week. As always, thank you so much for reading. I would love to hear your feedback, good or bad.

"Heimdall informed me she was hurt," Thor said, bursting into Gladsheim's healing chamber. "What happened?"

Loki couldn't help but notice his son's instant captivation with the fabled Prince of Thunder, the boy enchanted by a figure he had spent his life reading about. Why couldn't Heimdall have left Ollerus in Glasir. These were not the circumstances Loki wished his son to be introduced to Asgard under. He'd rather Ollerus meet Thor once a reconciliation had been established between brothers, eliminating any chance at Thor confusing the boy with misunderstood events.

Loki exchanged only a brief, tense glance with Thor before focusing back on his lover's broken and unconscious form. Sif was laid out before him on Eir's table, illuminated by the network of images hovering over her. This unplanned tragedy demanded his full attention: this horrific misstep that was undoing everything he had recently gained, this error that would put him right back in chains should the truth come to light.

"She got beat up by trolls," Ollerus spoke up in a timid, shaken voice, taking it upon himself to answer Thor's question. Eir was too involved in slowing the venom's progression through Sif's body, and Loki had no desire to converse with his brother whom he hadn't spoken to since humiliating him in front of the Warriors. Leave it to Ollerus to step in. "Then, I guess," the boy paused as Thor stepped closer, "a witch poisoned her?"

"Poison!" Thor approached the table with heightened concern. He then looked across Sif's bloodied body to Loki who refused to meet his incriminating gaze. "How could this have happened? Is she going to be alright?" Loki ignored him.

With a gentle shove to Thor's silver-scaled arms, Eir urged him to step back. She hated being crowded when she worked. "She's in a coma but she does not have long." Her voice was weakened yet she kept strong through it all, paying no mind to the frost burns she had suffered from Angrboda's attack. Loki was ignoring his injuries as well, bruises and bleeding wounds trivial in comparison to everything else at hand. He needed to go and to wake up Odin, but he wasn't sure how he was going to do that, nor did he want to leave Sif's side. What if she awoke briefly only to find him absent?

"I'm Ollerus, by the way," the boy angled his neck to view the red cloaked King next to him. "Your highness." Loki narrowed his eyes at Thor.

"I know who you are, son," Thor said in a calming voice. He moved to place his hand on Ollerus's
shoulder but Loki wedged between them, guiding the boy away from Thor.

Loki placed his hands on his son's shoulders. "Watch over her." The tall boy was still wearing the leather armor Sif had forced him to wear, the set he hated wearing. "I'll try to make this quick." Loki then left the room urgently.

"Where are you going?" Thor followed, jogging to catch up to him. Loki picked up his pace, saying not a word, which was only making Thor more concerned. "Talk to me, Loki. Why were you attacked by trolls? Who is this witch your boy speaks of?"

Loki remained silent, flustered that he now had to approach Odin with this incessant badgering. As if this whole situation wasn't difficult enough without Thor at his heels. He rounded a corner, his frustration then compounding when he nearly ran into Volstagg's barrel chest. He and Fandral were making their way to healing room, no doubt informed by Heimdall of Sif's condition. Loki tried to push past the massive warrior but was halted by a meaty hand upon his chest.

"Not so fast," Volstagg said. He then looked to Thor. "What happened?"

"Sif has been poisoned," Thor supplied and Loki winced. "Eir says it is fatal." This was not going to go over well with these two.

"Poisoned?" Fandral echoed. He then shoved past Volstagg and slammed Loki against wall, withdrawing his rapier. "What did you do?"

A temperamental burst of magic forced Fandral back, the invisible wave knocking the warrior to the floor and jarring Thor and Volstag's balance. "Do not touch me." Loki spat. He then turned and continued down the royal corridor, hearing the whine of strained leather as Thor was holding Volstagg back.

"Let me handle this, my friends," Thor spoke softly, helping Fandral to his feet. "Go to the healing chamber. Sif's boy is there, in need of comfort."

Loki's chest ached upon hearing that, hating that he couldn't be there for Ollerus in the moment. This was one situation where a cloning spell wouldn't suffice. No magical illusion could mimic the feel of a real embrace or offer supporting words. He shifted his hurried stride to a jog and then a full out run, the end of the hall where Odin's door stood a seemingly infinite distance. Breathless, he finally reached the door. It sparkled with a protective spell, impenetrable to most, even Mjolnir, which Loki now heard growing closer, carrying Thor with it. Thor had traveled the endless corridor with the help of that damned hammer in a fraction of the time it had taken Loki to run it.

"Our father cannot help us this time," Thor said upon approach. "He has sealed himself in. His magic is impregnable. Even Mjolnir could not break..."

A simple hand gesture removed Loki's magic—wearing the golden guise of Odin's magic—from the door. Thor was incredulous.

"This was your magic all along?"

Loki avoided eye contact, taking a deep breath and wrapping his fingers around the large ornate door handle. He attempted to open the door but Thor ripped him away, yanking the door open himself and storming into the hallowed chamber.

"I dread to think what you have done to him," Thor's voice cracked. Loki gathered himself then followed Thor into the room, a shudder racking his body once he beheld the familiar cocoon. It sparkled in that living gold aura, delicate and translucent, each twinkle a piece of Odin's thoughts
and dreams. Thor knelt by the bed, inspecting his father, ensuring he was asleep and nothing more."

"He is unharmed," Loki assured.

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

Loki approached slowly, each muscle tensing up with a different emotion, none of which he identified as the hate he felt the last time he entered this room, when the All-Father was draped over his shoulder. During the first Odinsleep Loki had witnessed, the guards had been the ones to carry him in and carefully lay him down, Frigga close at their heels, hands covering her mouth in disbelief. Loki had held back, still in shock, too overwhelmed with the truths he has just learned to know what he should be feeling. It wasn't grief, that much he was certain of. It was something closer to opportunity.

Shapeshifted into a soldier, he had only needed to drop the words 'Svartalfheim' and 'body' to induce the second sleep. Odin had been teetering on the brink since Frigga's death, loosing his grip, making one bad call after the next. The Chaotic Prince had done Asgard a favor in being the final push that triggered the Odinsleep. The old fool would have put them all in danger by housing the Aether so close to the Tesseract. He knew not the potential of those primordial powers or of the beings that sought them, nor did he have the capacity to deal with them.

What he did, however, have the capacity for—and was the only being known to possess this rare wisdom, much to Loki's reluctant acceptance—was how to heal Sif. Eir fell short because she did not work with dark magic as much as Odin did, nor did she converse with the enigmatic Norns. If anyone knew the required resources to combat a deranged witch's venomous attack, it would be the All-Father, especially now that he would be adequately restored from his grieving state.

Loki drew closer but stalled when Thor rose up and planted himself between him and the bed, blockading.

"Now is not the time for this, Thor," Loki said. "You must let me speak to him. If I don't wake him up, Sif will die. He is the only one who can help her."

Thor studied the desperation Loki had on clear display, conflicted, tightening his grip on the hammer, his knuckles going white. Finally, he seemed to find truth in Loki's intentions and stepped aside, sliding Mjolnir into his belt and crossing his arms over his chest.

Loki sighed. "I wish to speak to him alone."

"Forgive me that I don't trust you."

Loki had no choice but to let him stay. He didn't have the time to talk him out of the room either. He instead nodded, understanding, then knelt down at the bedside.

"All-Father," Loki began, finding a comfortable distance with that title. "We need your help. Sif is dying from illness. Poisoned, beyond Eir's capability to heal her." Loki paused to look for a trace of reaction but there was no change. He continued. "She needs your aid or we will lose her to the underworld. Please All-Father. Eir alone cannot save her."

Odin's chest rose and fell but no more or less than it has been doing. At a loss, Loki glanced to Thor, who merely stood contemplatively. Loki was hoping for a suggestion. Desperate times were indeed upon them when Loki looked to Thor for assistance.

Thor closed their distance and knelt at the bed. "I am here too, Father. We all need you. I need
This should do it, Loki thought. The golden son's touching sentiment better suited for this task than the silver tongue's ever would be. These were the words Odin truly wanted to hear.

"I am sorry I left Asgard," Thor continued, his speech becoming more broken. More difficult. "I should have stayed with you, in our time of mourning. I should have taken the throne when you offer—" Loki cleared his throat, interrupting. "What?" Thor barked.

"I was actually the one who offered you the throne, remember? Then you said how I had the better grasp on ruling, and that you'd rather be a good man than a great king?"

Thor sighed, frustrated. "Yes, I remember now."

"And then you offered me Mjolnir and I turned it down?"

"I said I remember," Thor's volume rose. "There is no need to rub it in. Yes, you pulled one over on me, again, all so you could—" Thor cut himself off. "It just occurred to me why you refused Mjolnir." A smirked tugged at Thor's mouth. "You wouldn't have been able to hold it. It would have pulled you to the floor and then your game would have been revealed."

"Brilliant deduction." Loki rolled his eyes. "It's only taken you how long to figure that out?"

"Oh, pardon me if ruling Asgard has taken precedence over unraveling your mischief. Some of us have better things—"

Odin stirred, a faint hum escaping his lips, capturing both brothers' wide-eyed attention.

"It is the arguing," Thor suggested. "Last time father awoke from the Odinsleep, we were fighting."

Loki narrowed his eyes, skeptical. "What are you suggesting? Shall I take a crack at you? Should we take this to the Bifrost so you can destroy it again?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It was a ridiculous idea," Loki said. "If our arguing interrupts the Odinsleep then he would be the most sleep deprived—"

"Well I don't hear you offering any insight," Thor said, shoving off the bed and falling into a pace. "Did you not come in here with a plan? I thought you always had a plan. Did you simply think he would awaken at the mere sound of your voice?"

"I have a theory," Loki defended. "But I prefer to test it when you're not here."

"Well that's not going to happen. So spit it out."

"Truths," Loki blurted. His voice then shrank. "I-I think our truths stir him. He reacted after your confession."

Thor paused his pacing, holding his arms out expectantly. "Then what are you waiting for, Loki? Sif is depending on you, as is your son. We're all depending on you."

"Your truths work too."

"You have far more to confess than I," Thor argued. "And besides, it's your turn."
"Fine!" Loki snapped. He couldn't argue there was no time. He turned back to Odin, taking some deep breaths and attempting to clear his thoughts of Thor who was standing expectantly behind him. He could do this. He told the truth all the time. To Ollerus, to Sif. Why was this any different?

"Talk to him," Thor added. "As his son."

Muscles tensed in Loki's neck. "Easy for you to say."

"Talk. To him." Thor would not let up. "Now."

"I know!" Loki bristled, furious how Thor had commandeered the situation. Loki knew what he had to do and he already would have been doing it had Thor not intervened with his watchdogging. Did he realize how severely he was slowing down the process? How he was endangering Sif with these delays?

"All-Father," Loki began, trying to ratchet down the edge in his voice. "I need you to wake up. I...I want you to meet my son, Ollerus. He is the most remarkable child, he has taught me so much in very little time." Loki paused to study Odin, watching for any sign of change. There was nothing. He had to continue. "He has taught me...Well, I have learned...how difficult it can be to make the right decisions for a child. How the need as parent to protect our young, can cause us to make improper decisions. Lie even."

There was a single twitch in Odin's one visible eye. Loki's heart jumped. "Thor!" he said. "He twitched."

Thor darted over, kneeling down, scanning Odin. There were no more twitches. Thor looked to Loki. "Well, keep going."

"Father, please," Loki blurted, surprising himself. Why did he say that? This being was not his father—ah to Hel with it! He had to keep going. "I think...I understand why you lied to me." From his peripheral he could see Thor's features soften. He took a deep breath. "I'm trying to forgive."

"Trying?" Thor said, brow lifting.

"That is the truth," Loki countered. "To say any more would be a lie."

Thor nodded, accepting, and they both looked to Odin, who hadn't budged since the single twitch. "This isn't working," Loki sighed. "Perhaps there is something Heimdall can do."

Thor stood up, offering his hand to help Loki up. "Why don't we leave him in peace. Let him muse on all that was spoken."

Loki accepted Thor's hand, lifting himself up. "Last time he was asleep, Mother said he could still hear everything."

"Aye." Thor led him to the door. "Mother also said he never wakes in the presence of others."

Loki stopped, blinking in disbelief. "You could have mentioned this earlier."

"It only just occurred to me," Thor confessed.

Loki shook his head. "It amazes me you can get up every morning and dress yourself, let alone rule Asgard."

"Enough of that." Thor took it lightly, opening the door for Loki. "Let us return to the healing
Upon return, they found Volstagg and Fandral standing outside of the room, regaling Ollerus with fantastically exaggerated war stories. They were emphasizing Sif's many strengths and victories which, if Loki correctly recalled, needed very little exaggeration to be impressive. Ollerus was fascinated by it all, smiling through watery eyes and even laughing. Loki had to admit these barbarians were occasionally good for something. Ollerus brightened upon seeing Loki, interrupting Volstagg to speak to him.

"Father! Elder Eir figured out how to slow the venom's spread. Now the All-Father has more time to heal her. Did," he paused, looking down the hallway. "Did you wake him up?"

Loki felt his shoulders drop. "We're...working on it." He was about to explain the situation but Thor cut in.

"I will update him." He placed his hand on Loki's shoulder. "Go to Sif. She needs you."

Loki nodded, gratefully, then exchanged smiles with his son before entering the healing room. Eir was bent at Sif's side, cleaning the last of her wounds. She had completely transformed Sif from the battered condition he last saw her in, her bloodied and mangled armor piled in the corner, replaced by a loose linen gown that was beige in color with a tie in the front, allowing easy access to her superficial injuries. It was standard issue patient wear but Sif had a way to make it beautiful, even with half her face swollen and purple, her lips dried and split, and her hair disheveled. Loki's heart sank as he sat beside her. He didn't think it could sink any lower for her but the pained expression on her face proved him wrong. It was a deep pain, beyond the flesh wounds, beyond the tainted, burning blood.

Eir affixed the final bandage on Sif's leg then put away her supplies, squeezing Loki's shoulder as she passed behind him. "I'm glad you're here," she said with a worn voice. Operating on reserves, she channeled most of her energy into her work alone. She couldn't afford to be slowed by fear or grieving. "Let her know you're there. I need a break if I am to be any help during Odin's appraisal of her."

"He's not awake yet," Loki said, lowly. He took Sif's hand between his. "How long does she have?"

"A full day," Eir said, moving to Loki. She began dabbing the open wound on his forehead. "Possibly two."

"Don't worry about me," Loki said, pulling away. "Go. Get some rest." She smiled at him before leaving the room. He was amazed she didn't suspect anything.

Propping an elbow on the table, he leaned into his arm, resting his head close to Sif's and continuing to to caress her hand with his thumb. He listened while Thor and the Warriors talked to Ollerus, asking questions to get to know him, distracting him from the present tragedy. They were doing a better job than Loki ever could. They knew what to say. They didn't have any guilt to mask.

"I know you told me to look after Ollie," he spoke weakly, pathetically. "But I think your comrades are better suited for it. Our son will ultimately prefer their company, especially once he learns what I have done."

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Sif had been right when she said all who meet Ollerus fall in love with him. Thor was completely
taken by him, fascinated at traits he recognized from both parents and enamored by what was uniquely his. The boy spoke with confidence the way Sif did when telling a story and he even picked up some of her mannerisms, like the lofty chin and proud posture. He talked excitedly about skiing and hunting, offering to teach either sport to whoever cared to learn. Fandral expressed an interest in skiing once Ollerus mentioned how he impresses the Valkyries with his jumps, and Volstagg wanted to hear more about the ideal way to cut a stag shank for maximum absorption of marinating spices. Ollerus hid blades beneath his clothing, just like his parents did, pulling each one out to explain what he used them for. They all had specific roles, whether for carving trinkets or skinning animals, each knife had its designation and he kept them very clean. He was meticulous like his father.

That was only a glimpse of his similarities to Loki, however. Beyond the tall, lean build and sharp facial features, there was the young man's mind, complex and brilliant. Thor didn't even need to ask if he took to books, that was obvious by his vocabulary and his knowledge of Asgardian history. He had dates memorized for battles Thor and the Two barely remembered fighting in, and any chance he got to correct them on a fact, he would. He made everyone laugh, especially with stories from his younger years, where he apparently pushed Sif to her wits end, an impressive feat indeed that the Warriors were much less successful at.

It was so strange, Thor mused, to imagine Lady Sif as a mother. How well she had hidden it from them all these years, and the tragedy was that she didn't have to. The All-Father wouldn't have exiled a child like this, how could he? Sure he may have masked his blue skin and dodged the issue of Loki's heritage a while longer, but he wouldn't have separated child from parent. Not again. Not after what he had done to Loki's cursed children.

That was a whole other matter that stung Thor's heart, the issue of Loki's violently broken family whose matriarch turned her jealous wrath onto undeserving souls.

Eir had told Thor the specifics of Sif's attackers, how Angrboda had tricked them and how she probably had sent the trolls to sieze them in the wilds. Angrboda may be a frost giant by blood but she always held the status of a troll by Asgardian standards, exiled from her people, choosing to live among outcasts and criminals, maddened by her handling of dark magic. Her infamous sorcery and her undeniable beauty were what had lured Loki in. Looking back, Thor wished he would have spoken up against Loki's nightly escapades into the wilds, but at the time he saw them as no more than rebellious stunts. Imagine the heartache he could have prevented if he had any foresight, the lives he could have spared a tragic fate. But how was he to know? How could anyone have predicted such an atrocity? Loki didn't even see it coming, and he was usually several steps ahead of his enemies' game.

Thor's heart ached for his brother, as much as it was for everyone else scared for Sif's life. Despite all he had put Thor through, Loki was proving to be on a path to redemption, suffering through trials set up by the warriors, substitute teaching for magic classes (Thor hadn't believed that when Eir first mentioned it), learning to forgive their father for the truths he withheld. Was this is how fate would repay him? It wasn't punishment enough that they lost their mother, but now Loki was on the verge of losing the only other woman dear to him. It wasn't fair. He couldn't let this happen. To anyone! Not Loki, not Ollerus, not Eir, not his comrades, and especially not to himself.

Sif was his best friend. He wasn't about to see her conquered by a cowardly witch.

"Loki," Thor beckoned upon entering the healing room. They were going to do whatever it took to awaken Odin. "Get up."

Loki lifted his head from the table, his eyes sunken for having stayed up all night with Sif. Ollerus
was seated across from him, sharing the duty of keeping a vigilant watch. The boy had brought his father some wine and various snacks, but Loki hadn't touched any of it. He was in a dark place, comparable to when Thor had gone to him in the dungeon, asking for his help. Loki had a peculiar way of mourning, unlike anyone else. This is the second time Thor had witnessed it, and both times he was unnecessarily self loathing, as if he was the one to blame. Thor hated seeing him like this, especially in front of his son.

"Ollerus," Thor said, "keep watch on your mother. Loki. Walk with me."

Loki didn't raise a fuss, just placed a sleepy kiss on his boy's head as he ambled to the door. He didn't speak until they were in the hall.

"Are we attempting to wake the All-Father again?" His voice was laden in defeat.

"Yes," Thor confirmed.

"What good will it do?" He avoided Thor's gaze. "We don't know for certain that Odin can heal her. Eir said it was only a possibility."

"You cannot lose hope, Brother. And you must not blame yourself. These things, their...beyond our control."

Loki snorted. "Are they?"

"Yes!"

Loki shook his head. "I couldn't protect her."

"Sif is not one who needs—"

"In fifty feet, make a slight right turn." Thor was cut off as a rigid female voice buzzed in his pocket. Loki gave him a strange look.

Thor continued, sliding his hand into his pocket. "She's not one who needs protec—"

"At the next intersection, make a legal u-turn," the voice said again, muffled.

"What," Loki's eyes widened, "the Hel."

Thor pulled the small computer out, trying to remember which button silenced her. "OK. Let me take a look." He mistakenly turned her volume up, "I'm afraid I can't answer that for you."

"Why do you have that?" Loki asked.

"Her name is Siri." Thor smiled, fumbling with the device. "I like to listen to her. She reminds me of Jane."

Loki could only stare, dead panned. "Have the healers found a name for your condition yet?"

"Shut up," Thor defended. "I miss her. And the condition is called love, which I know you—"

"I found what you were looking for. All You Need is Love by the Beatles. Shall I play it for you?"

"By the fires of Muspelheim," Loki threatened. "Shut it up or I will."

"Alright, fine." Thor resorted to pushing every button. One of them should do the trick.
"I do not understand, Mus-pel-heim."

Or not.

"Please repeat the question."

"Give it here!" Loki snatched her from his hands then made her vanish with a flick of green dust.

"Bring her back," Thor ordered, his voice pitching up.

"It's not a her, it's an it," Loki corrected. "A highly obnoxious one."

"Give her back!" Thor shoved his arm.

"No."

"Dammit, Loki." Thor backed down. "I hate when you do this."

"You can have it back if you let me silence her."

"But..." Thor whined. "When will she be able to speak again?"

"When I pull my cock out of her mouth."

"Loki!" Thor grabbed his collar, halting their stride. "Do you speak this way in front of your son?"
A slip of laughter then escaped him. He tried to play it off. "It is highly inappropriate." More laughter. "Childish behavior."

Loki pulled his jerkin free. "Which explains why you're amused." He made the device reappear, waggling it out of Thor's reach. "Is this what you want?"

"Give it back!" Thor grabbed for it but Loki jerked it away.

"No."

"Give it back now!"

"Make me!"

Thor kept grabbing and reaching but Loki's long arms held it just beyond his finger tips. It wasn't long before they were wrestling on the floor, a tangle of protests, growls and outstretched arms. Loki kept switching which hand he held the device in, sometimes curling his entire body around it when Thor's reach got to close.

"Quit behaving like a child," Thor commanded, attempting to pry Loki's fingers open.

"Need I point out the obvious?" Loki snarled.

"What is this?" A familiar voice filled the hallway, freezing both brothers in place. They looked up to see Odin advancing slowly upon them. "Have I awoken to times past? When my sons fought as boys, and not enemies."

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The icy wind did not chill her. Her footsteps upon the cobblestones bore no weight. The eerie, tinkling melody drawing her down a frozen corridor was not of the living world. These were all
signs that told Sif exactly where she was. Helheim.

She should, by all sensibility, be racked with fear, but when one's body was merely a whisper of what it should be, there was no capacity to feel an appropriate twist in the gut or palpitation of the heart. Fear did not follow her down here, nor did the longing that came with separation from her son or the heartache that she may never see him. Sif was numb, and she was grateful for that. It was something she could operate with under the circumstances: a shield of apathy.

She approached the sinister throne of a rotting queen, abstaining from drawing a hidden blade. What good would it do? One does not open negotiations for their afterlife with a threat.

"I should not be here." Sif's voice echoed up to the vaulted stone ceiling.

"You really shouldn't." The throne swiveled to reveal the deliverer of the pinched, melodic voice. She was much smaller than Sif had always pictured and strangely dressed like a doll. Well, a doll that had been trampled a by a stampede of bilgesnipe, save for the bony and magnificent crown. "Whoever wrote the rules for the afterlife of Asgardians," the girl mused, casually thumbing through a thin book with glossy pictures of Midgardian fashion, "was a world class spunkwad. Eons of loyal service, countless opportunities for an enemy blade to grant you passage to Valhalla, and here you are. All because of one little needle. Boy did you get the ass end of the bargain."

Sif held her ground, bolstered by how little effect the girl's cruel words were having on her. "You must be Hel."

"You must be pissed!" she laughed, tossing the floppy book behind her.

Sif backed up to Hel's previous words. "What...bargain?"

"You..." Hel rose, tilting her head, snapping her fingers to beckon someone over. "You still don't know?" Several naked, wretched-looking goblins gathered at the base of the throne, creatures Sif couldn't decipher as living or dead. Hel gestured some orders at them, keeping her gaze fixed on Sif. "He didn't tell you, not even on your deathbed? Wow, what a bastard."

"Tell me what?" Sif moved closer once the creatures scampered off, trying to ignore a tugging in her chest.

"Oh, this worked out even better than I thought it would." Hel brought her hands to her cheeks like a beauty queen just crowned. "I can't believe I get to be the bearer of bad news."

The tug got worse. There was now tightness, hinting at pain, creeping up her throat. Sif lifted her twitching chin and watched wordlessly as the teenager slid up the ruffled sleeves of her white blouse and began a series of delicate dances with her hands.

"Starting to grasp the big picture now aren't you," Hel sang, a swarm of sparkling dust gathering at her fingertips.

Sif shook her head, rigidly. "He wouldn't."

Hel nodded. "He did." Her sympathy was mocking. "He traded your eternal damnation so he could put on his big resurrection show." The swirling dust then rocketed from her hands, startling Sif as it spread around them, reaching high, creating a walled enclosure that quickly began resembling a royal bedchamber. "If you don't believe me I'll play it back for you. I recorded our whole conversation."

The room began materializing furniture and light fixtures, all regal and grand in design, wallpaper
in patterns Sif couldn't recall the name of due to the sick overwhelming her. It was taking all of her strength just to stand tall in her show of resilience. One of the goblins hobbled up and plopped a chair beside her. Even they weren't fooled by the charade. She sank onto the velvet cushion, doubling over, leaning her head into her hands. What she found most disturbing was her lack of surprise.

"Yeah, I don't need to play it back for you," Hel said, strolling over to a large wardrobe a few goblins just delivered. "You believe me." She swung the doors open one at a time. "You know what he's capable of."

"You plotted this together?" Sif whispered, lifting her clouding gaze to the sickly adolescent who was sifting through hung garments. "Why? How have I wronged you?"

"Technically, I did it for Mother." She pulled a green dress out for inspection, shifting her glance contemplatively between it and Sif. "She hates your guts and I'm inclined to take her side. You understand, blood ties and all."

"No." Sif tore out if the chair, pacing, her voice wavering. "He would never put Ollerus at risk. He would not deprive our child of his mother. He loves Ollerus."

Hel had moved on to a different garment. "He claims to love me and Jojo and Fifi and look where we all ended up."

"He..." Sif paused, regretting the words before they escaped, "said he loved me." Hel opened her lopsided grin to speak but Sif cut her off. "Don't you say it!"

"Lordofthelies," Hel coughed out.

"Shut up," Sif ordered, pleading. "I know, okay? I know! I just..."

Hel hugged a red gown to her chest. "You thought he'd changed for you. Oh, sweet and tragic delusions."

"You are a cruel, vile thing," Sif spat.

Hel took it as a compliment, smiling innocently. "I learned from the best."

Sif turned away, hiding her building tears. What she wouldn't give for the emotional shield she walked in here with.

"Look. If it's any consolation, I didn't trust him to hold up his end of the bargain," Hel filed a little of the edge from her voice. Sif kept her back turned but heard the recoil of a metal hanger as a garment was tugged off. "I thought for sure he'd find a way to take Mother out before she could get to you. Guess I overestimated him too. Turns out he truly is just out for himself." Her voice was drawing closer. "But, whatever. Why don't we get you out of that gruesome armor and into something less barbaric." Sif whipped around to see a long red gown draped over Hel's arms. The girl prattled on. "You are much prettier up close than I thought you'd be. I can't deny that Father does have fine taste in women." She snapped and a few goblins padded up to her, taking the gown. "Mother is quite the catch too. I imagine you'll get to meet her soon, well, properly meet her. You probably didn't have much time to chat while she was murdering you."

The goblins closed in on Sif, silky gown laid across three sets of stubby, outstretched arms. She backed away. "Touch me not, foul goblins."

"Nyblings!" Hel corrected. "They're Nyblings." The creatures shot their attention to Hel, hearing
their name and awaiting an order. "Have you even opened a book before? Ugh, I dread to think of the uncultured conversations we're to have over tea." She shook her head. "Well come on Nyblings, don't stand there like dunces. Prep her."

The Nyblings advanced on Sif again and she readied herself. One of them reached for her boot. She tried to kick it but her foot flew right through, causing the pathetic creature to lose its balance and topple forward. The other Nyblings backed up, a couple of them snickering at their fallen comrade.

"What the..." Hel's eye widened. She used her magic to lift a perfume bottle from the vanity and launch it at Sif. It passed straight through, shattering on the wall and startling a nearby Nybling. "You're not dead." she was now upon Sif, poking a pale finger through her bracer. "How are you not dead?"

Sif felt a smile slowly stretch her lips. "Because I do not belong here." She felt her confidence restoring. "It'll take more than than the twisted, petty plots of wicked creatures to conquer me."

Hel narrowed her green eye, pushing her hair back to reveal the other one, which was blue and equally calculating. "You must be in a deep coma." She crossed her arms, hair flopping back over her face. "Your resilience is impressive. I've seen that poison take giants out in a matter of minutes." She rubbed her petite chin. "What am I missing here?"

Sif puffed up, building to say something intently obnoxious about good dominating evil, but she was silenced when her arms blossomed with chilling goosebumps. She deflated, growing fearful. Why was the cold affecting her all of a sudden? Why was the ground now pushing back on the soles of her boots, and why was her briefly claimed victory drifting away like a memorial sky lantern. She drew her arms to her body, shivering.

Hel brightened. "Now that's more like it. The poison is running its course. You'll be dead soon." She summoned a long fur lined cloak to float over from the wardrobe and wrap itself around Sif. The warrior flinched when it touched her but she regrettfully couldn't refuse its warmth.

The satisfied queen sauntered back to her throne, smirk spreading over her shoulder. "You might as well make yourself comfortable. You're going to be here for quite some time."

Music: Gutter Glitter by Switchblade Symphony
A heartbroken Sif, who's a devoted mother, who's on the brink of a dishonorable death, was a tricky thing to write. I hope I did her justice.

"Oh, my dear, reckless shield maiden. Look what you've done to yourself."

That should have been the first clue, Sif thought. Eir does not gush.

"You know better than to take on more than you can handle."

Um, no she doesn't. Eir knew that.

"How careless you are with your life. Do you not treasure the love that surrounds you?"

Was Eir high? Why the blathering on while Sif was bleeding all over the table. The warrior was so baffled and had been about ready to argue had her blood not been flooded with an invasive sting, flagging all of her survival instincts into a state of shock. She gasped, watching in stricken confusion as Eir removed the needle and smiled darkly.

"Elder, what did you give me?" He words were choked, every muscle seizing, taut and scared, even the ones barely clinging to bone. The burn was unbearable, a pain beyond physical, stretching into the eternal. An agonizing scream tore apart whatever she had tried to say next, a rarity that frightened her even more.

Sif never screamed. Not like that. Not at pain, never at the lumbering monsters that stared her down on the battlefield. She had been the cause for others to cry out so helplessly, beings of lesser character that couldn't take a blade with a little dignity, but never did she allow such weakness to occupy her voice when her flesh was attacked. A warrior is trained to take it, embrace it even, for flesh wounds only make the body stronger. But this was no mere flesh wound. This attack came with a creeping horror, a venom slowly thiefing her of Valhalla—yet another lost dream—and an unexpected enemy shedding the guise of Sif's beloved Elder. It was a figure tall and wretchedly skinny, cheek bones stretching a coarse blue skin she would slice before embracing, scarlet eyes whose beauty still radiated through anguish brought only by envy.

"Angrboda..." Sif shuddered.

She had always believed—until learning the true reason for her son's blue skin, when Thor had broken the news of Loki's true heritage—that her pregnancy had been afflicted by Angrboda's curse, a petty act of jealousy that always kept Sif looking over her shoulder. The very mention of the Jotun's name would raise hairs on her neck, both before and after her involvement with Loki, for rumors had bled through Asgard of Angrboda's alleged threats to any maiden who caught the dark prince's eye. Sif had laughed that off, though. She kept alert but wasn't afraid, especially not before Ollerus was conceived. No deranged exile prevented her from taking what she wanted. She may have even taken the giantess's reputable threats as a challenge.

How she was regretting that now.
"In exchange for what you took from me," the witch's voice flowed deep through the canyons of heartache, sultry and threatening, claiming strength by balancing on the edge of breaking, "I have taken your immortal glory."

Sif tried to spit out a defense but her tongue became tangled, literally, by Angrboda's chilling mouth enveloping hers. She froze, momentarily, then tried to push her off but hadn't the strength. Her body was hobbled by the array of assaults, this additional one completely blindsiding her. Feeble hands only splayed over thinly covered, tattooed breasts. Wooden beads and other clattering jewelry fell across Sif's neck as large moistened lips slicked over her split ones, creating an unwanted balm. She tried to writhe free but teasing talons, poised at the tips of bony fingers, captured her face and toyed with her fleeing tears. She had never, in all her life, felt so helpless. She recalled some noise of protest escaping her lips, not the vengeful roar she has hoped for, but a mere whimper. Pathetic. Weak. Scared.

"You're a monster..."

Sif always liked to boast that she didn't get scared. That no foe, no matter the size and ferocity of their weapon, could ever strike fear in her heart. But she had never faced an enemy like Angrboda before, a being driven by a merciless ache that only love can inflict. A shadow riddled with a pain Sif was growing to understand more and more as she sat on frozen cobblestones, wrapped in furs with nothing to occupy her time but her memories, regrets, and a residual chill on her lips. That phrase about death and fury and a scorned woman had never taken on such frightening clarity before.

It hadn't taken long, by all standard measures of time, for Loki to tear into the healing room and quake everything with a desperate and magical burst. Angrboda was ripped away and flung into the wall while Sif gasped for freedom and rolled off the table. It was all she could do in her condition. She clawed at the floor in frustration, hearing her assaulter escape and Loki hollering out futilely. He then called for help and fell at her side, turning her over and wrapping his arms around her.

"Sif," he said. "What did she do to you?"

At the time he felt wonderful. Despite the sickness clouding over her, and despite the impending tragedy, she had found peace and consolation in each of Loki's tears that fell upon her. She knew not where she was drifting to but her fear surrendered to the convincing ruse that bent over her and pulled her against him. He repeatedly apologized and she hadn't understood why, but thought very little of it as she stroked his cheek and spilt her heart, one last time.

What a fool she was.

Sif shrank and pulled the furs tighter around her, cursing. She had been played all along. Used and deceived. Slathered in false hope and sugared words, and for what. Another chaotic plan destined to fail, one that involved her son! How could she be so blind? Why did her heart override her common sense? How could she set herself and Ollerus up for this kind of heartache?

And most importantly, what did Loki want with him? How could he do this to his own child?

Through lies. And a blackened heart. That was how he would do it. He would string the boy along and use this tragedy as a means to sink his claws deeper, put on a grand show of grieving that everyone would fall victim to as they embrace him in consolation. Sif could only pray that Ollie was clever enough to see through the charade. That his intellect would defend him against the very being it was born from. Sif had to believe that. Any other outcome would be unimaginable punishment to dwell on. The very thought sickened her more than any poison could: Ollerus joining the ranks of Loki's demented offspring, his talents turned to spreading grief across the
realms, Angrboda adopting him as her own.

Sif trembled with a rage reserved only for her worst of enemies. Loki and Angrboda better hope they find a means of immortality because if they end up down here seeking a little family reunion with the Queen of Unfortunate Lineage, Sif would step up where Hel may show mercy and make their afterlives a painfully regretful affair. That might just make this eternal damnation worth its while.

Her chest caved and she shivered. Anger did not ease the pain. A hot temper would not warm her this time. Lust for revenge would not help her son.

Sif hugged her knees closer to her retracted form, the cold spreading through her spirit the way she assumed the poison was spreading through her flesh. Eir would have some lengthy explanation for this phenomenon, pointing out all the parallels between the deterioration of her physical health and waxing ache in her heart, all spoken in that rigidity that Sif never thought she would miss so dearly. What she wouldn't give to be back in Glasir, peeling off her dented armor while being pelted by a stiff lecture about wearing her muddy boots into the temple. Or better yet, hearing the lecture directed at Ollerus while he dragged his latest kill in to show his proud mother.

A splitting pain streaked across Sif's sunken chest and down into her gut. She hung her head.

What a failure of a mother she turned out to be. She never should have hidden him from Asgard, never should have lied, never should have hoped for the impossible family reunion. She should have taken her chances with Odin. He may have shown mercy and spared him exile. He did, after all, adopt a Jotun baby as his own. If only she had known that thirteen years ago. Perhaps he would have taken pity on her baby too, accepting him into their world. Maybe Volstagg and Hildegund would have adopted him with open arms, giving him a real family and raising him with experience and natural parental instincts. Sif had only her unqualified intuitions with every decision she made on behalf of Ollerus, blindly trusting the gut of a warrior, hoping it would guide her through motherhood like it always reliably guided her across enemy lines. How wrong she had been. She only ever brought him isolation, false hope, and now grieving.

Perhaps this was the reason she was in Helheim. She would be eternally punished for ruining the life of an innocent child. It was a just sentence. Her boy deserved much better.

Sif lifted her head, looking out over the courtyard she had claimed for her solitude. A thought occurred to her, a faint flicker of consolation that was within her grasp, like the one candle lit window she could see in this ghost town of icicles and sorrow.

A mother's regret was the only torment she would accept from this cursed plane of existence.

She would allow herself to be burdened with only one channel of grieving, and that would be for her son, a soul worthy of it. Hel would only see her cry for an honorable love, not for a misguided one. That was the torture assigned to silly girls and daydreaming damsels, Hel bent on fulfilling fanciful ambitions. That would not be Sif's damnation. She refused to be shackled with a faceted heartache. There were too many hearts wounded by him and plenty more to come so long as his tongue stayed connected to his trickery. Sif would not be one of them. She would pray to whoever listened for liberation from Freyja's enchantment. She would ask that, once her soul finally departed her failing body, that it leave behind her love for Loki. She no longer wanted it.

Let Angrboda be cursed with it.
Music: Ball and Chain by Social Distortion
Loki shares with Thor and Ollerus what really happened between his fall from Bifrost and the Chitauri invasion on Earth. There are tie-ins with Guardians of the Galaxy featuring The Collector and his assistant Carina (I love these characters!). There also may be spoilers for GotG but mostly there's headcanon regarding Loki's involvement with The Collector and Thanos. You don't need to have seen GotG to get what's going on.

Ollerus's presence was the only thing keeping him from losing it. The boy was a calming breeze of innocence and optimism in a room stuffy with distrust and unanswered questions.

"What does that mean?" His son pointed to a pulsing image in the multilayered, mystical chart hovering over Sif's body. Its complex data was being sifted and manipulated by two pairs of hands, both old, wrinkled, and amazing at their craft.

"They're getting closer to finding a cure," Loki said softly, regretting that he couldn't offer a better explanation. Eir and Odin were channeling magic beyond his understanding, and not for its complexity, but for its orientation. Light was like a foreign language, learned best through immersion rather than books, a culture that shunned him at the gates.

Ollerus looked at him with eyes warmed by compassion. The intuitive youth could sense the tension and all the unspoken grievances built between the time of Odin's awakening and now. "She's going to get better," he smiled.

Loki's return smile was forced. He hadn't the capacity for the genuine thing, not while he was depending on the being he despised the most to save one he loved. This was a torture beyond anything his flesh had ever endured, probably some sort of recompense for underestimating Angerboda, a being who was quickly overtaking Odin's place at the top of his hate list. At what point had the rug been pulled so cruelly from beneath his plan that he was to end up here, helpless, useless, and practically speechless since Odin caught him wrestling with Thor over some stupid Midgardian computer.

"See, I told you," Thor had said, snatching back his device. "It was our fighting that woke him up."

Loki had been too paralyzed by Odin's appearance to argue back. The events following all seemed to blur together in a stupefied dream, Thor pulling them off the floor, slathering the old badger with praise and gratitude, then guiding him into the healing chamber while he explained why they woke him up. At one point Odin had squeezed Loki's shoulder with an unspoken relief, but the moment was shortened, thankfully, as Eir descended up them and scanned Odin's state of health.

He watched from behind as the All-Father worked, noting the creases and folds in the regal armor where flesh once fit it. He had withered even more since Loki last saw him. According to Frigga's observations, he has been deteriorating ever since he used dark energy to send Thor to Midgard while the Bifrost was disabled. It showed in the thinning of his hair, the dullness of his beard, and the deeper set of his eyepatch. He was no longer the stout ruler of Loki's youth, but a shadow of a king ready to be succeeded.
Any other time, Odin's failing condition would be a pleasing sight, but not today, not when Loki needed him at full potential. Funny how tragedy had a way of shuffling the deck. No longer was the throne at the forefront of his mind. It had been crowded out by fear, grief, and regret. He couldn't decide what pain was more pressing: what he would do if he lost Sif or what was he going to tell Ollerus regardless of Sif's fate. To tell the truth would risk losing his son's love and Loki wasn't certain he could handle that on top of losing Sif. However, to lie would only perpetuate a detestable legacy that would stop with his parentage. Loki has lied enough to his own blood, from the empty promises made to Fenrir to the bargain he never intended to honor with Hela. Ollerus would not join the ranks of the deceived.

But how was he to tell him? When and where? Certainly not in the chaos of Sif's unknown fate. That would be a disaster. He had to wait for the right time, choose his moment appropriately, and in the meantime be as truthful as he could. Ollerus deserved no less.

Loki stood back from the healing table, one hand resting lightly on his son's shoulder while Thor stood vigilantly at Odin's side, monitoring him closely and steadily annoying the piss out of him.

"My son," Odin addressed Thor. "Since when have you known me to require a babysitter?" Thor tried to argue but Odin insisted that he and Eir be left to work alone for efficiency sake and suggested they show Ollerus the Hall of Yggdrasil. Loki made no resistance against that idea, trusting Sif's health under the elders' expert watch and grateful to have an excuse to leave the room. Just because he needed Odin's help didn't mean he wanted to hang around him.

Ollerus's eyes lit up as they journeyed through Gladsheim's grand corridors and echoing chambers. Thor played a sort of tour guide to lighten the mood and Ollerus was amused by the stand-in king's broken and debatable knowledge of his own damned palace. Thor kept glancing at Loki each time he knew he recited a fact wrong, expecting an argument or an attack at his intelligence, but Loki remained silent, having not the will to nitpick his brother anymore. At least not today.

They reached the towering archway that marked the entrance to Yggdrasil's chamber and Ollerus scurried ahead, enchanted by the light-bathed branches he could see in the distance. The massive hall housed a living avatar of Yggdrasil, a stunning metaphor of the realm-spanning arbor that connected the nine realms. Asgardians visited this chamber for multiple reasons, some seeking education, some enlightenment, others merely craving a moment to bask in the aura of calm found beneath her boughs. On some occasions, such as classroom outings, the tree would be illuminated with a projected map, drawing upon the branches the relative locations of each realm. Despite its inaccuracies Loki had always liked the drawn map. It reminded him of visiting this place as a child when he first set his plans in motion of exploration beyond the borders of Asgard.

A simple spell he taught himself long ago reproduced this very map and Ollerus's eyes widened, reflecting the magical-born lights that grew before him.

"Wow," he gawped. "Father, show me all of the places you have traveled. Are there any realms you haven't set foot on?"

"I have visited every realm known to Asgardian legend," Loki boasted. "I have even visited realms beyond the reach of the Bifrost."

"You mean even Heimdall doesn't know about them?" Ollerus asked.

"He is aware of these worlds," Thor added, uneasily. "But he cannot see them. That is why we believed Loki hadn't survived the fall from the Bifrost."

Thor was bringing this up because...?
"That explains why my history book is wrong." Ollerus turned to Loki. "What happened after you fell?"

Loki took a deep breath, glancing briefly at Thor, irritated. It's as if his brother knew of his vow to speak only the truth to Ollerus. "I was pulled into a rift," he began. "Because the Bifrost was crumbling, the portal that had opened to Jotunheim became unstable, therefore creating a wormhole. My body was at the mercy of warping spacetime. I was lucky not to be pulled apart and dispersed randomly throughout the universe. I might still be drifting, frozen, had she not pulled me in.

"She?" Thor questioned. "I don't recall the Chitauri having gender."

"It was not the Chitauri that found me."

"It wasn't?" Thor was perplexed. "How is it then you came to ally yourself with them?"

"I made a bargain with ancient being called Taneleer Tivan, also known as The Collector."

"Yes, I know this man." Thor said. "He is in possession of the Aether thanks to you. Do you have any idea how difficult that was to explain to SHIELD?"

Loki laughed. "Lucky for all of us, the fate of the Aether wasn't decided by you. You would have handed it right over to them."

"What's SHIELD?" Ollerus chimed in before Thor could argue.

"Bad guys," Loki said.

"No," Thor countered. "Not entirely."

"Oh really?" challenged Loki. "Were they not intending to wipe out all of New York City?"

"That was a desperate measure," Thor said, pointing sternly at Loki. "A decision they wouldn't have been burdened with if you..." He trailed off.

Loki looked at him expectantly. "If I what?"

Thor backed down. "You wish me to elaborate in the company of your boy?"

"It's okay Uncle Thor," Ollerus said. "I know what happened. Father had to resort to desperate measures himself, in order to keep the real enemy from winning."

Thor shook his head, glancing between the two. "Already, you are stringing him along with your lies."

"I have not hidden the blood on my hands," Loki defended.

"I know about it." Ollerus nodded. "So, was SHIELD the enemy you pretended to ally with, Father?"

"No," Loki continued, pleased by his son's dismissal of Thor's concern. "My ally was a very powerful, very old, very mysterious being who's name I was never told. Even his lapdog kept a degree of anonymity by calling himself 'The Other.' Tivan knew their names, yet he never told me. He also failed to tell me of their brutality, but I suppose that made my act as their prisoner all the more convincing."
Thor and Ollerus could stare blankly, unable to put the pieces together.

Loki smiled. "Suppose I should start from the beginning."

Thor crossed his arms. "Yes, I suppose you should."

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Floating in space was the first experience that helped teach Loki to appreciate his Jotun blood. He would have died without it. A lack of atmosphere is an intense brutality to any living organism but some can withstand it longer than others. Most Midgardian life wouldn't survive the initial pressure, death becoming them as they bled profusely from every orifice. Some might even get the thrill of explosion. The heartier types, specifically the bio-enhanced specimens—while not particularly enjoying the squeeze—would survive it just long enough to instead perish by suffocation. And then they'd explode. How Loki would adore watching the Hulk burst into hundreds of little green chunks. Asgardians could suffer through both the squeeze and the suffocation for a very undignified length of time which would reduce them to begging for a weaker constitution granting a quicker death. There is no valiant honor to be claimed while each internal organ bursts one at a time. Jotun anatomy, on the other hand, is impressively resilient. It can withstand the torture long enough for the cold to set in and comfortably numb the body into a familiar state of hibernation, much like the Midgardians cryogenic freezing technology.

That was the state Carina had found him in. He had no idea how long he had been frozen, but unfortunately, it hadn't been long enough to forget his last conversation with Odin, or the grip he relinquished on Gungir.

When he awoke he thought he was dreaming, or in the afterlife, for never before had he seen anything like the structures and technology surrounding him. It was like glimpsing into Midgard's astronomical future should their space travel be crafted by consumer preference rather than the military need. There was every comfort a being desired all ergonomically fitted into a compact and colorfully upholstered space, refreshment dispensers nestled between brilliantly lit panels containing all manner of buttons and dials. Oddly textured fabrics hung fashionably around the few portals, whose view was nothing but the speckled blackness of space. That was the first clue that made Loki realize he wasn't existing on a metaphysical plane. Space was his last memory after the fall.

"Tivan will like you," came a hospitable voice from behind, fully snapping Loki awake. "He's never had a creature that can change colors like that."

It was then Loki realized he was behind glass, confined to cylinder just tall enough to stand in. He peeled his face from the wall and locked eyes onto the woman rounding his prison, studying him like a specimen. He studied her back through his sharpening vision, surprised by the innocence of her appearance. Her skin was a sweet shade of pink, like she was a confectioner's creation come to life, and upon her face were ridges that could be mistaken for scars, much like the markings of the Jotun.

"Who are you?" Loki asked, his voice hoarse from the thawing. "Why am I in this cage?"

"My name is Carina." Her radiant eyes twinkled with fascination. She was holding an electronic tablet that scrolled with data, pulling her attention away from Loki for only brief moments. "I'm sorry I had to put you in this capsule—I prefer to call it a capsule—but we do that to all alien species collected. It's nothing personal. I just can't risk you contaminating the pod. That capsule creates a sustainable atmosphere for whatever living material is inside, all while decontaminating it of any biological hazards. Also, had our communication been blocked, it would have served as a
translator until we supplemented you with an injection."

"An injection?" Loki didn't like the sound if that. "Of what?"

"A universal translator. But don't worry," she assured, sifting through data on her tablet. "You are not in need of one. Your kind appear to come equipped for intergalactic communication." She glanced up. "Where are you from?"

Loki stood on weakened legs, supporting himself against the glass. "Can't you tell from your little readouts?" He wasn't about to offer information for free.

"Usually," she said, tilting her head at the scrolling text. "But your bloodwork is peculiar. I can't pinpoint your species."

Loki ran his hand along the glass, gauging its integrity. "I'll tell you if you release me from this cell." His magic hadn't replenished enough from the freeze to break out on his own.

Carina giggled as if he'd just told her a joke. "I can't do that." She then stowed her tablet into her belt and paid him her full attention. "I am Krylorian. But I have never stepped foot on my world of origin. I couldn't even if he let me travel that far. It was destroyed by the Kree."

Loki narrowed his eyes, a dozen questions passing through his mind. Why was she telling him this? Who were the Krylorians, and the Kree? Who was this 'he' tethering her and, most importantly, what did any of this have to do with him?

"Your turn." She smiled, raising a brow. "I told you about myself now you owe me some information. Oh, and let's not forget I saved your life, which at least earns me your name."

So it was nothing more than a fair exchange. "Very well." Loki could play this game. "I am Steve Rogers of Earth."

"Liar." Carina's eyes lost their glimmer. "I know who Captain America is. I should only be so lucky to meet him, or any Terran for that matter." She then sighed, turning away. "It's okay. I understand your hesitation to share personal information. No one should be expected to trust their captor."

"Forgive me for my curiosity. It's not often I get to converse with others as civil as yourself. I merely wanted to know where your type comes from that I may one day visit it."

If sympathy fishing was Carina's method of interrogation then Loki was close to breaking. He was starting to pity her. She was either a gifted actress or a truly sad and lonely individual. Really, who desired the company of Midgardians?

They spoke no more until she announced their arrival at a place called Knowhere, the severed head of a massive titan, the oddest of places to build a civilization yet strikingly familiar to the lore behind the creation of the gods. Fear should have been at the forefront of Loki's mind as his capsule was covered and moved through the city, but he couldn't help but be captivated by the sounds of bustling commerce, boiling cauldrons, and nightlife much like Asgard's undercity only backed with the roar of spacecrafts coming and going. He had never heard so many different sounds condensed into one place. The symphony then cut off abruptly as they entered what he assumed was the museum Carina mentioned, and he heard her discussing placement of his capsule with one who could only be her superior. Loki hadn't yet determined her standing with this being but it was obvious from his patronizing tone that her position was not a desirable one.

"Your services are no longer required here, Carina," the mysterious voice said as he approached
the capsule. "Run along and finish cleaning the lab."

Once Carina was gone, Loki didn't hesitate to use what little magic he had restored to conjure a quick, short range spatial displacement spell. That cage was an insult to craft. He appeared across the room, ducking behind another glass prison that housed a rather unnerving carnivorous plant. He watched, intrigued, as the garishly garbed owner of this comprehensive collection flung the covering from Loki's capsule then made a sliding noise of amusement when discovering its emptiness.

"Asgardian," he called out without turning around.

Loki contemplated a means of escape yet found himself unable to follow through. There was something enticing about this being, some potentially lucrative alliance to be made. This was a man of power, wealth and influence, somebody Loki could deal with, so long as it was on his terms. To walk away would be a missed opportunity.

"Guess again." Loki emerged from behind the terrarium.

"Your magic is Asgardian." The wild-haired eccentric finally turned around, laying a lusting gaze upon him. "Your style is Asgardian." He crossed the room with a slow and hypnotizing stride, his cloak dusting the floor behind him. Loki couldn't look away, nor did he move when the being approached him, just breaching a comfortable distance. "Your tongue is Asgardian." He was taller than Loki but only because his boots had thick heels, a style leaning toward feminine, and his smell was indistinguishable but alluring, probably a fine alien musk. "Yet your blood is of Jotunheim."

Loki winced. He was still adjusting to this truth. "Your senses are keen."

"I will hear your story." This was not a request.

"My story has a price." Loki would not be intimidated.

"I am allowing you to live."

"You have no desire to kill me." Loki gestured to the prisons around them, specifically one housing a slumbering dark elf. "I am too valuable."

The man brought his fingers to his lower lip and fondled the small tattoo upon it. "Indeed you are." He deliberated, studying Loki's eyes, changing tactics. "I imagine you wish to know who I am as I wish to know more about you. A fair trade of information don't you think?" He held out his hand, the one that had touched his mouth.

Loki paused before responding, leaning back against the glass and crossing his arms. He couldn't appear too eager."Agreed." He took the man's hand but was not shaken in return. Instead the enchanter brought it to his lips, placing a kiss upon his knuckles, causing Loki's eyes to flutter awkwardly. He hadn't expected that. There was clearly much to learn of Knowwhere's customs.

"Let us begin," he released Loki's hand and swept his arm out dramatically to showcase his prided collection, "with a tour."
Again, I'm taking headcanon liberties concerning Loki's actions in The Avengers. It really comes to fruition in this chapter and I hope it does the character justice, as he was envisioned by Marvel and the Myths. Pardon my failure at being consistent with how I spell Norse terms, but I hope I haven't failed at Loki, given how much time I've devoted to the muse. His journey is such a wild ride!

Thanks again for reading and for your comments. xoxo

"Fortune has smiled on us all that I was the one to find you, and not him." Tivan sipped his bioluminescent cocktail, elbow propped behind Loki in a garishly tacky yet admittedly comfortable plush booth. The smell of alien musk was ever present, as was the crowding warmth from Tivan's proximity. He had hovered throughout the entire tour, leaning in and touching where it wasn't necessary. Loki didn't reject the intimacy but he didn't reciprocate it either. He just wrote the behavior off as part of the culture and kept focused on the proposition this charmer was presenting him with.

"Who is this enemy of yours?" Loki sifted through an illuminated diagram projected in front of him. It was the inner workings of a relic called The Tessaract, one of six of the legendary Infinity Stones. All this time, he thought the gauntlet in Odin's vault was nothing more than an ancient religious artifact.

"That, I cannot tell you," Tivan drawled, picking loose strands of black hair from the silky golden trash Loki was forced to wear while his royal attire was being refurbished. The extended exposure to ice had cracked and faded the leather, reducing it to the attire of Asgardian peasantry, which was still a blessed preference over the costuming of a spaceport pimp. Tivan had insisted on upgrading his garb though, saying it was all part of the plan.

"The more you know of them," the alien continued, drawing out inconsequential words, "the greater the risk you'll say the wrong thing and they'll know you've been planted. Even a gifted tongue must be cautious. You need to approach them in ignorance, as nothing more than an exile willing to trade his knowledge of The Tessaract for a means to furnish his ambitions."

Carina appeared at their table, swapping out her boss's empty glass with a full one. He had her playing waitress as well it seemed, filling all roles of subordination in this multi-faceted museum. Loki had yet to decipher the nature of their relationship. The few subtle consistencies were her unhappiness and imminent volatility. She tried to hide it with robotic mannerisms, but Loki saw through the act. "Is your Moonage Daydream not to your liking?" She said, glancing at Loki's untouched cocktail.

"Oh," he blinked, claiming his glass. "Forgive my rudeness." He took a sip under two sets of curious eyes. The liquid ignited his cool internals and painted a short narrative on his tongue, a sort of synesthesia. It seemed a comet's journey through the heavens had a flavor. "That's...fascinating."

Loki hadn’t realized—too distracted by new and odd sensations—there was a line of glowing liquid still clinging to his mouth, until Carina bent over and sucked it from his upper lip. He inhaled sharply, first at the sweetness of her saliva and again at twitch in her eye. This pigtailed Krylorian was alarmingly unstable, and now she was kissing him. It was a situation less favorable, strangely, than the satisfied smile stretching Tivan's face. Was this customary behavior or was she being forced into a decadent performance by a bored and indulgent immortal? He was leaning toward the latter.

"The second taste of Daydream," Tivan cooed, fondling a jeweled button on Loki's shirt while Carina swept his mouth clean of the comet's tale, "is best experienced with a clean palette."

Carina straightened her posture, dabbing her lips with a napkin. Loki's head was spinning. "Will that be all for now?" she asked with very little inflection.

"Go." Tivan gestured her away. He then smiled at Loki. "Wait before you take another drink." He tapped his index finger on Loki's forehead then curved it down his face, stopping at his lips. "Nurse it or the effects will interfere your study of The Tessaract. This mission is more important than anything. My...competitor, we shall call him, cannot be allowed to obtain the stone. With or without your proprietary understanding, he will eventually find a way to harness its power, which is why we must act quickly."

Loki waited to speak until the finger was pulled from his lips. "How will they find me and not suspect my connection to you?"

Tivan pinched a fleshy magenta wedge from the edge of his glass. "Carina will take you to a smuggler's outpost frequented by the Chitauri. You will find them." He sucked the glowing sheen from the fruit. "You will demonstrate your magic. Make them an offer they can't refuse, or let them capture you." The treat disappeared into his mouth and he licked the juice from his fingers. "I trust you'll know how to play it. Balance your strength delicately with subordination. Just be certain, in the end, the stone is within our reach and out of his."

Loki played a dozen scenarios out in his mind, all with one common denominator. "Would you consider Odin's vault within your reach?"

"That is not ideal," he sighed, tracing the rim of his glass. "But it will suffice so long as you have access to it."

"I can accomplish that," Loki boasted. "So long as you are patient."

The alien smirked, plucking another fruit from his glass and feeding it to Loki. The flavor streaked a colorful nebula across his thoughts. "My dear godling," Tivan patronized, "I am immortal. I wrote the book on patience."

Loki waited for his swirling mind to settle before responding. "Your competitor, is he immortal?"

"More or less."

"Should I be afraid?" he asked with less concern than he was feeling.

Tivan took a deep breath and lifted a spotlessly white eyebrow, smirk still holding. "Yes."

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"They tortured you," Ollerus asked in a heavy voice, "didn't they, Father."
Loki cast a distant gaze over the map of Yggdrasil. "They did not break me."

Thor looked thoughtfully at his brother, his eyes twitching between pity and doubt. "If all this...Purple Hand desired was The Tessaract, why bother waging war on Midgard? He could have simply used your knowledge to take it."

"If I wasn't working against him, I would have used The Tessaract to port me and it back into his domain. But according to The Other," Loki dropped his gaze, "he rather liked my idea of war."

Thor narrowed his eyes, glancing briefly to Ollerus who remained contemplative. "That was your idea?"

"It was my only desire which they were willing to grant," Loki explained. "He wanted to test Earth's mettle. It was a win/win for him, or so he believed."

"Why would you desire war?" Thor shook his head, not waiting for an answer, not wanting it. "What if your plan had failed? What if The Avengers had failed and this cosmic being obtained the stone? You would have murdered countless innocents for nothing."

Loki sighed. "Look, just because a number exceeds your tally of fingers and toes does not make it countless. Countless casualties are what will happen if this enemy obtains the stones."

"Who are The Avengers?" Ollerus chimed in. Loki passed this one to Thor.

"We are a team that SHIELD assembled to combat..." Thor trailed off, disheartened. "Why Coulson?" He turned to Loki. "Why did you..." Glancing at Ollerus again, he couldn't finish his thought.

"You can say it, Thor," Loki said. "I am not afraid to hide the truth from my son."

Thor's eyes saddened. "He was a good man."

"You..." Ollerus filled in the gaps quickly, "killed him?"

"I saw an opportunity and I took it," Loki said to Thor. "Your team, while initially—and rather amusingly—haphazard, showed great potential."

"Do you expect me to believe you wanted us to succeed?" Thor was insulted. "You took every opportunity at hand to hurt us. Don't you dare try to underplay that by claiming it was all part of your plan. That shank in my side had no bearing on our enemies defeat."

Loki looked to his son, avoiding Thor's glistening and impaling stare. Ollerus had dropped his gaze to his fidgeting hands. He was comprehending what Loki was reluctant to confess, how Loki's plan could have been carried out much less violently had a grudge not been ever present.

"My initial plan to rouse Earth's army into action," Loki said, "was to present them with a globally recognizable enemy: an alien, with a classically fascist flare, rising up in Germany, threatening their most sacred of ideals."

"Freedom," Thor supplied.

"Precisely," Loki said. "Fear of freedom lost is the driving force behind the most formidable defenses, from apocalyptic bombs to a motley crew of heroes. Lust for control brings out their worst and their best. My ally greatly underestimated Earth's strength, but I did not. I knew the caliber of weapons in SHIELD's arsenal, most of which are unknown to the lower ranks. I read all
about them during my brief infiltration of their containment site where they held you and Mjölnir. I also witnessed how the human's quality of character transformed you in a matter of days, influencing you enough to earn Mjölnir back, an impressive feat indeed. Midgardians are strong in ways undetectable by outside observation."

"Yes they are," Thor's voice edged up. "All the more reason you should not have murdered them."

"I had to be convincing," Loki deflected. "To Earth's leaders, and to the Purple Hand."

Thor looked at Loki with conflicting emotions. "Why are you only telling me this now?" He couldn't shake the hurt from his tone. "Why didn't you tell me on Earth?"

"You muzzled me, remember?"

"Before that." Thor was not amused. "When we fought upon Stark Tower. Or after that, when the guards brought you to our father? What about when we joined forces against Malekith. Why keep this a secret? You're only further damning yourself."

Loki shook his head. "You wouldn't have believed me. Your Avengers wouldn't have believed me and Odin wouldn't have—"

"You underestimate me, Loki," an aged voice interrupted.

"Father." Thor moved to the entrance of the hall where Odin stood. "Have you found a cure?"

"We found a means to a cure," Odin said. His voice was tired. "Take Ollerus to the healing chamber. Eir will explain the details."

The wash of relief Loki felt in hearing there was a cure, and of being relieved of story hour, was shortened by the discomfort of Odin's presence. How long had he been listening in?

"Come on, Ollerus," Loki said, guiding his son to the exit.

"I was speaking to Thor." Odin reached out to Loki as they passed him. "You stay here."

Loki's heart lurched, not with fear but agitation. If Odin was expecting another round of confession he was going to be disappointed. Loki didn't have to explain himself to this being.

He took a deep breath and watched as Thor motioned for Ollerus to leave with him. The boy complied but looked over his shoulder with parting words for Loki. "I would have believed you, Father."

Loki smiled and watched the two leave, drawing the moment out as long as possible.

"A remarkable young man," Odin said, soiling the peace.

"What do you want?" Loki faced him, his smile gone.

"For you," Odin spoke patiently, "for once, to fully speak the truth."

Loki felt no remorse as he watched the old man lean into Gungir for stability. "Sorry, you just missed it. You'll have to come back for a later show."

Odin sighed. "I'm not talking about what you have convinced yourself is true. I'm talking about what you consistently omit."
With a huff Loki turned away. He was not going to do this. Not now. Hopefully not ever. "What did you learn about Sif's condition?"

Odin turned toward Yggdrasil, shifting with Loki's diversion. "There is a rare herb that can neutralize the poison. It only grows only on Midgard, endemic to a very small and specific ecosystem." He magnified the place which he spoke of on the map.

Loki approached, studying the map closely. The region was far into the northern hemisphere, a place sparse with vegetation given its year round snow cover, an enticing destination. "I will retrieve at once. Tell Heimdall to transport—"

"Nay," Odin cut him off. "You will be unable to tell it apart from its neighboring plants. Its camouflage reaches beyond what Midgard's science has the capability to explain."

Such little faith in him, as always. "If it is cloaked in magic I can surely find it."

"No, you won't." Odin was adamant. "Even if I did allow you to trespass on Midgard, it is beyond your detection. However, it is not beyond your kin's."

Loki was about to argue until hearing that last part. "Which kin?"

Growing distant, Odin moved to the railing surrounding the tree, his gaze outward. "It is no mere coincidence that the only magical being who can sniff out this herb is the one I have fettered." He sounded almost guilty.

"Fenrir." Loki's heart fluttered.

"Angrboda has found a most clever way to liberate her son," Odin explained. "She knew exactly which poison to use and how we would be forced to rely upon the wolf to save Sif."

Could that be true, Loki wondered. Could the witch really have motives beyond jealousy for attacking Sif? It was a difficult sell. She rarely showed affection for Fenrir when she had the chance. "If all she wanted was our son to be freed, why would she devise such a chaotic plan? Why threaten Sif's life? She knows how large a bounty that crime will warrant her. She could have simply pleaded her case to Thor now that he is King. He has much more sympathy for my children than you ever did."

"Fenrir's release may not be all she seeks." Odin turned to him, shifting his tone. "Perhaps she also desires, in a most grandiose and destructive manner, to leave her mark on the hearts of those who first wounded hers."

"You cannot blame me for her erratic behavior," Loki defended. "I never meant to hurt her."

Odin deliberated a moment, his expression unreadable. "I am not blaming you." When he spoke his tone was softer. "I know your intention wasn't to hurt her. But these things happen and now we—now I, must deal with the consequences."

Loki narrowed his eyes. "What are you saying?"

"I will free Fenrir. I will take him to Midgard. And we will return with Sif's cure."

Loki couldn't believe what he was hearing, nor could he fathom how this scenario would be possible. Fenrir would never help Odin, not even if he freed him. Too many years of imprisonment and suffering has passed.
"Let me join you," Loki suggested.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because in exchange for the rights to your criminal trial, Thor made an agreement with the people of Midgard that we would prohibit your re-entry."

Pathetic excuse. Loki could easily slip their watch undetected. "At least bring me with you to Lyngvi. Fenrir will not aid you without my convincing."

"I cannot." Odin was immovable, even in a weakened condition. "For my own well-being, I will not corner myself in a cave while flanked by two powerful grudges."

He had a point there.

"Besides," Odin continued. "It is best you stay here with Sif. Be at her side. Remind her of what she has to fight for."

He left the room and Loki's heart sank. Didn't Odin know? Hadn't he been listening? The Prince of Chaos was far better at giving noble souls something to fight against, not for.

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Loki did as he was told and stationed himself at Sif’s side. However, it wasn't until everyone had left the healing chamber for dinner that he relaxed enough to speak to her. There was very little he could tell her in the presence of others that wouldn't incriminate him.

He leaned on the table and began combing his fingers through her hair.

"Can you believe Odin is going to free Fenrir? And here I thought the old man could no longer surprise me. He has either rejected the prophecy of his demise, or embraced it. Either way, he is risking a lot for your benefit. They'll probably expect you to thank him upon your awakening. They will expect that of me as well..."

"He likes Ollerus. That was the first thing he said to me when we spoke. I mean, really, how could he not? Our boy... Sif, our child truly is remarkable. He is reason enough for you to pull through this, more than I ever could be. I don't even know what I'm supposed to say to keep your spirits strong. Not after everything I've done.

"I told Thor and Ollerus about the bargain I made with The Collector, and of my true role in the attack on Midgard. Actually, I only told them part of the story. I left out the bit about...enjoying it. About how I set out to deface the legends Midgard had built around Asgard. I wanted to make him regret ever calling me an Odinson. I found pleasure in the terror I unleashed. I made special effort to hurt Thor. It wasn't much of an act, being the villain. I could have done it even if the Chitauri hadn't threatened me. I had nothing to lose. The torture they subjected me to paled in comparison to what I already harbored. I only let them believe they were the cause of my tears, my pleas for mercy. They thought they had broken me but really, I had come to them already broken. I was in so much pain, Sif. I tried to explain this to you on our journey to Lyngvi but it came out all wrong. I hadn't intended to tell you anything, but I also hadn't intended to kiss you. You...put quite the kink in my plan. I never set out to rekindle my love for you."
"I certainly never intended to hurt you either. I just underestimated Angrboda, just as the Purple Hand, and all his dark designs, all his arrogance, had underestimated me. A sick twist of irony. Oh Sif, I was a fool. I deserve this pain, but you do not. You never did. Your patience for me was infinite, your hope a beacon, your touch a luxury. I never deserved your love, yet you gave it so freely."

He bent over and placed an extended kiss on her forehead.

"Father!" Ollerus's cracking voice echoed down the hall, drawing closer, snapping Loki back into the role. "Father." He burst excitedly into the room, out of breath. "He's taking me with him to Lyngvi."

Loki blinked. "You actually managed to schmooze Odin into taking you along? I'm impressed."

"It wasn't my idea it was his."

"Was it now..." Another surprise from Odin. "You know," Loki turned to Sif, "this will never pass her approval. Dare I say you're lucky she's asleep?"

The adolescent moved to the opposite side of the bed, where he could directly lay a pleading look on Loki. "Does it pass your approval?" He mellowed his voice. "Because he won't take me unless you say it's okay."

Loki contemplated this. He wasn't worried for Ollerus's safety. The boy could handle himself against any dangerous animal. He was more hung up on Odin's intentions. Was this...an attempt at reconciliation?

"Promise me you won't get eaten and you have my approval."

Ollerus grinned. "I promise."

"Also promise me you won't mistake your half brother for your game and stick an arrow in him."

He playfully scoffed. "I wouldn't do that."

Loki smiled and gestured him over, wrapping him in a tight embrace. He could smell the newness of the royal leathers Gladsheim had furnished. He looked stunning in them, rich blues and regal golds to accent his natural colors. The people of the palace had accepted the undeniably contrasting child into their world with more ease than anyone had anticipated. How times have changed from when Loki was a boy.

"Be careful, son."

"I will," Ollerus said as they broke the hug.

"Remember," Loki added, still grasping the long skinny arms, "once your mother is awake and learns of this journey, to point out that it was Odin's idea to bring you. She has enough to forgive me for already."

Ollerus nodded and bent over to kiss Sif on the cheek. "Hold on a little longer, Mother. I promise we'll make you better." He then left the room and Loki's heart stung, bittersweetly. Turning back to Sif, he took her hand between both of his, squeezing, his thumbs caressing her unnaturally cool flesh.

"Yet another surprise... Everything seems to be coming together in ways I never could never have
designed. Unexpected alliances forming. Attempts at reconciliation. Our son will find a way to convince Fenrir to help. They will return with your cure, I know they will. Ollerus promised they would make you better and I believe him. They will heal you and you will awaken to the life you always dreamed for him, rich with family, acceptance, and love. The life I never had, and never will."

He sunk down to rest upon his arm, his head lying next to hers, his heavy eyes fixed on her pained placidity.

"I don't anticipate your forgiveness. I don't expect you'll want me to stay when you learn the truth. Even Ollerus will find it too much to overlook. However, I will take comfort in knowing there will be no more lies between us, even if my confessions drive a realm-spanning wedge between us. I will find satisfaction in the memories you both have given me."

Music: Some Nights (intro) by Fun
Chapter Summary

Three sections to this:

1. Sif is becoming more detached and Hel is a complicated little thing.
2. Ollerus is plunged headfirst into family drama and Odin is a complicated old thing.
3. A unique friendship is formed.

Sif stirred. She hadn't been asleep but she wasn't exactly awake. She was merely resigned to focus on the cold as reprieve to the chaos of thought. Occasionally she felt a presence of warmth, brief and otherworldly, an ethereal flicker she liked to think was Ollerus holding the hand or kissing the face of her mortal body. But those moments were fleeting and unreliable.

Her chest clenched, so she stood up. She had no concept of time but she knew she had sat in solitude long enough. Pulling her cloak tightly around her, she ventured back to the throne room. Hel's company didn't seem so bad anymore.

"Well, look who's gracing me with her mopey-dopey presence." The cadaverous queen sat prim and proper at her conjured table, pinching dried leaves into a mesh ball. She was wearing white lace gloves instead of the black netting. "Sit down," she gestured to the empty seat across from her. "Have some tea." She handed an empty teapot to the Nybling playing waiter who scampered off, perturbed that he was assigned a subservient role while two of his comrades sat in complacency at the table. One was wearing a crooked bow-tie and the other a frilly bonnet, yet the rest of their bodies were naked as newborns save for the threadbare loincloths. What kind of game was Hel playing with these sad creatures?

"You conjured an entire wardrobe for me," Sif said upon approach, "yet you cannot clothe your poor minions properly." She remained standing.

Hel raised her brow. "Poor minions?" She then snorted, looking to the bow-tied Nybling. "Poor minions, she says." The creature smiled, like a mongrel awaiting a dinner scrap. Hel shook her head. "She pretends to know things about us."

"You will not mock me," Sif warned.

"I will unless you sit down and drink some fucking tea."

Sif eased off, glancing down at the beady black eyes of the Nyblings beaming up at her. What else was there to know about them? They seemed so innocent, so victimized. "Very well." Sif slipped into the chair crossing her ankles and lacing her hands in her lap. She towered over the other three at the table. "There's no need to be rude." She softened her tone. "I come here simply for your company."

Something flickered across Hel's eyes, a tease of vulnerability. She then blurted, "Do you like my hair?"

Sif blinked, surprised and a little amused. This child was so unpredictable. "I do," she replied,
admiring the change of style. Hel had swept the raven locks off her face into an up-do, weaving them intricately around the base of the morbidly beautiful crown. "Queen Frigga fashioned her hair in similarly complicated braids. I never had the patience for anything beyond a ponytail."

"I can tell," The girl sassed, eyeing the locks falling around Sif's face. "I mean," she corrected, "you should let me show you some. There are quick and easy tricks that would look pretty in your hair. I've never seen that shade of black before..." she paused, tilting her head. "That's not hair dye, nor is it natural."

"It's a curse." Sif's voice darkened. "One I'd rather not discuss." The Nybling returned with a steaming tea pot, a blessed distraction. "Will I be able to drink tea in my ambiguous condition?"

Hel signaled the Nybling to fill Sif's cup first. "I guess we'll find out. I've never served tea to an inbetweener before. This should be interesting."

Through the swirling steam, Sif saw four sets of curious eyes upon her. She tested her rigid fingers on the tiny handle, pinching with success and bringing the cup to her lips. What should feel like humid heat felt instead like numbing, not a cold numbing, rather injections Eir had given her in the past before surgery. That made sipping difficult, her lips unable to feel contact with the cup's brim. She managed regardless, the liquid skirting across her tongue and racing down her throat. Again, no heat, only more numbing. It wasn't unwelcome.

"Not bad," was the only comment she had.

"Queen Frigga," Hel mused. "I have only a brief memory of her. It was my crowning day, the one day I was welcomed into Gladshiem. The Queen, my father and Thor were the only attendees."

Sif nodded. "I remember that day. Thor invited me to come, but I went home instead. Ollerus was still a baby so my trips to Glasir were frequent."

Hel sipped her tea, mismatched eyes peering over her cup. "What if you didn't have Ollerus? Would you have come?"

"I..." Sif became tangled between words and thought. It has been a long time since she thought about what her life would be like without her son. "I don't know. I suppose so. It really would have depended on my standing with..." She paused, fidgeting with her cup. "...with your father."

Hel glanced at her Nyblings who were marveling at the sugar cubes dissolving in their tea. "What's your standing with him now?"

Sif closed her eyes, her shoulders dropping. The topic of Loki seemed inevitable. "Do you grant your residents the mercy of forgetting?"

Hel blinked. "Wow. Harsh." She glanced to each Nybling again, murmuring, "I guess I should have expected as much." Her volume restored. "But yeah, I can do partial memory wipes. You first have to die, completely."

"How long do I have?" Sif asked sullenly.

"No clue," Hel said. "You have some super-powered resistance to that poison that I've never seen before. I was clocking your croak time at like, yesterday, but you proved me wrong. Something mystical is keeping you alive and I'm guessing it's that potent little pocket of dark magic in you. And I'm not talking dormant. I'm talking active and frequently used. I can sense it."

Sif shook her head. "It is not mine. It is probably the spell that changed my hair color."
"Wrong," Hel said. "I would know my father's magic. This is different. This is you."

"That is impossible," Sif argued. "I haven't a magical bone in my body. You're lying."

"Cross my heart," Hel gestured. "I don't lie about magic. No ma'am, we take our magic seriously down here."

"If I was a magic wielder, Eir would have told me." Sif began questioning her herself. "Wouldn't she?"

"Don't look to me for answers," Hel shrugged, snapping a disciplinary finger at the Nybling trying to remove its bonnet. "You Aesir are a fickle bunch. Maybe your elder didn't want you pissing about with dark magic, so, in the spirit another elder posing as parental figure, she lied to you. And probably for your own protection. Dark magic isn't a game. If you don't know your tits from tats, you'll end up like my mother."

"Wh-what are you saying?" Sif was trying to wrap her mind around this. "Is my hair blackened...because of my own magic?"

"Looks that way, yeah."

Sif wondered if there was an upside to this disturbing revelation. "Could I use my magic to cure the poison?"

Hel shook her head, attempting to straighten the bow-tie on the other Nybling. It was no use. It was set on crookedness. "Only one thing can neutralize that toxin and it sure ain't a newbie sorceress."

"But you said it was keeping me alive."

"I said it was keeping you from dying," Hel corrected. "For all we know, your magic could keep you suspended in this coma forever. There's no way to know. Magic responds uniquely to each of its hosts. I wonder if Mother knew this about you when she picked her poison. Maybe that's why she went with such a bizarro choice. I told her to use one of the classics but she was insistent on that obscure Midgardian plant. I wish she'd told me why..."

Sif beheld the verbose teenager questioningly. It was difficult to tell her as friend from foe, her apathy and rudeness pointing to foe while her honesty hinted at friend.

"Would you teach me magic? Sif ventured. "That I might learn to awaken from this nightmare."

Hel narrowed her eyes. "What's in it for me?"

"What do you want?"

The mismatched eyes darted around, either searching for answers or afraid to speak the truth. It was a nice change of pace for once, to see her scrambling for retort.

Sif leaned in. "There must be something you want."

Hel's eyes locked back on Sif. "That's exactly what Father said when we made our bargain."

Sif's breath caught. "What did you tell him?"

"I wanted you."

"Why?"
"I lied. Sort of." Hel's eyes then saddened. "I actually wanted Mother. I thought either you or Father would slay her if she attacked you, and then she'd end up here."

"If she died by my sword," Sif stated, "wouldn't that earn her an honorable afterlife?"

"Exactly." Hel smiled, bittersweet. "She'll earn a higher plane of damnation, which will allow us to be together. If she is instead mortally consumed by her abuse of dark magic, or if she takes her own life, I'll never see her again. Contact with family is strictly prohibited for souls bound to such wicked depths, even when their family is Queen of the Damned."

Sif actually felt sorry for this desperate, lonely girl. But she was also, still, very perplexed by her. "You could have asked anyone to slay her. Why did you devise this plot with your father? Why involve me?"

The girl shrugged a single shoulder, her puffy sleeve skimming her cheek. "It sounded like fun?"

Sif groaned. "You are your father's daughter."

"Thanks?" Hel wasn't certain how to take that. "So, back to the original question. What's in it for me?"

"Hold on, I'm still...I don't get..." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "So, Loki and Angrboda never teamed up to plot against me?"

Hel rolled her eyes. "Wow. You're going to make me spell it out aren't you." She then sighed dramatically. "I gave Father the impression I was trading his fake resurrection for your damnation, which I sort of was because let's face it, your soul is a sweet-ass trophy, but what I really wanted was to get Mother down here, and I couldn't very well ask my Father to slay my Mother. That's just bad form. Anyhow, Father, being true to his sex, was an idiot and agreed to my terms, thereby giving me permission to harvest your soul."

"Permission?"

"Yeah. It's a little rule around here for folks like you that are like, Valhalla bound to an obnoxious degree. I needed a family member or loved one to sign you over, so to speak. Now, where was I?"

"Your father was an idiot," Sif provided.

"Oh, right. Father thought he could outsmart the time-old rules of my realm (and part of me actually thought he might do it) but ultimately proved that there are limitations to even his scheming. However, nowhere in there did he and my mother ever share their plots with each other. Mother would have told me. She's still pathetically sprung on him, which is really sad because he's clearly and totally sprung on you."

Sif laughed ironically. "How can you sit across from me, in this realm, and say that? It's his fault I am here!"

"By the Great Tree, you are so fucking thick." Hel almost hurt herself with a facepalm. "He never wanted you down here, don't you see? Yes, he's an idiot for making a deal with the devil, and yes he's reckless and dangerous and untrustworthy and a dozen other things under the Branches, but none of that negates the obvious truth that he loves you."

Sif frowned, refusing this information. "What makes you so certain?"

"Because I know love when I see it."
"You're only a child." Sif was grasping. "What do you know of it?"

"More than you apparently." Hel scoffed. "I may be young but I've seen my share of heartbroken souls to know what love looks like."

Sif looked puzzled. "Why are you telling me this now when earlier you took pleasure in telling me of his betrayal?"

Hel's mouth skewed with a smirk. "I never actually said he betrayed you. I only said we bargained your soul. It's all in the wording."

"This is nothing but a game to you."

"Daughter of Chaos." Hel grinned.

"Forget it then," Sif sighed. "I don't want your help in learning magic. You'll only toy with me, make me sick like your mother."

"Hey now," Hel warned. "You will not slander her. That's not even remotely fair."

"Fair?" Sif couldn't believe what she was hearing. "She poisoned me, intent on killing—"

"Dead or alive, you will always possess that which she most desires."

Sif thumped the table, rattling the china and the Nyblings. "Speak no more to me about love." She then rose, shedding her cloak, rejecting all of Hel's hospitality. Beneath the cloak wasn't the armor she appeared here with but a gown of indistinguishable detail, shifting folds of misty fabric, elegant and ethereal. It was the attire of the dead, which meant she didn't have long. If the poison didn't kill her, her denial would, magic be damned. "I am not some dolly you can play with," were her parting words.

Hel waited for the fog to envelope the stubborn warrior before sighing her exasperation. "Let no one claim I didn't try." She turned to a Nybling. "What's that Earth saying? Boy who cried wolf?"

The creature blinked, looking around the room. "No, dummy, I'm the boy. The one known for pranks, and then when he finally comes around to speak the truth...?" The Nybling kept searching the area for a wolf. "Ah forget it. Shut up. Drink your tea."

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Ollerus felt like a playground of mixed emotions that had worn themselves out from war charades and then collapsed together to form an anxious knot in his gut.

"Are you afraid?" Asked the All-Father in a stern but gentle tone as they approached the entrance to Fenrir's cave. The journey to Lygnvi from Asgard was over in a blink of Heimdall's magic.

"No." Ollerus knew the feeling wasn't fear. "A little nervous." He shrugged. "That's all."

Odin looked over his shoulder before leading them into the darkened, jagged entrance. "Good," was all he said. They descended down the narrow path. When the natural light became blocked by their depth, Gungir's stone illuminated to guide their way.

"Do you think," Ollerus broke the silence, "Fenrir will actually help us? I mean, after what you did to him and all."

Odin paused before speaking, his reaction out of sight. "You are blunt as a mallet." Another pause.
"It is no wonder with your parentage."

"I mean no disrespect," Ollerus said. He truly didn't. He just never saw the point of tiptoeing across a frozen lake when a light-footed sprint held the same risk. "I just don't understand why Father couldn't have come. He's our best option for convincing Fenrir."

"Your father is needed at your mother's side," Odin explained, stepping carefully down the natural rocky steps. His red cloak dragged over tiny puddles, its rich color darkened where the water absorbed. "I trust this encounter to your inherent abilities. You will be a fine soothsayer."

"M-me?"

"I am merely here to dispel Gleipnir."

Ollerus now questioned if Odin had overdone it on the mead during dinner. "He's never met me. I don't think he even knows about me."

"None of that will matter." The elder turned to put his assurance on display, the white hot light from Gungir showing every line in his face. "Your half-brother's senses are the sharpest I've ever known."

That knot in his gut was tightening. "What am I supposed to say to him?"

A smile shown in the Odin's single eye, yet his mouth remained still until he spoke. "The truth."

The pair continued down the shrinking tunnel, the echoes of their footsteps dashing ahead with the light-fearing creatures. Under any other circumstance, Ollerus would be scrambling to capture and identify the cave fauna, but his mind was too occupied with the impending encounter.

When anticipation threatened to eat him alive was when they finally found an opening. Odin slowed his step, motioning Ollerus to stay back out of sight. Odin went ahead into the chamber.

"Have you come to finish me off?" came a resonating growl that made Ollerus shrink in his boots.

"You know as well as I what is in the prophecies," Odin stated.

"So you've come to die," said the beastly voice with an unseen smile.

"I have not," Odin said firmly. "There are more pressing matters at hand."

There was a pause, and the sound of shifting fur. Fenrir then asked, "What is that presence?"

Ollerus's heart jumped. The wolf could sense him. Odin turned and signaled him to reveal himself and Ollerus did not hesitate, but gasped when he saw his brother. The fabled creature was so much larger than he ever pictured, almost as big as a bilgesnipe. Even while lying down he loomed over the both of them. Ollerus approached cautiously.

"Um, hi." He cleared his throat. He sounded weak, his voice always cracking when he didn't want it to. "I'm Ollerus."

Fenrir angled his nose up, inhaling deeply. "Indeed you are." His mouth didn't open when he talked. His voice just sort of, came from his belly.

"I'm Ollerus too." He dared a smile. "We're half-brothers."
Fenrir's only reaction was the flexing of his nostrils. His eyes were unreadable, reflecting the dancing light of magical torches placed around the cave. Their fires burned a familiar, familial green. The wolf spoke again. "Why have you come here, Ollie?"

The boy was eased by his nickname. "We need your help." He stepped forward, slowly. "In exchange for your freedom. There's a plant on Midgard, one that cures poison. You can help us find it."

Fenrir tilted his massive, thickly-furred head ever so slightly. "Who is sick?"

"My mother."

"Hmmm," mused the creature, shifting its gaze to no one. "My mother is also sick. She loved dark magic more than she ever loved me. Unfortunately, there is no cure for her malady." He paused, turning back to Ollerus. "Your mother is the Aesir warrior who cut the sword from my mouth."

Seeking explanation, Ollerus turned to his elder. Odin had nothing but a knitted brow. Apparently, the All-Father wasn't as all-knowing as everyone thought.

Ollerus turned back to Fenrir. "Does that mean you will help us?"

The wolf stretched his neck out to breath in another waft of air. "You carry the gene of dark magic mastery," he said on exhale. "I can smell it. It is the same as mine."

"What?" Ollerus was taken aback.

"For this reason, I will consider helping you."

"I don't, though. I'm like my mother in that way. We can't learn magic. You must be smelling..." Ollerus realized the weakness of his argument as he was saying it, "my Father's magic in these torches, which you probably smell all the time and would know the difference between it and someone who just walked in your chamber."

"Thank you for making my point for me." Fenrir sounded amused. "Your mother smelled of a similar dark magic. Dormant, underutilized."

"That can't be." Ollerus shook his head. "Neither of us can learn magic. Father said so."

"Father lies." There was resignation in Fenrir's voice. "Cheer up. You learn to live with it. You and I share the blood of a unique form of dark wielder. Like our father, we have the power to balance it."

Odin stepped forward. "Balance it with what?"

"Do not interrupt me!" barked the beast. He then calmed down. "That power is self control. Mother lacked this discipline."

"Do I have the discipline?" Ollerus asked.

"You do not know until you work with it," Fenrir explained. "There is always a risk if you do not also wield Light, which by the smell of it, you do not."

Ollerus's chest became weighted with that feeling of betrayal again. "I wish he would have told me..."
The slipping of loose rocks and an aged grunt caught Ollerus's attention. He turned to see Odin reduced to one knee, leaning heavily into Gungir. "All-Father!" He darted to his side.

"Splendid," Fenrir growled. "Is it time for me to dine on your withering flesh?"

"Do not fuss over me, son," Odin said as he pulled himself back up.

"I will locate your precious herb," Fenrir continued, entertained, "if you let me fulfill the prophecy of the All-Father's death."

"No, Fenrir," Ollerus interjected, moving toward the beast. "You'll have your freedom. It's a fair trade." He surprised himself with his insistence.

"In your freedom," Odin intervened, his voice restoring. "You are welcome to hunt me but I promise nothing. If vengeance be your life's ambition, then I will not dissuade you. However, I will warn of the decay it will inflict upon your soul. You would be wise to mimic the aspirations of your brother."

Fenrir looked to Ollerus. "And what are your aspirations?"

"Not to crunch on the All-Father's bones," Ollerus pleaded. "Come on, Brother. Don't make this complicated. We're going to free you. You can run wild. You can visit our Father. Maybe...maybe we could travel the other realms together."

Silence fell upon the cave as Fenrir contemplated what was said. The animal was hard to read but Ollerus swore he saw some taut fur relax and new sheen across the shifting, autumn-colored eyes. Dripping stalactites and crackling torches counted the passing time.

"I will help you," the wolf finally said.

"Yes!" Ollerus cheered while Odin, despite his weakening condition, actually smiled a for real smile.

***

Midgard had a unique rawness to it. Under moonlight, the region they were transported to looked like forests of Asgard, but the array of alien scents painted a new landscape on Fenrir's mind. He was free. His heart surged with a forgotten thrill as his legs pumped and his claws flung the tender earth behind them.

"Am I going too fast?" he asked, using his mouth instead of his magic to form words. His spindly blue brother clung with surprising strength to the dense fur around his neck, just below the permanent crease left by Odin's fettering ribbon. The teen's clutching fingers were an odd sensation after years of binding and isolation. More specifically it was a blessing. He had forgotten what physical, familial touch felt like.

"Not even," Ollerus responded, strangely winded even though he wasn't the one running. Perhaps he too was thrilled by their shared adventure. "I've had Glimmer, my pegasus, up to twice this speed."

"Is that a challenge?" Fenrir taunted, playfully.

"Could be," Ollerus countered.

Accepting the challenge, Fenrir beckoned his magic to quicken his legs' pace where muscle alone
would not suffice. It wasn't the wisest thing to do since he should be focusing his energy on maintaining their cloaking spell, but he didn't care. Let the spell flicker. It would give any backwoods Midgardian who happened to be in their path a wild story to tell their grandchildren. And besides, Odin wasn't here to reprimand them, thank the heavens. The aging Aesir fell victim to an obviously inherited silver tongue. Fenrir couldn't believe Ollerus had convinced the All-Father to let them collect the herb on their own. This kid had some skill for one not knowing how to use his magic.

"How old are you?" Fenrir asked.

"Thirteen. You?"

"I can't remember. Older than you."

"Yeah, but not by much," Ollerus stated. "Our Father...how should I put this..."

"Wasted no time knocking up your mother after he moved on from mine," Fenrir supplied. "At least that's how Hel put it." A projection of his sister had frequented his cave over the years to catch him up on gossip.

"There isn't really another way to put it." Ollerus paused before speaking again. "Tell me about your Mother."

Fenrir questioned the young woodsman's intentions. "You ask to ease the process of hunting her down? I will not tell you."

"No," Ollerus said, a little offended. "I know what she looks like. I mean what's she like, as a mother?"

"I wouldn't know. My first memory is of Father and of Asgard. He took me in and raised me where Mother neglected me." At least that is what Father always told him. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't think she's as bad as the Aesir make her out to be." Ollerus seemed reluctant to accept this. "I hated her at first for attacking my mother, but Odin said she had a hidden agenda besides revenge. It only seems fair that I give her the benefit of the doubt the way I have to with every Asgardian I've met, my parents included." There was bitterness there. "I also want us to be friends and hating your mother isn't conducive to that."

Friends. Fenrir couldn't help but be touched. He never had a friend before. "Tell me about this presumed hidden agenda."

"Odin believes," Ollerus began, "that she didn't poison my mother for the sole purpose of killing her. She did it so we would be forced to free you since only you can sniff out the cure. Her choice of poison is too specific for coincidence."

"Interesting..." He had wondered why the All-Father was being so merciful. Apparently he had no other choice. "So, am I supposed to be grateful to her? Do I simply forget that I was abandoned as a pup?"

"Father could have been lying about that," Ollerus said with a darkening tone. "Like you said back in the cave, he lies. He lies to his kids, and it's something we just live with. For all we know, he took you from her."

Fenrir felt his spirits falling by the grim turn of their conversation. He didn't want to talk about their parents' failings right now, he waned to get back to the friend part. "Are you going to be this
moody for our entire mission?" The question caught Ollerus off guard. "Because," the wolf continued, lightheartedly, "if anyone should be moody, it's me. I'm hungry again."

"But Odin let you eat like twenty stag on the way to the Bifrost," the hunter said. "You even ate the arrows I stuck in them."

"I've eaten nothing but lizards since you were a toddler," Fenrir argued, teasingly. "And here you are whining about one little lie."

"Little?" Ollerus scoffed. "Magic's kind of a big deal."

"You know what's really a big deal? Starving while in solitary confinement! But am I going to complain about that now..." His words paused as he jumped over a fallen tree, hurdling them through the crisp, exhilarating air. "...and spoil the mood?" he continued with a smile. "No."

Ollerus gripped tight to his fur for the landing, struggling to keep his body aligned. "I see your point." He couldn't hide the thrill from his voice. "There'll be time for complaining later. Now, I say we take the most obstructed path we can find. That was really fun!"

The wolf flopped his tongue out the side of mouth. He liked having a little brother. A friend.

"I agree. Better hang on tight."

Song: [Wolf by First Aid Kit](https://www.apple.com/itunes)
There was very little that could pull Loki away from Sif's side. He didn't dare step away for trivial matters, risking her waking up with him gone. His heart wouldn't allow it. Staying vigilantly with her was the least he could do after getting her into this mess, he owed her at least that much. However, when the raven he had stationed at the observatory delivered the news of Odin's return without of the company of his sons, he felt compelled to address the matter personally and immediately.

"Why didn't you accompany them?" he said, arms held out questioningly, approaching the All-Father halfway up the Bifrost.

"You needn't worry," Odin said with only a brief glance. His steps were slow and labored. "The pair is more than capable of completing the task."

Loki watched the withered king pass, curious. "That isn't my concern." He then fell in step with him. "What if they draw attention to themselves? SHIELD would be on them in a heartbeat."

Odin kept his gaze forward. "I put a cloaking spell on them, masking even the heat their bodies radiate. They will be fine."

Loki wanted to believe that but it was difficult to trust Odin's waning judgment. The children were capable, yes, but they were restless and excitable (possibly mad in a Fenrir's case) and Loki knew from firsthand experience how easily a pair of wily youngsters could break the rules and get into trouble. They were a recipe for chaos. The All-Father should know this more than anyone.

"Heimdall is keeping a close watch," Odin added.

"Right," Loki forced a laugh. "Because that always kept Thor and I out of trouble."

Odin turned slightly, raising a brow. "A valid point." He faced forward again. "But my mind is still at ease. Ollerus does not strike me as one who will fail a mission, especially not when his mother's health is at stake."

"It is not Ollerus I worry about," Loki said. "Fenrir is unstable." Again, something Odin should be more than aware of.

"He was initially," Odin explained. "However he took to his brother almost instantly, and that helped to tame him, just as I hoped it would."

An unexpected warmth blossomed in Loki's chest, forcing his concerns to back down. He had hoped his sons would form a bond, he just hadn't dare expect it for fear of disappointment. "Did Fenrir threaten you?" he asked in a calmer voice.
"As expected."

"What other means did you use to tame him? You said Ollerus only helped."

"I said he could hunt me," Odin stated. "And I meant it."

Loki blinked, uncertain what to make of this. "Has your deteriorating condition made you suicidal?"

"Ha." Odin blurted, amused. "You would like that, wouldn't you." Loki opened his mouth to respond but Odin continued. "I said he could hunt me. That does not promise him a kill."

Studying the ancient being's distant gaze, Loki narrowed his eyes. It seemed he couldn't predict any of Odin's actions of late. "Why would you do that? You know what the prophecies say."

"The prophecies..." Odin shook his head. There was still laughter in his voice. "Fenrir will not be my demise. The prophecies are extinct. Wiped out by the human's lack of belief. With their advances in science came an infectious skepticism, one that is spreading into Asgard. Your own brother has even lost faith."

Well then, this too was unexpected. He knew Thor had developed doubts since mingling with humans, but since when did Odin question the very texts he contributed so much to? "I suppose Thor has his reasons," Loki said, playing down his surprise. "Dissolving away in Jormungand's belly is hardly a fate to aspire to."

"He does not eat Thor." Odin turned, brow knitted, a look that made Loki concerned again. "He poisons him, fatally. So they say." He shrugged. "So I said... Where do you get your information?"

"From dreams," Loki stated. "Same as you." Uneasiness crept into his voice as the amusement left Odin's. "Why would our visions be inconsistent?"

The All-Father slowed his pace. "Do you see what I mean?" he said, awkwardly, avoiding eye contact. "The prophecies are falling apart. They are starved of belief and have therefore lost their weight and reliability. When was the last time you had a vision consistent with those of your childhood?"

"I haven't." Loki was growing suspicious of Odin's sudden evasiveness. "Not since before...before the fall, but I thought that was only because I haven't slept properly since then."

Odin came to a stop and shifted his weight into Gungir. He finally met Loki's eyes. "Do you remember your last vision?"

"Of course I do," Loki stopped with him. "It was the same vision I always had. The one I would tell you about."

"You saw yourself on the throne."

Loki paused, trying to ignore a nagging déjà vu. He strained to recall the memory of his visions, the ones purposefully set to the back of his mind. They came slowly, through a haze of the last few years' chaos. "It's a seat of power," he began, "but it's not the throne I once interpreted it as. It is...not a throne at all." A disturbance rippled through his body, a warning that the past was repeating itself. He laid a hard gaze on Odin. "Why? Now what aren't you telling me?"

"It is of no consequence." Odin turned to continue down the Bifrost but Loki stepped into his path.
"How can you say that?" His heart began racing.

"Because the prophecies are nothing but myth." Even Odin could hear the weakness of his argument.

"It is of consequence to me." Loki's tone became harsher. "Please Father, if I am a part of your visions, you must tell me. You owe me that!"

Odin paused. "You called me Father."

"Do not make me regret it," Loki snapped.

Odin hung for another moment, still and unreadable, while dread and anticipation crept through Loki's thoughts. History was not repeating itself, it couldn't be. He wouldn't dare!

"I saw you," Odin began, shoulders sinking, "reunite with your children. I saw you and Heimdall battle each other to the death. I saw you wield great pillars of flame."

Loki’s heart began pumping searing blood through a twisting gut.

"I saw you," Odin continued remorsefully, "and your children by Angrboda, allied with Surtr."

"No," Loki said, trembling, clinging feebly to one last hope. "Angrboda is Agent of Surtr, not me. She is the one at the helm of—" he cut himself off, a thought striking him that derailed his argument. "I haven't had this vision since before I learned of my lineage." His voice dropped to hover over a whisper. "I always assumed the stunted frost giant, eyes blazing red, ordering their children to attack...was her."

Odin stepped closer, placing his hand on Loki's shoulder. "My visions put you at the helm. But that was all they were. Visions."

Loki met his gaze with fogging vision, his chest pumping to keep up with his surging heart. "I am Bringer of Ragnarok..."

"You don't have to be." Leather creaked as Odin squeezed his shoulder. "Your destiny is what you make of it."

The tears broke as he knew they would and streamed down his face, but he didn't care. How many times has Odin seen him cry? How many times now has he invoked these tears by withholding detrimental information? "Did you know this about me when you took me from Jotunheim?"

"I did not," Odin said. He was telling the truth. "It wasn't until after your children were born that these visions came to me."

Loki turned, pulling out of Odin's grasp and drifting to the edge of the bridge. His mind was racing. History was repeating itself, yet this time...it was different. Much less disheartening, to his surprise. He gazed out over the city. The sunrise warmed the reaching spires, highlighting their glory, creating beacons of light.

"Now, it all makes sense," he whispered. His tears stopped, and his heart found another rhythm. Beneath his boots, the tips of which peaked over the long drop, the Bifrost's luminous spectrum danced wildly, spanning the rising mists. His heart swelled as he found a kinship in the monstrous waterfalls below: plummeting forever, unlimited in power, unquestionable in purpose.

"Loki," Odin said, moving cautiously towards him.
Loki turned to meet the old god's single, prophetic eye. "I am the Agent of Chaos." He then smiled, stretching wide his wetted cheeks. "And I'm really good at it."

"Do not entertain these thoughts," Odin warned.

"It is more than thought," Loki stated, convicted. "It is our shared prophecy. I am the God of Mischief."

Odin stepped closer. "You can use your strengths for good."

He laughed. "You know nothing of my strengths."

"I know you are a good father." Odin now stood with him at the edge, grasping his arm. "Something I never was."

Loki blinked. He had never seen Odin like this before: remorseful, frightened even. This encounter took a turn toward the amusing. He glanced down at the wrinkled hand on his arm. "Do you think I'm going to jump?"

Odin's eye saddened. "I don't know what to think."

"Of course you don't. You will not accept who I am." Loki's grin retreated.

"I said this before and I'll say it again." Odin looked desperate now. "You are my son. You always will be, no matter how you reference me, no matter the path you choose." He then motioned toward Gladshiem, sparking and regal in the distance. "Now walk with me back to our home."

"No." Loki pulled out of his father's hold. Their home now looked alien and unwelcoming. There was no place for him there, not even the throne. He couldn't go back. He could never go back. He would not let Sif wake up to this truth, nor would he subject Ollerus to it. They could no longer be entwined in his destiny, he would not risk that for them.

"Loki," Odin tried again, futilely.

Loki let one last tear fall. "I am your son you say, no matter the path I choose?"

Odin nodded once, his own eye glistening.

"I will hold you to that." He turned away. "Now leave me."

Musical Interlude: Mr Crowley by Ozzy Osbourne

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Thor poked his head into the healing chamber, finding only Eir at Sif's bedside. "Have you seen Loki?" he asked.

Eir shook her head. Her eyes were sunken, tired. "Not since this morning when he asked me to watch over Sif. Is something the matter?"

"No, Elder. Nothing for you to worry about." He entered the room and approached Sif's side, taking the cold flesh of her hand into his. She was gaunt and pale, stilled by a tangible sorrow, a mere shadow of Thor's dear and feisty friend. "How is she?"

"It's peculiar," Eir began, adjusting Sif's pillow and tucking the fur blanket around her body. "I can't find the connection between her unconsciousness and the poison. I understand why she..."
initially slipped into the coma, considering the blood loss and trauma to her body, but I expected her to wake up shortly after the transfusion. The poison hasn't spread into her neural system. There is no medical explanation why she is still asleep, rather a magical puzzle we have yet to solve."

"Strange," Thor said, scratching his beard. "Where is the magic coming from? Could it be Loki's curse on her hair?"

She took a deep breath, oddly hesitant to answer. Since when was Eir anything but forthright with pertinent information? What did she have to hide?

When Eir finally made to speak, she was interrupted by a flicker in the projected screen on the wall. It caught both of their attention. With a series of static and random flashes, the images of Sif’s mapped anatomy morphed into a video of none other than Tony Stark in his Black Sabbath t-shirt, squinting and tracing his fingers over the screen.

"What magic is this?" Thor was caught between surprise and pleasure at seeing his comrade. Eir could only blink in confusion.

"I can hear him," Tony exclaimed. "Still no visuals. Jarvis, divert 30% more power to audio."

"Tony," Thor called out, approaching the screen. "How are you accomplishing this?"

"Technology I stole from SHIELD. I'd explain it to you if I felt like needlessly killing a half hour while you stare blankly at me. But I don't." Tony talked like a whirlwind, as always. "You can see me can't you?"

"I can indeed." Thor smiled. "It's good to see you, Tony."

"Wish I could say likewise but it's at least good to hear you. Can't expect transdimensional Skyping to run flawless in experimental stages. Anyhow, quick question." The screen distorted again, transitioning haphazardly to an infrared feed of an oversize wolf and a teenage boy. "Can you see this?"

"Yes," Thor said, excitedly, pleased to see his nephews were alright. He glanced at Eir who was also relieved.

"Good, at least that works," Tony said. "Do these things on-screen belong to you?"

"They do," Thor confirmed. "Is this a live feed?"

"No, this is footage from several hours ago. I would have contacted you sooner but, well, you're in space, and I had to invent a way to reach you. Fortunately that hammer of yours has an energy signature like an intergalactic spotlight."

"Tony, please." Thor didn't have the time for his friend's technical jargon right now. "What contact have you had with my nephews?"

"None. That's why I'm contacting you. They vanished from our surveillance of— ... Nephew?"

Oops. Thor should have cross-checked his words. "Ollerus is son of Lady Sif, who is like a sister to me."

"Sif... Sif," Tony searched his memory out loud.

"I believe some of your comrades refer to her as Xena."
"Yes. Of course, Xena. Wow! Never would have pegged her for a MILF."

"A what?" Thor was forever trying to translate Starkspeak.

"Forget it." He was already past that. "OK so, son of Xena. That's a good thing. Very noble. Good with a shield. Coulson described her, paraphrasing, as Cap with tits."

Eir's eyes widened, shooting daggers at the screen.

"Mind how you speak about her." Thor edged up his tone. "I am not the only Asgardian in the room."

"Oh yeah?" Tony had no remorse. "Who else is there?" Eir shook her head, not wanting any part of this. She was not amused.

"It doesn't matter." Thor shifted his glance between Eir and the screen, which still displayed Loki's sons, a fact Thor hoped didn't need to be revealed given Tony's opinion of Loki. "Get to your point. Why does Ollerus's relation to Lady Sif interest you?"

"Good bloodline for a prospective Avenger." Tony paused for effect. "Yes, you heard me correctly. We want to recruit him. Barton was impressed. Wants to take him under his wing. Ha! Hawkeye's wing. I just made a pun without even trying."

"This is..." Thor wasn't sure how to approach this. "This is good news." Which it truly was, but under different circumstances.

"You sure about that?" Tony questioned. "You words say one thing, your tone another. What aren't you telling me?"

"Ollerus is half-Jotun."

"Why should this concern me? Banner is half King Kong and the team still manages."

"My brother is of Jotunheim." Thor confessed, vaguely. He wished he could just come right out with it but...

"OK, fuck that." Tony was quick to piece it together. "The kid's not on board. No way."

"You cannot judge Ollerus by Loki's crimes," Thor defended.

"I can and I am." Tony didn't budge. "I don't need some punkass godling throwing me out a goddamned window the moment we have philosophical differences."

"He is a good lad," Thor pressed. "He takes after his mother in many ways."

"Terrific." Tony wasn't impressed. "So he has terrible judgement with his romantic life." He then sighed. "Unbelievable. I can't believe Loki knocked up Xena. I didn't even think he swung that way."

"I will not tell you again to mind how you reference The Lady Sif. She is gravely ill, lying before me as we speak in a coma. The reason we sent Loki's sons to Earth was to retrieve a plant that will heal her. Only they could accomplish the task"

There was pause on Tony's end. Was he actually feeling guilt? Probably not. "A plant?" he then said, curiously. "What kind of plant? Is there something I can do to hel—hold up...sons? Plural?"
"Fenrir, the wolf, is also child of Loki." Thor wished he could see Tony's reaction. It was probably amusing.

"How..." Tony's mind was surprisingly slowed by this one. "Never mind. I don't want to know."

"I thank you for offering your help, Tony, but it is not needed."

"I take it back. I do want to know. Is the wolf a shapeshifter?"

Thor sighed. "It is a long story. I will tell you another time. Perhaps when I return to a Earth."

"And when will that be, approximately? Been trying to, assemble a few things, but it's tough, yanno? Everyone's so emotional. I'm wondering if the Avengers Initiative should offer mental health coverage. Also, how much longer until the demon spawn beam back up to you? I've suddenly lost the desire to keep masking them from SHIELD."

"Heimdall will transport the children back to Asgard the moment they locate the plant. As for my return to Midgard...I wish I knew. My father is in no condition to take the throne back, and I can't exactly hand it over to my brother. At least not yet."

"I wasn't aware you had another brother."

Thor tugged at his beard, wondering how she should put this. As far as the Avengers knew, Loki had been killed by the dark elves, news that inspired celebration more than mourning among them. They were in the dark to the events of late. However, they needed to learn the truth, which included the fact that he was being considered for the throne.

"I was referring to Loki."

"Come again?" Tony was appropriately shocked.

Before Thor could answer, Fandral briefly stuck his head in the room, announcing, "The children have returned."

"Excellent," Thor said. He then turned back to the screen, pleased with Fandral's timing. "Tony, I must end our conversation. I will explain it all to you later."

"No wait!" Tony sounded desperate. "You don't drop a bomb like that then—"

"Farewell, friend," Thor interrupted. "Please end your transmission. The healers can't have your disrupting presence while they prepare Sif's cure."

"Goddamned Asgardians," Tony griped. "Very well. But we will talk later. Stark out."
Chapter Summary

This could also be named That Gory Chapter With All the Hugs, but that doesn't have the same kick.

Disclaimer: Yes, there is gore but it's more implied than graphic.

As always, thank you for reading. <3

The afternoon tumbled into evening as Thor stood on the balcony, ignoring the magnificent pinks and oranges of sunset sweeping over his kingdom. His mind was a jumble. He had so many issues to address. First of all, there was the giant wolf with the monstrous appetite parked outside the healing chamber. He kept sending Ollerus on kitchen raiding errands while he sat in furry vigilance awaiting updates from either Odin or Eir as they prepared Sif's cure. Her health was Thor's most worrisome thought. There was also the unexpected recruitment call from Tony Stark, which reminded Thor of his Midgardian commitments he had been neglecting, not only to the Avengers but to Jane. She was always present in his mind. How was he ever going to make her happy if he was bound to Asgard through birthright?

And then there was Loki, who has been absent since this morning.

Father had been avoidant on the issue all day, locking himself in his private chamber until called upon to assist Eir. This frustrated Thor. A couple of guards had reported seeing Loki and Odin on the Bifrost but no one, not even Heimdall has seen Loki since. What had Father said to him to drive him from Sif's side, and why in the nine realms had he chosen to say it now? Was he blind to Loki's volatility? The two should have, Thor reasoned, avoided each other's company wherever possible. Father's judgement was dwindling more by the day.

As reluctant as he was to admit it, Thor needed Loki present, in mind and body, not only to be there for Sif but for counsel. He was floundering as King.

He didn't want the title nor was he suited for it. As a boy, Thor saw only the King's commanding placement on the frontline, a spotlight to swagger and exercise his military expertise. He never considered the day-to-day pressures of the throne, the politics of pleasing the masses with delicate balance, the monetary puzzles, and the theater of diplomacy with the other realms, which he never realized until lately was nothing but ram dung wrapped in pretty words. This was a skill his brother excelled in, which was why Thor needed him here!

"Uncle Thor?" Ollerus peeped his head around the threshold. "May we join you?"

'We.' He meant the wolf too. "Of course." Thor gestured toward the railing, his eyes glued to the furry black mound stepping onto the balcony. Fenrir's talon-like toenails clicked loudly against the marble, and his cast shadow eclipsed half of the balcony. He nodded civilly and Thor, claiming a small relief, returned the greeting. It was a peace offering of sorts. "Any updates on your mother?"

"She's not my mother," Fenrir murmured, backhandedly, his hind legs folding beneath his dense coat. Even seated, the animal overtook Thor in height.
"He knows that, dummy." Ollerus hoisted himself to sit on the railing, swinging his skinny legs around to dangle over the kingdom. "He was taking to me." He turned to Thor. "No updates yet, but Fenrir did overhear Odin talking about Father and why no one can find him, something about a conversation they had this morning."

"Nothing escapes my hearing," Fenrir added, surprisingly dismissive of being called 'dummy.' How quickly these two have adapted as brothers. "Our king's bumbling father seems to have driven mine off."

Any other being would have to answer for disrespecting the All-Father, yet when it came to family his father had wronged, Thor often made exceptions.

"He'll be back," Ollerus assured. "He's going to be there when Mother awakens." Thor wished he had the boy's confidence. "Hey maybe, we could ask Heimdall what happened."

"It will do you no good," Thor said. "My father restricts Heimdall's reach into family matters, which includes conversations." Although Thor had still asked Heimdall about it this morning, hoping the watcher had broken the rules. Just because Heimdall was restricted from eavesdropping didn't mean he always abstained.

"Bummer," Fenrir sighed. "I was looking forward to seeing my father today.

Ollerus gave Fenrir a reassuring scratch being the ear, pulling a deep appreciative noise from him. It reminded Thor of the rare and cherished moments he used to share with his own brother, not so much a scratch behind the ear, but a rub to the shoulders or a strong hug.

"Tell me about your journey to Midgard," Thor asked.

Ollerus swiveled to sit sideways, crossing his legs in front of him the way Loki always did. He continued scratching various spots on the wolf's mane. "It was unreal."

Thor smiled. "What was the name of the region you visited?"

"The Himalayas," Ollerus said, half illuminated by the sun's descending rays. They muted blues of his skin but lit his golden hair to a color Thor hadn't seen since before Sif went black. "Which is a really weird name since the only people we saw were women. It should be Heralayas."

Fenrir groaned, face-pawing. "I told you to leave that joke on Midgard."

"And I told you to leave the ladies' baskets alone," Ollerus said. "We weren't supposed to get seen by the locals. Every village in that valley probably heard their screams." He turned to Thor. "I hope we didn't make trouble for you, Uncle."

"Worth the risk," said the wolf in a grinning voice. "Those fish were delicious. And if you'd let me eaten the ladies, we wouldn't have had to worry about them reporting anything."

Ollerus shook his head while Thor laughed, saying "No trouble at all." He now understood how the pair appeared on the human's radar. "I've dealt with far greater mischief than that."

That comment brought a wave of silence and exchanged, awkward glances. The subject of Loki was a sensitive one, they could all sense it without fully understanding why.

The three were distracted by the approaching swish of a woman's skirt.

"Elder," Thor said as Eir emerged onto the balcony. "What news of Sif?"
Her fingers were stained with chlorophyll, her dress blotted with chemical splashes, and her typically neat hair a nest of loose curls. She swept her gaze across the three, clearly formulating her words to suit the audience, which wasn't something people did before delivering good news.

"Elder, what is it?" Ollerus slide down from the railing, hesitation in his voice as if he wasn't ready to accept anything he didn't want to hear.

Eir cast her gaze down, ashamed. "She isn't waking up." Her voice was a cracked whisper. "I don't know what else to do. It is in the hands of dark magic now."

Thor's heart split. Was that it? Had he lost his dearest friend to darkness? Eir's crumbling composure was saying he had.

"Elder..." Was all he could say. What does a king do in these situations? He could only think to wrap Eir in a hug.

Ollerus fought back his own tears. He refused to lose hope. "My father will know what to do," he stated, moving for the exit. "I'm going to find him. Come on, Fenrir."

"No, Ollerus." Eir pulled away, her voice restoring some weight. "You need stay here with your mother. She needs you."

Ollerus paused, narrowing his eyes. "You mean...because it is in the hands of dark magic? And I have that in me?"

"How--" Eir cut herself off, gaze shifting up to Fenrir. "You told him."

"It seems someone had to," said the wolf.

Thor was now thoroughly perplexed. "Can someone explain to me what this is about?"

Eir took a deep breath, drying her eyes, lifting her chin. "I will," she said. "Later," she then added. "Sif is our priority." She turned to Ollerus, placing her hands on his chest. They were the same height yet her restored composure made her towering. "Go the healing chamber. Talk to Odin. See if he can help you use your dark magic to break whatever spell Sif is under."

"Can Fenrir come with me?" Ollerus asked. "He knows dark magic too."

"I require him for another task," Eir said. "Go now. Time is of the essence." The boy nodded, glancing at his brother with a shrug before darting off to do as told.

Eir then turned to the wolf, fearless. "Fenrir. Only you can track your father down in a timely manner. We need his dark mastery more than anyone's."

"What's in it for me?" Fenrir played at resistance.

"Desist the futile arguments." Eir was not amused. "You know what you need to do." With a delicate dance of her hands, the healer enchanted Fenrir with an empowering spell, a puff of platinum dust similar to the spells Thor would receive pre-battle. "When you find him," Eir continued, "use your piercing howl to break his invisibility from Heimdall, then you will be transported here."

The spell caused Fenrir's fur to stand on end. He seemed to enjoy it. "And if he refuses?" he asked, rising to stand on all fours.
"Then he is truly lost to us," Eir said darkly. "If the direness of Sif's condition does not spurn his aid then nothing will."

Thor felt a tightening in his chest, one he was regrettably familiar with. "How can I help?" he said, approaching the two.

"Go with Fenrir," she said, imbuing Thor with a different enhancing spell. It made Mjölnir glow. He liked this spell. "See that he stays on task."

She then left the balcony, presumably returning to the healing chamber. Thor couldn't help but admire the sudden shift, and her commandeering of a seemingly hopeless situation. Here was a solid example of why the All-Father had elected her chief physician of the many Valkyrie contenders.

He turned to Fenrir who was doing the canine equivalent of an eye roll. "I do not need a babysitter."

"Forgive us that we are not acquainted enough yet to believe that. We mustn't take any chances when Sif's health is at stake."

The wolf sighed, moving for the exit. "Understandable."

"Then let us commence our mission at once." Thor was trying to make this sound kingly. "I guess I'll just..." And he was failing miserably at it. "...follow behind while you..." Really, what part of this mission was even remotely regal? Or even mighty? "...pick up my brother's scent?"

Fenrir shrugged as they journeyed down the hallway. "Sounds about right."

"Do you need a scrap of his clothing? Perhaps one of his favorite books?"

"We share the same blood. I know what to look for." Fenrir shook his head. "Duh."

"Very well." Thor was impervious to sass. "Let's quicken our pace that we waste no time."

"Just one thing before we go." Fenrir stopped.

Thor was growing impatient. "And what might that be?"

"I'm hungry."

***

"How did you find me?"

Twigs and broken glass crunched beneath Loki's boots as he entered Angrboda's dwelling. It was nothing more than a shack, buried deep in troll-occupied forests, a pitiful downgrade from the quaint and decorated cottage he used to visit her in.

"I never lost you," he said.

She narrowed her dulled orange eyes. Naturally, she didn't trust his intentions. However, she couldn't tear her eyes away as she inspected every battered detail of him. The forest had not been kind to his leathers.

"Have you come to avenge your whore?" she growled.
How petty, Loki snorted. He turned to inspect a trinket dangling from the scrap metal she called a roof. It was merely a painted rock strung up by fraying rope, blindly assumed a religious artifact. She had truly reduced herself to the gypsy witch her reputation painted her as. Was it the effect of public opinion or her mishandling of dark magic? Either way her condition was tragic.

"What good would it do?" Loki turned the trinket over in his fingers, pretending to admire it. "Sif is lost to me." He allowed sorrow to darken his tone. "As is all of Asgard. Ollerus, Thor. They've become...irrelevant." He met her eyes. "But you are not."

Angrboda tilted her head, crossing her arms across the flimsy patch of mammal skin she called a shirt. It barely covered what was left of her breasts. Through a nest of strung beads, he could make out rib bones shaping her gray-blue skin. Her exoticism used to be so alluring. She must be blind to the degradation of her physicality given the seductive sway she was now attempting in her approach. He had to admit, though, the evening sun that broke through the splits in the ceiling was striping across her Jotun tattoos, creating attractive patterns.

"How stupid do you think I am?" she said. The years of dark abuse had filed her voice down to a sultry purr. It was actually quite pleasing. She took the trinket from him, pulling the rope slowly from his fingers. Her stance curved into an S like it always did, compensating for their height difference. She too was small for a giant but still had a foot on him. He remembered that once being a turn-on.

Her barb-like fingernails fondled the trinket. "How long before the soldiers barge in here and arrest me?"

Loki smirked, impressed by her suspicions. "I have come alone," he said. Slowly, he pulled a small shank from a hidden sheath, turning it over to catch the light. It was the one she had crafted for him years ago. He kept it in immaculate condition, the blade's fine edge able to slice his palm with a mere afterthought. He made a fist until blood dripped, coating his fingers in binding paint. He then drew a line down her ridged forehead and smeared his thumb across her cheek. "I swear by our Jotun blood." He painted the same pattern on his own face. "By our entwined destiny."

The witch's breath caught when he touched her and she watched in awe as he performed this sacred ritual of their people. Closing their distance, she blanketed his face with her palms, careful not to smear the blood. Her hands were dry, cracked, feeling like troll instead of Jotun, yet still swollen with magic. When she pushed her fingers into his hair line, he could tell by the feel of the damp forest air that she'd removed his Aesir guise, temporarily. He closed his eyes, soothed.

"I can't believe he hid this from you." Her hands lingered in his hair. "Hid it from us. It's his fault our offspring are monsters."

Loki opened his eyes, resisting a wince. How dare she speak so heartlessly of their children. "We all could have been so much more." He snaked his bloodied hand around her long fingers, bringing her hand to his chest. "And we still can."

A single eye twitched, one in need of makeup to mask the dark circle beneath. "What do you mean, entwined destiny?" Her distrust leaned toward curiosity, as he hoped it would.

"I have seen our future." He squeezed her hand. "The prophecies are finally clear to me." Hope spilled into his voice. "Ragnarok is ours if we desire it."

Her eyes fluttered, skeptical. She clearly wasn't as enthused about the end times as he was. However, he still had her intrigued.
"Do you," she ventured, cautiously, "desire me?"

He breathed deeply before responding. "I have seen us both in my dreams, commanding a great ship, our children reunited." Her other hand retreated but he caught it before she could take it back, entwining their fingers. "We're all spearheading the rebirth of our realms. A purpose as inevitable as it is glorious."

Her eyes softened. "You have...seen us together?"

He saw an opportunity and claimed it, roughly pulling her to his lips. She resisted at first, making a small noise of protest, but as his hands found her hips and he inched up on his toes to harden the kiss, her muscles relaxed and her lips parted.

She tasted nothing like he remembered. Her flesh that once was a winter's mist was dried by dark obsession. A tongue that used to be decadent and massaging had become rancid and graceless. This was not the woman of his youthful desires but a carcass of memories trapped forever in their past. His heart sank but he did not pull away, simple clung to minute familiarities to keep the moment genuine.

After a satiated, resonating hum, she was the one to break the kiss. "I was wrong," she whispered. "You're the true reason our children are monsters." Her words flagged all the warning signs but he didn't react quickly enough. She had already pulled the shank from his belt and plunged it into his side before he could shove her away.

"You're disgusting," she growled as he staggered back. "How dare you come to me and insult me like this. Seduce and lie to me."

Teeth gnashing, he wrapped his fingers around the knife's handle and pulled, quickly and cleanly. It stung like a... "Bitch!" he said aloud.

"What do you want?" She snatched a rusted, ornamental spear from the wall. It was pathetically dull. "I know you don't love me. You never did!"

He pressed his hand to the wound, groaning. It wasn't fatal but it would hinder his movements, meaning knife play was no longer an option. He needed to rely on his tongue now. Always a dependable back-up plan.

"How could I love you?" he spat. "I never even saw you through the foul exhaust of darkness that shrouds your heart."

She winced, her twitching chin dragging down the edges of her mouth, reflecting the harshness of his words.

"Forgive me," she began with a snarl, "if I'm not the genius with the dark arts that you are." She then forced an unamused, manic cackling. "I'm sorry that I wasn't raised by an Aesir witch who taught me how to control it, that I was exiled from my own people because of my size, forced to live among trolls, to feed, cloth, and teach myself the ways of magic." The laughter had died. "Not every bastard Jotun baby spared their life gets to grow up in luxury."

"Desist your woeful anecdotes." Loki rolled his eyes and cleaned his dagger with the corner of a haggard tapestry posing as decoration. "I stopped pitying you the moment you neglected our children for your own selfish desires." He filtered not an ounce of cruelty, despite the ease of his tone. "Blame me all you like but it was you that damned them. You abandoned them for your petty ambitions." And now he let the accusation bleed in. "They only wanted your love and protection
and you denied them that, the simplest, most instinctual of parental duties." Add a rougher edge. "Even I am capable of that. We are not the monsters, Angrboda." The killing blow: "You are."

Her chest pumped, fanning the fire behind her eyes. Any moment now...

"Your hypocrisy will be your demise." She roared as she lunged for him, clutching the spear with white knuckles. She never could conjure a magical attack while enraged, always relied on untrained, emotionally driven physicality. He was relieved to see that hadn't changed.

He was also dreading what came next.

Even while wounded, it was hardly a challenge to get the upper hand, disarm her of the spear, and ready his dagger at her throat. The most difficult action was the final slice. This was, after all, the mother of his children. He closed his eyes and recalled the foulest Chitauri warrior from his memory.

Gurgling and grasping at her gushing neck, Angrboda dropped to her knees, choked gasps desperate to fuel her retching sobs. Loki slide the dagger into his belt and knelt by her, easing her body to lay comfortably on the ground. Her home didn't even have flooring. She was to die in the dirt and pine needles. His heart sunk deeper and he allowed a tear to fall, openly for her to see.

"This is merely steel rending my flesh." The deathly rasp was her final defense. "There is nothing more you can inflict upon my heart."

"Forgive me, my enchantress, but you are wrong." He pushed the matted locks from her face, stroking her hollow, dry cheek. She held her tears in. He didn't deserve them, not yet at least. "You will see in time that I am setting you free, and you will thank me."

Musical break: Born to Die by Lana Del Rey

***

(Earlier that day)

Loki hadn't the will to leave Asgard. Not yet. He knew he could find sanctuary in the wilds, bury himself deep among sheltering pines that bolstered the magic required to keep invisible from Heimdall. He needed time to think, to process a truth he had long denied. Part of him wished Odin had lied to him on the bridge, at least until Ollerus and Fenrir had returned. It would have been nice to embrace them one last time while under the assumption he belonged with them, and with Sif, but he was hardly going to nitpick the timing of a truth he'd long desired confirmation of.

How freeing it was to embrace a true identity, even with the heartache and isolation it brought. He finally understood his purpose. Too long had it lingered just out of reach, taunting and allusive, intimidating with its taboo nature. No longer would Loki hesitate to accept the calling, to become what he has spent his life unknowingly training for, guided by secretive instincts and comfortable inclinations. Gone were the days he would harbor guilt for doing what he did best. It was time to pursue his destiny.

He was, the Harbinger of—

"Why are you out here playing Davy Crockett?"

His glorious inner-monologuing was rudely shut down by his daughter's sudden emergence. He wasn't surprised to see her. Annoyed, but not surprised.
"Hela," he sighed.

"Shouldn't you..." she drawled, her projected presence perching on a low branch like that smugly grinning cat of Midgardian literature, "$...oh, I don't know, be with the woman you claim to love while she's dying?"

What did surprise him was the absence of her grin. She was actually conveying more sympathy than sass.

"They don't need me to awaken her." He took a seat at the base of her tree, leaning his back into the bark, knees pulled to his chest. With Hela he could speak openly. He had nothing to hide from her. "They're better off without me."

"Hmm," Hel studied his behavior. "Defeatism doesn't suit you." She shrugged it off. "Oh, hey, newsflash: your lady's not waking up."

Loki's breath caught. "What?"

"Remedy was useless," she explained casually. "Dark magic is keeping her under. Odin can't crack it. Eir is fumbling through old spell books wishing she studied more of the dark side. Your dolly here is pretty much doomed."

He sat up on his knees, peering up at her. "What makes you so certain?"

"Because she's still here." She spoke as if it were common knowledge. "Donning the threads of the dead. The dark magic is neither killing her or awakening her. She's just stuck, suspended."

Why was she telling him this? Wouldn't sharing this vital information work against her? "Who's magic?" he demanded. "If it is your mother's I will—"

"Her own," she cut in, muting his threat with disinterest. "That secret little reservoir I took the liberties of telling her about since no one else bothered." She shook her head. "Asgardians. I tell you what."

Loki's mind began racing. What else had she told Sif? More importantly, how could he use this new information to save her? "You must help her," he ordered. "Show her its workings. Send her back."

"Why would I do that?" she laughed. "She's mine. You gave her to me."

"No, Father, it's not a game." She met his adamant stare with her own. "Just like allowing your passage into my kingdom, or staging a resurrection, or honoring my end of the bargain, wasn't a game. You don't get to pick and choose from the rules of my realm just to suit your needs." She then leaned back, restoring her sass, crossing her wretched legs in front of her. "We made a deal."

"She does not belong with you," he argued. "You know that."

She raised her brow. "Well she certainly doesn't belong with you, but the whims of love won't have it any other way." That comment made them both back down, Loki out of surprise and Hel out of confession. "You should be with my mother." Her attitude was now weighted in sadness. "Mother shouldn't be sick. Our family shouldn't have been split up, exiled, imprisoned..." She paused, fidgeting with the lacy trim of her skirt, chin dropping with her volume. "And Isolated. But fate likes to play twisted games."
Her theatrics were born of reality, a display tugging hard at Loki's chest. "I thought you liked ruling. No one is better suited for the title than you." Had he deluded himself to her happiness all these years to ease his own conscious? He always assumed the throne contented her, that her gifts as a prodigious ruler were enough. She was so advanced with her magic and her knack for governing that Mephisto entrusted the title to her at the age of twelve, ending his mentoring role a decade earlier than planned. It never occurred to him, or to Loki until now, that teenagers, no matter how adept, still needed familiar company. Mentors, peers...family. Anything besides the damned.

"My daughter... I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't." She tried to laugh off her tears. "Like Mother, you were too involved in your own shit."

"I tried, Hela," he pleaded. "You must believe that. I begged Odin to spare you, to let me raise you."

"I believe you," she admitted, her tone lightening. "But I'm glad Odin didn't listen to you, otherwise I'd be nothing but a freak. I wouldn't have my crown." Swinging her legs to dangle down, she floated to the ground, skirt puffing out like an umbrella. She had lost all transparency and her mismatched feet actually flattened the grass beneath them.

She approached him. He remained on his knees, putting him a head shorter than her. She was royalty after all. Petite, cursed, ridiculously dressed, but impressive all the same.

"Don't tell anyone," she said, wiping a tear from his cheek. "I'm not supposed to fully materialize in the living world."

The thin white flesh of her skeletal hand was unexpectedly warm. He smiled. "Wherever did you inherit such adherence to the rules?"

"It's my job," she said proudly, moving her hand to toy with the hair at his shoulder. "Look, there's nothing I can do for your maiden. She won't listen to me. Doesn't trust me." She had never spoken so civilly to him before. "However if you can find one versed in dark magic, able to teach her what she needs to learn, I will grant them passage into my realm."

"I can teach her," Loki suggested. "Unless..." He had a nagging suspicion.

Hel blinked. She then burst with laughter, throwing her head back. So much for civility.

"You told her about our deal, didn't you." That wasn't a quesiton. His suspicion was confirmed. He now understood the pain he'd studied on Sif's serene features while he sat sleeplessly with her.

"How could I resist?" Hel shrugged innocently, descending from the giggle fit. "Anyhow, find someone who's NOT YOU, and send them my way. Preferably someone she will trust."

"What must I do for this favor?"

"I want you to slay Mother and consume her heart."

Loki raised a single brow. "What?"

"That is the only way I'll ever see her again." Her tone hardened. She was serious. "Any other form of slaughter will damn her to a depth even I can't reach. Her heart has become too blackened, even more since we made our bargain. It's a good thing neither you or Sif slaughtered her during the
attack. My miscalculation of her condition could have separated us forever... And that would have sucked major bilgesnipe balls."

It was Angraboda she wanted all along, not revenge, at least not solely revenge. He should have seen this coming. It seemed everyone had a hidden agenda.

Tears welled in the girl's eyes as she continued. "I want to help her. I need her. And she needs me. Please, Father, tell me you'll do it. It's a fair trade, the woman you love for the one I love. I bend the rules of my realm and you compromise whatever convictions might otherwise stop you from brutally murdering the mother of your—"

"Hela," Loki pressed a finger in her lips. "I get it. Your loyalty to your mother is...admirable." It truly was.

"Does that mean you'll do it?" She brightened.

He nodded, reluctantly.

With a squeal, she threw her arms around his neck. "I knew you'd agree, you demented sicko."

Still processing what he just agreed to, it took him a moment before he could return the affection. He wrapped his arms around her frail form, quickly warmed by a resurrected sentiment, relishing the moment that only a pair like them could share. "Anything for my favorite daughter."

She broke the hug with a shove and a chuckle. "I'm your only daughter, jerk." Loki shrugged and she smirked. "Right then, enough of this or you'll think I've gone soft. Can't have that rumor flying around." Her body began dematerializing, growing transparent. "Don't forget, you need to send me someone who knows their dark magic inside out, like we do. Not some nickel-licker looking for a quick buck. Otherwise, they won't have the skill to help your lady. Got it?"

"Got it." He already had someone in mind.

"First things first, though," she added. "Go to Mother. You'll find her in the ravine beyond the swamplands. Hidden away in acamouflaged shack, invisible to the passer-by but detectable by magic. She hasn't masked her magic for years. She's become sloppy, all the more reason to put her out of her misery."

"The ravine is only a half day's journey by foot," Loki said. "You shall have her by sundown."

"I better." She was levitating now, enveloping herself in swirling dust. Her tangibility had departed. He already missed it.

"Goodbye, Hela." He smiled, genuinely.

"See ya wouldn't wanna be ya!" She was gone with an anticlimactic puff.

His smiled vanished and he sighed. "She really needs to work on her exits."

Rising to his feet, he moved onto the inevitable, retrieving a small device from his back pocket. He had acquired it on Knowhere for a very specific purpose.

"This should prove interesting." He pressed what Carina had called the "talk button" and brought the device to his mouth.

"Are you there?" He released the button, waiting. A few moments passed. He tried again: "Carina,
it is Loki. I was led to believe this would work." He had no patience in situations like these, the momentum of his agenda at the mercy of someone else's availability.

Finally, the device replied. The voice crackled and distorted, and clearly wasn't Carina's.

"Tivan?" Loki answered.

A pause. Then static. Then, //You have the Tessaract?\n
It was most certainly Tivan. "I need your help."

//So...this is in exchange for the Tessaract?\n
"It is not." This could prove difficult.

//That device...was only to be used when you acquired the Tess—\n
"Stop saying Tessaract!" Loki interrupted. He then sighed. "Tivan, I'm...I'm desperate. There's no one else I can turn to." Tivan was the only other dark magic artisan Loki could depend on. The being had eons of practice, techniques learned from cultures Loki never knew existed. He had to admit he was jealous.

"Someone very dear to me," Loki explained, "is going to die. You can stop it."

//Why should I care?\n
The ancient was being more stubborn than Loki expected, not the pliable old charmer he was used to. Tivan's voice droned instead of sang. What had happened to him since their last encounter?

//What's in it for me?\n
"Me." He put all his cards on the table. There wasn't time for anything else. "You can have me."

There was an unnerving stretch of silence before the response came.

//Very well.\n
Loki's shoulders sank. It seemed his shiny new glorious purpose would be put on hold while he devised an escape clause from this deal. But at least Sif would be saved.

//Your timing is serendipitous. I've lost Carina to a most...unfortunate accident and have need for a new assistant.\n
"You wish me to be your slave?" He supposed that was better than a trophy. "So be it."

//Excellent.\ His voice pulled up a notch. //So, my lovely Laufeyson, how may I be of service?\n
***

(Present time)

"Father, what have you done?" Fenrir said upon finding his quarry. The wolf had dashed ahead the instant he picked up Loki's scent and Thor had followed, shoving through a mess of shrubbery and finally finding the front door of a dilapidated shack. As he joined Fenrir inside, fearing what his nephew's overheard words were implying, he was actually relieved when he first saw Loki. His brother was slumped on his knees, coated in blood and in a state of shock, but he was alive.
"She wasn't World's Greatest Mom, I realize," Fenrir said, baffled. "But why?"

As Thor got closer and met Loki's haggard eyes, he was unnerved to see the blood was concentrated on his hands and mouth, a scene from one of Mother's taboo books on the dark, cannibalistic practices of the occult. What had Loki done? Was this his method of vengeance? Is this why he disappeared from Gladsheim?

"I had to." Loki spoke with a sickened whisper, shuddering and weak.

Fenrir sniffed the ground, dirt and pine needles stained crimson. He moved to Loki, inspecting the stab wound that Thor was now noticing. Some of the gore was Loki's blood after all, further perplexing Thor to what exactly had happened here.

"Her blood, it's..." Fenrir lifted his eyes level with his father's. He was unable to finish his thought.

"She was already dead, my son." Loki reached up to stroke the wolf's mane then stopped himself. His hands were coated in Angrboda's blood, so he returned them to his lap. "I've done her a favor," he said, stricken.

Fenrir closed his eyes, bowing his head. His tail disappeared between the tall hind legs.

Thor knelt down by the pair, putting his questions on hold, offering the corner of his cloak that Loki might clean his hands. He felt no remorse for Angrboda's death given what she did to Sif, but his heart tugged for his kin. Fenrir's grief was freshly familiar. The witch was still a mother to be mourned, even though her crimes had warranted this execution. Perhaps not an execution of this degree of horror, but punishment nonetheless.

Loki didn't accept Thor's offering but willed the blood away with his magic, dispersing it up, through the gaps in the ceiling and into the tree canopy, a final resting place.

"Why have you done this?" Thor asked his brother, softly. "Consuming a heart is not a ritual one does in vengeance." And consuming a heart as blackened as hers would have detrimental effects on a soul already wounded.

Loki didn't respond immediately. He simply raked his fingers into thick fur, scratching Fenrir's neck and shoulder, offering a rare but genuine consolation. The wolf was rigid at first but ultimately accepted the affection, dropping his head until his nose grazed Loki's lap. It was a warming sight, one Thor was grateful he could witness.

Loki then turned and looked at Thor with reddened eyes, not a redness of tears or exhaustion, but something else. Thor couldn't place it, and he didn't like it.

"I made a deal," Loki said. "To undo the first one."

He had no idea what Loki meant. He probably didn't want to know.

Fenrir lifted his head, his eyes glinting the earthy and peaceful hues of their surroundings. He seemed to understand what Loki was saying, having the advantage of a sixth sense and actual blood ties. "It all happened for a reason. If Mother had never poisoned your maiden, Odin would not have set me free, and I never would have met Ollie."

Loki brightened upon hearing the boy's nickname, touched by his sons' camaraderie. He smiled, bittersweetly, and clenched a patch of fur at Fenrir's neck. "Once Sif has awakened," he said with conviction, "all will be as it should."
Thor hated to be the downer here, but... "Lady Sif is not responding to the remedy."

Loki glanced at him, unaffected. "I have taken care of it."

Thor narrowed his eyes. "Tell me."

A buzzing came from Loki's pocket, a cursed distraction. Loki retrieved the glowing device responsible paying it his full attention. It was technology not of Asgard or Earth. Tony would be jealous.

"It is done," Loki whispered, the blue light illuminating the contours of his face intermittently. Thor watched in flashes the hopeful expression shifted back to uncertainty. "Sif has awakened."

"What is that thing?" Thor asked, skeptical.

"It is our guarantee." Loki's sureness was chilling. "Sif has been cured."

"Loki, please," Thor was starting to believe him regarding Sif, but he could tell something was wrong. Loki never solved their problems without harming himself in the process. "Tell me what you have done. What price did you pay to save her?"

Loki shrugged, stowing the device as a corner of his bloodied mouth curled. "Nothing I can't afford."

"What does that mean, Brother?"

He didn't answer but instead clutched Fenrir by his mane, a hug of sorts. "Promise me you and Ollerus will look after each other."

Thor knew a goodbye when he heard one. "Loki..."

"And remind Ollie," Loki continued, "that no matter how far you both travel, no matter the reach of your exploration, that he needs to frequently check in with his mother."

"Right," Fenrir smiled. "Because that's what teenage boys love to hear." His smile then faded with their embrace. "Where are you going, Father? Will I be able to visit you?"

"Not for a while." Loki didn't answer Fenrir's first question.

Thor was fed up with his dodging of the issue.

"Loki," he said again, grabbing him by the upper arms. He studied the glistening, red-veined emeralds of his eyes, opening his mouth to interrogate, but then falling silent. Suddenly, all the questions that had built up became unimportant. The details he sought weren't a priority. Thor knew, deep down, he would never get the real answers, and nor did he want them. What he wanted instead, that he knew he could get, was readily tangible.

He pulled Loki into an embrace, perhaps the last one for a long while. He clutched the back of his neck, hand full of stringy hair, while his other hand flattened the green cloak beneath it. He tried not to squeeze what with Loki's stab wound, but he cared more for imprinting a new memory of his brother than of the pain he might be inflicting. Affection should never be shown without the full strength of one's arms.

Loki winced and his muscles tightened, but he did not refuse the hug. Rather, he returned it, partially, on arm sliding over Thor's cape. It was better than nothing.
"You really are a sentimental fool," he said.

Thor chuckled, giving one final squeeze. He then broke the hug but kept them close.

"Is that all you got?"

Loki was quick with an excuse. "I wouldn't want to set a bad example in front of my son."

"Pfff." Fenrir rolled his eyes. "Too late for that, Father. You murdered Mother and ate her heart."

"Well it's never too late to start being a good influence," Loki quipped. Then his pocket buzzed again. "Oh my." He winced, placing his hand over it. "I wish he'd let up. That vibration is dreadful on a stab wound."

"Loki." Thor pulled him closer, snaring his attention back, clutching the sides of his head. He had one last shot at this. "Brother. Promise me you will keep out of trouble."

Loki stared blankly for a moment, disbelieving, his hair a stringy jumble under Thor's grip. His face then split with laughter, a grin ear to ear, baring all of his teeth.

Thor sighed in frustration. He geared up to make some defensive remark but didn't get the chance. With a flash of the alien device, Loki was gone.

Again. Just like that.

Thor would allow his nephew a few minutes of mourning before calling Heimdall for transport. And who was he kidding, he needed these minutes as well. He thought he had used up the ability to miss Loki, spent it all after his fall, but the blood that now stained the leather at his torso told him otherwise. It was blood not of his family line but connected to him through infinite veins of memory. It was the blood of a frost giant, the blood of his enemy, and come what may, it would always be the blood of his brother.
Awakening

Chapter Summary

This is basically a song fic. I couldn't help myself.

She wondered if a perpetual dream state was the condition of the dead. There was a comfort in that, a peace amid the chaos, a beckoning to abandon all worries for the ease of drifting. It was a calling unheard by warriors and mothers, alien in its defeatism, yet alluring for the mercy it promised her heart.

Everything felt lighter, and she was starting to like it. Her body bore not the weight of her armor but a veil of mist, masquerading as a gown. She imagined it would be cold to touch if her being could feel anything. Perhaps it would feel pleasant, like the massage that was now enveloping her scalp. A subtle tingle that blossomed into kneading, strong fingers that combed through her hair, sometimes brushing her face, and then her lips.

Which was odd. Too intimate. She opened her eyes.

"I don't recall you being a blond," said a familiar and unwelcome voice.

Sif spun into a defensive stance, her body reclaiming some sensation, but only to feel violated. Before her was Tanaleer Tivan, that shifty eccentric, seeming very much alive and circling her. His pompous fur cloak dragged on the frosted cobblestones, his eyes were dark and curious. She glared obscenities at him. She hadn't felt her skin for a while but now it was crawling. How dare he touch her. How dare he study her like his prey.

"What are you doing?" She turned slowly with each of his steps, keeping her eyes locked on him. He leaned in and inhaled deeply, causing her to flinch. Did he just sniff her hair?

"Interesting," he mused, backing off. "So simplistically...complicated."

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

He ignored her questions, turning away, seeming to lose interest. Now she was violated and insulted.

"Your majesty," he called out. "I require your assistance."

The room around them took shape and detail as he strolled through it, growing brick walls and dim lights around him. Warn wooden flooring spread out from his shiny, pointed shoes and his white hair became orange from the glow of the gas lamps. In a matter of footsteps, Sif's frozen tomb was transformed into something warm and inviting, like the pubs of the undercity. Why hadn't she thought to decorate her afterlife? How difficult could it really be to use her magic?

She would ponder that later. First things first. "Tell me why you're here," she said adamantly, her voice gaining more volume.

Tivan was standing at a waist-high relic from Midgard's last century, an aged furnishing lovingly constructed of carved wood. It supported a black disc that spun atop a felt table. Sif could vaguely
place its purpose but questioned why it too was here. It all seemed so random. She would have
assumed she was dreaming had Hel not appeared, her very aura the reality of death.

"I really shouldn't get involved," the young queen said, not even making an entrance. She was just
there, like she had been all along.

Still, she did a double take upon seeing Sif. "The heck you do to your hair?"

The garishly garbed alien glided up to the teenager, bringing her tiny hand to his tattooed lips. "I
dearly want you to get involved." He kissed her and Sif shuddered. The union of the pair was
disturbing.

"Tell me," Tivan continued, still holding her hand. "Have you even been in love?"

Hel tilted her head, briefly glancing at Sif, who was readying herself to intervene. What exactly did
this ancient think he was doing? With a young girl no less!

"I haven't been so lucky," Hel said, unacceptably hospitable. "Pickings down here are slim."

He released her hand. "How unfortunate." His attention then shifted to the relic, attending to its
knobs and moving parts.

Hel propped her hand on a cocked hip. "Why do you ask?" Sif was wondering the same thing.

"I find it fascinating," he said, his back turned, "how intimately woven our supernatural fibers are
with our hearts. I hate to even use the word 'supernatural.'" He looked over his shoulder. "For what
is more natural than love?"

The adolescent girl raised her one visible brow, her face half-covered in that strange hairstyle
again. "You fancy yourself a poet?" she asked with her reliable sass.

Tivan glanced to Sif. She narrowed her eyes at him. He looked to Hel, then back to the instrument,
which started making a scratching sound before it filled the room with a suddenly springy melody.

Tivan turned around, his hips finding the rhythm. "Do you like poets?" he said as he showily
closed the distance between himself and Hel, slipping a hand on her little cinched waist. "Perhaps
dancers?"

A line was crossed. Sif stormed up and tore Tivan away from the now enchanted queen. The
restored strength of her arms would have surprised her if she wasn't so disgusted.

"Don't you dare," she warned, getting in Tivan's face. "She is merely a teenager."

Hel stepped around Sif, challenging. "I am of consenting age."

"That matters not," Sif scolded. "He is a scoundrel. A predatory degenerate."

Hel crossed her arms. "The word you're looking for is creeper."

Sif couldn't respond before a puff of Hel's magic knocked her down. She hit the floor with a grunt.
The queen then rejoined the smugly swaying man, allowing his hands to position her in a proper
formation and pull her to his body. Sif tried to get up but Hel's magic had rendered her immobile,
her palms splayed on the floor, fingernails splintering the wood.

"Where were we?" the ancient cooed in a disgracefully charming tone before he swooped Hel into
a series of dramatic turns and syncopated steps. Sif fought her restraints and snarled in protest, but
to no avail. All she could do was watch, and grind her teeth. The pair would not be hindered from their...oddly...captivating display. Strange how their movements complimented the cheerful tune so well that Sif was forgetting to struggle. How was something so wrong falling into such perfect time and flow?

"You were asking what I look for in a lover," Hel picked up their conversation. "Coming from no experience whatsoever in the field, I must admit my expectations are high. One's first love could make or break the entire experience, depending on how it is handled."

Sif couldn't agree more.

"You are wise for your age," Tivan flattered.

"I learn a lot from the dead," Hel agreed. "You'd be amazed the wisdom that comes from hearing woeful regrets on repeat."

"I see," Tivan said, intrigued. "And what is the most common regret?"

"Having too high of expectations."

Tivan and Sif exchanged glances, half expecting the record to scratch out the music.

"Did you not just say..." Tivan questioned.

"It's pitiful," Hel cut in, "the standards these rotting saps had for their lovers of the living world. Talk about putting all your eggs in one basket. They think a lover is supposed to solve all their problems, cure all their ailments, fill their world with roses and kittens for all eternity. What they fail to realize before it's too late, is that true love, once all the roses have wilted and kittens grown into mangy old flea bags," she slide her gaze to Sif, "is a treacherous minefield that they were too chickenshit to cross."

Sif narrowed her eyes.

"Interesting," Tivan said, lifting Hel onto his hip and twirling them with a flourish.

"So tell me, my dear..." He returned her to the floor and they started the routine over, holding her inappropriately close this time. "What kind of lover awaits at the opposite end of your minefield?"

"Fuck if I know," she shrugged, impartial to his flirting. "Preferably someone who didn't bring me music from my neighboring realm when he has the selection of the entire universe to impress me with."

Tivan looked insulted. "I rather like my choice. Knowhere had a visitor a short while ago that introduced us to the wondrous potpourri of Terran tunes, specifically their mid-century Rhythm & Blues."

"It's called R&B," Hel corrected. "Ya square."

Tivan laughed, pushing the curtain of hair from her face and brushing her cheek. "You are quite charming."

That, Sif fumed, was too much. Paralyzing spell long faded, she sprung to her feet and charged toward them.

"Stop this at once!" She yanked Hel from liberally roaming hands, shouldering between the two
and beholding Tivan with no shortage of disgust. "You should be ashamed. Her father would gut you!"

Hel laughed, shrugging Sif's hand from her shoulder. "I thought you didn't care about him."

"I care about what is decent and appropriate," Sif stated, sizing up Tivan. "This display is neither."

The alien smirked, inching toward her. "And why not?" He detached the extravagant cloak from his shoulders and tossed it aside. "She's not your daughter. We aren't harming anyone."

"It is wrong." Sif held her ground as he moved closer. "Loki would slaughter you. And if given the opportunity, I would assist him. You're lucky I am without my weapons."

Tivan exchanged a brief glance with Hel, holding his smirk. "Is this true, your highness? Would your father disapprove of our...intermingling?"

"Quite," Hel nodded, adjusting her fishnet gloves. "He'd cut you clean across that fancy codpiece for a most decadent removal of your manhood."

Tivan glanced down his body, brow knitting. "Well then," he cleared his throat, restoring his composure. He then stepped to Sif's side and dared to fidget with a lock of her hair. She could see from her peripheral that it was indeed her natural gold, a bothersome distraction that allowed Tivan to slip his hand onto her hip and guide her into an easy step.

"That would make him," he continued while Sif fought another form of paralysis, not a spell this time but something different. "...a most committed father now wouldn't it."

Sif opened her mouth to argue but there were no words. Her head spun while he spun her across the room, whisking her by a blur of Hel, who watched in amusement. Her entire body lit up, painfully, like the prickling of blood rushing back into a deadened limb. Her limbs were anything but dead, though. They moved with this peculiar man, beyond her control, and that tingling returned to her scalp, this time creating a chill upon it. Such a contradiction of sensations.

"A most intriguing specimen, your father." Tivan spoke to Hel as he drove Sif's defiant body. "I learned much about him while he stayed at my museum. He's so convicted, so ambitious. All while being so unpredictable."

Amid her artful disorientation, Sif wished she could shield her ears. His words stung deeper than any physical pain. She had worked too hard to forget all of this, to dismiss from her memory the wondrous puzzle that had haunted her for too long.

Tivan continued, "He carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, yet he has no idea where he is going."

"Why do you suppose that is?" Hel asked as they breezed by her.

"Because," Tivan said and Sif squeezed her eyes shut, not that that did any good. "His heart houses both chaos and purpose, a pair that make lousy roommates yet still create a force to be reckoned with, rendering a being that's infinitely perplexing as he is alluring. A fine prize indeed." His voice shifted to hover at Sif's ear. "Especially once you factor in his capacity for love."

With a growl, Sif found the control to shove Tivan away.

"I know what you are doing and you will stop!" The hair that fell in her face was a light brown. She pushed it away, out of sight. "Whatever this is must come to an end. I will not be a part of your
Hel scoffed through her smile. "We're not the ones playing games, milady. You are. With your silly, stubborn, schoolgirl denial."

"It is not denial," Sif defended. "He bargained my life and put our son at risk. I will not forgive him for that."

"Hmmm." Tivan chimed in, bringing his finger to his lips. "Your highness?" he asked.

"Yes, Tanny boy?"

"How many of your broken-hearted residents have forgiven their lovers?"

"Very few."

"And how many have fallen out of love because of their grudge?"

"Even less."

"How very fascinating." Tivan crept up to Sif, his gaze locked with intent. "The heart can still love, even after it has been wronged."

Sif frowned, standing her ground. "Why does any of this matter to you? What stake have you in my personal affairs?"

He offered his hand, posing as a gentleman. "Dance with me again and I will explain."

Sif looked down at his offering, then back up to his expression that attempted innocence. His eyes were a mystery, dodging any specific color yet reflective of all the eons and expanses of space they had witnessed. He was not a trifling man. There had to be a greater reason for his presence here, some connection with Loki that probably worked in their favor and against Asgard's.

With a sigh, Sif relented, taking his hand.

"That's better," he said, leading her in a series of steps that she never learned but somehow knew. Was it the work of his magic? Perhaps it was her own? Whatever the explanation, she couldn't deny that she felt better. The pain had subsided and this whole business of dancing could admittedly be enjoyable, perhaps under different circumstances though. And with a different partner.

"I must admit," Tivan said, "I didn't expect my task here to be so much fun. I thought I'd have to work for my reward."

"Spare me your riddles and explain yourself." Skilled dancer or not, Sif would not draw this out unnecessarily.

"I have been tasked," he began, "by our common acquaintance, to free you from your nightmare."

Sif's breath caught. "In exchange for what?" She quickly collected herself. "Will he now hand over the Tessaract?"

"If only," Tivan said in a dreamy tone.

"Then what?" Sif demanded. "Loki is incapable of remedying his mistakes without bringing about more harm. Tell me what he has traded this time."
"Himself."

The room fell silent save for the inappropriately happy jingle that carried on. Even Hel was surprised.

Sif's feet became less graceful as she felt the weight of her boots around them. She looked down to see her armor restored upon her body, heavy and real. A far cry from the whimsical fibers that were there moments ago. She promptly met Tivan's eyes. "What do you mean?"

He smiled, his eyes scanning her hair. "I think you know what I mean," he said.

"She might not," Hel added, her elbow propped on the music box. "Not really the read-between-the-lines kind this one."

"Say no more," Sif shot at the girl. "I understand. I think." Her feet became clumsier with each word.

"Curious," Tivan said with an amused glance to her feet. "With relenting of the heart comes rejecting of coordination. Still, not bad for a first time magic user."

"What does that mean?" Sif ordered, halting their dance. "Please tell me. What of his fate? And of mine?"

Tivan reached for her neck and pulled a strand of raven hair out for her too see, letting it slip through his fingers. "You are almost home. And he is almost mine."

Dread washed over Sif, leaving her as raw as when she first entered this cursed realm. She closed her eyes. "He traded his freedom that I might live."

Hel was ready to burst with some sarcastic comment but Tivan silenced her with a hand gesture. Her turned back to Sif, lifting her chin with his finger.

"How does that make you feel?" he asked. He then brushed that finger over her cheek and she sent him to the floor with one punch.

Hel laughed. "Wow, I didn't think inbetweeners could garner that much strength. You're really getting a handle on your magic."

Tivan was not laughing. He needed a moment to restore his senses, blinking and shaking his head. He rose, wobbling to his feet, hand cupping half his face.

"Are you going to answer my question," he growled, "you brutish bitch?" His words became biting. "Your lover, the father of your child, has handed himself over to me, opted to become my slave, all so you can live. Doesn't that make you feel anything?"

"That I want to bury my glaive in your gut," Sif snarled.

Tivan realigned his jaw, attempting to restore his composure. "And why would you want to do that?"

Sif puffed up to respond but her words choked her. She wasn't about to confess anything to this lovlife.

"Why are you doing this? she said. "Why must you toy with me instead of simply freeing me like he wants you to do."
"Freeing you," Tivan said, exasperated, "is proving anything but simple."

"What must I do?" Sif pressed. "Tell me. I will not attack you again. I won't even threaten."

Tivan snorted. "That, I find difficult to believe."

"Please," Sif was becoming desperate. "Tell me what I must do."

Pulling an embroidered handkerchief from his pocket, he dabbed his split lip, purposely taking his time to answer her. Sif clenched her fists in impatience.

"I was supposed to teach you to use your magic," he said, his voice losing some edge. "And in a sense, I suppose I am."

Sif shook her head, uncomprehending. "How is drudging up my heartache meant to teach me anything?"

He waggled his finger at her. "Your heartache is what fuels your magic." The finger started moving in circles. "It's all interconnected, simple in that magic feeds on our emotions, complicated because your magic latched on to the most obstinate one it could find."

Sif blinked, starting to comprehend. "What you said earlier," she began, "about magic, and the nature of love..."

"Was intended not to woo a child," Tivan said, "but to awaken a sorceress."

Realization struck like a giant's bludgeon to the face. Sif's eyes darted as she imagined Eir piecing her skull back together, solving the puzzle. Now it was all making sense. Her magic and her love for Loki were one in the same. That elusive mysticism had stayed dormant until a very specific desire was born. It cared not for her ambitions or her goals, not for her loyalty or her camaraderie, but that forbidden fruit that tragically ripened only after she denied it. It took the form of her raven locks as that was the last place Loki had touched her before the dozen-year wedge was driven between them.

There was a flutter in her gut. She'd almost forgotten what that felt like.

She recalled back to what Loki had said on the island, about magic being present between them when Ollerus was conceived. It was a comment meant only to charm in the silliest of ways, yet it held so much more than either of them had realized. Her feelings for Loki were not a curse. They were not a burden or punishment from the gods, not a fantasy or a delusion. They were the very fabric of her being. And they were there to be embraced, to suffer for, to...drive her safely through the proverbial minefield. There could be no more denying it.

She closed her eyes. The weight of her breastplate pulled her chest down, and her boots connected more solidly to the ground. She knew what she had to do.

"I'll ask again," Tivan said, breaking the silence. "Why does the fate of a criminal concern one such as yourself? Aren't I doing your kind a favor by removing him from your realm?"

"He is not yours to take," Sif said, a quiet warning. She opened her eyes. "He is mine, and I will come for him."

"Because..."

"Because I love him."
Her final words triggered a quick disintegration of Helheim. The last image she saw before the
light was of Tivan and Hel, bidding her farewell with forced grins and patronizing waves. She also
heard Hel saying something about a wizard and ruby slippers. She didn't know or care what the girl
meant. It didn't matter anymore. She was going home. She was going to see Ollerus again. She was
going to reunite with them both.

She gasped, a real breath. Upon her body she felt the warmth of animal furs. She sighed, relieved.

Strange, she thought before opening her eyes, that one being could be both her damnation and her
redemption. She wanted to cut this throat.

But not as much as she wanted to kiss him.

Music: Love is Strange, by Mickey & Sylvia.
This is the second-to-last chapter and it's a beast. I shoehorned way too much into it, mostly little side-character indulgences that have no bearing on the pairing but entertain me nonetheless. There's even a totally random cameo stuck in for fangirly fun. I have no self control.

Thank you again for reading. It's been a year since I started this obsession and I can't believe it's nearing the end. It means so much that you've stuck with me this far. xoxo

Now, enjoy!

If she let go, Sif feared, she might lose him again. So she held tighter, pressing hard kisses onto his head, her tears of joys soaking into his hair. The lean, strong arms that squeezed her in return were bliss. She thought she would never feel this again.

"My darling Ollie," she said. "I am so sorry."

"For what?" he said in a deeper voice than she remembered.

"I put you in danger. I should have known better."

"The stampede wasn't your fault, Mother." His words were muffled on her shoulder. "I'm the one who should be sorry. I shouldn't have let those trolls get to you."

He doesn't know, Sif realized, who really was to blame. "We need to talk later, love." She crushed him harder against her cheek. "But for now let me hold you. I missed you so much."

His hold tightened. "I missed you too."

***

"What in the godforsaken universe happened here?"

Loki had opened his eyes to the aftermath of war. Only vague familiarities surrounded him, the smell of smelting, the feel of manufactured atmosphere, the disorienting displacement from home. It was when The Collector had entered, drink in hand, his cloak sweeping a path through broken glass, scattered artifacts and withered flora, that Loki knew he had made it to Knowhere.

"Where is the Aether?" he then asked. There was a disturbing amount of guilt Tivan was trying to hide in his cocktail.

"Your lady is quite impressive," he said. "A little barbaric..."

"You don't need to tell me that." Loki stepped closer, shards crunching under his boots. "Tivan, where is the Aether?"
"Did you think," he began, actually attempting charm, "I wanted you back here for only your pretty face?" He raised his hand to what he believed he owned, but withdrew once fully seeing Loki's face wasn't as pretty as he remembered. "I need your help, Laufeyson." Translated: the Aether was gone.

"That is not my name," Loki said. "The Bringer of Ragnarok will be an Odinson. And all those who parish will know it." Present company included if it came down to it. "The deal was, you keep it protected and I help you collect the other four. You have failed to uphold your end of the bargain, therefore I am no longer bound by our current contract."

"Hmmm," Tivan mused. He then turned, moving to a small tattered table which held a set of dusty antique bottles. "I don't think you want to go, dear 'Bringer of Ragnarok.'" He partially filled his glass with an unnaturally purple liquid, then topped it off with a splash of something clear, and probably quite potent. "Curious," he said. "Your ambition is to ultimately murder one who was worth sacrificing your freedom for, perhaps not directly, but war is war and you can expect she'll be on the frontlines." His pinky was used to stir the drink. "You are the most contradictory being I have ever met." Turning, he sucked the liquid from his finger, slowly. It popped from his lips. "You understand why I had to have you."

"You don't have me." These displays had no effect on Loki. He's dealt with enough enchanters in his time, building up resistances after that unfortunate tangle with Lorelei. "I am your equal." He joined the ancient at the table, helping himself, hoping whatever inebriant this was would dull the throb of his stab wound, among other aches. "You know this. You have not chained me or stuffed me into a capsule. You allow me to roam freely. I could escape these flimsy walls in a heartbeat of magic." He took a drink. It tasted strange, and burned, but ultimately felt good. "You are correct in assuming I want to be here," he concluded, "But only under my conditions."

"Of course you want to be here. You want the stones as much as I," Tivan said. "How else will you garnish the power you need to...annihilate your home and family?"

"Once we've acquired all six," Loki deflected, "then what of our alliance? We hardly share the same ambitions."

"Why don't we deal with that when the need arises and focus on the present." Tivan closed their distance, eyeing him up and down. "Like getting you cleaned up. This blood upon you has a most, disturbing odor."

***

Eir had to pry the Warriors from Sif for fear they'd squeeze her back into a coma. "You will see her again at dinner," she said, escorting Sif out of the healing chamber and into the baths, where she quickly stewed up a medicinal pool of oils and healing spells.

"Am I to be the main course?" Sif joked as she slipped out of her patient's gown and into the large, steaming basin. Her eyes rolled back at the enveloping heat. "Oh my, so this is what Valhalla feels like."

"You need to soak for at least half an hour if the oils are to have any effect on your wounds," Eir said.

"I can manage that," she exhaled, sinking until the water grazed her chin.

Eir went quiet for a long moment, returning several small bottles to their proper places around the room. "I suppose you wish to know," she finally said, "why I kept your magic a secret from you."
"That would be nice." Sif wasn't upset but she still wanted an explanation. She had decided, during her endless cycles of thought in the underworld, that she wouldn't hold a grudge about Eir's deception. It seemed all Asgardian parents did their share of omitting valuable information, Sif especially. To fault Eir would make her a hypocrite of royal proportions, and she was too exhausted to be anything but a mound of soaking flesh right now.

Eir took a golden brush from the shelf, studying it in her hands. "Where did you get this?"

"It was the Queen's." Sif opened one eye to glimpse it. "She used to brush my hair with it." She lay her head back with a sigh. "Loki gave it to me."

Eir moved a stool to the head of the tub, taking a seat and letting Sif's hair down from its bun. She began brushing, slowly, not for the sake of preening.

"You were such a vicious young thing," she began, softly. "It shouldn't have come as a surprise to see your magical streak make a violent debut," she laughed a little, "not like it surprised the three seasoned Valkyries you bested in the ring."

"They had it coming," Sif added. "Bullies."

"Your gifts were evident," Eir continued, "from the moment your fingers touched smelted weaponry. It was your first passion. So, naturally, your magic bolstered it. I did not realize it back then, but I see it now. Dark magic was not threatening to devour you. You merely borrowed its power for a situation you could not handle alone." She laughed again, ironically this time. "All these years, my perception of the dark arts have been...so biased."

"Discipline and dedication are what bolstered my abilities," Sif said. "I will not credit magic, whatever orientation it may be, for years of hard practice."

"You can't discredit it, either," Eir said, "not when its workings are entwined in our very being."

She ran her fingers through the silky strands left in the brush's wake. "I was wrong to assume magic would lead you down the same path as Amora."

"Amora," Sif rolled her eyes. "She, like Lorelei, is cut from cloth where I am from steel. An enchantress is nothing more than a coward, preying on men's weaknesses instead of challenging their strengths. I would never reduce myself to that."

"I am well aware, now, that you have not the tendencies of a siren," Eir said. "However, I did not back then. You were still a child when your magic surfaced, knobby-kneed and appalled at the introduction of supportive undergarments. My heart still ached for Amora's fall. Please understand, she was my top student and I loved her as such, but you..." The brush stilled and Eir's hand slid over Sif's shoulder. "You were different. You were more. I could not risk it."

A warmth, not from the bath, blossomed in Sif. She squeezed her Elder's hand, coating it with oily water, saying, "I understand." She turned and smiled. "I am your daughter. You wanted only to keep me safe. And yes," her chin jutted forward, "I said daughter. It is due time we start using these terms with each other."

There was nothing like a brush with death to make one realize what's really important in life.

Eir's eyes softened, their sheen reflecting the candlelight. "Does this mean," she asked with a shy vulnerability, "you have given up searching for your real parents?"

"I know who my real parent is," Sif assured, sliding back into the water once the air chilled her wet shoulders. "And if the folks who conceived me happen to still be alive and finally wish to meet me,
then I suppose I'll humor them."

"You musn't be bitter," Eir continued brushing, her tone hardening back to normal. "They could have valid reasons for orphaning you."

"Sure." Sif wasn't convinced. "Just like Laufey could be justified in leaving his infant to die." Again, Loki came up in conversation. It seemed inevitable. "I suppose it makes sense," Sif confessed with a sigh, returning to their previous topic, "what with the blurred lines between passion and mysticism, that my battle skill is entwined with my magic."

"Why the change of mind?"

"Because I've heard the same explanation from both you and Tivan now," she said. "My magic clings to my loves. And it took confessing a...very specific one to liberate me from the depths."

Eir paused, her hands stalling the way they always did when the gears of her mind cranked up. "Of course," she said distantly. "We were so close, yet...even if we had figured it out, we'd have no control over it."

"Strange isn't it?" Sif laughed a little. "All the combined power between you and the All-Father but no one could save me but myself."

The brushing resumed, less gentle this time. "I suppose you'll be rubbing it in for the rest of our existence."

"Only when the need arises," Sif teased. She then rolled her head back, closing her eyes. "Oh, Elder. What do I do now?"

"About?"

"Who do you think?"

"You wait," Eir said, firmly. "If Loki has promised himself to The Collector, as you claim, there is nothing we can do for him."

"Do not say that. There is always hope. And please don't say he promised himself, as if in marriage. The very thought," she cringed, "and to that, creeper, no less."

"Do not be silly," Eir said. "Tivan takes trophies, not trophy husbands."

"You speak as if you know him."

"We crossed paths once," Eir admitted. "Long ago."

There was clearly a story there, one Sif would get out of her another time, when there were less pressing matters at hand. "Can you talk to him? Ask him to release Loki?"

"He does not relinquish his possessions so diplomatically."

"Then curse his bargain," Sif said, jolting upright. "I will take Loki from him."

"Sif," Eir said, easing her back. "Do not over exert yourself. And please don't meddle in the affairs of that ancient."

"Why can't I?" Sif argued. "He meddled in my affairs."
"He did so under contract," Eir said, adamantly. "Something his kind take very seriously. As do our kind. We mustn't bring tension into Asgard's relationship with him, especially not while he has the Aether."

Sif sunk back down into the water. "Curse you, Loki. You got yourself into this mess."

"He often does," Eir added.

Silenced stretched between them until thunderous footsteps were heard approaching. The chamber door flew open.

"Sif," Thor boomed joyfully.

"Thor," she returned the greeting without thinking, whirling up to see him, sloshing water over the edge."

Eir's eyes widened and Thor turned pink. That was when Sif's indecency became apparent to her. She made some noise of embarrassment while her arms slapped across her chest.

"Sorry," Thor said, turning his back, "I did not expect—"

"It's a bathing chamber," Eir barked, snatching a robe from the wall and tossing it to Sif. "Very little happens in this room besides what it is named for."

"I apologize," Thor repeated. "I wasn't thinking. I only wanted to—"

Sif barely had the robe tied before she threw dripping arms around her dearest comrade.

"...do this," he finished, embracing her in return with vocalized relief. "I refused to believe it until I saw it," he said, picking her up and spinning her. "My friend, how we worried for you."

Sif laughed, holding him at arm's length once he dropped her. "Worries in vain, dear comrade. Did you think I would be defeated so easily?"

"Of course not." Thor smiled, squeezing her shoulders and gazing upon her with tired eyes. "It is good to see you well."

"It's good to be well," she said.

"She won't be," Eir chimed in, "if you don't allow her rest."

Sif ignored the Elder, peering over Thor's shoulder to the open door. "Did you," she began, apprehensively. "Did you return alone?"

Thor's smile shrank. "Fenrir returned as well." That was all he said and her shoulders sank.

"Come," he then offered, leading her to the door. "You must see him with your son. They are quite the pair."

"So I've heard," Sif said, skeptically. "Ollie sounded like he got attached rather quickly." She wasn't certain how to handle this news yet.

"Come to the feasting hall and see for yourself," Thor insisted. "I am certain that is where they are. The wolf's appetite could rival Volstagg's."

"I've heard that as well..." Sif trailed off, stopping them mid-step. That was exactly what Loki had
said about Fenrir when they visited the island. Now her heart sank.

"I will go," she began, attempting a lighter tone. She couldn't think about him now. "But I must first...get dressed?"

Thor laughed, moving for the door. "My apologies. I will meet you there."

Eir sighed, looking to Sif. "If your not going to rest then at least promise me you'll eat more than you drink."

Thor chuckled as he left, murmuring something about Hel melting over.

Sif smiled, moving to Eir and clasping both her hands. "I promise." She then punctuated, "Dear Mother."

Eir had no choice but return the smile, blushing as she did.

"Now," Sif continued, throwing open the wardrobe doors and beholding the garments like they were a Vanir riddle. "I need your help. What does a lady wear when formally meeting her son's half-brother?"

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The decadent steam room and tall jetted tubs he remembered from his first visit here were not the luxury that rinsed his body this time. The dried blood and forest residue were instead doused by a bucket of cold, tinted liquid set behind a dining table, which stood on end to serve as a makeshift privacy wall. Everything he remembered enjoying about the museum was obliterated by Carina's little demonstration with a power she knew nothing about. The nerve of her. He never would have agreed to Tivan's terms if he'd known this ramshackle abode awaited him. This arrangement he put himself in truly was turning out to be a sacrifice. He dried off with his own clothing.

Decent medical facilities were unheard of on Knowhere, and Loki, redressed and still in pain, refused to subject himself to the commoner's clinic, which he imagined bred more illness than cured it. His wound was healing too slowly, his natural regeneration stunted by Angrboda's blackened blood snaking through his veins. He needed help, regrettably, and there was no one but his drunken host who could offer it. Loki asked, and Tivan said he had a doctor that made home visits, and could "beam" him here within the hour. "Fine," Loki replied.

"The table serving as the washroom wall," Tivan slurred with a half-hearted gesture. "Use it to lie on."

"That can't be sanitary."

"You'll figure it out," he said as he left the room, voice trailing. "You're clever like that."

"Patronizing prick," Loki said. Of course he could figure something out. And he did with plenty of time to spare before the doctor arrived, using a cleaning spell—which he swore used to take more time and effort—to sanitize the surface he was to lie on.

He waited, staring up at the punctured ceiling, his preferred line of thought dedicated to where the Aether was and how they were going to get it back, yet his actual thoughts drifting to all he had left behind in Asgard. The doctor's arrival was timed perfectly, before a second ache set in.

"Who are you supposed to be?" grumbled the old, gaunt man. He appeared of Midgard but then again so did many of Knowhere's inhabitants.
"I was about to ask the same of you," Loki said, trying to place where he has seen this man before. He had heavy bags under his large blue eyes. In his youth, he had been handsome.

"I asked first," he replied, plopping a worn leather bag on the table.

Loki laid his head back, keeping an eye on him. "I am Loki of Asgard."

"Leonard McCoy, retired medical officer of the Starship Enterprise." He retrieved a device from his bag and held it up proudly. "Some folk call me Bones."


"You," the man began, toying with adjustments and settings, "just introduced yourself as a Norse myth and you're calling me fictitious."

"You're not even in the right time."

"Anything's possible in these parts fella." He began hovering his now humming device over Loki's injury. "So, who are you really?"

"Who are you really?"

"I asked you first."

"I told you who I am. And I was actually truthful about it."

"If you're truly a god," the man said, making eye contact, "then why do you need a doctor?"

"I never said I was a god. You humans love to assign that title to anything you can't explain. Not that I'm complaining."

The doc snorted. "Can't argue with you there." His tone then lightened as he continued the scan. "People will keep on creating deities far into the future, even with the advances we'll make in technology and space exploration. Our discoveries uncover more questions about our existence then they provide answers for, so religion stays alive and well."

Lunatic or not, this man had good conversation. "Spirituality is built into your survival instincts. So long as your kind exist, so will your gods."

"Does that mean with human extinction comes your own?" His eyes lifted from the readings. "Loki of Asgard?"

"I sure hope not. I would dread to be at the mercy of your kind."

"Hmmm," the man contemplated, peeling woven leather straps back from rib to hip to expose Loki's wound. "Aren't you the damned fool that causes the extinction of your kind?"

"I see it as more of a rebirth myself." He watched in concern as a new device was pulled from the bag. Fortunately, it didn't appear to have any needles or probes.

"Yeah," the doc drawled, "I remember reading stories about you. You're not a very nice fella. I'm not sure I even want to patch you up."

"Idle threats..." he said, watching as green light was projected into his flesh. Within moments, the pain subsided and the wound shrank. "Tell me, what stories did you read? The attack on New
York? You know you cannot trust Earth media to give an unbiased account."

"New York?" His brow quirked. "Might wanna recheck your timeline. I'm talking the myths. With
the giants and the dwarves. Ancient stories I read as a boy, about ransomed maidens, stolen gold,
trickery and...say, didn't you change into a mare and—"

"It was only that one time," Loki defended. "I didn't know how else to remedy the situation. We all
underestimated that accursed giant and his, rather impressive steed."

"I...don't need the details." He shook off the imagery. "You really are him, aren't ya?"

"No, old man, I'm merely a figment of your decrepit imagination."

"Hah! Nice try but I been around too long to fall for tricks." He studied some readings on his
device. "So, explain to me, Loki of Asgard, how'd you get this stab wound?"

"A woman."

"Explanation enough," he nodded. "Sounds like a friend of mine. Say, how'd you end up on
Knowhere?"

"Also a woman."

"Is a woman also to blame for your blood poisoning?"

"Most certainly."

"How did it happen?"

"I was rescuing my daughter from the jaws of a giant serpent and its fang punctured me, poisoning
me."

"How noble." The doc rolled his eyes. "Now tell me what really happened."

"You're good," Loki smiled.

"Comes with the job."

"I was stabbed by a Jotun witch, right before I ate her corrupted heart."

He paused before responding. "After a lifetime of practicing medicine, I still can't decide if it is a
blessing or a curse to hear the tales of people's injuries."

Loki shrugged. "You asked."

"Part of my job."

"I thought you said you were retired."

"From Starfleet, wise ass. Not from paying back favors I owe to hoarders with the tackiest fashion
sense this side of the galaxy."

"Thank you!" Loki laughed, gratefully. "Although, if you think his taste is tacky, you should see
Knowhere's street styles. It's like a superhero convention on psychedelics out there."

"I don't even wanna know," the doc said, shaking his head. "I venture outside of these walls as little
possible. Just beam in, fix his latest humanoid, beam out." As the man leaned over to inspect what remained of the wound, Loki noticed a peculiar scar, maybe even a seam, peeking out from under his collar.

"So," the doc said, "tell me more about this corrupted heart. I assume you mean it was poisoned and for reasons...unfathomably asinine to me, you took it upon yourself to eat it."

"I had to," Loki said.

"Fine, whatever." He fumbled with the straps of Loki's tunic, attempting to cover up the now-healed flesh. "What kind of poison is all I care about."

"Dark magic."

His hands flopped. "Do you want me to help you or not?"

"I speak the truth."

"I don't work in magic, man. I'm a doctor, not a Vegas attraction."

"Vegas?" Loki was insulted. "That's not real magic."

"It's all a bunch of," his hand waved around, "lights and mirrors and tomfoolery. This witch girlfriend of yours had you duped."

Loki burst out laughing. "Oh that's rich. How is it that you, an intergalactic man of medicine, a time traveler, have no experience in magic?"

"It's called science."

"Please do not bore me with this debate. Can science do this?" With thought alone, Loki drove the doctor's hands to properly weave his tunic straps back together and cover his flesh.

The man frowned, insulted. "We're done here." He packed up his bag the instant he regained control. Apparently, one doesn't toy with a doctor's hands. "Your poisoned blood can send you to the fiery pit for all I give a damn."

"Been there, done that." Loki sat up on an elbow. "And it's ice, not fire. You humans are forever confusing your elements of the afterlife."

The man turned and walked away, speaking into his wrist watch. "Will somebody beam me the hell out of here?"

"Come on, now," Loki grinned. "It was all in good fun."

The man made it halfway across the room before he slowed to a stop. Loki anticipated his response but was instead surprised to see his spine straighten and his chin drop to his chest. He became inhumanely still, and the mystery began unraveling.

"Interesting," Loki said, sliding off the table and approaching him. Where was once a fascinating character was now an upright corpse, fantastically organic despite the robotic internals he was now presuming it had. Unlike the techno-organic physiology of the Chitauri, this being had not a visible fleck of synthetic material. There had only been that one sign, the seam.

"It was all the craze a few years back," Tivan said upon entry. "Customizing your medibots into fictional characters. Lucky for you he was in the shop during the accident, and was spared
annihilation."

Loki folded his arms. "He lacks bedside manner."

"Be grateful I didn't go with Dr. Frankenstein." A couple adjustments to Dr. McCoy's watch reawakened him and sent him out of the room. "He's still programmed to the old floor plan," Tivan said. "I need to send him back to the shop. Anyhow, from what I overheard, he wasn't able to cure your blood poisoning."

"I'm starting to think," Loki said, "it is not something I want cured. That trick I played on him, its spell was cast with far more ease than normal, as was an earlier spell. I think Angrboda's share of dark magic, is exactly what I need."

Tivan blinked, unimpressed. "You might change your mind once you see what it's doing to your complexion."

***

Watching Ollerus with his brother was a delight. They teased and they bickered, but behind every word was a shining gratitude that they had found each other. A mother couldn't wish for a happier reunion for her child. She felt warmed all over, and the wine wasn't to blame. "See," Thor said, seated next to her. "I told you."

Sif smiled wider. It was a blessing to have this back. Family. Friends. She laughed when Volstagg and Fenrir played tug-of-war over a goat leg. Such barbarians were her kinsman, and she loved them all dearly. Fandral claimed the seat on the other side of her, surprisingly lacking a companion on his arm but predictably running his mouth off of his latest feats in the arena. Hogun had even come to celebrate, taking time away from his people to clink Sif's glass and give her a not-so grim nod. He might even slip a word in if Fandral would ever shut up.

The head of the table, reserved for the royalty, was empty. Thor preferred his place among friends and Odin was absent, still feeling ill according to Thor.

"I wish he hadn't exerted himself on my behalf," Sif said.

"We needed him to help Eir find your cure," Thor said, his fork poking at a boiled root. His appetite was surprisingly small. "And had we not awakened him, then Fenrir wouldn't have been freed."

They both glanced at the wolf, just in time to see the massive snout rolling the last bread roll onto Ollerus's plate. Sif was touched by the gesture Fenrir believed went unnoticed.

"Asgard is witnessing a new dawn," Thor began, "when a Jotun and a once-feared beast can sit at our table."

"Half Jotun," Sif corrected, lightly. "I always dreamed this life for him but I never imagined it would happen so soon. And I certainly couldn't have predicted the events leading up to it."

"If you had it to do over again," Thor asked, "would you change the choices you made?"

"Do what over, exactly?" Sif questioned. "Letting myself become pregnant and then lie about it? Or letting myself fall in love in the first place."

Thor's smile softened. "All of it."
"I wouldn't change a thing."

He raised his goblet. "Cheers, to no regrets."

She met his toast. "Your mother always said it was wasted emotion." They drank.

"And your mother said," Thor reminded, "go easy on the mead."

Sif rolled her eyes. "I know," she sighed. "Can't have any fun until I'm fully healed. Never mind that I feel fine. I've half a mind to jump up dance once the bard gets here."

"Dance?" Thor chuckled. "You? My how the underworld did change you."

"I had," she argued, "a change of heart before that. Loki," she then confessed, gaze dropping to her lap, "had insisted I dance with him at his banquet."

"Shame that celebration wasn't to be," Thor added in a low voice.

Sif glanced back up, scanning the revelries around them. "I wish he could be here, Thor. To witness..." her eyes fixed on the teenagers, Ollerus laughing while Fenrir demonstrated a spell that made fruit levitate, "the beauty of his creation."

"Aye," Thor said. His expression then shifted to something worrisome. "Sif, there's something I need to tell you, a couple things really, but I do not wish to say them here."

Sif sighed. She had unpleasant information to share too. "About Loki."

Thor nodded while taking a pull from his goblet. He cleared his throat. "We will talk after dinner."

And talk they did, at length, exchanging every frustrating detail of both of Loki's bargains. This was the first Sif was hearing of Angrboda's slaughter and Thor was made aware of Loki's initial bargain with Hela: the one that nearly killed Sif. Thor's fist crunched a segment of the balcony railing when hearing this, but as Sif explained the second bargain with Tivan, Loki's attempt to right his wrong, Thor calmed down. "I suppose his sacrifice makes up for his gambling of your life," he said, clapping marble dust from his palm. "But it still doesn't explain why he dismembered Angrboda and ingested her heart."

Sif blinked. "He did what?" Thor went on to explain what he and Fenrir had witnessed in the forest, every gruesome detail. "That would explain your lack of appetite," Sif added, feeling queasy. "I did not understand what I was seeing at first," Thor continued, "nor had I the time to question it before Loki was gone. I barely had time to say goodbye. Fenrir had to explain to me the reason for consuming her heart, saying that was the only way to cleanse her afterlife."

Sif shook her head, at a loss. "Lucky for the witch we did not cross paths—wait a moment..." She paused as the pieces fell into place. "There must have been a third bargain, between Hela and Loki. Maybe that is why he left Asgard. Hela was completely smitten with her wretched mother and wanted nothing more than to get her into Helheim. She admitted to me that her initial bargain with Loki was ultimately intended to accomplish this, assuming either I or Loki would slay her before she could get to me. But both Hela and Loki underestimated her..."

"And you paid the price," Thor provided.

"But really," Sif continued, "I didn't. Loki did. He...rid the witch of poison by consuming it. And
for what? Certainly not for his own sake, there would be no gain in becoming sick. He would have done it for his daughter."

"Then," Thor synced up, "not only did he sacrifice his freedom for you, but he's sacrificed his health for his daughter's happiness."

A chill shot down Sif's spine. "So now he's trapped and he's sick and there's nothing we can do about it because of...politics?"


Sif shook her head in refusal. "No. I do not accept that. You are the king, Thor. Surely you can negotiate something with Tivan."

Thor nodded. "Perhaps." He wasn't half as worked up as Sif. "We will discuss it in the next council meeting."

"When will that be?" Sif urged. "We cannot put this off."

"I will make it happen as soon as possible."

Which he did, only 'as soon as possible' meant the following evening because Queen Brunhild had insisted she be on the committee, but wouldn't be able to attend until she sorted out a matter where apparently some deceased revelers had hopped Valhalla's gates and were flirting with the Valkyrie cadets. Sif was mad with impatience by the time they actually assembled. The group was comprised of the same faces that were around last night's dinner table, substituting Ollerus and Fenrir for the Valkyrie Queen. Ollerus had many colorful words of protest for not being included, and insisted he belonged in a discussion concerning his own father. Sif wished he could have been there too, his persuasive skills a potential boon in expediting a rescue mission. But rules were rules and the doors closed on his and the wolf's disgruntled faces.

"Thank you for meeting on such short notice," Thor's words hushed the room. He went on to read awkwardly, from his cheat sheet, all the customary opening statements that a king is required to say. This part was always painful enough when Odin did it, but with Thor being a slow reader, Sif found herself missing certain aspects of Helheim. If it wasn't for Fandral passing her notes under the table, she may have gotten herself ejected for a disorderly outburst.

Fandral's first note read, "Near death has not disqualified you from our arranged duel."

She quirked her brow at him and he awkwardly avoided eye contact! which was strange. Shrugging it off, she discretely scribbled her comeback: "If you didn't use my downtime to hone your skills, then you may as well yield. Also, why are we opening with the topic of Vanaheim's trade relations with Alfheim? Don't they know we have more pressing issues to discuss?"

Fandral snorted when he read it, pulling a glare from Hogun, who droned on about increased tariffs on Elven imports. The response he gave read, "the day I yield to you is the day I take a vow of celibacy."

"Because Hogun figures if he's here, me might as well address the concerns of his people. He doesn't give a pygmy nymph's nutsack about Loki's well being. And to be perfectly honest, neither do I."

Sif glared at him from the corner of her eye, a look that admonished his rudeness. She responded, "Rumor has it you abstained for a week after that trick you fell for.
"Could that be the cause of your callousness?"

Fandral turned red, keeping his eyes fixed on his lap. He didn't once look her way while replying, not even to pass the note.

It read, "Who told you? Nevermind, it doesn't matter.

"Yes. That is one reason I'm not in a hurry to rescue Loki."

Sif looked up from the note, scanning her eyes around the room to feint her interest in the discussion. When she felt her committee members were adequately convinced, her hand resumed its secretive scrawling.

"He told me. He also told me how liberal you were with your tongue when you believed it was in my mouth. I should cut you.

"Is there another reason I should know of why you won't help?"

She passed the note, noticing vaguely how he held her fingers longer than necessary and wondering why was he acting so strange. He was fidgety. Fandral never fidgeted. The room then quieted while Hogun took his seat and Thor rose. That was probably the most Hogun had ever said all at once in his lifetime. Sif now wished she paid closer attention.

"The next matter at hand," Thor began and Sif awaited with anticipation, "is the allocation of resources for restoring the gates of Valhalla." Sif wanted to scream. "I implore you," Thor continued, "to give Queen Brunhild your undivided attention."

Sif watched, tight-lipped, as the pompous Valkyrie rose. Why did she choose now, of all times, to launch the Glasir Restoration Project?

"You're probably wondering why I've chosen now to launch the Glasir Restoration Project," the golden queen said. Sif turned her out the moment Fandral's note was stuffed into her palm, deciding she didn't care. She would hear nothing but talk of the project in her coming visits back home. She opened the note.

"By Faubauti's frozen nipples, you are so clueless."

She had no idea what Fandral was talking about. She hadn't a clue what anyone in the room was talking about for that matter. All she knew was that no one else was bothering to comprehend the urgency of Loki's situation and she had to do something about it. She couldn't sit here and pass notes like some silly schoolgirl.

"Forgive my interruption," she said upon rising. "I insist we postpone discussion of non-urgent matters until we've addressed the very reason our king had called this meeting. I mean no disrespect, my Queen, but your topic can be postponed without injury. Mine, however, cannot."

She fixed her eyes on Thor. "I request passage, granted by Heimdall, back to Knowhere that I might petition a breach of contract with The Collector."

All eyes were upon her. Thor seemed grateful, and a bit contemplative, while the majority worried for her well being, and Brunhild...well, Sif would get a lambasting from her later. The Queen hated being interrupted.

"I know," Sif continued, "the details have yet to be revealed in full to all of you, but I need your support in negotiating with Tivan. He already has the Aether, we cannot allow him to posses one of our own. Loki belongs here, in Gladsheim, close to his family. That is the only way we can prevent..."
losing him again. So will you help me? Can we devise a strategy to free him? Perhaps offer The Collector something from the vault in exchange?"

Wordless opinions and exchanged glances swept across the table. Sif couldn't tell how her words landed. No one was saying anything and she grew impatient. She made to plead her case again, but a new presence emerged, stealing her audience. It was Odin, weary-eyed but ever-commanding. He approached the table. She remained standing. She probably shouldn't have.

"Lady Sif," he addressed her specifically. "I understand your urgency." His voice was rougher than normal, thinned out, yet still that of a king's. "And I am grateful for your intentions, as Frigga would be if she were still with us. Your commitment to Asgard and your undying loyalty to the crown contribute greatly to our strength as a realm, and a people. I know you want only what is best for the kingdom, that you fight for her security and you risk your own future to keep her's safe."

Sif was honored, all while a dread was building. There was a bomb waiting to be dropped.

"Because of your love for Asgard," Odin said and she knew it was coming, "I cannot permit you to open these negotiations."

The room fixated on her just as her heart plummeted. She kept her chin raised. "What is your reasoning, my Lord."

"Loki is lost to us." And there it was.

"Inside Asgard," Odin continued, his words becoming labored and not from his health, "he is a threat to our safety. Which I, solely, am to blame for."

That, she didn't see coming. No one did.

***

Loki sat, studying through the obstacles of shelves and bottles his reflection in the bar's mirrored backsplash. Odin's transfiguring spell was barely hanging on, only tinting his natural blue instead of masking it, resulting in a depressing gray. What was even more depressing were the wrinkles and veins made prominent by Angrboda's accursed affliction. Was a boost in magic really worth all this?

"Hmph," snorted the being occupying the stool next to him. He had reptilian skin and was shaped like an upright walrus. His posture advertised his regular occupation of lower class watering holes, which was all Knowhere had to offer its population. This was a hard fact in mining communities no matter their galaxy, one Loki would have to learn to live with. The walrus spoke. "I thought only pretty folk gawped that much at mirrors."

Loki sighed, settling back down on his stool. "I used to be pretty."

"Yep," he drawled, "Happens to the best of us. Used to be quite th catch myself, once upon a time, so much that I had me the finest of ladies. Let me tell you, that dame's mustache alone could launch a thousand crafts."

Loki swirled his cocktail before sipping it, resigning himself to the reality that yes, tonight he was just another homely bloke spilling his woes to strangers.

"She broke my heart that one," said the walrus.
"I'm sorry to hear," Loki replied with little empathy.

"Was a long time ago." He brought his mug to the impressive mustache, which presumably harbored lips. "'Bout you?" he said. "You got a lady?"

"I did, once."

"She break your heart?"

"Not this time." Loki paused. "More, the opposite. Plus I nearly got her killed and damned to an eternity of suffering."

"They don't much like that," verified the walrus. "Was she pretty?"

"No they don't. And yes, she was beautiful."

"You apologize?" he asked.

"I never got the chance," Loki said.

"Why not?"

"Because I left her side and ate the heart of another woman." Loki looked at the mirror again. "That is why I'm ugly."

The bald head nodded in response. "Yep. That'll do it."

***

As difficult as it was, both in accepting and repeating, Sif relayed Odin's confession to Ollerus: the conversation on the Bifrost, and the talk of prophecies that triggered Loki's departure. She wanted to be angry with Odin for his tragically-timed truths but how could she? When should truths surface when not as soon as possible? Even if Odin had said nothing, would that have stopped Loki from his reckless, misguided behavior? Probably not.

Sif also told Ollerus about Loki's bargains, all three of them. Fenrir had already told him about Angrboda's slaughter, and the consumption of her heart, but he hadn't knowledge of Loki's bargain with Tivan, or his initial bargain with Hel, the one Sif struggled herself to forgive.

Their legs dangled over the lamplit kingdom and the young man's shoulders slumped in the most disheartening way.

"Why did he have to make shady deals with people?" He lifted his head to gaze distantly over the city lights. "If he hadn't ever faked his death..."

"Do not burden yourself with explaining his methods." Sif spoke gently, tucking a lock of hair behind his ear. "It is futile and you will only drive yourself mad."

The air was cold and Sif was underdressed, still wearing the thin, short-sleeved gown from last night's dinner. She had fallen asleep in it and not cared in the impatient pacing that followed her rest that she had worn it, wrinkles and all, to the meeting. She shivered.

"Should I get your cloak?" her son asked.

"Don't bother." She kissed his temple. He was such a gentleman. "This is nothing compared to Helheim."
Ollerus shook his head. "What he did was wrong, I know. But he's not our enemy. He's just sick. Because of that tainted heart."

"I want to believe that too," Sif said. "But Odin's account, the way he described the look on his face—"

"Odin is wrong," Ollerus blurted. "He's sick too."

Sif frowned. "You should not disrespect—"

"You should go to him, Mother." Sif was taken aback by his prosecuting tone. "You can help him. Use your magic. If it could awaken you from the dead, think what it could do for Father."

She shook her head. "It's not that easy. I can't simply use my magic for healing the way Eir does."

"Can't you at least try?"

She didn't know how to respond. She didn't want to get his hopes up, or hers for that matter, but she didn't want to crush them either.

"If you won't then I will," he said, shifting his gaze to the Bifrost. "I have magic too. And so does Fenrir."

"It's not like," Sif began, regretfully, "Heimdall can just go against the king's orders and grant you passage out of the realm."

"He's done it for you and Uncle Thor."

"That was different."

"Was it?"

"The All-Father wasn't in his right mind," Sif explained. "Heimdall committed treason because Asgard's safety was at stake."

"If we let Father keep thinking he's meant to bring the apocalypse, Asgard won't be safe! Please listen to me, Mother. We can't sit idly by. If you won't go to him then I swear I will. If not by the Bifrost then by some other means. Between Father's secret portals around the realms, and alien tech that jumps through space, Fenrir and I will find a way."

Sif looked at him, studied his eyes. She knew there would be no stopping him. "I believe you," she said. "You'll set your mind to it and you'll go. And I won't be able to stop you unless I chain you down."

"Don't ever use that word around Fenrir," Ollerus cautioned.

"What. Chain? Sorry."

Ollerus sighed. "You don't need chains to stop us. You only need to go to him yourself. I know you want to." He pulled his legs in and stood, offering his hand to her. "Talk to Uncle Thor again. Talk to Odin, to Heimdall. Or say to Hel with them all and just go."

"Ollerus," she warned, accepting his hand. "Mind your words when speaking of your elders."

He helped her to her feet, annoyed. "So what, that's it? 'Shut up and mind your elders' is how we handle this?"
"I didn't say that," Sif said calmly.

"Then what!?"

She watched as tears glazed over his eyes, a sight that finalized her acknowledgment of what needed to get done. He was right. To Hel with the committee. Why had she even bothered with them in the first place? There was no one left to help Loki besides her and Ollie, and he knew it. He understood that Odin and Thor had exhausted their resources of hope. He understood that his elders didn't always have the right answers. He understood, most importantly, that there still was a reason to hope. How his limited years acquired him this knowledge, Sif could not explain, nor did she need to, but if it came to pass someday that her Ollie would inherit the throne of Asgard, she wouldn't be an prouder of him then she was now.

She smiled at him. "I'll go."

Music: Losing My Mind by Pet Shop Boys
New Horizons

Chapter Summary

It's finally finished and 2015 will be the year I get my headspace back. (pfff, yeah right who am I kidding? This pairing is my drug, especially now that they're confirmed in a cutscene of Disney/Marvel's Infinity game.) Seriously, look it up. Ironman totally acknowledges it, albeit sarcastically because, well, it's IRONMAN, but still. It's enough to make me happy.

Enough of my rambling. I hope you enjoy this and feel free to yell at me if you didn't. You've earned the right if you stuck with the story this long. Happy New Year! xoxo

edit: after several requests, here's the link to the game cutscene. You need to skip ahead to 7:00. (they're so cuuuute)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"By whose authority are you granted passage outside the nine realms?"

Heimdall stood ever vigilant in the observatory, his gaze everywhere without movement of his eyes.

"By my own," Sif said upon approach.

"What do you hope to accomplish?"

"I don't know." She stopped at his side, her gaze hard on his profile. She had expected some resistance here, and she was ready for it. "Watch and see for yourself," she said. "I know you're curious. You too want to see what he's capable of. Otherwise," she took a step closer, "you wouldn't have allowed him to wear the All-Father's guise."

Heimdall's eyes slide to her, slowly, one brow arching.

"I will open the portal for you," he said, turning toward the platform, "but I will not keep your actions a secret from my superiors."

She could live with that. She just hoped, assuming things went better than planned, Heimdall wouldn't report *all* of her actions.

"When I call to you," she said, following him to the platform, "will you grant our re-entry into Asgard?"

"Circumstances as they are now," he replied, halting her just before the step. "I can only promise to bring you home. He is still a threat to Asgard."
Sif's shoulders dropped, and with a heavy thunk, Heimdall dropped the sword into the centerpiece. It immediately spawned snakes of lightning, branching out in every direction, hotly illuminating the runes and patterns throughout the dome. The sight helped to keep her spirits up. No matter how many times Sif had witnessed this, it never lost its magnificence.

"You may bring him in shackles," he spoke over the noise, "and I will consider it."

That, Sif knew, was not an option. Loki would not want his children to see him bound, and neither does she for that matter. It was difficult enough for her to witness.

Stone ground as the walls shifted, the observatory aligning itself for a distant galaxy. Sif physically prepared herself for the journey. Mentally, she would have to play it by ear. Moments before the distorting spectrum consumed her, she heard Heimdall say one last thing.

"Stay strong, Lady Sif."

Traveling between realms was nothing. Just a quick and exhilarating blast that always ended too soon and with great impact. But traveling outside the nine realms was different, prolonged, and disorienting. And without a reliable objective at hand, such as the brief delivery of an item or a message, the journey was daunting. Sif couldn't maintain her resolve while hurdling through celestial planes, couldn't hone her thoughts while her focus was all that was keeping her body—which was still healing from the troll attack—from dispersing through the universe. She could only wait it out, ready herself for the hard landing.

The prismatic light vanished as quickly as it dumped her into a vacant alley, the same place she and Volstagg had been deposited on their last visit. It was damp and it reeked, a repulsive and nauseating setting, which is why it was uninhabited and the ideal spot to arrive. The few seconds it took to gather oneself were a window for any fearful witness to attack, so Heimdall always dropped them in a vacated spot.

Sif rose from a couch while etched runes died away around her. The atmosphere was instantly heavy on her skin, and there was an added breeze on her leg. The split of her gown had torn to the thigh.

"Wonderful," she said, fiddling with it for only a moment before giving up. Punishment for her impulsiveness, she supposed. She was to embark on this mission dressed like a lounge singer. However, had she ventured back into the palace and retrieved her armor, she would have risked interrogation by Eir or Thor, and they might have halted her momentum. Eir would never have let her make this journey while her stitches were still fresh. And Thor...well, she wasn't sure what Thor would say but she imagined it wouldn't be encouraging. Sif hated to admit she was disappointed in Thor, and in Odin. Loki was not a lost cause.

The gown, on the other hand, just might be.

She felt foolish and self conscious as she weaved through gaudily-dressed and gaping crowds, their eyes fixed on her as if she was the one who looked ridiculous. Were a glaive and shield really that clashing with evening wear? They certainly weren't intimidating. She had to dodge every other shoulder, and swerve for children running rampant, whereas when she and Volstagg traversed these crowded streets, armored to the teeth, the inhabitants cleared a path. The arching entryway of The Collector's museum couldn't come soon enough.
His building stood like a beacon in the center of town, misleading with its height just how far away it was. When she finally arrived, she hardly recognized its street-view facade through all the scaffolding. Where there was once a sultry lounge with glaring neon and a pink-skinned woman behind a hostess's podium, there was now the fluorescent-lit dullness of renovation.

She stepped inside and pressed on without customary escort, an uneasy feeling growing in her. Where was the buffering nightlife? Where had the pink woman gone? Did anyone even reside here anymore? What if Tivan had moved on, and taken Loki with him? How would she find him then? Surely, Heimdall wouldn't have sent her here if Loki wasn't on the premises.

She grew more anxious as she forced open the private door in the back. Nothing was as she remembered it. There was no maze of disturbing beings imprisoned behind glass, no pillars strangled with alien vines, no winged creatures of song, boasting the perfect acoustics of the ceilings their cages dangled from. There was nothing at all familiar.

"Hello again."

...Except for that voice. She whirled to face him, raising her weapons.

"You will hardly be needing those," Tivan said as he strolled up to her. He lacked even half the charm (if one could call it that) and sophistication he had in Helheim. There was no fitted vest or regal cape, just a ruffled shirt half-tucked into loose-fitting pants, and around the inappropriately deep cut of his v-neck was a silver medallion encrusted with jewels. He looked laughably sleazy as he sipped a brightly colored cocktail.

"What happened here?" Sif holstered her weapons. He wasn't a threat. Her leather harness, on the other hand, could be. It rubbed uncomfortably on her exposed back and the forearm straps of her shield didn't feel any better.

Tivan was perplexed at her fashion sense. He eyed her curiously. "You look," he bit back a chuckle, "quite stunning."

"Where is he?" She puffed up her chest, which didn't have nearly the same effect without her breastplate.

"Is that any way to thank me for saving your life?" the ancient said. "For allowing you the opportunity to reunite with him?"

That meant he was here.

"Answer me," Sif said.

A smile spread across that tattooed mouth, one that was begging to be punched again. Sif kept her fist under control, even while he purposely delayed his response, toying with her anticipation.

"I had a feeling you would come," he said. "The noble warrior on a linear path to rescue her prince from evil. In pursuit of her happily ever after, destined to prove that once again, unconditional love will conquer all. What she doesn't anticipate, through all her daring bravado, and the humorous clichés, is what actually awaits—"

"Enough," she cut him off. "I will not ask again."
His smile lingered like a bad aftertaste, telling her everything she didn't want to hear.

"Go down this hall," he said, pointing behind her. "Make a left at the shattered tank labeled 'Howard.' Work your way past the piles of debris, minding your step not to crush any small skittering things that pass between them. I would like to keep those intact. Once you've past that, make a right into the lab. He should be there. If he's not, try that dreadful tavern across the street."

"He's not," Sif said, surprised, "he's not your prisoner?"

Tivan arched his brow. "He stays by his own will." That was a taunt if she ever heard one. "Don't say I did not warn you."

Sif did not humor him with a reaction. Simply squared her jaw and turned on the heel of Eir's pathetically flimsy flats. She aimed for the hallway he directed her to, relaxing her posture once she was out of his view. He couldn't know how nervousness was creeping up on her, how his words did affect her. Why would Loki choose to stay? Was he truly lost to his cataclysmic purpose? Should she have listened to Odin?

"Be strong," said Heimdall's voice inside her head. She pressed on.

Upon reaching the mentioned tank, she noticed its plaque read more than just 'Howard,' but 'Howard the something,' who left behind a few white feathers in his cell. She had no capacity to wonder about it and took the passage to the left.

The debris was there as described, mounds of twisted metal and tangled cables, all serving to support withered flora clinging for height and for life. Eir would pity them, compelling herself to restore them to health. Sif didn't care. She continued down the hall.

She found it peculiar to see everything in shambles. This was not the look of purposeful remodeling, but of restoration, just as Gladsheim had done post Dark Elf attack. Strange that she was once again climbing over rubble and ducking under columns moments before confronting Loki. There was an unexpected comfort in that familiarity, a challenge she was accustomed to. She clung to it.

Passing the final mound with a stronger stride, she aimed for the doorway she presumed to be the lab. Her heart pounded in a rhythm she called excitement rather than anxiousness. She could sense a strong presence, hear the hum and swish of projected screens being sifted through, and she knew she had found him.

What was she going to say? She hadn't rehearsed any lines. She never could with Loki, he would always catch her off guard, render her tongue-tied, and not in the way she preferred. She breathed deeply and rounded the threshold.

The room was lit only by electronics, cold blue illumination bleeding over hard, mechanical surfaces, speckled in red and green bulbs. And there he was, stood at the center of it all, dark, lean, without his royal cloak to hide his form. His hair hung to his shoulder blades, its midnight sheen catching the hard light. Something flared inside her.

She was reminded of the first time she'd seen his hair long like this. He was in his cell and Frigga had caught her spying on the transmission from behind a pillar.

"I can arrange a visitation to his cell for you," the Queen had said after closing the projection.
Sif stuttered, trying to play it off. "That won't be necessary."

Frigga smiled sweetly. She always saw through Sif's denial, knowing her heart long before Sif ever did.

"He needs you," the Queen said. "He has become so lost."

The memory faded and Sif took a step deeper into the lab, bolstered, making her presence known.

Loki's hands stilled mid-datasearch. She watched his shoulders lift with an inhale, listened to the creaking of his leather. "You've come to take your revenge," he said, low and soft.

She was so relieved to hear his voice that it took a moment to comprehend his words. Those cold, distant words, as if their reconciliation had never happened.

"If I were in my right mind I would," she said.

He didn't move. The sound of her voice, or maybe it was her choice of words, seemed to surprise him. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

A dozen responses queued up, all honed for a warrior's tongue and all unsuitable to speak. She had to keep this light. She had no idea what to expect or how volatile he was.

After a moment, she said, "You owe me a dance," surprising herself. "Remember how insistent you were about dancing with me at your banquet?" That was a good plan, she thought. Remind him of their time in Glasir.

"My banquet has been cancelled."

"It doesn't matter."

His shoulders sank and his hands lowered from the screens. "You should not have come."

That stung.

"You shouldn't have come either." Her tone hardened.

"I had to."

"Why?"

"Sif," he pleaded, keeping his face hidden. "Return to Asgard. Nothing you can say will—"

"I love you." There was nothing to lose at this point.

Silence hung as he hung his head. The hum of the monitors filled the room.

"Won't you look at me?" She dared a step closer. He was almost within reach.

He swiped away the screens. They had pictures of the infinity stones and streams of data, none of which she had a chance to read. What was he planning? She dreaded to wonder. His schemes
always took him out of reach.

Finally, he turned and her breath caught. She knew he was ill but she'd never expected this. His eyes were sickly, red-veined and sunken into a face she hardly recognized beyond its sharp angles. The poison had taken an awful toll on his complexion, allowing it not the familiar Aesir beige or his natural blue, but a deathly gray. Wrinkles pulled heavily around his eyes and mouth, and his cheeks were more hollow than they had ever been. She opened her mouth, but words did not come.

"If I return to Asgard," he said. "I will be your enemy."

The even tone of his voice did not match his words or his haggard appearance. Sif found hope in that and watched silently as Loki took then her in. He first scanned her hair, then her bared shoulders, then the tear of her gown, then back up to her face. His eyes flashed a familiar sadness.

That was a good sign.

"You're only confirming what Odin believes of you," she said.

"Sif," he closed his eyes. "Just...go."

She didn't budge. She wouldn't accept defeat, not this soon, not without a fight. So she stood, searching deep through his layers of distortion, waiting for him to open his eyes again. When he did, she saw it, that familiar green. Despite the encroaching bleed of illness, she saw a pair of spring buds, pushing through winter's oppression.

She smiled, closing their distance and cupping his cheeks. "There you are," she whispered.

He grew fearful. "Sif, don't. You'll only make yourself—" She silenced him with a kiss.

He went rigid and attempted some of noise of protest, but his resistance was short-lived. She could feel, beneath her fingers, the fleeting tension in his body. She hummed as his mouth accepted hers and she chose not to be bothered by the unfamiliar texture of his cracked lips, or the dryness of his flesh. It was still him and he still felt right. Still smelled of leather, still tasted like winter's first snow.

His hands timidly found her waist then slide to her hips, relishing the silk of her gown. She knew he'd love it! He pulled her body flush and she hardened the kiss, nipping and tugging at his lips, her fingers properly tangling into his hair.

He then broke the kiss with a sharp inhale. Too soon.

"You shouldn't have done that," he breathed. "You'll only make yourself sick."

She shook her head, keeping their mouths close. She was through with being sick, especially when Angrboda was the cause.

She tried to reconnect the kiss but he stopped her, reacting to some kind of physical attack. She watched in curiosity as his eyes bled over with a new, natural red, and the exotic blue of his Jotun skin washed out the gray of decay. He shuddered as he always did while assuming his true form, so she slid her hands over his shoulders. The sight of him reminded her of their night by the river in Glasir and she brushed her fingers over his cheek.
"Loki?" she asked softly.

He trembled, holding his hand out to study the state of his skin. It stayed blue, despite the warmth of the room. His eyes locked onto her.

"Your magic," he said, awed.

"Is that what happened?" She blinked.

"How do you feel?" he asked urgently.

"Fine," she shrugged. "Why?"

"Something has been taken from me," he said, his mind racing. "I fear you have absorbed Angrboda's—No, wait...Odin's spell." He blinked in disbelief. "It's gone."

Sif arched her brow. "My magic overpowered Odin's?" She a hard time buying that. "What about the poison?"

Loki closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths, gauging the feel of each one. "It has been subdued," he said with an odd relief.

Sif could only stare, bewildered and fascinated. An idea then struck her and she smirked, curious what else was her magic capable of.

"I can't help wonder..." she said, letting her hands glide down his chest until they found his belt line, "if I could fully cure you by—"

"Sif!" His eyes popped as she loosened a buckle. "What are you doing? We can't do this here." He seized her wrists and couldn't help but smile. She knew she could get it out of him.

"Then come home with me," she said while pressing into him. "Be with your sons and your family. The prophecies do not bind you, nor does The Collector. You are free to live a life of peace."

His smile shrank then disappeared altogether. "I will never know such a life," he said, releasing her wrists. "There is no peace while Odin lives."

She wouldn't let his body go, no matter the dark cloud that had drifted back over him. "He told us what happened on the Bifrost. He regrets it deeply. He even blamed himself for your..." She trailed off.

"For my what?" he prompted.

She had no idea how to finish that thought. How does one describe anything about Loki?

"You tell me," she said. "What is all this? What are you doing here? Why must your purpose be to such a grand scale? Can you not be satisfied with all that you already possess?"

"Satisfaction is not in my nature," he said coldly, the words further chilled by his frosty appearance. "It never will be until I have fulfilled my birthright."
She inched back, pulling her hands from him. "To destroy Asgard. And everyone you love with it?"

"The slate will be wiped clean." His crimson eyes widened. "The nine realms reborn."

"You will kill us."

"Death does not await you, Sif, only transcendence. I will lift you to heights greater than Valhalla."

Her heart sank. What did that even mean? 'Transcendence beyond Valhalla.' "You are truly ill," she said. "The destiny of our people is not yours to control."

He pulled away from her, turning his back. "I don't expect you to understand. Not right away."

She pursued. "If it is fame you seek, you will find no greater satisfaction in it than you will with your family."

He shook his head. "If family is the ultimate priority Sif, then tell me, what justice do you do our son by risking your life on the frontlines?"

She would not let him turn this around on her. "I fight for the preservation of Asgard, to protect her future generations."

"All of whom will eventually die and file into the afterlife to stagnate in revelry. Is that the fate you wish for Ollerus? Eternal inebriation in the halls of Valhalla? I certainly don't. He is destined for much greater heights and the realms reborn will take him there. And you. And my idiot brother and anyone else who has proven themselves worthy."

Sif shook her head. These were the dreams of madness. "How can you know all of this?"

"While on Midgard," he kept a straight face, "I obtained a giant bag of fortune cookies."

She fought back a smile, shooing away the image of him marveling over little white strips of paper. "Be serious, Loki."

"Because it all lines up," he continued. "The prophetic dreams of my youth, and the visions gifted me from the Tessaract. You cannot understand until you align yourself with the stones. It won't make any sense unless you are exposed to at least one. Your eyes become opened."

This conviction was familiar. "You talked this way on our journey to Lyngvi, yet you spoke not of Ragnarok then."

"I didn't realize until Odin's final confession, that Ragnarok is Asgard's ultimate redemption."

"I don't..." She sighed, bringing her hand to her forehead. "I can't."

"Bring me the Tessaract and I will show you."

"Absolutely not," she snapped.

"We'll only borrow it," he said. "We very well can't store it here to have it stolen like the Aether was."
Her eyes popped. "The Aether is gone?"

"Sadly, yes."

"Dammit, Loki!" Her hand dropped. "I knew it. I knew it was a bad idea to deliver it here."

"If you knew, why did you follow through with my order?"

"Because I thought it was Odin sending us."

"Of course," he said with an eye roll. "Never question the mighty All-Father's judgement, no matter his obviously failing health."

"It was your order!"

"And you should have questioned it."

"I did!"

"Only after the fact, when it was too late."

"You will not shift the blame onto me, Silvertongue. It is your fault we lost the Aether."

His tone shifted contemplatively. "It's actually Carina's."

She grew exasperated. "Seriously, Loki? You'll blame the servant girl and not yourself?"

He didn't respond, just turned from her and slowly paced through a shift of thought. She sighed, running out of ideas. What was she thinking in coming here? He truly was lost.

"Sif," he said after a long moment. "I don't want to fight. You came all this way. Let us make the most of it." He closed their distance, surprising her by taking her hand. The feel of his Jotun skin was still strange: coarse, but alluring. "You say I owe you a dance?"

She tilted her head.

"There are places we can go on the strip," he added.

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you avoiding the issue by...asking me out?"

"Seeing how you're already dressed for the occasion," he eyed the length of her and smiled. "Yes. Why not?"

She stared a moment, contemplating. There was still so much unanswered, vast differences they had yet to resolve, but his smile was, well, it was so classically endearing. How could she say no?

Loki insisted she leave her weapons behind, saying they did nothing for the dress and were unnecessary in this community. She reluctantly obliged, figuring his magic and her fists were more than enough against any potential hostiles. They left the museum and sought out the poshest establishment Tivan could recommend, hoping for a suitable dance floor. What they found instead was an awkward crowd of interpretive dancers, moving robotically to a noise that could pass for a banshee's mating call. Was that, Sif cringed, supposed to be art? Loki wasn't impressed either, so
they passed it by, settling for a lower class joint that featured a new sound known as 'Footloose,' rumored to be a gift inspired by the 'Star Lords.' Sif had no clue what that meant, but she and Loki both recognized it as modern Midgardian and agreed they weren't going to find any better. So in they went, hand in hand, hoping for the best.

Loki motioned to the bar, figuring Sif would need some liquid courage, but she refused. She didn't dare risk inebriation on a mission so delicate. Her mind needed to be clear, her objective always at the forefront no matter the ease of their 'date.' She especially couldn't risk a lapse in judgement while dancing was expected of her. Her pride was at stake. Loki was more skilled in this area, having ballroom etiquette lessons forced upon him as a young prince. She now regretted the times she had made fun of him for it.

She strode with forced confidence onto the floor, weaving around jutting hips and flourishing arms that made it look so easy. Loki tugged her into their own space and directed her into a proper stance. The evidence of his royal upbringing could be so admittedly sexy. It reminded her of past royal banquets, when she would steal glances at his performance of formalities. Which was very distracting.

Needless to say, their first attempt across the floor did not go well. "Step with my feet not on them," he said with exasperation.

"Sorry," she barked. She was honestly trying her best but she couldn't get used to being led. Plus the inconsistent flashing of the club's lighting was making it impossible to focus on her footwork, not to mention the tempo of the music was incomprehensible. It wasn't steady and smooth like the melodies of Asgard. She was so out of her element.

"You're embarrassing me," Loki said, glancing around. "I have to live in this community."

She wanted to argue that, insisting he didn't have to live here, but she backed off. This was not the time or place. She wanted to keep things mellow, so she instead kept her eyes fixed on him, letting herself drift into the ease of admiring his looks. His pale skin illuminated with whatever color of light they were passing under, captivating her. Before they left the museum, he had cast a new disguising spell upon himself, saying he preferred not explain his change of skin color to the locals. Little did they know the difference between Odin's spell and Loki's. His skin was arguably the color it always was, but the untrained eye might not recognize a peace he now reflected from finally gaining control of his own appearance. It filed an edge that had been there for as long as she knew him, and made it impossible to pull her gaze away. He looked radiant.

"Thank the eternal," he said as the music changed. "A slow song. Can you at least manage rocking from side to side?"

The crowd around them shifted, the singles leaving the floor with rolling eyes while the couples smiled dreamily and wrapped their arms around each other.

"I'll knock you around from side to side," she teased lightly, sliding her hands over his shoulders. "Unless you put your arms around me."

He quirked his brow but did as ordered, bringing their bodies flush. His hands found the small of her back, a pleasant coolness in his touch, recalling all the right memories of him. The scoop of her dress hung low so he sneaked one hand beneath the fabric, placing it just above tacky.
Their warmth connected, swaying smoothly into the rhythm. All that was required of Sif's feet were slight turns and shifting of weight, something she could handle. The steps were simple, just like the moment. Neither spoke while time slowed around them, while the music moved in syncopation with dozens of other lovers all sharing their own moment, finding their own parallels in the lyrics. Sif closed her eyes felt every inch of where their bodies met. She was so at peace.

About halfway through the song, when the last of Loki's muscles had relaxed, he bowed his head, resting his mouth at the nape of her neck. His lips did not kiss but his hands slid hands up and crossed to her sides, arms embracing her in way that was...beyond romantic. It was more intense, needy, and possibly grateful. It reminded her of the embrace they shared on Fenrir's isle, only this time there was no storm to distract or no beastly children to tear him away. There were only the two of them. She breathed deeply and leaned her cheek against his head, his hair humid on her skin. Moments like these could sustain even the most weary soldier through a millennia of war.

The lyrics then gave way to an instrumental bridge, and she felt his breath preface words against her skin. She anticipated them.

He lifted his head enough to speak and said, quietly, "Is it too late to apologize?"

She opened her eyes. "For what?"

"For the bargain with my daughter."

Right. That. "No," she said.

He lifted his eyes to meet hers, solemnly and sincerely. "I'm sorry," he said.

She gazed at him, her internals fluttering while her body wanted to melt. He was so beautiful, and so exposed. Just for her. Impulses taking over, she clutched his neck and kissed him—needing him —until the song came to an end, dying into something unfortunately upbeat.

Parting their lips, she breathed, accepting reluctantly the dance was over yet longing for the night to continue. "Take us somewhere quiet?" she requested.

He smiled. The whirling lights caught a new twinkle in his eyes. "I know just the place."

They left the tavern and strolled arm-in-arm down the bustling thoroughfare. Sif had become less concerned with the looks people gave her dress and focused instead on ignoring the inevitable decision that faced her and Loki at the end of the night. She was too elevated to worry about anything now.

"Ollerus would love this," she said, referring to the diversity of Knowhere. There was skin, scales and fur in every color of the Bifrost.

"It gets old fast," Loki said, diverting them down an alley meant to be a shortcut. "The colors are the only thing brilliant in this colony."

A being suddenly leapt out from behind a dumpster, flinging threatening demands at them.

"A fine example stands before us," Loki added, coolly.

"What are you waiting for?" growled the stranger, brandishing a rusty knife in her three-fingered
hand. "Hand over the valuables or I take 'em myself, from your corpses."

Loki rolled his eyes while Sif studied the creature. It was difficult to make out her build beneath the loose and ragged cloak, but that didn't matter. Intimidation was not something Sif would let spoil her mood.

She gestured to Loki. "After you."

"No, I insist," he said, sliding his arm off her waist and stepping back. "You enjoy attacking women more than I."

She cocked a brow, turning back to the being to gauge her threat. The only flesh she could see was a slit around her eyes, enough to see beads of sweat forming. Hardly a challenge.

"This is going to look silly in a gown," Sif noted before kicking the knife from the alien hand and twisting into an attack stance. The creature yelped and took off running, much to Sif's disappointment. That was not a duel worth regaling to her comrades.

She looked down as she felt an indecent exposure on her thigh. "Oh, rats," she griped, lowering her fists. "I've torn my dress even more."

"That's not all you've torn," Loki said, tilting his head "Did she actually land a hit on you?"

Sif noticed as Loki was commenting that there was blood soaking through her dress. "Fantastic," she said. "This is a wound from the troll attack. My stitches must have slipped."

"Good," Loki said. "I thought for a moment your skill had faltered."

"I could dispel that thought with a kick to your gut," she threatened, fussing with her dress. It was beyond help, torn and now stained. "I look a wreck," she said with defeat. The blood was spreading more, and the wound actually stung now that her adrenaline was subsiding. This was not the direction she wanted the night to go.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Loki said, giving her an odd look.

"I am fine," she lied. "Where is the nearest textile vendor?" She placed her hand over the wound and attempted walking but two steps in had her stumbling.

Loki shook his head. "Just admit you need a medic."

She tried to stand up straight but the pain was too sharp and she hissed through her teeth.

"I'm guessing," he said while offering support, "you ignored Eir's orders to avoid strenuous activity."

Relenting to accept his help, she hobbled to the closest crate, leaning against it and making a frustrated noise while curling around her wound.

"You say," she strained, "you know a medic here? I cannot make the journey back to Asgard like this." Nor can she engage in other activities.

Kneeling at her side, he drew a dagger and cut a slit in her dress. "I do know a medic," he said,
spreading the fabric to view her wound. "But I doubt he'll assist us after the trick I played on him." He put his dagger away.

"Why am I not surpris—hey!" Sif protested as Loki hoisted her in his arms. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking care of you," he said. "Now hold on to me, shut up, and be romantic. I can sew you back up if you don't worsen the wound by struggling like a roped pig."

"Loki, really, it's noth—ow!" Her body argued with her.

"Sif," was all he needed to say while giving her a look. With those eyes. Those hypnotic eyes.

"Fine," she sighed, wrapping her arms around his shoulder.

He carried her out of the alley and back to the thoroughfare, still en route to the quiet place they set out for. They stopped only once to grab an aid kit from all-night the variety store, Sif fishing the credits from Loki's tunic while the clerk stared in bewilderment. Loki never once set her down. It became amusing after a while, the looks they got. Sif would never let this happen in Asgard, getting mistaken for some damsel in distress, but this wasn't Asgard and she had nothing to prove to these aliens. There was only one purpose in coming to Knowhere and his body felt wonderful against hers. She hardly noticed the throb of her wound, or at least she pretended not to notice, combating the pain by resting her head on his shoulder and feeling instead the throb of his pulse. She wondered if Heimdall could see them or if Loki had a cloaking spell active. Then, she decided, she didn't care either way. She closed her eyes and nuzzled into his neck, a smile stretching her cheeks.

The noises surrounding them lessened with each of Loki's purposeful steps, and soon there was nothing but the distant buzz of the nightlife. It floated up beneath them and Sif opened her eyes when she felt a breeze. Loki was taking her into a tower, like a lighthouse for space craft, perched high and isolated from the activity of the colony, somewhere near the harvested titan's left eye, she guessed. They ascended on a spiral staircase that wrapped around the outside. The view was astonishing, comparable to the view at the observatory but with an entirely new arrangement of celestial bodies. It was all so romantic.

Once at the top, Loki eased her down at the northerly window, in what would have been a beam of blinding light if the tower was still in use. There was a mat and a pillow on the floor. This was not his first time here.

"How did you know of this place?" She asked, sitting up on an elbow. He knelt by her side and drew his dagger.

"I found it the same way I found our hideaways in Alfheim," he said while cutting away more fabric of her gown. "I asked the locals where the most popular places are in town and then go the opposite way as directed."

Classic Loki, she mused, watching his hands while he attended to her wound. Her flesh stung but his cool touch was soothing, and she liked the meticulous way his long fingers moved. Her head tilted absently.

After a moment, he peered up at her. "Don't watch me," he said. "I brought you up here for the view. There is much to see out there," he glanced at it. "Alien worlds, distant galaxies, primordial
secrets. One would need a billion lifetimes to explore them all."

"Sounds exhausting," Sif said while scanning the expanse. "Ollerus would love it." Her eyes fell back on him. "I wish you could see him with Fenrir. They are brothers through and through."

"That's not always a good thing," he said with an amused edge. His voice then softened. "I do hope our paths will cross again. I regret how little time we had together."

"They will." She had to believe that.

Conjuring a disinfecting spell for her wound, Loki fell silent. Sif watched in curiosity as his hands birthed emerald sparks and her breath caught when they glittered across her flesh, leaving a wake of green-lit goosebumps. After the light died, Loki began removing what was left of her old stitches. The spell must have had a numbing agent because Sif couldn't feel anything but his electric proximity to her exposed flesh. She breathed deeply.

He grew contemplative in the silence, then broke it by asking, hesitantly, "Has Ollerus forgiven me?"

Sif exhaled. "For what?"

"For lying to him about his magic."

She didn't want to think about that now. It wasn't even her place to answer such a question.

"If you come home with me," she said. "You can ask him yourself."

"Sif, please," Loki said. "I've already explained why I can't."

Her voice edged up. "I don't accept that."

"Because you don't understand."

"Because it is madness!"

So much for romance.

Loki shook his head, biting back his response, the air around them cooling. Silence now stretched like a gaping chasm. They should have placed bets for how quickly they could spoil the mood with arguing. With a sinking feeling, Sif watched as Loki dug out a needle and thread from the kit, his movements jerky, frustration obvious.

"To speak my mind," he said, "will doom our conversation to circles. I'll serve you better with this needle by sewing my own lips shut."

"Please don't do that," she said. "Your lips serve perfectly fine without words." That made him smile, and she returned the smile but impending sadness hung between them, a shared resignation. Loki was right. His philosophies would summon more argument, reminding them just how clashing they were at a very fundamental level, and that would crumble all that the night had built. Sure, there was always the option to search for middle ground, make compromises and alter perspectives, but Sif had a feeling they wouldn't get very far with that before a heated debate had their bodies entangled in the best way possible to work out differences. And then what? More
avoidance of the bilgesnipe in the room while they floated back to the museum, surrendering to the inevitable goodbye.

To sync up in the manner that lovers are conventionally supposed to, one of them would have to abandon the very essence of what makes them tick, and to do that would take away a vital spark between them, therefore extinguishing what made their love unique. Sif would not bend on her convictions, nor did she wish to see Loki tamed into what Asgard expected of a prince. He was chaos and he was comfortable in that, and when he was comfortable was when he igniting her passion the most. During their journey in the wilds, when he said "you always did like me best at my worst behavior," she now realized he had been spot on. She couldn't deny that anymore. Yes, she loved him for his devotion to his children, and yes she loved him for his brilliance and his beauty, but that wasn't the core of it. She loved him for their differences. She loved him for exactly who he was, and the conflict he aroused in her heart. For how can their be war without conflict? How can The Lady Sif shine for who she was without war?

"Loki," she said, breaking the silence. "I love you."

His gaze lifted and his eyes softened as he heard all that was being spoken in her three little words. She sat up to be close to him, and he said, "I love you too, Sif," and they kissed, sweetly, sadly, accepting, with laughter and perhaps a tear. She was going to miss him to a painful degree.

And speaking of pain, her would chose then to bleed all over his lap and she had to lay back down and suffer through his hands upon her flesh which was threatening to tease her into a madness that rivaled his.

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Thor couldn't settle on being relieved or incredulous at hearing the news, so he instead commented teasingly at her outfit.

"I had limited options in Knowhere," Sif griped, awkwardly adjusting her 'booty shorts,' as Tivan coined them. There was only one clothing store opened on her and Loki's walk back from the lighthouse and it catered to the locals who stayed up until sunrise. The closest ensemble she could find to her color scheme made her look like—how did Loki put it—an 'abstract peppermint candy that's sprouted legs,' whatever that meant.

"How long will you be gone?" Thor asked more seriously. She could see doubt in his eyes.

"As long as it takes," she stated softly.

He broke their gaze, turning to the banquet table and picking through the fruit. Nothing seemed appealing to him.

"You don't trust him, do you." she said. "Nor do you approve my decision."

He met her gaze again. "I trust your instincts, my friend. It is a solid plan and I admire your resilience." He forced a smile, betraying all of his conflict.

"Thor," she pleaded, moving to him and placing her hand on his forearm. "Tell me what bothers you?"

His smile softened, and he placed his hand over hers. "My father and I," he began. "We were
planning on conditioning Ollerus for the throne." Sif blinked. "Now I must maintain the title until your mission is complete and postpone my return to Midgard."

"My son," Sif paused to make sure she heard him correctly. "A Lokison, has been chosen for the throne?"

"If Ollerus desires it," Thor said, "and if he continues to meet the qualifications while we train him, your son will leave his mark on history as the first Jotun blood to rule Asgard."

Sif was speechless, trying to imagine how Ollie would take this news. She had a hunch her son had caught Odin's eye but she never imagined this would happen so soon. It was wonderful news, yet, she wasn't certain they were ready for it. Ollie had only just left Glasir. He was set on exploration, unwaveringly committed to their mission.

"Sif," Thor interrupted her thoughts. "Your silence has spoken much."

She met his eyes and admitted, "He will not want it now. Not this soon."

Thor sighed. "I had a feeling."

Sif sighed too and there was a stretch of silence and telling glances. "It troubles me," she began, "to know of your unhappiness. Why can't you visit Midgard and leave the throne to the committee? They are more than capable."

"You know how Asgard values its figurehead," Thor said with an eye-rolling tone.

"Let one of the Three step up," Sif suggested but Thor shook his head.

"Worry not, my comrade. We will work something out." He forced another smile and squeezed her arm, causing her heart to sink for him. She knew how badly he missed Jane and it bothered her to know she couldn't be here for him right now. "Now," he said, "tell me where your first stop will be that I might direct Heimdall to keep a closer watch on you."

Squeezing his hand gratefully, she went on to lay out her itinerary.

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(Back on Knowhere, before Sif’s return to Asgard)

"Either we buy you something here," Loki said, growing exasperated, "or you go naked."

Sif cringed at the neon lit window display. The clothes they had stretched over the mannequins looked like the remains of deflated party balloons. "Well there isn't much difference between my options is there?" She resorted to fussing with her gown, trying once again to conceal the rips and stains with clever knotting. She only managed to worsen the tears.

"Give it up," Loki said while forcing her inside. The only appealing items in this shop were the tall boots, yet somehow Loki talked her into the dressing room with a number of small red things. They emerged from the shop shortly after his comment about leggy peppermint, which had been his nicest critique of everything she had tried on. He also suggested she buy the silver-winged tiara that complemented the get-up, but that was answered with a threatening glare.
"How does that vendor sleep at night," Sif growled as they strolled in the direction of the museum. "Charging so much for," glancing down her body, she shook her head, "so little."

A group of miners on their way to the early shift passed by, gawking. "You're the only one who seems to mind," Loki said with a smirk. He then snaked his hand beneath her scarlet cape, tugging her closer to him.

With every emerging ray of simulated sunlight, their time together grew shorter. The morning was inevitable so they did their best to steer conversation away from hostile topics, such as prophecies, Odin, Thor, and well, there wasn't much of anything substantial they could discuss civilly, so that limited them to friendly teases and stolen kisses, which always came too easily with Loki.

As they entered the museum, the florescent lights of the foyer were a harsh awakening. Loki trailed off from his idle chat, and Sif felt a sinking in her chest. Her departure was imminent, and she would be returning alone. They turned to face each other, one set of hands entwining, eyes meeting with a shared sadness.

"Make certain," Loki began, heavily, "to have Eir check your wound upon return. The journey may loosen my stitching. I'm hardly an expert—"

She pushed her finger to his lips, drawing closer and feeling a tightening in her throat. She couldn't speak, fearing her words might convince them they were making the wrong decision. She withdrew her hand, inching to his mouth, and he ducked to meet hers. Their lips were about to connect, when the elevator door swished open.

"I must have your body after you die."

Leave it to Tivan to spoil the moment.

"I will never die," came a familiar growl.

Sif and Loki turned in unison to see Tivan emerge from the lift with large and furry company. It was Fenrir.

"My sister is queen of the damned," boasted the wolf.

"Fenrir," Loki said, delighted. "What are you doing here?"

"Your sister," Tivan replied as the beast moved ahead of him, aiming for Loki, "has the most impressive moves."

Father and son connected as another familiar voice emerged across the room, from the gallery door. "Father!"

Sif spun around, planting a hand on her hip. "Why am I not surprised?"

Ollerus dashed across the room, doing a double take at Sif, saying, "what the Hel are you wearing, Mother?," before crashing into Loki with a hug.

"It appears," Tivan provided, eyeing Sif, "she is wearing booty shorts."

"My sons," Loki muffled through teenage limbs and fur, "I thought I would never—wait," he
paused, whipping his head at Tivan. "What did you say about my daughter?"

"Let it go, darling," Sif said with a brush to his back before she wrapped her arms around Ollerus. "How did you get here?"

"Heimdall," the boy stated, proudly. He then turned to Loki. "Are you coming home, Father?"

Sif watched as Loki's smile shrank and he searched for the right words. She considered answering for him, perhaps to lighten the blow, but decided it wasn't her place to speak for him. Ollerus needed to hear it from him first.

"This is my home for now," Loki confessed and both Ollerus's and Fenrir's shoulders sank. "Lend me your ears," he said, a little brighter, "and I will explain. Perhaps you will understand better than she is capable of."

Sif huffed, about to protest when Tivan stepped up to her, pulling her aside. "Might I have a word with you?"

She glanced between the two men, making to argue but eventually agreed with a sigh, looking over her shoulder at the mismatched family while Tivan escorted her into the gallery.

"Quite the reunion we have here," he mused, stopping them at the bar. "Would you like a drink?"

"No," Sif said. "State your business."

He wiped clean a previously-used chalice, inspecting it for spots. "I see you've made him pretty again."

Sif shrugged. "My magic's kind of awesome."

"Indeed," he agreed, setting the glass down and thumbing through his liquor bottles. "And just look at how he behaves with—"

"Magic plays no part in that," she interrupted. "He loves his children by nature."

"That is not what I'm saying." He pulled a cork from his bottle of choice, holding it out for her to smell. She declined. "Since you've arrived, I've noticed a change in him, beyond the superficial." Sif's brow knitted while he poured his drink. "Walk with me," he said, guiding her towards a set of large bay doors. Sif went along with him, uncertain what he was up to but figuring it best if she gave Loki ample time to explain things to Ollie and Fenrir. Plus, she wasn't exactly in a hurry to leave now that the kids were here.

"I have a proposition for you," he said and the doors rattled open as they approached, slowly revealing a craft on the other side.

Sif ducked her head to see more of its details. "I don't understand."

Tivan waited for the doors to fully retract before explaining, swirling the contents of his drink and gazing with pride at the spaceship before him. Sif shook her head, looking at him for answers.

"I want you to help Loki collect the infinity stones," he stated, and Sif thought for a moment he was joking, until he continued. "No matter what you and your family say to him, he will not return
to Asgard until he has them. His conviction is as obstinate as your love for him."

Sif arched her brow. "Why would I do this? My loyalty is to the protection of Asgard. I will not enable his convictions."

"I'm not asking you to aid him in Ragnarok, my dear, I only ask you collect the stones. In doing so, you are protecting Asgard."

She made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. "We would ultimately be collecting them for you. How is that protecting Asgard?"

"Because if the stones fall in the clutches of Thanos, or even Loki's solely, Asgard's destruction is imminent."

"Who is Thanos?" Sif asked.

"The puppeteer of the attack on New York. It is only a matter of time before he comes for the Tessaract. And when he does, he'll leave a wake of destruction."

Sif narrowed her eyes. "So you expect me to believe you are the lesser of three evils that can be trusted with the stones?"

"Essentially, yes." He sipped his drink, cool and confident to an obnoxious but almost convincing degree. "Look," he continued, "you don't need to worry about what happens once we've collected them all. One mission at a time. Only concern yourself with the acquisition, and with keeping your lover in-line, which your magic is clearly apt at doing."

This sounded all wrong, but Sif hated to admit that she was starting to cave, lured by an alternative she never knew was available: procrastination of the inevitable, in the form of outer space adventure that would ultimately be for the good of Asgard. Or at the very minimum, it would allow her access to cataclysmic power, thereby keeping it out of the wrong hands. Wouldn't it? "You will trust Loki and I with this ship, to scour other worlds for these stones?"

Tivan smiled with a subtle victory. "Yes."

She stared at him, her thoughts a pendulum between Asgard, Loki, her duty, her passion. Her son. Ollerus would say go for it. No, he'd want to come. Which meant Fenrir would come too.

Her gaze dropped to Tivan's drink, and she spoke in a relenting tone, "May I have some of that?"

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"Your intentions are good," Ollerus said, his golden hair splayed over dense black fur, "but you're still crazy."

Loki laughed from beside him, his head also sunken into Fenrir's side, his hands clasped over his chest. The wolf seemed to be content—with eyes closed and chin resting on front paws—to serve quietly as furniture. "At least you're more understanding than your mother," Loki said.
The three were aware of Sif and Tivan's re-entry into the room but we're too caught up in the warm reunion and prickly debate to offer them more than a glance.

"How do you justify gambling so many lives on the hope of a rebirth?" Ollerus stared in bewilderment at the ceiling, his hands doing part of the talking. "Why initiate it? Can't you just let Asgard play out its own events?"

Loki paused, losing his smile but keeping a light tone. "If I do that, then it will be annihilated by him."

Ollerus turned. "Who, Odin?"

"No," Loki met his eyes, "the Purple Hand."

Both rose and fell with Fenrir's breathing, staring in conviction, and understanding. Ollerus remembered exactly—from Loki's recount of his time with the Chitauri—just how seriously this mysterious antagonist should be taken.

"That must be a big hand," Fenrir chimed in with his humming growl. "Sounds delicious."

"If he acquires the stones," Loki continued, "and the gauntlet, he will wipe the nine realms from existence, stripping them of their magic of rebirth."

Ollerus narrowed his eyes. "You know because..."

"He told me," Loki said, growing distant. "He said if I failed him, my world would suffer the consequences."

A wash of sympathy fell over the boy's face, then it shifted to admiration. "Yet you still crossed him."

Loki arched his brow with a subtle smirk. "Of course I did."

"Well played, Father," Fenrir added.

"Thank you, Fenrir."

Ollerus shifted to another approach. "What if," he began, "what if I was king of Asgard, like you wanted me to be. Would you destroy it then?"

Loki's thumb twitched while his mind worked, and then sadness fell upon his brow. "I have abandoned that hope," he said softly.

"But what if?" Ollerus pressed.

"Then..." Loki now fumbled for a response, "then you would achieve even greater heights in your rebirth."

"Translated," Fenrir clarified, "he'd still kill you. By the gods, do I love my twisted family."

Ollerus's face twisted while he took it all in. Sif began fearing what effect this was having on him
and stepped forward to intervene, but Tivan grabbed her arm, a slight shake of his head saying 'let
this play out.'

"Would you fight me?" Ollerus asked in a darker voice.

"No," Loki shook his earnestly. "Surtr will consume your body in flames. Along with all the others
not defeated by Jormungand, or Hela."

"Mother too?"

"Most certainly," Loki said with a glint in his eye. "I can see her now, glaive in hand, hurdling
herself into the fray with a piercing war cry. She will go out in a most fantastic blaze of—"

"You bet your arse I will," Sif crossed her arms with a nod.

Ollerus caught her eye with a look of exasperation. "Mother, please tell me you two figured out a
cure for him. He's talking crazy."

Sif sighed, looking to Loki who only shrugged innocently, not helping.

She and Tivan both let their gaze linger on him, noticing something new, briefly exchanging looks
that acknowledged how much healthier he looked now than before they left room. Sif wouldn't
have believed he could shine anymore than he had on the dance floor, but leave it to Ollerus's
involvement to surprise her again.

Tivan turned with her to confide. "He has never looked so healthy," he whispered.

"Ignoring his words, it's as if he's not even poisoned anymore," Sif agreed. "Could his children...be
his cure?"

"Only death, and the consumption of his heart by another will be his cure. The children merely
subdue him, like you do." Tivan rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Is the boy's magic passive like
your own?"

"Yes," Sif said, "Fenrir's is not, though. He uses it like Loki does."

"You know I can hear you both," Fenrir spoke with a raised volume. "My senses detect all."

"What are they talking about?" Ollerus said.

"Magic," said the wolf.

Sif laid a resolute look into Tivan. "I'll do it," she said. "I accept your mission. But only if the
children can come."

"Fine," Tivan said. "I can see their strengths will be of use to you. You'll make a formidable team.
Just be sure...to regularly vacuum up the fur. It is custom upholstered."

"Now what are they talking about?" Ollerus sat up. "What mission?"

"No idea," Fenrir said.
Loki peeled himself to his feet, stating, "I know." He approached Sif and Tivan, arms head out in question. "Do I not have a say in this?"

"Of course you do," Sif said to him. "But I doubt you will say no." She then called out, "Ollerus, Fenrir! How would you like to join your father and I on an intergalactic scavenger hunt?"

Ollerus blinked and Fenrir lifted his head, glaring. "Don't joke about things like that, Mother," the boy said.

"Yeah, lady," griped the wolf. "What's wrong with you, getting his hopes up like that."

"She wouldn't joke about that," Loki said to them with his eyes fixed on her.

"Your father's right," Sif said, approaching the two. "In the best interest of Asgard, I wish to obtain the infinity stones that I might keep them out of evil's clutches. And the best way to obtain them is to form proper alliances."

Sif smiled proudly while Loki walked up behind her and spun her into an embrace.

"Ew," Fenrir said when their lips met, laying his head back down.

Ollerus sprang up, jolting his parents from their kiss by wrapping his arms around them both. "I know it sounds corny," he prefaced excitedly, "but I'm just going to say it. This is a dream come true."

"Yep," Fenrir murmured. "That was corny."

Sif laughed, keeping an arm hooked around Loki while tugging her son's cheek to her lips. Her heart fluttered wildly. Never could her hopes have reached such heights as the joy she was feeling now. She knew it was only a short term solution to an unpredictable destiny, but it was enough. More than she ever imagined.

Tivan still loomed on the outskirts of the family reunion, strolling up to Fenrir. "So, about that acquisition of your hide," he said. "That is...once your spirit has departed."

"Father," Fenrir called out. "May I eat him?"

Loki peered up from his group embrace, saying, "not yet." Tivan cocked his brow at him. "He first needs to show me how to fly our craft. In the meantime, Fenrir, try to come up with a name for her."

"How about Angrboda?" Fenrir suggested flatly.

Sif and Ollerus exchanged awkward glances while Loki's face fell to his palm.

"Tact isn't one of his strong points," Ollerus noted diplomatically.

"You don't say," Loki droned.

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Thor's embrace made breathing a futile ambition, and Sif relished every moment of it, pressing her cheek fondly to his scruff. They separated, keeping forearms entwined.

"I thank you, Sif, for stepping up where I had not the strength to," he said warmly. "I will miss you. All of you."

"And I you, my brother," Sif said, honored beyond words. "But fret not, we will pass through Asgard again soon enough."

He smiled. "How will we contact you until then?"

"I will provide you the hailing frequency for our ship," Sif said. "Her name is Legacy."

Thor nodded once. "That is a good name."

***

"It's a stupid name," Fenrir barked, his voice leaking into the cockpit as Sif entered, shaking her head. She shut the door behind her, cutting off her son's defensive remark.

"Please tell me our first stop is a short journey away," she said, flopping into Loki's lap. "Those two don't do well in confined quarters."

"They'll be fine," Loki assured lost in his star charts whose screens he had to reposition since her body blocked his view. She was still wearing her peppermint costume, sans cape. Strangely enough, it had grown on her, its oddly stretchy fabric admittedly more comfortable than leather and steel. Loki hardly minded a lap covered in bared legs either. His hand found her thigh, thumb absently petting her flesh while he plotted their course.

"How was the meeting with Thor?" he asked.

"Better than expected."

He looked at her, waiting explanation.

"He shared with me," Sif began, "some rather...unexpected yet wonderful news. He and Odin are reserving the throne for Ollerus."

She watched as a deluge of reactions swept across Loki's features, beginning with doubt and fear, softening into disbelief and eventually spreading with joy—and of course, a conniving touch of mischief.

"Once we help," she continued, "get the travel bug out of his system, which could take a while—"

"A long while," Loki added, knowingly.

"He will be our King," Sif concluded, full of hope.
Loki responded with a kiss and she gladly accepted it, floating with their shared joy like their ship in the edges of Yggdrasil's system, awaiting coordinates, soaking in the view. They knew there would be asteroid fields ahead of them, dangerous planets with hostile creatures, philosophical clashes worsened by clausrophobia, and a vengeful and powerful being seeking to glove his purple hand in gold and gems and destroy everything they held sacred. It was going to be Sif's best mission yet, complete with adventure, danger, challenge, and most importantly, with those dearest to her. Fate may have convoluted plans for her family's destiny, but it would never diminish the beautiful simplicity of what she had right here and right now.

She would treasure it always.

Roll Credits

with music by The Lightning Seeds

Chapter End Notes

Here is a link to the complete playlist for those who dug the tunes:
http://grooveshark.com/#!/playlist/Legacy/92355512

End Notes

The canon I draw from is mostly Marvel Cinemaverse and Norse Mythology. I love the bizarre stories of the ancient lore and intend to weave in as many references as I can. I also take a lot creative liberties when translating the canon to fit in a Marvel world (and my headcanon). Norse Myth is so beautifully open to interpretation and I abuse the Hel out of that right!

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