Flight
by steelcrash

Summary

After learning of his true heritage, Loki flees to the wilds of Jotunheim, setting into motion events that will change his life, and Thor’s, forever.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The day of Thor's coronation. Loki stifled a yawn, ignoring the stern glower from his father, smiling back instead at his mother. The ambassador from Alfheim was talking, droning on about the gift the Ljosalfar had provided for the son of Odin. It was a large, polished, slightly egg-shaped lump of gold. Gold, Loki mused, was not something Thor needed. His brother was being handed the adoration of the masses along with the throne of the most powerful and peaceful of the nine realms.

The elf finished his speech, and it was time for Thor's ascension to the throne. Their father started his speech, and Loki didn't stifle the grin he gave his brother as he winked at his younger sibling. Loki spared their mother a glance, where she was trying to catch Thor's gaze, her smile still in place but the look in her eyes suggesting they were both in for a lecture after the coronation was over.

Except the speech was interrupted by a commotion, and their father his sons to follow him to the armory.

One week later

No laughter, no mischief, only silence. Loki sat on the steps, where only days before he'd been beside Thor as his brother plotted their disastrous trip to Jotunheim. The sound of footsteps and voices coming toward the banquet hall caught his attention. Loki stood to leave, but Volstagg suddenly blocked his way, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"You only did what you thought was right," he said. "The execution was not perfect, but your heart was in the right place."

Volstagg clasped his shoulder, and Loki met his gaze for an instant, and the warrior gave him a smile before turning his attention to the food-laden table beside them. A simple gesture, and Loki felt something ease in his chest. Volstagg, ever the peacemaker, and yes, his friend, no matter how much Loki tried denying it since Thor's banishment and finding out about his true origin.

Except the tension came back when Sif stepped into his path, flanked by Fandral and Hogun. He'd been avoiding her, and just his luck. . .

"This is is all your fault," Sif said, slapping Loki.

Volstagg stood, ready to step between prince and warrior, but Fandral stayed Sif's hand before she could strike Loki again.

"Loki is still your prince," Fandral aid. "We share equally in the blame. Thor refused to listen to his brother, or you, Sif. He brought this on himself."

"That may be so, but Loki's always been envious of Thor," Sif said.

Loki's gaze snapped to the female warrior.

"How well you know me, Sif," Loki said. "Yes, please tell me of how I envy Thor's boorishness, his vanity, his disregard for everything our father tried to teach him."

"You think you would be a better king?" Sif asked.
“For Asgard's sake, yes,” Loki snarled. “But I've never wanted the throne.”

With that, he walked away.

“Liar,” Sif said.

Loki stopped, balling his fists, but thinking better of a retort, he kept going. Another argument was not worth his time. And angry and lost, Loki let his steps lead him to the armory. The gold nugget drew his attention, and he trailed his fingers over the stone.

“What do you know what that is?”

Loki jerked his hand back, hearing Odin’s voice.

“A gold rock,” Loki said.

“I'm surprised your mother hasn't yet revealed its true nature to you,” Odin said.

“Does it matter?” Loki asked.

“It does, in a way,” Odin said. “It’s a rare and precious gift the light elves bestowed upon Asgard, but Thor will have to prove as worthy of it as he will Mjolnir. But enough of your brother. Neither of us came her to discuss him.”

Loki ignored the comment, placing his hands on the Casket of Ancient Winters, and it glowed.

Power surged through his veins like cold fire. He watched his hands change to blue. They faded to their normal appearance as he let go, and turned to face Odin once more.

“Am I cursed?”

“No,” Odin said, coming down the steps.

Loki stepped away from the casket, turning his attention once again to the gold stone the elves had brought to Thor's coronation. It glinted in the light.

“What am I?” Loki asked.

“You are my son,” his father answered.

“What more than that?” Loki said, staring down at his hands as they turned blue. “The Casket wasn't the only thing you took from Jotunheim that day, was it?”

“No. In the aftermath of the battle I went into the temple and I found a baby. Small for a giant's offspring, abandoned, suffering, left to die. Laufey's son.

“Laufey's son?”

“Yes,” Odin said.

“Why?” Loki said. “You were knee-deep in Jotun blood. Why would you take me?”

“You were an innocent child,” Odin said.

“No. You took me for a purpose,” Loki said. “What was it? TELL ME.”

“I thought we could unite our kingdoms one day, bring about an alliance, bring about permanent
“What?” Loki said.

“But those plans no longer matter,” Odin said.

“So I am no more than another stolen relic, locked up here until you might have use of me?” Loki asked.

“Why do you twist my words?” Odin said.

“You could have told me what I was from the beginning,” Loki said. “Why didn't you?”

“You're my son. I only wanted to protect you from the truth,” Odin said.

“What, because I...I...I am the monster parents tell their children about at night?” Loki said.

“No...No,” Odin said, clutching at his chest, sinking down on the steps.

“You know, it all makes sense now, why you favored Thor all those years, because no matter how much you claim to love me, you could never have a Frost Giant sitting on the throne of Asgard!” Loki accused.

He watched as his father collapsed, and he turned, hand brushing against the stone. It inexplicably warmed at his touch. Cracks appeared under his fingers, and the stone broke into pieces. Something flopped out, wings flapping, and Loki caught it before it hit the ground. It mewled, red eyes locking with his own, and he knew she was hungry, cold, and why wasn't he doing anything about either of those problems? She started thrashing him with her wings and tail, and Loki shushed her, wrapping his coat around her, and that seemed to placate her for the moment. She stopped thrashing, and bumped her head against his chin, crooning as he yelled for the guards.
Chapter 2

Flight

Chapter 2—Miscalculation

Disclaimer: I do not own the Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Loki cloaked himself and the hatchling with his magic when the two Einherjar entered, and he
watched long enough to make sure they were going to help Odin, and he slipped past, heading for
his chambers. He entered, setting the dragonet down on his bed.

"Stay," he said, and she cocked her head at him, chirping, the set her attention to preening while
Loki turned his attention to other matters. He grabbed his hunting knapsack, tossing it down beside
her, the grabbed a bag he'd enchanted (bigger on the inside and all that), stuffing inside some clothes,
his winter cloak. He picked a few books he decided he might need, tucking them into the bag. He
grabbed his knives, threw his bed furs in the bag. Everything he might need, he hoped.

Settling his bags and bow on his back, he picked up the hatchling, who let out a startled squeak.

"We have to go, little one," Loki said, cradling her in his arms. "We're going to Jotunheim."

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The portal spat Loki out, and he landed on his knees, and the hatchling clawed at him, mewling
piteously as he fought to stand against the wind and driving snow. His feet under him, Loki took
heed of his surroundings. They were in Thrymheim, deep in the mountains. The abandoned fortress
city was desolate, ruined. A good place to hide. Who would think to look for him in Jotunheim? It
was the last place he figured anyone would consider, if they even cared. They way he'd taken to the
frozen realm was hidden to his mother and even Heimdall.

The city was considered cursed by the Jotnar, according to the legends he'd been taught as a child.
Bordered by one of the largest forests of the realm, any sane being, Jotun, Aesir or otherwise, would
avoid it. Not him, and he had good reason to never go back to Asgard. The creeling of the dragonet
brought him back to his senses, and he set about finding shelter, eventually picking one of the least
damaged buildings on the edge of the city.

Conjuring a fire, Loki sat down beside his companion.

"What am I going to do with you?"

She mewed, butting him.

"Hungry? I'll have to do something about that," he said, grabbing his pack, rummaging around for
jerky. He offered it to the hatchling, and though he could feel how ravenous she was, she gently took
the piece from his fingers, wolfing it down, then opening her mouth for more. The process continued
until the meat was down the creature's maw.

Loki stood, trying to balance his companion in one arm while arranging his furs and cloak as a nest.
He laid her down, and she curled into a ball, sighing in contentment. The hatchling was satisfied for
the moment, but what was he going to do?

He had some food in his other bag, not enough for long, and he'd have to hunt. Now he had the time
to contemplate his actions, Loki knew he hadn't planned very well for his long-term survival. Then again, he'd never been in a situation like he was in now. Before, he was always with Thor, or some combination of his brother, Sif, Fandral, Hogun and Volstagg. Oh, he'd been in trouble on his own before, but never like this. There was no one coming for him this time, not if he could help it.

He wasn't what he'd always thought. He wasn't Aesir, and his father, no, Odin was not his father. Odin lied. Instead, he was a monster, the very nightmare only days before Thor vowed to destroy. Loki knew he was different. He'd always known. Pale and dark-haired while most of the Aesir were golden, like Thor. He was slender but strong, and didn't fight with the brute strength of the other Aesir. He favored stealth, speed and distance over bashing his enemies. It kept him safer on the battlefield, and allowed him to better concentrate on the whole situation rather than one enemy at a time. How many times had it saved himself, Thor and the others? More times than he cared to count, and Thor would ever admit.

Thor. Gone only a few days, but Loki felt his absence like he was missing a limb. He had lied to Sif about envying his brother. He didn't envy Thor the throne—such power was a fearsome thing to consider, but he hoped, with time, Thor would shoulder the burden with wisdom and compassion.

Odin had called Thor vain and cruel, charges Loki wouldn't deny. He'd also called his son arrogant and stupid, which again, Thor was. Then again, the biggest problem was Thor's lack of forethought. His brother was a brilliant tactician when it came to the battlefield and getting what he wanted, but not so good at considering others or the consequences of his actions. Loki was the one usually left cleaning up Thor's messes. He kept Thor out of trouble with their father, and sometimes Thor returned the favor when they were younger, before his brother became so arrogant.

Oh, Loki knew people considered him arrogant, and his pride in himself and his abilities rubbed them the wrong way. He swore to himself he didn't care what others thought, but that people could consider Thor's own arrogance acceptable while his own was not hurt. But he never showed it, instead turning others' insecurities against them, telling the truth, twisting it, but they never truly listened. They called him Lie-smith and Silvertongue. Better to let them believe what they wanted, when the truth was so much harder to face.

Like the facts staring him in the face. What was he supposed to do next?

Standing, Loki sighed, setting about securing their hiding place with wards, checking his weapons, and putting his bags out of reach of curious hatchling claws. That done, he sat back down by the creature, leaning back against the wall, closing his eyes.

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After a few hours' sleep, Loki woke. Scrubbing at his face, he sighed. A lovely situation he was in. Thor exiled, the Allfather in the Odinsleep. The gift meant for Thor sleeping a few feet away in a nest she'd made from his furs and cloak.

As if she could sense his gaze, the creature woke, cocking her head to the side, chirping at him before settling back into the furs.

"What are you?" Loki asked, as if he already hadn't figured it out. Bat-like wings, four legs, forked tongue and tail, the nubs of horns on her head and spikes on her back. Gold scales matching the color of her egg, and Jotun red eyes. Dragon.

Legends said the Ljolsalfar had them, but who gave much credence to old stories? Obviously there was some truth, considering the evidence beside him.
He could feel her emotions, and glimpses of thoughts. A bond existed between them, and he wondered just how strong it was. Something to contemplate later, when he was ready. For now, he turned his attention to the dragon.

"You need a name," Loki said, saying the first thing that popped into his head. "Halla?"

She hissed and the blackness in his head let him know she disapproved.

"Dagny?"

He was greeted with a snort this time.

"Drifa? We're among the snows, so it's fitting," Loki said.

Another snort, and she dug her claws into his arm.

"Fine," Loki said, picking up a book. It was one of his mother's favorites.

"Isond," he suggested. The hatchling crawled into his lap, butting his chin with her head, crooning in happiness. "My mother would approve."

The name was from one of Frigga's favorite books, the tragic story of the lovers Tristram and Isond. Loki was intimately familiar with the tale, having had to read it aloud to his mother as part of his punishment for one of his more...inventive tricks as a teenager. The one that started with cutting off all of Sif's hair while she slept, and ending with getting his lips sewn shut in Nidavellir.

Not one of his better ideas at the time, but one of the lessons learned proved valuable since. Not letting Sif get under his skin was a personal challenge. She was a fine warrior, but her devotion to Thor raised his ire. She thought she hid well her affections for his brother, but to Loki, it was painfully obvious. Loki did have a begrudging respect for her fighting skills, and in battle, he knew she tried to protect Thor as he did, but her reasons were far from as selfless as his own.

He, at least, tried to be courteous to the warrior maid, but she didn't grant him the same consideration. Then again, he was a prince, and raised as such, and she was just a warrior. Loki knew Sif was jealous of him in one respect—he had Thor's love, where she did not, not as she wanted, but she had Thor's respect. Loki envied her that. Thor treated Sif as an equal, but not him.

And now his fool brother was exiled to Midgard, without his powers or Mjolnir, and Norns knew what trouble he'd get himself into. Thor was alone. Abandoned. Despite his anger toward Thor, Loki's fear for him was far deeper. He damned Odin for sending Thor away, for lying to him, and Loki didn't wipe away the tears when they started falling. He laid down, Isond curling up beside him, sending him her love and reassurance. Loki threw an arm across his dragon, letting all coherent thought slip away as he fell back asleep.

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Asgard

Frigga stood in Loki's bedchamber, running her fingers over the spine of some of her son's many books. Loki was usually meticulous when it came to keeping his chambers organized and spotless. His books were no exception. Many were gifts from her or his father, even Thor, and Loki loved books. Some of the books were scattered on the floor, others stacked no doubt where he'd put them before he left.

He'd left in a hurry, and the Einherjar had searched the palace, and found nothing. Heimdall couldn't
see him, and he was even beyond her own sight. Also disheartening was the fact some of Loki’s prized possessions besides his books were gone—his favorite dagger and throwing knives weren’t in their customary place. His bed furs, heaviest cloak and the knapsack he always took on hunting trips were also missing.

Loki hadn't taken his mare, as Sinir was still in the stables, in her stall next to Thor's gelding, Gisl. That lead Frigga to the knowledge Loki was no longer on Asgard. She knew of some of the hidden ways out of the realm. Not all of them, but Loki was clever and cunning enough to find out things he ought not know. Too clever for his own good, sometimes.

Running away was not something in Loki’s nature. Certainly inclined to mischief, and he was either usually causing it or right alongside Thor as he did something epically, well, Thor. Sometimes Loki goaded his brother into it, but more often than not, Loki was the one saving Thor, Sif and the Warriors Three from their own foolishness. She knew something was wrong with her youngest son, and she suspected what it was.

Since her sons' return from Jotunheim, nothing was the same. Thor banished, Loki more troubled than she’d ever seen him, and over more than his brother's absence. Loki knew. Odin fallen into his sleep, and she couldn't question her husband over what transpired in those last few terrible moments before Loki disappeared.

Also, nothing was missing from the armory save the contents of the stone from Alfheim, which was not a stone. Knowing its true nature and the fact the egg hatched for Loki gave Frigga some comfort. At least he wasn’t alone, but he was facing a challenge he wasn't prepared for, along with the knowledge of his true heritage. Loki was strong and clever, and he would come back to his family. She had that hope for him. Then there was Thor, alone, mortal, also beyond her sight and grasp.

Frigga was worried for her sons. Always together, she knew they had nothing to fear. Loki had been following Thor since he first learned to toddle after his older brother. Where Thor went, Loki followed. They were sun and shadow, strength and cunning. But as they grew up, they grew apart. Thor's vanity and foolishness were a wedge between them, as was Loki’s pride. Still though, they were together through thick and thin, and Frigga hoped it was something they would grow past. Now, however, that hope was dashed. Apart, Frigga feared for them both. Thor, exiled without his powers or Mjolnir, and Loki, just gone.

Her sons, both lost. She prayed they would come out of their respective ordeals unscathed, but the fates were not kind. And Odin, if and when he woke, oh, the words they would have. He was responsible for the mess they were in. She was also to blame, in her own way. He was the reason her boys were gone, and he'd even abandoned her, leaving her to rule alone.
Chapter 3

Flight

Chapter 3—Revelations and Regret

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Loki stopped counting the days after the end of the first month. No point. He had settled into a routine, and keeping himself and Isond safe and the dragon fed took up most of his time. His days consisted of get up, feed Isond and himself, then taking the dragonet out for some air and exercise. She was growing at least an inch a day, and had doubled in size since her hatching. Originally the size of one of his mother's forest cats, Isond was now the size of a wolfhound.

Her fast growth fueled her almost never sated hunger. It forced Loki during the few fitful hours of Jotunheim's daylight, and he tried to be back inside before dark. The mountains outside Thrymheim were filled with wilder creatures than Asgard, and even beyond what he knew and had experienced of Jotunheim himself.

He was familiar with the abandoned city, having snuck in and out of Jotunheim by himself when he needed to get away from Thor, or his parents, or just life in Asgard in general. Never one of Loki's favorite places, he never stayed more than a day or two, fearing being found by the Jotnar. He knew paths out of Asgard his mother had no knowledge of, and used that information mostly out of curiosity until the day he decided to make a deal with the Jotnar he let into Asgard the day of Thor's coronation.

Thor. Always a sore spot. Loki hadn't yet let himself accept the fact it was his antics that lead to Thor's banishment. Maybe everything was always leading up to that point, and it would've happened eventually. And it could've been worse. Odin was kind in sending Thor to Midgard.

Odin never showed the same degree of disappointment with him as he did with Thor. Maybe there was never the same level of expectation, or any at all. Also, the times he was angry with Loki alone were never as bad as when he was in a temper because of Thor, or the things they did together. The exceptions were the Nidaveller incident, and the times they tried setting themselves up as gods on Midgard.

Odin's rage after what happened on Nidaveller was something Loki only heard about, as he spent several weeks in the healing wing of the palace, recuperating while the healers put him back together. Loki started the whole thing, but Odin's fury was directed at Thor for letting something so terrible happen to his younger brother. Loki did remember Odin making Thor watch as the healers removed the threads holding his lips shut. How Odin only let Thor leave after he and Frigga started to help the healers remove the magic bindings the dwarves placed on him. Loki recalled the pain, not being able to scream, how Thor had started screaming at the healers to do something for him as he watched his younger brother writhe in agony.

Odin's disappointment stemmed from the fact Thor hadn't tried harder to protect his brother, or be a better example. Loki smiled at the memory of Thor telling their father he didn't let Loki do anything, he did as he pleased. It eventually became a joke between them, and yes, he, Loki, still did as he pleased. Which at the moment was trying to keep himself from returning to Isond empty-handed.

Another day of hunting. Six weeks gone bye now and Isond was asleep back in their shelter. Loki was getting better at picking up what she was thinking, and she seemed to understand what he said...
when he talked. At least he hoped she understood. She wouldn't understand if he didn't bring back fresh meat. Dealing with a starving dragonet wasn't something Loki wanted to face.

He was hoping for a successful hunt, as the bull elk he tracked all day was close. The animal would provide meat for days, and Loki was willing to use his magic to transport it back to the city. The beast was huge, bigger than the elk on Asgard, and more like the elk once found on Midgard. They were almost as tall as a Jotun at the shoulder, and just as dangerous as one of the giants. Loki knew because only days before he'd watched one of the creatures kill several dire wolves as they tried to bring it down.

His own elk was close now, and Loki stepped out into the open, sighting an arrow as the beast dug nearby in the snow for any vegetation. Loki was ready to let his arrow fly when the beast's head came up, and it looked directly at him. It bugled, putting its head down, and Loki started backing away.

The elk pawed the ground, and Loki ran toward the ice-covered river a few yards away, hoping the elk wouldn't follow. But it charged toward him, swiping with its antlers, and Loki ducked, rolling out of its way, conjuring a wall of fire to turn it away. But the weight of the elk and the intense heat of his unnatural flame weakened the ice, and Loki heard it crack as he and the beast fell into the water.

Pulled under by the weight of his clothes and the pack on his back, Loki couldn't free himself fast enough, and involuntarily sucked water into his lungs. The cold didn't bother him, and he felt magic slide over his skin as his appearance shifted to Jotun. The cold wouldn't kill him, but drowning would.

Loki! He felt, rather than heard someone calling his name, in his head. Isond was suddenly there, pulling him toward the surface. Able to breath, Loki threw an arm across the dragon's back, and she helped pull him to shore.

I'm never letting you out of my sight again. Why do you look different? You're blue. Your eyes look like mine now. Why are there lines on your face? Can we go inside now please?

"How..." Loki started.

The little dragon cocked her head up at him. I've been trying to make you hear me for days. Maybe you were finally ready to listen.

"You can talk."

Of course. I'm a dragon. Did you think I was just a beast?

Isond snorted, and Loki laughed.

"Never," Loki said. "I knew from the moment you landed in my arms you were no mere beast. I knew there was a bond between us, but how far does it go?"

I don't know.

"What do you know, my dear Isond?" Loki asked.

I know I don't want you to be sad anymore. If you miss your brother so much, why don't you go see him? Does he turn blue like you? I think I might like him.

Ask a dragon a question, and you would get an honest answer, Loki reflected.
"Thor is far away," he answered. "Beyond my reach."

Why?

"If you know he's why I'm sad, then why don't you know why he's gone?" Loki said.

*If you miss someone you should just go see them. I missed you, I knew you were in trouble, so I came to you. It wasn't hard. I can feel your magic, and I have my own, but I can't figure out how to use it yet. I've watched how you fetch things to you sometimes, so it's how I came to you. It wasn't hard. Maybe you can go to Thor that way.*

"Even if that were true, I'm not ready to see him yet," Loki said. "Come. Let's get inside."

He started walking back in the direction of the city, Isond beside him, watching with interest as he stopped to pick up his bow. They continued back to the city in silence. Once back inside, he stripped, conjured a fire to dry off himself and his clothes and crawled into his bed. Isond flopped down beside him, yawning, and Loki threw an arm across her shoulders.

"Thank you," he said.

*I will never let anything happen to you. I am yours and you are mine.*

Isond began crooning, and Loki let himself be lulled to sleep by the song of his dragon.

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Midgard

Thor was, as the humans said, keeping off the radar. Already he'd drawn too much attention to himself. He'd been hit by a car, tasered, drugged and interrogated in the space of only a few days after his arrival. Included in that was his failed attempt at recovering Mjolnir. The hammer was still where he left her weeks before, 30 miles out of town, surrounded by SHIELD agents.

One of the agents, Phil Coulson checked in with him daily. Thor still called him "Son of Coul" just to push his buttons, as Darcy said. Darcy Lewis was one of the first three friends he'd made on Midgard. His only friends. He already considered her his shield-sister. Darcy was teaching him how to drive. She helped him get a cell phone, an email address and was the one helping him acclimate to his surroundings. She wanted nothing in return but his friendship, which he gladly offered. Erik Selveig and Jane Foster were the other two Midgardians he'd met, and they'd made a place for him in their lives. Erik was a good friend, and a wise man. And Jane. She had the potential to be so much more, if he could find a way.

But for the moment, he was still trying to find his way in this new world, and pursuing her would only complicate matters more than they already were. Luckily, Thor was spending most his time with Erik and Darcy, as Jane was at the SHIELD compound, studying Mjolnir and trying to figure out her connection to the Bifrost, or Einsten-Rosen Bridge as Jane called it. He understood it was the same as the Bifrost. Jane insisted it was a theory until she could prove otherwise, and Thor had long given up trying to explain or prove otherwise.

He was currently sitting on the roof of Jane's building with Darcy, in the dark, waiting for dawn, drinking coffee and trying to get the taste of tequila out of his mouth and misery out of his head.

It wasn't working, as Darcy kept asking questions.

"So Sleipnir is real," she said. "Eight-legged horse. How does that work? And Erik said according to
the myths, Loki gave birth to him."

Thor rolled his eyes. It was one of Loki’s annoying habits, and lately, he’d found himself guilty of it more and more.

"No, Loki did not give birth to Sleipnir," Thor said. "Sleipnir was a gift from Vanaheim to my father for his aid in helping them in the Jotun war. Sleipnir was a mere colt when Father received him."

"How do you get an eight-legged horse?" Darcy asked.

"I never asked," Thor said.

"Got any good Sleipnir stories?" Darcy said.

"Why are you so interested in Sleipnir?" Thor said.

"I like horses," she answered. "What color is he?"

"Black," Thor said. "Big and black and not very friendly, unless you bribe him. Treacherous beast. And yes, I do have a story I can tell you about Sleipnir. It all started when Loki lost a wager with Sif."

"Sif is real, too? Is she really your wife?"

"No," Thor said, sighing, and once again, rolling his eyes. Midgard was testing his patience. Probably one of the many lessons his father wanted him to learn. "Do you want to hear the tale or not?"

"Yes," Darcy said.

"Sif wagered Loki he couldn't do something impossible," Thor said. "Loki stole some of Idunn's apples, snuck into the stable and fed them to Sleipnir. He let Loki onto his back, and I climbed on. We rode Sleipnir through the city, into the market. I'd never seen my father so angry..."

"How old were you?" Darcy said.

"Loki was nine," Thor said. "I was 11. Father made us clean up the mess we made, and we had to work for some of the merchants whose wares we damaged. I still haven't forgiven Loki for bribing that damn horse. He still follows Loki around like a puppy when he gets a chance. Loki always did have a way with animals."

Loki could tame the wildest colts, and he'd helped in the stable during foaling season, one of the few places in the palace where the staff actually requested Loki's presence. Their father's ravens favored Loki over himself, strange, considering the ravens spent time only with their father. Sometimes he wondered if Loki extended his patience and affections to the beasts because they were more honest than people. If they didn't care for you, they let you know immediately.

"You must really miss him," Darcy said.

Yes, he did indeed miss Loki. More than anyone, perhaps their mother. He didn't miss his father, Sif, Volstagg, Hogun or Fandral half as much as his brother and mother and home itself.

"I do," Thor said. "I've failed Loki, and everyone else I care about, but it's perhaps Loki I owe the biggest apology, besides my father."

It was starting to sink in how much he relied on his brother, and how he took him for granted.
"I wish I could tell him how much I appreciate him, and just how much I do love him," Thor said.

"Tell him when you get home," Darcy said, refilling his mug from her thermos.

"You're very optimistic about my chances of returning home," Thor said. "I wish I had such faith in myself."

"Nobody's perfect," Darcy said.

"I understand," Darcy said. "I do. Augustus, Gus, is my baby brother. He was my parents' oops baby. I failed him big time this spring, and my parents."

"Oops baby?" Thor asked.

"You know, a surprise? My mom was 33 when she had me. She had trouble conceiving," Darcy said. "TMI, I know. I'm never gonna forget the look on her face when she told me she was pregnant. 46 and she was in nursing school. That was a fun day."

"A child should always be a blessing," Thor said.

"Yeah, not so much for my mom when she found out," Darcy said. "I don't know how it works where you're from, but my mom's age at the time was a little old to be having a kid. Gus was a happy accident.

Anyway, it was over spring break. I couldn't talk my 10-year-old brother out of skateboarding off the garage roof. He got a skateboard for his birthday. Not my idea, by the way... He broke his arm in three places, and I held his hand the whole time in the emergency room. My God, it was one of the worst days ever. This kid, who I was responsible for while my parents are out of town, I'm supposed to be his role model, and there's nothing I can do but hold his good hand while the doctors set his other arm. He cried, but I didn't. I just kept reassuring him, but I was falling apart inside. He spent the night in the hospital, and he had surgery the next day. I didn't break down until I got him home. Our grandma came to help, and I locked myself in the bathroom, cried until I puked. My uncle had to come over and broke the door down to get me out because I wouldn't come out. I thought my parents were going to kill me."

"You did the best you could," Thor said. "I've done the same."

Darcy punched him on the arm. "At least somebody gets it. Jane doesn't. She's an only child. She also doesn't get why my mom named her kids after Jane Austen characters. For God's sake, I'm named after Mr. Darcy."

"I don't understand the reference," Thor said.

"You don't strike me as a Jane Austen kind of guy," Darcy said. "Unless you want to try one of her books. They're not bad. I can't condemn the source of my name after all."

"Contrary to what my brother thinks, I do enjoy reading," Thor said. "I just don't have the time."

"I know the feeling," Darcy said. "Want to go watch another movie?"

"May we watch another of Sam and Dean's adventures?" Thor asked.

Darcy smiled. "Yup," she said. "Just don't get all melancholy again. I don't have anymore booze stashed. We'll have to get more later today."

Apparently "Lilo and Stitch" and introducing Thor to "Supernatural" were both bad ideas. He
stopped talking as much, and Darcy got out the tequila. Three bottles and Thor was still going, and she could only listen while he rambled on about his younger brother. Sounded like he and his brother had daddy issues out the wazoo, but who was she to judge? She dragged him back inside, threw him a box of Pop Tarts and snuggled up against him on the couch.

Thor smiled, and tried watching the show, but his attention turned back to Loki. Did Loki hate him? Sif was always accusing Loki of being jealous, but his brother claimed otherwise. Loki was always there for him, his voice of reason. A realization Thor was only coming to terms with, and beginning to appreciate. Even when his brother thought he was being the biggest ass in all the realms, Loki let him know it, but he could never stay angry at him.

On the other hand, Loki’s anger toward others was something to behold. A sullen, angry Loki meant anyone who raised his ire would suffer the consequences of his mischief. And Loki could be devious. On occasion, Thor had to talk him down, change his brother's mood. If he, Thor thought something was a bad idea, it usually was.

Speaking of bad ideas, his little jaunt to Jotunheim cost him everything. Nothing should matter more than his family, his friends, and his duty. He'd failed them all. Asgard on the brink of war, his family and friends in danger, all he held dear, because of one bad choice on his part. The most recent in a long string of bad decisions, and one of the worst. Loki tried to talk him out of it, as he always did, and he didn't listen. He'd betrayed his father and his trust. Loki was probably sitting in on their father's war councils, preparing for conflict, or maybe negotiating a truce. Loki, with his quick wits and silver tongue had smoothed over many a negotiation. Thor smiled at the thought. Loki, despite his mischievous nature, was skilled at diplomacy. Thor usually started the fight with his actions and Loki finished them with words.

He missed his brother and the easy camaraderie they once shared. Once as close as brothers could be, Thor now understood he'd let his own vanity and pride come between them. Let the opinions of others matter more than his sibling. Loki was his brother, but once, his best friend and closest confidant. When had he let that slip away? Could he ever get it back?

If he could get home, he vowed to try. On Asgard he had time, but here on Midgard, time was slipping away, and he had choices to make, like stay in New Mexico or leave? Coulson offered to take him to New York, but Thor wasn't sure he wanted to go. The humans said summer was winding down with the advent of August, but to Thor, it was still the warm season. Hot season was more like it. New Mexico in the summer was hotter than any day in Asgard he'd ever experienced.

Erik was also preparing to leave, going to work on something Coulson mentioned once, in a place called Socorro. Darcy was mulling over her options—continue working with Jane or finish her education. Coulson pointed out she could do both as SHIELD would pay for her to stay and work with Jane and complete her degree.

Staying with Darcy and Jane was appealing because it was familiar. All he really had left until he could earn Mjolnir back, or his father finally forgave him and let him come home. So far, it seemed the depth of Odin's wrath had Thor leaning toward the fact his father wanted him to do things the hard way. He only hoped Odin wasn't being so harsh with Loki.
A warning: Wanted to give a head's up to anyone who might have issues with a few things in this chapter. Nothing too graphic, but if you're squicked out by certain things, turn back now. Mentions of an adult receiving a beating from a parent, grand-patricide, and slight intersexuality. (A mention.) And a ritual hunt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flight

Chapter 4-Omens

Disclaimer: I do not own the Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

The day after the incident of the elk, Loki vowed to be more careful, and invited Isond to hunt with him. He was more careful after that, and also gave up all pretense of keeping his Aesir appearance. No point anymore, and Isond cared not what he looked like.

He was Jotun. The cold didn't bother him, and he gave up his Aesir clothing in favor of practicality. No shirt, only leather vambraces on his arms to protect them when he hunted. He tried going barefoot in the snow, but he was too Aesir to keep it up after his first try, and besides, he didn't like the feel of the snow and ice beneath his bare feet, so he kept his boots. Also, his hair was longer, and Loki figured anyone from his past life who saw him now probably wouldn't recognize him.

With more time on his hands with Isond helping him hunt, he started teaching her how to use her magic. Loki also began exploring his Jotun abilities, and accidentally froze everything in their shelter. Unfreezing took some figuring out, and after restoring things to their prior unfrozen state, he was exhausted, and not feeling well. He chalked it up to using so much magic, but after that, things only got worse.

The next day, he woke, feverish, clutching his stomach in pain. Isond, afraid to touch him, stood over him, wings unfurled, worried.

What is wrong?

"I feel ill. That's all, Isond," Loki said. "Go back to sleep."

It's NOT nothing. You're afraid.

"Just a little pain," Loki said, wincing, trying to jest, but instead, he moaned, rolling over onto his side, curling into a ball. Not just a little pain. He felt as if he were on fire, and he felt bile rising in his throat. He got up, running outside, falling to his knees, sides heaving as he coughed up blood. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Loki struggled to his feet, but he collapsed. Isond, who had followed him out, keened.
Her duties done for the day, Frigga made the long walk to the Heimdall's observatory alone, lost in her thoughts. The day went well, considering court was its usual pleasant, gossipy self. She'd dodged questions about Thor and Loki's whereabouts, ignoring the questions about Odin's recent lack of appearances. Duplicity was not in her nature, and she could only hold out so long before revealing the truth.

More than that at the moment, Frigga couldn't shake the feeling something was not right with one of her sons. Heimdall could at least let her know how Thor was doing, and she always enjoyed the guardian's company.

Asgard's guardian stepped down from his post as the queen approached, greeting her with a smile.

"How fares my queen?" Heimdall asked.

"I've had better days, my friend," Frigga said.

"As have we all," Heimdall said. "How may I serve you, my lady?"

"Can you see Thor?"

Heimdall was quiet a moment before answering. "He waits, and he thinks, and he watches," he said. "And he's safe."

"Is he happy?"

"Content, I think," Heimdall said. "He's not the same man he was before."

Frigga took his hand, twining his fingers with hers. "But he still hasn't earned back Mjolnir," she said. "I wish I could do something."

"Be patient," Heimdall said. "Thor will return home in time."

"Is that reassurance or do you know something I do not?" Frigga asked.

Heimdall shrugged. An enigmatic answer from the man, but a truly Vanir trait. Their people were scattered across Asgard, having been assimilated long ago. Frigga remembered the Aesir-Vanir war. Heimdall was younger, not born until after the war. But like her, he was a seer. All of their race had some kind of farsight.

Heimdall saw everything. If one sought something or someone across the nine, Heimdall could find them.

"What of Loki?" Frigga asked, hoping for something.

"Still nothing of him, my queen," he said.

"I know he still lives," Frigga said. "Heimdall, here you may call me Frigga. You know I'm not one for formalities when they're not needed, not like my husband."

"As you wish, Frigga," he said. "I remember when you became queen. You were not what our king expected."

"And Odin was not what I imagined, either," Frigga said.

"You changed him for the better," Heimdall said. "He was so lost after Jord died."
"We all lost so much then," Frigga said.

"But gained much in return," Heimdall said. "You a son and husband, and the rule of Asgard."

"I never wanted Asgard," Frigga said. "I only thought of the child Odin offered, nothing else."

Heimdall gave her one of his rare smiles.

"Your sons have been the scourge of the realms since their births," he said.

"My pride and joy," Frigga said. "They will be the death of me, I fear."

"Not so, my lady Frigga," Heimdall said, knowing Frigga's sight was different from his own. She never talked of her visions, but he knew she could see the future. Not all the paths the future might take, but true visions of what was to come.

"I wish you could bring Thor back to me," Frigga said.

"We both know I cannot," Heimdall said. "I would be breaking the orders of my king."

"And I cannot defy my husband's decree, even though he sleeps," Frigga said. "Heimdall, I wish my sons were here. Thor brought his banishment on himself, but Loki. . ."

"He was hurt, my queen" Heimdall said. "Hurt and confused, as well he should be. The Allfather lied. He should have told Loki the truth."

"You know what he is then?" Frigga asked.

"I've known since the king rescued them from Jotunheim," Heimdall said. "Loki's arm was burned, like Volstagg, but he bore no wound."

"You will tell no one," Frigga said.

"You have my oath," Heimdall said. "I've had my differences with Loki, but he is still a prince of this realm, and your son. I will continue to search for him."

"Thank you, Heimdall," Frigga said, giving his hand one last squeeze.

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Jotunheim

A lone dire wolf loped through the ruins of Thrymheim, stopping occasionally to sniff the air or paw at something interesting on the ground. Soon bored with its exploration, the wolf, which was not a wolf at all, started changing. White fur faded to blue flesh, and it rose onto two legs instead of four. Blood-red eyes replaced yellow, but the look in those eyes was no less feral. A single Jotun warrior was more than enough to terrify the residents of the other eight realms, and this one's size was exceptional indeed.

Byleistr stretched, popping his back and neck. Too much time spent on four legs instead of two. Normally he preferred something with wings, but a wolf suited his mood better of late. The Jotun was licking his wounds, biding his time until his return to Utgard. Being alone in the wilds of the realm was preferable to Laufey's company. The latest beating Byleistr received at his father's hands for disobedience was nothing compared to his fear of what Laufey might do to Helblindi. Helblindi was safe, and Laufey did keep his promises, but he used Helblindi as a pawn to keep Byleistr in line. He hated Laufey for it, but his loathing for his sire went far, far deeper.
Laufey was not proud of his oldest son, though other Jotnar would have been proud to claim Byleistr as their own despite his strangeness. A head taller than Laufey, wider through the shoulders, Byleistr took after the parent who birthed him. Laufey was slender for a Jotun, but what he lacked in size he made up for with savagery. Laufey had many faults, and Byleistr knew all his secrets, including his father's fatal flaw. One of the reasons Laufey returned his son's hatred. Laufey was king, but his familial legacy, his personal legacy would be two imperfect bastard sons and his true heir sacrificed to the snows in his stead.

Laufey gave Byleistr's own two sons to the elements as punishment for caring—loving someone, and for defying him. Byleistr was by nature a forgiving man, but he would never forgive Laufey. One of his earliest, most vivid memories was screaming after his father as he took his new brother from the healers, still covered in blood from his birth, shoving him out of the way and never looking back. It was in that moment Byleistr learned one of his earliest and most valuable lessons—he would never do anything to become the kind of monster his sire was.

Instead, he dedicated his life to trying to help others. Laufey thought him weak and flawed for it, but Byleistr didn't care. He'd never needed his father's approval for anything but he still walked a fine line. He was alive because Laufey found him useful on occasion. Byleistr was a skilled healer, and a warrior as well. He could just as easily put down a rebellion then turn around and help the people he'd just fought against. Laufey didn't understand. Once, he might have, and Byleistr knew that part of Laufey was dead, along with any chance his father had of redemption.

And if only Laufey knew of the Asgardian hiding in his realm, the one Byleistr had been watching for weeks. He seemed harmless enough, spending most of his time hunting, and occasionally talking to himself. The Asgardian was pale and slender with dark hair, not a typical Aesir. Any Asgardian who willingly walked into Jotunheim with the intention to stay either had something to hide, or he was crazy. The talking to himself seemed to indicated that, but Byleistr wasn't so sure.

The giant was snapped out of his thoughts by a terrible noise, full of sorrow and unlike anything he'd ever heard before. He made his way toward the sound, finding an unusual sight—a gold dragonet standing over an unconscious Jotun, but a Jotun the size of an Aesir.

Byleistr approached slowly, hands up and open.

"You have nothing to fear from me, dragon," Byleistr said.

Can you help him? The creature asked, and he heard the question in his head, the voice tinged with fear and uncertainty.

"I think so," Byleistr answered, picking up the smaller man, following the dragon. "What happened?"

He hasn't been feeling well for several days, not since he changed color after what happened at the river. He said he was hot, like his insides were on fire, and he hurt. I could feel his pain. Then he started coughing up blood.

"I'll see what I can do," Byleistr said. "I've only ever seen two other Jotun so small. One never lived to see maturity, and the other is only a child. What is his name, dragon?"

Loki.

Yes, Isond answered.

"What are you called, dragon?"

Isond.

"Let me see what I can do," Byleistr said, reaching into the pouch at his belt, pulling out his healing and rune stones. He set one of the stones on Loki's forehead, another on his chest and the other on his abdomen. Then he ran his hands over him in the same spots, using his magic to delve into his body to find what ailed him. Not surprising, yet it was. A simple problem with a simple solution, but his inborn Jotun magic was so intertwined with Aesir magic Byleistr couldn't just heal him. He had few options, and none were pleasant. Not wanting to consider them yet, he turned his attention back to the dragon.

"You say he turned blue a few days ago?"

Yes. He fell into the river and I rescued him.

"He didn't look like he is now ever before?" he asked.

No.

"I think he's going through his first change," Byleistr said. "His magic is unique, a fusion of Jotun and Asgard. . . ."

What does it mean?

"Jotun can change form," Byleistr replied. "It usually happens when we're much younger, when our voices change between our twelfth and fifteenth winters. We gain the ability to shift our forms to look like another person, or become an animal, like a wolf or bear or elk. Not just illusion, but we can slip our skins and change into something else. As our bodies change, we come into our magic. It's taken as a sign we're becoming adults."

A nice way of explaining puberty to the dragon-child.

So you can fix Loki then?

"I can't fix him. I can only help ease the transition over the next few days, or I can end it quickly, which will hurt far more, but I think he will recover faster. Either is painful, but it is your decision," Byleistr said.

Fix him NOW.

Byleistr inclined his head toward the dragon. "As you command, my lady."

He knelt back down beside Loki, placing one hand over his head, the other his stomach, hands glowing as his magic sought out the other man's. Remembering what his Aesir form looked like, Byleistr willed him to change, and he did. Loki whimpered, and Byleistr grimaced. Loki's Aesir form was the one his body remembered, and preferred. Being in Jotun form was only an accident, and the change was only skin deep—a light blue with barely defined lines of his heritage.

"I'm sorry," Byleistr said, forcing Loki to fully change, inside and out, to finally form the parts needed to be truly Jotun, making Loki remember the form he was born with. He screamed, writhing in pain, and Byleistr withdrew his hands, staring down at his work. Loki's skin was now a rich Jotun blue instead of sickly grey-blue, and the lines on his skin were more pronounced. Byleistr traced the
lines on Loki’s cheeks and forehead, thinking. He’d seen these lines before, once, when he was a child. His brother, the infant Laufey took to the temple as a sacrifice, had borne such markings. So, the Casket of Ancient Winters wasn’t the only treasure of Jotunheim Odin took back to Asgard.

Loki’s moans brought Byleistr back to reality, and the dragon had sidled closer, almost too close for comfort. He crushed one of the healing stones over Loki’s body, and the soft white glow of its magic suffused his body, easing his pain, and settling him into a healing sleep.

"He’ll sleep for a day or two now," Byleistr said. "It's what he needs most. That and a decent meal. I'll stay a few days, make sure he's all right."

Thank you, Isond said.

Byleistr stood, bowing. "I try to help others when I can," he said.

He needed help. He's been so sad and not even I can change that. He thinks he's a monster.

"He's not a monster anymore than you're just a beast," Byleistr said. "Your friend is lucky I like a challenge. I'll try to change his mind.

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Two days later, Loki woke. He felt different—whole, as he hadn't in a long time. Isond bounded over, knocking him back onto the furs, forked tongue lapping at his face, wings thrashing him.

LOKI LOKI LOKI. YOU'RE WELL.

"Isond, please, my head feels like it's going to explode," he said, hugging the dragon. "You don't need to be so loud."

"You're lucky she's been so patient. Your friend's been very worried about you."

Shoving Isond back, Loki managed to get to his knees, forming a blade of ice without much thought at the intruder.

"About time you woke up, Asgardian."

"Who are you?" Loki asked, staring up at the Frost Giant in front of him.

"An ally, if you wish it. My name is Byleistr," he said, reaching out, dissolving Loki's blade. "Calm yourself. If I meant to harm you, you'd be dead already."

"You're Jotun," Loki spat.

"So are you, in case you haven't noticed," Byleistr said.

"It only recently came to my attention," Loki quipped, sitting back down, draping an arm across Isond's neck. "Again, why are you here?"

"You needed help, and I was in a position to offer it," Byleistr said. "We're not all monsters. And neither are you. Would a dragon of the Ljolsalfar choose to align itself with a monster?"

"I think she may be defective," Loki said, wincing as Isond reached over, sinking her teeth into his arm. "What was wrong with me?"

"A very late Jotun puberty," Byleistr said.
"Always something," Loki muttered.

"Do you know what this means?" Byleistr asked.

"Not really," Loki said.

"We're shapeshifters," Byleistr said. "You have magic, but the ability to completely change our forms is something we're born with. Thanks to some very powerful magic, your Asgardian appearance is your true form, and I had to make your body remember the form it was born in. You now bear two true forms—Jotun and Aesir, if that makes sense. Up until now, you may have been able to alter your appearance with illusion but now you can actually shift your form into something else. Let me show you."

Loki watched as Byleistr shrank down into the form of a shaggy white dire wolf and back.

"See?"

"How..."

"I'll stay a few days and show you," Byleistr said. "That's not all. All Jotun have the ability sire or bear children. As if you weren't able to tell by the new parts. . . ."

"And blue wasn't enough," Loki said.

"Consider it a blessing," Byleistr said. "I've borne two sons, and there is no shame in it."

"Two? One wasn't enough?"

"Making the decision to create a life rather than take it is always my choice," Byleistr said. "Although one day I will choose otherwise."

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A few days turned into almost two weeks, with Byleistr showing Loki how to use the gifts he was born with. Finally, the giant decided it was time for one last test. He was taking Loki hunting. Isond stayed behind, Byleistr promising to keep Loki out of trouble for her. Byleistr found a pack of dire wolves, which was traditional for what he was planning. They tracked a pack for hours until Byleistr finally spoke.

"Pick one," he said. "Slip into its skin."

He watched Loki change into the wolf he'd picked, and then back into his Jotun form.

"Good," he said. "The one you chose, kill it."

"What?"

"Kill it," Byleistr said, watching as Loki approached the black wolf, touching his mind with its own, just as he'd been taught. Loki drew his blade across its throat, blood splashing hot across his hands. Byleistr walked down the hill, joining him. Dipping his fingers into the wolf's blood, he traced the markings over Loki's face, arms and torso with the blood.

"Blöð kallar á blöð, svo pakki syngur, vetur hefur komið, ljósið mun deyja, og að endurfæðast," Byleistr said. "Ég vona að þú ert verðugur, bróðir."

Loki didn't understand the words, all but one, which sounded like "brother," but he wasn't sure. Byleistr had explained the whole ritual was necessary as a rite of passage for all Jotun, and Loki
wasn't going to argue.

Byleistr hefted the carcass over his shoulder. "I'll see you in a few days," he said, walking off into the blowing snow swirling around them.

The giant returned a few days later, with food, and a rolled up bundle of fur. He threw it at Loki.

"A gift," Byleistr said, watching as Loki unrolled it and shook it out. "You don't really need a cloak, but one never knows when they might need to make a good impression."

"Thank you," Loki said.

"That's not all," Byleistr said, handing Loki a leather string with teeth. "The canine teeth. You picked an impressive specimen. Enjoy the gifts. I hope they serve you well."

"You're leaving?"

"I have to return to Utgard soon," Byleistr said. "You probably shouldn't stay here, either. Head west, away from the city, further into the mountains. There's a valley beyond. The weather will be a little milder, and the hunting will be good. It's near the Mimisbrunnr. I wouldn't venture too close."

"I'm not mad," Loki said.

"Not mad? A Jotun raised Aesir and bonded to a dragon?" Byleistr said.

"A Jotun who learned compassion?" Loki fired back.

Byleistr grinned. "I'll tell you my story, Asgardian, when you tell me your tale," he said.

"Why have you been so helpful?"

"Why can't you trust anyone?"

"I try not to," Loki said.

"A pity," Byleistr said. "I told you—we're not all monsters. Laufey is the true monster here. He's caused so much sorrow, and someday he will pay."

"You sound like you know from personal experience," Loki said.

"I do," Byleistr said. "I have no love for Laufey. The only accomplishment anyone seems to remember is how he took Odin's eye in the last battle of the war with Asgard. I just remember how terrified I was."

"You fought in the war?"

"I was barely a child," Byleistr said. "Laufey might have wounded the Allfather that day, but he lost so much more. Enough about the past. I should be moving on. Remember what I said, Asgardian, and you should avoid detection."

"What was the ritual with the blood?"

"Something I was never able to do with my own brother," Byleistr said, holding out his hand. Loki clasped it. "Be safe. Good hunting, fair weather."

He nodded at Isond, and the dragon bowed her head at him, and they watched him walk away.
Byleistr grinned, feeling something he hadn't felt in a very long time—hope.

Chapter End Notes

The translation, of Byleistr's invocation during after the hunt in English:
"blood calls to blood
so the pack sings
winter has come
the light will die
and be reborn."
I hope you're worthy, brother."

The hunt is a rite of passage for all Jotnar (in my headcanon), but the bit with the blood and the words is the marking of the true heir of the realm. Had Loki and Byleistr been raised together, Byleistr would have done this for Loki when he was old enough, as he's the older brother, but not a legitimate candidate for the throne. (Byleistr is the result of a dalliance Laufey had before meeting the royal consort, who was Faurbauti, the one who gave birth to Loki.) Helblindi is Laufey's youngest son, just a boy, another bastard child he gladly would have exposed to the elements as he too, is flawed. Helblindi is only alive because Byleistr begged for Laufey to spare him, and the king uses it as an opportunity to control Byleistr and keep him in line.
Chapter 5

Flight

Chapter 5-Educe

Disclaimer: I do not own the Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Dragon logic, Loki decided, was nearly flawless. Isond the bull-headed insisted during their various debates she was right, he was wrong because she could be objective. That brought Loki to the conclusion arguing with a dragon was futile at best. Isond was slowly bringing him around to her way of thinking. He had already admitted concession on some points, but not to the dragon. Possibly some things in his previous life, the one he left behind, weren't as bad as he convinced himself.

Loki settled back against the dragon's warm hide, the movement not bothering the slumbering dragon. Sitting cross legged, he ran his fingers over the scabbarded throwing knives in his lap. He picked one up, admiring the leather work on the scabbard. Six pairs, and each pair had the same creature on the scabbard and the hilt of the knife—ravens, wolves, the world serpent, horses, eagles and falcons.

Drawing one of the blades, Loki tested the edge with a finger, drawing blood which he wiped on the leg of his breeches. Crafted especially for his hand, perfectly balanced to accommodate his fighting style, the knife edges never dulled and the weapons always returned to his hand. Forged by Odin using Mjolnir, the weapons were a gift from his father on Thor's 18th birthday, the day he was given Mjolnir. Beside the other knives was his dagger, also a gift, but from Thor, again, forged with Mjolnir by his brother with assistance from Odin.

Loki didn't use them anymore as he could form blades of ice. He only had the knives out to look at them, considering what they meant to him and the memories they held. Sentiment. Stupid, useless sentiment.

Setting the knives aside, Loki considered the matter of his last debate with Isond before her nap. The dragon was convinced he wasn't just something Odin once had a use for and cast aside. Even if she didn't say anything, the dragon was always inside his head, feeling what he was thinking. Blocking her out only caused her distress, so Loki had stopped trying. Her perspective on his self-loathing was he needed to stop, because he was loved, and trusted with things Thor never was. Isond also asked him if trust was not part of love? She loved and trusted him unconditionally. Even Frigga often said there was no love without trust. Maybe Odin's trust was his way of saying he loved him without even saying it.

No. Odin always told Thor he loved him. Loki heard the words far less often from Odin if at all. But Isond knew from his memories Odin trusted him with things he'd never trusted with Thor, like Gungnir and Sleipnir, and sought his counsel on matters he never would've asked Thor about.

Gungnir, Loki knew, was strong evidence supporting Isond's claim of trust. Thor had only touched Gungnir once that Loki recalled. Gungnir, their father's spear, was the traditional weapon of the kings of Asgard, passed down through time, and the symbol of office. The times Odin let Loki use Gungnir to spar against Thor and Mjolnir were some of his happiest memories. It proved he could hold his own against his brother. Loki never won, but he had enough skill to fight Thor to a draw. And Gungnir always found her way to his hands. Different than Mjolnir, Gungnir was forged from a living star, and its power was that of a sun itself.
Loki always wondered why Thor received Mjolnir—one had to be worthy to wield her. Loki couldn't even lift the hammer, and for that reason, he was unworthy. But what did that mean? He thought the hammer fickle because one had to be worthy to wield it. Of course, Thor let the fact go to his head. Worthy, to Loki, meant having humility, wisdom and honor. Thor was honorable (most of the time), but he was not humble or wise. Loki was beginning to suspect Odin gave Thor the hammer to give him an ideal to strive for, to make him a better man. Yes, and it was working splendidly considering Thor's banishment. Maybe having nothing to bash his enemies with would force Thor to become more creative, to find other solutions than fighting.

Worthy, honorable, golden Thor. Presented with a dragon egg as a gift for his coronation. What the Hel were the elves thinking, Thor bonded to a dragon?

Loki felt Isond stir behind him. I hatched for you. I would not hatch for him. I would have waited until I found you.

Her thoughts were full of love and warmth, setting Loki at ease.

I chose you but I still think I will like your brother.

"Thor is a boorish oaf," Loki said.

They why is he in your thoughts so often?

Infuriating creature. "None of your business," Loki said.

You miss him and your mother and father and your friends. And who are Sif and Sigyn?

"Sif is a warrior in love with my idiot brother and Sigyn is newly married and expecting her first child with her dolt of a husband," Loki answered.

If you love her why aren't you with her?

Loki didn't bother asking which woman the dragon was referring to.

"It's not that simple, Isond," he said. "Just like I can't go to Thor, or back home. I have no home anymore."

You are my home.

Loki pressed his the heels of his hands against his forehead in frustration. He could not fathom the dragon's mind. She had craned her neck around, eyes inches from his own, expecting an explanation. On one hand, Isond was cunning, intelligent and insightful, a person in her own right in the body of a dragon. On the other, she was child-like with the questions and her reasoning sometimes and Loki had to remind himself she was only a few months old. The questions she asked sometimes reminded him of those asked by small children. Loki knew "Why?" was a favorite of three- to four-year-olds.

As punishment, he'd once spent the better part of a summer tending the children of delegates from the other realms. Frigga's unsubtle way of trying to teach him patience. And amazing how amusing people found it when they discovered the 13-year-old prince of Asgard was baby-sitting their children. It was one of the reasons why Loki extended his patience toward small children and animals, appreciating their honesty and earnestness. Both were qualities Thor still possessed.

The damn dragon also had him reevaluating his feelings regarding certain people, emotions he'd long buried, although Sigyn was a more recent development, and Sif was something in the past, when he was still a foolish boy.
His first kiss had been with Sif when he was fifteen. A stolen kiss, but a kiss nonetheless. She was fourteen at the time, the two of them allies against the older, bigger boys and men Thor trained against. The ones who thought the slender, sly prince wasn't worthy of their effort, nor was the dark-haired maid who they said would look so pretty in a dress. They were both determined to prove them all wrong. The kiss happened one day after weapons practice. Loki and Sif were sitting in his mother's garden, in the shade, Sif talking in very unladylike terms about the fates the others deserved.

Loki, acutely aware of the attraction women of all ages had for his brother, had caught Thor on several occasions kissing said women. Loki did like Sif, she was his friend, he hoped for more someday, he was curious as to what all the kissing fuss was about, and who better to share it with than Sif? So he kissed her, and she blackened one of his eyes. While he was picking himself up out of the dirt, Sif grabbed him by his vest, shoved him up against a wall, kissing him back. Then she threatened to disembowel him if he ever told anyone before kissing him again. Loki had kept that secret.

And Sigyn. Her father deserved a fate worse than any Loki could devise for marrying off his daughter to the first man that asked all because he didn't want her involved with the Lie-smith. Loki hadn't even had time to ask Odin or his father to intervene. Sigyn was betrothed, married and bundled off to her new husband's lands in the space of only a few days. Even Thor was unable to console him, but it had proved a decent distraction for his brother, giving him something worry about besides his upcoming coronation. Loki, completely out of character, had started several drunken brawls in various taverns around the city. Volstagg, once he caught on, served as a decent companion on his evenings out. Loki started the fights, and Volstagg gladly joined in, talking many a tavern proprietor out of alerting the Einherjar to his prince's activities while Loki forked over gold to pay for the damages.

The Warriors Three and Sif. Oh so many pleasant memories. They were bound to Thor by love and loyalty, and as they matured, the bunch of idiots Odin considered responsible enough to keep his heir from getting himself killed. They were honor- and oath-bound to the Allfather to safeguard the realm and its future king. Even Loki wasn't free from taking an oath before Odin, and he was Thor's brother.

Even better, Loki knew their insecurities as well as his own. Proud, beautiful Sif was convinced if Thor couldn't see her for her true self, no one ever would. Something Loki had in common with Sif. Fandral's bravado and devil-may-care smile hid his fear he would never be more than a pretty face. Hogun's eyes held a sadness nothing would ever chase from them. The only one who wasn't a mess was Volstagg. He was the easily the emotionally stable member of the group, the grown-up. They made up the broken little family Thor forged for himself.

They weren't Loki's friends. Thor wasn't his brother. And Loki knew he lied only to himself. Loki always said he loved Thor above all others, and he meant it. He'd always loved Thor more than he should. And now he knew Thor was not his brother by blood.

No. Loki would not go there.

At best, if Thor were to find out, he would see such a thing as a betrayal. At worst, the thunderer would kill him. Thor would kill him anyway when he learned Loki was not his brother, and Jotun.

All possibilities, but there was one certainty Loki knew beyond a doubt—if he saw Thor again, nothing between them would ever be the same.

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Asgard
Frigga sat in her chambers, watching a storm rage outside as she bade Sif enter. Sif eyes widened as when she saw one of Odin's ravens on the queen's shoulder.

"Pay Huginn no mind," Frigga said. "I hope you're well."

Sif sat down. "I've been better, my queen," she answered.

Frigga offered her a gentle smile. "I know you've been off on an adventure," she said.

Sif started at the floor a moment before answering. "Actually, I, along with the Warriors Three have been searching for Loki," she said. "I've just returned from Alfheim, and the elves didn't exactly give me a warm welcome."

"Go on," Frigga said.

"I was told to deliver a message to the Allfather," Sif said. "But as he sleeps, I'll tell you. The elves wish to know why their gesture of good faith to Asgard, a way to forge a bond between the two realms, has been denied. Ellead, the king, said he expects an answer within a fortnight."

"He'll get none," Frigga said.

"My queen, is that wise?"

Frigga stood, giving Sif another smile. She wanted to see what the elves would do, and she was touched Sif and the warriors would search for her wayward son.

"Worry not, Sif," Frigga said. "I know what the elves seek, and I will deal with them."

"Have you any word of Thor?"

"None," Frigga said with a sigh. Of course Sif would ask after Thor. Once, Frigga was sure Sif would make a match with one of her sons. The future was clear, but it had changed. Frigga could only see tangles where once there was certainty. It wasn't her Vanir vision at fault, but something dark seeping across the Nine Realms. She hoped Odin woke and her sons returned home before it made itself known.

She was about to offer Sif refreshment when an alarm started sounding throughout the palace. Not the dungeon was being breached, but the alarm from the day of Thor's almost coronation.

"The weapons vault," Sif said, unsheathing her sword, heading for the door.

"Sif, wait," Frigga said, grabbing a dagger and following the warrior maid and Einherjar for the vault. Once there, Frigga and Sif watched as the Einherjar searched the vault, and after a while, the captain came to her.

"My queen, nothing is amiss," he said. "The Casket of Ancient Winters, the Gauntlet and the others relics are all accounted for."

"You're wrong," Frigga said. "One weapon is missing. I had Gungnir brought here for safekeeping. My husband's spear is missing."
Chapter 6

Flight

Chapter 6-Lapse

Disclaimer: I do not own the Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Isond picked her way through the snow beside Loki, grumbling.

Are all the other realms like this?

"No," Loki answered.

I'm tired of snow.

"You should be used to it by now," Loki said, throwing an arm across Isond's shoulders, leaning against the beast. She was growing well, 15 hands high at the shoulder, almost big enough to ride, but Loki was afraid to fly with her yet. She could fly far and high, but he always kept her in his sight when he took her out for exercise.

When can we go to Asgard? She asked, sounding wistful.

"You know we can't, Isond," Loki said. "How many times do I have to explain?"

Until I understand.

"Stubborn, silly beast," Loki said, slapping her shoulder.

NOT a beast. Like you're not a monster. Can we go to one of the other realms then? I'm tired of snow, and hiding. And the wind. How unhappy you are. I want to see the mountains of Asgard. And the palace. Trees. Trees covered in green leaves, not pine needles. Flowers. I've never seen a flower, except in your books, or in your memories. A river not frozen. Rivers run, don't they?

Suddenly, the dragon's head snapped up, and she drew in several deep breaths, sniffing the air.

Loki formed a blade of ice, ready to strike. It was starting to snow, and there was fog. He was feeling deja vu, remembering the incident with the elk. He heard a roar, then something coming closer. White, large, on four legs. A ghost bear. Perfect. The largest of Jotunheim's bears, snow white and afraid of almost nothing in existence. And what occurred next happened so fast Loki couldn't get out of the way. Isond roared, knocking him back out with a swipe of her left forearm, thinking he couldn't defend himself. And then something looking like smoke belched out of her mouth, and she coughed, throwing her head back, opened her mouth and spewed flame at the bear.

By now the bear, realizing its mistake and it wasn't going to have an easy meal, turned tail to run, but not fast enough. Isond's stream of flame barely touched its backside, singing the bear, causing it to bawl in pain as it streaked in the opposite direction.

Isond had reared back on her haunches, wings unfurled, flapping awkwardly to hold herself up while Loki stood.

I didn't know I could do that, Isond said, sheepish.
"Well, my dear Isond, you certainly taught him a lesson he'll never forget," Loki said, laughing. Isond swiped him with her tail, knocking him back down into the snow.

_He deserved it. I thought bears sleep in the winter._

"They do in Asgard," Loki said. "Not the ghost bears. They're bigger here than in Asgard. Everything here in Jotunheim is much larger. The people, and the animals."

_Why aren't you big like Byleistr then?_

"I was born small for a Jotun," Loki said.

_How much bigger will I get?_

"I don't know," Loki said. "I wish I could tell you."

_It'll grow as big as I want, Isond said._

"Isond, there are limits," Loki said.

The dragon snorted. It seemed like Isond intended to do as she pleased.

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A few days later, Loki and Isond moved from the valley Byleistr told them about and back to Thrymheim. The giant was right about the hunting, but Loki knew winter was coming on. Yule was only a few days away, and it meant the beginning of winter across the realms. The days in Jotunheim were short enough, and getting shorter every day. They could shelter better in the city than in the mountains, and Loki had learned of several hidden pathways from the valley to the ruined city. They could hunt and be back in the safety of shelter by nightfall.

Thankfully, Isond wasn't eating every day. She was up to every third day now, as her growth was starting to slow a little. Still, Loki needed food for himself, trying to keep a store for the worst days of winter, or when Isond refused to go outside to hunt. The dragon was increasingly stubborn when it came to the howling winds and snow outside. Byleistr had explained he might be able to do something about the weather. Most Jotnar could affect the environment around them in some way, although a few could control the weather itself—call a snowstorm, calm the winds, clear fog. Loki hadn't tried yet, as he was too busy keeping Isond occupied.

Also, Yule was only a couple of days away now, and Loki tried not thinking about the celebrations, feasts and his family. Asgard would be ablaze for the 12 days of the celebration, starting with bonfires on the first evening to keep the dark of the first night of winter away, and ending with the welcoming of the new year, when they would burn until morning.

_You're making yourself sad again, Isond noted. Go home. Quit being silly. You miss Asgard, and all it contains—your family most of all._

Loki had no reply. He refused calling Asgard home—he had no home and no family anymore. None save for Isond.

Distracting the dragon, he turned his thoughts to Thor.

"I wonder how my Thor enjoys Midgard," he said.

_We could scry him out, Isond offered._
"No," Loki said. "I've never tried seeking someone across such great distance."

You're stubborn.

"So are you," Loki retorted.

You should go back if you're homesick.

"I have no home" Loki said.

Wrapping herself around Loki, Isond rested her head on his shoulder and he reached up to scratch her chin.

What is so terrible your family wouldn't take you back? I would not have chosen you if you were not worthy of me. How many times must I tell you this?

"Maybe you chose wrong," Loki said. The distress the dragon felt verged on physical pain and Loki almost recoiled, but Isond needed his reassurance, but ended up offering it instead.

You are mine and I am yours. Never doubt that.

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Midgard

Yule passed, for Thor, without much notice. On Midgard, it was called "Christmas," and lasted only a day. There was food, drink, singing and camaraderie, for which Thor was thankful. It proved a welcome distraction from his homesickness, and Erik, Jane and Darcy tried their best, but Jane wasn't there for the holiday itself.

Erik had a few days away from his work in Socorro, and Darcy stayed instead of going home to see her parents. She said she had time off coming in January, and didn't want to abandon him. Thor was touched, and her selflessness earned her a kiss under the mistletoe that Jane had kept hinting about in the days leading up to Christmas. Jane was the one who left, going to England to see her mother for the holiday.

Thor had found himself dragged across New Mexico on Darcy's quest to find suitable gifts for friends and family. Roswell and its museum proved most interesting. Thor wondered how the Midgardians could be so naive about life across the realms. They weren't alone, never had been. Well, their ignorance began with their worship of technology. They'd drifted away from magic and their connection to nature. As he'd once told Jane, magic and science were the same thing. Just not necessarily technology. He only wished he could take her to Asgard to show her, then maybe she would understand.

Of course, it would never happen. Mortals hadn't been allowed in Midgard in almost a millennia by local reckoning. Might've had something to do with that time he and Loki snuck off to Midgard, setting themselves up as gods. He was 17, Loki 15. That particular year was a busy one for the sons of Odin. Nidavellir, Midgard, the month wandering in Svartalfheim because Loki got them lost, couldn't find the way back and Heimdall couldn't see them. Loki snitching on him to his father for his...unseemly and unprincely behavior, leading to the second version of what the Midgardians called "the talk," Asgardian style, he received from his mother and father, only without so much yelling. At least between Frigga and Odin, unlike the first round. There was also the second trip to the healing wing, as a reminder of the first, Odin holding his sons in place with a death grip on a shoulder of each, where again, they watched Eir the healer birth one of her children. Thor, after that, thanks to Loki, was not seen alone in the company of a woman not his mother until he was older.
Several years older.

"Hey, get your butt over here," Darcy yelled, getting his attention. "Dinner time. Erik and I can't eat all of this by ourselves, you know? And I don't want leftovers this time. Hey—would you like to go on that show 'Man vs. Food?' It might be fun."

"Volstagg would be a much better choice," Thor said, taking the plate Darcy handed him, sitting down at the table. She sat down between he and Erik.

"Hold hands," Darcy said. "Gotta say grace."

Thor took her hand, and Erik's. Thor did so out of respect, and appreciated the sentiment of the prayer. People in Asgard prayed to the Allfather, and people in Midgard prayed for different reasons, but maybe the people of the two realms weren't so different after all.

88888

Jotunheim

Yule. Loki told Isond stories of when he was a child, how his parents celebrated with him and Thor in private as a family as well as with the realm they ruled. Of course Isond had to ask him to show her a snowball, so Loki obliged, taking her outside, scooping up a handful of snow, shaping it and tossing it at the dragon, hitting her square between the eyes.

Once back inside, he conjured a fire, settled into his furs against the dragon, telling her more.

"Father. . .Odin like to tell us each year the tale of how he wooed our mother," Loki said. "He courted mother after they were married. Frigga isn't Thor's birth mother. Odin married her after his first wife died. Odin said he worked hard to earn Frigga's love. How she puts up with him, I don't know. . .Thor is so much like him. . .fires are lit across the realm, there is no fighting. Any conflict ends for the 12 days, by decree of the Allfather, on pain of death. Gifts are given. Any aid needed is received. It's a time of peace and goodwill across the realms. The ancestors are honored. We feast, revel in surviving another year, and hope for the best in the new year."

_I hope to experience it someday. How do they celebrate Yule on Midgard?_

"By decorating dead trees, singing songs, exchanging gifts," Loki said. "Much the same as in Asgard, but we do not decorate dead fir trees. Father once explained it involved something about the elves giving gifts to everyone in Midgard. I don't see how the Ljolsafar would care about that, beyond keeping up the old ways and borrowing a few mortals each year, just for a bit of fun. And I'm not sure how much Father said was really in jest."

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Yule passed, and the first day of the new year as well. Loki had been away from Asgard almost eight months. He stopped thinking so much about home and the past, and dwelling so much on the slights he'd perceived as well as his anger. Teaching Isond about magic and how to use it took up much of his time now. She was becoming less child-like in her thinking, able to concentrate more, and proved a fast learner.

She could sustain her flame, and could fly far and fast, and Loki could still hear her no matter how far apart they were. Except she'd terrified him the day they were out while they took turns teleporting around the city. Again, Loki made her stay within the range of his sight, but Isond insisted her magic was much deeper than his own, she could see in his head how to use the magic just so, and why
couldn't she use it to go as far away as she wanted. So Isond decided to prove she could.

The dragon winked out, and Loki waited for her to appear in another spot, but she never did. Seconds passed, and he called for her, screaming when she didn't reappear, becoming more frantic as the minutes passed by. Then, after seeming gone an eternity, she popped back beside him, a small deer in her mouth.

*I was hungry, so I decided to find something to eat.*

Loki spent the next half-hour ranting at the dragon about why she should not try to do something so foolish without him. Properly admonished, he let the dragon eat.

The two spent several weeks in that routine, until the day they decided to try something different. Loki had fitted a makeshift saddle to the dragon, mainly braided strips of leather holding a few furs in place for a seat. He watched from the cliffs overlooking the city as Isond flew, getting accustomed to having something on her back in flight.

*It feels strange. I can fly you without anything on my back. You won't fall. I won't let you. Why else would you be bonded to me if not to fly with me? I want you to fly with me. Please?*

Isond landed beside him, bending her forearm so he could use it to climb onto her back. Loki had been on her back a few times before, but she was always on flat ground, not the edge of a cliff. Her hop-gliding with him was nothing compared to what was coming. He'd been putting it off since she'd first started breathing flame. Isond insisted it meant she was big enough and mature enough for them to do as a dragon and their bonded should—ride the skies together. Isond closed her wings, sniffing the air. The wind was strong, but not too much for the dragon's flight. She'd flown in worse, but not with him on her back.

Isond was calm while he was not. Terrified? He, Loki of Asgard, son of Odin and Frigga, brother of Thor, wielder of Mjolnir, was indeed terrified. Isond took one leap and they were falling. Loki opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out, his voice ripped away by the wind. The dragon unfurled her wings, and Loki's head snapped with the first downbeat. They were flying. He laughed, then whooped with joy, and Isond's.

The dragon flew a few circles around the city before Loki convinced her to land. Once she was back on solid ground, he slid off her back and down her side until his backside hit the snow.

"That was amazing," Loki said, standing on shaking legs, hugging the dragon's neck.

I told you, Isond said, smug.

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Midgard

New Year's Eve. Year's End on Asgard. More revelry, this time with Erik, Darcy and Son of Coul, who was in town checking up on them all before heading back to New York the next day, then he was going north. He was excited, and Thor just clapped him on the back, wishing him well on his adventure, and he hoped the man would find what he was looking for. Thor liked Coulson, wished he could count him as friend. Making another shield-brother on Earth was more attractive than thinking about how Jane was still gone.

"Dr. Foster's work is important," Coulson said, breaking into Thor's thoughts. "Maybe she'll be able to get you home. She has an easy job compared to mine. I herd cats. Supernanny, that's me. If I have to answer one more phone call from Tony Stark in the middle of the night, I'm going to commandeer
a quinjet, fly out to California and tase him back to the Stone Age."

"Who is this Stark you speak of?" Thor asked, curious.


"Oh, the man Darcy finds so attractive," Thor said.

"Attractive my Aunt Fanny," Coulson said, loosening his tie and undoing a couple of buttons on his shirt. "Pardon me. Usually I don't indulge so much, I need to vent. I'm going through a bad break-up, we might have found something really, really important up north, and I don't want to get my hopes up."

"What lies in the north?"

"Classified," Coulson said. "That mean's it's a secret."

Thor nodded, emptying his beer mug, catching the bartender's attention, and getting another for himself and Coulson.

"Still no closer to getting yourself home?" Coulson asked.

"No," Thor said.

"Try harder," Coulson said. "I can only keep my boss and his bosses off your back for so long. Pretty soon they're going to come out here, and try blasting your hammer out of the ground, and take you and it someplace not pleasant. Remember what happened this summer, Donnie Blake?"

A reminder of the night Erik rescued him from Coulson.

"I remember well, Son of Coul," Thor said.

"It's Coulson. Or Agent. Or Agent Coulson," he said. "Don't make me tase you."

"Did someone mention tasers?" Darcy said, bounding up between the two men, throwing an arm around both. "Almost midnight. Who's gonna give a girl a kiss when it turns midnight?"

Coulson kissed her on the cheek. "I've got to go. Happy New Year, and stay out of trouble, all right?"

"No promises," Darcy said. "Thanks for the Ipod, by the way."

Coulson smiled, clapped Thor on the shoulder, and nodded at Erik on the way out.

The bar patrons started to countdown as midnight neared, and Darcy threw confetti on Thor, while Erik finished his one shot for the evening. No drinking with Thor like the last time.

"I have to go, too. I have to be back in Socorro early," he said, setting down his glass. "Exciting things going on in the lab. I can't wait. We flip the switch tomorrow."

Thor smiled, not saying a word. Sometimes he didn't get the Midgardians and all their secrecy. Possibly if they had to do something in secret it wasn't worth doing? Secrets could be terrible, dangerous things. Hopefully they wouldn't cause danger.

"C'mon, big guy. Walk me home?" Darcy said.
"Of course," Thor said. "I owe you a kiss besides."

He kissed her, and had to steady Darcy after he broke away.

"I wish Jane knew what she was missing," Darcy said.

Thor's smile lost some of its brightness.

"Hey, I see how your spark faded a little," Darcy said. "She'll be back in a few days, then you'll have her all to yourself. I get Christmas with my crazy family. The past week was nice, though. I've missed Erik. I like having him around. He keeps Jane centered, helps her focus on her work."

"You could have gone to your family before now," Thor said.

"And leave you alone? What kind of friend would I be?" Darcy said, linking her arm with his, dragging him outside. "I think that's what you need right now, more than trying to figure out what to do about Jane. Fine. You love her or you don't. Easy to decide. What to do about it, not so much. I thought earning MewMew back and getting home was your priority. Seeing your brother and your mom, trying to apologize to your dad? I thought you missed them. I know if I were in your place I'd be doing everything in my power to get myself home. Rescuing kittens from trees. Helping old ladies across the street, that kind of thing."

Darcy knew Thor was trying. And she, not Jane, was the one who got to see him after some of the worst moments he'd experienced. Like Halloween night, during the huge thunderstorm they experienced, he'd taken Darcy's car out to Mjolnir. She'd found him on his knees, screaming up at the sky, begging his father to let him come home, calling for mercy from somebody named Heimdall. He'd bloodied his hands trying to free the hammer. He'd also fallen down, hitting his head, knocking himself senseless, earning himself another trip to the hospital for an overnight stay with a skull fracture and bad concussion.

Jane's reaction upon returning from Socorro the next day? Oh my God you poor baby, let me kiss it all better did you miss me what happened while Darcy just sat there, crumpled National Geographic in hand, Thor staring off into space while Jane fusses.

That was the last, worst episode. And Darcy didn't think Jane understood what Thor was going through. Sure, he was gorgeous, kind, sweet, kind of like an overgrown puppy. A whipped puppy with nowhere to turn, which was why Darcy was going the friend route rather than oh please notice me. Thor needed a friend more than anything else. This huge, beautiful, confident man was broken inside. He'd been humbled, humiliated and beaten down. He wanted to go home. Get back to his family and his real life, not be stuck on Earth.

She wished she could help him, knew she was helping by well, helping. Playing the Darcy Lewis version of Agent Coulson, herding cats. Ah, Coulson. He'd offered her an internship and future as his personal assistant and protégé if she finished her degree while riding herd on Jane and her work. Both were now on the SHIELD payroll. Kind of.

"You're unnaturally quiet," Thor said as they walked.

"Just thinking," Darcy said. "This year has to be better than last year, right? I think you'll get home. You've been stuck here long enough."

Thor squeezed her hand. "I hope you're right, my lady," he said.
Jotunheim

The middle of winter, Loki was tired of the terrible weather, and irritable because Isond was unhappy. She was bored, miserable at being cooped up most of the time, except for when Loki was brave enough to try calming the weather long enough to go hunting, or rarer still, a flight. He wasn't sleeping well, either, having dark dreams he never remembered. Isond always woke him from them, and they never talked of it, because the dreams terrified the dragon as much as they did him, as she shared them.

Isond didn't ask about returning to Asgard anymore, but he was starting to consider it. Maybe he could go back. Loki was just as tired of hiding as Isond. Possibly he could reconcile with Odin if and when he awoke from the Odinsleep. Frigga would know what to do. She would help ease things between them. Loki wasn't so angry anymore as much as resentful and hurt about not being told the truth. And being Jotun, Laufey's get—choosing still to not deal with it, except he found himself starting to wonder about some of the things Byleistr said in their brief time together. What was the big warrior's connection to Laufey? Byleistr was a calm man, but Loki had sensed carefully controlled rage under the surface. It came out in the venom in Byleistr's voice when he spoke of Laufey. Loki hoped he would have the chance to learn more.

Byleistr ran across the tundra in his wolf form. Four legs were faster than two in this case, and holding this form hurt less. He was bleeding, starting to leave bloody paw prints in his wake, and he felt something broken in his chest, like one of his lungs wasn't working properly. Shifting back to his true form would heal his wounds, but cost him valuable time. He needed to find Loki, warn him.

The damn fool hadn't been where he told him to go. Hiding near the Mimisbrunnr, and the root of Yggdrasil would've afforded safety, and they both would not be in the predicament they were now. The vile thing helping Laufey was unnatural. Not of any of the Nine Realms, something from beyond. Byleistr hated it, feared it, and had tried to kill it, to no avail. He had killed the warriors who came for him. Jotnar blood on his hands, and he didn't care. Laufey's supporters were all blinded by his father's desire for conquest and revenge.

Thrymheim finally in his sights, Byleistr shifted back to his true form, knowing he'd be healed when he did. Except he wasn't healed. The wound on his chest was still bleeding, and he covered it with a hand. His ribs on that side weren't working properly either. Part of his ribcage was going in while the rest was going out as he breathed. The bones were broken, and he hurt, but he kept going. He started screaming Loki's name when he came close to where he and the dragon had sheltered before. And suddenly, Loki and Isond were in front of him.

"Loki, you damn fool," he said.

Loki stared. It was the first time Byleistr had called him something besides "Asgardian."

"You and Isond need to go, now. Return to Asgard. Call the Watcher," Byleister said. "Please. You don't know what I've risked to come here. They're coming for you. . .Laufey knows you're here. I thought he was just going to kill you, but I fear he has something much worse planned."

Byleistr fell to his knees, so he was at eye level with Loki. The giant coughed, brushing at the flecks of blood on his lips.

"I wish I could have known you better, brother. Please forgive me," Byleistr said, collapsing to the snow.
Chapter 7

Flight

Chapter 7—Gambit

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Asgard

The shining realm was playing host to a delegation from Alfheim. Abroen, rider of Gallanr, knew diversionary tactics when he saw them. Queen Frigga was pleasant company indeed, but she kept putting him off. A week they'd been in Asgard, and he still had not the answers he sought. Now, he was standing in her chambers, Gallanr out in the queen's garden, napping under the fitful winter sun. Abroen stood, hands behind his back, gaze on the Allfather's queen as she talked quietly with the Lady Sif. His elven ears could hear them, but he couldn't make out what they were discussing. Magic was involved, as he could feel it slide against his skin as he'd entered the queen's rooms for his audience.

A week they'd been in Asgard, and were still the talk of the city and the realm. Three riders a dragonback flying down the Bifrost would be talked about for a long time, Abroen figured. The dragons of the Ljolsafar rarely left Alfheim. They weren't exactly a secret, but the riders of that realm were private, and stayed out of the limelight. Thousands of years before their numbers were higher, but they'd dwindled over the centuries. Plenty of eggs, just not enough people suitable to hatch for picky dragonets.

An egg was part of the reason why he was in Asgard. Abroen's mission to Asgard was twofold—find out what happened to the egg given to Asgard, and learn the truth, if any, of the rumors coming out of the realm eternal. Whispers had it the Allfather slumbered. Neither he nor his sons had been seen in months. Rumor had it Thor, the heir, was exiled and the second son gone with him.

And the dragons...the dragons impressed the people of Asgard, and it took much to impress the Aesir. His own Gallanr wasn't the largest dragon in Alfheim, but she was the biggest of the three sent to Asgard. Andriel's Zayan and Nivan's Halad were both males, and smaller than Gallanr. Abroen and his partner were chosen for the task because he was trustworthy, and he had a gift for observation. He was a quiet man by nature, less likely to cause a conflict than one of the hotter-tempered riders, and the fact he was brother-in-law to the queen of Alfheim didn't hurt either. His wife, Halleah, was sister to the queen, and also a rider. Abroen had no use for the intrigues of court and little patience for it besides. Patience that usually held him in good stead, but not now.

Representing his king and queen was one thing, but his interest in the egg given to Asgard was of more import personally than what was going on with that realm's royal family. He was concerned, because a weakening Asgard meant potential chaos and harm to the other realms, including his own. No, he was representing the Council of Riders, also. The hatchling given to Asgard and its partner were his responsibility. He and Gallanr were teachers. They were tasked with training up newly matched pairs, teaching them everything they needed to know to function as a rider and dragon should, and to teach them the lore and the gravity of what they were accepting.

He couldn't reckon what the king and head of the council were thinking—just giving away a dragon egg. His interest in the egg was personal as well, for it was one of Gallanr's hatching, and he and his dragon were the ones to bind the hatchling within, warding her so she would hatch only for the right person. The egg did hatch. He always knew when they hatched. One of his dragon-given gifts. He
wondered what kind of gift the hatchling bestowed on her partner. Abroen only hoped they were faring well.

The female warrior finally left, leaving Abroen alone with the queen.

"I've waited long enough, Lady Frigga," he said. "Why didn't anyone alert us the egg had hatched? And who did she choose?"

"My son, Loki," Frigga said.

Ah, so not the golden son, the heir. Abroen smiled. "I did not think the dragon-child would pick your elder son, as everyone assumed. Your younger son is a mage, and much trusted by his father for his counsel, correct?"

"Yes," Frigga said.

"Then why is he not here?"

"Loki has left Asgard," Frigga said.

Abroen crossed his arms, lips pursed.

Well, what a fine predicament he found himself in. "Why didn't you send for us? If he's gone, we could 've tracked him. How far do you think he went with a hatchling in tow?"

"Far enough to evade Heimdall's sight, and my own," Frigga said. "Loki does not want to be found."

"We could try to find him," Abroen said. "Although searching the other realms might prove difficult."

"My warriors have tried, and came back with nothing," Frigga said.

"Which realms?"

"Alfheim, Vanahaim, even Svartalfheim," Frigga said.

"What of Nidaveller?" Abroen asked.

"Loki is banned from from ever setting foot there again, on pain of death," Frigga said. "He has no love for the dwarves."

"Jotunheim?" Abroen said.

"No," Frigga said. "I think not. He wouldn't. . . ."

"Why not?" Abroen said. "All things considered, the simplest solution is often the best, or the most obvious."

Yes, Loki would go to Jotunheim, when he'd just found out he was Jotun, and not to mention the fact Asgard was on the brink of war with them. Except Laufey had been unusually quiet for months. No threats, no incursions, no communication at all. No, it really couldn't have been that obvious all along, could it? Not when Loki was involved.

"Why didn't you come sooner?" Frigga asked, changing the subject.

"Ellead thought we should wait," Abroen said. "He respects the Allfather. Speaking of Odin, is it
true he's fallen into his slumber once again?"

"Yes," Frigga said, sitting down.

Abroen sat down beside her, taking her hands in his own. "It's a heavy burden you bear, my lady," he said. "I'll send word to my king, see if he will make some rangers available to search. Maybe they would have more luck."

Frigga nodded.

"Now that's settled, did you know many of your people think our dragons are mindless beasts we tamed for our amusement?" Abroen asked.

"I heard what happened with Fandral," Frigga said.

One of the Asgardians, a pretty warrior named Fandral, while flirting and trying to earn favor with Andriel, had asked how they tamed the beasts, not expecting to learn they were sentient. Needless to say the flirtation ended quickly.

"Zayan won't leave the poor man alone," Abroen said. "He keeps telling him he will make a snack of him yet."

"I take it Zayan has quite the sense of humor?" Frigga asked.

"Yes," Abroen said. "Most in Gallanr's line do."

"Your dragon is Zayan's mother?" Frigga said.

"Yes. Zayan is of one of Gallanr's hatchings, as is the egg that hatched for your son," Abroen said. "Gallanr's mate is Duran, the dragon of my wife, Halleah."

Jotunheim

Loki rushed to Byleistr's side, Isond helping roll the giant onto his back. Loki felt his neck for a pulse, and it was rapid and weak. Blood still poured from the wound on Byleister's chest, and Loki placed his hand over it, pressing down. It helped stabilize the broken ribs, and lessened the flow of blood. Loki tried pouring his magic into the wound to heal it, but it felt...wrong. Byleistr's energy felt corrupted with a taint Loki had never experienced.

What can we do? Isond asked.

"I'm trying to heal the wound, but it's not working," Loki said. "I should be able to do this. I've done it so many times before, but Isond, it feels like Byleistr's been poisoned, but not with anything I've ever seen. Help me get him inside, would you?"

Before the pair of them could move, they heard a crack like lightning. Wisps of blue smoke licked the air around the two beings now standing a few yards away. One was Jotun, holding a scepter. The other being was unlike Loki had ever seen. The Jotun approached, the being beside him staying a few steps back.

The Jotun was Laufey, his father.

Laufey hesitated, breath catching in his throat. His heir, Farbauti's child, standing before him, and it was almost like seeing a ghost. The small Jotun had his nose and chin, but there the similarities
stopped. Laufey knew he was slender for a Jotun, but Farbauti had been more slender still, but a fierce warrior despite his thinner build, which his heir shared. The boy was almost the same rich blue as Farbauti, and had his eyes, and the same defiance shined through.

The Jotun king watched as the boy put himself between his father and Byleistr. Laufey smiled, and his hesitation lasted only a moment.

"Greetings son," Laufey said, striking him.

The blow sent Loki flying, and he was slow to get back on his feet. He split blood as he stood.

"I'm not your son," Loki said.

"Good. We understand each other," Laufey said. "You just might prove useful to me after all. But you'll still die, in the end, as was and will be your fate."

"I make my own destiny," Loki said.

"Brave words from a runt," Laufey said. "I tire of this discourse."

This time, he aimed the scepter in his hands at Loki, and he barely dodged. Isond put herself between the two men, trying to shield Loki. But the thing with Laufey suddenly appeared behind Loki, restraining him. Loki fought to get free, but he couldn't move, and Isond was bound as well.

"The Other has ways of doing things that reach beyond my understanding," Laufey said, walking over. "Apparently there's a bond between you and the beast. He's using it to hold you both in place, as if you had not noticed. Struggle and the pain will become unimaginable. Not that it matters anyway, because soon all you will know is pain."

Loki screamed as the blade entered his chest, and he looked down, expecting blood, but there was none. He felt the blade in his body, felt and heard the crunch of bone as Laufey twisted it. And he screamed again, Isond's roars soon drowning out the sound of his own voice, until there was nothing but blackness.

88888

Utgard

Byleistr woke with a start. He was in one of the healing chambers, and he was not alone. Laufey stood nearby, watching him.

"Why didn't you let me die?" Byleistr asked.

"You still might prove useful," Laufey said. "As you did today."

"Where is Loki?" Byleistr said, standing.

"He is none of your concern," Laufey said. "Consider yourself lucky to be alive and move on. The Other healed you. Be grateful I've given you this much, Byleistr."

"Whatever you have planned, you will fail," Byleistr said.

"Your conviction is admirable, but as usual, you are wrong," Laufey said.

"Am I?" Byleistr said. "You say you want to restore our world, but instead of showing remorse and appealing to the Allfather for help, you seek war and vengeance. How is that going to change anything?"
"I will take back what is rightfully mine," Laufey said. "The Other has promised me the help I need to accomplish my goals."

"Restoring Jotunheim doesn't have to involve war," Byleistr said. "There are those among your people who still follow the old ways. Your sacrifice would bring prosperity back to Jotunheim."

"I have no intention of joining my ancestors yet," Laufey said.

"A pity," Byleistr said.

"You lack the courage to kill me yourself, yet see yourself as my potential replacement," Laufey said.

"I don't want the throne," Byleistr said. "And I am not a monster like you. Because of you the other realms regard us as monsters. Savages. They fear us."

"Rightfully so," Laufey said.

"Whatever goodness you had died with Farbauti," Byleistr said, hoping to end the discussion.

Laufey said nothing.

"I'll never forgive you," Byleistr said.

"I neither need nor desire your forgiveness and pity," Laufey said. "Get out of my sight. Helblindi's been calling for you."

Byleistr clenched his jaw, trying to think of something else to say, but he didn't. He walked away, knowing Helblindi needed him. The boy was terrified of Laufey and didn't tolerate well other Jotun besides Byleistr and a select few the big warrior entrusted with his youngest brother. Helblindi was like Loki—small, tiny for a Jotun of his age, but he was healthy, and the healers said he was the size of a normal child the same age from the other realms. He was just a runt, everyone said, but he was Byleistr's reason for living.
Thor was just finishing the lunch dishes, listening to Darcy and Jane talk. They were arguing over the television show about the zombies, Jane trying to convince Darcy she was wrong about her reasons for why it could happen. Thor smiled. Jane wasn't trying to deny it couldn't happen—his presence opened up the possibilities for many different things.

Throwing the dish towel over his shoulder, Thor walked over to the table, sitting down between the girls.

"I've seen them, you know," Thor said.

"Seen what?" Darcy asked.

"Draugar," Thor said. "They exist. The walking dead. I've fought them."

Darcy stopped mid-sentence, turning away from Jane to Thor. "What?"

"Terrifying creatures," Thor said. "The stench alone is bad enough, but they are relentless enemies. Fire's an effective weapon. I'm lucky Loki was by my side each time. He's far better fighting them than I am. Fortunately it's a problem not experienced in Asgard since before my grandfather's time. I can't say the same thing about the other realms."

"You've fought zombies," Darcy said. "Real live zombies."

"Yes," Thor said, smiling. "Why does this make you so happy?"

"I'd love to see Coulson's face if he found out zombies are real," Darcy said.

"My father said there were outbreaks of draugur here in Midgard," Thor said. "Why do you think the people of the north who once worshiped us learned to burn their dead as we still do? And Jane, it is not sickness that causes a draugr to rise. They die and come back for many reasons. Loki could explain much better than I."

Darcy stuck her tongue out at Jane, and the scientist rolled her eyes.

Before Thor could anything about the now finished argument, he stopped, frowning. He felt the touch of magic. Even in his mortal form he could feel this, because it was from Asgard, and it would never leave him. He could sense it—the Bifrost.

Not only that, the clouds and the flash of light on the west edge of town marked where the Bifrost touched down.

Jane's equipment started going off, but Thor wasn't paying attention. From Jane's building they had a full view to the east and west, and Thor could easily make out what was coming their way. He walked outside, down the street, barely paying the people any attention as they went the opposite
"Why are you here?" Thor shouted at the Destroyer. One of Asgard's most formidable weapons, forged to protect the treasures of the realm. Incapable of speech, the thing gave him the only reply it could—it knocked him Thor into the air and half-way down the block.

By now, everyone in downtown was aware something not good was happening, along with Darcy and Jane. It was Darcy who managed to pull Jane away from the computer.

"Something just knocked the hell out of Thor," Darcy said.

"We should help," Jane suggested.

"Do you see that thing?" Darcy said, grabbing her coat and running outside, Jane following. The girls ran down the street, watching as Thor picked himself up off the ground, wiping blood from his mouth and holding his ribs.

"Get everyone to safety," he said. Famous last words.

Darcy turned, starting to yell at whoever was nearby to get the hell out of town, but they already had the idea. A little encouragement never hurt, and neither did helping hand up several little kids, a dog and somebody's grandma into the back of a pickup. Jane started assisting, turning back once to look at Thor, who was once again knocked down by the Destroyer.

Also joining in on the sudden need to evacuate was Phil Coulson, who'd been on his way to the lab when the weirdness began. Flash of rainbow light, storm clouds, giant black robot looking thing breathing fire and throwing Thor everywhere. Yes, just another normal day on the job. He noted the job Darcy and Jane were doing herding people away from the one-sided fight, and watched as Thor faced down the thing with nothing more than a garbage can lid for a shield. And Thor was yelling about laying down his mortal life for those he loved, blah blah blah. Coulson couldn't move, or yell for Thor to get out of the way when it swiped at the big man harder than before, knocking him even further. He landed a couple of yards away from the SHIELD agent, and he winced as he heard the crunch of bones shattering as Thor hit the ground once again. And this time he didn't get up.

Coulson watched as the faceplates on the giant closed, and he gained enough composure to move, and he knelt down beside Thor, checking for a pulse. He found none, and stood up, getting out his phone, hitting speed dial.

"Sitwell, get a team here now," he said. "God, I don't even know. . .send medics, a security team. . .no, not the standard protocol. We're talking Hulk-broke-Harlem level security needed here. Yeah, center of town. Hurry."

He ended the call, putting away the phone, when the robot, or whatever the hell it was, started moving again. Toward him. And the face was opening, Coulson could feel the heat radiating off it, and then there was lightning from the blue clear sky, the scent of ozone, and a hammer flying into the now-revived Thor's hand.

"Son of Coul, now would be a good time to leave," Thor suggested.

Coulson nodded, scrambling back to his vehicle, but he didn't get in. He wanted to see the fight.

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Thor couldn't relish the feeling of joy at having Mjolnir back in his hand or the return of his powers. No fear, no distress, no speculation over why the Destroyer was there for him, as he was too busy
trying to kill it. Already half the town was destroyed, and he hoped Jane and Darcy were far way by now. Innocents were in the line of fire, and he would not let them be harmed, as it was his presence that was the cause of their potential harm.

He wasn't getting anywhere on the ground, so Thor started spinning Mjolnir, taking to the sky, drawing the Destroyer's fire. It could not touch him, and Thor, suddenly finding his advantage, spun up a storm, lifting it into the sky. Thor dove straight for it, satisfied when Mjolnir took out its head, and the Destroyer fell to Earth. Thor followed it down, striking it with lightning, making sure it would not get up.

Closing his eyes, Thor took a deep breath. Mjolnir was in his hand. He was no mortal anymore. Opening his eyes, Thor called Heimdall. Moments later, the Bifrost appeared, and he stepped into its light, popping out into the observatory, but it was not Heimdall who greeted him. Standing before Thor was a Jotun—Laufey, holding his father's spear, Gungnir, and a staff with a glowing blue gem.

"You're amazingly resilient," Laufey said. "Your famed Watcher is not so lucky."

He gestured at Heimdall, who was frozen out on the Bifrost.

"Why are you here?" Thor asked.

"Making a little mischief before I head back to Jotunheim," Laufey said. "Worry not little prince. I will return for what is mine, if there's anything left when I return."

Thor frowned at the cryptic remark, watching as the Jotun king slid Gungnir into the keyhole of the Bifrost, and it activated, rotating away from its normal path, and turning back toward the city.

Laufey disappeared in a blue flash of light, leaving Thor alone. The Bifrost was turning white with the fire of Gungnir, losing its rainbow hues. Shielding his eyes from the light, Thor pulled Gungnir from the keyhole, but the Bifrost didn't stop. Frustrated, he threw the spear down the Bifrost bridge, grabbed Heimdall, dragging him out of the observatory. The energy from the open portal was starting to build, working its way down the bridge toward the city. Thor took a look over his shoulder, at the palace and its surroundings. So many people would die if he did nothing. He would never see Jane again. The lives of his people compared to his promise to a mortal? Even he wasn't that foolish.

Raising Mjolnir, Thor brought it down, smashing the bridge repeatedly until it started to crack. Large fissures appeared under his feet, and the Observatory went off the edge of the world, taking with it the Bifrost under Thor's feet, and the resulting shockwave knocking Mjolnir from his hand. He fell, pieces of the shattered bridge cutting him as they flew by, the jagged edges of the broken path digging into the hand he was using to hold on. Then his father was there, pulling him up and over the edge, back onto solid ground.

"I've got you," Odin said, holding his son close as Thor sank to his knees.

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Odin Borson, king of Asgard, Allfather of the Nine Realms was sat upon his throne, listening as his thanes and some of the minor nobility bickered among themselves. Tyr, commander of the Einherjar and his trusted friend, stood at his side, although two steps down from the throne. Only five days after the Bifrost was turned against them by the Jotun king, and people were wanting answers, but Odin had none to give them.

The only positive from the breaking of the Bifrost was the fact Asgard was now effectively cut off
from the other realms, meaning the Jotun had no easy access to Asgard. The secret ways were being searched out and closed by the Einherjar and the best mages of the realm. Unfortunately for them all, the best he knew of was gone. His son, Loki, gone, and all because of his own pride and damn foolishness. Odin's other victim, Thor, was still in the healing rooms recuperating from his battle and efforts to save Asgard.

Odin only wanted to go see his son, and talk with Frigga about how next to proceed, not deal with nobles. He was almost about to dismiss them when the sound of lightning filled the throne room, the crack reverberating off its walls. The nobles scattered as something appeared in their midst. Chaos ensued as they realized it was a Jotun.

Odin's eye narrowed. It was King Laufey of Jotunheim, holding a scepter in one hand and a bundle wrapped in black fur.

"Greetings Allfather," Laufey said. "I bring you news, and also wish to offer a proposal that will prove beneficial for both our realms."

Odin struck Gungnir against the floor. "I will speak to King Laufey in private."

Gathering their shredded dignity, the remaining nobles quickly shuffled out of the throne room, followed by the guards, who took up their places.

"What do you want Laufey?" Odin asked.

"Give me back the Casket of Ancient Winters and I promise I will spare you what is to come should you refuse," Laufey said.

"I will never return the Casket to your hand, Laufey," Odin replied. "What is this news you have for me?"

The Jotun king walked up the steps to the throne, setting the bundle in his hands at the Allfather's feet.

"That belonged to the Aesir we found hiding in my realm," Laufey said. "The one you stole from me is dead. I can't say his death was painless, but it was quick."

"You killed your own son," Odin said.

"I granted him a mercy. He never should have been allowed to live. I gave him to the snows as he was once promised," Laufey said. "There lie his belongings as proof of his death. The weapons bear your taint, Allfather. As did he who wielded them."

Odin opened the bundle—a cloak of black wolf fur, wrapped around the knives he'd given Loki, and his dagger. Objects Loki would never part with.

"He was no one's son, Allfather," Laufey said. "He was never granted a name."

"His name was Loki, and he was my son," Odin said.

"Mourn him as you will," Laufey said. "But know this—I will have back the Casket of Ancient Winters by any means necessary. War is coming, Odin Borson, and it will mean the end of everything you love."

Odin watched as Laufey stepped away, disappearing the same way he appeared. The fact the Jotun walked into throne room so easily should have bothered Odin, but at the moment, he didn't care.
Instead, he drew one of Loki's knives, wrapping his hand around the hilt with one hand, running his fingers over the flat of the blade with the other. Bowing his head, for the first time he could remember in centuries, the Allfather wept.

Thor woke, something warm and heavy draped across his middle. Propping himself up on his elbows, he saw Herja, his mother's forest cat. The white-furred, green-eyed demon purred loudly, bumping his forehead with her own.

"I see my lady, you're with child again," Thor said, noting the cat's protruding sides, and scratching her under the chin. "Congratulations are in order, but if you birth them in my bed again, we will have words. Loki's chambers are far better suited. More nooks and crannies to hide a brood. And dark corners filled with mice. Good hunting, I promise."

The cat purred harder as he petted her, and Thor was grateful for company that didn't treat him as if he would break. Seven days he'd been in the healing rooms, an entire week wasted. The first four days he spent mostly sleeping, but he knew his mother and father had been in to see him. When he was awake, Thor asked the healers when he was getting out, where was Loki and when would he see him? Their reply? No one would look him in the eye. They politely evaded his questions. Until Eir entered his room, Herja hissing at the healer. Thor frowned, as normally Herja was a friendly creature, and Eir and the animal were well familiar with each other.

"My prince, your parents request your presence in Lady Frigga's chambers," Eir said. "You are to go as soon as you are presentable."

Thor took his time getting cleaned up and dressing, as a formal summons from his parents was not something he was expecting. His stomach churned as he finally left the healing rooms and went to his mother's chambers. He entered, finding his parents standing side by side, Odin's arm around Frigga, his father looking old and tired and Frigga's face pinched with worry and something else.

Thor felt the bile rise in his throat. It was about Loki. Why else would everyone be avoiding him, and his parents looking so out of sorts?

"I know you've something to tell me about Loki," Thor said.

"Loki is dead," Odin said.

"What?" Thor asked in disbelief. His vision swam, and his chest felt heavy, as if he could not suddenly catch his breath.

"King Laufey of Jotunheim appeared two days ago, and he brought with him Loki's knives. You know as well as I Loki would never willingly part with his knives, not matter how much he denied his dislike of sentiment."

Thor put a hand on the back of a chair to support himself. "How... Laufey appeared? Here? In Asgard? The Bifrost is destroyed. How did he come to be here?"

"I know not," Odin said. "He carried with him an unusual scepter that seemed to have something to do with it. It was magic, ancient and powerful, of a kind I've never encountered."

"How did Laufey come into possession of Loki's things?" Thor asked.

Frigga walked over to Thor, taking his hand, guiding him to sit down, and she knelt down beside him, hand on his cheek. "Loki disappeared a few days after your exile, and your father had fallen into the Odinsleep. Loki was beyond my sight, and even that of Heimdall."
"What does this have to do with anything? If he left Asgard, why didn't anyone go searching for him?" Thor asked. "Not even our friends bothered?"

"They tried, Thor," Frigga said. "But they found no sign of him."

"So you'll believe the lies of an enemy who walks into our realm, and tries to destroy us?" Thor asked.

"Not lies," Odin said. "Of us all, Laufey is probably the most honest. I do not blame Loki for leaving us. The fault is completely mine."

"Why do you say that?" Thor asked.

"Loki is not of our blood," Odin said. "At the end of the war, I found him in Jotunheim, an infant, only a few days old, left to die. I couldn't leave him to his fate, not after the deaths of so many...so I brought him home to Asgard. I thought one day Loki would be the key to building a lasting peace between our realms but it was not to be. And that is not all, my son. Laufey was Loki's true sire."

Loki, Jotun. Fine. Thor could deal with that. Laufey's son? The king of the Jotnar?

"Why didn't you tell him?" Thor said, standing so forcefully he knocked over his chair, and he began pacing. "And I went to Jotunheim to destroy them, called them monsters..."

Odin walked over, grabbing him by the chin. "Thor, look at me," he demanded. "I made mistakes. I've wronged both of my sons. Nothing I can ever say or do will make up for that fact. Despite what Loki thought, I loved him, as a father should love his son. And I never told him. Nor did I tell him how proud I was of the man he became."

Odin handed Thor Loki's dagger, touching his fingers to his son's cheek for just a moment.

"I'm so sorry my son," Odin said. "I should have told you both the truth from the beginning. Perhaps none of this would have happened. You both deserved better. And Thor, I know I don't say it often enough, but I love you, my son."

Odin walked away, leaving Frigga alone with their son. She wrapped her arms around Thor, sinking to the floor with him as he fell to his knees.

"Is he really gone?" Thor whispered.

"I can't see him," Frigga said. "I had thought...never mind. It's not important right now."

88888

In the years to come, Loki would remember glimpses of worlds and the spaces between the realms. Waking up suspended, staring at stars not in Asgard's sky. Svartalfheim, with its dead cities, broken ships and all the earth scorched black. A fleet of black space ships shaped like nails, each with a glowing red orb, hanging in the dark of creation. Leviathans that looked like Midgard's great whales, only these truly massive creatures swam the seas of space. And last, a terrible face vowing to court death itself, even if it meant the end of all creation.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flight

Chapter 9—Feint

Disclaimer: I do not own the Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Empty time, going through the motions. Almost six months since Thor's return to Asgard, and it was not a happy one. He was grateful to be back among family and friends, but Loki's absence made it hard to breathe sometimes. Sif and the Warriors three kept him occupied when he wasn't at court, learning the craft of kingship, or with his mother, just spending time in her presence. He tried not to be alone, as it was a reminder of what he'd lost.

Sometimes Jane crossed the thunderer's mind, and he would go see Heimdall to ask how the scientist fared. Always the same—she searched for him. But did he want to go back? Thor had told his parents of the scientist, and Frigga was happy he'd found someone, but Odin, not as pleased. And Sif had all but told him he was an idiot when she heard about the mortal. Thor did wonder what Loki's thoughts would have been, and the more he reflected on it, not a good idea. Loki was honest. Always, despite what others believed. Darcy and Loki, on the other hand, that made Thor smile. The two probably would've gotten on well. He tried not to think of Jane, just one more hurt he didn't want to think about. The guilt Thor felt over the whole matter wouldn't go away.

Loki learning of his true heritage was all his fault. Thor didn't care Loki was born Jotun, or Laufey's son. He was angry with his father and resented the fact Odin lied to them both. Loki was meant to be a king, just the same as him. A different realm, but again, it didn't matter. Loki was his brother, and that would never change. But there was no point dwelling on the past. Thor had his duties, training, helping settle petty disputes around the realm, Odin putting his trust in his heir to do the right thing. Thor was trying to become the man he wanted to be, that Loki believed he could be.

Loki. Nothing would ever be the same without him. During Thor's exile on Midgard, he had hope. Now, it was gone, along with his brother. He never considered the reality he was now living. Loki was always there—his shadow and conscience.

88888

Frigga had a new duty added to her days since the time Abroen and the elven delegation spent in Asgard. The dragonrider had gone back to Alfheim with the others, but several days later, returned to Asgard, asking to speak only to the queen. He brought with him two dragon eggs—one obsidian black and the other azure blue. One egg for Asgard, the other for Midgard.

Besides bringing the eggs, Abroen and Gallanr helped ward everything in the vault. Even Odin couldn't fault that logic when he found out. Frigga checked the wards and the eggs each morning. Abroen said she could touch them, and the dragonets could hear voices while they slumbered, waiting for the right person. She liked to think the baby dragons inside enjoyed the company. Abroen explained the two eggs now in Asgard's possession were two of the more stubborn the elves had ever dealt with. Both had gone unhatched for centuries, and the elves wondered if the dragons inside would stand a better chance at finding partners elsewhere. The council decided one of the two eggs would be given to Asgard, and the other held for Midgard.
Besides, having the eggs around gave Frigga something to worry about besides Thor, and how he was dealing with Loki's absence. Odin had enough to occupy his time. He did worry about his remaining son, but left it to Frigga to deal with him. The queen held no resentment toward her husband, only a fading anger and sadness over the fate befalling her family. Frigga mourned Loki's loss, but on the inside, she still held on to the hope her son was alive. Her baby was a survivor, always had been. Some in Asgard considered Loki a coward, but he was brave, and always did what he had to, ensuring he and Thor came home alive.

Frigga put a hand on each egg, closing her eyes. She smiled as she felt the faint touch of the mind of each slumbering dragon. They dreamed, and they waited, and Frigga knew they would not have to wait much longer for their respective partners. That much of the future was certain, though who they would partner with was unknown. Dragons over the skies of Asgard. A beautiful dream, one Frigga had often, but not of dragons. Just one dragon. Golden, like its egg, standing beside her youngest son. The queen couldn't tell if it was a true vision, or just a mother's dream of her lost child. Did it truly matter?

Removing her hands from the eggs, Frigga turned to head up the stairs and out of the vault. Eir needed her help with a patient in the healing rooms, and she'd put off going long enough. The queen startled, seeing Heimdall waiting at the top of the stairs, helmet off. He walked down, meeting his queen half-way.

"My queen, I come bearing news," Heimdall said.

"Does my husband know you've left your post?" Frigga asked.

"He'll find out soon enough, and why," Heimdall said. "Lady Frigga, Prince Loki is alive, on Midgard."

He watched as tears of joy started to fall down the queen's face, and his eyes widened in surprise as she placed a quick, chaste kiss upon his lips. He would not be the one to tarnish her joy at his news. She would find out soon enough what chaos Loki was causing in Midgard.

88888

Dragged back and forth across the Nine and the spaces between realms by the Other, separated from Isond. Torture, coercion and lies. Left to the tender mercies of the Other. Loki vowed to kill Laufey, the Other and lay waste to the Chitauri. He would do it. He swore in the name of the Allfather. Oh, and how could he forget Thanos?

Isond a prisoner on Jotuheim. Byleister dead. Thor probably still stuck on Midgard. Laufey had told Loki he'd killed Thor, but he didn't believe it. There was some truth to the Jotun king's claims he'd attacked Asgard, as when he gave Loki permission to call Heimdall, there was no response. Asgard's watcher never left his post for anything short of the Allfather's orders or less likely, death.

Laufey, the bastard, had sold out his own heir. Odin lied, but Loki knew he had his reasons. He trusted Odin. Almost 1,000 years and Odin had never give his youngest son a reason to not trust him, not until those last fateful moments in the vault. Even then, Loki clung to the hope Odin would wake and accept him back. Ah, hope. Such a fragile thing compared to what Loki felt most days.

His resolve was another matter. It was unbreakable, not unlike the hold the scepter had on him. Loki had possession of Laufey's scepter, a gift from the being known as Thanos. Loki suspected the scepter held the Soul Gem, or a shard of it. The Soul Gem was one of the Infinity Gems, one of which Asgard once held, and the Infinity Gauntlet, the weapon once holding all the gems. Asgard's gem, the Tesseract, was lost on Midgard during the Jotun-ASgardian war. Odin brought the weapon
across realms to use, but he never had the courage to unleash the gem's power on Midgard, and later, it was lost to history and legend.

Thanos wanted the Tesseract. Loki knew he was just a pawn in a bigger game, and should he succeed in giving Thanos what he wanted, the titan promised Laufey he would receive the assistance he needed to get back the Casket of Ancient Winters and destroy Asgard. Loki decided to play his part, going along until he found an opportunity to break free. He was not called the Lie-smith and Silvertongue for nothing. He would give truth to the lie's he'd been accused of all his life.

And his brave, beautiful Isond, stuck on Jotunheim. He could still feel her, a faint presence in the back of his mind, holding him to this existence. He would return to her. He owed her that much. Loki would pay that debt, he promised, and it was finally time. Loki opened a portal, taking every bit of magic and will he possessed, channeling it into the scepter, using it to find the Tesseract. Cold seeped into his bones and deeper as he traversed the space across the realms and the spaces between.

Then Loki was down on one knee, gathering his wits. It took a moment to realize he was on Midgard. Slowly raising to both feet, Loki took not of his surroundings. Scientific equipment. People. And the Tesseract a few yards away. The mortals were all staring, some approaching with their weapons drawn. Loki was willing to wait and see what they did next.

"Sir, please put down the spear," one yelled.

Loki fired the weapon at the man, who had an eye patch. The man beside him knocked him to the ground. His selfless act did not go unnoticed, but Loki suddenly found himself busy defending himself. He hoped he could avoid a confrontation, but the gem in the scepter was blood-thirsty, and Loki knew, again, thanks to the gem, most of the people in the room had blood on their hands. A few he spared, the ones he knew had regret in their hearts and minds. The rest, well, he didn't want to think about it.

(primitive weapons)

Turning his attention to one of the few mortals left standing, Loki grabbed him.

"You have heart," he said, touching the man's chest with the point of the spear, watching as his eyes became the same blue as his own.

And the moral with the eye patch thought he was being so stealthy, grabbing the Tesseract, trying to sneak it away.

"Please don't," Loki said. "I still need that."

"This doesn't have to get any messier," Eye-patch replied.

"Of course it does," Loki said, laying it on thick. "I've come too far for anything else. I am Loki of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose."

Off to the side, one of the scientists stood, approaching, but not too close. "Loki? Brother of Thor?"

Loki's head snapped around, gaze centered on the older man. "You know Thor?" he asked.

"Yes," the man said.

"Is he still here?"

"No. He went back to Asgard months ago."
At least his oaf of a brother made it back home, and Laufey had lied. Still, Loki was not finished.

Eye-patch had more to say. "We have no quarrel with your people."

"An ant has no quarrel with a boot," Loki fired back.

"Are you planning to step on us?"

"I come with glad tidings of a world made free," Loki said.

"Free from what?"

"Freedom," Loki said, stepping forward, and the dark man stepped back. Loki was making him nervous. "Freedom is life's great lie. Once you accept that in your heart... you will know peace."

He hesitated long enough to use the scepter on the scientist who claimed to know Thor.

Eye-patch watched, and Loki wanted the conversation over. Get Tesseract, get out and away. He could end this travesty, and get the Hel off Midgard.

"Yeah. You say peace, but I think you mean the other thing."

The man Loki now knew to be named Barton spoke. "Sir, Director Fury is stalling. This place is about to blow, and drop a hundred feet of rock on us. He means to bury us."

"Like the pharoahs of old," Fury said.

"He's right. The portal is collapsing in on itself. We got maybe two minutes before this goes critical."

"Well then," Loki said, looking to Barton, who drew his gun and fired at Fury, dropping him. Loki knew he wouldn't kill him, and he was right. While the man called Fury was picking himself off the floor, Barton grabbed the case holding the Tesseract, and Loki stumbled. He'd come so far, and he would not fail. Loki would reign chaos on them. He was a god of mischief, but he would bring turmoil. Loki was not inherently evil. He enjoyed mischief. Occasionally morally ambiguous, there were lines even Loki would not cross. He'd make an exception for Laufey, the Other, the Chitauri and Thanos. He would give Thanos what he wanted—death.

Chapter End Notes

Posted a picture at my Tumbler account of a dragon that strongly resembles how I imagine Isond. Visit at:
http://dragonsofasgard.tumblr.com
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flight

Chapter 10—Harbinger

Disclaimer: I do not own the Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Germany

Tapping into the power of the Tesseract took effort, but it was easier for Loki than expending anymore of his own energy and magic. Using the cube's power to transport himself over a distance was simple, and Loki made his entrance while Barton was busy with his own task. Loki figured his orders to not kill anyone unless absolutely necessary would go unheeded.

Gaining his own entrance into the mortal soiree was simple enough. Loki walked in, acting as if he belonged. And it looked like the mortals had learned sophistication since his last sojourn in the realm. Walking down the stairs, Loki spun the scepter, now in the form of a cane, snapping the neck of the man coming toward him. A mercenary. His death was quicker than he deserved. Loki continued on, grabbing the scientist, flipping him onto his back onto the ancient sculpture. The mortals, of course, screamed and started running like stampeding cattle. So easy to fool them, making them see what he wanted them to see. They thought he killed the scientist, when it was far from it. Maimed was more like it, but he wouldn't die.

With Barton's part of the mission over, Loki followed the herd outside, changing his garb back to his traditional Asgardian ceremonial armor. He was claiming to be their king, so he might as well look it. Loki was enjoying himself, a little, causing so much chaos. It was liberating, but he was playing a role, and he couldn't lose himself. Isond was counting on him, and she was his one link to sanity, who he was, not this creature he was becoming. He was Loki of Asgard, brother of Thor, son of Odin and Frigga, chosen of Isond. The Other was watching, and Loki wouldn't fail to deliver.

"Kneel before me. I said kneel," Loki bellowed, slamming the scepter into the ground, catching the attention of the mortals, bringing them to their knees. So much better.

"Is not this simpler? Is this not your natural state?" Loki said. "It's the unspoken truth of humanity, that you crave subjugation. The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel."

One of the crowd actually had the gall to get to his feet. "Not to men like you," the man said.

"There are no men like me," Loki said.

"There are always men like you," the man replied.

Loki raised the scepter, wishing he didn't have to make a threat. He wasn't going to hurt the old man. He could see in his mind the ordeal he went through as a boy, and Loki was appalled by the sheer butchery and evil he found there. This was the realm to which Odin exiled his brother?

"Look to your elder, people. Let him be an example," Loki said, aiming the scepter, when something deflected the blast. The blast was reflected back at him, knocking him down.
His assailant was in a blue uniform with red and white on it.

"You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing," he said.

Loki knew who he was—Steven Rogers, also known as Captain America. The Other was very thorough in letting him know about his potential foes.


"I'm not the one who's out of time," Rogers said, taking a swing.

Loki deflected the blow, and commenced beating the Hel out of the mortal, who surprisingly, was able to hold his own. Right up until the other mortal showed up, the mouthy, overconfident one in gold and red armor. Quickly followed by the aircraft with the very large gun pointed in his general vicinity.

"Make a move, Reindeer Games. . ."

Loki surrendered.

"Good move."

88888

Loki wasn't keeping track of time. He was strapped in his seat. Listening to the mortals argue, amusing. Almost. One was child-like, and the other had never been child enough. Loki didn't need the scepter to deduce that. It was written all over them. Then there was the lightning, and he gave them a terse answer when they questioned him. The jet lurched, then Thor was there, jerking Loki out of his seat, then tossing him onto the ground.

"Where is the Tesseract?" Thor asked.

"I missed you too," Loki managed, picking himself up off the ground, turning away from Thor.

"Do I look to be in a gaming mood? The Bifrost is destroyed. Do you know how much dark energy our father had to muster to bring me here?" Thor asked. "Laufey came, told Father you were dead."

Loki's head snapped around, gaze meeting Thor's. "Did you mourn?" he asked.

"We all did. Our father. . ." Thor started, but Loki cut him off.

"Your father! He did tell you my true parentage, did he not?" Loki asked.

"We were raised together. We played together. We fought together. Do you remember none of that?" "I remember a shadow," Loki said. "Living in the shade of your greatness."

"Odin always said we were both meant to be kings," Loki said. "I think Midgard will do, don't you, brother?"

"So you take the world I love as recompense for your imagined slights? No, the Earth is under my protection, Loki," Thor said.

"And you're doing a marvelous job with that! The humans slaughter each other in droves, while you idly fret. I mean to rule them. And why should I not?" Loki said.
"You think yourself above them?" Thor asked.

"Well, yes," Loki said.

"Then you miss the truth of ruling, brother. A throne would suit you ill," Thor said.

Loki didn't say anything about how ill-suited Thor was for a throne, so he changed the subject. Distraction was a good idea.

"I've seen worlds you've never known about! I have grown, Odin's Son, in my exile! I have seen the true power of the Tesseract, and when I wield it..." Loki said.

"Who showed you this power? Who controls the would-be-king?" Thor asked.

"I am a king," Loki said.

"Not here! You give up the Tesseract! You give up this pointless dream. Come home," Thor said, his voice breaking, almost desperate now. And Loki almost gave in, when his brother put his hand on his neck, his brother's familiar old gesture of affection. But Loki didn't break, as he held on to his resolve. Too much was at stake.

"I don't have it," Loki said, eyes dropping to Mjolnir, which Thor was brandishing. "And without the cube, I'm as good as dead. You'll need the Tesseract to bring me home, but I've sent it off, I know not where."

"You listen well, brother. I..." Thor never finished the thought as a streak of gold and red knocked him off the edge of the peak.

"I'm listening," Loki said, watching as the annoying mortal fought with his brother. But his attention was captured by the two ravens circling over his head. Odin's ravens. Huginn landed on his shoulder, and Muninn flew down, taking a perch from which to watch the fight.

"So you've found me," Loki said. The raven cocked its head, watching him. "I'll give you a message for Odin—tell him I'm sorry."

The raven cawed to its companion, and Muninn flew overhead. Huginn took wing beside his brother, and the ravens disappeared. Loki turned his attention back to the fight, watching the mortals and his brother trying to one up each other, until the moment he saw Thor gunning for the soldier. Loki closed his eyes, hands going over his ears as Thor brought Mjolnir down on the shield. The shockwave knocked the thunderer back, flattening trees, but the soldier still stood, proud. Then they were coming for him, putting him in shackles. Another ride on the jet, this time he kept his mouth shut, and then he was transferred to a large glass cage on the mortals' flying ship. That was followed by another engaging conversation with the man called Fury.

Another mortal showed up a little later, a woman this time.

"I'll make this short. I'm Agent Natasha Romanov," she said. "What are your plans for Agent Barton?"

Loki stared. At least she was direct. "I haven't thought that far ahead," he said.

"Seriously. That's the best you can do?" Natasha said. "I don't care what you're doing here. I just want Agent Barton back."

"Your world in the balance and you bargain for one man?" Loki asked.
"I owe him a debt," Natasha said. "Simple as that. I've got red in my ledger, I'd like to wipe it out."

Loki opened his mouth to say something, but suddenly, he was unable to speak. The Other stood before him.

"The Chitauri grow restless," the Other said. "As does my master."

"Let them gird themselves. I will lead them into glorious battle," Loki said.

"Battle? Against the meager might of Earth?" the Other said.

"Glorious, not lengthy. If your force is as formidable as you claim," Loki said.

"You question us? You question HIM? He, who put the scepter in your hand, who gave you ancient knowledge and new purpose when you were cast out, defeated?"

"I was meant to be a king," Loki said. "Until my birthright was taken by my own sire. Thanos put the scepter in his hands, not mine. I only want vengeance."

"Your ambition is little, born of childish need. We look beyond the Earth to greater worlds the Tesseract will unveil," the Other said.

"You don't have the Tesseract yet," Loki said. "I don't threaten, but until I open the doors, until your force is mine to command, you are but words."

"You will have your war, Asgardian. If you fail, if the Tesseract is kept from us, there will be no realm, no barren moon, no crevice where he can not find you. You think you know pain? He will make you long for something as sweet as pain," the Other said. "The games you play must end, Asgardian. Give us the Tesseract."

"You'll have it when I'm ready," Loki said.

"Stalling will not save you, or those on this ship. Your failure to cooperate will cost you. I hope you're prepared to deal with what's about to be unleashed. You consider yourself a monster, but you're nothing compared to the creature the mortals have in their midst."

It occurred to Loki what the Other meant to do—unleash the alter ego of the man called Banner.

"No. No you can't," Loki screamed at thin air.

"Uh, are you guys seeing this?" Natasha asked, talking into her comm.

"Rock of ages flipping his lid? That would be a yes," Tony Stark answered. "You need help down there?"

"No. I'm good," Natasha said, leaving Loki, heading up to the lab.

Loki braced himself as the ship lurched. He had lost complete control of the situation, if he'd ever had it at all.

88888

Jotunheim

Byleistr made his way through the palace, ignoring the looks he received from other Jotnar. He'd been gone several days, just to get away. He'd crossed Laufey again by attacking the being called the
Other. The third time in as many months he'd tried to kill it, and he failed. Again. He'd only returned
to check on Helblindi, and make sure what was left of Utgard was still standing. And of course, he
couldn't find any sign of his younger brother. Byleistr made his way to the healing rooms, finding his
friend Annar, busy making healing stones.

"Where is Helblindi?" Byleistr asked.

"Napping in front of the fire in the kitchens with my wolves," Annar said, stopping his work long
enough to clasp Byleistr's hand.

"Has he behaved himself?"

"Mostly," Annar said with a grin. "He did ride Aima through the great hall the other day, and the
other morning he took Aim and Venni exploring."

"Outside?"

"He's fine," Annar said. "I healed up the worst of the cuts. He didn't cry once."

"You let him outside. Alone," Byleistr said.

"I didn't let him do anything," Annar said.

"You weren't watching him, were you?" Byleistr asked.

Annar frowned. "I left him with the wolves for only a few minutes. He was drawing, quite content,
and when returned, he was gone."

"What was so important you left Helblindi alone?" Byleistr said.

"Suttung killed a pair of Laufey's pet Chitauri, and he asked me to help get rid of the bodies," Annar
said. "We ended up cutting them apart instead to see how they work."

"They're not very intelligent and seem to have no independent thoughts," Byleistr said.

"True," Annar said. "It was a waste of time."

"And in that time, Helblindi snuck out with the wolves," Byleistr said.

"Yes," Annar said. "And that's not all. Laufey threatened to kill Suttung this morning."

"What did he do this time?"

"He took Helblindi out and showed him how to unfreeze and call one of the guardians. It was
amusing, but Laufey was not pleased," Annar said.

"How did Suttung take the threat?" Byleistr asked.

"Laughed and spit in the king's face," Annar answered.

"He's going to get himself killed," Byleistr said. "Is he crazy?"

"Suttung is missing part of his arm, not his wits," Annar said. "He also laid kinship claim on you and
Helblindi again."

"Laufey doesn't recognize the claim," Byleistr said. "He never has."
"Suttung is Farbauti's brother," Annar said. "He's of a noble line, has no sons of his own. Why won't Laufey accept the claim?"

"Suttung is only alive because he's blood kin to Farbauti," Byleistr said.

"He also offered to help you. . .remove Laufey from the throne," Annar said. "All you have to do is say the word."

"I'm not killing Laufey," Byleistr said.

"It's your birthright," Annar said. "You're the oldest."

"I'm a bastard and outcast," Byleistr said. "Do you think anyone would accept me on the throne? And what would happen to Helblindi if I failed?"

"Suttung and I would take Helblindi with me to one of my uncles," Annar said. "Maybe leave Jotunheim, go to Vanaheim. They're not completely against us."

"How do you know this?"

"I don't," Annar said. "It can't be any worse than staying here, can it?"

"I don't know," Byleistr said.

"You know, I wasn't done telling you about Helblindi's little adventure," Annar said. "He dragged me back out with him, he said he'd found something, and wanted to show me. The wolves and I followed him to the temple. He'd found the entrance into the tunnels below. He took me down, yes, indeed, Helblindi has found something. What's a dragon doing in the caves beneath the temple?"

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the delay in posting up a new chapter. Been under the weather the past few days.
Thor listened to the assembled mortals talking amongst themselves. How could they make sense of anything, all talking at once? They were decent people, Thor supposed. Banner wasn't a monster. He was a good man. Stark's heart was in the right place. Rogers was also a good man, but so young to carrying such sadness. Natasha a warrior in her own right. And Fury. Norns, Thor didn't know what to think. He would wait and be wary of the man in charge. Thor sighed, turning his attention back to the conversation.

"He really grows on you," Bruce said.

Stark arched one eyebrow, and Rogers glanced his way, incredulous.

"Loki's gonna drag this out. So, Thor, what's his play?" the captain asked.

"He plans to rule Midgard," Thor said.

"How does he plan on accomplishing that?" Rogers said.

"I know not," Thor said.

"Maybe they're planning on building another portal," Banner suggested. "That's what he needs Erik Selvig for."

"Selvig?" Thor asked, surprised.

"He's an astrophysicist," Banner explained.

"He's a friend," Thor replied.

"Loki has him under some kind of spell, along with one of ours," Natasha said.

Thor said nothing. That certainly explained much, including Loki's behavior. But who was using him, and was he going along willingly? Thor doubted it. Loki was stubborn and bowed to no one.

"I wanna know why Loki let us take him," Rogers said.

"I don't think we should be focusing on Loki," Banner said. That guy's brain is a bag full of cats, you can smell crazy on him."

Thor's gaze snapped up, full on Banner, who took a step back. "I don't care how you speak, Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard, and he is my brother," he said.

"He killed 80 people in two days."

"He's adopted," Thor said, hoping to end the discussion.
"Thor, with me," Fury said, gesturing for him to follow him out of the lab. Thor went with him, pondering his brother. Loki was gaunt, paler than normal, and there was a madness in his eyes. Loki always had something of a fey look to him, but his brother's appearance frightened Thor. He hadn't told the others of this. He thought of mentioning it to Coulson, but he didn't. The man was busy enough, wrangling the others.

Loki didn't look healthy. Had he been tortured? Thor doubted his brother was acting of his own free will. Loki never once, in all their years together, mentioned wanting a throne. Maybe something changed in the time they were apart.

Thor also had no intention of returning home without Loki or the Tesseract. The humans were playing with forces beyond their understanding, playing at being gods, much as he and Loki did when they were boys. But at the time, they were boys. The humans were still children compared to the other races of the realms, and under the protection of Asgard. The other realms were strong, able to protect themselves, but Midgard, ever the bastard child of the realms. Odin always said human mortality was their defining trait. Despite their short lives, they burned so bright. The complete opposite of Asgardians, but they still had many of the same traits. People were people, even if they were Aesir, Jotun, elven or human.

"Your brother's opened up a can of worms," Fury said. War hasn't started yet, but do you think you can make Loki tell us where the Tesseract is?" Fury asked.

"I do not know," Thor said. "Loki's mind is far afield, it's not just power he craves, it's vengeance upon me. There's no pain that would prise his need from him."

"A lot of guys think that, until the pain starts," Fury said.

"What are you asking me to do?" Thor said.

"I'm asking what are you prepared to do?" Fury said.

Thor was taken aback. "Loki is a prisoner," he said.

"They why do I feel like he's the only person on this boat that wants to be here?" Fury said.

"You're asking me to torture my brother for information?" Thor asked.

"If it comes to that," Fury said. "Think about it."

Fury left Thor alone once again. The thunderer sat down, the gravity of the situation finally taking its toll.

These mortals were so different from Jane, Darcy and Erik. At least Darcy and Jane were safe, and he'd have to see what he could do for Erik, if anything.

His thoughts cycled back to Loki. Thor was afraid for his brother, terrified of losing him again. Thor was certain Loki was not himself. Loki was many things, but not a murderer. Loki would face Asgardian justice, not Midgardian. Fury hinted at wanting him to torture his own brother. Asgardians were many things, but they would never resort to torturing a prisoner. Locking them away, yes, but their needs were met, and they were treated with some dignity. All prisoners were someone's family or friend. And Loki was still his brother, blood or not. Thor would not throw away more than a thousand years of kinship and friendship. He would not abandon Loki.
Loki was knocked to his feet when the ship lurched, an explosion reverberating through the bulkheads. Struggling to stand, he sighed. Losing control of the situation was something he hadn't allowed for. The scepter out of his hands and its influence lessened let Loki realize he'd never really been in control at all. Maybe he wasn't, but he would do what he could to keep the Tesseract away from Thanos. He could try. The best solution, because Loki knew if he kept it in his own hands, he would have no choice but to hand it over to the enemy. The influence of the scepter was that strong, and he would not risk it, which was why he'd sent Selvig off with the damn cube in the first place. If he didn't know where it was, he couldn't hand it over, and maybe find a solution that didn't involve invasion, war and death. So far, his luck was holding magnificently.

Conditioned to hand it over when it was in his possession. He would not. Thanos would have to come get hit himself if he wanted it. Or the Other would have to get it for him. They would not have it from Loki's hands. He would die first, and if that meant dooming Isond as well, he would make that choice. At least they would die together. Better to die than keep living separated from her as he was. With him only a short time, but Loki knew the bond between them was deep, breakable only by death. He would not want go on living without her, and he doubted she could survive the breaking of their bond. So he would choose to take her with him if it came down to it. Hopefully it would not come to that, and stuck in the cage, there was nothing he could do, so Loki sat, waiting.

88888

Thor tried reasoning with Banner when he turned, but it did not work. The fight didn't last long, and the healer's alter ego Thor buried in the floor of the flying fortress. He managed to stand, ignoring the damage around him, calling Mjolnir and heading for Loki. To try and contain his brother.

And once he was at the cage, Loki tricked him, as he fell through the double of his brother, and into the cage.

"Are you ever not going to fall for that?" Loki asked, walking over to the cage's control panel. "The humans think us mortal. Should we test that?"

They were interrupted by the presence of one of the morals, the non-superpowered kind.

"Move away please," Coulson said.

Loki stepped away, as asked.

"You like this?" Coulson said, gesturing with the rather large gun in his hands. "We started working on the prototype after the Destroyer came for Thor. Even I don't know what it does. Do you wanna find out?"

Thor couldn't move, nor utter a sound as the real Loki appeared behind Coulson, stabbing him with the scepter.

"No!" Thor screamed, scrabbling against the glass prison, watching as Loki made for the control panel.

"Forgive me, brother," Loki said, pushing the button. Not one of his better ideas, but he needed to get his idiot brother off the ship, along with himself and Barton, who was much too skilled for his own good at causing mayhem. Any other time, Loki would've appreciated it, but not this day.

Loki turned away from the panel, stepping past the fallen mortal, but he stopped when he spoke.

"You're gonna lose," Coulson said. "You lack conviction."

"What makes you think I ever wanted to win in the first place?" Loki said, kneeling down in front of
the bleeding mortal, pressing a hand to the wound, Coulson confused as the Asgardian's hand
glowed gold. "I'm truly sorry for what I've done. I know none of you will ever understand that, but
rest easy. You'll live."

Picking up the scepter, Loki made his way up to the flight deck, where a quinjet was waiting. Barton
wasn't with the team, but it didn't matter.

88888

Jotunheim

Byleistr stared at Annar, not quite believing what he was hearing. The desire to throttle his friend
over letting Helblindi venture out so far was overridden by the need to hear the rest of what he was
saying.

"Helblindi said he found something, so I went back out with him," Annar said, repeating himself.
"What's a dragon doing in the caves below the temple?"

"What?"

"Dragon. Like in the old stories about the Ljolsafar," Annar said. "Gold scales, white horns an claws
tipped with black."

Byleistr grabbed Annar by the arm, yanking him along. "Show me. Now."

"I thought you wanted to see Helblindi," Annar said.

"My brother can wait a little longer," Byleistr said. "This is important."

"You know something, don't you?" Annar said.

"Possibly," Byleistr said, dragging Annar outside.

"What is going on?"

"I stumbled across an Asgardian hiding in Thrymheim months ago," Byleistr said. "I watched him
for a few weeks. Thought he was mad but harmless the way he kept talking to himself, until the day I
found out he was not Asgardian nor mad. He was Jotun."

"You've spent too much time out in the snows running with the packs," Annar said.

"I'm not crazy," Byleistr insisted. "Not only was this Asgardian really Jotun, he bore the marks of
royalty."

"Maybe another of Laufey's by-blows," Annar offered.

"He was small for a Jotun, but the marks were unmistakable," Byleistr said. "The Casket wasn't all
Odin took from us."

"You make no sense," Annar said.

"The Jotun I met in the wastes was raised on Asgard, Annar. He's small, a runt like Helblindi, and he
bears the marks of a royal. His name is Loki," Byleistr said. "Prince Loki of Asgard, the Allfather's
younger son."

"You're mad," Annar said.
"Runs in my family. Yours too, come to think of it," Byleistr said. "Don't you remember the day Farbauti died?"

"How could I forget my father shoving you into my arms while he tried to reason with Laufey," Annar said. "Or how you screamed when the king left with the infant. I still have nightmares about it. I still think you're mad, but it doesn't explain the dragon."

"Would you stop talking and cloak us please? You're much better at than I," Byleistr said. "Are we almost there?"

"Almost," Annar muttered, stumbling over rubble as he looked back, making sure Byleistr was still behind him. "How could Laufey hide something so big right under our noses?"

"How did the Chitauri find him?" Byleistr said, stopping when he ran into Annar, who was staring at the back of the cavern they'd just entered.

"It's back there," Annar said.

Byleistr called fire to his hand, lighting up the cavern, approaching the golden bulk in the back. It was indeed a dragon—Loki's dragon.

"She's called Isond," Byleistr said.

"You've met?" Annar asked.

"She's bonded to Loki," Byleistr answered.

"And of course you made friends," Annar said.

"Does he know?" Annar asked.

"Know what?" Byleistr said, studying Isond who had some kind of contraption strapped around her head.

"That you're brothers?" Annar said.

"No," Byleistr said. "What is that on her head?"

"Looks like one of the dark elf long sleep devices from the Aether War," Annar said. "My great-grandfather told us tales of them when we were boys, remember?"

"What is that technology doing here?" Byleistr asked. "Never mind. Help me get it off her."

The two of them managed to cut the harness off the dragon's head, and Byleistr watched as Annar crushed the jewels on the harness with a rock. The dragon’s eyes snapped open, and Isond's head came up. Standing on wobbly legs, she spread her wings for balance.

Byleistr? I thought you were dead.

"Not so, Lady Isond," Byleistr said.

Where is Loki?

"I hoped you could tell us," Byleistr said. "This is my friend, Annar. He and my brother found you."

I am in your debt, my friend.
"Just find Loki and bring him back," Byleistr said. "We have unfinished business with Laufey."

Loki's vowed to kill him.

"He'll have my help if he returns," Byleistr said. "You have my promise."

Isond said nothing, as she concentrated, reaching out, feeling for Loki's mind. Making the connection, she disappeared.

88888

New York

The city was in chaos. A portal open over the city, and an alien invasion in full swing. People running and dying, and a small group left to defend them. Thor's endurance and patience were running out, and so was his desire to reason with his brother. They were on top of Stark's tower, beating the life out of each other, and Thor was growing desperate. He faced Loki, ready to strike, waiting for the next blow, trying yet again to reason with him.

"Loki, turn off the Tesseract or I'll destroy it," Thor said.

"You can't. There's no stopping it," Loki said.

"So be it," Thor said, raising Mjolnir high, striking Loki, who was knocked back. He stood, wiping blood from his mouth, and charged his brother, slashing at Thor with the scepter. Again, he was pushed back, and Thor pinned him to the ground.

"Look at this," Thor said. "Look around you. You think this madness will end with your rule?"

"It's too late. It's too late to stop it," Loki said.

"No. We can together," Thor said.

Loki hesitated, and for a second, the blue glow in his eyes faded. Thor cracked him in the jaw again, but with Mjolnir instead of his fist, sending his brother flying. Thor made his way over to Loki, ready to hit him again if necessary, and he knelt down, grabbing Loki by the shoulder, just in case.

Except Thor could only stare as a beast landed a few meters away, roaring. His grip on Loki lessened, and Thor looked down as his brother sat up, shaking his head, eyes back to their normal color.

Loki took advantage of Thor's stupor to disengage himself from the bigger man's grasp. Loki struggled to his feet, limping to the dragon.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked.

Always, Isond replied.

Loki put his hands under her chin, and touched his forehead to the dragon's.

"We can try and stop this," Loki said. "Will you help me, Isond?"

Climb on my back and we will bring the enemy death.

Loki climbed onto Isond's back, calling to Thor. "Brother, follow me."
Thor watched, stunned, as the dragon leapt off the edge of the building, his brother on its back.
Chapter 12

Flight

Chapter 12—Reprisal

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

New York

Tony Stark had just finished eliminating the enemies on his tail when he saw something being chased by one of the Chitauri sleds. It was gold, had large bat wings, turned on its tail mid-flight and flamed the sled out of the sky. It looked suspiciously like a dragon. And as it shot past, he got an even better look at it. Yup. Definitely. But he had to make sure.

"Uh, guys... is that a dragon?" Stark asked. "Legolas? Cap? Anybody?"

From his perch, Clint squinted, looking around until he saw something winging across the sky. "I think it's a big bird or something," he said. "Wait... yep, definitely a dragon. What the hell is a dragon doing in the middle of the battle?"

"I have no idea, but it's kicking Chitauri ass, so I saw we leave it alone," Stark said.

At that moment, the diving dragon caught the attention of one of the leviathans Loki remembered from his months apart from Isond. The creature turned around, giving chase. Isond dove beneath it, evading it as Thor shook off his shock and hit the leviathan with his lightning.

Isond was also using her flying prowess to destroy the Chitauri sleds. The flying machines couldn't corner very well, and Isond would catch the aliens' attention. The Chitauri followed, crashing or meeting their end by ice or lightning or Isond's fire.

Loki lost track of how long they'd fought. Isond was silent, but no words were needed between them. He thought and she did it. She knew what he wanted, and they were one as they fought. Then Thor joined the soldier on the ground, and Loki and Isond gave them what cover they could, Isond flaming Chitauri out of the sky and he brought them down with deadly rain of ice and hail.

Eventually, the fight was over, and Stark, of all people was the one to end it. Urging Isond down, the dragon landed, Loki sliding down her shoulder, leaning against her. Her sides heaved from her efforts, and Loki could barely stand, but he watched as the others, who were nearby, tried to revive Stark.

What do we do now? Isond asked.

"We go to Jotunheim," Loki said. Together, they used their combined magic to tap into the Tesseract, and moments later, they were being billowed by the driving winds and snows of Jotunheim.

Thor stood, turning around, searching for Loki, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Utgard

Loki stood beside Isond, eyes closed, calming the storm outside the Jotun palace.
"Laufey, face me," Loki called, shifting into his Jotun form. "I know you're there. Or are you too cowardly to stand in the presence of the runt you left to die? Besides, I have something you want—the Tesseract."

Laufe was suddenly in front of him. "Show me," he said.

Loki threw a cloth-wrapped bundle at the king's feet. Laufey bent down to pick it up and his hand went right through it. Loki used the moment to slash at the giant with a blade of ice, knocking him down and taking him off guard.

"So, you wish to claim your birthright? Or die trying?" Laufey asked. He didn't wait for an answer, and shot daggers of ice at Loki, who deflected them with a swipe of his hand.

"I see that Vanir witch taught you her tricks," Laufe, taunting Loki, who slashed at him. The giant avoided the hit, feinting, stabbing Loki in his bad leg, and he screamed. Isond answered with a roar, swooping down, knocking Laufey off his feet, holding him down, waiting for Loki to stand.

He limped over, forming a blade of ice.

"I offer you the same mercy you offered me as a babe," Loki said. "At least your death will be quick, unlike the fate you planned for me."

Loki struck Laufey's head from his body, falling to his knees. Isond roared, watching as Byleistr came running over, helping Loki to his feet.

"I'm glad to see you're alive," Loki said.

"Not as glad as I am to see you, brother," Byleistr said, turning his attention to two other giants standing nearby. "Annar, Suttung, gather the Jotnar."

"What is going on?" Loki asked.

"You killed Laufey in combat," Byleistr said. "No one will doubt your claim as king. If you don't go through with the ritual that needs to be completed, you will not leave Jotunheim alive."

"What must I do?" Loki asked.

"Hold still and not pass out," Byleister said, watching as the Jotnar gathered around them, and Suttung woke the guardians to also stand witness over the rite, and to greet their new master.

Byleister conjured a blade of ice, and began carving runes into the skin of Loki's left forearm, and repeated the process with the right. When he was finished, the Jotun called Suttung dipped his fingers into Laufey's pooling blood, tracing it over the lines in Loki's skin.

"Do you swear by your blood, and bone and body you will not forsake your oath as king of this realm? That if you break your word, only your blood will bring prosperity back to Jotunheim?"

"I swear," Loki said.

"Hail Loki Laufeyson, true king of Jotunheim," Byleistr proclaimed.

The gathered Jotnar stood, silent, watching and waiting, suddenly aware of the dragon in their presence, but Isond stood quietly, watching the whole ordeal with interest.

"We're not done," Loki said, laying his arms over Byleistr's, burning another set of runes into his arms. "You will hold the throne for me until I return."
"What? No. Where are you going? You have to stay, if only for a day or two to heal," Byleistr said, placing his hands on Loki's shoulders. "Brother, you've only just returned. . ."

"Sentiment, Byleistr," he said.

"Not a sentiment," Byleistr said. "You are my brother. We share the same father. Laufey is my sire, also. Loki, you must stay."

"I can't," Loki said. "I have unfinished business in Asgard. I'll return when I can. I promise."

He walked away, scrabbling up onto Isond's back, and Byleistr watched them disappear.

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Asgard

Isond soared between the pillars leading to the throne room of Asgard's palace, landing once she reached her destination. Loki vaulted from her back, gritting his teeth as he landed, favoring his bad leg, laying one hand against Isond's shoulder for support for a few moments. Gathering his strength, he winced with each step, holding back a grimace as he walked to the Allfather's throne, carrying a leather bag dripping blood, and his own joined it, flowing from his wounds. Loki's footsteps on the flagstones was the only sound as he approached the throne of Asgard. He knew the people gathered there recognized him—how could they not? His form was the same shape, his hair and voice the same, his height did not change. His skin was blue and his eyes blood red.

No one stopped him as he approached the throne, stopping at the bottom of the stairs leading up to Hlidskjalf.

"Greetings Allfather," Loki began, reaching into the bag. "I Loki, bring you tidings from my sire, Laufey."

He tossed the bloody contents of the bag at Odin's feet, ignoring the shrieks and gasps from the people of the court as they realized what it was—the head of the Jotun king, Laufey.

"As is my birthright as the true-born heir of Laufey, I have claimed the throne of Jotunheim. As its new king I can promise there will be no war with Asgard, Allfather. My brother Byleistr holds the throne in my absence."

Odin's lips curled up in a slight smile, and he nodded at Loki, watching as his wife finally stepped down, going to their son, caressing his face, ignoring the blood, running her free hand over the marks on his right forearm.

"Loki, do you know what you've done?" Frigga asked.

He met her gaze, removing her hand from his cheek, holding both of her hands in his own.

"Does it matter?" he asked.

"I love you, my son," Frigga said. "Give Thor my love also."

Loki nodded, limping back to Isond, not minding when she dropped her shoulder, helping him up on her back. The court watched as the dragon disappeared, and immediately started talking.


The crowd quieted at the command of their king.
"I demand an oath of silence from everyone here, that you will not reveal what you have seen and heard here today, until such time as I give you leave to talk of the events you have witnessed," Odin said. As one, the gathered court swore their oath, and Odin said nothing as Frigga came to stand by his side, lacing her fingers through those of his free hand.

"Did you know he would return to us?" Odin murmured.

"I never stopped hoping," Frigga said.

Midgard

Thor was not panicking. On the outside, he was trying to project calm, but he didn't think he was succeeding. Loki was gone, with no good-byes or explanation. Rogers squeezed his shoulder, offering a reassuring smile. None of them were talking, only eating. Thor forced himself to eat, knowing he needed a meal after the day they all had. The Tesseract was secured, and Erik was at one of SHIELD's medical facilities, receiving the care he needed. And Norns, Coulson was dead. Thor sighed, suddenly realizing how exhausted he truly was.

Later, when he was finally alone on the helicarrier, Thor sat down on the bunk in his assigned quarters, staring into the darkness. Where had Loki gone? Didn't he trust him? What was going on in his mind? Was there anything left of his brother? Then he heard a soft knock at his door, and he stood, answering it, surprised to see Rogers awake.

"Can't sleep either?" Rogers asked.

"No," Thor answered.

"Everyone else is asleep. I was just doing the rounds, checking up on everyone. I don't think anything will wake Stark, nothing except the Hulk."

Thor had to smile at that.

"Banner is a very effective alarm clock," Thor replied. "Among other things."

"He did give you quite the beat down," Rogers said.

"Don't remind me," Thor said. "I don't think my back is ever going to be right again."

"I bet you'll heal," Rogers said.

"Once I return home," Thor said. "I wish you all could accompany me to Asgard. I would love to show you its beauty."

"Maybe some other time, when things calm down," Rogers said. "You'd really invite us?"

"Why not?" Thor said. "It would be fitting, as Earth's guardians, to prove to my father Midgard can protect itself, stand on its own feet. And for you to properly honor the memory of Coulson's sacrifice. He was a good man."

"You knew him?" Rogers asked.

"New Mexico," Thor said. "I'm probably not supposed to talk about it. I wish I could have known him better."
"Me too," Rogers said. "C'mon. Let's go get some coffee, and you can tell me all about him."

Morning came much too soon for everyone involved, and Fury's debriefing degenerated into an argument. The newly minted Avengers were sitting around the table on the helicarrier's command deck. Thor stood back, listening to the others bicker when something outside caught Rogers' attention.

"Thor, you better look at this," he said. Thor came over, took one look and ran, Rogers following.

Loki stood on the flight deck beside the creature, a bloody hand resting on its shoulder. He took one step toward Thor on unsteady legs before collapsing into his brother's arms.

"Mother sends her love," Loki said, closing his eyes and going limp.

Thor started screaming for a healer and the others watched as the creature crashed to its side.
Chapter 13

Flight

Chapter 13-Query

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Four armed guards—one on each side of the door, the other two facing them from across the corridor. Bruce Banner gave the guard beside him a dirty look as he let himself into his patient's room. He drew the line at having somebody with a gun following while he checked on a patient. Loki was unconscious, and if he were human, his vitals would have Bruce worried. Well, Loki wasn't human, or Aesir, like Thor. He was Jotun—Frost Giant, like from the myths.

Yeah. Back to the vitals, Banner. Blood pressure and respirations were below normal, and he couldn't even guess what was a normal body temperature for a Jotun. Hell, he'd just call it stable until something changed, and keep an eye on him. He'd never worked on a patient that had skin that blue and was still breathing.

All in all, the day could've been better, could've been worse. He checked Loki's vitals one more time, adjusted the IV lines so they didn't occlude. He also looked at the bandages around Loki's wrists, making sure they weren't soaked through. They weren't, and that was a relief. He also pulled the covers back, looking at the dressing on Loki's right leg. Still bleeding, but not as bad as before. Banner grabbed some supplies from a nearby shelf, setting about reinforcing the dressing. Loki didn't flinch during the process, which made the doctor wonder if the painkillers were working, or if Loki was even at home anymore.

Oh, and how could he forget the critter they moved off the flight deck and into one of the hangars below. He'd provided some of the muscle for that after making sure Loki wasn't going anywhere. Banner also figured somebody needed to get Rogers something nice for staying with Thor while he sat with his brother, calming him down enough to end the thunderstorm from hell. Banner was starting to hate the helicarrier even more than he had before. If he was going to fly, he'd just Wile E. Coyote himself off a building like he had in New York.

Satisfied Loki was going to live (take that, Fury), Banner let himself out of Loki's room, not surprised to find Thor waiting outside.

"How is he?" Thor asked.

"Stable," Banner said. "Nothing's changed."

"When do you think he'll wake?"

Banner sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "He's obviously been through a lot," he said. "A few hours? A couple of days? Never? I don't know. Look, I can't answer your questions, so why don't you try and answer a couple of mine. Those lines on Loki's skin—are those scars?"

"No," Thor said. "The Jotun are born with them."

"OK. That explains that, but what about the marks on both forearms? I recognized them as runes, and those are fresh cuts to his skin. At first I thought maybe he tried. . ." he trailed off. Excellent to suggest to Thor his brother tried to off himself.
"Runes?" Thor asked.

"Yes. Like Viking runes found in Scandinavia," Banner said. "I've seen them in books, and in museums. Not one of my areas of expertise. Maybe Tony and Jarvis could figure them out?"

"Unlikely," Thor said. "May I see the marks?"

"Tomorrow when I change the dressings," Banner said. "Thor, I've been as honest with you as I can be about Loki's condition. This is nothing I've ever been trained to deal with. I'll do everything I can to get him better, but if I were you, I wouldn't want to keep him around here any longer than necessary. Get him back home, let him take care of him. And I don't like the way Fury was talking today. . ."

"Loki will not face Midgardian justice," Thor said. "He will stand before the Allfather and be judged for his crimes in Asgard. I want to get as far away from Fury as I can. Did you know he asked me if I was willing to torture my own brother?"

"I'm sorry," Banner said. "Thor, it's late. We've both had a really long day. Try and get some rest, and come get me if anything changes, all right? I'll be back in a couple of hours to check on you guys."

Thor nodded, letting himself into Loki's room. He pulled up a chair, sitting down, taking up his vigil once more.

88888

Two days later

Loki fought his way to consciousness, sitting bolt upright, ripping the tubes and lines from his body, heeding only the desperation and terror in Isond's mind. The alarms on the medical equipment surrounding him started going off, and Loki gave it only a second's consideration once he realized he was not alone in the room, and the other occupant was awake.

Thor stood, taking a step toward Loki, who closed his eyes, concentrating on Isond. . . and he found her, in the dark, in an enclosed space not big enough for her to even stretch her wings. He conjured a light, dropping down by the dragon's head, which she put in his lap.

"I couldn't find you again. I was alone in the dark like before when you were gone I thought it was happening again and again and again. . ."

"Isond, I'm here," Loki said. "It's all right. You're safe. You've been asleep. So have I. Only a few days, I think, this time. We needed the rest after all the traveling we've done. We're on Midgard, remember? My brother is here."

He scratched the dragon's chin, and she crooned, much like he had as a hatchling. But light spilled from beneath a nearby door as it slid up, a group of armed SHIELD soldiers entering, weapons drawn. Isond growled low in her throat, and belched smoke from her mouth.

"Come any closer and I guarantee you will regret what happens next," Loki said as he heard the clicking of guns, glowering at the man called Fury, who came from between the armed men.

"What the hell is going on?" Fury asked.

"You fools think you're so clever, acting first, asking questions later," Loki said. "Make them put away the weapons or I cannot guarantee anyone's safety. Isond is no mindless beast."
Fury twitched when he saw more smoke coming from the beast's mouth, and took a step backward when he thought he saw a trickle of fire from her nostrils.

"Weapons down," Fury said, ignoring the fact Banner and Thor had just pulled up beside him. "Would you mind explaining what is going on?"

"Isond won't hurt you," Loki said. "She's as sentient as you or I."

Fury blinked. "Banner, get his ass back up to medical," he said. "Can't you tranquilize this animal or something?"

"Not that kind of doctor," Banner muttered.

"Isond, kindly let the healer know you do not need his assistance," Loki said.

Isond snorted, turning her attention to Banner.

"Loki, what kind of trick is this?" Fury said. "You've got nothing to prove. . ."

Banner punched him in the arm. "Not a trick," Banner said. "So not a trick. She's talking in my head. . .this is incredible. . .No, I won't let them hurt him, I promise. . .No, you can't eat him. Do you make it a habit to eat people? OK then. . .yeah. . .An exception? Wouldn't do it. Bad idea. Yeah."

He stood there, scratching his head. Could his life get any weirder? Then, Thor, who was standing beside him, dropped Mjolnir and his face went slack. And Loki was looking at the Asgardian with a look of amusement on his face.

"Please let Isond out," Loki said. "She won't stray far. She needs to fly, and hunt. She's starving, and she can keep herself from being detected. I ask this not for myself, but as a favor for Isond. She won't hurt anyone. You have her word, and mine, and that is one promise I will not break."

There was an earnestness and honesty in Loki's voice and demeanor Fury couldn't fault. "Fine," he said. "Get Stark up here, and somebody tell him he gets to take the dragon for a walk."

88888

One look from Banner silenced any protests Loki might've voiced about Thor carrying him back to his room. Transporting himself to Isond took much out of him, and even he could admit he was in no condition to walk back. His leg was on fire, his arms hurt and he was hungry. And he hated being so weak and vulnerable.

"You certainly know how to make an entrance," Banner said once they had him back in his room.

"It's one of his gifts," Thor said, ignoring the scathing look from Loki.

Loki rolled his eyes as the two men helped him down onto the bed.

"I could've gotten myself back here," he said.

"Sure," Banner said. "I need to get everything hooked back up."

One look from both Asgardians and no.

"OK then. I'll be back in a while to check on you two," Banner said. "Don't blow up the ship again. You two need anything?"
A look passed between the brothers. "Something to eat," Loki said. "Please."

"Refreshment would be much appreciated," Thor said.

"No problem," Banner said, letting himself out, leaving the brothers alone.

Loki gingerly pushed himself up against his pillows. "How long have I been out?" Loki asked.

"Almost three days," Thor answered.

"When was the last time you slept?" Loki said. "No offense brother, but you look terrible."

Thor gave Loki a wry smile. "I could say the same about you, Loki. I've slept a few hours here and there over the past few days," he said. He'd stayed with Loki, letting no one but himself or Banner touch his brother.

"How long have I been gone?" Loki said.

"September now here in Midgard," Thor said.

Loki frowned, counting back.

"14 months," Thor answered.

"I thought it was much longer," Loki said. "How long did it take you to get home?"

"Over eight months," Thor said. "Were you in Jotunheim all that time?"

"The first eight months," Loki said. "After..." Anyone's guess, but he did not say it out loud.

"I thought of you every day," Thor said. "Our friends even went searching for you across the realms."

"Truly?" Loki said.

"Yes," Thor said. "Why did you leave?" There. The one question he'd been wanting to ask for months, one he thought he would never get answered.

Loki shrugged. "You were gone. I just found out my true parentage. Why not? It seemed like a good idea at the time...I argued with Father, Isond hatched and fell into my arms," Loki said.

"Isond?"

"My dragon, you oaf," Loki said. "Your coronation gift from the Ljolsafar. She hatched for me."

"You named the dragon after that terrible story mother loves?" Thor asked with amusement.

"Yes," Loki said.

Thor's expression hardened. "So you chose to run away?"

"I didn't know what else to do," Loki said. "Does it even matter now?"

"It does," Thor said, sitting down on the edge of the bed, facing Loki. "But we'll not discuss it now."

He reached out to brush a stray lock out of Loki's eyes. "You need a haircut, brother," Thor said.

"Please don't," Loki said, shrinking away. "I'm afraid this isn't real, that I'll wake up still in the
clutches of the Chitauri once more."

"You're not dreaming, Loki. I'm here," Thor said. "We're on Midgard. I'd hope if you were dreaming you'd think of Asgard. You just cowed Fury and his men with the dragon you tamed."

"Not a dream," Loki said.

Thor wrapped his arms around his brother, and Loki hesitantly reciprocated the gesture. Thor pulled him close, and for the first time since they were boys, Loki cried.

88888

Stark was taking Isond for a "walk." The dragon was beautiful, polite, and he was having the time of his life. The part of the evening where she downed three cows was a bit of a low point, mainly because it ruined his appetite. But after eating, Isond was in a better mood, and followed him back to the helicarrier. He escorted the dragon back to the hangar designated as her quarters, now that Fury was aware she was a sentient being, and not an animal.

"So, Puff, where did Loki find you?" he asked, taking off his helmet.

The dragon cocked her head sideways, and Stark grinned. Such a human gesture.

I hatched for Loki because I was waiting for him. And why do you call me "Puff?" My name is Isond.

"Goldilocks, I give everybody a nickname," Stark said. "Reindeer Games, Capsicle, Point Break, Agent. . ."

Why?

"I don't know why," Stark said. "Puff's the name of a dragon in a song."

And he started singing the song for the dragon.

You mortals are strange, but I like you, Stark. Not the man with one eye. He hides too many secrets.

"Tell me about it," Stark said. "Look, I'll be around to check on you later. You need anything, don't upset Loki or Thor. Call one of us. We can try and help."

Thank you, Isond said, touching her nose to his shoulder.

"No, we should be thanking you, Isond. You kicked ass during the battle. I don't if anyone else has said it, but thank you," Stark said.

88888

Banner and Fury stood outside Loki's room, watching the brothers talk. Banner was losing his argument with the SHIELD director, but he did have one card up his sleeve. Banner's eyes turned green, and Fury backed away.

"I'm his doctor, and I say if Thor wants to be in there, he can stay," Banner said. "Do you even understand the scope of trauma his brother is recovering from? Also, he's no threat. That's not the same guy that popped into your New Mexico base and flattened it, or who lead an alien invasion into New York. He's expressed remorse every time he's been awake, and said he'll accept whatever punishment he deserves. Nick, he's exhausted. Loki's been through a lot. His brother thought he was dead. They need a little time."
"What'll you do if I don't?" Fury asked.

"Then I'll throw you out the window on the command deck," Banner said. "I know you won't break, but I'm willing to bet it'll still hurt like a bitch."

"Bruce is right," Natasha said, interrupting the conversation. "Leave them alone."

"I'm with them," Steve said. "Bag of cats and all, but Bruce does have a valid point."

"Am I the only one who thinks this is a bad idea?" Clint asked.

Natasha silenced him with a look.

"I'm still on the whole dragon thing," Tony said. "Is anybody else? I mean, it's a real live fire-breathing dragon. Where did he get her? She's awesome. Can I get one? I think I want one."

"A day or two," Banner said. "That's all I'm asking. I know you want to interrogate Loki, just wait. Please?"

"Fine," Fury said.

88888

The next morning, Thor showed up with breakfast, and the brothers ate and Banner dropped by to check on Loki and change his dressings. Once he was gone, Loki knew what was coming from the way Thor was looking at his bandaged arms.

Thor gestured at the bandages on Loki's wrists.

"Banner thought at first the blood was evidence you tried to hurt yourself," Thor said.

"Believe me, carving the runes into my skin was not my idea," Loki said.

"What do they mean?"

"It's not important right now," Loki said.

"I know a binding when I see it," Thor said. "What have you done, Loki?"

"Something that cannot be undone," Loki said. "Please, Thor, leave it at that for now. I'm not ready to discuss it."

"Like you're not ready to discuss where you've been, what you've been doing and how came you by a dragon?" Thor asked.

"I wasn't lying about Isond," Loki said. "I was in Jotunheim for months. Laufey didn't lie about that, at least."

"What were you doing all that time in Jotunheim?" Thor asked.

"Hiding," Loki said. "Not plotting."

"Really?" Thor asked. "You come here, with an army at your back, and that's the best you can come up with?"

"Do you think I'd willingly consort with such creatures?" Loki snarled. "I was a pawn of the
Chitauri. Laufey, my own sire, gave me over to them to use for his own purposes. I was not a willing participant in their plans, believe me."

"And what were their plans?" Thor said.

"In return for the Tesseract, the Chitauri would help Laufey regain the Casket of Ancient Winters and their help in destroying Asgard," Loki said. "I was under the influence of the scepter—the same as Barton and your friend Selvig. I think the stone in the scepter may be one of the Infinity Gems, like the Tesseract."

"What? Where is it now?" Thor said.

"Jotunheim, the last time I checked," Loki said, biting his lip.

"How did it get to Jotunheim? Loki, what is it you're not telling me?" Thor said. "Where did you go after the battle in New York?"

"I had some personal business to take care of," Loki said.
"What kind of business?" Thor asked.

"It's not something I'm ready to discuss," Loki said.

"Loki, when will you be ready to talk? When you face Father and Mother?" Thor asked. "You've expressed regret over what you've done, but do you really mean it? The man you killed—Coulson, he was a friend, a good man. Do you not regret his death also?"

Loki frowned, taken aback. "What do you mean? He's not dead," Loki said. "I did wound him, but I healed it enough he wouldn't die. I did regret hurting him, and I know I wasn't in my right mind, but I know my magic well enough to know..."

"Not dead?" Thor asked. "Are you sure?"

"I repaired the worst of the damage," Loki said. "He was in the way, but he didn't deserve to die. I didn't completely heal him, I couldn't."

"Coulson isn't dead," Thor said.

"No," Loki said.

Fury lied, Thor realized. "Brother, I'll be back in a while," he said. "I'll see if Banner will stay with you."

A few minutes later, Thor was replaced with the doctor.

"I don't know what you said to Thor, but he's on the warpath," Banner said.

"I think your Fury is going to have a very unpleasant day," Loki said.

"OK then. Anything you want to talk about? I'm not that kind of doctor, but I can listen," Banner said, pointing at the bandages on Loki's arms.

Loki stared at the dressings, pondering the runes beneath, which hadn't faded even when he shifted forms, and they were not healed.

"Thor said that's binding magic," Banner said. "You didn't try and hurt yourself did you?"

"No," Loki said. "The runes are indeed binding magic, but the oath was mine to take. I know full
well their weight, and I accepted it."

"Vague, you know?" Banner said. "So you made the decision knowing what you were getting into."

"Yes," Loki answered.

"Look, I've got some other questions I need to ask. Not pleasant, either," Banner said. "Fury wants to question you himself, and it's kind of my job to see if you're up to it or not. I don't want to, but I have to."

"I understand," Loki said.

"You've managed to heal some pretty extensive damage over the past couple of days. I've seen the signs, and I know torture when I see it," Banner said.

"You're not wrong," Loki said.

"Which leads me to my next question, even more unpleasant, did they hurt you...like beyond torture?" Banner asked, hoping Loki would get the hint.

"I was not violated in the way you insinuate," Loki said. "Torture was enough on its own, and being separated from Isond. Laufey was kind enough to tell the Chitauri the best way to torture a Jotun is with fire."

"Laufey is your father?"

"He sired me, but he was not my father," Loki said. "Odin is my true father."

"Thor said you're adopted. How are you taking that?" Banner asked.

"I ran away from home, hid out in the wilds of Jotunheim and killed my sire. How do you think I'm doing?" Loki asked, but there was no venom in his voice, merely resignation.

There. He said it. He'd killed his own sire.

"Laufey was a monster," Loki said. "The Jotnar are not monsters, but he was."

"Does Thor know what you've been up to?" Banner asked.

"Not yet," Loki said. "I take it this will stay between us?"

"Doctor-patient confidentiality," Banner said. "I know probably don't trust any of us, but you can trust that."

"It's the same on Asgard," Loki said. "Healers are highly regarded as trustworthy."

Banner smiled. "Good to know," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"I want to go home," Loki said.

"Even though you're probably in a lot of trouble?" Banner asked.

"One constant in my life remains," Loki said. "Better a cell in Asgard than remaining here."

"How does Isond feel about all this?"

"You could ask her yourself, Banner," Loki said.
"I'm being considerate," Banner said.

"She goes where I go," Loki said.

"She's OK with that?"

"We share a bond," Loki said. "We've been apart enough, and being separated from Isond is a fate worse than death. I don't want to experience that again."

"What about might happen to the two of you when you go back home? Have you thought that far ahead?" he asked.

Loki sighed. "No, I haven't," he said.

"Maybe you should start thinking," Banner said. "You and Thor staying here—bad idea," Banner said. "Fury's not all that bad. He's kept trouble off my back more times than I'll ever know. He's doing the same for the two of you, but there's only so much he can do. Same goes for me. I've done what I can."

"Thank you," Loki said, giving the doctor a small smile.

"You're welcome," Banner said.

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Thor left the command deck after dropping what Stark called his "bombshell" about Coulson. The thunderer was angry, but understood Fury's reasoning behind lying. It still hurt no less, thinking a friend was dead, and by Loki's hand. The others were still with Fury, berating the man for lying, and trying to extract Coulson's location. Thor wished Fury luck, he was going to need it.

He considered going back to spend more time with Loki, but he didn't. Thor didn't want to anger or upset his brother again, so he walked, grateful how the humans gave him his space. He eventually found himself at the hangar housing the dragon, and the beast snorted when she saw him.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Isond said.

"I'm not, lady dragon," Thor answered.

I have a name. Please use it.

"Pardon me, Isond," Thor said. "Are you well?"

They're treating me better, if that's what you mean. The one called Stark has been quite helpful.

"He's an interesting man," Thor said. "Not at all what I thought. Nor are you. You're not a beast."

Hardly. When will we go to Asgard? Loki misses his home.

"Soon," Thor said. "I can't keep putting it off, and being home will do Loki some good."

I want him to be happy, Isond said.

"As do I," Thor said. "Thank you for saving my brother."

Isond butted his chest with her head, nearly knocking him over, making Thor laugh in surprise.
He had you to come back to. You were never far from his thoughts. He missed you. I knew I would like you.

"You're a far wiser being than I, Isond," Thor said. "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."
Chapter 14

Flight

Chapter 14—Homecoming

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

A motherfucking dragon on his motherfucking boat. What the hell was next, Fury asked himself. Damn dragon was sentient. Like a person. She threatened him a couple of times a day. He was developing a nervous tick. And what the hell did Coulson do when he found out about the dragon? Laughed so hard he popped his stitches and nearly passed out. Fury knew Stark passed along pictures of the dragon to the agent. Anything to keep him off his back about his precious Captain America cards, but Coulson currently had the real thing down in medical visiting. Fury had no doubt how that was going to end. Hopefully well.

Back to the dragon. Natasha was good at talking the critter down. Isond (what kind of name was that?) tended to get a little worked up when anyone got a little too close with a gun or tried backing her into an enclosed space. Fury had no problem with letting her up on the flight deck during the day as long as she behaved herself. He didn’t want another large, angry creature tearing the hell out of his boat. Natasha and Stark were getting along well with the damn thing. Even better was how the security council kept asking about Loki, the Tesseract, the scepter, the Avengers and what was he going to do next? He did not get paid enough to deal with this crap.

Besides the real life creature of myth, he had two gods of legend on his boat. At least the dragon was cooperating. Loki was getting better and Thor was twitchy every time someone not Banner got too close to his brother. Apparently Thor trusted Banner with his brother even after the beat down his alter ego gave the thunderer. Fury couldn’t complain about how well the Avengers were getting on together, but they were shutting him out. Not that he blamed them. He lied to them, when in the back of his mind, he thought maybe having their trust was more important. Well, they had each other, and they would have Coulson as their handler once he was well.

At the moment, all Fury wanted was to debrief Loki and get him and the Tesseract the hell off Earth. The council was looking for someone to blame, and Loki was it. Fury still wasn’t sure how much blame they could pin on Thor’s brother. Only one way to find out, he thought as he walked to the interrogation room.

As Fury entered, he watched as Natasha, who sat across the table from Loki, pushing a plate of donuts toward Asgardian.

"Don't be nice to him," Fury said.

"He needs to gain some weight," Natasha said, picking up a pastry and handing another to Loki. "And you need to relax, Nick."

Loki bit back a grin as the SHIELD director took a seat at the end of the table.

"You know why we're all here," Fury said. "Might as well get started. Start from the beginning. Thor explained you took off to another realm. I don't suppose you were plotting world domination with your father, right?"

"Laufey is not my father," Loki said. "I was tortured and coerced," Loki said. "They separated me from Isond, and used me to try and gain the Tesseract."
"Who's they?"

"I was in Jotunheim for more than eight months before I was captured by Laufey," Loki said. "He had gained the favor of a being called the Other—who leads the Chitauri. He promised Laufey help in defeating Asgard in exchange for his help to get the Tesseract."

"How did this Other get in touch with Laufey?" Fury said.

"That was never explained to me," Loki said.

"Where do the Chitauri come from?"

"Beyond the Nine Realms," Loki said. "That's not all. The Other works for a someone called Thanos. He is mad, and power-hungry. He will stop at nothing to get his way, and he means to 'court death herself.'"

"And that means?" Fury said.

"I know not," Loki said.

"What do you know then?"

"Thanos will come," Loki said. "I had hoped the draw of the Tesseract would be enough to force him to appear, that your heroes would defeat him, but now I'm not so sure. I do know he is mad, and he wants the Tesseract."

"Which is why it's getting shipped back to Asgard with you," Fury said. "Anything else?"

"No," Loki said. He left out the part about the mad titan wanting all the Infinity Gems. Giving the humans enough information to protect themselves was one thing. He would not provide them with a way to get themselves into even more trouble.

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That evening, Loki lounged against Isond, grateful for the chance to get outside. A couple of armed guards stood several yards away, but Agents Romanoff and Barton were also keeping a close eye on him. He, Isond and Thor were returning to Asgard the next morning, and Fury gave them leave to do what they wanted for a few hours. Loki was half-listening to Tony Stark's questions while also paying attention to Isond's inner dialogue.

"Hey, Reindeer Games, you listening?" Stark asked, leaning over, snapping his fingers in Loki's face. "Why do you keep checking out? Your eyes go blank. I know you're not listening."

"I'm talking to Isond when I 'check out' as you call it," Loki said.

"Puff, he really talking to you or just zoning out?" Stark asked.

He is talking to me, Isond said. He finds you amusing. You are interesting. Who is Jarvis? Is he a dragon? You mention him often.

"Jarvis is my assistant," Stark explained. "He lives in the suit, in the walls, wherever I need him to be."

"Your Jarvis is a clever invention," Loki said. "I'd keep him out of Fury's clutches."

"The same goes for Isond, Loki," Stark said. "Although having you two here is giving him a
conniption, which makes me feel all warm and fuzzy in ways I cannot even begin to describe. Bastard. I still can't believe he told us Phil was dead. By the way, thanks for not killing Phil."

"You're welcome," Loki said.

"That was like the one thing that was unforgivable. I mean, aliens invading New York and nearly getting myself killed is one thing, but I know now you weren't completely in your right mind. Thor explained a little. Speaking of, are you two going to be OK? Patching things up?"

"I don't know," Loki said.

"Not a good answer, Loki," Stark said. "Either you do or you don't. I know right now things are kind of weird, but try and work things out. You two have a second chance. Don't screw it up."

"I'll try not to," Loki said. "Why do you care so much?"

"Thor's a good guy, and I'm thinking despite the emo bad boy thing you have going on, there's the makings of a good man in there somewhere," Stark said. "If I can change, anyone can. And you've got a badass dragon, so that's another thing going for you. Also, the whole adopted thing isn't that bad either. Your parents chose you—they're stuck with Thor."

Loki tried not to smile, but it was hard to not smile at that sentiment. "I'm sure the Allfather would love to hear you speak of his heir in such a way," he said. "Possibly he might agree sometimes."

"You guys are like what, the Asgardian equivalent of barely out of college, right? You've both still got a lot of growing to do," Stark said. "Agard frat parties. That might be fun. Think I could maybe get a few days in Asgard?"

"I'm sure the Allfather would not deny Thor's shield-brothers such an honor," Loki said. "It's been centuries since any Midgardians have set foot in the realm eternal."

"Keep us in mind," Stark said. "It sounds amazing."

"You have no idea," Loki said. "The palace, the city, the mountains, the Bifrost, you can't begin to imagine their beauty."

"With the Bifrost broken, it's gonna be a while before you guys can just pop buy for a visit, right?" Stark said.

"Possibly," Loki said. "There are several means available in Asgard to travel the realms. The Tesseract is one such."

"And Thor's girl is working on her theory, so maybe we'll build our own Bifrost here," Stark said.

"The Bifrost is not a plaything," Loki said, ignoring the comment, filing it away for future reference. "Have you not learned your lesson from the Tesseract?"

"Just sayin'," Stark said. "Why do you have a dragon and Thor doesn't? He's got the hammer, but I'd rather have a dragon. Is he gonna get one? Can I have one?"

"The Ljolsafar don't give just anyone a dragon," Loki answered.

"You have one," Stark said.

"Isond hatched for me because she said I was 'worthy' and she was waiting for me," Loki said.

"Wait—you have to be worthy like Mjolnir-worthy for a dragon?" Stark asked.
"Mjolnir is...Mjolnir," Loki said. "I cannot lift her. I've never been able to lift her."
"The hammer is a girl? Well, better Isond than a magic hammer," Stark said.

I think you would make a good dragon-partner, Isond said.

"See, even Puff thinks I deserve a dragon," Stark said, grinning.

Loki smiled. "A Midgardian knight in armor astride a dragon," he said. "The realm would bow down to you."

"They kind of already to," Stark said. "Make you a deal—get me to Asgard, and I'll take you anywhere on Earth you'd like to go for a couple of days. Anytime you're here, you've got a place to stay. Maybe not New York, though. Malibu would be a better choice."

"What about Malibu?" Banner asked, walking over with Thor.

"Just inviting Loki if he's ever in town," Stark said. "Bruce, Thor, you too. Even Natasha and Clint. Might be fun. I'll show you a good time here if you guys can show me a good time on Asgard."

"I'll see what I can do," Loki said.

Thor said nothing, looking thoughtful, which, Loki knew, was always dangerous. But before he could say anything, Isond was battering him with questions.

Is he a Frost Giant? He's big enough, I saw him when he helped move me, but the color is wrong. Is he forest giant instead? He's green, so he would be a forest giant. It's like he's a giant, but not. Why is he of two minds? Are there other kinds of giants in this realm? Why do all the mortals walk around staring at the little devices in their hands? Why are they so interesting? Will you get one and show me?

Loki couldn't contain his laughter.

"What's so funny?" Bruce asked.

"Isond, tell him," Loki said.

You must be a forest giant of Midgard. You're part giant and green, like Loki is Aesir and Jotun. He is not of two minds like you. And like Loki, you are not a monster. You helped us, like Byleistr did.

Bruce blinked. "Loki, did you hear that? She means that? And who's Byleistr?"

"Isond is one of the most truthful, earnest beings I've ever met," Loki said. "Byleistr is a friend."

"You made friends among the Jotnar?" Thor asked.

"Yes," Loki said. "Did you not make friends here during your exile?"
"You know I did," Thor said.

The brothers did not see the glance that passed between doctor and genius philanthropist, but both could tell a potential argument was coming.

"Guys, it's been fun, but we really probably should turn in. Early morning and all," Banner said.

Loki met his gaze, nodding. Banner smiled.

88888
Loki stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep. He thought about waking Isond but he didn't. In a few short hours, he would be home. Something he wanted for so long, but now he was reluctant. Afraid. Then he heard the door to his room slide open, revealing Thor.

Loki sat up. "Did I wake you?" Thor asked.

"No," Loki said, watching as his brother sat down beside him.

"I'll be glad to be home," Thor said. "Won't you?"
Loki shrugged. "I don't know what kind of reception I'll get," he said.

"You helped start an invasion of another realm, but you were not responsible," Thor said. "You're hurt, and you need healing, more than what you've received here."

"What about facing justice? What will happen to Isond?" Loki asked.

"Father will be fair," Thor said. "I know he will."

"Fair after he lied to me? To us both?" Loki said.

"I don't condone his actions, Loki, he had his reasons," Thor said. "You are Loki Odinson, son of Odin Allfather, and my brother. I don't care you were born Jotun. Father never lied when he said we were both meant to be kings. And was he angry with you over letting the Jotun into Asgard? Or not stopping me from going to Jotunheim? No. He exiled me, and let you stay. He trusted you, and I betrayed his trust, my family's trust. Father wasn't wrong about that, either. I do know now I'm not ready to take the throne. You would make a far better king than I."

Loki sighed.

"What, brother?" Thor asked.

"Nothing," Loki said. "Are you finished?"
"Not quite yet," Thor said. "I missed you, Loki, you're my brother, and I love you. I'm sorry for how I've treated you in the past, and I promise I'll try harder in the future. You're my equal, you always have been."

Loki said nothing, running his fingers over the runes carved in his arms. Thor grabbed him by the wrist.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he asked.

"You're worse than a bull bilgesnipe during mating season—always blundering your way through everything, charging in without thinking," Loki said. "Are you ever going to learn to leave well enough alone?"

"Probably not," Thor said. "I'm just glad to have you back. Do you accept my apology or not?"

"For now," Loki said, laying back down, turning his back to Thor. "I know I'll probably hear it again several times a day until I'm sick of it."

"Likely," Thor said. "I'll go now. Try and get some sleep."

Loki sat up. "Thor, wait," he said.

"Yes?"
"I love you, too."

Asgard

Heimdall watched as three figures appeared in a flash of blue light. Two were familiar—the crown princes of Asgard. The third was a dragon of the Ljolsafar. Waiting beside Heimdall was his king and a small contingent of Einherjar. Asgard's watcher spared his king a sidelong glance as his heir approached.

"Welcome home, son," Odin said, nodding at Thor, and spared Loki a glance. His younger son met his gaze a moment before going back to staring at the broken Bifrost.

Thor handed Odin the container holding the Tesseract, and he handed it to the waiting Einherjar.

"Secure this in the vault," he said, watching as the guards left.

"Loki, come here," Odin said. Loki walked forward, coming to stand before the king of Asgard. He frowned, seeing how gaunt Loki was, and dismayed at the limp in his step. But his gaze softened when Loki's eyes met his own.

"I'm proud of you, my son, and I love you," he said.

Loki looked from Odin to Thor and back, and Odin pulled Loki close.

"I thought I'd lost you, my boy," he said, relieved when Loki hugged him back. And he finally let him go, reluctant, turning his attention to the dragon.

"She's a fine beast, Loki," Odin said.

"Her name is Isond," Loki said.

Odin bowed to the dragon. "Lady Isond," he said. "Thank you for bringing back my son."

Isond bowed her head to the king, and nuzzled Loki's shoulder.

"Thor, I'd like to have a word with your brother. Alone," Odin said. "Your mother is waiting for you besides."

Thor swung Mjolnir, taking off toward the palace.

"You should go to Jotunheim as soon as you're able," Odin said.

"Why?" Loki asked.

"It's where you should be," Odin said. "I never should have denied you what was rightfully yours."

"I don't want it," Loki said, watching as his father took him by one wrist, pushing up the sleeve of his shirt, running his fingers over the still-healing runes.

"You've truly claimed your birthright," Odin said. "Do you know what these runes mean?"

"Not by my choice," Loki said. "Byleistr all but forced it on me."

Odin's lips curved up ever so slightly in a smile. "Both of my sons learned humility and the value of
self-sacrifice in their exile. One day you'll both make fine kings."

"What of the fact you've passed off a monster as your child all these years?" Loki asked.

"Loki, you're not a monster," Odin said. "You never were. You are my son, and I love you. Never forget that. I've come to realize I haven't said it often enough."

"Sentiment, Father," Loki said, venom in his voice, but there was a glint of humor in his eye.

"Ever the trickster, my boy," Odin said. "You need to get yourself to the healing rooms. Eir and your mother will have both our hides if you don't."

"What of Isond?"

"Your mother's garden will suffice for now," Odin answered. "We're renovating your chambers and the one beside to accommodate a dragon."

"What? Am I not to be punished?"

"Loki, that is not a concern right now," Odin said. "I have other matters to consider, and it can wait. Go. Your mother and I will come see you later."

Almost a week spent in the healing rooms, and unlike in the past, Loki didn't mind. He was feeling better, his leg and arms were healing, and he missed Asgardian food more than he could imagine. He was mostly left to his own devices—talking with Isond, sleeping, reading. He also had some company. Eir was stern but gentle, as always. His mother came every day, bringing books, news or treats. Thor came, and so did Odin, but less often. After all, the Allfather had a realm to run.

The afternoon of the sixth day he was awakened by a sudden, violent thunderstorm, and the appearance of Fandral. The warrior sized him up as he walked into the room.

"You've looked better," Fandral said, setting down the books he was carrying on Loki's beside table. The warrior then made himself at home, sitting down in the chair by Loki's bed, propping his feet up on its edge.

"What's he done this time?" Loki asked, glancing outside at the raging storm.

"I'm not at liberty to say," Fandral said.

"What are you doing here?" Loki said.

"I thought you could use the company," Fandral said.

"I'd rather be alone," Loki said.

"You've got to be bored stiff," Fandral said.

"The quiet is nice," Loki said, hoping to get rid of the other man, and suddenly eyed the books. "Did my mother send you?"

"I was on my way here of my own free will when I ran into the queen, who was coming here herself to bring you those books," Fandral said. "But your mother decided she'd better go see if she could keep your father and Thor from killing one another."
"What are they arguing about?" Loki said.

"I told you—I can't say," Fandral said, trying to change the subject. He knew full well what the argument was about, Thor's desire to go see his Midgardian woman. "When are you getting out of here so you can introduce me that that magnificent dragon of yours? You caused quite the stir, showing up the way you did. The Allfather made everyone who was there swear an oath they wouldn't talk about what we saw, but the queen said I'm not forbidden to speak of it with you."

"You were there?" Loki said. "I didn't notice."

"You were busy," Fandral said, amusement in his eyes. "It was impressive. You always did have a flare for the dramatic, but that was something anyone who witnessed it won't soon forget. Not the only spectacle we've had here in Asgard these past months. We had a delegation from Alfheim, complete with dragonriders. I made a fool of myself, thinking the dragons were just tame beasts, until one, Zayan, proved otherwise. He kept telling me I'd make a good snack. That fellow had quite the sense of humor."

"So does Isond," Loki said. "Why did the Ljolsafar send a delegation?"

"They ran Sif out while she was in Alfheim looking for you, and a few days after her return, they came through the Bifrost, demanding to see the Allfather," Fandral explained. "Something about Asgard losing the egg the realm was entrusted with. I can assume that Isond was from that egg?"

"Yes," Loki said. "Fandral, this has been enlightening, but don't you have some maiden to go bother? Sparring with my brother or Sif, Hogun or Volstagg?"

"Thor is, as you well know, having a discussion with your father," Fandral said. "Sif is in Harokin on some errand for the queen and Volstagg and Hogun are investigating rumors of strange creatures in some of the outer provinces. Tyr and the Allfather have stepped up patrols all around Asgard, but no one's found anything yet."

"What kind of creatures?"

Fandral shrugged. "Shapes in the darkness," he said. "No livestock killed, no one and nothing missing. Phantoms, probably."

"Yes, hopefully," Loki said.

"Don't sound so disappointed," Fandral said, reaching over, slapping Loki on the shoulder. "What say you we get you out of here for a while? You can introduce me to Isond, and we can raid the kitchens for something to eat—food not approved by Lady Eir. It'll do you some good."

"I'm supposed to stay here," Loki said.

"Bored out of your mind? Don't you want to get out, see the city, get reacquainted with Asgard?" Fandral asked.

"I'm not ready," Loki said.

"Fine," Fandral said. "I'll have food brought here, and I'll share all the latest gossip."

"Gossip? Really, Fandral?" Loki said. "Mother did put you up to this. Or was it Thor, feeling sorry for me?"

"I did come on my own," Fandral said. "This is my way of offering an apology. I know I've stood up for you in the past, but I should have tried harder. We all should have. We're not just Thor's friends. I always counted you among mine, and again, I should have tried harder. Loki, I am sorry for any pain or wrongs I've caused in the past."
He offered a hand, which Loki clasped.

"Now that's done, when are you and that dragon going to offer to take me flying?" Fandral asked.

"You can ask Isond yourself," Loki said. "Would you like to go with us the next time she needs to hunt? The decision to let you on her back is her's alone."

"Understood," Fandral said, grinning, gratified when Loki smiled back. "You know, you do need a haircut."

Loki hit him with a pillow.

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Chapter 15

Flight

Chapter 15—Worthy

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Fall in Asgard was one of Loki's favorite seasons. The air was clean, crisp and warm, paradise compared to the hostility of Jotunheim's climate. His mother's garden offered a safe haven for a while. He wasn't given release yet from the healers, but he was behaving himself. Loki used Isond as a backrest. The dragon was napping, and Loki had his eyes closed, enjoying the warmth of the sun. He missed it during his time in Jotunheim, and it was one of Isond's favorite things about Asgard. Isond was happy, and Loki was starting to make peace with the idea of being content. Making a new place for himself instead of settling for the old. The possibility was tantalizing, a fantasy he was almost willing to give into, except he was afraid. He would soon face the judgment of his king, and he was not ready for that.

You worry too much, Isond said, waking.

"One of us has to worry about our necks," Loki replied, amazed at how his dragon always knew when he needed her. "I'll not let anything happen to you. We'll go back to Jotunheim, or possibly we could see refuge with the Ljolsafar."

Why leave again when you've just come home? Isond asked.

"Because if Odin and the council decide what I've done is high treason, at best, I'll be locked away, and at worst, facing death."

Why? You did not do those things because you wanted to. You were not in control. I will tell them this. They will believe me. Thor knows, too.

"Isond, it's not a matter of believing," Loki said. "They need facts. I'm not very popular with many people."


"A very small group of people and one dragon," Loki said.

I will make them see, Isond said, conviction in her voice, as if the matter was already settled. I called your mother. She will make you see, if I can't.

Sighing, Loki wasn't surprised by the appearance of his mother. She walked over, taking a seat beside him in the grass.

"Eir has decided you're well enough to leave the healing rooms," Frigga said. "

"Then what?" Loki asked.

"Don't worry about it now," Frigga said, squeezing his hand.

"Should I be worried?" Loki said.
"Loki..." Frigga warned.

"I've heard the rumors," Loki said. "I know what people think I've done."

"You're in no condition to face judgment right now," Frigga said. "You need time to heal in both body and mind. Rest. Heal. When the time comes, your family will stand beside you."

"But Father..."

"Trust Odin," Frigga said. "If not him, trust me, and your brother. We won't let anything happen to you. Nor will Isond."

Frigga is right, Isond interjected. She is wise.

"And you're naive," Loki muttered.

Frigga ignored the comment, growing used to Loki's sometimes one-sided conversations with the dragon. She decided to change the topic of conversation.

"Isond is beautiful," Frigga said. "Noble. And right. You should trust her judgment."

"Stubborn is more like it," Loki said. "She's always on her best behavior for everyone else. Impeccable manners. . ."

"You're also willful, Loki," Frigga said. "Isond is a good match then. Abroen will be pleased."

"Who is Abroen?"

"One of the dragonriders from Alfheim," Frigga said. "He came with the delegation while you were gone. They arrived wanting to know what happened to the egg they brought. Abroen knew the egg hatched. He is a teacher, and he'll be glad to know you've returned, if he doesn't already."

"Why should the elf care about what happens to me?" Loki asked.

"Abroen is to be responsible for training the dragon from the egg Asgard was given and that dragon's partner," Frigga said. "The Bifrost broken presents a problem, but there is no reason why you can't use the Tesseract or the Casket of Ancient Winters to go to Alfheim. Or to bring Abroen and Gallanr here."

"You sound confident, believing Isond and I have a future," Loki said.

Frigga sighed, taking Loki's hands between her own. "I will not let anything happen to you," she said. "You are my son, Thor's brother. You doubt your place in this family?"

"No," Loki said. "And Mother, Isond and I don't need the Bifrost or any other assistance in traveling between the realms."

"I know," Frigga said. "I just wanted to hear you say it. It's quite a gift you've been given, my son."

"Isond saved my life," Loki said. "I don't think I'll ever be able to repay her."

"Loki, repay her with your love, and loyalty and trust," Frigga said. "Your family also owes Isond a debt for bringing you back. Do you think I'll let anything happen to either of you? Abroen explained the depth of the bond between dragon and rider. Do you understand how deep it goes? The binding is soul-deep and lifelong, breakable only by death."

"I suspected that," Loki said.
"Then you know how precious is the gift you've been given," Frigga said.

"I thought she was a gift to Thor," Loki said.

"Abroen explained the egg was a gift to Asgard," Frigga said. "He wasn't surprised to hear it hatched for you. The Ljolsafar bind the eggs with magic, and they hatch only for the right person."

"Isond keeps telling me she waited for me," Loki said.

"She's telling the truth," Frigga said, smiling up at Isond, who craned her neck so she could see them both.

I like Thor but he was not for me, she said.

"See?" Frigga said. "That's not all—Abroen brought back two more eggs after the delegation left. He's entrusted them to me. One is for Asgard, the other for Midgard. He said these two eggs have gone unhatched for centuries, Loki. The rider council hoped maybe they could find their partners in another realm."

"A dragon for Midgard? Are the elves mad?" Loki laughed. "Father's agreed to this?"

"He's left the eggs to me to deal with," Frigga said. "As well as your tutelage in dragonlore. Abroen left some books. I was waiting until you were feeling better. When would you like to start?"

"Tomorrow?" Loki said.

"Fine. Have breakfast with me, and we'll begin," Frigga said, giving Loki's hand a squeeze. "Have you spoken with Thor?"

"About what?" Loki asked.

"Everything?" Frigga said. "Jotunheim, for example?"

"I haven't told Thor yet," Loki said.

"Don't you think you should? The two of you need to sit down and have a very long talk, Loki," Frigga said.

"When does Thor have time? And what was his tantrum about the other day?" Loki asked.

"Thor can tell you himself," Frigga said. "You're right calling the storm a tantrum."

"So he learned nothing in his exile," Loki said.

"He did," Frigga said. "Thor needs to learn to accept things he cannot change, to learn patience."

"He doesn't surrender easily," Loki said.

"As stubborn as you or your father," Frigga said. "Thor needs patience, and you need to learn how to trust more, Loki."

"Why should I when no one trusts me?"

"Have you not heard a word I've said?" Frigga asked.

"Why didn't you tell me?"
"We never wanted you to feel different. You are our son and we are your family, Loki," Frigga said.

"The day I left, Father said he once planned to use me to bring about an alliance between Asgard and Jotunheim. What did he mean? Was I to be the puppet while he pulled the strings?"

Frigga sighed, praying for patience. Loki, ever the cynic. Odin's original plans had come to fruition, in a way. Much later than planned, and not in the way he'd imagined, and they'd discussed. Loki didn't need to know that, yet. Perhaps he never would know.

"You weren't meant to be a puppet," Frigga said. "Odin imagined an Aesir-raised Jotun, a king familiar and more tolerant with the ways and races of the other realms, someone who would help bring about peace between Jotunheim and Asgard, someone of both realms. Loki, again, it's not a matter to worry about now. Come, let Isond nap, and I'll take you to see the eggs."

Loki stood, helping his mother up, following her to the Vault. The eggs sat in their own niche, once occupied by Isond's egg. One was obsidian, the other azure.

Frigga grabbed Loki's hand, placing it on one of the eggs, covering it with her own. She smiled at Loki's gasp of surprise as his mind touched that of the sleeping hatchling.

"I can't make out their dreams, but I know contentment when I sense it," Frigga said. "These two are quite happy where they are, waiting. I think they'll hatch soon, though."

"For who? How are they going to find partners when they're stuck here in the vault?"
"I'm waiting for your father's permission to present them to the people of Asgard," Frigga said. "It's what they do in Alfheim several times a year—they make a feast-day of it, and anyone who wishes may present themselves to the eggs. Everyone from noble to commoner has a chance at a dragon."

"The elves are mad," Loki said.

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That evening, Fandral dragged Loki out to celebrate the fact he was free (mostly) of the healers. They were tavern-hopping when Fandral grabbed Loki by the shoulder, trying to drag him along when he saw her. The lady's companion, who Fandral recognized as a cousin, caught the warrior's eye and tried to distract her companion, but they failed.

Loki stopped, breath catching in his throat, seeing Sigyn. Feeling eyes on her, she turned, smiling, walking over, taking his hand.
"Loki, I hear you've had quite the adventure," Sigyn said.

"That's an understatement," Loki said. "How have you been, Sigyn?"

"Married. Had a daughter," Sigyn said. "Theoric was disappointed. He wanted a son."

"I knew you were married, and expecting a child. Congratulations," he said.

"Thank you," Sigyn said. "My life must seem so ordinary to yours. . . you, here, with a dragon, fighting invaders in Midgard. I don't believe a word of the rumors, that you lead the army because you wanted a realm for yourself. I remember you said you never wanted a throne."

Loki rubbed the back of his neck. Yes, he wanted no throne, and now he had one, waiting.

"I'd take ordinary for a while," Loki said. "What are you doing here in Asgard?"
"Theoric and his father came to court, and I wanted to come along. I miss the city," she said. "I don't miss my father, but I miss this place. It's my home."

"What request did your husband ask from my father?"

"More land," Sigyn said. "He can barely take care of what he has, and he fancies himself a thane."

Loki snorted. "I hope he's treating you well," he said.

"My father will kill Theoric if he mistreats me," Sigyn said. "He's a decent man, Loki. Not you, but there is no one like you. We should go. Theoric's waiting."

Sigyn turned to go, but she came back, quickly kissing Loki before leaving with her cousin.

"As I said flair for the dramatic," Fandral said. "Buy you a drink?"

"Yes, please," Loki said.

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Loki sat on the floor in his study, laying out the mass of straps and buckles he'd found upon returning from his evening out with Fandral. Isond was sound asleep, leaving Loki to his own thoughts. He could've done without seeing Sigyn, and he didn't want to think about his conversation with his mother. Yes, he did need to explain some things to Thor, and his brother needed to share his experiences during his exile. It would be the first step in getting to know one another again. And fate was not going to be kind enough to leave him alone.

Loki heard familiar footsteps, and didn't look up.

"What's all this?" Thor asked, looking at the mess of leather and metal on Loki's floor.

"A harness and saddle for Isond," Loki said. "Mother found pictures in a book from the Ljolsafar, and Father had it made."

"Why didn't you just magic something up?" Thor asked, leaning against the edge of Loki's desk.

"Magic something up? I can't. You know that. Small things, but not something this big," Loki said. "Besides, did you learn nothing from our lessons as children? Or do you not repair your own tack?"

"I do, but I keep it in good repair," Thor said. "I don't like sewing. My fingers aren't right for it."

"Not still women's work, eh?" Loki asked, grinning as Thor frowned, picking up a book and throwing it at him.

"No," Thor said.

"I'm sure I have some socks that need darning, or you can get some of Father's," Loki said. "I remember how much you loved learning to use a needle and thread."

"Don't remind me," Thor said, throwing himself down on the floor by his brother.

Loki had his sleeves rolled up, vambraces off. No point in wearing them when he and Isond were the only ones to see. The runes were still healing, and would leave lovely scars. He'd taken to wearing vambraces while he was out with Fandral so no one would see the marks.

Thor grabbed him by the wrist, looking at the runes.
"When are you going to tell me what these mean? What happened in Jotunheim? I know you went from the battle in New York, here to Asgard, and back," Thor said.

Loki pulled away, standing, before sinking down in a nearby chair.

"I killed Laufey," Loki said. "I claimed my birthright as king of Jotunheim. The runes were a binding when I took the oath. I was half-mad, Thor. Byleistr gave me no choice. . .I had a choice, but I accepted the binding."

"Who is Byleistr?"

"My brother," Loki said.

Thor frowned.

"My older half-brother," Loki said. "Laufey was his father. Don't worry, Byleistr is nothing like Laufey. He's kind. He helped me when I needed it most. I think you two would like one another."

Thor sat down across from Loki. "Father knows? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Father knows," Loki said. "Believe me, Father knows."

"Why not tell me?"

"I wasn't ready," Loki said.

"That explains why you were blue and covered in blood when you returned," Thor said.

"You're taking this surprisingly well," Loki said.

"How did Father take it?"

"I didn't ask at the time," Loki said. "I was too busy trying to stay on my feet and keep from bleeding to death. I'm sure he and everyone else appreciated the spectacle of me, Jotun blue, on a dragon, throwing Laufey's head at the foot of the throne."


"Thor, don't jest," Loki said.

"I'm not," Thor said. "I know that's not all of it, but I appreciate knowing, Loki. When you're ready to tell all, I'm willing to listen."

"Likewise when you decide to tell me what happened on Midgard," Loki said.

"Not much to tell," Thor said.

"What was your tantrum the other day about then?" Loki asked.

"I made a promise to someone on Midgard, and I mean to keep it," Thor asked. "Father denied me my request to return."

"Thor, using the Tesseract to jaunt off to Earth is not wise," Loki said. "You have no idea of what's out there, waiting. . . ."

"The Tesseract is safe here," Thor said.

"Believe what you will," Loki muttered. "Thor, I'm tired, and I'd like to get some sleep."
"Rest well, brother," Thor said, leaving Loki alone.

A few days later, Loki was wakened early by two of the Einherjar and taken to the presence of his father in the throne room. Loki stood, terrified, knowing what it meant—he was to face judgment. And thankfully, it wasn't what he expected. His punishment—given back his old life, allowed to hunt Isond when necessary and take her flying. On foot or horseback, never outside the city's farthest boundaries. He could work on helping repair the Bifrost. (He and Isond could transport themselves across the realms, but he swore an oath to his father they would not, unless they had the Allfather's permission.)

His freedom depended on his penance and how much effort he put into being accepted back, rebuilding his own identity, becoming someone he could be proud of himself, not just being Thor's brother.

More good news came from Eir, who said he was almost physically recovered from his ordeal. His leg was healed, and he still had a slight limp, but Eir said with proper care and exercise, he would soon be back in full health. His mind, however, was another matter. Only Isond fully understood the nature of the ordeal, has she'd lived through it herself. She'd kept him sane, and Eir credited his bond with the dragon as part of the reason he'd healed so quickly. Loki knew he still had a long road ahead, and he was willing to face it.

But not ready to take over in Jotunheim, despite his father's efforts to get him to go, so finally, a few weeks later, Loki gave in. Isond didn't mind being back, and Byleistr was happy to see him.

"I have a favor to ask," Byleistr said, once the small talk was finished.

"I'm not staying, despite your wishes, and what my father thinks," Loki said.

"Well, you could stay and take over here," Byleistr said. "I know that won't happen."

"What is this boon you desire, Byleistr?" Loki asked.

"It's about our brother—Helblindi," Byleistr said.

"We have another brother?" Loki said.

"Yes," Byleistr said.

"Why haven't I met him then?"

"Because Helblindi is like you—what the others call a runt," Byleistr said. "He young, and small, and there have been two attempts on his life since you killed Laufey. If anything happens to him, I'll never forgive myself. I want you to take him back to Asgard with you. He'll be safe there, won't he? I can't look after him and try and run a kingdom right now. Loki, please. Either you stay and take on your responsibilities here, and let me care for Helblindi and get back to my life, or I rule in your stead and you take him with you."

"I can't stay. Not yet," Loki said.

"I know you don't want to stay," Byleistr said.

"I'll come when you need me," Loki said. "You know that."
"Then you'll take Helblindi back with you?"

"Can I meet him first?" Loki said.

"Follow me," Byleistr said, leading Loki to Annar's chambers, where the healer was watching the younger Jotun. As soon as Byleistr opened the door, he was set upon by the much younger and smaller Frost Giant. The older giant bent down.

"Give Annar any trouble today?" Byleistr said.

"No," Helblindi said.

"He's been good, as he always is," Annar said.

"You always say that," Byleistr said.

Annar snorted. "Greetings Loki," he said.

"Annar," Loki replied.

And Helblindi was suddenly staring at Loki, blood red eyes wide, and Loki was still taking in the fact the Jotun was so young and small, he looked barely the age of Volstagg's youngest son, who was only five. The boy was slender, and he had short, black hair.

"Who are you?" Helblindi asked.

"I'm your brother, Loki," he answered.

"You're not my brother," Helblindi said. "You're too small."

"Laufey was my sire, too," Loki said. "I was born like you—a runt."

"How come I've never met you before?"

"I was raised in Asgard," Loki said.

Helblindi frowned.

"It's true," Byleistr said. "Have I ever lied to you?"

"No," Helblindi said.

"Blindi, you know it's not been safe here in Utgard for a long time," Byleistr said. "I don't want anything to happen to you, which is why Loki is going to take you back to Asgard with him."

Helblindi blinked, backing up against Annar and one of his wolves.

"I won't go," he said.

"You will," Byleistr said. "You'll be able to come visit. I promise. And Asgard is not like Jotunheim. You have a chance to see something not even I've seen. Besides, remember the dragon you and Annar found? She's here, and she belongs to Loki. Would you like to meet her?"

"Bribery Byleistr?" Annar said, crossing his arms, shooting Loki an amused look.

Byleistr glared back. "Helblindi, I'd like to talk with Annar for a few minutes, all right? And Loki, there's someone you need to meet," he said. "Blindi, will you take Loki to Suttung?"
The boy nodded, walking past Loki and out the door. Loki followed.

Isond was immediately smitten with the boy, and Loki half-listened to the rapid-fire conversation between the tiny Jotun and dragon. He was trying to ignore the warrior the boy had dragged along with them. Helblindi didn't introduce the other Jotun in his haste to meet Isond.

Ignoring the Jotun, but he continued staring. He was taller than Laufey had been, more slender, darker blue, the tone closer to Loki's own when he was in his Jotun form. He was also missing his right arm from just below the elbow.

"Boy, do you know how strongly you favor Farbauti?" the Jotun asked.

"Who are you and who is Farbauti?" Loki asked.

"My name is Suttung," he said. "Farbauti was Laufey's consort, the one who gave you birth. Farbauti was my younger brother."

Suttung let it sink in.

"That would make you my uncle," Loki said.

"Correct," Suttung said. "You would've made Farbauti proud. I'm grateful to see you survived, thrived even."

"Even a runt like me?" Loki said.

"You're not the first runt in Jotunheim, and you won't be the last," Suttung said. "Did you know the Allfather has Jotun blood running in his veins?"

"Odin is pure Aesir," Loki said.

"Not as pure as he'd like anyone to believe," Suttung said.

"Does it matter?" Loki said.

"Not really," Suttung said. "I'm proud you're of my line. Laufey was a fool for what he did to you."

"Are all of the Jotun like Helblindi and I committed to the snows?" Loki asked.

"No," Suttung said.

"Why is Helblindi alive then?"

"Because I told Laufey if he killed another child, I would kill him," Suttung said. "He gave you to the snows—his own heir, and Byleistr's sons, to teach him a lesson, and he murdered his mate as well."

Loki gasped.

"Laufey wasn't always like that, though. He was ancient. I think he lived too long. He was king here when the Allfather's father was young. I'm not defending him, though. Never that," Suttung said. "I never understood why Farbauti agreed to become his consort. Maybe he saw something we never could. I think if Farbauti would've lived, he would have been Laufey's redemption."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Loki asked.
"Because you need to know at least one of your birth parents wasn't a monster," Suttung said. "The Jotnar are not monsters. We are a proud, fierce people, changeable as the ice and snow of this realm, Loki Odinson. I should go. Byleistr is coming."

Loki turned, watching his brother approach.

"How did the visit with Suttung go?" Byleistr asked.

"He let me know Laufey was even worse than I thought," Loki said. "I'm sorry for what he did to you."

"My strength is what kept me alive," Byleister said. "I would have done for you what I could, but I was still a child myself. But Helblindi... I was determined he would not suffer your fate. Suttung saved him, but I kept him as safe as I could. I'm glad you'll be taking him back to Asgard. He doesn't belong here. He's too small."

"Like me?"

"Yes," Byleister said. "But you've proved yourself a true Jotun, and I'm proud to call you brother. I'd be even more pleased to call you my king."

"I'll make you a deal," Loki said. "Take the throne for now. Keep it for me. I'll go back to Asgard, and see what I can do to help you rebuild here. Possibly I can convince my father to let me bring back the Casket of Ancient Winters."

"More than a fair trade," Byleistr said.

"Are you sure things here will be fine?" Loki asked.

"Suttung and his allies are slowly convincing those who followed Laufey that throwing their support behind his true heir and the prince-regent would be a very good idea," Byeistr said. "That a runt killed Laufey and has the backing of the Allfather himself is enough to make most of them reconsider outright rebellion. Many alive now fought in the war, and remember facing Asgard's legions. They're not keen on doing so again."

"I'm glad to hear it," Loki said. "Do you know any of the ways into Asgard?"

"A few," Byleistr said.

"Send someone if you have need," Loki said.

"I will," Byleister said. "Before you go, I have something for you."

He handed Loki a necklace, four dire wolf teeth on a leather string.

"Remember this?"

"Yes," Loki said, slipping the necklace over his head.

"You should be going," Byleistr said, going over to Helblindi. "Be good for Loki and Isond. I'll visit when I can."

Helblindi nodded, and Loki picked the boy up, setting him upon Isond's back before climbing up himself. Byeistr waved, watching as the dragon disappeared.

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Thor was guileless, and too surprised to even really consider how their father sent Loki to Jotunheim when he saw his brother coming his way down the corridor. Because where else would Loki get the tiny Jotun child clinging to him as if his very life depended on it?

"Not a word, Thor," Loki said as he passed, Thor falling into step beside him, walking along, figuring out they were headed for Frigga's chambers.

Thor held the door open for Loki, and Frigga smiled, seeing both her sons, and it changed to surprise when she saw the child Loki carried.

Thor stood back, watching.

"Helblindi, may I present my mother, Queen Frigga," Loki said, trying to disengage the boy, but he held on tighter.

Loki turned around, shooting Thor a scathing look, and he left.

Frigga came closer.

"Mother, this is my brother, Helblindi," Loki said. "Would you like to meet her?"

"I don't bite," Frigga said. "Are you hungry?"

The boy nodded.

"He's the one who found Isond, and Byleistr rescued her," Loki said.

"You helped rescue Isond? Come here, Helblindi, and tell me the tale," Frigg said, holding out her hands to the boy.

His grip slackened, and Loki set him down, kneeling at his level. "Frigga will get you something to eat, and we'll find you a room," Loki said. "I'll be back later. There's no need to be afraid. If you need me, call for Isond, or tell my mother. I'll come. I have to see to Isond."

By then, Frigga had Helblindi by the hand, already starting to charm him. Loki smiled, leaving them alone. And of course, Thor was waiting outside.

"Unless Jotun children mature very quickly, I think it's safe to assume he's not your child?" Thor asked. "I've learned a few things about Jotun biology."

Loki wished he could call lightning so he could flatten his oaf of a brother.

"I thought you liked girls," Thor said. "Not that it matters, I mean, I know you had feelings for Sigyn, and for a time, I thought you and Sif were close."

"We were children," Loki said.

"Not children anymore," Thor said. "And here you come with a child. . ."

"Helblindi is my brother," Loki said. "I brought him back as a favor to Byleistr What was I supposed to do, leave him there?"

"No," Thor said. "Have you any other brothers?"

"I met my uncle," Loki said.

"Hopefully not Laufey's brother?" Thor asked.
"No," Loki said.

"I'm glad to know you had someone in your own exile who cared for you," Thor said. "You said Byleistr helped you when you needed it most."

"He did," Loki said.

"I met someone during my exile," Thor said. "She was kind, beautiful, everything I could have hoped for. . .yet I'm here, and she is on Midgard. She was the reason for the storm after we returned home." So that was what Fandral said he couldn't talk about, Loki mused.

"Her name is Jane," Thor said. "She's a scientist. She hit me with her car. And her friend, Darcy, shot me with lightning."

"Lightning? A mortal?" Loki asked.

"It's called a taser, and yes, lightning," Thor said. "It was painful. I was mortal, after all. I think you and Darcy would be fast friends."

"Anyone who could take you down with your own element is a friend of mine," Loki said. "And this Jane hit you with a car?"

"Yes," Thor said.

"Anything else I need to know about your exile?"

"Later," Thor said, dropping the subject. He missed Jane, and talking about her made him miss her all the more.

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Several days of wrangling with Odin and Loki finally wheedled his father into relenting and considering the return of the Casket to Jotunheim. The fact the Chitauri scepter was still in Jotunheim was a sore point for the Allfather, especially after Loki explained, once again, the powers of the scepter's gem. The possibility it was another Infinity Gem was alarming, and Loki, suggested they could trade it for the Casket. The thought of returning the relic to Jotunheim was more appealing than an Infinity Gem sitting unsecured in another realm.

Odin hadn't made a decision yet, but Thor was suddenly interested in the Casket and followed Loki down into the vault when he went to see the heart of Jotunheim.

"Remember coming down here when we were boys, and the stories Father would tell us?" Thor said.

"Yes," Loki said, putting his hands on the Casket, watching as they turned blue.

"Can you control the transformation?" Thor asked.

"I've learned how," Loki said. "Jotun are natural shapeshifters. The first form I learned to take was a wolf. The teeth on my necklace are from it."

"What's it like to change that way? Thor said.

"Slipping your skin," Loki said. "I can't really describe it."

"Anymore than I can explain what it's like to call lightning?"
"Exactly," Loki said, removing his hands from the relic, the blue fading back to pale Aesir skin.

Thor's attention was already on to something else, and Loki cocked an eyebrow with interest as his brother eyed the dragon eggs.

"I wonder if either of these will ever hatch?" Thor asked, pressing his hand to the blue egg.

"Only when they find the right partner," Loki said. "Come. Mother's waiting on us, and you know how she is when we're late."

"And Helblindi will be asking for you," Thor said, giving the egg one last pat. But he stopped when it started to glow, and cracks appeared in the surface.

"Loki, what's happening?" Thor said, watching as shards of the egg fell away.

Loki was frozen in place at the sight of the hatchling pushing out of the remnants of the egg, and Thor panicking. The hatchling opened its mouth, clamping down on Thor's hand, thrashing its wings.

"Ow! No, don't bite. Loki, he's not happy with me. He's starving," Thor said. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Pick him up," Loki said. "Meet your new partner."
Chapter 16

Flight

Chapter 16—Hearsay

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Thor held the thrashing hatchling, who mewled piteously, looking to Loki for help.

"Reassure him, you oaf," Loki said. "We need to get him something to eat."

"I think he's angry," Thor said, following Loki up the stairs out of the vault. "He's thinking blackness. I made him wait too long? Hatchling, I did not make you wait to hatch. You made that decision yourself. You could have hatched for anyone you wanted."

The dragonet squawked, like he was in disagreement with his partner.

"Do not bite me again."

A snort this time.

"I think I'm going to like him," Loki said, leading his brother toward the kitchens.

"He's a disagreeable little thing," Thor said.

"If he's convinced you made him wait to long, he is correct," Loki said. "Take my advice. Do not try and argue. You will lose. Every time."

"He's just hatched," Thor said.

"They're as intelligent as we are from the moment they hatch," Loki said. "It just takes time for them to learn to form words."

"He's communicating very clearly," Thor said. "Food. Now. Was Isond like this?"

"She was a bit more patient," Loki said, entering the kitchens. He asked the closest cook for a bowl of fresh meat, and the woman took one look at the baby dragon and hurried off, returning a few minutes later with a bowl full of raw, bloody meat.

Loki took the bowl, and the hatchling tried diving head first into it, but Thor caught him.

"Good work," Loki said. "We'll take him outside. And you're going to have to make him chew each bite. He'll choke himself to death if you don't."

"You know from experience?"

"Yes," Loki said.

The went outside to one of the small greenbelts located around the palace. Loki sat down in the grass, and Thor took a seat beside him, wrapping both arms around his dragonet as he lunged once again for his food. Loki pushed the bowl toward Thor. "Have at it," he said.

"This is revolting," Thor said, picking up a piece of meat.
"What's so different between this and dressing out a carcass after a hunt?"

Thor put his hand in front of the hatchling's snout, and he grabbed the meat, and Thor's fingers again, drawing blood.

"Chew, you little monster," Thor said, and the dragon ignored him, inhaling the meat.

"Yes, Thor, calling him names is going to help establish a bond," Loki said.

Another handful of meat, another bite. Eventually Thor managed to get most of the meat down the dragon's throat without losing any fingers.

"We need to show him to Mother," Loki said.

"What about my hand?" Thor said.

"Mother first, then I'll take care of it," Loki said, standing, helping Thor up.

They walked to their mother's chambers, Thor cradling the somnolent hatchling in his arms.

"Not so bad now," Thor said.

"Get used to it," Loki said, grinning as his brother passed him, entering the room.

Frigga was sitting beside Helblindi, reading to the little boy, but she stopped when she saw her sons, and what Thor had in his arms. She stood, coming over, kissing him on the cheek, fawning over the new hatchling.

"What are you going to name him?" she asked.

"Kjalvor," Thor said.

"Bravery?" Loki asked.

"Yes," Thor said, scratching the dragonet under the chin, earning a happy sigh. "He had the bravery and audacity to bite me, so I think it's fitting."

"He'll keep you honest," Frigga said, putting an arm around Helblindi, who snuck up beside her.

"May I see him?" Helblindi asked.

Thor knelt down, holding Kjalvor so the boy could get a better look. He held out his hand so the dragon could sniff, and he scratched him between the nubby horns on his head.

"Will he be as big as Isond?" Helblindi said.

"The males don't grow as large as the females," Frigga said.

Thor frowned, and Loki smiled.

"Don't make fun," Thor said.

"I'm not," Loki said. "He's a sturdy fellow. I imagine his smaller size will make him quicker in the air."

"If he flies half as well as Isond did in New York, I'll be happy with that," Thor said. "What do I do now?"
"Let him sleep," Loki said. "He'll wake again in a few hours, and you'll do more of the same."

"You will help me with this, won't you, Loki?" Thor asked.

"I can only try," Loki said.

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The rest of the day was spent with Isond and then watching Thor's second attempt at feeding Kjalvor, which went a little smoother. Their mother was amused by the spectacle, and Odin less so, but he did spare Kjalvor a look of affection as he did any youngling, but Thor received a stern lecture about not abandoning this new responsibility.

Then Loki met with Fandral, who was going out with him for the evening. And he covered well his disappointment the news Thor now had a dragon.

"Possibly Alfheim will provide another egg once the Bifrost is repaired," Loki said. "They've given an egg for Midgard, so there is that hope."

"I'll settle for a flight with Isond every now and then," Fandral said, clapping Loki on the shoulder.
"Ready to go?"

"Why not?" Loki said. And suddenly they were set upon by another member of the Warriors Three.

"Where are you lads going?" Volstagg asked, throwing his arms across the shoulders of the other two. "Drinking? Feasting? Fighting? All three, I hope?"

"Drinking," Fandral said. "It's been far too long for Loki, so we're going to break his fast."

"So not truly a welcome home feast," Volstagg said. "We should have one."
Fandral grinned. "Anything for a feast."

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The evening was still young by Volstagg standards, but late for Loki, who hadn't imbibed in a very long time, and couldn't take the stares and whispering after a while. Fandral extracted a promise for another attempt later, when Loki was feeling more up to it, and Volstagg just hugged him, bidding him good night. Would it really be that easy to get on with his life?

Not a thing he wanted to ponder. Loki only wanted sleep, as his head was throbbing from the rare elf wine Volstagg suggested they try. Vile drink Loki thought, kicking off his boots.

Your thoughts are fuzzy, Isond said. I don't think I like this.

"That makes two of us," Loki muttered, turning down the lights with a motion of his hand.

You enjoyed yourself tonight. Volstagg is nice. Is he always so happy?

"It is his nature," Loki said. "He's a good man."

See, you do have friends, Loki. You were wrong.

He didn't gratify the dragon with answer, ready to drop face first into his pillows, but he heard the door open, and walked out into the great room, ready to berate whoever it was interrupting his attempt at sleep. That desire died quickly.
Thor let himself in, carrying Kjalvor, whose eyes were bright. Helblindi was beside Thor, carrying Herja by her armpits.

"What are you doing here?" Loki said.

"I came to the conclusion no one will bother me here," Thor said. "If one more person drops by to offer their congratulations or asks to touch Kjalvor, I'll bite them. And I found Helblindi wandering the corridors, so I brought him with me, and Herja was with him."

"You're not letting that demon loose in here," Loki said.

"She had her last two litters in my bed," Thor said.

"Another?"

"Yes," Thor said. "She was with child when I came back from my exile. I tried to encourage her to birth them here, but she won't take my advice. Maybe next time."

"Herja is not a demon," Helblindi said, setting the cat down.

"No, but I think Kjalvor is part demon himself," Thor said.

"Why?" Loki asked.

"He shredded my favorite cloak, ripped apart three pillows and tried chewing on Mjolnir's handle," Thor said.

"Did you leave him alone?"

"For only a few minutes," Thor said. "I went to get something to eat, came back, and found my chambers in ruin, and Kjalvor with his teeth on Mjolnir."

"You can't leave him alone," Loki said. "When he's asleep, fine, for a bit. But do not leave him alone while he's awake. Isond would go through my things while I was out hunting. You need to watch him. He's just a baby."

"I'll watch him," Helblindi said, hopeful.

"You can help Thor with him," Loki said. "But he's going to have to do most of the work himself."

I had only Loki, Isond said,

"You turned out fine," Thor said. "And Helblindi, thank you for the offer of help."

He reached over, trying to ruffle the boy's hair, but he shrank away.

"I won't hurt you," Thor said.

"You're big and loud," Helblindi said.

"Like a bilgesnipe," Loki said.

"What's a bilgesnipe?" Helblindi asked.

"A huge, loud creature that tramples everything in its path," Loki said.

Thor's smile faded.
"Thor, I'm sorry. . ."

"No, you're both right," Thor said. "Helblindi, if I've frightened you, I meant no harm. I hope we can be friends, and I would appreciate your help with Kjalvor."

The boy smiled.

"There, all settled," Thor said. "Anyone hungry? I'll send for something to eat."

Hours later, Loki was awake. There was barely room for himself, Helblindi, and the cat. Thor was laying on his back across the foot of the bed, arm splayed out, Kjalvor resting his chin on it, body curled against Thor's side. Blindi and the cat had the most space, while Loki was consigned to the edge of the bed. His bed. The demon added insult to injury by climbing up on his side using him as a pillow.

"Herja, go sleep on Thor," Loki muttered. "Kjalvor won't eat you."

The cat flicked her tail, and Loki sighed. It was strange, not being alone. Not that he'd truly been alone in months, with Isond a constant presence in his mind. His space was being invaded, and he didn't think he minded.

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Weeks in Harokin and Sif was glad to return home. Knowing Thor was back from Midgard put a spring in her step and a smile on her face. She heard the rumors on her journey back about another dragon in Asgard, but how could that be, with the Bifrost destroyed? Possibly the elves used magic to move across the realms. No concern of hers.

A broken Bifrost meant Thor could not return to see the mortal. Sif wasn't petty, but she was a woman, and jealousy was something she could not deny. Rumors also abounded about Loki, that he returned with Thor, but those were darker rumors filled with war and death. That Loki was not dead was not a surprise. He was a survivor. And if Loki was back in Asgard, she figured he was under lock and key in the dungeons. An attempt to takeover Midgard was a precursor to a coup in Asgard. Sif knew Loki was sired by Laufey, the Jotun king. Thor, along with his mother, had revealed Loki's true parentage to herself and the Warriors Three not long after Thor's exile ended. The possibility Loki was in league with Laufey didn't surprise Sif at all. Again, just rumors.

Sif was tired of rumors. She believed none of them, choosing to learn the truth for herself, if there was any to be learned. Her errand for the queen proved unfruitful, and once she reported to Frigga, she was going to go find Thor and the others, and celebrate their reunion. She was walking down the grand avenue of the palace when she stopped, staring, mouth agape.

"Loki?" she said, incredulous.

"Hello Sif," Loki said. "Did you have a pleasant journey home?"

Her mouth wouldn't work. Loki was being polite. Had to be some kind of trick. And what was he doing with a tiny Jotun child in tow? The little boy stared, red eyes wide, almost afraid.

"Fandral said you were in Harokin on an errand for my mother," he said.

"Yes, I was," she said. "It was a long journey. Who's this?"

"Helblindi," Loki said. "My younger brother. Helblindi, this is Sif."
The boy tried to hide behind Loki, but he put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "He has nothing to be afraid of, does he, Sif?" Loki asked, daring her to say something unkind.

"No," Sif said. "Welcome to Asgard."

"Thank you," Helblindi muttered.

"Well, I'm off to see your mother," Sif said, continuing on her way.

"Oh, I've just got to be there to see her reaction to Kjalvor and Isond," Loki said. "Blindi, would you like to come along?"

Helblindi nodded, and Loki transported them to his mother's garden, where Isond was enjoying the sun.

What mischief are you planning now? Isond asked.

"Be patient, Isond, and you'll see. I'm not planning anything," Loki said. "I just want to watch what's going to happen."

Helblindi sat down, leaning against the dragon, and Loki followed suit, smiling when his mother appeared.

"What has made so happy, my son?" Frigga asked, noting the smile on Loki's face.

"Can't I just be happy?"

"You're happiest when causing mischief," Frigga said. "Should I be afraid?"

"No," Loki said, throwing a clod of dirt at Thor as he joined them, Kjalvor clawing at his partner, wanting to be put down.

The brothers watched as the hatchling settled next to Isond, chirping up at the bigger dragon, who rumbled back.

He's so tiny. Was I ever that small?

"Yes," Loki said. "Don't you remember?"

I'd rather forget. I was helpless and you had to protect me. Now I'm big enough to protect you and the realm. Will Kjalvor get that big?

"He'll be big enough," Loki said.

Is that Sif? Isond asked, and Loki turned to look. Sif was standing just inside the garden a few yards away, once again staring.

Loki smiled as Sif failed to find her voice again as she saw Thor with them. And Isond.

"So, I see the rumors about another dragon were true," Sif said. "When did one of the elves return?"

Loki stood, throwing an arm across Isond's shoulders. "Isond belongs to no elf," he said, letting it sink in.

"How..."

Frigga took Sif by the arm, leading her to a bench. "I'll explain later, my dear." she said.
"It's good to see you, Sif," Thor said, sitting down on the ground by Isond and Kjalvor, who crawled into his lap. He smiled down at the baby dragon. "Loki's good fortune has worn off on me. Kjalvor hatched for me a few days ago."
Chapter 17—Ordinary

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

The sun was going down on the seventh day after Kjalvor’s hatching, and Thor and Loki were putting weapons away out on the training ground. Loki spent the afternoon sparring with Fandral and Volstagg while Thor helped assess new recruits for the Einherjar. Thor was taking advantage of what time he had when Kjalvor was asleep to see to his other responsibilities. Watching Loki fight was a sight to see that day because his brother fought like he'd never seen before. And he wanted to spend a little time with Loki with no dragons, no responsibilities.

"Spar with me," Thor said, deciding to test the waters.

"Why, so you can gloat?" Loki asked, arms crossed.

"No," Thor said. "It's been a long time, Loki. Why not? Afraid?"

Loki frowned; Thor grinned. "I'd like to fight the Jotun king himself."

"You've never fought a Frost Giant like me," Loki said, skin turning blue. He grinned.

"That's more like it," Thor said, tossing him one of the spears the Einherjar used, and picked up a war hammer.

"Shall we begin?" Loki said, circling Thor, who dropped, spinning, throwing out a leg, catching Loki, striking the first blow.

Loki fell over backwards, rolling out of the way as Thor struck this time with the hammer, missing as his brother barely got out of the way, dodging sideways, picking up handful of dirt before getting to his feet. Loki threw the clump of dirt in Thor's face, and he spluttered. Loki drove the point of the spear into the ground, holding it as he jumped, using his momentum, spinning around, kicking Thor in the face.

"Had enough?" Loki asked.

"Hardly," Thor said, spitting. "Nice touch with the dirt. You're not fighting fair."

"You didn't say I had to, brother," Loki said. lunging at Thor with the spear, missing, but he hit him with the blades of ice he threw with his other hand.

Thor's armor deflected most of it, and he upped the ante with his next strike, channeling lightning into the hammer, splitting Loki's spear in two with the blow as he tried defending himself. It knocked Loki onto his back. He rolled out of the way, scrambling to his feet as Thor turned, and Loki grazed his cheek with the point of the ice blade he produced, drawing blood.

"Well done, brother," Thor said, grinning. "I can't remember the last time you drew my blood."

Loki said nothing, only watched as Thor began circling him again. This time he channeled lightning with the hammer, shooting it straight at him. Loki dodged, coating the ground with ice, causing Thor to lose his footing, falling on his back.
Annoyed now, Thor called wind, brewing up a small storm, and a downpour, reducing the training grounds to a muddy bog.

"Really, Thor?" Loki said. "That's the best you can do?"

Thor grinned back.

Loki closed his eyes, calling out to the storm himself, driving the wind into a gale, and turning the rain to sleet and hail.

"I yield," Thor said, letting the hammer slip from his fingers.

"You're only giving up because I beat you at your own game," Loki said, letting his skin fade back to its normal Aesir appearance.

"No, I yield because I'm tired, and I'm afraid of how far we might push each other," Thor said. "Take a look around."

Ice coated everything, Thor had broken some of the benches and surrounding flagstones with lightning.

"We're going to have to clean up this mess," Thor said. "Tomorrow. You were impressive, Loki. We'll have to continue this sometime and somewhere we won't destroy anything important. Aren't you going to say anything?"

"You're not distressed by what new tricks I've revealed? What this monster can do?"

Thor gritted his teeth, counting backwards from 10, as Darcy recommended to keep from losing his temper.

"No," Thor said. "Loki, how many times do I have to tell you, you're not a monster? There is nothing monstrous about you except this self-loathing you indulge in."

Loki glared back, but said nothing.

"I name you Loki Stormking," Thor said, trying to change the subject. "Beating me at my own game."

"But I'll never match up, will I, Thor?" Loki said. "I only ever wanted to be your equal."

"You are my equal," Thor said. "In some ways, you've even surpassed me."

"How?"

"You're a king," Thor said. "You have Isond. Father's trust in ways I've never had."

"It'll come," Loki said.

"I hope you're right," Thor said, clasping his brother's shoulder. "I am proud of you, Loki."

"Thank you," Loki said. "I'm going to go see Helblindi. Hopefully he hasn't been up to any mischief."

"Go. I'll try and see if I can fix any of this," Thor said, looking around.

"Good luck," Loki said, walking away.
Thor sat down, taking in the damage. It would take more than cleaning up. Stone masons, probably an architect and an engineer. Oh well.

He'd only wanted to size up Loki's fighting skills, spend time with his brother, and what he got was a surprise. New sides to Loki he never imagined. He fought like a berserker during their sparring match, and had grown in confidence. Loki was never a weakling. His skills as a warrior were in other areas, not smashing as most Aesir. People made fun of Fandral for his choice of blade. Sif's weapon was more "manly" than Fandral's rapier, but it was skill that counted, not brute force in that case. Thor's gift was brute strength, like most Aesir. He appreciated those who had other skills. They were all well versed in how to use other weapons. Axe, spear, hammer, bow, mace, staff, shield and even their own bodies.

Thor preferred Mjolnir, Loki his knives. Thor was more than proficient with a short sword and shield, and he'd watched Loki shatter noses with his fists on several occasions. They'd single-handedly destroyed a tavern or two in their stupidity, no weapons needed, only strength and creativity. Which they both put to good use destroying the training yard. Thor grinned, thinking. He couldn't wait to face Loki and Isond with Mjolnir.

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Fandral slid down Isond's shoulder, landing on shaking legs.

"We must do that again," he said. "That was amazing. Thank you, Isond"

You're always welcome to fly with us, Isond said. And you know where to find something to eat besides sheep. They're too woolly.

Loki joined him on the ground.

"Father's been paying weregild to some of the farmers near the city so we don't have to fly far," Loki explained. "Sheep are cheaper than cattle, and easier to come by."

"You're not breaking the rules flying out so far?" Fandral asked.

"Not if it's so Isond can eat," Loki said.

"Will Kjalvor have to hunt when he gets big enough?"

"He will if I have anything to say about it," Loki said, scratching Isond's chin.

"He has Thor hopping," Fandral said, smiling.

"Thor needs to be more firm with him," Loki said. "Kjalvor will walk all over him."

"He already does," Fandral said. "All Thor sees is a baby that needs to be indulged."

"A baby, that in a few short months will be able to make flame and fly where he pleases," Loki said.

"Has Thor figured out you and Isond can go anywhere you please in the blink of an eye?" Fandral asked, now serious.

"No," Loki said. "And how do you know?"

"It didn't take much to piece it together," Fandral said. "Don't worry, I won't tell Thor. I imagine the Allfather would not be pleased if Thor were to find out, correct?"
"You have no idea," Loki said.

"He'd want to take off to Midgard and see his mortal," Fandral said. "I do think his feelings are sincere. I've never seen him like that before."

"Does it matter?" Loki asked. "He'll do what he wants, spite father again, if he makes up his mind he's going, he'll find a way."

"You'll not help?"

"No," Loki said. "My freedom and my future depend on the oaths I've sworn, Fandral. I'll not endanger Isond by catering to Thor's whims."

Fandral clapped him on the shoulder. "I wouldn't expect you to," he said. "I heard you to made a mess of the training ground last night."

"Thor wanted to spar, so we did," Loki said.

"That wasn't sparring," Fandral said. "Sparring doesn't break flagstones or cause storms. Nifty trick, by the way."

"He didn't say I had to fight fair," Loki said, heading toward the palace, Fandral following.

"You don't fight fair," Fandral said. "It's why we're all still alive."

The large black dire wolf loping through the palace caused shrieks, screams and the brandishing of weapons until people realized it was no threat. Possibly. The tiny Jotun boy gleefully riding upon its back was greeted with some smiles and not a little suspicion, but no one dared say a word as the wolf passed them by. The look of intelligence in its eyes suggested keeping silent was a wise decision.

And when word reached Thor, he knew Loki was responsible. Letting Blindi ride him around the palace. Probably spoke to Loki's sense of mischief, and no doubt made the boy happy.

The brothers were eating dinner in the kitchens when Thor found them when he came to get Kjalvor's evening meal. He couldn't resist asking Loki.

"Someone said they saw a black dire wolf running the palace today," Thor said. "Quite large. Might make a good pelt for my room."

Helblindi giggled, and Loki glared. "It is one animal you will regret hunting," he said.

"No doubt," Thor said, crossing his arms, raising an eyebrow expectantly. "I might change my mind if I was allowed to see this magnificent beast."

"Here. And now? In the middle of my meal?" Loki asked.

"Why not?"

"Might scare off members of the staff," Loki muttered, but he stood, backing away from the table. He shifted; Thor's eyes grew wide, and Helblindi clapped.

"Norns, Loki," Thor said, watching as his brother changed back.

"Does it hurt?"

"No," Loki said, sitting back down by Helblindi, stealing a piece of bread off the boy's plate, making
him punch him in the arm.

"Can all the Jotnar do that?" Thor asked.

"Yes," Loki said.

"I can't wait," Helblindi said.

"You have much to look forward to, Blindi," Thor said, ruffling the boy's hair, grateful he didn't flinch away this time.

"I want to turn into a wolf like Byleistr and Loki, and a ghost bear like Suttung. Can I turn into a dragon?" he asked.

"We'll have to find out," Loki said. "Finish your dinner, brother, before it gets cold."

The boy dug into his food, and Loki smiled.

"You've worked wonders with him in a short time," Thor said.

"Mother deserves most of the credit," Loki answered.

"So do you," he said. "I've got to get back to Kjalvor. I hope he hasn't destroyed my chambers. Again."

Loki rolled his eyes. "It's not that bad," he said. "If you learned to clean your room, it wouldn't be a problem."

Thor ignored the comment, grabbing a bowl of meat, heading back to check on the hatchling. The dragon was becoming a bright spot in his life. Always there, a part of him. And of course, the little monster was awake. At least he was where he left him—in pillows on his bed.

Thor picked him up, taking him outside to eat. Feeding the little dragon didn't take long, and Kjalvor snorted at Thor, cocking his head, as if he were the biggest idiot in the universe.

"You don't think very highly of my intelligence, do you?" he asked.

Kjalvor chirped happily, butting his head against Thor's chin. "And you're joking?"

Another chirp, and he crawled into his lap, thinking happy thoughts.

"Kjalvor, you are an evil little dragon," he said.

He chuffed, and Thor scratched his chin. "What am I going to do with you?"

Loki was nervous, finally having agreed with his mother to let Helblindi go spend time with Volstagg's mob of children. Frigga told him he had nothing to worry about, but Loki felt his stomach lurch when he saw Volstagg coming his way.

"Loki, a word," Volstagg said.

"What is it?"

"Helblindi is fine. He's caused no trouble, only he's spending most of his time with the hounds,"
Volstagg said. "Were there no children for him to play with in Jotunheim?"

"A friend of our brother had dire wolves he spent much of his time with," Loki said. "As for children, he's so small. . ."

"Dire wolves? The wolves the size of a pony?"

"Annar has two," Loki said, amused. "Aima and Venni. They're quite tame."

"That's not all," Volstagg said. "Just so you know, Gudrun said she's going to marry Helblindi. She's taken a fancy to him."

"Are you giving me a warning or your blessing?" Loki asked.

"They're children," Volstagg said. "I'm grateful you trust Helblindi with me and my family. Loki, he needs to spend time around children his own age. Hildegund and I will be glad to take him whenever you like. I think he, Thraakad and Leif might hit it off."

"Despite the fact he's Jotun?"

"So what he's blue? You were born Jotun, and it hasn't changed anything in my eyes," Volstagg said. "You're still Loki. You've changed, for the better, but you're still my friend, and Thor's brother, and my prince"

"Sif and Hogun don't feel that way," Loki said, frowning.

"Sif has eyes only for Thor. We both know that," Volstagg said. "And Hogun, either he'll come around, or he won't."

"Sif isn't a fool," Volstagg said, shushing Loki with a look. "She regrets what she said to you. She just needs to work up the courage and apologize."

"I don't need an apology from her," Loki said.

"Sif is sorry, Loki," Volstagg said. "She went looking for you. We all did."

"Out of duty, I'm sure," Loki said.

Volstagg sighed. "We searched because you're our friend," he said. "How many times to you need to be reminded?"

"I don't want to talk about Sif," Loki said. "Thank you for letting Helblindi spend time with your children. There is no one else I would trust him with."

"Thank you," Volstagg said. "Why don't you come have dinner with us tonight? Hildegund keeps asking after you, and the children want to hear about Isond. Please say you'll come."

"I'll be there," Loki said.

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Thor sat in his chambers, Kjalvor on his lap. The dragonet crooned s he scratched his chin, but he stopped when he heard a knock at the door. Kjalvor snorted as Thor stood, carrying the dragon under one arm, opening the door, surprised to see Sif.
"Sif, come in," Thor said, trying to ignore the blackness shooting through Kjalvor's previously happy thoughts. "How are you this evening?"

"I wanted to see if you'd come out with me tonight," she said.

"I can't," Thor said, glancing down at Kjalvor.

"Then I'll stay. I can send down to the kitchens, get something to eat, and we can catch up," Sif said. "Harokin was . . . interesting, and you should hear the stories of what people say they've seen."

Kjalvor growled, smacking Thor with his wings.

"Sif, I'm afraid I can't," Thor said. "Another time, perhaps?"

"Fine," Sif said, leaving.

Thor shut the door, glaring down at Kjalvor. "What is wrong with you? Sif is my friend. You're going to have to get used to her sooner or later," he said.

Kjalvor yawned, and Thor could sense what felt like annoyance.

"You can't always have your way, Kjalvor," Thor said, depositing the dragonet on his bed. Possibly the dragon was trying to teach him a lesson. He had been thinking of Jane more lately, and how more responsibility would mean even less chance of seeing her once the Bifrost was repaired. Possibly Kjalvor was expressing resentment over others being put before himself.

That realization made Thor feel guilty. Kjalvor was only days old, and already wiser than his partner.

"Are you telling me I should listen to you more?" Thor asked, flopping down on the bed beside the hatchling. Kjalvor answered by butting his head.

It was late when Loki finally got Helblindi settled into bed, checked on Isond and headed to his own chambers, only to be accosted by his father.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Father?" Loki asked.

"I would like to talk to you about Helblindi," Odin said.

"If it's about the wolf. . ."

Odin gave Loki a tolerant smile. "No," he said. "I want you to consider something-I could do for him as I did for you, make him look Aesir."

"I'll not have him thinking there is anything wrong with being what he is," Loki said.

"I hoped you'd say that," Odin said, clapping him on the shoulder. "We can wait," Loki said. "Let him make the decision when he's old enough, when he comes into his magic."

"Giving him the choice I never gave you," Odin said. "A wise choice."
"Is that the only reason you're here?" Loki said.

"No. I take it Thor told you of the mortal woman he met?" Odin asked.

"He didn't say much," Loki said.

"Enough, I suppose," Odin said. "He thinks himself in love with her."

"He did tell me that," Loki said.

"And you failed to tell him what you thought?" Odin said.

"I thought keeping my opinion to myself would be the most diplomatic course of action," Loki said.

"My son, I'm disappointed," Odin said. "Thor refuses to listen to me. Possibly he will listen to you."

"What can I say that you haven't already?" Loki said. "What opinion did Mother offer?"

"To leave him be for now," Odin said. "I believe she is correct. Frigga is rarely wrong. Possibly this is something Thor will grow out of."

"Good luck with that," Loki said. "I get the feeling his mind is set."

"His mind can be changed," Odin said. "If you can change for the better, so can Thor. His exile did some good, but he still has much growing to do."

"And what of myself?" Loki asked.

Odin placed a hand on his shoulder. "You, I worry about, my son, but not like Thor," he said. "I know you still have much healing to do, but I don't doubt the path you're on. You always find your way, Loki. It's late. I should go. Your mother will come looking for me if I'm not careful, and she will lecture me for interfering where I have no need."

"Good night, Father," Loki said.

"Rest well, son," Odin said, taking his leave.

No venom or anger from Loki, or resignation. A good sign, proving Isond was good for Loki, and Odin hoped Kjalvor would have the same effect on Thor.

Loki was a little more open, more balanced. Odin knew his youngest still hadn't healed from his ordeal, and it would take time. He was keeping a close eye on the boy, as was Frigga. So far, he seemed to be coping, but just that. Loki was skilled at keeping his true feelings to himself. Frigga was the best at reading him, and once Thor was as astute as his mother, but as the brothers grew apart, so did the resentment. Odin hoped they could move past it, become close once again. They were trying, but it was a hard road facing his sons.

The responsibility Thor faced with his dragon still hadn't sunk in. Loki accepted that burden well. The weight sat well on his son's shoulders. Isond was Loki's saving grace. Loki openly showed the dragon affection, and he wasn't self-conscious about it. As he grew to manhood, Loki showed his emotions less and less. He was starting to show vestiges again, and Odin was grateful for that. And Helblindi. The boy brought out another side of Loki.

His family was on its way to being whole again.
Chapter 18

Flight

Chapter 18-Kinship

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Thor's days during the first three weeks of Kjalvor's life were a blur. Sleep. Wake. Dress. Stumble to kitchen to get meat for Kjalvor. Stuff hatchling senseless. Bathe. Get food. Train or go to court or council. Feed hatchling. Feed himself. More of same as morning. Feed hatchling, feed himself, take Kjalvor to Loki's chambers or out with his brother and Isond. Also reassuring baby dragon and keeping him from going through his things. Thor's chambers became almost as clean as Loki's. Not quite, but close.

Loki also became tired of listening to his brother's whining. Thor wasn't afraid of hard work, he just needed to vent.

"Quit complaining," Loki said. "I don't want to hear it."
"How did you manage?" Thor asked.

"Spent most of each day hunting until Isond saved my life, then she started hunting with me a while each day," Loki said.

"Another tale that needs telling," Thor said. "Mother keeps reminding me you and I need to 'talk' as she calls it."

Loki rolled his eyes.

"Mother needs to butt out," he said.

"I'm going to tell her that," Thor said.

"Tattletale," Loki said.

Thor stuck his tongue out at his brother, and Loki threw a book at him.

Play nice, Isond said. Kjalvor crooned happily, watching them.

"Loki doesn't play nice," Thor said.

"Having a giant oaf of a brother I had to find some way to survive to adulthood," Loki said. "And hitting does not solve everything. Ever."

"It's always worked," Thor said.

"One day you're going to find an enemy you can't smash your way through," Loki said.

"You'll be there to help me find another way, brother," Thor said.

"Hopefully I can keep you out of the situation before it begins," Loki answered.

"I hope we're not do a 'situation' as you put it for quite some time," Thor said.
"Well, with the Bifrost broken, it eliminates the possibility you'll go getting us all in trouble," Loki said.

"There's still plenty of mischief we can cause here in Asgard, Loki," Thor said with a grin.

"Please leave me out of it," Loki said. "Don't you have to go bother mother for a lesson or something?"

"We both should," Thor said. "Too much to learn, not enough time to learn it."

"I know," Loki said. "Any dragon questions I can answer?"

"How long before Kjalvor is big enough to carry me?"

"Isond was a little more than six months the first time we flew together," Loki said. "He's growing at almost the same rate, but we'll have to wait and see."

Thor rubbed his dragon's head. "I can't believe they grow so fast."

"Mother has all the lore Abroen left," Loki said. "This would be so much easier if the elf was here. I'll be glad when the Bifrost is repaired."

Thor didn't answer, and Loki could guess what his brother was thinking, wondering about the mortal woman. And thankfully, he changed the subject.

"Helblindi seems to be getting on well," Thor said.

"He loves it here," Loki said. "He's happy and safe."

"And loved," Thor said.

"He didn't lack for love from Byleistr," Loki said.

"No," Thor said. "Mother loves having him here, and he's been good for you. He's also been a help with Kjalvor."

"Especially at feeding time, right?" Loki said.

"Kjalvor is patient with Blindi. He doesn't try and bite," Thor said.

"It's rather like having a child," Loki said.

"Except if I ever have children, I'll father them instead of having them hatch from an egg," Thor said.

"You think that means any less work? You are mother and father to Kjalvor until he has any sense of his own," Loki said. "I raised Isond by myself. I had no idea what I was doing. At least you have Isond and I, and Mother."

"She turned out fine," Thor said.

"True," Loki said. "Your demon of a dragon-child needs you to guide him for now."

"I know," Thor said, and both brothers looked at Kjalvor as they heard his stomach growl.

"Don't let him bite off your fingers," Loki said. "We really should take him hunting soon. He needs to learn."

"Pick a day and we'll go," Thor said.
The middle of the night, and Thor was awakened by a terrified Isond.

I can't wake Loki, Isond said. He doesn't hear me. He dreams of the mad one.

Thor ran, Kjalvor across his shoulders, tail wrapped around his neck for balance, throwing open the door to Loki's chamber, finding his brother thrashing and screaming in his sleep. Thor managed to untangle himself from Kjalvor, the dragonet situating himself on the other side of Loki, watching as Thor tried to wake his brother. He grabbed Loki, shaking him, watching as his eyes opened and eventually cleared.

"Thor?"
"You were having a nightmare," Thor said.

"I wish it was a simple nightmare," Loki said. "I was with the Chitauri. They were torturing me, you were dead, Asgard and Midgard destroyed, Thanos lording over it all. . ."

Thor kissed his forehead, smoothing back the sweat-plastered hair from Loki's face.

"It's all right," Thor said. "I won't let anything happen to you." "Don't make promises you can't keep," Loki said. "Thanos said he would kill everyone I love, lay waste to Asgard, Midgard, everything."

I won't let him hurt you, Isond said. You're safe. We're safe.

"No one is safe from Thanos," Loki said.

"Have you talked to Father of this?"

"A little," Loki said.

"Loki, they tortured you?" Thor asked.

Loki laid back down, turning over, facing away from Thor.

"I'm not talking about this right now," Loki said.

"If not now, when?" Thor asked.

"They separated me from Isond. That was the worst," Loki said. "I could endure the physical torture, up to a point. They also used the scepter, making me see things that weren't real. After a while, it was difficult to tell what was real and what wasn't."

"Like on the helicarrier," Thor said.

"Exactly," Loki said.

"Can Eir and the other healers do anything about these nightmares?" Thor asked.

"Eir said it will take time for them to fade," Loki said. "The body is easy to heal, but not the mind."

He felt Thor lay down beside him, moving close enough to wrap one arm loosely around him.

"I'll stay for a while," Thor said. "No arguing. How many times did we do this for one another as boys?"
Loki smiled. "You'd come running when you had a nightmare about the Jotun," he said. "Oh how times have changed."

"And you, afraid of being abandoned," Thor said. "What a pair we are."

"Go to sleep," Loki said, giving Thor's hand a quick squeeze.

After a while, Loki knew he was not taking his own advice to heart. He couldn't sleep, and Thor was happily snoring away. So was Kjalvor, and the baby dragon was projecting his happy thoughts to himself and Thor. Isond was also sending her love and warmth. Still, sleep wouldn't come.

He hated feeling so weak and vulnerable. Loki didn't want Thor's pity. He only wanted to move past what happened, and get on with his life.

Loki knew if he didn't confide in someone eventually he would end up being dragged to Eir by some combination of his family, possibly even Isond if she were in enough distress. And he was trying to not cause her distress. Isond was also bothered by memories of their ordeal, and her own helplessness at being unable to protect him.

Anger, resentment, hate. Anger and resentment he could channel into something else. Anger was always a useful tool, and he could also use the resentment as motivation to do better. Move on. Hate was something else, a dark path he did not want to walk. He toed the line during his months under the control of Thanos and the Other, but he never fully gave in. He had Isond to help pull him back.

Hate was also an emotion he'd been accused of having toward Thor, with Sif doing the accusing, along with the usual combination of jealousy. He didn't hate Thor. He hated what his brother became over the years—vain, cruel, all the things their father accused him of before his banishment. There was some resentment toward his father and brother, but none really toward Frigga. A little anger still at her part in not telling him, but she would not defy the Allfather. Her husband she would gladly defy, but her king...even Frigga would not go that far. She would find a way around. She taught Loki that. So far, it was a lesson Thor hadn't taken to heart. Loki figured when he did, it would involve taking off to Midgard to see the mortal woman.

No, Thor preferred the direct approach. It was why Thor so desperately needed the balance his brother could provide, if only he'd let him. They had let each other back into one another's lives, in varying degrees. And Norns, Loki was grateful Thor wasn't being overbearing, just trying to make things like they used to be. And he was trying to keep his temper in check, being patient with his brother. They had to relearn how to be brothers.

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Midgard

Tony Stark was enjoying an evening drink a couple of days before all the Thanksgiving madness started. He currently had his face pressed against the window, staring outside at the landing pad of his tower. He wasn't seeing things—hallucinating Reindeer Games and Puff wasn't his first choice of a hallucination. He grabbed a jacket, heading outside, watching as Loki took a bundle from the harness on Isond's back.

"Why are you here instead of Thor?"

"Thor has new obligations that currently preclude his duty as sworn protector of Midgard, or as prince of Asgard and future king," Loki said. A way of saying without saying Thor wasn't allowed on Midgard. Also their father wasn't banning all mortals from Midgard—just one.
"OK," Stark said. "What are you doing here?"

Loki handed the other man the bundle. "Bringing you a gift from the Allfather," he said. "A gift to Midgard's protectors for your compassion and hospitality to the sons of Asgard when it was needed most."

"Like what kind of gifts?" Stark asked.

"Healing stones I know for certain," Loki said. "Along with gold, should you ever have need of it, along with a gift for each of you."

"Uh, thanks," Stark said, riffling through the bag. "How's it going in Asgard?"

"Fine," Loki said. "How do you and the rest of the Avengers fare?"

"Clint and Natasha are off on some mission in Russia I'm not supposed to know about," Stark said. "Bruce is down in the lab. He moved in. Has his own floor. Everybody does, including Thor. Kind of thought about rearranging a little space for you and Isond if you're ever guests. Steve's with Coulson. Nobody's been able to pull him away since we found out he's alive. I think they're dating."

"I'm glad some good has come out of what happened," Loki said.

"More than you think," Stark said.

He reminds me of Helblindi, Isond said, joining the conversation.

Loki glared at the dragon. "Helblindi is not like Stark."

"Who's Helblindi?"

"My younger brother," Loki answered.

"I thought Thor was your only brother," Tony said.

"I have three, counting Thor," Loki said. "Byleistr, Helblindi and I share the same father, Laufey, former king of Jotunheim."

"Former?"

"I killed him," Loki said.

"So you're a king then," Tony said. "Wow. How does Thor like that?"

"Prince of two realms, king of none," Loki said. "I am sworn king of Jotunheim, but my brother Byleistr holds the throne in my place. My responsibilities as prince of Asgard and dragonrider keep me busy enough."

"Isond, is he keeping out of trouble?" Stark asked.

He tries. I try. Trouble seems to find us on its own.

"We should be going," Loki said. "My father doesn't want us gone too long."

"You could stick around a day or two," Tony said. "Thanksgiving is Thursday. Big meal. Football, if you like that sort of thing. Everyone will be here."
"We can't stay," Loki said. "My own responsibilities come first."

What kind of food? Isond asked.

"Puff, whatever you like," Tony said.

We should stay.

"We are going home," Loki said. "It's not negotiable, Isond. You know that."

The dragon sighed. Fine.

"You have a curfew or something? Little old for that, aren't you?" Tony asked.

"You have no idea, Stark," Loki said, climbing astride Isond. "Try and stay out of trouble yourself. Heimdall will be watching should you require assistance. Call for Heimdall, and aid will come."

"Just not Thor," Tony said. "So that like makes you and Isond Avengers now. Sort of. If you're taking Thor's place."

"Only for a while," Loki said. "Hopefully you won't require my services."

"Look at it this way—if we're to the point we need you and Puff, we're probably fubared," Stark said. "I hope you know what that means."

"I do," Loki said. "Farewell, Stark."

A few seconds later, he and Isond were back in Asgard, soaring over the mountains toward home. He was glad the first round of reparations for what happened in Midgard was done. More would follow, when the Allfather was ready.

And Loki knew he and Thor needed to approach their father about bringing their mortal friends to Asgard, or possibly even one of the other more hospitable realms.

Turning Stark loose on Asgard or Alfheim spoke to Loki's sense of mischief. The elves would no doubt enjoy his quick mind. And they still had no problems with members of other races in their realm as long as they tried to behave themselves. Some families in Alfheim boasted members with round-tipped ears and eyes of ordinary mortal or Aesir colors. Like the Vanir, the Ljolsafar had no problem with certain things races of the other realms found aberrant or just distasteful. Half-breeds and mixed bloods weren't the problem.

Loki considered if Thor wasn't crown prince of the realm, possibly their father would be more lenient regarding the mortal woman. It wasn't even that she was mortal, but that Odin doubted Thor did know his own heart.

With Thor's judgment and maturity in question in past months, how could he know with that kind of certainty he'd found the person he was meant to be with? Loki wanted Thor to be happy, but not at the cost of defying their father again.

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A simple night out. That was the lure, and the promise, but unfortunately, it was degrading rather quickly. A matter of opinion between Thor and Galti, a thane's son was the problem. Fandral would later wonder which comment caused Thor to snap.

"Is the Allfather mad, with a fool for an heir and keeping a Jotun sorcerer so close to the throne?"
"Loki is my brother, and your prince," Thor replied.

"He's not your brother. He's a war criminal who should've been put to death the instant he set foot back in Asgard."

Fandral winced as he heard the crunch of broken cartilage and bone as Thor smashed the man's nose with his fist. The warrior managed to duck the spray of blood, using it as an opportunity to immobilize one of Thor's arms. Volstagg was quickly beside him, wrapping both arms around Thor's middle.

"Enough," Volstagg growled. "He's not worth your time."

Thor shrugged them off, walking outside. He started pacing in a circle, and Fandral met Volstagg's gaze. The big warrior shook his head. Fandral ignored him, grabbing Thor and dragging him as best he could away from the others.

"Remember your place, Thor," Fandral said. "Do you mean to undo all the hard work the Allfather has done, trying to restore your good name?"

"What do you mean?" Thor asked.

Fandral didn't want to have to be the one to do it, but none of the others would. Loki was only starting to get a grasp of the political situation in Asgard, and Fandral knew his friend had other matters to worry about. Thor did too, but he was in a better place than Loki to be dealing with matters of state.

"Eight months you were gone because of your own stupidity," Fandral said. "The Allfather in his sleep, Loki gone, your mother bearing the burden of ruling without either of you to help her. Oh, how proud of yourself you must be, defending those who don't need it."

"He dishonored my family, and his king," Thor said.

"And you rose to the challenge beautifully," Fandral snapped. "Loki can fight his own battles, and your father will deal with such matters. Galti broke an oath he swore to the Allfather, and he will be punished. Possibly getting his face smashed in will be punishment enough."

"Since when do you care?" Thor asked. "And what oath?"

"Giving them what they want," Fandral said. "Have you learned nothing? You can ask your father about the oath. Do you have any idea how much damage you caused to your own reputation when we went to Jotunheim?"

"No," Thor said.

"That wasn't all. We were on the brink of war," Fandral said.

"Nothing came of it," Thor said. "Asgard is safe."

"Asgard is safe from Jotunheim only because Loki killed Laufey," Fandral said. "Haven't you sat in on any of the council sessions? You were on Midgard. You fought an invasion. Who's to say it couldn't happen here? Loki, against the better judgment of your parents and the healers, has spent more time than he should talking about matters I don't think he's even begun to deal with."
"I've been to a few," Thor said.

"Not enough," Fandral said. "I've only attended to lend support to Loki, and because my father would skin me alive if I didn't show up."

"Loki's confided in you?" Thor asked.

"A little," Fandral said. "And do not make this about Loki. You, my friend, need to get your head out of your ass and pay attention to what's going on around you. Thor, grow up. Quit moping about your mortal, and deal with what is right in front of you. You keep saying you're not ready to rule, but one day, you will have to take the throne. You've been preparing for that eventuality your entire life, then a little over half a year on Midgard and you say you've come back changed."

"I have changed," Thor said.

"Prove it," Fandral said, walking away.

His night now over, Thor decided to go see the one being in the Nine Realms who would be glad to see him. He left Kjalvor with his mother and Helblindi, and the dragon had been asleep at the time. Now, Kjalvor was awake, and it was only when Thor was back in close proximity to the dragon did he feel his distress and anger. Thor reached out a hand trying to reassure the dragonet, but Kjalvor bit him, hard, drawing blood.

The stream of profanity coming out of his mouth earned an angry glare from his mother, who knelt down by Kjalvor as the dragon sought her out instead.

"How could you not hear Kjalvor?" Frigga asked. "He's been calling to you."

"I can feel how angry he is now," Thor said, trying to staunch the bleeding from the bit on his hand.

"His anger is nothing compared to mine if you don't start explaining where you've been," Frigga said.

"I was out with Fandral and the others," Thor said. "I had a...disagreement with someone at a tavern. That's all."

"Kjalvor's been upset all evening, and you couldn't feel it? You can't just ignore him when it suits you," Frigga said. "This is one responsibility you cannot shirk."

"It was only an evening out with my friends," Thor said.

"That's fine, but you upset Kjalvor, and weren't paying attention," Frigga said. "He comes first. Always. From now on. You will learn to put him before yourself, or you will answer to me. Not your father or Loki. Me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Thor said.

"Take him and go," Frigga said. "Kjalvor chose you, my son. He waited almost 400 years for you. Don't make him regret that choice."

Thor spent the next few days trying to mend things with Kjalvor, and under the watchful but angry eyes of Isond and Loki. Loki's patience with Kjalvor was almost limitless, but with Thor, not so
much. They weren't speaking, and when they did, the words were few. Loki wanted to throttle his brother, and made sure Thor knew it. Fortunately, the lesson he was trying to learn was sinking in. No one or nothing was more important than his bond with his dragon.

Isond was the one thing Loki cared about more than himself. She came first, would always come first. Before himself, his family, Asgard, Jotunheim, anything else. He instinctively knew that from the moment they bonded. Frigga explained it, too. It was the nature of the bond. It didn't exclude loving another, having a relationship with a person, but it made it hard to consider having someone in his life when he was bonded to the dragon. Thor would come to accept it, or not.

Their mother also told them there was more to the bond the elves could explain, once they had the chance. Loki was just eager to learn, and wanted the Bifrost repaired, because it meant he wouldn't have to lie anymore, and worrying about breaking his oath to his father.

"Kjalvor needs to learn how to hunt on his own," Loki said.

"Isn't he a little young for that?" Thor asked.

"Isond started hunting with me when she was six weeks old," Loki said. "She saved my life. Kjalvor is perfectly able to start making himself useful. You need to quit babying him."

"Not too cold outside?" Thor asked, hopeful. Late fall, with winter closing in.

"Excuses, Thor?" Loki said, rolling his eyes at his brother.

"A little cold, inclement weather won't hurt him," Loki said. "The weather here is downright pleasant compared to Jotunheim this time of year. Would you like to take him hunting there instead? Besides, you need to get out of the palace yourself."

"I do not," Thor said. "Isn't Kjalvor too small to hunt yet?"

"He's bigger than Isond at the same age," Loki said.

"Mother said he'll reach his growth faster," Thor said. "Around a year, year and a half."

"I think they're like raptors," Loki said. "As females are bigger than the males."

"Only because they lay eggs," Thor said.

May I eat him? Isond asked.

"Be my guest," Loki said.

"Not funny, you two," Thor said. "We'll take him out tomorrow if the weather is decent. I better go check on him."

"Good night, brother," Loki said, watching Thor go.

Thor entered his chambers, finding it mostly in order. Except he found Kjalvor on the table in his study, lounging beside Mjolnir, the dragonet eying the hammer.

"Get down from there," Thor said, trying to shoo him down, but the dragon ignored him. Now easily the size of a large wolfhound, he snaked his tongue over the hammer. Thor picked Mjolnir up, removing her from Kjalvor's reach.
"How many times to I have to tell you to leave Mjolnir alone?" Thor asked. "No. Now quit misbehaving so we can go get you something to eat."

No.

Thor dropped Mjolnir, cracking the floor.

"What did you just say?"

No.

"No to misbehaving or food?"

Neither. I like the word. I thought it was my name for a while.

"Then why don't you heed me when I say it?"

Kjalvor snorted, climbing down from the table. All you have to do is ask nicely.

He made his way over to Thor, butting his head against him. At least now we can talk properly, if you'll listen to me. Why do you not listen? I always hear you.

"I'll try harder." Thor said. "I promise. Come. Let's go see Loki and Isond."

Loki was with Isond, who was curled up in her wallow, using the dragon as a backrest as he read.

"What do you want, Thor?" Loki asked. "Good evening, Kjalvor."

Hello, the dragon responded.

Thor grinned at the shock registering on Loki's face.

"He can finally talk," Thor said, slapping Kjalvor on the shoulder.

Silly hatchling, Isond said. Took you long enough.

"Isond, be nice," Loki said. "Manners. What was his first word?"

"No," Thor said.

Loki laughed, and Isond rumbled in amusement, the sound Thor now knew was the sound of dragon laughter.

Now I can tell Thor no, Kjalvor said.

"Good luck," Loki said. "I've been telling him not to do certain things since I developed the sense to do so, and he still won't listen. Maybe he'll listen to you instead."

I hope so. I'll bite him again if he doesn't.

Thor frowned.

"He'll do it. You know that," Loki said. "You've deserved it every time."

"Don't remind me," Thor muttered.
Chapter 19

Flight

Chapter 19-Remembrance

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Thor picked a morning a few days before Yule to take Kjalvor out to teach him to hunt. They decided to go on foot, as Kjalvor refused to find a way to hitch a ride with Isond, and their horses did not react favorably in the presence of either dragon. Kjalvor wasn't up to flying himself just yet, as he was just learning to glide.

And, of course, Thor picked one of the late fall's coldest days to leave. Not that it bothered Loki. He could deal with the cold. Thor, he knew, would complain if he was given a chance. But Loki's own lack of his personal weapons was his problem. And he let Thor know as his brother and Kjalvor met himself and Isond outside the palace.

"I need to replace everything," Loki said.

"Such as?" Thor asked.

"My bow, knives—everything," Loki said. "I lost everything in Jotunheim. I had to raid the armory this morning for replacements. I guess they'll do."

"The weapons used by the Einherjar aren't good enough?" Thor asked.

"Do you know how hard it is to find a decent set of knives?" Loki asked.

"I'm sure you'll tell me all about it," Thor said.

Loki smacked him in the back of the head. "Like I'll have to hear about the cold," he said. "Stow anything you don't want to carry on Isond's saddle."

I don't mind the cold, Isond said.

"That's not what I heard for months on end in Jotunheim," Loki said, waiting as Thor secured his bedroll and other gear to Isond's harness.

"Isond and I agree about the cold?" Thor asked.

"Just because she can stand the cold doesn't mean she likes it," Loki said.

At least you understand, Isond said.

"Wait until you have to stand the heat of a truly terrible Asgardian or Midgardian summer," Loki said.

Hot, cold, what does it matter? Kjalvor asked. Can we go now? I'm tired of waiting.

He reached over, nipping at Thor's hand. "You heard him, brother, let's go."

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They picked an old favorite hunting spot, far enough away from the city for game to be plentiful, but still close. Isond had flown ahead, and they found her waiting, lashing her tail like a cat.

Took you long enough, she said, but her tone was playful.

"We would have been here sooner, but Kjalor decided to go exploring," Loki said.

I know. Was I any different?

"He's curious, that's all," Thor said. "He's never seen a live boar before. It's not his fault he's only seen them trussed up for eating."

"So you don't mind the fact he ran you over and dragged you into the river while trying to get away?" Loki asked.

You're not supposed to put your partner in danger, Kjalvor. You're supposed to HELP them.

I was helping Thor, Kjalvor said. He got in my way.

Kjalvor lolled his tongue out of the side of his mouth at the bigger dragon, and Isond snorted, while Loki rolled his eyes.

"Are we going to set up camp or not?" Loki asked, starting to pull his gear from Isond's harness.

Loki was comfortable in his furs, settled in against Isond, not minding the cold. The fire was out, and he pondered for a moment why his idiot brother hadn't done anything about it. He heard Thor's half of his conversation with Kjalvor, but he didn't look over. He would have seen Thor coming his way, dragging his furs, Kjalvor bumping up against him. And then Thor nudged his brother with his booted foot.

"Loki, are you wake?" Thor asked.

One blue eye opened, glaring up at him, and Isond raised her head, staring at the other pair.

"I am now," Loki said.

"We're freezing to death," Thor said. "Can we join you?"

Loki threw an arm across his face.

Thor nudged him harder, and Loki balled a fist, smacking him in the back of the knee, but his brother didn't flinch. Loki sighed, giving in, scooting closer to Isond, rearranged her front legs to accommodate him, and Thor arranged his bedding, sitting down, taking off his boots, and laid down in the furs, pulling some of Loki's onto himself. Loki tugged them back, holding on with one hand, propping himself up with the other, sparing Kjalvor a glance as the younger dragon curled up beside Thor.

"You have your own bedding, Thor. Don't steal mine," he said.

"The cold doesn't bother you," Thor said. "I'm not very fond of it."

"I still enjoy being comfortable," Loki said, yanking his covers back. "If you're so cold and uncomfortable, we can go home."
He's only grumbling because he's not sleeping in his own bed, Kjalvor said.

"Going soft in your old age, princess?" Loki asked, grunting when Thor elbowed him in the ribs.

"Frost giant," Thor muttered.

"Oaf," Loki countered.

The soft sound of Thor's laughter brought a smile to Loki's face.

"Do you know how long it's been since we've done this?" Thor asked. "Too long."

"I know," Loki said. "At least Isond and Kjalvor give us a real excuse to get away for a few days."

"When we get back, it will be Yule, so there is that," Thor said. "A little time with no responsibility beyond those to family and dragon."

"I doubt Father will let us off so easy," Loki said.

"Nor will Mother," Thor said. "She expects us to finally dedicate some real time to learning the dragon lore provided by the elves."

"Better than than council meetings and court," Loki said.

Council is better than court, Kjalvor said. Isond and I agree with that. The problems in council are real. Sometimes at court, too, but not so often.

"You both listen in?" Thor asked.

Of course, Isond said.

"Loki, did you know this?"

"Isond's mentioned it before but I didn't know Kjalvor paid attention also," he said.

I listen because you have to. You'll be king one day, and I am your dragon, so I should know what you know, so I can help, Kjalvor said.

I agree with Kjalvor, Isond said. I, too listen so I can learn.

But it is still boring sometimes, Kjalvor said.

"No one will disagree with you there, Kjalvor," Thor said, reaching over, rubbing the dragon's head. "Still not cold?"

Not really. It's not bad.

"Wait until you go to Jotunheim," Thor said. "That's cold. Bone-chilling, freeze your beard off cold."

Loki is from Jotunheim, and the cold doesn't bother him or Isond. Why should it bother us? "Because I am Aesir-born, and this is unseasonably cold weather," Thor said. "Almost too cold to snow."

I'm not cold.

"You already said that," Thor said.

"Thor, quit whining," Loki said.
"I'm not whining," Thor replied.

"Whatever," Loki muttered, earning another elbow from his brother. "Thor, shut up and go to sleep."

"Why?" Thor said. "We might as well enjoy ourselves while we can. Look at that sky. I've missed this. Remember the skies in Midgard, that time we snuck off? Watching the northern lights dance? New Mexico was too far south. Still beautiful though. Speaking of Midgard, Loki, could you take me there?"

"I can only transport myself and Isond so far with my magic," Loki said. "So no. Not without the Tesseract or the Casket of Ancient Winters, and both are forbidden. Besides, would you want to go so far away from Kjalvor?"

"Distance affects the bond?" Thor asked.

"The bond can only stretch so far before it breaks," Loki said. "Do you know what happens then? You both die. When I said I saw worlds you've never imagined, Thor, I was neither jesting or lying. I could barely feel Isond. Byleistr said the Chitauri used dark elf technology to make her sleep. I always knew she was there, but sometimes, I know I was so far away I almost couldn't feel out bond."

"Dark elf technology? It would have to be thousands of years old. How did they come by it?" Thor asked.

"I don't know," Loki said. "Byleistr's friend Annar recognized it. Besides, I don't want to consider the implications."

"I didn't mean to bring up unhappy thoughts," Thor said.

"I know. You just blunder your way into it sometimes," Loki said.

"Do you wonder how much is really out there?" Thor said. "What we haven't see, or explored?"

"I remember some of it," Loki said. "What I saw. Unimaginable beauty, and some things I would rather forget."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I thought that was what we're doing," Loki said.

Did you know there are even spaces between the realms?"

"No," Thor said.

"Your Jane could probably explain it," Loki said. "The distances are vast, Thor. You can't even begin to imagine."

"I can. I know how the realms work, and how they're connected," Thor said. "I explained it to Jane."

"You made a scientist understand the cosmology of the Nine Realms and Yggdrasil?" Loki said.

"Yes," Thor said.

"You'll make a scholar yet," Loki said. "Get some sleep. You're going to need it."

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Kjalvor figured out fishing on his own the next morning. Bored and tired of waiting for the others to wake, Kjalvor wondered down to the river. He was also hungry, and knew he wasn't getting anything to eat unless he waited or took matters into his own claws and teeth. River meant fish, and how hard could it be to catch a fish?

Wading into the water, he stuck his head under, looking for fish. He pulled his head back out of the water, and saw a glint of silver. A fish. Not a big one, but it was still potential breakfast. He took a swipe at it, and it got away.

He waited a bit longer, and another came along. A much bigger fish. More suitable for his first meal of the day. Kjalvor didn't move, just thought about catching the fish without having to give himself away, and as he touched his snout to the water to lunge for the fish, a tiny jet of electricity hit the water, and the fish. It stung the unsuspecting dragon, but he was so surprised he grabbed the fish, running for Thor, excited he'd actually caught something on his own.

And when he reached his still sleeping partner, Kjalvor leaned over Thor's face, dropping the cold, dead, limp fish on his face.

"Look! I caught a fish. I can hunt and feed myself now," Kjalvor said, picking it up and holding it to Thor's face, who was now awake and spluttering.

"You're wet, cold, and what's burnt?" Thor said. "What in the Hel did you say?"

Kjalvor was sitting back on his haunches, but he stood, swinging his head and the fish in his snout, smacking Thor in the head with it. Not hard. Just enough to sting, and he dropped the fish in his lap.

My breakfast, Kjalvor said.

Loki was sitting up now, watching the show.

"Looks like he made his first kill," Loki said. "You should be proud. And I think the burnt smell is the fish. Smells like burnt Midgardian wiring."

"Kjalvor, what did you do?" Thor asked.

I think I struck it with my own lightning. Tiny blue lightning. Not white and big like yours, Kjalvor said. It hit the water and it stung me and killed the fish. I'm going to eat now.

He picked up the fish, swallowing it in two bites. Still hungry, Kjalvor said.

Four days of freezing, dragon pranks and Thor was ready to go home. Kjalvor mastered gliding in that time, and was working on his flying. With help, he'd also managed to bring down a deer or two, but he now had the idea of what to do in his head. And Isond was showing him one last lesson involving elk.

Kjalvor watched as Isond dove toward the herd, the elk scattering as she took down her chosen prey. Isond grabbed it in her claws, her momentum snapping the animal's back. She skidded to a halt, folding her wings back, tearing into the carcass.

"I'm supposed to do that? Kjalvor asked, looking from Thor to Loki and back.

"Not yet," Loki said. "Wait until you're bigger."
They arrived back on the day of the solstice, also known as Yule around the realms. The brothers cleaned up and joined the festivities with their friends. And Thor had managed to find something used during Midgard's winter celebration. Mistletoe. Under which two of Thor's favorite people were standing.

Thor grinned, taunting Loki, and Sif's hand went to the spot where she normally carried a dagger, but had none.

"You're supposed to kiss," Thor said. "Don't you know the custom in Midgard?"

Another frown, but Loki gave Sif a quick, chaste peck on the lips, and Sif smiled back, appreciative of the fact Loki was acting as a gentleman, and not an ass, unlike a certain other prince.

"Loki, you can do better than that," Thor said.

Loki rolled his eyes at Thor, noticing the murder in Sif's eyes as she glared at Thor.

"Would you like to come over and show me how it's done, brother?" Loki asked.

Before he could say anything else, Sif grabbed him by the collar, yanking him toward her, kissing him hard. Loki's arms flailed until he finally managed to find places for his hands that wouldn't get him killed, and Sif let him go, but not before whispering in his ear.

"Do you want to kill him, or should I?" she asked.

"Be my guest," Loki said, eyes flashing with amusement, sitting down by Fandral, watching as Sif took off after Thor.

"Could've been worse," Fandral said. "At least you weren't stuck with Thor. Or Volstagg."

"Or you," Loki grinned.

"I'll have you know Hildegund has no complaints about my kissing," Volstagg said, joining the conversation. "I'll prove it."

He grabbed Fandral, giving him a not so chaste kiss before shoving him away.

"I think I need a drink. Join me, Loki?" he asked.

Loki grinned. "Volstagg, I think you left quite the mark," Loki said.

Later, it was just the royal family together in the great hall, along with Helblindi.

Thor sat with Loki, listening as their parents bickered over what gift to give who first, while Helblindi watched the king and queen.

"Mother looked at me strangely when I asked to put up the mistletoe," Thor said.

"Can you blame her? You asked first, then had to explain, correct?" Loki said.

"Yes," Thor said. "She thought the tradition of kissing was quaint, but it doesn't explain the look about the mistletoe. I think she saw something in that moment regarding the future."
"Hopefully you kissing Sleipnir under the mistletoe," Loki said.

"No, you know how she gets sometimes," Thor said. "I wonder what she saw."

"No telling," Loki said, watching as their parents approached.

"Would you like to hear a tale, Helblindi?" Odin asked.

"You're not telling that story again," Loki said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Thor punched him in the arm. "They always tell this story," he said. "What story?" Helblindi asked, worming his way in between the brothers.

"How Father courted Mother after they were married," Thor said.

"You're supposed to court before you get married," Helblindi said. "Even I know that. Annar wants to court Byleistr, but he keeps saying no."

Loki stared down at his little brother. "Byleistr never told me that," he said.

"Annar told Byleistr he wouldn't ask anymore, but he told me he wasn't giving up," Helblindi said. "And Gudrun said she's going to marry me when we're older. Is that all right?"

"You don't have to decide anything now," Loki said.

"Good," he said. "But she said she wants to be a warrior like Sif. Can Gudrun do that? Why aren't there more girls who are warriors? Why aren't any of the Einherjar girls?"

"Frigga is a warrior," Loki said. "She taught me how to use my magic, and how to fight. She'll teach you when you're ready."

"What about Thor?"

"Mother taught me it's all right sometimes to not fight fair," Thor said, grinning at Loki. "Loki never fights fair."

"You always say that," he said.

"Women can be warriors, just like men," Thor explained. "In Midgard, they're warriors, doctors, anything they want. They can be also here in Asgard, but it's harder to be accepted. I hope to change that."

"Good," Helblindi said. "I'd rather help people than fight. I can help you with that. I want to be a healer like Annar. But Byleistr said I'll have to learn to defend myself. I'm still too small to learn."

"Not true, Helblindi," Thor said. "We were barely your size and age when Father said it was time for us to learn. We'll just have to find a weapon and way of fighting that will suit you. For now, we could concentrate on something like a bow and arrow."

"Do you want to hear the tale or not?" Odin asked, arms crossed gaze raking across all three.

"Let us tell Blindi," Thor said. "You two go find some mistletoe."

Later, Odin took stock of his family. Helblindi was asleep by the fire, a wooden dragon in each
hand. Geri and Freki were his pillows. Thor and Loki sat nearby, talking in low tones. Odin walked over to Frigga, placing an arm around her shoulders, kissing her cheek.

"Are you happy, my wife?" he asked.

"Yes," Frigga answered.

"Our family is healing. Asgard and her people at peace for now," Odin said. "Is there anything else I can give you?"

"Possibly," Frigga said, her gaze meeting her husband's.

"Name your desire, wife," Odin said.

"Another time, perhaps," she said, noticing the look of affection and sadness on her husband's face as he watched their sons.

"Every time I look at Thor I see her," Odin said.

"I know you miss Jord," Frigga said. "I know you did love him."

"He made it hard not to, and you were much the same," Frigga said.

"Why did you say yes?"

"I saw the child you offered, and I couldn't say no," Frigga said. "I didn't care about anything else. Thor needed me."

"So did I, only I wasn't wise enough to see it at the time. Jord was the love of my youth, Frigga, but you are the love of my life," Odin said.

"As you are mine, Odin," Frigga said. "Although the trouble in the beginning. . .Almost two years you were gone, and you come back, missing an eye, covered in blood, carrying a newborn, walking into my chambers, scaring the wits out of me and Thor, so exhausted you had to lean on Gungnir for support. I will never forget that night. And when you set Loki into my arms, I knew I could never let him go. He was mine."

"He's always been yours," Odin said.

"He's your son, too," Frigga said. "I see it all the time."

"As I can see the mark you've left on Thor," Odin said. "Frigga, do you regret not having a child of our own?"

"We have two sons, and Helblindi," she said.

"No, a child of our blood, together, you and I," he said.

"Another spare, as Loki once put it?" Frigga asked.

"Yes," Odin said.

"I never wanted to take the risk again, after losing my daughter," Frigga said. "Besides. It's too late. At my age? I'll settle for helping Loki with Helblindi."
"What about grandchildren?" Odin asked.

"Do you think those two will provide us with any while we're still of an age to enjoy them?" Frigga asked.

"Do the dragons count?" Odin asked.

Frigga kissed him, caressing his face. "Only if you want them to."

"They're a blessing I never anticipated," Odin said. "Did you foresee any of what's come to pass this past year?"

"Not all," Frigga said. "I knew there would be change and heartbreak, but not how."

"What of the coming year?"

"Joy," she said. "And strife, but Asgard will stand strong, as will her king."

"Frigga, what is coming?"

"I cannot say," she said. "The lines are not clear. They haven't been in some time. Promise me this—regardless of what happens to me, you will stand by our sons, no matter what comes to pass."

"Frigga. . ." Odin warned.

"The future is not set," Frigga said. "It can change."

"Are you certain?" Odin said.

"I am certain of that," Frigga said.

Thor and Kjalvor took his bed, and Loki took his furs to sleep by Isond, Helblindi and the demon cat Herja joining them. Loki didn't mind, but Isond was pestering him with questions.

"You kissed Sif. I didn't think it was an unpleasant experience. Isond said. Why do you do it?"

Oh Norns, he was not having this conversation with his dragon, fearing next it would be where do little baby dragons come from. So he nipped the conversation in the bud.

"Not tonight, Isond," Loki said. "It's late. I'd like to get some sleep."

Why can't you answer the question?

"I can answer the question, but I don't want to," Loki said, pulling the covers up over his face. Isond pulled them back.

Why not?

"Thor could explain much better than I," Loki said. "He's better at relationships."

I don't want him to explain. Other people have someone. Why don't you?

"I have you," Loki said. "That is enough. Do you understand that?" Loki said.

I do. I just want you to be happy.

"I get by, Isond. That's enough."
It's not.

He sat up, and Isond butted him.

"You never give up, do you?"

No. Why should I give up on you? I'll never give up on you. I keep telling you I chose you for a reason.

"No one else will ever measure up, Isond. That's why," Loki said. "Now get some sleep."

She nudged him once with her snout, sighing as she laid her head down, and Loki knew she would drop promptly off to sleep. Matters were sometimes were ncomplicated in the dragon's mind. Black and white, mostly, with occasional shades of grey. Isond tended to deal in absolutes when he was being stubborn. Her way of winning him over to her way of thinking. He could never win an argument with her. But did he want to?

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Loki leaned against Isond, watching the sun rise. Thor walked over, throwing his arm across Loki's shoulders.

"I'm glad the past year is done," Thor said.

"You didn't feel the same last year, stuck on Midgard?"
"I did," Thor said. "What about you?"

"I tried not to think about it," Loki said.

"I have something of yours," Thor said, abruptly changing the subject, reaching under his cloak, handing the item to his brother.


"Laufey returned it and your knives as evidence you were dead," Thor said. "Father gave it to me. He has your knives and a cloak."

Loki turned the dagger over in his hands. "You've had it all this time?" he asked.

"I've carried it every day," Thor replied.

Loki embraced his brother, and Thor held him tightly.

"I'm just glad I could give it back," Thor said.
Chapter 20

Flight

Chapter 20—Revelation

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

With Yule over, it was back to business at the palace. Business which Loki was currently avoiding, namely a summons from the Allfather. He knew what it was about, as his mother asked innocently over breakfast a few days before if he and Isond would be interested in helping repair the Bifrost, and she mentioned his father was hoping he would help. He didn't give her an answer. And his answer to his father was clear because he was out flying with Isond, far past the boundaries agreed upon. An act of defiance, an immature and petty one, but Loki did not care.

It was his first real act of rebellion since returning. Disobeying a summons from his father, probably not a good idea.

You should just tell him you do not wish to be near the Tesseract, Isond said.

"Do you think he'll accept that?" Loki said. "I don't want to touch it, I don't want to be in its presence. I wish it was away from Asgard, but there is nowhere safer for it."

Couldn't we use our magic instead to help fix the Bifrost? Isond asked.

"Thor had to use Mjolnir and all of its might to break the Bifrost," Loki said. "I think it took a sheer amount of will on his part, also. The best sorcerers and engineers in the realm can't put it back together, so what difference do you think we'll make?"

They are not us, Isond said. And why does the thought of the Bifrost being repaired trouble you so?

"It means Thor will go running off to Midgard again, leaving behind his responsibilities," Loki said.

Frigga said once the Bifrost is fixed, we, along with Thor and Kjalvor are going to Alfheim, or the one called Abroen will come here, Isond said. No one will go 'running off to Midgard.'

"You don't know Thor like I do," Loki said. "And my mother told you that? How often do you talk to others?"

When it suits me, Isond said. I talk to Frigga and Helblindi all the time. Sometimes Fandral. I like him. He is wistful for a dragon, much like Tony. I talk to Thor and also Kjalvor. Less often the Allfather. His mind is fathomless, but I don't fear what I see there. He asks me how you are.

"That's all he wants to know?" Loki asked.

Yes, Isond said.

"Because he's afraid I'll go off the deep end, as the mortals say?"

No. He fears for you, wants you well. I know what you see when you sleep. I see it, too. Maybe you should go to the healers, or talk with Thor. He would listen. I would listen.

"The healers already said they can do nothing for what ails my mind," Loki said.

Then they're not very good healers, Isond said. What about Annar or Byleistr?
"I doubt they can do much either," Loki said. "Besides, I feel fine."

'Fine' means you're lying, Isond said. Why do people say that when it is a lie?

"To get through the day, Isond," Loki said.

You're not very good at lying to yourself, or me, Isond said. I always know.

Thor, of course, did not ignore the summons from his father. He dressed, ate, checked to see if Kjalvor needed to eat. He was eating every other day now, and Thor was grateful his appetite was slowing down. It meant more time for other things besides feeding the dragon.

"Would you like to come along?" Thor asked.

Of course.

Grinning, Thor jumped from the balcony, swinging Mjolnir, Kjalvor following, diving off, giving his partner a scare as he watched him fall almost to the ground before opening his wings.

"Why do you do that?" Thor asked.

Because it amuses me, Kjalvor said. I won't hit the ground.

"Overconfident brat," Thor said. "You scare me to death each time. Are you going to pull that when I fly with you?"

I haven't decided yet, Kjalvor said. Besides, wouldn't you rather fly with me than have to use that thing in your hand?

"What's wrong with Mjolnir?" Thor asked.

I see what it contains, Kjalvor said. Do you know what you hold in your hand?

"I see something for building, protecting, or destroying," Thor said. "Why do you dislike Mjolnir?"

I don't dislike it, Kjalvor answered. It's powerful, as powerful as the things in the vault where I was. Yet it is in your hands. Why?

"It's a weapon suitable for a king," Thor said. "One day I'll be king of Asgard."

That's not an answer, Kjalvor said. I thought kings are supposed to be wise, like your father. He doesn't always have to carry around a weapon.

"I can't fly without Mjolnir," Thor said.

You can fly with me when I'm big enough, Kjalvor said. Loki is right. You have an 'unhealthy attachment to your hammer.' Sometimes you spend more time with it than me.

"Mjolnir is as much a part of me as you are," Thor said.

I'm better company, Kjalvor said.

"That you are," Thor said, landing. Kjalvor landed beside him, folding his wings along his back, giving Thor his best I'm-an-innocent-little-baby-dragon look. Which was funny, because Kjalvor was
now almost shoulder-even with his gelding, Gisl.

"Can't you be serious?" Thor muttered. "My father is here, along with Heimdall, and this is not something to joke about."

The only response he received was a snort, and Thor couldn't've sworn Kjalvor rolled his eyes. Could a dragon even do that?
"Are you through?" Odin asked, giving his son a stern look, but spared Kjalvor a small smile and a look of affection.

Thor frowned. "Sorry, Father," he said.

Odin exchanged an amused look with Heimdall, who was trying to hide a smile.

"Where is Loki? I thought he was supposed to be here," Thor said.

"He is, but he chose not to come," Odin said. "I'll deal with him later. Thor, you know I asked you here to see if you could help repair the Bifrost. The engineers and sorcerers haven't been able to come up with a solution to speed the repair, let alone anything beyond their recommendations we use the Tesseract to do so."

"Why do you think I can help?" Thor asked.

"You broke it, I think you can help in the repair. Heimdall knows the Bifrost better than anyone. I was hoping Loki and Isond could lend their assistance as well," Odin said. "Loki's quite powerful and imaginative when it comes to his sorcery. His input could prove valuable."

"What do require of me?" Thor asked.

"Mjolnir," Heimdall said. "The one thing the so-called experts agreed upon was the Tesseract will be required. It's energy we'll use to repair the Bifrost."

"And how shall we do that?" Thor said.

"First by fixing the Bifrost beneath our feet," Heimdall said. "Do you know what you did when you broke it? You severed its connection to the root of Yggdrasil, effectively cutting us off from the other realms."

Odin and Heimdall watched as the color drained from Thor's face. No one bothered explaining just how much damage he caused. Then Kjalvor was beside him, head resting on his shoulder. Thor looped an arm around his neck, hugging him.

I can see where it's broken, and how it needs to be fixed, Kjalvor said. Can't they see? Can you not see? The path is broken, but there is also a crack in front of it, bleeding black. I think it needs to be closed to fix it.

Thor looked askance at the dragon, who only blinked. "Repeat that for my father and Heimdall," he said.

He did, and Heimdall smiled. "I'm glad someone else can see, Lord Kjalvor," he said. "We'll need you also. And Loki and Isond as well as the Tesseract."

"Will it really be that easy to fix?" Thor asked.

"It will take a great amount of energy and will," Odin said. "It needs to be done. We've been cut off
from the other realms for too long."

"Father, when it is fixed, I was hoping, possibly, you could spare me a few days. I would like to go to Midgard. . ." Thor said.

"No," Odin said. "You have obligations here. And you would leave Kjalvor as well?"

"He would be fine without me, I'm sure," Thor said.

You would leave me here? Alone? Kjalvor asked.

"You wouldn't be alone. You'd have Loki and Isond, Mother, Helblindi, Fandral," Thor said.

It's not the same, Kjalvor said. Why would you want to leave me behind? What's so important?

"I don't know how Jane would react to you," Thor said.

"Once the Bifrost is repaired, you're going to Alfheim, if it can be arranged," Odin said. "You've known this since Kjalvor hatched for you."

"Once we're done there, I will go to Midgard," Thor said. "I made a promise I aim to keep."

"We'll see about that," Odin said. "Be here first thing in the morning."

I'll see to Loki."

With that, Odin began the long walk back to the city. Thor watched him go.

"That went well," Heimdall said.

"Can you see her?" Thor asked. "How is she?"

"She still searches for you," Heimdall replied. "And she misses you."

"I miss her," Thor said.

With Isond settled for the evening, Loki entered his study, throwing off his coat, stopping when he saw his father sitting in a chair by the fire, reading a book. He set it down, standing.

"Hello, Father," Loki said.

"You ignored a direct order from your king today, Loki," Odin said. "I wish to know why."

"Which order?" Loki said. "I flew Isond past the boundaries I was given because I'm sick and tired of seeing the same things day after day. And I want nothing to do with the Tesseract. Is that so hard to understand?"

"Surely the Tesseract is not a temptation," Odin said. "I know you better than that."

"Do you really want to know the truth? Fine. I'll tell you. Thanos placed a compulsion on me, that if the Tesseract were in my hands, I would return it to him, no matter the cost," Loki said.

"You've been near the Tesseract several times since your return. Have you felt an overpowering desire to take it and flee?" Odin said. He approached Loki, putting his hand on his neck, much like Thor always did. "I think the compulsion you fear was a result of the scepter. Think of this as a test
for yourself, Loki. I've put this off, hoping there was another way to repair the Bifrost, but there is not. Your help will be needed. Thor will be with you, as well as Isond, Kjalvor and Heimdall. Nothing will happen."

"Can you guarantee that?" Loki said. "Father, I fear the Tesseract, what it can do."

"I'm glad to know you respect such power, but not the way the lesson was learned," Odin said. "Come. Have dinner with your mother and I, and Helblindi. Then get a good night's rest. You'll need it."

"You want us to do this tomorrow?" Loki said.

"Why wait?" Odin said. "Besides, you have an obligation to Alfheim, or have you forgotten. As well as Jotunheim. You keep running from your responsibilities as well, although I cannot fault your reluctance. I hope you will grow into the kingship waiting for you."

"He asked if he could go to Midgard didn't he?" Loki asked.

"Yes," Odin said.

"Did he throw a tantrum?"

"No," Odin said. "Kjalvor provided a suitable distraction. Heimdall and I could feel his distress."

"I will throttle him," Loki said.

"Your mother already gave him a tongue-lashing, as did Fandral," Odin said. "It was quite the sight to see. I didn't know Fandral had it in him."

"Fandral has grown up," Loki said.

"As have you," Odin said. "I just hope my mischievous trickster of a son is still in there somewhere."

"So do I," Loki said.

Odin wrapped his arms around his son, pulling him into an embrace. Loki sighed, but hugged him back, grateful for the fact his father had been more affectionate since his return.

Odin let him go. "Let's go. We shouldn't keep your mother waiting. Besides, I have something I need to return. Thor said he returned you your dagger at Yule. I've had your other knives since Laufey brought them back, as well as a black cloak of wolf. I've never seen that before."

"It came from the wolf whose form I take," Loki said.

"The large dire wolf Helblindi rides around the palace?" Odin said.

"Yes," Loki said.

"He told me about the wolves in Jotunheim. He loves Geri and Freki. Oh, the other day, I caught him in your mother's garden trying to lure Huginn and Muninn with bread crumbs."

"Did it work?"

"Huginn went to him," Odin said. "The boy is fearless. Reminds me of you at that age, although he is a quiet boy compared to all the questions you used to ask."
"Won't that change?" Loki said.

"I imagine so, as he becomes more comfortable here," Odin said. "He's still fearful, and I don't blame him. People are distrustful of what they fear and don't understand."

"He's just a boy," Loki said.

"A Jotun child," Odin said. "The Jotun have a reputation for a reason, Loki."

"A reputation as monsters, you mean," Loki said. "I know what I am."

Odin grabbed him by the shoulders, digging in enough to hurt. "Do not twist my words, boy," he said. "Laufey was a monster. The Jotnar are not monsters. You are not a monster. The Jotnar have a reputation as the most fearsome warriors in the Nine Realms. I hope one day you'll be proud of your heritage. Did you know I have Jotun blood in my veins?"

"What?" Loki said.

"My mother, Bestla, was the daughter of Bolthorn, a Jotun. He was small, like you," Loki said.

"Then how could you let us grow up thinking the Jotnar monsters, when you share their blood?" Loki asked.

"I never called them monsters," Odin said.

"Then you never corrected Thor when he did," Loki said.

"I tried," Odin said. "You know how stubborn your brother can be."

"Are you going to tell Thor this?" Loki said.

"When he's ready," Odin said. "Or you can, when you think he's ready to hear it."

"You would trust me with such a thing?" Loki said.

"I trust you with many things, Loki. Why not this, too?"

The next morning, Odin stood back, looking at the broken Bifrost. Some work was already done, what could be completed without the rainbow bridge itself. The moorings were in place for a new observatory; the only the only problem was the broken Bifrost that didn't connect with it.

His sons, their dragon and Heimdall stood ready to complete their work. Loki held the container with the Tesseract. Closing his eyes, he felt Isond's magic meld with his own. Reaching out for the Tesseract, they connected with it, containing the explosion of energy, focusing it, forcing it toward Mjolnir.

As combined Tesseract energy and magic made contact, Thor and Kjalvor concentrated their lightning, joining the other two energies. Thor brought down Mjolnir, closing his eyes against the white-hot brightness of the light reminiscent of what came from the Bifrost when he destroyed it. One strike of his hammer and the cracks beneath their feet disappeared. Another strike, and the jagged edges of the broken path extended a few feet. Strike after strike it grew and grew and grew until it finally extended out to the edge of the flooring of the new observatory, connecting.

Heimdall walked out onto the observatory deck, sheathing his sword in the lock. He watched as
Yggdrasil appeared, traced in lines of white light, and in miniature. Pulling the sword, he turned around.

"You can stop now," he said. "The breach is repaired."

Heimdall watched as Mjolnir slipped from Thor's grip, and he sank against Kjalvor, and Isond caught Loki in her talons as he keeled over, unconscious from his efforts, Tesseract still in hand.
Chapter 21

Flight

Chapter 21-Sojourn

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Loki was annoyed. Four more days spent in the healing rooms, three of which he was unconscious. Thor hadn't fared any better, he learned, as Thor had come by his room that morning, Kjalvor trailing, trying to hide from Eir. Watching the healer grab Thor by the ear and drag him back to his room was the most entertaining part of his day so far, beside Isond's conversation.

Are we really going to Alfheim? She asked.

"In a few days," Loki said.

Aren't you looking forward to it? We get to meet dragons that aren't Kjalvor, Isond said.

"Kjalvor isn't that bad," Loki said.

Male. Hatchling.

"He is not a hatchling," Loki said. "He's bigger than you were at the same age."

Only because he won't be as big when he's finished growing. Will his brain eventually catch up to the rest of him? Isond asked.

Loki laughed. "Hopefully at the same time Thor's brain catches up," he said. "Why does Kjalvor annoy you so?"

He doesn't annoy me, Isond said. He is decent company. Sometimes. Are you sure Thor didn't drop him on his head after he hatched?

"Dearest Isond, I can assure you Thor did not drop Kjalvor," Loki said. "I was there, remember?"

He was in his egg an awfully long time, Isond said. That's it. He was there too long.

"Do you know how long you waited?" Loki asked.


The conversation over, Loki heard the door click, and watched as his mother entered the room.

"Next time I think I'll ask Eir to put you in another room. You've spent entirely too much time in this one," Frigga said, coming over, sitting down on the edge of his bed.

"Am I getting out today?" Loki asked, hopeful.

"Tomorrow," Frigga said. "You need to rest."

"I feel fine," Loki said.

"Stand up and walk to the door and back," Frigga said.
Loki scooted out of bed, standing, taking two steps before he almost went down, but Frigga looped an arm around his waist, dragging him back to bed.

"See?"

"Is Isond in the same condition?" Loki asked.

"She took a short flight this morning, and ate three cows," Frigga said. "She's better."

"Did you hear Thor tried to escape earlier?" Loki said. "He came in here, draped across Kjalvor, using him to hold himself up."

"I heard," Frigga said. "Hogun is babysitting them right now."

"I don't need a sitter?" Loki said.

"Do you?" Frigga asked. "Planning mischief? I'm surprised you and Kjalvor haven't been pranking Thor together. That dragon keeps him on his toes, just like you used to."

"I haven't had time for mischief," Loki said.

"There is always time for fun, dear," Frigga said, brushing a lock of hair out of his eyes. "Loki, you need a haircut. Desperately so."

"I do not," he muttered.

Frigga stood, leaving the room, coming back few minutes later with a pair of scissors. She sat down on the edge of the bed by her son.

"Turn around," she said.

Loki did as he was told, and Frigga started snipping away, handing him a mirror from the bedside table when she was done.

"Is it to your liking?" she asked. "You look more like the son I remember now."

His hair was now a little longer than it was before he left.

"It'll do," he said, handing her back the mirror.

"I wish you didn't have to leave," Frigga said. "I argued with your father Abroen could come here, but Odin wants you both to go to Alfheim instead."

"Isond and I could be back here in a heartbeat," Loki said.

"I know," Frigga said. "I've taught you what I can, but there is so much you need to learn about, that only Abroen and the other elves and dragons can teach. Besides, I think getting away from Asgard will do you some good. Isond is excited, too."

"Tell me something I don't know," Loki said. "It's all she's talked about since I woke up. That and Kjalvor doesn't have a brain in his head."

"He's still growing," Frigga said. "I think one day soon Isond won't feel the same way about Kjalvor."

"She's been patient with him," Loki said. "So have I. It's Thor I want to throttle."
"Thor will learn his place with Kjalvor. If I can't see to it, the elves will," Frigga said. "I can promise you that much."

"Mother, he doesn't get it, does he?" Loki said. "Thor's still acting like nothing has changed."
"Just like you try and convince yourself there's nothing wrong," Frigga said.

"I'm doing fine," Loki said.

"You've not been up to any mischief since you returned," Frigga said. "The only people I know you want to spend time with are Fandral and Helbindi, and you and Thor still haven't talked. Your father and I are worried, Loki. Talk to me, or Fandral. Go talk to Sleipnir it will help set you to rights. You can't keep holding it all inside. It's not healthy."

"If I tell anyone, they'll know how weak I am," Loki said.

Frigga closed her eyes, counting backwards from 10, claspings Loki's hand a little tighter than she should.

"You used to tell Thor and I everything," Frigga said.

"I've grown up," Loki said.

"You've grown more stubborn and closed off," Frigga said. "Thor still confides in me. Why can't you?"

Loki looked away, biting his lip. He did not want to tell his mother what he'd been through. He didn't want to feel that vulnerable and raw all over again. He knew Frigga knew something of his ordeal, but he didn't want to have to tell his mother how he'd been tortured, brought low, a prince of Asgard shamed and loathing at his own weakness, and how he couldn't break free.

"Thor is a fool," he said, but there was no venom in his voice.

"A fool who was so inconsolable when he thought you dead he almost destroyed the city," Frigga said. "The storm lasted nearly a week, Loki. Your father had to knock Thor unconscious and took Mjolnir away to make it stop."

"Make that a sentimental fool," Loki added.

Frigga sighed. "Believe what you will, Loki. It's not just your mind that needs healed Loki, but your heart."

Leaning forward, she kissed him on the forehead. "Rest. I'll bring Helblini around later," she said, watching as Loki laid back down, closing his eyes.

Her baby, always so perceptive, but not about himself or his feelings. Frigga worried about him. Thor always knew his own heart. Loki doubted. He was secure in his skills and pride as a sorcerer, but not with himself or his place in the lives of his family and friends. Frigga figured it was because he knew he was different, but now that he knew it made no difference, she hoped it would change. He seemed better, but she knew he was not.

She saw the doubt in his eyes, and sometimes fear and desperation when he was in a large group with no one close he cared about. She'd watched as he transported himself away. And when confronted about it, Loki brushed it away.

He needed to let go of what happened, and Frigga was angry the healers kept saying they couldn't do
anything more for him, because physically, he was in good health. The rest was now up to Loki, and she could only support him.

Both of her sons needed to let go and let the past be that—in the past. Thor was always content to live in the moment, and Loki was a thinker and planner. She hoped the balance would serve them well in the future. She and Odin would not always be there for their sons.

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Three days later

The framework of the Heimdall's observatory at the end of the Bifrost was in place, enough so the bridge would actually work. Loki wasn't eager to be one of the first to test it, but his father and Heimdall assured him it would work as it always had.

Now, he was standing beside Isond, waiting for Thor and Kjalvor. He checked his gear, taking mental stock of what he was bringing—extra clothes, a few books, and treats from his mother. Loki had everything but his knives packed on Isond's harness.

And of course, Thor was running late, landing beside him, Kjalvor at his side, not bothering to stifle his yawn.

"It's not that early," Thor said.

Kjalvor snorted, butting him in the shoulder, nearly knocking him over.

No, but thanks to you we overslept, and kept Isond and Loki waiting. I'm going to get a lecture from Isond the Perfect.

You're late because of Thor, Isond replied. I can lecture him later, if you'd like.

Just bite him for me. Your teeth are bigger.

They were interrupted by the appearance of Sif, Volstagg and Hogun who came riding up, dismounting.

"You can't expect us to not see you off," Sif said, hugging Thor. "Stay out of trouble."

She turned to Loki, giving him a quick embrace, whispering in his ear. "Watch over him, will you?"

"Always," Loki said, giving her a small smile.

Volstagg and Hogun came next, the big warrior punching Thor in the arm and hugging Loki. Hogun merely nodded at them both.

Then Fandral came riding up, horse sliding to a halt, and he jumped down, pack bouncing on his back as he came running over.

"Good. I'm not too late," Fandral said.

"What do you mean?" Thor asked.

"I'm coming with you," Fandral said. "On your mother's orders. Someone has to keep an eye on you two."

Heimdall got their attention by clearing his throat. "Are you ready to go or not?"
"As ready as we can be," Thor said, walking toward the portal, watching, looking back as Heimdall set his sword into the lock.

Thor put his arm across Kjalvor's shoulders.

"Don't be afraid," Thor said. "I'll be with you. It's like flying, only not. More like sliding across the realms on a beam of light. Loki, Isond and Fandral will be right behind us. I've done this many times, Kjalvor."

It will be fun? Kjalvor asked.

"Yes," Thor said. "Let's go."

They stepped into the light, and Kjalvor pressed close to Thor. They slipped out of Asgard, and for a few moments, all Thor felt was sheer panic until Kjalvor realized he was still beside him, and nothing bad was happening. Then they hit the ground, Kjalvor stumbling as his feet touched something solid, leaning against Thor as the came out of the Bifrost. And he leaned so hard he knocked Thor over, toppling over on his partner.

"Get off me," Thor managed, trying to scramble away from the dragon as he tried to stand. Instead, he was caught by a thrashing wing as Kjalvor stood, and was knocked back into the dirt. Thor stood, a stream of profanity coming out of his mouth as he realized Loki, Isond and Fandral had arrived, and they were not looking at him. They were looking past him. At an elf. A rather distinguished looking, somber elf who had his arms crossed and a large grey dragon, even bigger than Isond, standing beside him.

"Welcome to Alfheim," he said. "I am Abroen, Gallanr's rider."

The dragon reached out, touching Isond's nose with her own. Loki leaned against Isond, watching the exchange.

Greetings, daughter, Gallanr said.

Loki's gaze snapped to the bigger dragon, and to the elf.

"My wife's dragon, Duran, is mate to Gallanr," Abroen explained, watching for any reaction from Loki. He looked thoughtful.

Abroen's smile stayed intact, but he was surprised by Gallanr's admission. As a species, dragons barely acknowledged kinship ties, except when it came time to mate, making sure they chose as far outside the family tree as possible.

"Your dragon is from Gallanr's most recent clutch," the elf said. "I chose her egg myself for Asgard. I was pleased to hear she made a good match. What name have you given her, Prince Loki?"

"Isond," Loki answered.

"And who is this fine fellow, Prince Thor?" Abroen said, looking over at Kjalvor.

"Kjalvor," Thor said.

Abroen finally looked over at Fandral. "You are?" he asked.

"Fandral. A friend. I'm here on Queen Frigga's orders to keep an eye on this bunch," he said.

"You have a personal reason to be here, also, do you not?" Abroen said. "You hope for a dragon."
"How..." Fandral started.

"I know potential when I feel it," Abroen said. "It's one of my gifts. Come along. I'll get you all settled, then you can join my family for dinner. I'm sure you'll have questions."

They walked a short distance, through a small wooded area before entering into the hills, and a canyon, which open revealing Abroen's home.

"This is Drekinheim," Abroen said. 

"A city of dragons?" Thor asked.

"Yes," Abroen answered. "There are riders stationed in different parts of the realm, but most are here. The city is as old as the realm itself, and most of the buildings are stone, fashioned with magic. Of course, you'll have your own accommodations."

They followed Abroen and Gallanr a bit further until they came to a cliff face a the edge of the city. Cave openings littered its face, with several dragons sunning themselves on ledges. Abroen lead them to two on the lower level, up stairs carved into the rock. The path lead up and into the dragon-sized entryway. There was a stone wallow filled with sand in the anteroom, and beyond that, a room with a bed and other creature comforts.

"Your quarters are the same," Abroen said. "This is where riders from outside the city and those who are unattached stay."

"What about me?" Fandral asked.

"You can stay with one of us," Thor said.

"You can stay with me," Loki said. "You can have the bed, I'll sleep beside Isond."

"Good. Get settled in. I'll be around later to collect you for dinner," Abroen said.

Loki watched Isond and Fandral go inside, and Thor and Kjalvor were already gone.

"Wait," Loki called, catching up with Abroen.

"What is it, lad?" Abroen said.

"Your dragon is Isond's mother?" Loki asked.

"Yes," Abroen said, reaching up, rubbing Gallanr's chin. She only blinked at Loki.

"No wonder you had such an interest in what happened to Isond," Loki said.

"I am grateful to see she turned out so well," Abroen said. "We'll talk of the dragons later. I will give you fair warning you will most likely be walking into an ambush at my home. Halleah and I have four children. Calania is the oldest, and she is a dragonrider. Her dragon is Awyr. The others are Lere, or oldest son, and Ravonith and Tavorthel. The youngest two are twins, a girl and a boy. A gift from Duran and Gallanr's last mating."

The elf shook his head in exasperation. You'll meet them all tonight. I hope you don't mind.

"No," Loki said. "I look forward to it."

"Good. Go rest up, explore, spend time with Isond or your brother and Kjalvor," Abroen said.
"You'll have a few days to familiarize yourselves with everything here, but after that, you'll be wishing for spare time."

Abroen lead them to his home, where Gallanr was sunning herself on the ledge next to a smaller dragon bright copper in color. Another was beside them, further down, almost the size of Gallanr. She was charcoal colored.

"The copper male is Duran, my wife's partner. The dark grey is Awy. She belongs to my daughter Calania," Abroen explained. "Isond, Kjalvor, make yourselves at home. I'm sure you're eager to make the acquaintance of other dragons."

Kjalvor needed no urging, launching himself up on to the ledge, grazing Thor as he went.

Oops, he said.

Kjalvor made sure all heard the comment, and Abroen gave Thor a stern look.

"What? That's my fault?" Thor said.

"Abroen, with his sense of humor, I don't suppose Kjalvor is the child of your dragons, also?" Fandral asked.

"No," Abroen said. "Kjalvor's parents are Itaar and Noran. They're bonded to Tanric and Sennen, who are all looking forward to meeting him, considering how long he waited to hatch."

"My mother told me it was over four centuries," Thor said.

"It was," Abroen said. "Isond's wait was short—only a few months. Enough for now. Let's go inside, and you can meet my family. You'll be seeing enough of them."

The three Asgardians followed him inside, and Abroen was immediately set upon by a woman who could only be Halleah, his wife. She had a child in each arm, and she kissed her husband, handing one of the twins over to him.

Not missing a beat, she turned to her guests.

"Make yourselves at home," she said. "And there are not titles in this house. Names only. I do not stand on formality here within these walls."

Thor glanced at Loki. "I think I'll like it here," he said.

"That remains to be seen," Loki said, taking a seat beside Fandral.

Another member of the family came in, looking them over. He was young, shorter than Abroen, but looked much the same. He looked them all over.

"Not what I was expecting," he said.

"Lere," Abroen warned.

"I thought they'd be bigger," he said. "All the stories about Asgardians make them out to be larger than life. These three look...ordinary."

"Two of them are the sons of the Allfather, and the other is their friend," Abroen said.
"I mean no disrespect," Lere said, sticking his tongue out at his father.

Thor bit back a laugh, and Loki was trying hard to keep a straight face.

Halleah came over grabbing him by the ear. "Lere, take your sister and keep her occupied," she said, giving him Ravonith.

The boy sat down by his father.

"More dragons, I see. Who does the gold belong to? Father's been worried about her for months," Lere said. "With her here, he can stop worrying."

"Isond is mine," Loki said.

"You're Loki, correct?" Lere asked. "Everyone here figured she would pick the Allfather's heir."

"Kjalvor picked me instead," Thor said.

"The blue? He's a stubborn one," Lere said. "He's famous, considering how long he went unhatched."

"You have no idea how stubborn he can be," Thor muttered.

Lere grinned. "You're Thor? Tanric is going to love this. He hasn't been able to shut up about that egg since it went to Asgard."

Another voice joined the conversation. "What egg?"

"My daughter, Calania," Abroen said as she sat down across from him.

"Itaar's unhatched egg," Lere said. "It hatched for Thor."

"I gathered that from the excited little blue outside," Calania said. "He's charming, your Kjalvor is. And Isond is very polite."

Eventually, Halleah called them all to dinner, and for the Asgardians, it was a strange but entertaining affair. Several one-sided conversations going at once, but Loki enjoyed it. Being among people who shared a dragon bond and understood was a revelation. He didn't feel so different in that respect, and Thor was even getting the hang of it. So was Fandral. And being around normal, without the expectation of being a prince and that responsibility, to just be himself was a weight off his shoulders.

And Fandral was acting strangely, picking at his food.

Thor elbowed Loki, catching his attention. He nodded toward Fandral, who was suddenly speechless in the presence of Calania each time she asked him a question.

"That's never happened before," Loki whispered.

"I know," Thor, whispering back. "This could be interesting."

Fandral kicked them both under the table. "What delusion are you two sharing?" he asked.

"Nothing, Fandral," Thor said, smiling.

Loki grinned back.
"I hate you both," Fandral said.

Finally, Halleah excused herself to put the youngest children to bed. Thor took Kjalvor to their quarters for the night, and Fandral went out exploring with Lere and Calania, leaving Abroen to talk with Loki.

"I've waited quite some time to meet you, Loki," Abroen said.

"I'm sorry you had to wait," Loki replied.

"What's done is done," Abroen said. "My interest in Isond's welfare was and still is more than personal. My function among the riders is to oversee the training of new dragon pairs. Only the timing has changed. You've done well by Isond, but there is still much you have to learn. I was chosen to be your teacher because I'm bonded to a female. I can lend you my perspective and personal experience."

"What's the significance of Isond being female?" Loki asked.

"That she is female," Abroen said. "It comes with its own unique set of circumstances. Leave it at that for now."

"My mother spoke very highly of you," Loki said. "You earned her respect and affection."

"I'm happy to have made Queen Frigga's acquaintance," Abroen said. "Considering I'm no noble."

"You're married to the sister of the queen," Loki said.

"I was a ranger long before Gallanr chose me," Abroen said. "I'm common-born. I caught Halleah's attention long before she caught mine. I'm what the Midgardians call a 'late-bloomer.' I fought in the Asgard-Jotun war. Many of us answered the call when our king asked if any would help."

"I didn't know any from other realms fought," Loki said.

"Laufey's war would've affected all the realms eventually," Abroen said. "Enough talk. Go see to your dragon, lad, and get some rest."

Thor walked down the steps, sitting down on the rocks beside Loki.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"No," Loki said.

"Nightmares again?"

"Yes," Loki said.

"I just can't sleep," Thor said. "Strange surroundings."

"Try sleeping next to Kjalvor," Loki suggested. "It might help."

"I will," Thor said. "How long do you think we'll be here?"

"Long enough to learn what we need to know," Loki said. "Home isn't that far away, Thor."
"I wasn't talking about going home," Thor said. "I wish to return to Midgard."

"That again?" Loki spat. "Thor, get it out of your head for now that you are not going. We have work to do here."

"If you were in my place, you would understand," Thor said.

"What?"
"If you've ever loved anyone, like I love Jane, you would understand," Thor said.

Loki's jaw clenched. "I loved Sigyn, and look where that got me," he said. "She's married to another man, bore him a child. Don't think I don't know what it is to be separated from someone I love, because I do know that pain very well. And what of the days of your exile? Worrying and wondering if you were safe, happy, loved? How long it would take you to get home? Did you even spare me a thought while you were gone?"

"I thought about you all the time," Thor said. "How you were faring, and how much of an apology I owed you. And when I thought you dead, Loki. . ."

"Mother told me about the storm," Loki said.

"Then never doubt that I love you, brother," Thor said.

"I don't," Loki said. "The fact you haven't pushed since I've been back is evidence of that."

"Loki, I'm trying to be patient. When you need to talk, I'll listen," Thor said.

"Are we finished?" Loki asked. "We need to get some sleep."

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Abroen used the next few days to gauge his new students' temperaments, abilities and the depth of their bonds with their dragons. He quizzed them on the lore their mother was supposed to teach them, watched them spar. Loki and Isond were remarkably well adjusted, considering how they started out. There was an undercurrent of stress between them, but Abroen sensed it wasn't because of each other. He and Gallanr would have it out of them eventually. He just needed to give the time. He was worried about the pair, wondering what else they went through.

Then there was Thor and Kjalvor. Not bonded as well as he hoped, and Thor constantly distracted. He would get Thor undistracted and concentrating on his dragon—the entire reason he was in Alfheim.

The third Asgardian, Fandral, was no problem so far, beyond the sudden interest Calania had in the man. His daughter was an adult, and capable of making her own decisions. If he interfered, Halleah would have his head, no matter his thoughts on the situation. During his short time in Asgard Abroen quickly learned Fandral was quite the scoundrel with the ladies. So far though, with his daughter, Fandral was a perfect gentleman. Maybe Calania had him scared.

One thing was for certain—he had his work cut out for him.

Now, though, he and the Asgardians were waiting for his friends, Tanric and Sennen to arrive. The two had been away several days trying to see if there was any truth to rumors about marauders in the outer provinces. He would find out later, as it was not the reason the two riders were coming.

Overhead, two dragons began their descent, and Loki covered his eyes, shielding them from the flying grit as the two dragons landed. One was a large blue female almost the size of Gallanr and the other was a smaller brown male.

The two elves dismounted, joining them.

"Tanric belongs to the blue, Itaar," Abroen said. "Their mates are Senen and Noran."

Thor and Kjalvor looked at one another and then up at Itaar.

"You're Kjalvor's mother?" he asked.
I am. Itaar answered. He chose well, I hope, in picking you as his partner.

Turning her attention to Kjalvor, the big dragon looked him over. I'm grateful to see you hatched. So stubborn. Just like Senen and Noran. You'll make us proud, Kjalvor.

Senen rolled his eyes at the stubborn comment. "Glad to make your acquaintance, Thor, Kjalvor," he said. "We were beginning to think he'd never hatch."

Kjalvor butted up against Thor, suddenly unused to being the center of so much attention.

"He may be stubborn, but he's a good heart, hasn't he?" Tanric asked.

"Kjalvor isn't afraid to tell me what he thinks," Thor said. "He's honest, and brave. That's what his name means. He bit me when he hatched."

A strong, brave dragon, Noran interjected. Princeling, I hope you are worthy of him.

Tanric and Senen exchanged a glance; Abroen was suddenly giving Thor more scrutiny than usual.

"We have much to do today," Abroen said. "Have dinner with us tonight. Halleah and the children will be happy to see you. Tanric, aren't you getting ready to fly patrol?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Take Isond and Loki with you," Abroen said.

"May I go as well?" Fandral asked.

"Go," Abroen said, dismissing the others, turning his attention to Thor.

"Do you wish to be here in Alfheim, Thor?" Abroen asked, watching as Thor leaned against his dragon. Kjalvor looked thoughtful, but said nothing.

"I have to be here," Thor said. "I'll do what's expected of me."

"If that's so, why have you not been as attentive as you should be?" Abroen asked. "Do you wish you were elsewhere?"

Thor shrugged. "Like I said, I had to come here because of Kjalvor," he said.

"Do you regret his hatching for you?"

"No. Of course not," Thor said, frowning, taken aback by the question. "I wouldn't trade him for anything."

"Then why aren't the two of you closer? Loki and Isond are one," Abroen said. "You still think of yourself and Kjalvor as separate entities. You each have your own identity, but you are also connected. Do you understand the profound nature of the gift you've been given?"

"I don't think it's sunk in yet," Thor said, giving an honest answer.

"Isond and Loki had the benefit of being alone together for months," Abroen said. "You have a lot of catching up to do. Kjalvor is doing well. He's a quick learner, and you are fortunate he's such a jovial fellow, and that he's been so patient with you. He's waiting for you to catch up. I, on the other hand, am not so patient. What distracts you from your studies and Kjalvor? What have you to say for yourself, Odinson?"

Thor flinched, staring at the ground.
"Well?"

"I made a promise to someone in Midgard," Thor said. "I had hoped, with the Bifrost repaired, I could go, and keep that promise. . ."

"During the time you are under my tutelage you are dedicated to nothing more than your dragon and your training," Abroen said. "It's been that way since we first learned to tame the wild dragons. The fact you're here with your brother and your friend makes no difference. Once you're free of me, you can do as you please, but not one moment sooner. Do you understand, Thor?"

"Yes," he answered.

"You need to accept things have changed. They will never be the same again," Abroen said. "Your life changed the instant Kjalvor hatched."

"I thought maybe things didn't have to change that much," Thor said.

"You're not in Asgard. Midgard is not even a consideration right now. You are in Alfheim, and you are not returning home until I deem you ready," Abroen said. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," Thor said.

"And get rid of that," Abroen said, pointing at Mjolnir. "You'll not be needing her."

"But. . ."

"You've become accustomed to using that hammer for smashing things, but you're going to learn to do something else with a hammer," Abroen said. "One of the blacksmith apprentices broke his leg today in an accident. You're going to replace him a few hours a day."

"And what is this supposed to teach me?" Thor asked.

"Patience," Abroen said. "Mjolnir can be used to destroy and build. I think you've spent more time with it destroying things than creating. An act of destruction takes no time at all. Creating something—that takes time, and patience."

"What about Loki?"

"He'll be spending time with the healers," Abroen said.

"Does he know that yet?" Thor asked.

"No," Abroen said.

"What is the lesson Loki will be learning?" Thor said.

"Trust," Abroen said. "We are going to reforge what was broken. The two of you tolerate each other. There is some respect there, born out of love and shared history, but you're different people now. You need to learn to accept each other as you are now."

"I thought things were better between us," Thor said.

"You know better than I, but still, you will do this," Abroen said.

"Will you be putting Fandral to work also?"
"Possibly," Abroen said. "Come with me, you two."

He turned them over to Ursal, the smith, and headed home, thinking on the way. Putting Thor to work in the forge was the best idea he could come up with. To hammer and shape with his hands, without Mjolnir, Kjalvor beside him, the two of them bending metal to their wills, would help his bond with his dragon, and hopefully teach him patience. If not, he could find something else.

Sending Loki and Isond to the healers made sense. He'd learned by questioning Loki that his magic gave him some healing ability, but Abroen wanted him to learn from the ground up. Healers were trusted across the Nine Realms. If Loki could learn to accept trust, he would hopefully learn to trust himself. Isond's trust in her partner was unbreakable, and Abroen hoped it would rub off on Loki.

And Fandral. Abroen figured giving him over to the weapons master, anything to keep him out of trouble himself. He got along well with other dragons and their partners, so that was a plus. He would prove useful, and possibly worthy of a dragon himself.

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The day was cold, but Abroen dragged them all outside anyway. Loki and Fandral used Isond's foreleg as a bench, and Thor was bundled up, huddled against Kjalvor for warmth. Gallanr was unfazed by the weather or their new students. He wondered if the fact she wasn't worried was a good sign. Maybe the dragon knew something he didn't. Sometimes she made him paranoid that way, only telling him after the fact, or right before something happened. Gallanr was calm, one of the calmest dragons in the realm, considering she was female. Thor's ignorance and thoughtlessness hadn't set her off. Yet. But she did share his anxiety over Loki and Isond. Gallanr just covered it up better. Pushing it from his mind, Abroen started their first official day with history.

Loki was interested to hear more of the history. During his visit to Asgard Abroen had left a small amount of information with Frigga, and Loki and Isond were eager to learn all they could. And Thor could always be kept interested in with a good story, and Kjalvor was just the same.

He listened as Abroen explained the first dragons were tamed during the Aether War, the creatures joining their might with the Ljolsafar to fight the oncoming darkness. The first dragons were bonded solely with magic, joining theirs with that of the elf they agreed to partner with. Eventually, the process was honed with magic, until it was a complete, lifelong joining.

And they also learned there were still wild dragons in the mountains and deserts of Alfheim. One of the few sentient races in the realms older than Asgard or the elves themselves.

Abroen also told them over the ages, dragon riders became guardians of the realm as well as teachers, warriors, healers and historians. Which, of course, piqued Loki's interest.

"Do the dragons know anything of the Infinity Gems?" Loki asked.

"Some of the most ancient among the wild ones could, but I would not want to face their wrath when awakened," Abroen said. "We might have something in our archives. They go back farther than anything you have in Asgard."

"Asgard has some of the finest libraries in the realms," Thor said.

Isond and Loki shared a look.

"I saw that," Thor said. "I do know how to read, Loki."

"Name the last book you read," Loki said.
"The damn book you used for Isond's name," Thor said.

Loki smiled, about to taunt Thor about the book when Abroen gave them both a stern look. Thor punched his brother in the shoulder, and they turned their attention back to the lesson, which lasted a while longer until Abroen sent Thor and Kjalvor off, leaving Loki and Fandral.

"Loki, Thor has his assignment, it's time for you to receive yours," Abroen said. "You and Isond will be working with the healers each day. I think you'll make a fine healer, and you already have some of the necessary skills."

"What if I don't want to learn healing?" Loki asked.

"Do you want to face my wrath?" Abroen said.

"I suppose there some purpose in this lesson?" Loki said.

"You, hopefully, will learn to be more trusting," Abroen said.

"When do I start?" Loki said.

"Halleah will take you to the healing wing," Abroen said. "Good luck."

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After that, their days had a set routine. Eat, exercise the dragons, lessons, midday meal, smithy or healing wing, sparring, evening meal and a little free time. Abroen hoped working them hard and long there would be no time for mischief. He hoped they would prove him wrong.

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Loki let Thor drag him to the sparring ring after dinner each night. It was becoming a habit, part of their routine. Fandral was off drinking with Tanric and Sennen, or spending time with Calania and Lere. The dragons usually spent the time sleeping, or visiting others of their kind.

They never used their powers during these matches, just a chosen weapon and their different strengths. This night, Loki had two short swords and Thor chose a spear. Loki knew Thor's mind was else where when he managed to slice his brother's arm open and grazed his forehead.

"Damn it, Loki, be more careful," Thor said, throwing down his weapon, unsure of which wound to tend first. The blood flowing into his eyes seemed to be more of a problem.

"You're the careless one, brother," Loki said. "You're distracted. It's your own fault you're bleeding."

"What am I supposed to do, not spare Jane a single thought?" Thor said.

"Not when someone has sharp, pointy things pointed at you," Loki said.

"Don't joke," Thor said. "I'm not in the mood for it."

"Are you in the mood to beat each other senseless? Would that make you feel better?" Loki said.

"What would make me feel better is just one day in Midgard Loki. One day," Thor said.

"We are not having this discussion again," Loki said, putting his swords back in their place. "Now it's your mortal, who's to say it won't be something else in the future? You keep looking for excuses, Thor. When are you going to grow up and face reality? You are heir to the Allfather. You cannot just walk away from your destiny."
"Oh, like you won't accept you've a throne waiting, yet you hide in Asgard and act like nothing has changed, Loki," Thor said.

"We're not talking about me," Loki said. "The more excuses you make, the more you slack off, the longer we stay here, and you have even more of a wait to see your mortal. How do you know she hasn't moved on?"

"Because I haven't," Thor said. "You said you loved Sigyn. You should understand. Has there been no one since?"

"But I moved on, Thor," Loki said. "It was the right choice. And to answer your question, there was the thought of someone, for a moment, when I was in Jotunheim, but it doesn't matter now. Thor, mortal lives are so short. Do you really think she'll continue to wait?"

"Is it Sif?" Thor said.

"No," Loki said. "Don't try and change the subject. Thor, be patient. Don't anger Abroen, and don't risk Father's wrath. Please. If your mortal is truly worth having, she'll wait. Have faith you'll see her again, and soon."

Loki hoped, for his brother's sake, the woman was worth it, despite his own feelings on the matter.

"Why can't you back me up on this, Loki?" Thor asked.

"What?"

"I love Jane," Thor said.

"Loving someone is not the same as being in love with them," Loki said.

"Does it really matter?" Thor said. "I love her."

"You keep saying that like you're trying to convince yourself you mean it," Loki said. "There are fare more pressing matters at hand than your damn mortal. We need to finish our training and get home. I know what Abroen said to you, and he meant it, because I received a different version of the same lecture, which, apparently, you did not take to heart."

"If you finish your training, you could go home first," Thor said.

"You ass," Loki said. "We are in this together. We came together, we will leave together. Have you heard nothing Abroen has said?"

"Why are you so adamant we finish this together?" Thor asked.

"Because you're the one damn person in the universe that still means more to me than Isond," Loki said. "Despite the fact that half the time I want throttle you, you're still my brother, and that's the one thing I held onto when I was in Jotunheim, and after. The one thing besides Isond that helped keep me sane. I've always loved you more than I should."

Thor gave him a strange look. "Then why can't you be happy for me?"

Thor suddenly found himself flat on his back, seeing stars, blood gushing from his nose.

"I didn't know you could hit that hard, little brother," Thor said.

"There are many things you don't know about me, Thor," Loki said.

Isond, call a healer for Thor. I'll not be helping him myself.
With that, he transported himself away from Thor.

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Abroen's head hurt as he lay down beside Halleah. It was late, and he'd had a talk with Loki after hauling Thor to the healers.

"What did they fight about?" Halleah asked, rolling over, laying her head on her husband's chest.

"The same thing," Abroen said.

"Midgard?"

"Is Loki jealous?" Halleah asked.

"Angry more than anything," Abroen said.

"Can you blame him?" Halleah said. "Have you explained things to him yet?"

"No," Abroen said. "I was waiting for that."

"Abroen, how could you? He needs to know," Halleah said. "The sooner you tell him, the more time he'll have to come to terms with it. I can't believe you. I should make you sleep outside with Gallanr."

He'll not be sleeping beside me, Gallanr replied. Some teacher you are.

"Do you want me to tell him?" Halleah asked. "He has no quarrel with me."

"I should have you deal with Thor," Abroen said. "I thought he'd be less difficult of the two."

"He's a man in love, and I know how stubborn those can be," Halleah said. "You did have words with him about it tonight?"

"He can't get the notion out of his head he is going to Midgard when he wants," Abroen said.

"Does he know what Loki and Isond can do?"

"No," Abroen said. "The Allfather made them swear an oath they wouldn't reveal that ability."

"How did you get it out of them then?"

"Loki and Isond have been much easier to deal with than Thor," Abroen said. "Even Fandral."

"Send them home," Halleah said.

"And give him what he wants? No," Abroen said. "I need another solution."

"I'll think of something," Halleah said.

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Loki was grateful Abroen let him and Isond out of their daily lessons the next day. They were to fly a patrol with Calania and Awyrr, and Fandral was along, staring at the elf maid as she received their orders from Tanric.

Calania shot Fandral a smile.
Go talk to her, Fandral, Isond said.

"Abroen will kill me if I lay a hand on his daughter," Fandral said.

"You're going to walk over and talk to her," Loki said. "Talk, Fandral. That thing you obviously cannot do when she's around. Talk about the weather. Ask about the city, anything. She'll talk back, and I'm certain she doesn't bite."

She likes you, Isond added.

"Even I can see that," Loki said. "And Awyr hasn't tried eating you, so I'd say that's to your advantage."

Fandral waited until Calania was done talking with Tanric, and he watched as she vaulted to Awyr's back.

"Good weather for flying today, isn't it?" Fandral asked.

"For now," Calania said. "The dragons say a snowstorm is coming. We'll have to see."

"They can tell the weather?"

"Some," Calania said. "Would you like to fly with Awyr and I today?"

"Uh, of course," Fandral said.

Awyr offered her foreleg for Fandral to climb up, and he situated himself behind the other rider.

I told you, Isond said.

When they returned from patrol, Abroen and Gallanr were waiting for them.

"Is everything all right, Father?" Calania asked.

"All is well, daughter," Abroen said. "I merely have something I need to discuss with Loki. Go spend some time with Fandral."

Calania smiled, linking her arm through his, dragging him away, Awyr following.

"If it's about last night. . ."

"No," Abroen said. "Although we are going to have words about it. I have something else I wish to discuss. Remember when I told you I was chosen to be your teacher because of my experience and perspective?"

"Yes," Loki said.

"Good. Get comfortable," Abroen said, sitting down against Gallanr. "It's a fairly sensitive subject among new riders, but I'll start off with the easy part first. I think Isond has reached her full growth. I'm not surprised she hasn't reached Gallanr's size. Not many do. Isond only had your magic to sustain her, but you did a fine job. She suits you."

"How long does it take for them to mature?" Loki asked.

"Some of the smaller females reach their full size at 18 months," Abroen said. "Two to two and a
half years is more common. Sometimes three, if they're exceptionally large. The males usually mature in a year. The females rise to mate around two years of age. That's a rule of thumb. Some earlier, some later. Isond will be two years old this summer. It's an eventuality you need to prepare for."

"What?" Loki asked.

"Despite our best efforts and those of the dragons themselves, they have a biological imperative to mate," Abroen said. "We've been unable to breed it out of them, and unfortunately, it is part and parcel of being a dragon rider. Although I can say, being one half of a mated pair, it is an exhilarating and rewarding experience."

"What do you mean?" Loki asked, confused.

"Mating can be. . .intense. Some riders choose not to participate in that aspect-to give in to the emotions they feel, and consummate the flight with a partner much as the dragons do," Abroen said, letting it sink in.

"Couldn't it be avoided altogether?" Loki asked.

"You can try," Abroen said. "When the time comes you won't have much warning. Isond will be feral, and you can try and bend her to your will. It's the only solution I can offer, or you could bring her here and wait it out until it happens. I'm sure the two of you could find potential mates here in Alfheim."

"Why would I want Isond to go through it with a stranger? Why does she have to go through it at all?" Loki asked.

"I survived it, and you will too," Abroen said. "It was how Halleah managed to rope me in, Gallnr's first flight. I've never regretted it. Calania has yet to experience it, and I've already talked with her. You're not alone, Loki."

"Why did you wait to tell me this?" Loki said.

"I didn't mean to," Abroen said. "Besides, you've had other matters to deal with. Your mother told me your true heritage, Loki. She thought it best I know. What happened during your time in Jotunheim? And after?"

"I'm not talking about it," Loki said.

"Fine," Abroen said. "But you do have another option. One I don't know if you've even considered. Kjalvor will be fully grown in a few months. You're Jotun. Your mother is Vanir. Both peoples have different tolerances and customs, as do we here in Alfheim. I don't know if you've even thought about it, how close you are to your brother, who is not your brother by blood. Kjalvor could be a suitable choice for Isond, if she would have him."

"Not bloody likely," Loki said.

"The decision, in the end, is yours," Abroen said.

Loki decided to change the subject. "Do you elves still abduct humans on a lark?"

"They sometimes end up here when they venture too close to a portal," Abroen said. "The king frowns upon it. In this day and age they no longer know us as the light elves, but think they've been taken by 'aliens."

"Pity," Loki said. "I've met real aliens, and the humans are right to consider them hostile."
"Another race?" Abroen asked.

"Not from any of the realms," Loki said.

"Is that what you were doing when you weren't in Jotunheim, but taken by these aliens?" Abroen said.

"Unfortunately, yes," Loki said.

Abroen placed a hand on his shoulder, biting back a laugh. "I know you're telling the truth, but do you know how preposterous that sounds?" he asked, not able to hold back his laughter.

"Now that I think about it, I do," Loki said, laughing himself.

Abroen wiped the tears from his eyes.

"We once happily accepted mortals here," he said. "Other races are still welcome. Attitudes have changed across the realms, and not necessarily for the better. When did we lose our tolerance and respect for one another?"

"Three wars in 5,000 years probably didn't help," Loki said. "All three instigated by other realms."

"Laufey was a fool for trying to take Midgard for himself," Abroen said. "The Vanir quickly learned their lesson. And our kin, the dark elves... Malekith would have destroyed all were it not for King Bor. They paid the ultimate price for his pride. I wonder if any still live."

"There were remnants of their technology in Jotunheim, being used to make Isond sleep while we were apart," Loki said.

"Their hibernation technology, from their ships?" Abroen asked. "No one has seen anything like that since the Aether War. Does the Allfather know?"

"Yes," Loki said.

"You and I are going to have a long talk about all this before you go home, Loki," Abroen said.

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Halleah's solution to their fighting, much to Thor and Loki's annoyance, was to spend more time together. Lessons, sparring, eating together, usually with someone in attendance, like their dragons, or Fandral, or some combination of Fandral, Calania, Tanric, Sennen or Lere. With a baby-sitter, they were much less likely to fight, but Thor resented being treated like a child, and Loki cared less. Some days they didn't talk. Those were the worst days, when Fandral wouldn't relay messages between them and even the dragons gave up. And eventually, it was Thor who broke the silence, picking a nice, safe subject.

"Kjalvor learned to flame the other day," Thor said, one evening after sparring. "He singed me the first few times, and apologized. I found out later he was jesting, and he knew how to do it all along."

"You should be proud," Loki said. "Soon you'll be flying with him."

"And we'll be going home," Thor said.

Loki ignored the comment he knew was hanging in the air, and Thor didn't mention it.
"Abroen said Isond's almost old enough to mate," Thor said. "I think you'll have some decisions you need to be making soon."

"Decisions that are none of your business, Thor," Loki said.

"Just making conversation," he said. "I miss home, don't you?"
"My home is with Isond," Loki said.

"Then I guess Kjalvor is my home, too," Thor said. "Loki, I'm sorry I've been so adamant about Midgard. I'm trying to be patient. Truce?"

Thor offered his hand, which Loki clasped. "Truce."

"Where is Fandral?" Loki asked, suddenly noticing their friend was no longer with them.

"Tanric and Sennen happened by a while ago and dragged him off with them," Thor said. "I think they went drinking. Or forced him to go see Calania. Are those two making any progress? You see them more than I."

"He's up to talking to her," Loki answered.

"Good," Thor said. "Let's go get something to eat, and go see Isond and Kjalvor."

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Loki was in his quarters, sitting in a chair, reading a while before turning in. Isond was sound asleep, but he heard a ruckus coming from anteroom. Standing, Loki watched as Tanric and Sennen entered.

The elves had Fandral between them, and gently deposited him onto the bed.

"He did himself proud," Tanric said. "I think he may be in need of a healer in the morning, though. We'll just leave him here. Good night."

The elves stumbled out together, leaving Loki staring down at Fandral.

"What happened to you?" Loki asked.

"I think I've been poisoned," Fandral said. "Elvish swill. Please put me out of my misery, won't you?"

Loki patted him on the head. "It will pass, Fandral," he said.

"Some friend you are, I'm dying, and you won't help me along to the next world," Fandral said.

"And they think I'm overly dramatic?" Loki said. He covered Fandral up with the furs, placed a hand on his head, and concentrated, easing the headache.

"Thank you," Fandral said.

"Next time it happens, you're on your own," Loki said.

"Least you're learning," Fandral said. "Hopefully no more having to go to Eir when we need healing, right?"

"You should be so lucky," Loki said. "Get some sleep."
The truce between the brothers held, and a few days later, Thor was ready to take his first flight with Kjalvor.

I bet he falls off, Isond said, watching with interest as Abroen checked the straps on Kjalvor's harness and saddle.

"I will not fall off," Thor said.

"Make sure you don't," Fandral said.

"Why do you think Abroen let me bring Mjolnir?" Thor said, pointing at the hammer, which was setting on the ground a few feet away.

You won't fall off, you will fly with me, and then we will be a proper dragon and rider. Finally, Kjalvor said. Are we going to do this or not?

"Remember, this is not like riding a horse," Abroen said. "If you would have flown with Loki and Isond or another pair, you would be better prepared for this."

"I promised Kjalvor my first flight on a dragon would be with him," Thor said, climbing up onto the dragon's back. "Ready?"

Kjalvor snorted, and took a hard leap into the air, flapping his wings, snapping Thor's head back.

"Easy," Thor said.

Kjalvor grunted in response, gaining a little altitude, flying a few circles over the others before Abroen signaled them to land.

"Well done," Abroen said.

Thor slid down Kjalvor's shoulder once they were on the ground, wrapping his arms around the dragon's muzzle, planting a kiss between his eyes. "Thank you for not scaring me to death, Kjalvor," he said. "That was amazing."

See, I do know what I'm doing sometimes, Kjalvor said.

Loki was grateful after a few more weeks Abroen relented, letting the brothers spend more time apart. Loki and Isond were granted permission to fly patrols on their own, with Fandral joining them most of the time. Thor and Kjalvor flew with Abroen and Gallanr or Tanric and Itaar, or sometimes with his brother. Abroen preferred letting the less experienced pair fly with the others just in case.

At the moment, Loki was sitting with Isond and Fandral, enjoying a short break on the ground.

"Has our time here been what you thought it would be?" Fandral asked, tossing Loki a dried apple.

He shrugged. "I didn't know what to expect," Loki answered.

It's been hard work, Isond said. It isn't bad, though. I enjoy learning, and Loki does, too. I'm glad to meet other dragons. Kjalvor's been better, too.

"Not so much a silly hatchling now?" Loki asked, reaching up, scratching Isond's chin.
No, she answered.

"The dragons are getting along better, and you and Thor seem better," Fandral said.

"We declared a truce," Loki said.

"Glad to see it's holding," Fandral said. "Will it last once we return home?"

"We'll see," Loki said.

"At least we're not bored," Fandral said. "I wish I knew what we were looking for. I'm sick of rumors. Months of people seeing things in the dark in Asgard, now the same here. What is going on?"

"Nerves," Loki said. "Who knows. It's been a long winter."

"Think it could be the Chitauri?" Fandral asked. "Because it is not wolves. Rumor had it at home before we left there was some unrest in some of the outer villages—livestock slaughtered, people going missing."

Loki shuddered, and Isond touched her chin to his shoulder. "I hope not," Loki said. "That would mean they've found a way across the realms without the scepter or Tesseract."

If it is the Chitauri, we will fight them to the last, Isond said.

"Hopefully it won't come to that," Fandral said.

"How goes it with Calania?" Loki asked, changing the subject.

"She came by the other day," Fandral said. "We talked. It was pleasant."

"I hope you didn't bore her with tales of amazing you think you are," Loki said.

"No. We talked of Asgard, and dragons," Fandral said. "She's a nice girl."

"Which is why you should treat her with respect," Loki said.

"I am," Fandral said. "I would like to make it home alive."

"Not to mention what my parents would do to you if you create diplomatic problems," Loki said, grinning at Fandral.

"I'm not stupid," Fandral said. "Calania is the niece of the queen and king here, and in line to the throne, even if she never stands a chance. Not that it matters. I like her, and Awyd."

"Then don't ruin your chances," Loki said.

"I'll try not to," Fandral said. "What about you? Anyone catch your eye?"

"I've been too busy," Loki said.

"I've been sitting in on the same lessons you have," Fandral said. "I know the wheels are turning in your head. Tread carefully."

"I will," Loki said.

"Make sure you do," Fandral said.
Winter slowly gave way to spring, and before Loki knew it, they had been in Alfheim more than three months. His training with the healers was going well, and he didn't mind. Larenid and Gilon, the pair he was assigned to, were testing the waters, giving him some responsibility. Nothing major, just the village circuit they took once a week, checking on patients and their welfare. Most of the villagers were comfortable with the fact Loki was an outsider. Isond's presence helped with that, and they respected and trusted healers. He was never greeted with suspicion, normally smiles, or relief somebody was there to help. People, strangers, trusted him. But here in Alfheim, he had no reputation beyond what he and Isond made for themselves. He wasn't a prince, but Loki, rider of Isond, and whatever else he wanted to make of himself.

He and Isond were almost done making the rounds for the day, when he found himself smiling.

"You're happy, Isond said. That's taken long enough. Being here has been good for us. You think less about when we were away from each other, but I still think you need to talk. Gilon said Midgard has healers that might be able to help us."

"I'll consider it," Loki said. "We have three more houses to check up on."

The last three consisted of a prized mare carrying a rare set of twins, a little boy with a broken arm slow to heal and an elderly woman with gout. The healers among the dragon riders didn't make any distinction between healers for people and animals. A healer was a healer. Loki liked that idea, and Isond concurred.

The horses here don't run from me, Isond said.

"It's because the horses in this part of the realm are used to seeing dragons from the time they're foaled, and they know they have nothing to fear from your kind," Loki said.

Sleipnir isn't afraid of me, Isond said.

"Because Sleipnir fears almost nothing," Loki said.

When are we going back to Asgard? Isond asked.

"As soon as Abroen says we're ready," Loki said.

You need to ask him about the gems again, Isond said. I've asked Duran, Itaar and Noran, and they only know about the Tesseract and the Aether. They told me more than I wanted to know about the war with the Dokkalfar. Awyir said Calania could take us to the archives in Cathrad.

"We'll ask Abroen when we return," Loki said, eager to check on his remaining patients.

The mare was due any day, Loki decided, and that was one delivery he would assist with gladly. The boy's arm was healing better with a little nudge from himself and Isond, and he was made to sit down and eat dinner with Eda, his last patient of the day.
It was late when he was finally able to excuse himself, and he did not want to fly back to Drekinheim in the dark. Isond was perfectly capable of it, but they didn't have to take the long way back.

"Abroen didn't say we couldn't, and we're not in Asgard, so why not?" Loki asked.

Because I know eventually this is going to backfire on us, Isond said.

"You're becoming as paranoid as Abroen," Loki said, placing a hand on Isond's shoulder. A moment of concentration as they joined their magic, and they appeared outside the entrance to their quarters. Where Thor was sitting with Kjalvor.

How did you do that? Can you show me? Kjalvor asked Isond and Loki.

Thor was standing beside Kjalvor, arms crossed.

"I thought you've been out making your rounds," Thor said.

"We have been," Loki said.

"Silverglade, Aetilia and Iros are a day's flight at least," Thor said. "I thought you couldn't transport yourself very far."

You shouldn't tell him, Isond said.

"Isond, he would've found out eventually anyway, and the Bifrost is repaired, so there's not point in pretending anymore," Loki said.

"Found out what?" Thor asked.

"Isond and I can transport ourselves across great distances," Loki said.

"Even across realms," Thor said. "So you lied to me."

"No, I never lied. I said I could not take you to Midgard, and it wasn't a lie. Father made me swear an oath, Thor, because he knew what you'd do when you found out. And no, it is still forbidden, so don't ask."

"Does it take a great deal out of you?" Thor asked.

"Hopping across the realms isn't my idea of fun," Loki said. "From one to another isn't difficult. More than that, and it's beyond exhausting. You saw the evidence of that when we came back to the ship on Midgard. We went from Midgard to Jotunheim, to Asgard, and back to Midgard."

"Without using the Tesseract?"

"We tapped into it to it to help," Loki said. "But we don't need it."

"It's one of your gifts then, as Abroen calls them?" Thor said.

"Just like Kjalvor can call and breathe lightning, and the two of you have learned to shape metal and stone without a forge," Loki said.

Building is better than destroying, Kjalvor interjected.

"I agree," Loki said.
"Have you eaten?" Thor said.

"Yes," Loki said, but I wouldn't mind joining you, brother," Loki said.

Loki lounged beside Isond as she napped. Thor and Kjalvor were at one of their combat lessons, from which no doubt Thor would return covered in bruises and asking him to heal his contusions. Some things never changed. Loki watched them occasionally, but more often, he and Isond were getting schooled themselves. Now that he and Isond were learning to fight properly together, Loki knew how lucky they were in New York. Luck and instinct got them through, but it served them well, and Abroen was pleased with their progress in that area. In the air, on the ground, apart or together, they were a formidable force.

Kjalvor and Thor were learning, and watching them apart, in the air, Loki felt no pity for anyone facing his brother and his dragon that way. And Thor now had a healthy respect for what he and Isond could do, after facing them together, without Kjalvor, with nothing but Mjolnir as his defense. A storm or lightning could knock them out of the sky, but on the ground, apart, Thor couldn't fight them both when facing Isond's fire, claws and teeth and Loki's knives or ice and snow.

Even Fandral had picked up a thing or two, and Loki was eager to show his father what they learned.

Even better, Thor was less abrasive of late, more contemplative, and certainly more humbled. Loki felt more at ease with himself, and Thor. They could actually get through a conversation without mention of Midgard, or either one of them picking a fight. It wasn't the ease their relationship had when they were boys, but it was better than it had been in a long time. Abroen's wisdom in forcing them together did have some merit.

Thor came limping in, followed by Kjalvor.

"This brat of mine tripped me with his tail, on purpose, then he set my cloak on fire," Thor said.

Isond reached over, touching noses with Kjalvor, as if congratulating the younger dragon.

You probably deserved it, Isond said.

"I did not," Thor said.

"Did too," Loki said. "Haven't you learned anything? You're vulnerable on the ground without Mjolnir. You need to keep an eye on everything that's going on during a battle, or let Kjalvor be your eyes and ears. Isond can teach him."

I watch and listen, but he doesn't hear me because he's so intent on smashing things, Kjalvor said.

"When in a battle will I not have Mjolnir?" Thor asked.

"It could happen," Loki said. "You're very good at starting a fight, and seeing it through, but you need to keep an eye on the bigger picture. How many times have I saved us that way?"

Thor sat down by Loki. "I know," Thor said. "It's an adjustment, learning to fight with Kjalvor in my head, beside me, after so much time fighting with Mjolnir in my hand."

"We'll adapt," Loki said. "Having Isond and Kjalvor with us in combat will hopefully give us an advantage if and when we're needed."
"And Fandral, if he gets a dragon, too," Thor said.

"He's learned much about fighting with them," Loki said. "He's gotten rather proficient at taking and giving directions during mock combat. Even that will prove an advantage."

"The Einhejar will have to be trained in how to fight with dragons," Thor said.

"I know," Loki said. "I'm not looking forward to that."

"Eh, it's something to worry about later," Thor said. "Would you mind taking a look at my right knee? I wrenched it when Kjalvor tripped me."

Loki kneeled down by his brother, feeling the joint for any warmth or swelling. It was puffy beneath his hands, and his hands glowed as he healed it.

"Good as new," Loki said.

"I wish healing your head were as simple," Thor said.

Loki glared.

"I meant no offense," Thor said. "I just hoped after all this time, you trusted me enough to talk, that's all."

"I wouldn't tell Mother before we left, so what makes you think I'll tell you?" Loki said.

Thor stood, placing a hand on Loki's shoulder. "Because it's eating you up inside, and you know you can trust me, brother," he said.

"Later, perhaps," Loki said.

"It's always later, Loki," Thor said. "Don't you want to get better?"

"I want to put it behind me. That's what I want, Thor," Loki snapped. "You don't talk about what happened to you on Midgard, or the months in Asgard after your return, so why should I spill my guts."

"Fine, you want to know? I'll tell you. The first few days, I was hit by a car twice, tased, arrested, endured a beating from a rather large mortal, and spent more time being humiliated and sorry for myself than I can ever remember," Thor said. "Their hospital was also a revelation. They drugged me after I fought them, and then they put me in restraints because I was a threat. Loki, I was out of my mind. I attacked people simply because they were doing their job. I didn't know that at the time, but it doesn't absolve me of my guilt."

Loki stared at the floor as Thor continued.

"I was mortal, Loki. Mortal. Stripped of Mjolnir and my powers. I've never been that vulnerable before," Thor said. "Darcy, Erik and Jane showed kindness, not because I was a prince of Asgard, but because I was someone who needed help. They thought I was mad, but they came around. I learned to cook. I washed dishes. I even got a job Loki. I was a bouncer at a bar. You throw people out when they get drunk or violent."

"Normally you're the drunk, violent one," Loki said.

"I can appreciate the irony, brother," Thor said. "Are you going to let me continue?"

"Go ahead," Loki said.
"I missed home, you and Mother and Father," Thor said. "For me, Loki, that was the worst part. And knowing how I treated you, hoping I would have the chance to apologize, then, when I finally made it home, they told me you were dead, Loki. Dead. No chance of ever making things up to you. I never realized until that moment that there wouldn't be a time when you weren't by my side."

"In your shadow, you mean," Loki said.

"Stop it," Thor said. "You've always been there, Loki, since I was old enough to know what it meant to be a brother. I'm sorry I haven't been a better brother, a better example, when you've always been a better brother to me than I've been to you."

Loki didn't answer, just stared at Thor.

"I'm not laughing at you, brother," Loki said. "Isond gave me her opinion, that's all. I've always had your back, Thor. I always will. You may drive me mad, but I do love you."

Thor hugged him, pounding him on the back.


"Your turn," Thor said.

Loki closed his eyes, and Isond snaked her head under his arm.

"Did you know the best way to torture a Jotun is fire?," Loki said. "We're immune to the cold, and I endured cold you cannot even begin to fathom. . .but fire. . .Even a Jotun welcomes its warmth and welcoming, but Laufey told them to use fire. It was their first, quickest method. They healed everything but the worst of the burns, which endured for months because of the Other. I still don't understand their science. Then they used the scepter, tried breaking my mind, but with Isond so near, it didn't work. Only after they separated us did Thanos' plans begin to take shape. I became his pawn, completely unwilling, of course, but I still managed to hold on to a small sliver of myself.

I told you already Isond was the reason why, but I held on for her. And because of you, brother. I refused to believe it was that easy for Laufey to kill you," Loki said.

"For a moment, I think I was dead, Loki," Thor said. "Then Mjolnir was in my hands. I don't really remember."

"Consider yourself lucky," Loki said. "Death would be a relief compared to what I went through."

Thor moved over to sit beside Loki, putting an arm around his shoulders.

"You don't have to go on if you don't want to," Thor said. "Enough for now, Loki."

"You're not going to say anything?" Loki asked.

"We've both been through our own worst nightmare, I think," Thor said. "Losing you was mine, and I didn't even know it."

"Thanos and the Other made sure I lived mine over and over," Loki said. "Once was enough. It was
more than enough."

A feast-day to honor the dragons, and the return of spring. Twice a year the Ljolsafar presented eggs for hatching, once in the spring, and once in the fall during harvest season. A day with no lessons, just a chance to enjoy each other's company, and watch Fandral come completely undone.

"Anyone who wishes may have a chance at the eggs," Loki said. "That means you, Fandral. Remember to breathe. It's all right if you don't make a match now. You can come back in the fall. And even if you don't have a dragon hatch for you, I don't think Calania would care."

Fandral glared. "Shut up," he said.

Does Fandral know he's been technically courting Calania since we arrived? Isond asked.

"Do you want to be the one to tell him that?" Loki asked, giving the dragon a pointed look.

"Tell me what?" Fandral said, turning white as Awyr landed and Calania joined them.

The elf kissed him on the cheek.

"You stand as good a chance as anyone today," Calania said. "My father said you have potential. He's never, ever wrong. It might not be today, but one day you will have a dragon."

"You think so?" Fandral said.

"It's one of Father's gifts," Calania answered. "If Thor can have a dragon hatch for him, you stand a chance."

"I heard that," Thor said, coming over, Kjalvor bumping him.

"You're not what any of us expected," Calania said.

"Is that good or bad?" Thor asked.

"Good," Calania said. "You had a reputation around here as a spoiled brat always looking for a fight. The incident in Jotunheim really didn't help. I'm happy to see you've changed."

"So am I," Thor said, flashing his best smile.

Loki elbowed him in the ribs. "Oh, he's a humble one, isn't he?"

Thor elbowed him back. "What was Loki's reputation?"

"The trickster, and your shadow," Calania said.

"That rings true," Thor said. "Always by my side and making his own mischief."

Loki kept his mouth shut.

"Loki's mischief is nothing compared to that time you lost Mjolnir and had to dress up as a maid to go get it back," Fandral said. "Or have you forgotten? You did make a pretty maid, though."

"Fandral, I love you and you are my friend, but if you ever mention that again, I will kill you," Thor said.
"Thank you for mentioning that little adventure," Loki said. "He needs to be reminded once in a while. It's humbling for him."

"Embarrassing beyond belief," Fandral said. "Remember how Volstagg made a pass at him?"

"I will never forget," Loki said, grinning.

"You're next, brother, after Fandral," Thor said.

Not if I eat you first, Isond said.

The stories you two tell are strange, Kjalvor said. This all happened?

"Yes," Fandral said. "I could go on all day about the adventures these two have been on. I've been along on some of them. The things we've seen and done. . .fought Draugr, worshipped on Midgard as gods. . ."

"Don't forget the goats," Loki said.

"Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjostr are sweet creatures and I'll not have anyone slandering their names," Thor said.

"What's wrong with a pair of goats?" Calania asked.

"Nothing," Loki said. "But these two are war goats from Vanaheim Father has Sleipnir, and Thor wanted a steed like Sleipnir, and he got the goats instead. Thor's the only person in existence those wretched creatures will tolerate."

"All right then," Calania said. "We have a feast to attend."

There were five eggs in all, two grey, one brown, one red and a dark green. Fandral didn't make a move the whole day, watching as three of the eggs hatched. No amount of urging from his friends or the dragons could make him go.

"You just walk up to the eggs and touch each one," Calania said. "One might choose you. It's as simple as that. Have faith."

"Go," Thor said, shoving Fandral toward the remaining two eggs.

Fandral wouldn't move, so Loki grabbed him, dragging him toward them. Fandral put his hand to the brown and nothing happened.

"Better luck next time," Fandral muttered, turning around, only to find Kjalvor staring him down.

The dragon butted him toward the green egg.

One more, Kjalvor said. Don't give up.

Fandral placed his hand on the egg, surprised when it warmed at his touch, and he pulled his hand back when he felt it crack. The little green hatchling chirped, trying to climb up his torso.

"At least it didn't bite," Thor muttered.

"He's happy to see me," Fandral said. "I'm glad to meet you."
The hatchling rubbed its head against his cheek, and Calania grabbed Fandral in an embrace, kissing him.

"I told you so," Calania said. "What are you going to name him?"

"Ivik," Fandral said, holding him up for the other dragons to see. Ivik chirped at the bigger dragons, who rumbled back. Content at having met the other dragons, he settled against Fandral, letting him know he was starving.

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They celebrated Fandral's good fortune by drinking in his honor, as he'd been carted off with the other new dragon partners. Loki returned later to find Fandral collapsed in bed, face down, still wearing his boots, Ivik curled in the small of his back. He managed to check on them without waking them before stumbling his way to Isond and to sleep off the wine.

But Loki was awakened by the sudden movement of Isond's head snapping up. Fandral came tripping into the room, carrying Ivik.

"Did you feel that?" Fandral said.

Ivik chirped, tilting his head, as if he was asking a question.

"Bifrost," Fandral said.

Ivik blinked, fluttering his wings.

"It means someone from home is here," Loki said.

Ivik looked at Fandral, his expression suggesting he wanted an answer.

"I'll go find out who," Loki said, standing, throwing on his pants over his leggings and put on his boots.

He walked outside, Isond following, finding Thor already on the ground talking with someone, Kjalvor perched on his ledge, lashing his tongue and tail in annoyance.

It's Sif, Isond said. We're to come home with her.

"Why?" Loki asked.

She isn't giving Thor an answer, only that we all need to return to Asgard.

Loki went down the stairs, joining Thor.

"Sif, just give me a reason," Thor said.

"Do you need a reason for a summons from the Allfather?" Sif said.

"Is it a summons from our father," Thor said, shooting Loki a look. "Or from the Allfather. There is a difference, and I hope you're wise enough to recognize it."

"Thor, I was awakened by an Einherjar in the middle of the night, given the message I was to come to Alfheim and retrieve you, your brother, Fandral and the dragons," Sif said. She noticed Loki, Isond, Fandral and the little green he had in his arms. Her eyes widen. 
"Hello Sif," Loki said.

"Good morning," Fandral said. "This is Ivik."

"Another?" Sif said.

"Ivik hatched yesterday," Fandral said.

"Too bad he's not bigger," Sif muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. We have to go," Sif said.

"Not until we see Abroen," Thor said. "We can't go anywhere without his permission."

"You're the sons of Odin. You don't need anyone's permission," Sif said.

"Ah, Sif, we do," Loki said.

"Why?"
Loki rolled his eyes at her, and Fandral sighed.

"We need to see Abroen. You can come with us if you like," Thor said.

They walked in silence to the elf's home, where Abroen was waiting when they arrived.

"The watch riders already sent word along someone arrived by Bifrost," he said. "I knew you would all be along. Hello, Sif."

She nodded, taken slightly aback at all the chaos and how well Thor, Loki and Fandral fit in, and seemed to be taking it. The place outside was crawling with dragons, and inside, the elf's family and several one-sided conversations were going on.

"A bit much to take in, isn't it?" Abroen said.

"Yes," Sif said. "No offense, Lord Abroen, but we need to get back to Asgard."

"Give them time to take their leave," Abroen said. "Your princes, Fandral, Isond, Kjalvor and now Ivik are as members of my own family. I think we deserve that respect."

"You're letting me go back?" Fandral asked. "Ivik's just hatched. . . ."

"Queen Frigga can serve as your teacher for now," Abroen said. "You're needed in Asgard."

"I don't know how much good I can do with a hatchling," Fandral said.

"Ivik will be a patient dragon, I think," Abroen said, reaching out, cupping the dragonet's chin with his hand. "A patient, strong fellow. The two of you will be fine. You'll have your friends to help. I don't think the Allfather would send someone to collect you in the middle of the night if it wasn't important."

They made their good-byes, went to retrieve their things and finally followed Sif out to the site of the Bifrost.

"You can tell us, Sif," Loki said. "What is going on?"
She didn't answer.

"Sif, I order you to tell us what is going on," Thor said, hoping pulling his weight as prince would work.

She turned, glaring.

"You'll find out when we return," Sif said.

"Ever the good little soldier, aren't we, Sif?" Fandral said. "Just tell us and spare us the drama."

"Go to Hel, Fandral," she said, eyes going to Ivik.

"Jealous, Sif?" Fandral asked.

"A little," she said.

They walked into the circle, and Sif called Heimdall. They came through the Bifrost, and Kjalvor managed to not flatten anyone on his way out.

Heimdall smiled at them all. "It's good to have you all back," he said, clasping Thor's hand, giving the little group the once over. Fandral, Loki and the two larger dragons were with Thor, while Sif had separated herself from them. Interesting.

"Your father is waiting," Heimdall said.

"Is everything all right?" Thor asked.

"It's not my place to explain," Heimdall said. "Your father is waiting for you."

Odin was indeed waiting for them, sitting on his throne, Gungnir in hand. He spared his boys a small smile before turning serious once again.

"I'm sorry to call you back home like this," Odin said. "But you and your dragons are needed elsewhere. Loki, your brother requests your presence in Jotunheim. You will go at once."

"What's wrong in Jotunheim?" Loki said.

"Civil war," Odin said. "You are the realm's true king, and you will go at once to stop the fighting. Sif and a contingent of Einherjar will go with you."

"Can I go with them, Father?" Thor asked.

"No, Thor, you will take Kjalvor and go to Nidavellir. They need our help in fighting marauders," Odin said. "The situation there is getting out of hand, and it needs to be dealt with. I wish you both luck."
Loki vaulted to Isond's back, holding out a hand to help Sif up as the dragon dipped her shoulder.

"Hold on," Loki said as Isond jumped into the air, flying to the observatory, where a company of Einherjar was waiting.

"Just how bad are things?" Loki asked Sif.

"Fighting broke out in Nidavellir weeks ago, and there are rumors coming from Vanaheim, but nothing substantiated yet," she said. "Nidavellir and Jotunheim are the worst right now."

Why is this happening? Isond asked.

"We'll find out," Loki said as Heimdall set his sword into the lock, igniting the Bifrost.

Loki urged Isond into the light, and the Einherjar followed on foot. And when they emerged, Loki expected to be buffered by the realm's winter winds, but what greeted them was worse than normal. Storms raging in Jotunheim weren't unusual. The intensity of the gale battering Utgard was abnormal. Loki urged Isond to the ground, and she landed by the Einherjar, who were trying to shield themselves from the storm. Loki tried calming it, but to no avail.

"We're going to have to walk," he said, pointing them in the direction of the palace.

"Good thing everyone dressed warmly this time," Sif said.

Loki rolled his eyes, turning away from her.

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Suttung met them. "We've been waiting for you," he said.

"Uncle," Loki said. "This is Sif, and you remember Isond."

He nodded at them, and looked beyond at the shivering soldiers.

"Get those men and your dragon settled in the great hall, then we can talk," Suttung said. "I'll have someone bring them food."

"What is going on?" Loki asked. "My father said there is civil war. . ."

"Byleistr can explain," he said.

Loki did as he was told, getting the men settled and telling Isond to watch over them before following his uncle to Byleistr's chambers. Byleistr was looking at a map on the table in the middle of the room, talking with Annar. Suttung left them to their discussion.

"Brother," Byleistr said, seeing Loki. "It's good to see you, but I'm sorry about the circumstances."
"As am I," Loki said. "Before we start, why couldn't I calm the storm?"

"Sorcery," Byleistr said. "It's been raging for days. We've had our best weather workers try, and nothing will stop it."

"Who is responsible?"

"Herg. He's the head of one of the oldest noble clans," Byleistr said. "He's managed to raise enough support to become a problem."

"I thought you had things here well in hand," Loki said.

"We did," Byleistr said. "But something's not right, as if you couldn't tell from the storm, and the fact I sent to Asgard for help. Herg gloated that someone named Thanos would give him the power to lay waste to his enemies if he took back the scepter. Sound familiar?"

The blood drained from Loki's face, and he felt faint. Sif grabbed him by the elbow.

He will not touch us. He will pay for the damage he has caused here, and elsewhere, Isond said. I will not let anything happen to you.

"Who is Thanos? Why is he doing this?" Byleistr asked.

"He is a madman," Loki said. "He tortured me, used me to try and conquer Midgard, gain the artifact called the Tesseract."

"What realm is he from?" Annar said. "And to what end?"

None of the nine realms, Isond replied. He is from somewhere beyond.

"How can that be? Not that I don't accept there is more than the nine, but someone interfering like that?" Byleistr said. "What is the Allfather going to do?"

"Put a stop to the burgeoning conflicts around the realms, and hope for the best," Loki said. "Thanos quite literally wishes to court death. Those are his words, not mine. I wasn't in my right mind at the time, so it's open to interpretation."

"Courting Lady Hel?" Annar said.

"Annar, I think Loki means death, as in well, death," Byleistr said.

Annar frowned at both. "Madman. Yes. Wonderful to know that's what we're ultimately dealing with," he said. "But why Jotunheim? Why stir up trouble here? We've been left on our own since the war. What could he want with us?"

"The scepter is here," Loki said. "It's a powerful weapon. Please tell me you still have it."

"It's hidden," Byleistr said. "I don't know where. I left that to Suttung."

"Why is this scepter so important?" Sif asked.

"It gives its holder the ability to control others," Loki said. "Read their minds, see into their hearts. I think the stone embedded in the thing is one of the Infinity Gems."

"Like the Tesseract?" Sif said.
"Exactly," Loki said.

"The cube lost from Asgard during the war?" Annar said. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Annar, shut up," Byleistr snapped. "Loki, we haven't been able to make a move on Herg. His clan's keep is in the mountains, north of Utgard. He was always a problem for Laufey, criticizing his decisions and character, but he never had any real ambition until now. I did agree with Laufey though. Someone should have killed Herg long ago."

"Why didn't Laufey do it then?"

"He couldn't just wipe out an entire clan," Byleistr said. "Do you know what kind of chaos that would have caused?"

"It's causing a problem now," Loki said. "I will make you a promise, brother. I will help you defeat this Herg. In return, you will continue to rule in my stead, and I will trade you the scepter for the Casket of Ancient Winters. No negotiating with the Allfather. It will be returned to its rightful place as the heart of Jotunheim."

Sif grabbed him by the arm.

"Loki, a word," she said.

"What?"
"You don't have that kind of bargaining power," she said. "Your father. . ."

"My father is not king here," Loki said. "I am."

"You can't just make that kind of promise," she said.

"I can, and I will," Loki said. "I am the rightful king of this realm, and my word is law."

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"I am Laufey's true heir. You are a guest here, and you have no right to question me," Loki said.

"I know you're Laufey's son, but king?"

"I killed Laufey," Loki said. "That makes me king here, Sif. Or did you not know?"

She started to say something, but chose not to, turning on her heel, leaving the room.

She thinks you're not telling all you know, Isond said. She wonders why you would keep something so important to yourself.

"I'll deal with her later," Loki said.

"Would you like me to talk with her?" Annar offered.

"Leave her be for now," Loki said.

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Stuck in Jotunheim again. Loki was not fond of the idea, but what could he do? And in the back of his mind, he couldn't let go of the terror he felt at the fact Thanos was once again reaching into places he had no right. Jotunheim now, possibly Asgard was next. The thought kept Loki awake at night,
but he was grateful he wasn't having nightmares, until Annar and Isond called him out on it. The healer was angry, and tried forcing him to take a day off from their preparations to deal with Herg, but Loki refused. His personal problems were nothing compared to those of an entire realm, and he soldiered on.

"Right back where we started," Loki said one night after they'd been in Jotunheim almost a week.

We'll make short work of them, Isond said.

"Short work" turned into three weeks of frustration.

They spent three weeks trying to get into the mountains, but were forced back at every turn. Ambushes and foul weather were the causes.

Communication didn't work—the messengers never came back.

And Byleistr and Sif refused to let Loki and Isond try and transport themselves to the fortress to deal with the matter themselves. Loki gave up trying to argue with them, and finally gave in to Sif's wheedling, letting her send for help. Although he wasn't sure what other help Asgard could offer. Only a few in Asgard were powerful enough to work with weather, and Loki doubted any of those sorcerers would come to the aid of Jotunheim.

Loki also gave Suttung leave to find any help he could, and his uncle sent out the call for any Jotnar who could work weather—the strongest, or the most creative. With Isond and Loki, they managed to quell the storm long enough for the combined Jotnar and Einherjar to move into the mountains. It took three days, working in shifts, to finally end the blizzard.

The morning of the fourth day, the weather was calm. No storm clouds on the horizon, just the hazy constant winter sun shining down its feeble light. No wind. Dead quiet. The combined forces of the Einherjar and Jotun were already in place, and Loki and Isond were simply biding their time until they set their plan in motion when they heard the roar of another dragon.

Thor, astride Kjalvor, landed beside them.

"What are you doing here?" Loki asked.

"Sif sent for help, so here I am," Thor said. "Kjalvor and I are yours to command."

"So you're finished in Nidavellir?" Loki said.

Hardly, Kjalvor replied. I don't like it there.

Hopefully you'll like Jotunheim better, Isond said, touching her nose to Kjalvor's.

The smaller dragon snorted, and Thor patted Kjalvor's shoulder.

"The dvergar set us both on edge," Thor said. "Too many bad memories, and I'm sure they've lied to us."

They are lying, and will continue to lie, Kjalvor said. Must we go back there?

"My father promised help, and if he orders us to return, we must," Thor said. "Kjalvor, I'm truly sorry."

"You could refuse," Loki said.
"I'll save defying Father again for something truly worthy," Thor said. "Now, where do you want us?"

"Go find Sif, and stay out of our way," Loki said.

Thor nodded, and Kjalvor took off.

"Ready, Isond?" Loki asked.

Yes.

Isond launched herself skyward, heading toward the pass that was the one way in and out of Herg’s holdings. Byleistr had explained it was why the clan chose that location as its home—it was almost impenetrable. But Loki was going to change that. Cutting them off, giving them no escape, or a way to get help.

Loki gave the snow at the top of the peak a nudge, and the snow started to slide, creating a deadly fall. The avalanche rolled down the slope, taking everything in its path, blocking the pass. There was now no way out, except by dragon or Bifrost.

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They moved further into Herg’s territory, and made camp that night. Loki was talking with his Byleistr and Annar when he noticed the glance shared between the two.

"What?" Loki asked.

"He's here," Annar said.

"The Allfather's brat," Suttung said, walking past them.

"Should I..."

"It'll be fine," Annar said. "He probably just wants to talk."

Byleistr clenched his fists, biting his lip, trying not to give into the desire to strangle Annar.

"He has that hammer, and a dragon," Annar said. "Besides, if it does get ugly, Suttung won't hurt him. Much."

"Annar..."

"I know, shut up, right?" Annar said. "Loki, I hope your other brother proves useful tomorrow."

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Thor was checking up on the Einherjar when a Jotun warrior walked up, Loki following behind.

"You're the Aesir brat who came looking for war all those months ago," Suttung said.

"Thor, meet my uncle, Suttung," Loki said.

"I thought you said he wasn't Laufey's brother," Thor said.

"He's not," Loki said.

"You owe us wergild," Suttung said.
"I do," Thor said. "I will make reparation when I can. You have my word."

"Good," Suttung said. "I take the Allfather told you of his heritage? That you have the blood of the Jotnar running through your veins?"

Why do things like this keep happening? Isond asked.

Loki couldn't answer, because Thor was looking at him, a questioning look on his face.

"What?" he asked, looking from Suttung to Loki, confused.

"I guess not," Suttung said.

"Your...our grandmother, Bestla, Bor's wife, mother of Odin, was half Jotun," Loki said. "Her father was like me"

"A runt?" Thor said. "Father told you this? And not me? Why not?"

"You've only recently become comfortable with the fact I'm Jotun," Loki said. "He told me I could tell you when I thought you were ready, and he only revealed the truth a few days before we left for Alfheim."

"Why save the truth for another time?" Suttung asked. "Better to get things out in the open."

The brothers glared up at the Jotun.

"Thor..."

"Loki, leave me be for now," Thor said, walking away.

"Thank you, Suttung," Loki snapped.

"As I said, why keep the truth from him?" Suttung asked.

"Because I know him better than anyone, and this could go one of two ways," Loki said. "Badly. You do not want to see that. Or nothing could happen."

"He'll do nothing," Suttung said. "Hopefully it will only stand to reinforce his connection to you, his brother, and his resolve to help us."

"I hope you're right," Loki said.

"I am," Suttung said. "You'll see."

"How can you have faith in someone you've just met?" Loki said.

"I believe in giving others the benefit of the doubt," Suttung said. "I hope Thor proves me wrong."

"Sentiment," Loki said.

"Something you deny, yet believe in very much yourself," Suttung said. "Farbauti was the same way. You're very much like my brother, I even see a little of Laufey in you. His ruthlessness, but it's been tempered by compassion and wisdom."

"I'm not a wise man," Loki said.

"No, but you have the makings of one," Suttung said.
"Again, sentiment, Uncle," Loki said. "I'm going to go make sure he's all right."

Suttung nodded, watching his nephew walk away. And he was suddenly surprised when he heard a voice in his head.

Loki thinks there are many things he is not, Isond said.

"What do you mean?" Suttung asked.

He thinks he has always been in Thor's shadow, that he is not worthy of what he has been given, and he does not want the throne here.

"Like it or not, Isond, he has it," Suttung said. "There is not changing it."

Loki knows that, but he hasn't accepted it. He refuses to accept many things he knows to be true, Isond said. I try and make him see, but he won't.

"He won't accept it until he's ready," Suttung said.

Three days of fighting. Herg was dead by his own hand, and his followers in disarray. Some surrendered, the rest were put to the sword. Loki didn't like the idea, but he knew Suttung was right. He was king, Byleistr his regent, and they had hard choices to make.

"It's nothing compared to the numbers that died during the war," Suttung said.

"It doesn't matter," Loki said.

"Your Aesir sense of justice does not belong here right now," Suttung said. "Laufey is dead. He ruled for millennia, Loki. You can't expect this to be easy."

Suttung is right, Isond said. They will rally, find another to support. I do not like the idea any better than you, Loki, but what other choice is there?

"We could send them to Asgard as prisoners of war," Loki said.

"That's your idea of mercy?" Suttung said. "How is that any better than mine?"

"They would have their lives," Loki said.

"Living in a dungeon, in another realm," Suttung said. "That is not living. At least this way they have a choice. I think you can sympathize."

Loki's jaw hardened as he stared up at the big Jotun. "What do you mean?"

"Isond told me some of what happened to you," Suttung said. "You were ready to choose death for both of you, rather than serve someone against your will. Let them have this choice, Loki."

"Fine," he said, leaving his uncle alone. "Take care of it then. Isond and I are returning to Utgard."

"Go," Suttung said.

Thor was in the great hall of Utgard's palace, hopeful the worst was over. He wanted to go home for
a few days, but he knew it was only a matter of time before he was sent back to Nidavellir, or elsewhere. And he was proud of Loki, Isond and Kjalvor. Loki was holding himself together, and managed to make it through the whole debacle physically unscathed. Mentally, Thor wondered, and wanted to discuss it with his brother, but the chance hadn't come up yet.

Nor had he time to deal with Suttung's revelation about his heritage. Thor was glad to see Sif and the other Aesir fighting so well alongside the Jotnar. Hard to be prejudiced when you were fighting and dying together for the same cause. Or shared the same blood.

"Quit thinking so hard. You're giving me a headache."

Thor turned, seeing Loki.

"How goes it?" Thor asked.

"I argued with Suttung about taking prisoners," Loki said.

"He was right, you know," Thor said. "But at least they are being offered a choice now. Many have chosen Asgard's dungeon."

"Would you have put them to death without a choice?"

"I would give them a choice," Thor said.

"At least we agree on that," Loki said.

"You know, I was wrong about the Jotun," Thor said. "I'm glad to know that. Also, some of the Einherjar are surprised to see Byleistr healing them," Thor said.

"He's a skilled healer, and there's no reason why he shouldn't help. Heimdall can't be bothered all the time."

"They've also been talking about how they saw you turn blue and called a storm to wipe out the enemy," Thor said. "An avalanche in the pass to close it off. You're not scaring them, Loki, you're earning their respect."

"Fear, most likely," Loki said.

Thor clapped him on the shoulder. "Brother, you're wrong."

A few days later, Thor and Kjalvor, along with Sif and most of the Einherjar had returned to Asgard. Byleistr, Annar and Suttung came to see off Loki and Isond.

Loki stepped back as Suttung approached, holding what could only be the scepter. It was bound in ice, leather and fur wrapped around it.

"I never want to see that thing again," Loki said.

"Hopefully you'll never have to see it again," Suttung said, securing it to Isond's saddle.

"Find a way to destroy it," Byleistr said.

"We'll try," Loki said. "Try to not start another war while I'm away this time."
"No guarantees," Annar said. "Although I do have something to ask. May I have your blessing to court Byleistr?"

He grinned at the other Jotun, who had murder in his eyes.

"You may have it," Loki said. "Good luck."

"He'll need it," Byleistr muttered, changing the subject. "He's not as thickheaded as I imagined."

"Annar?" Loki asked.

"No, Thor," Byleistr said. "Kjalvor isn't bad either."

Kjalvor has grown past being a silly hatchling, Isond said.

"You finally admit it," Loki said. "Byleistr, we should be going."

"I know. But how bad is it across the realms?" his brother asked.

"Bad enough," Loki said. "Thor was going back to Nidavellir, there are rumors of fighting on the frontier in Vanaheim, and Alfheim and Asgard have rumors of people disappearing. Rumors, so far. I hope it stays that way. And I am relieved Isond and I don't have to go to Nidavellir."

"Why can't you go to Nidavellir?" Byleistr said.

"Who would want to go?" Annar said.

"You don't want to know," Loki said. "Keep yourselves safe, if you can. Call Heimdall if you have need of us."

"Farewell," Byleistr said.

Loki called Heimdall, and the Bifrost appeared.

"Let's go home," Loki said, Isond following him into the circle. They flew the length of the Bifrost, glad to be away from Jotunheim. Again. He knew they would probably get sent elsewhere for a few days, but his father and Tyr were trying to give everyone a break when they could, rotating himself, Thor, Sif and the Warriors Three as well as the Einherjar as necessary. Or just sending reinforcements. Asgard's safety was most important, but so was restoring peace to the realms. They had nothing to do with Thanos' war on Midgard; they were victims of the chaos caused.

Loki felt guilty for his part in it, and he knew by trying to correct the damage he was making a difference. But for the moment, he was home.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

And now we finally have some actual Thunderfrost. Enjoy!

Flight
Chapter 25--Blurred
Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Isond closed her wings, diving inside the chamber connecting her own to Loki’s. She landed, and Loki slid down her shoulder, unfastening the scepter.

Your father waits for you, Isond said. He wants you to bring the scepter to his study.

“And how do you know this?” Loki asked.

He called to me when we came through the Bifrost, Isond said. He asked nicely. Odin has a strong voice. He only calls me when it’s very important. Maybe now you’ll be rid of that thing for good.

“I hope so,” Loki said. Isond snaked her head down, and Loki touched his forehead to hers. Can it be destroyed? Isond asked.

“I don’t know,” Loki said. “I’ll be back later. Do you need to hunt?”

Tomorrow. I think I’ll go sun myself in Frigga’s garden. Helblindi is there with her, along with Ivik and Fandral. I’ll be happy to see them, Isond said.

“Then go,” Loki said, sending the dragon off with a slap on the shoulder.

Wasting no time, Loki transported himself to his father’s study, surprising the older man. Heimdall was with him.

“You could have walked,” Odin said.

“I’d rather get this over with,” Loki said, setting the scepter down on the Allfather’s desk.

“Let me see it,” Odin said,

Loki glared at his father, but did as he was told, unfreezing the ice and pulling back the furs wrapping the scepter. Odin passed his hand over the stone in the tip, but he didn’t touch it.

“Loki, how long were you in contact with it?” Odin asked.

“Every day for months,” Loki said. “I never was far from it.”

“Did it speak to you?” Odin said.

“All the time,” Loki said. “I tried not to listen.”

“Does it speak to you now?” Odin said.

“I can hear it, Father,” Loki said.
“As can I,” Odin said. “Heimdall?”

“Destroy it,” Heimdall said. “I hear the voices within.”

Loki felt sick to his stomach.

“It’s not so simple,” Odin said. “It’s a shard of the Soul Gem. Why would the one who seeks the stones let go of a piece?”

“Thanos was willing to sacrifice it for his grand scheme,” Loki said. “But I imagine he would like it back eventually.”

“The humans had this in their hands?”

“Only for the few days I was in their custody,” Loki said.

“They did no experiments? Tried to replicate it?”

“Not this one,” Loki said.

“I know of their efforts with the Tesseract,” Odin said.

“Can this shard be destroyed?” Loki asked, hopeful.

“The gems cannot be destroyed,” Odin said. “I’ll have it taken to the vault for now, until we can decide what to do with it.”

“Bury it,” Heimdall said. “My king, it must not remain here in Asgard. Send it away from Asgard. Back to Midgard, or Vanaheim.”

“I’ll not endanger another realm with something we should hold here,” Odin replied.

“You’ll endanger our home and your son by keeping such a thing here?” Heimdall said.

Loki shot the watcher a grateful look, and Heimdall nodded back.

“Vanaheim would be a good place to send it,” Heimdall said. “Freya owes this realm a favor, and I think this is as good a time as any to call in that favor.”

“Fine,” Odin said. “Send someone for Tyr, and return to your post, Heimdall.”

“Yes, my king,” Heimdall said, picking up his helmet, and taking his leave.

“Do you think that’s wise?” Loki asked.

“For now,” Odin said. “We can move this artifact back to Jotunheim, or Alfheim. Even hide it in Muspelheim if we must, or send it back to Midgard.”

“You would trust mortal hands with it?” Loki said.

“If they know what’s good for them, they would safeguard it,” Odin said.

“They were experimenting with the Tesseract, and look how well that went,” Loki said.

“That is why Midgard is still under our protection,” Odin said. “Loki, enough. Go see your mother and Helblindi. They’ve missed you.”
“And you, Father?”

Odin gave his son a quick embrace. “Of course I missed you,” he said. “I expect a full report of your activities in Jotunheim tomorrow morning. Now go.”

He gave Loki a gentle shove toward the door, and Loki looked back over his shoulder, giving his father a tired smile.

Fandral, Ivik and Helblindi were away from Frigga’s chambers by the time Loki finally arrived. His mother set upon him, hugging him, then made a fuss over him.

“You're all right?” Frigga said, taking him by the shoulders, turning him too and fro, checking him over.

“Besides the fact I need a decent meal and I'm exhausted, I'm well, Mother,” Loki said.

“Isond is well, I know,” Frigga said. “She dropped off to sleep not long after she settled in the garden.”

“She fought well,” Loki said. “So did Thor and Kjalvor.”

“I'm proud of all of you,” Frigga said. “You and Thor are getting along? Talk everything out yet?”

“We're fine, Mother,” Loki said, rolling his eyes. “And we’ve talked a little. How's Helblindi?”

“Helping Fandral feed Ivik right now,” Frigga said. “Helblindi was in a fight while you were away?”

“What?” Loki asked.

“He's fine,” Frigga said.

“What happened?”

“Volstagg took his boys to the training grounds to watch, and Helblindi and Gudrun tagged along,” she said. “A couple of the older boys taunted them, and ended up in a fight with Blindi, Gudrun and Thrakad. Volstagg was furious, and your father, the less said the better.”

“I hope those boys have been punished?” Loki said. “Is Helbindi all right?”

“He earned himself a black eye and split lip,” Frigga said. “I think it’s time he started learning how to defend himself properly. I’ll begin his training, if you’ll allow me.”

“I could do it,” Loki said.

“When do you have time?” Frigga asked.

“Fine,” Loki said.

Loki didn't hear the door open, nor the stifled giggle and patter of small feet as they neared his bed. He did rouse when he felt Helblindi's weight coming to rest on his middle when the boy landed on him.

“I missed you,” Helblindi said, throwing his arms around Loki’s neck.
“I missed you, too,” Loki said, hugging him back.

“How are Byleistr and Annar and Suttung? Aima and Venni?” Helblindi asked.

“They're all well,” Loki answered.

“Did they ask about me?”

“Yes,” Loki said.

“Can we go visit soon?”
“When I can arrange it,” Loki said. “It's still not safe.”

“You're back, so it has to be safe now,” Helblindi said. “Did the Einherjar really fight with the other Jotnar? They didn't fight each other?”

“They fought side by side,” Loki said.

Helblindi's eyes lit up. “Just like Odin said they would,” he said.

“My father was very sure of that, was he?”

“Yes,” Helblindi said. “Thor said you caused an avalanche, and he made friends with Byleistr.”

“Both did happen,” Loki said. “And Suttung terrified Thor for a moment, I think.”

“Suttung does that to everyone,” Helblindi said. “He’s not scary.”

“Not scary to you, but to an Aesir...”

“We’re not monsters,” Helblindi said. “Laufey was a monster, like in Frigga’s stories. He’s gone now, so we don’t have anything to be scared of anymore.”

Loki sighed, hugging the boy a little tighter.

“I hear you’ve been helping Fandral with Ivik,” Loki said.

“I have,” Helblind said. “I want a dragon someday.”

“Maybe you’ll have one,” Loki said.

“I wish I could have one now,” Helblindi said. “My name-day is coming soon.”

“In a couple of months,” Loki said.

“That is soon,” Helblindi said.

“So?”

“I don't want you to forget,” Helblindi said. “It will be my first one here.”

“I won't forget,” Loki said. “Mine isn't long after yours. So what would you like for your name-day?”

“I want a ghost bear,” Helblindi said. “Suttung said he would get me a cub when I’m old enough.”
“We’ll have to talk about that, Blindi,” Loki said. “How about a pony instead?”

“A horse? A little one?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Thor and I had ponies when we were boys. Have you met Sleipnir yet?”

“No,” Helblindi said, yawning. “Can we see him tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Loki said.

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The next day, Loki took Helblindi to meet Sleipnir, as promised. The boy was timid with the horse at first, but after a few slices of one of Idunn’s apples, Helblindi and the stallion were fast friends.

After, Loki took his little brother back to his chambers, where he lounged with the Allfather’s wolves, looking at the pictures in one of his books. Loki gave him a smile, going back to his own work.

Knowing you're happy makes me happy as well, Isond said.

“Helblindi makes it very hard not to feel happiness,” Loki said.

I know what else would make you happy, Isond said. Even Kjalvor knows, and can see it.

“And what is that, Isond?” Loki asked.

Tell him.

“I’ve tried,” Loki said.

Then come up with a way he will truly understand. Or I will, Isond said.

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The weeks flew by, and Loki and Isond were sent across the realms along with Thor and Kjalvor, but they were never together long. Loki and Fandral and their dragons went to Alfheim for more training, and Loki went to the city of Cathrad, hoping to find more about the Infinity Gems, but it was a fruitless quest.

He was finally feeling up to talking with Thor, but there was never time to talk. A meal here, small talk there. Coming and going, putting down rebellion and trying to help where they could. Nidavellir was still a mess, Jotunheim was having problems again, and matters in Vanaheim were coming to a head.

Harvest was beginning, and Asgard marked it with a feast. And to celebrate the fact the Bifrost was repaired, and the burgeoning unity among the realms. Jotunheim, Vanaheim, Alfheim and Nidavellir sent envoys. Loki was fine with all the realms except the contingent of dwarves.

Brokkr. Of course he was in Asgard, the dwarf who sewed his lips shut. Loki could not set foot in Nidavellir again, but obviously Brokkr could enter Asgard without fear of any harm. Loki was going to speak to his father about it, but not now.

Loki was trying to leave the great hall, and the dwarf was dogging him, and Loki would be damned if he let him get the best of him again. Fandral was by his side, trying to help get him away, but luck was not on their side.

The dwarf stepped in front of them blocking their path.
“I hear you have a dragon now, Lie-smith,” Brokkr said. “Did you steal it, too? Or bend it to your will with your magic? Magnificent beasts. I bet they're a difficult hunt, but worth it in the end. I wonder how much a suit of dragonscale armor would fetch. Gold, too. Such a beautiful color.”

“Harm a scale on any dragon, and I guarantee it won't be me you'll deal with, filth,” Loki said. “You'll face the Ljolsafar.”

“Bah. They'd never know,” Brokkr said. “And you, pretty one, I hear you have a dragon yourself. Would you consider selling it?”

Fandral could feel his bile and ire rising, but he didn't raise a hand. Instead, he heard the hiss of metal as Loki withdrew his dagger, and sliced open the dwarf's cheek, leaving a deep gash.

“That was a warning,” Loki said.

What is the matter? What has upset you so? Isond asked.

Loki ignored her.

“Loki,” Fandral warned.

“I'm a guest,” Brokkr said. “Your father will hear about this.”

Loki moved to slash at the dwarf again, but Fandral grabbed his friend’s arm.


That seemed to snap Loki out of his rage, and he let Fandral drag him along. The other man lead him through the kitchen, grabbing a wineskin, pulling Loki along beside him.

“What in the Hel was that back there?” Fandral asked. “He is a guest. I use the term loosely, of course.”

“Father is negotiating a trade agreement with them,” Loki said. “We need ore and weapons, they need someone to finish kicking out the marauders. Of course the cowards can't do it themselves.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Fandral said, handing Loki the wineskin.

“One day I will kill that bastard for what he did to me,” Loki said.

“I know, but losing your temper in front of people like that will set tongues to wagging,” Fandral said. “Loki, you’ve been doing so well. . .”

“It was bound to happen,” Loki said.

“I guess,” Fandral said. “Where’s Isond hiding?”

“Her wallow,” Loki said. “I think Mother’s garden would be a good place for me to hide.”

“Then go, and stay out of trouble,” Fandral said. “Will you be all right? I need to check on Ivik.”

“As long as Brokkr doesn't come here, I will be,” Loki said. “You know Isond is only a thought away, and I can transport myself to her as well.”

“I wouldn't be transporting myself anywhere if I were you,” Fandral said. “If you need anything, have Isond send for me.”
“Fandral, I’ll be fine,” Loki said, giving his friend a jaunty salute and heading off on his own.

Once he made it to the garden, he sat down on a bench, sighing in relief. Too many people, when the only company Loki wanted was his own. His mother's garden was a solace. No one allowed but her family and a few trusted friends. Loki finished the wine, and laid down on the bench he was using, closing his eyes, enjoying the silence. But it didn’t last long, as he heard the familiar sound of Mjolnir coursing through the air, and he would know the sound of Thor’s footsteps anywhere.

Loki opened one eye, staring up at his brother.

“You're back,” Loki said.

“Just got here,” Thor said. “I wasn't expecting such a huge gathering.”

“Finish the fight in Nidavellir?” Loki asked.

“Not quite,” Thor said. “Just home a few days. Mother had Heimdall call me back. I knew I'd find you here.”

“What did you ask Isond?”

“I guessed,” Thor said. “Why did you leave the gathering?”

“Too many people,” Loki said. So, Thor didn't know about his discussion with Brokkr. “I just wanted to get away. You didn't talk to Fandral?”

“No,” Thor said. “Should I?”

Loki stood, walking over to the railing, overlooking another courtyard.

“You should,” Loki said, swaying, leaning against the railing to hold himself up.

“How much have you had to drink?” Thor asked.

“Not enough,” Loki said.

“I know you’ve been to Alfheim and Jotunheim again,” Thor said. “Hogun said it’s getting bad in Vanaheim,” Thor said. “We’ll probably be sent there next.”

“Jotunheim’s been a treat,” Loki said. “Mopping up.”

“When are you taking the casket back?”

“When all this blows over,” Loki said.

“I'll come with you, if you let me,” Thor said.

“You’d make good on the promise you made Suttung about weregild,” Loki said.

“I know,” Thor said. “Loki, get some sleep. We can talk more in the morning. That is, if you’re not nursing a hangover.”

“Stop talking,” Loki said, thinking. His brother was the rash one, the one who acted first, dealing with the consequences later. Maybe it was the mead, or Loki was tired of waiting, but he leaned in close, kissing Thor on the lips. It was slow and sloppy at first on Loki’s part, but then he felt Thor's hand on his neck, his familiar sign of affection. Kissing him back, pulling him closer. . .and Loki
broke away.

“I'm sorry,” Loki said, wiping at his mouth, stumbling away, leaving a confused Thor in his wake.

Isond waited for Loki. She knew he was coming, thought about transporting herself to him, but instead, she sent him her love and comforting thoughts as he stumbled his way into his chambers. He dragged his furs off his bed, making his way to her, making a nest encircled by the dragon's front legs. Loki pulled the covers up over his head, and Isond crooned until he dropped off to sleep.

And in the morning, when Loki woke, it was to light shining in his eyes, Isond licking his face.

“My head hurts,” he said.

I know.

“Isond, I'm such a fool,” Loki said.

He liked it. You wanted it. Why is it wrong?

“Where would you like me to start?” Loki asked.

You need to eat.

“No food. I'm not hungry.”

He kissed Thor. Thor kissed him back.

I'll call Frigga. Or Fandral. Take your pick, the dragon threatened.

“Fine. Food. When I can stand the thought of appearing in public again,” Loki said.

Sif was by earlier, wanting to know if you were all right because of what happened with the dwarf, Isond said. I told her to come back later. That creature was dragged to the Bifrost this morning by the Einherjar, and told not to come back.

“Does Thor know?” Loki asked.

Kjalvor hasn’t said anything other than the fact that Thor would like to speak with you, Isond said. And Thor is upset.

“Not surprising,” Loki muttered.

Your mother comes, Isond said.

“Wonderful,” Loki said, rolling over, facing Isond's bulk, and pulling his covers over his head once again. Maybe she would leave him alone if she thought he was asleep. He heard the door open, and footsteps.

“You have a bed, you know,” Frigga said, leaning over, kissing him on the top of his head.

“It's big and empty,” Loki said.

“Only because you're not in it,” Frigga replied. “Would you like anything to eat?”

“No,” Loki said, feeling something small land on his middle.
“Take the demon with you,” Loki said.

“My sweet, noble Herja is not a demon,” she said, picking up the cat.

“She knocks everything off my desk and shelves,” Loki said.

“Dear, she's a cat. It's what they do,” Frigga said.

“And she’s your spy,” Loki said.

Frigga smiled down at her son. “Herja is a cat, nothing more,” she said.

“And Geri and Frekki and Huginn and Muninn are just dumb animals,” Loki said.

“I'll send some food along,” Frigga said. “Don’t spend all day in bed.”

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Thor paced back and forth in front of Kjalvor, the dragon watching him, lashing his tail in his own annoyance.
Loki kissed him. A proper kiss. What was going through his mind when he did it? Thor was confused. Their mother was Vanir, as was Heimdall. They had more liberal views on certain romantic entanglements than the races of the other realms. Didn't matter that he and Loki weren't blood—they were still brothers. But Loki was always saying he loved him more than he should.

Thor knew he meant a great deal to Loki. Maybe Loki was entertaining possibilities because he could. Thinking about it did not mean one had to accept the idea. They were adults, and would likely laugh it off soon. Or Loki was serious.

Implications Thor did not want to consider at the moment. He loved Jane.

Loki upset the delicate balance between them with one impulsive act. Possibly some mischief, but Loki wasn't that petty.

Why are you confused? Kjalvor asked, breaking Thor’s internal silence.

“I'm conflicted, Kjalvor,” Thor answered.

Why? Whenever you're faced with change, you're so stubborn. Why do you have to make everything so hard for yourself? Kjalvor said.

“What do you mean?” Thor said.

Loki is here. He's always been with you. Jane is not here. She is in Midgard, where we're forbidden to go, Kjalvor said, hoping Thor would understand what he was saying. He was not going to spell it out for him. Sometimes his partner needed to figure out things on his own. He would give him nudge, though.

“Loki is my brother,” Thor said.

So? Does that change anything? Kjalvor said.

“It changes everything,” Thor said.

Why can't you see what is right in front of you? Kjalvor asked, voice tinged with frustration.

“I see my brother is confused, and needs to deal with what ails him,” Thor said.
You're a coward, Kjalvor said. Loki is hurt, and dealing with many things, but he is not confused about what he feels toward you.

“We are not continuing this any further,” Thor said. “What do you know of Loki's feelings?”

More than you, Kjalvor snapped. You don't listen, and you don't see. How can you be so deaf and blind? Is there any wonder Loki has been so angry with you in the past? You always think you're right, and everyone lets you by. No one denies you anything, yet you deny what is in front of you. I'll give you a little time to figure it out for yourself.

“Kjalvor, if I'm so wrong, why won't you just explain whatever it is you want me to know?” Thor said.

Because you will not hear me, he said.

“I hear you now,” Thor said, annoyed.

Only because you're becoming angry. I will not talk to you when you're like this.

“Kjalvor, you're being a child,” Thor said.

And you're not? Talk to Loki, but not when you're in this mood. Talk to your mother. Maybe Frigga can make you see reason as you can't see what's obvious.

Thor put his hand under the dragon's chin.

“Are you always so unhappy with me? Do you regret choosing me?”

No and no, Kjalvor said. You are mine, and I am yours. I waited for you, no one else. I do not understand how you can put the thought of someone who is so far away, who you haven't seen in so long ahead of me, and Loki, and everyone else that is important to you.

“You're jealous?”

No. I don't understand.

“I love Jane,” Thor said.

You love Loki. What difference is there? Kjalvor asked.

“Loki is my brother,” Thor said. “Jane is. . .everything I never knew I wanted.” Kjalvor snorted.

“What?”

How can you say that when you don't know what you truly want?


Kjalvor butted him in the chest, knocking him down. The dragon turned away, circling his wallow several times like a cat before lying down, closing his eyes.

“Kjalvor, what is wrong with you?” Thor asked.

The dragon didn't answer.

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Chapter 26

Loki managed to avoid Thor for only a day before his brother came looking for answers, blocking his path in the hall outside his chambers.

“We need to talk, Loki,” Thor said. “What was that the other night?”


“You kissed me,” Thor said.

“You kissed me back, so what's your point?” Loki asked.

“That I kissed you back is incidental to this discussion, Loki,” Thor said. “Why did you kiss me?”

“I told you,” Loki said. “Do I need to further humiliate myself for your amusement?”

“I'm not amused, brother,” Thor said. “Far from it actually.”

“You never could take a bit of fun,” Loki said, trying to brush it off. “You know, mischief? Remember that?”

“Don't trifle with me, Loki,” Thor said.

“I'm not,” he snapped back. “No one told you Brokkr confronted me at the feast?”

“No,” Thor said. “I heard he was told not to come back.”

“Someone should've pitched him off the Bifrost,” Loki muttered.

“He upset you,” Thor stated.

“So good of you to pick up on that,” Loki said. “He was rude, disrespectful, and said he wondered how much a suit of dragonscale armor would fetch.”

“He would kill a dragon for his own amusement?”

“That abomination sewed my lips shut, Thor, so I wouldn't put it past him,” Loki said. “I should have slit his throat, not his face.”

“You drew a weapon on a guest at a feast? In the great hall?” Thor asked, astonished.

“Brokkr is no longer welcome in Asgard, much as I'm not ever setting foot in Nidavellir,” Loki said. “If you want details, ask Fandral. He was there.”

“I don’t want to talk with Fandral. I want you to explain, Loki,” Thor said. I can understand you
were upset, and clearly confused about your feelings. And you'd been drinking. I didn't consider until now how truly ill you are.”

“Have you ever known me to be fickle with my affections?” Loki countered, ignoring the ill part.

“No,” Thor said.

“Remember when I told you in Alfheim there was a difference between loving someone and being in love with them?” Loki asked.

“Yes,” Thor said. “You said while you were in Jotunheim there was the thought of someone. . .”

Loki pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. Surely Thor wasn't that dense? Or maybe he would just drop the matter altogether?

“Loki. . .” Thor said, a warning in his tone, trying to get his brother to speak. Surely Loki wasn't entertaining seriously the notion he was. . .No. “You love me.”

Loki sighed.

“Of course I love you, you dolt,” Loki said.

“No, it's more than that, isn't it?” Thor asked.

Thor, we are not finishing this right now,” Loki said.

Thor slammed his fist into the wall by Loki's head.

“When, Loki?”

“It was just a thought, Thor, a notion,” Loki said.

“How long, Loki?” Thor asked.

“Since I found out we're not brothers by blood,” Loki said.

“We're still brothers,” Thor said.

“I know,” Loki answered. “We could be more to each other.”

“Isn't being brothers enough?” Thor said.

“Yes,” Loki said, lying through his teeth.

“Loki, you have my love,” Thor said. “Always. But...I don't think I can be what you want me to be. I love Jane.”

Loki shoved past Thor. “Always the same excuse since we've been back,” he said. “How can you be so sure of someone you knew such a short time? Think you Father would grant her immortality, and let her rule by your side? Have you even given a thought to what your Jane wants? Would you ask her to give up her life and friends for you?”

“I could go to Midgard, and stay with her,” Thor said. In the distance, he heard Kjalvor roaring.

“You've thought about this?”
“I never really considered that until now, Loki,” Thor said.

“If you think Father would let you go, you're a bigger fool than I,” Loki said. “You're heir to the Allfather. Your birthright is to rule Asgard and safeguard the Nine Realms.”

“I'm not ready. You've said it yourself,” Thor said.

“Oh, don't go throwing my own words back at me, brother,” Loki said. “At this rate, you'll never be ready. Thor, grow up. Father isn't always going to be here, and you will step into the role for which you were born.”

“Like you run from the throne waiting for you?” Thor shot back. “You talk of responsibility, yet you run from yours.”

“Are you calling me a coward?” Loki spat.

“Don't twist my words, Loki,” Thor said.

“You're the coward, brother,” Loki said. “We're done.”

He stormed off, leaving Thor alone. Aimless wondering later found Loki in a dark, forgotten corner in his favorite part of the library, thinking dark thoughts. No one would bother him, if they knew what was good for them. Loki knew his own mind and heart, at least on this matter. Months of trying to come to terms with the thought, and it was the truth. He did love Thor as his brother and more. He, damn it all, desired him.

Why are you doing this to yourself? Isond asked. You were honest. You told the truth. Why can't Thor accept that?

“Because Thor is blind,” Loki muttered. “Isond, that's why.”

The scuff of boots on the floor brought Loki back to reality.

“Feelings sorry for yourself?”

Damn. Sif. She was standing with hands on her hips, head cocked, trying to be facetious.

“Moping, Loki. So mature,” she said.

“Go to Hel, Sif,” Loki replied.

“I know you had a fight with Thor,” she said. “He flew off with Mjolnir, completely ignored Kjalvor when he tried to get his attention. Your mother is waiting for him to come back. I think Thor is in for it when he returns.”

“One can hope,” Loki said. “Now go away.”

Sif sat down in the chair across from Loki's.

“I thought the two of you were getting on better. You've been doing so well,” Sif said. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don't want to spend another minute today on that stupid, pig-headed ass,” Loki replied.

Sif bit her lip. Name-calling. Never a good sign. Insults always meant it was personal.
“Sif, what are you doing here?” Loki asked.

“I came to see if you're all right,” she said. “Was it about the mortal?”

Loki spared her a glance.

“She did come up in conversation,” he said.

“I hope Thor what an ass he's been,” Sif said.

“He's been better,” Loki said. “But no.”

“Of course not,” Sif said. “He'll defy the Allfather, and get himself banished or worse next time.

“You know how Thor is when he thinks he's right,” Loki said. “Need me to bring up examples?”

“No,” Sif said.

“Again, Sif, why are you here?”

“Isond sent me,” Sif said. “Fandral was busy with Ivik, so was Frigga, so she called me.”

“Why?”

“She thought you could use some company other than her own,” Sif said. “Besides, she was trying to calm Kjalvor.”

“I will throttle my dear brother when he comes back,” Loki said. “He's been warned time and again.

“I know,” Sif said. “Loki, I know you've both been through so much.”

He raised an eyebrow in interest.

“I'm sorry,” Sif said.

“For what?” Loki asked.

“That day—before you left, the words I said. I accused you of being envious of Thor, and I slapped you,” Sif said. “I'm so sorry, Loki.”

He could see the guilt in her eyes. He knew he could twist the knife, or just accept it and bury the past.

“I accept your apology,” Loki said.

“That's it?”

“What more do you want me to say? Do you want me to rant and rage?”

“Loki, stop. I know you've changed. For the better. I'm sorry the circumstances were so harsh, but I
truly am glad you're back. And I do hope there are glimmers of the old, mischievous Loki in there somewhere,” Sif said.

“He's on sabbatical,” Loki said. “Kjalvor is the resident Asgardian trickster now.”

“Clever,” Sif said. “I think you need to go help Isond with Kjalvor. I'd try, but I don't think he likes me very much.”

“He's jealous of anyone he thinks might take Thor's attention and affection away from him,” Loki said.

“That doesn't sound like someone else I know,” Sif said. “Why would he be jealous of me?”

“You should know by now how perceptive the dragons are, Sif,” Loki said. “Kjalvor probably senses how you feel about Thor.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sif, I know you're in love with my brother,” Loki said.

“That makes two of us then,” Sif said.

“What?” Loki asked.

“I came looking for Thor last night, and I saw the two of you,” Sif said. “I was shocked, but I can’t say I’m all that surprised.”

“It was nothing,” Loki said. “Can we please leave it at that? Please, Sif?”

Loki almost begging. That was new, so Sif decided to let it slide for the moment.

“Ivik is growing well. Fandral is lucky,” she said. “Will Asgard ever be given another egg?”

“I don’t know,” Loki said. “You could go with us to Alfheim when they have one of their feast days. Everyone gets a chance at the eggs. It’s how Fandral bonded Ivik.”

“I would like that,” Sif said.

“You're welcome to fly with Isond and I when you get the chance,” Loki said.

“Thank you,” Sif said. “Loki, I know we haven’t been close in a long time, but I hope we can work on trying to become friends again. Not because of Thor, but for the sake of friendship.”

“I'd like that,” Loki said, reaching over, giving one of Sif's hands a quick squeeze.

Frigga closed the book she was reading, setting it down. Helblindi was curled beside her, asleep. She gave the boy a fond smile, thinking of how much he reminded her of Loki at the same age. The queen was grateful to have another child around, and lately, much of his care had fallen to her, as Loki was busy with his own duties, and like Thor, getting sent to other realms to offer assistance.

Having Helblindi around also made her remember her talk with Odin at Yule, about what else he could give her. She had all she could ever want, but if fate was kind, she would soon have something she wanted. Not that she would tell her husband and sons yet.

Her sons. Frigga sighed at that thought. Thor and Kjalvor were in Alfheim, spending a few days
with the elves after how spectacularly her son upset his dragon. She knew he and Loki had argued, but not what they fought about. Frigga had her suspicions after Odin’s own row with their oldest before throwing him out of his study, and ordering him to Alfheim. The subject matter of the fight was probably the mortal woman, but Frigga figured there was more to it. There always was.

Her thoughts turned back to Thor and Kjalvor. The dragon was a challenge to her son, who was used to everything coming so easily. He had been from the start, as his personality was a reflection of Thor’s own. Kjalvor had a will of his own, he was mischievous, and good natured, like Thor. The dragon was also earnest to a fault. He didn't understand how Thor could put something between them.

Frigga was angry, and she knew Loki was furious because Thor upset Kjalvor, and there was even more behind Loki’s anger. She tolerated Thor’s declaration of love for mortal none of them would probably ever meet, hoping he would grow past it. Odin was right, in that Thor should consider others, but Frigga would not destroy Thor's hope.

Another happy family discussion, Frigga reflected, remembering Thor’s talk with them after he returned from Midgard, how he told them he found love with a mortal woman. Frigga was more sympathetic to that revelation than Odin, who said nothing during Thor's talk. Her husband had been gentle with Thor, tolerating his son’s revelation for the sake of the fact he’d just been told his brother was dead a few days before. Also, with Loki gone, Thor had nothing more pressing to do for while than go off pestering Heimdall about a mortal, earning himself several long lectures on his priorities.

A dark few months, as Sif was hurt during that time, Thor oblivious and inconsolable both. Sif because he'd given his love to a mortal he barely knew, and because of her guilt over her last words to Loki.

Sif. Now there was an interesting turn. With Thor gone, the warrior was spending time with Loki and Isond. Frigga wondered at that, but was happy they were settling back into something resembling friendship. Hogun was also coming around. A good sign, but she knew they were all going to need each other in the coming months.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the delay in getting up this chapter. Away from home several days without internet access, and when I got home, my laptop crashed and I had to rewrite this chapter. Four times.
Loki wondered at the fact Thor was sent to Alfheim before he could even protest. Their father gave him the details of the...discussion, and had then turned his attention to his younger son. He wasn't angry or disappointed with him as he was with Thor, rather concerned and exasperated. Loki managed dodging the worst of the Allfather's questioning, and did not want his own confrontation with his father. The concern was a little grating—personal rows between himself and Thor were once commonplace, or rather had been before their mutual exile. Maintaining the peace and civility had been easy for a while. Now...They were in unexplored territory.

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Alfheim

Halleah eyed the Aesir sitting across from her. Thor Odinson, son of Odin Borson, Allfather of the Nine Realms, was a spoiled, vain brat. Currently staring at the table between them, having the decency to at least act humble.

Kjalvor was better, settled with Duran and Awyrm at the lake on the edge of the city.

"Have anything to say for yourself, princeling?" Halleah asked.

Thor looked up, meeting her gaze.

"I thought there were no titles in your home," he said.

"Act like a child and you'll be treated as one," she replied. "So a child's title you'll be called unless you can give me a reason to treat you as an adult, and with respect, which you have not shown your own dragon."

Thor glared, blue eyes blazing a moment before he went back to staring at Halleah's kitchen table.

"I fought with Loki. It was personal, and it became rather heated," Thor said. "We had a difference of opinion regarding several matters. And you know of the mortal in Midgard—Jane, we talked of her, and it upset Kjalvor."

"Aren't you forbidden to go to Midgard?" Halleah asked.

"Yes," Thor said. "But that doesn't mean I can't think about it."

"True," Halleah said. "But what happened between you and Loki? That is also of concern to me. There is more going on than what you've said. Don't think you can fool me, boy."
Thor flinched, but said nothing.

Halleah kept going. “Is your brother jealous of your affection for this mortal? You know you can’t put the thought of someone else before your dragon,” she said. “They understand, yet they don’t. Kjalvor is jealous, and he doesn’t understand. He told Duran this. And Kjalvor is convinced you’re blind and stupid regarding certain matters, but he won’t tell me or Duran why.”

Thor shifted in his chair, fists balled on the table. He had to resist the urge to smack his head on the table. Loki? Jealous? Possible, considering his revelation. And Kjalvor, so angry. Oh, he had made a fine mess of things.

“The possibility of jealousy from Loki never occurred to me until now,” Thor said.

“You two are close,” Halleah said. “You've both been through much, and bonding a dragon each has further complicated matters. Especially Loki having a female.”

Thor frowned, figuring where the discussion was going.

“Do you have to bring that up now?” he asked.

“You, princeling, have to consider the fact there are matters that are out of your control. Isond is fully grown, and Kjalvor has almost reached his maturity. The possibility exists you and Loki may be caught unaware by two uncontrollable dragons lost to the mating impulse,” she said.

“Surely it’s not that overwhelming,” Thor said.

Halleah blinked. She couldn't decide if he was naive, stubborn or in denial.

“Unless Loki intends to come stay here until Isond rises, which I doubt, considering the circumstances in the other realms, one of you needs to try and be in control,” Halleah said. “You've heard this lesson how many times?”

“Can't we just lock ourselves away?”

“Possibly, if you have the sense to recognize what's going on,” she said. “You might have more time, considering you have Kjalvor. It's a bit easier to hold onto your wits longer when you have a male dragon. I’m just reminding you of what you're probably going to have to deal with if you can’t get Isond here. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Thor said.

“Now, you are going to apologize to Kjalvor, and you and Abroen and I are going to sit down and have a long talk when he returns,” Halleah said. “You, like Loki, have responsibilities to a realm besides Asgard. When it comes to Kjalvor, you will defer to us. I think we should have kept you here longer, and I know you can only stay a few days as it is, and you will make good use of that time.”

“Yes,” Thor answered.

“Any questions?”

“No.”

“Go then,” Halleah said.

He left, taking his time walking back to his quarters. Thor tried calling Kjalvor, but the dragon wouldn’t reply. A fine mess, indeed. His father angry with him, Loki probably never speaking to him
again and his mother disappointed. So many responsibilities and expectations, and he did not know where to start. He could start with Kjalvor, he guessed, and go from there. Then Loki and his parents, and friends. Even Fandral had yelled at him before he left Asgard.

He hoped for their forgiveness, but that was something he counted on too many times in the past. Loki was right. He did need to grow up. If Loki could shoulder his own responsibilities, then so could he. Except he suspected Loki was using his duties as an excuse to not deal with everything else. Oh yes, they were going to finally have the talk they needed to have even if he had to sit on Loki.

And Jane. He did not want to break his promise, but he would not defy his father. Hopefully Odin would relent and let him go when matters across the realms were in hand. No reason not to. Or there was another option now—bringing Jane to Asgard. Loki always insisted there were ways to deal with a problem besides head-on, Thor’s preferred method. That would prevent him from leaving Kjalvor, and not defying the Allfather. If only he could find a way to bring it up to his father. No, he would start with his mother. She could mention the idea to Odin, and try and persuade him. Yes, a suitable course of action, one he could live with, and hopefully not drive another wedge between himself and Kjalvor or Loki.

As he was now close to the cliffs housing himself and the dragon, Thor saw Kjalvor lounging on the ledge. He climbed the steps up to the ledge, walking over his dragon. Thor sat down on the ledge beside Kjalvor, and the dragon sidled over, dropping his head into his rider's lap. Thor reached up, rubbing the nearest eye ridge.

“Speaking to me at last?” Thor asked.

Kjalvor rolled his eye at his partner.

“Kjalvor, I'm sorry,” Thor said. “I keep disappointing you.”

Apology accepted, Kjalvor replied. We both still have growing to do, I think.
“Ever wiser than I,” Thor said. “I should have listened to you, and I would have saved Loki and myself a fight.”

At least you know now, Kjalvor said.

“And I was angry instead of understanding,” Thor said.

You were both angry, Kjalvor said. You fought like this all the time before Isond and I?

“More than I'm proud to admit,” Thor said.

What will you do now that you know? Kjalvor asked.

“Apologize to Loki when we get back,” he said. “Try and work things through.”

What about Midgard? Kjalvor said.

“Behave myself and not press the issue,” Thor said. “It's been almost two years. Possibly Jane has moved on.”

Then why don't you? Kjalvor asked. Why can't you be happy with what you already have?

Thor had no answer for the dragon.

88888
Thor was away almost a week, and Loki was grateful for the time away from his brother. He could almost forget the fight they had, and the reasons for it. But he couldn’t, not with Isond pestering him about it, and the questions from his mother. He almost gave in and told her, but he didn’t. Nor did he talk with Sif about it again, but at least someone knew.

Then his dolt of a brother came back, looking cowed and humbled, and Kjalvor a little happier. Thor was more civil, and they were sticking to small talk when not at court or our council. Under the watchful eye of their father, Loki and his brother were on their best behavior. Odin praised them for being so dutiful and attentive. Loki suspected their father rather enjoyed the guilt trip he was giving his sons. Loki stuck things out, throwing himself into his duties, along with taking care of Isond and Helblindi. He avoided Thor when he could, but did not ignore Kjalvor. And Thor’s tactic during all of this was to try and talk about Loki’s feelings.

The outcome of that was few were willing to face Loki on the sparring grounds anymore. It was the one place he felt safe taking out his frustrations. That or when he was with Isond or Fandral, and he vented until his friend, Isond and Ivik were tired of hearing his creative descriptions of Thor’s personality, character and intelligence.

And of course, the other realms could not stay quiet for long. Getting shipped off respectively to Jotunheim and Vanaheim. Loki could’ve blessed the marauders wreaking havoc in Vanaheim for getting his brother called away. And he cursed Jotunheim when he had to go back himself, but only for a few days this time. Bad weather was hindering rebuilding and repair efforts in the realm where he was born, and Byleistr hoped he could help with the storms.

Four days in Jotunheim, and it was late evening when Loki and Isond returned to Asgard. They had lessened the severity of the storms for a short time, but gave up. It was fall, and the weather was bound to turn ugly sooner or later in that frozen realm. Loki settled Isond in her wallow and went to get something to eat, but Thor accosted him.

“It’s bad in Vanaheim,” Thor said. “Be glad you’ve missed it so far.”

Jotunheim’s been a treat,” Loki said. “Mopping up.”

“Again?” Thor asked. “I knew you were gone, but not where. I just returned myself.”

“No. The weather is turning bad earlier than usual,” Loki said.

“The same in Vanaheim and Alfheim,” Thor said. “Don't you know what's coming? Or have you forgotten your lessons?”

“The convergence?” Loki said. “How could I forget? But it isn't for weeks yet, but that didn't stop Isond from dragging me out to talk to Heimdall about it. I think he's more excited than anyone.”

“I think you're right,” Thor said. “Get some sleep. I'm having breakfast with mother in the morning, if you would like to join us.”

“I'm going with father to meet with the war council first thing tomorrow,” Loki said.

“Have fun,” Thor said, smiling, clapping him on the shoulder.

Another invigorating meeting with the war council, Loki reflected, heading for his chambers. Isond
barely roused when he entered. He thought about waking her, as she was due for a hunt, but he didn't. He rolled out some maps on his desk, weighing them down at the corners with books, keeping them from rolling up. The Allfather and Tyr had more important matters to deal with, so it fell to Loki to come up with recommendations for what villages would be best suited for new fortifications.

The two had been putting it off for a while, considering the unrest in the other realms, and his father decided they might want to prepare for the worst in their own realm. They weren't spread thin yet, but it could happen. In that vein, some of the Einherjar were already in Vanaheim, and Loki knew he and Thor were likely headed there soon themselves if matters progressed.

Loki hadn't been at work long when he heard Isond stirring, and called out to the dragon.

“Isond?” Loki said. The reply was dark, with something else bleeding through. No words, just the feral thoughts of his dragon.

Loki staggered, realizing what was happening.

“Isond, calm yourself,” he said.

He put a hand against the wall, steadying himself from the force of her thoughts. Black for her anger bled through with white and red—her rising lust and a little fear.

Loki almost vomited, going to the floor on his knees. And Thor was there beside him, pulling him to his feet.

“How. . .” Loki asked.


“Where’s Kjalvor?” Loki asked.

“Mother's garden for now,” Thor said, his eyes going blank a moment. “I told him to go, but he's not listening.”

Another surge from Isond, and Loki grabbed Thor's arm for support.

“Isond, listen to me. Calm down,” he said.

He was met with a roar as a reply.

“Loki,” Thor said.

Thor shook Loki as his gaze went blank, as he tried pulling Isond back, but to no avail.

“Loki,” he said. “LOKI.”

Loki's eyes cleared for a moment.

“I can't call her back,” Loki said. “She won't listen.”

“Isn't it too soon?” he asked. “Why didn't you go to Alfheim? You can't mean for. . .”

“I didn’t plan for this, you oaf, if that’s what you’re insinuating,” Loki snarled, venom in his voice. Isond responded with a roar, and both brothers watched as Isond walked out onto the ledge near where they were standing, leaping into the air. And she was off like lightning, flying fast for the mountains, away from people, a streak of blue going after her.
Loki watched as Thor paled, and the bigger man’s own grip on him tightened.

“I don’t think you’ll want us to be outside when he catches her,” Loki managed, trying to separate himself from the dragon’s thoughts, but it was becoming more difficult by the moment.

Thor didn’t answer, eyes glazed over as he fought to bring Kjalvor back, but he was too far gone. And so was Loki, too intertwined with Isond now to tell who was who, and he kissed Thor again, this time hard and needy, and they both gave in to their dragons.

88888
Later the next morning, Loki stood on the balcony outside his chambers, leaning against the rail, clad in a loose shirt and breeches, barefoot. He didn’t turn when he heard Thor’s footsteps. His brother came up beside him, not touching, but standing close. Thor hadn’t bothered to put on a shirt, and he was bleary-eyed.

“Good morning,” Loki said, testing the waters.

“When are those beasts of ours going to return?” Thor asked.

“Remember your lessons?” Loki asked. “Could be today, or tomorrow. Whenever they come back to their senses.”

“Then why are we back to ours?” Thor asked.

“They’re asleep,” Loki said. “I can’t rouse Isond for anything.”

“Kjalvor won’t answer me, either,” Thor said.

“So we’re stuck with each other, unless you want to be caught elsewhere if they’re not finished,” Loki said.

“I’ll stay,” Thor said. “Are you all right? Loki, if I hurt you, I'll never forgive. . .”

“Thor, you didn't harm me, and what hurts I had, I healed with my magic,” Loki said.

“Loki, had you ever lain with anyone before?” Thor asked, hoping he was not right about the answer to that question.

“No,” Loki answered.

“Why?”

“I never cared enough for anyone to bother, except for Sigyn, and by the time we realized our feelings, she was wed to Theoric,” Loki said. “No one ever bothered looking past the fact I was prince, and your brother.”

“Picky brat,” Thor muttered.

“And you’re grouchy this morning,” Loki countered.

“Is there any wonder?” Thor snapped back.

“We’re not having this discussion now, Thor,” Loki said. “Come back inside.”

“And what?” Thor asked, unsurprised by Loki’s reply. He kissed Thor, pulling him back inside, hands, leaving his body only long enough to thrown his own shirt to the floor.
“Loki, we shouldn’t,” Thor said.

“Please?” Loki said. “I know I’ll probably never have this chance again. Don’t make me beg. Please.”

Loki dragged Thor back to the bed, pulling Thor down beside him, hands on the laces of his breeches. Thor shoved his hands away, pulling off his pants. Loki had already removed his own. Loki threw a long leg over Thor’s flank, pulling the other man close, and his head down for a kiss. Then he shoved his body against Thor’s, rutting against him. Thor caught on, and the slide of their cocks together didn’t last long until they both slipped over the edge.

Thor covered Loki, hand on his neck, his familiar, favorite gesture, kissing him. Pressing their foreheads together.

“You’re mad,” Thor said.

Loki grinned.

“Would you like me to prove it, brother?”

88888

Middle of the night, a soft knock at Loki’s door and he knew it was over when Ivik called him. Fandral wishes to speak with Thor, Ivik said. It’s important. We wouldn’t be here like this if it wasn’t. I’m sorry.

Loki shook Thor awake. “It’s Fandral,” he said. “He needs to speak with you.”

“Why?” Thor said, pulling on his pants.

“Ivik didn’t say, just that it’s important,” Loki said.

Thor left the bed chamber, coming back moments later.

“I have to go,” Thor said. “I’m needed back in Vanaheim. You know you can’t go, as the scepter is there.”

Thor leaned across the bed, kissing Loki on the forehead. “We’ll talk when I return.”
Chapter Notes

I apologize for the not so regular updates the past couple of weeks. RL has kept me so busy I don't know if I'm coming or going.

Flight

Chapter 28—Repercussions

Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Fandral was, as they said in Midgard, a wreck. Two days of beating himself up and a stern lecture from Frigga to straighten up, he was still a wreck.

Frigga is a wise queen, Ivik said as the dragon accompanied him to Loki’s chambers. You should listen to her. Or Isond. She said she knew what she was doing, and you should not worry.

“Easy for you both to say,” Fandral said. “Isond is finally awake?”

Yes, Isond replied. I told Loki you’re on your way.

With that, Fandral let himself and Ivik into Loki’s chambers, where the other man was going over maps on his desk.

“Good morning, Fandral,” Loki said.

“Is it, now?” Fandral asked. “I was expecting you to be in a more sour mood, considering how we woke you last night.”

Loki shrugged.

Fandral scowled back. Indifference? Lovely. So he tried a different tactic. Listening to Loki vent about Thor for weeks, was only fair he vented back.

“If Thor puts any of the blame for this on me, I'll kill him,” Fandral said, throwing himself down in a chair. Ivik curled up beside it, clearly unflustered by everything. “Then I'll have you find a way to bring him back, and I'll kill him again just for spite.

Loki stared, an eyebrow cocked in concern, arms crossed. Fandral, it seemed, had gone around the bend.

“Isond frightened the Hel out of Ivik, and myself in turn when we figured out what was going on,” Fandral said. “I told Thor to take Kjalvor and get as far away as possible, but what does he do? Runs straight to your side. Then Kjalvor wouldn't listen. In the time it took to get to you, they could've been in another realm.”

“So you're saying what happened is Thor's fault,” Loki said.
“It is Thor's fault,” Fandral said. “If you're looking for someone to pin blame on, then yes.”

“What happened, happened, and it cannot be changed,” Loki said.

Fandral’s scowl changed to a look of worry. Simple acceptance now. Huh.

“You got what you wanted, and for everyone’s sake, I hope it was worth it,” Fandral said. “Your damn brother, actually, the lot of you are going to drive me to drink. By the way, your mother wants to see you.”

“My mother can wait a bit longer,” Loki said.

“No offence, Loki, but you’re taking all this surprisingly well,” Fandral said.

“How else would you have me react? Thor has his duties, and I have mine,” Loki said.

“Don’t you need more time. . .”

“No,” Loki said.

“Then answer me this--how was it? No. . .I mean. . .what was it like?” Fandral said. “I hope you know what I. . .”

“I know what you mean. Terrifying at first,” Loki said. “Then not.”

A genuine smile appeared on Loki's face, the first Fandral could recall in ages.

“You truly do become the dragon,” Loki said. “Isond and I have never been closer.”

“Nor you and Thor,” Fandral muttered.

“I did hear that, you know,” Loki said. “But I would not trade the experience for anything.”

“How are things between you and Thor?” Fandral asked, hopeful. “Did the two of you talk. . .”

Loki snorted. “Not much,” he said. “We were a little too preoccupied to talk, Fandral.”

“Didn’t hurt to ask,” Fandral said. “Just when I think you two are going to be all right, something else happens.”

“You’re not scandalized by what happened between Thor and I?” Loki asked.

“Please. Remember who it is you’re talking to. I could tell you stories. . .” Fandral trailed off. Not going on about his exploits. Might get back to Calania, and upset Ivik, so he kept on task. “My mother is half-Vanir. Your own mother is Vanir.”

“We’re in Asgard, not Vanaheim,” Loki said. “Completely different royal family.”

“I know, but there is a precedent already,” Fandral said. “Besides, wasn’t it just a one-off deal because of the dragons?”

“More than likely,” Loki said.

“Unless Thor comes to his senses,” Fandral muttered.

“What?” Loki said.

“Nothing,” Fandral said. “You and Thor are going to talk when he gets back from Vanaheim. I
swear I will make it happen, even if I have to lock you in the dungeon. Watching you two dance around each other is exhausting. The two of you need to find equal footing and come to terms with each other.”

“I know,” Loki said, staring at the floor.

“Then do something about,” Fandral said. “All that rage and sadness pent up inside you for so long isn’t good, Loki. I worry about you. You know you can come to me, if you need to talk. Norns, Loki, even Sif is worried about you. Before she was sent off to Vanheim she mentioned how and Thor need to work things out.”

“Sif saw us in the garden the night of the feast,” Loki said, finally meeting Fandral’s gaze,

“Well which feast, and who did Sif see you with?”

“With Thor, the night I carved up Brokkr,” Loki said.

“And that’s significant because?” Fandral asked.

“I kissed him,” Loki said.

“That was the reason for the fight the next day?” Fandral asked.

“Not all of it,” Loki said. “The majority, and Thor did mention the mortal.”

“Of course,” Fandral said. “But she’s not here, is she? Nor does she have the advantage given you, Loki. You and Thor have known each other all your lives. Surely he wouldn’t choose her over defying your father again.”

“I no longer know Thor’s heart or mind,” Loki said. “I haven’t in a very long time.”

“More’s the pity,” Fandral said. “I only hope what happened between you and Thor was worth it, considering.”

They spent the rest of the morning together, taking Isond and Ivik for a flight, Isond setting a pace considerate of the younger, smaller dragon. And while they hunted, Fandral had more reason to grouse.

“I should be in Vanheim with the others,” he said. “But I’m stuck here in Asgard because of Ivik. He’s too small to be of use yet.”

“No, he’s not,” Loki said. “He’s not big enough to fight, but he can relay messages, and stand watch. Didn’t you listen to any of the lessons Abroen taught us?”

“I did, but I wasn’t thinking,” Fandral said.

“Do you really want to be stuck in Vanheim with more fighting? Thor’s ego?” Loki said.

_Thor’s ego? What of Kjalvor’s ego?_ Isond said, backwinging as he landed near the two men. Ivik landed beside her, sitting back on his haunches, lolling his tongue at Fandral.

_Kjalvor was so smug before they left. He will not be easy to live with when he returns. Then again, he was quick enough to catch me_, Isond said.

Loki said nothing, merely stood there biting his lip, while Fandral stared at him, curious at the exchange between man and dragon.
Don’t tell Kjalvor I let him catch me, Isond said.

“Your secret is safe with me, Isond,” Loki said.

“Do I want to know?” Fandral asked.

“No,” Loki said. “Come. We should return to the city. I do need to see my mother.”

Frigga sat reading when Loki entered her chambers. She stood, embracing him.

“Where’s Helblindi?” Loki asked.

“With Hildegund,” Frigga said. “She took the children on an outing. What, no hello mother?”

Loki kissed his mother on the cheek. “Happy?”

“Yes,” Frigga said, brushing the hair back from his face. “You need another hair cut.”

“I know,” Loki said.

“Are you all right, dear?” she asked.

“Mother, I’m fine,” Loki said. “Isond, too.”

“Loki, you know what I mean,” Frigga said.

“Not discussing this right now,” Loki said.

“Do you think I’m blind? That you can hide your feelings from me?” she asked. “Loki, give Thor some time and space, and you might be pleasantly surprised at the results. Have faith.”

Loki snorted in derision. “Sentiment, Mother,” he said.

“Sentiment is why you’re alive. Why I married Odin. Why Thor ran to your side the other day instead of leaving,” Frigga said.

“How…”

“Fandral needed a willing ear, and I provided it,” Frigga said. “He’s been a good friend to you.”

“I know,” Loki said. “More than I deserve.”

“It is not, and you know it, Loki,” Frigga said. “Why do you lie to yourself? Why will you not listen to me? My son, when I say have faith, you should have faith.”

“Fine,” Loki muttered.

“I warned your father not to interfere, and what does he do at first opportunity?” Frigga said. “But no, he believed the situation in Vanaheim was worsening, so he wanted Thor sent immediately. I did make sure to keep him up the rest of the night, letting him know exactly how I felt about his interference. I haven’t yelled at your father like that since…well, it doesn’t matter.”

Since Thor’s exile, she left out. No need in bringing that up. And Loki needed something else to think about, so she let the magic she was cloaking herself in to waver just a bit.
“Why are you covering yourself with an illusion?” Loki asked, noticing for the first time.

Frigga smiled, dropping the glamour.

Loki gasped, noticing the small bump of his mother's belly. He reached out, and Frigga took his hand, pressing it flat to her belly.

“When were you going to tell us?”

“When I was further along. You’ve both had so much to deal with, and I don't need you worrying about me,” she said.

“Mother, really, at your age,” Loki quipped. “Does Father know?”

Frigga swatted her son on the arm. “Of course,” she said. “Another son of Odin.”

“A boy?” Loki asked.

“Yes. Eir confirmed it the other day,” Frigga said. “I haven’t told your father that, yet.”

“Is he happy you’re expecting?” Loki said.

“Terrified,” Frigga said, smiling. “Yes, he is happy and terrified both. He wasn’t around for much of Jord’s pregnancy with Thor, and with you, we skipped all of that, but I’m glad to share this with him.”

“When are you going to tell Thor?” Loki said.

“Later,” Frigga said.

“Mother. . .” Loki said, hesitating.

“What, my son?”

“What was, is Father angry over what happened between Thor and I?” Loki said.

Frigga pursed her lips. “Why would he be angry? No, Loki, your father is not angry, or disappointed,” she said. “He has his reasons, but do not approach him about it now. Please.”

“I won’t,” Loki said. “I promise.”

“Good,” Frigga said. “Come. Walk with me.”

Loki linked his arm with his mother’s, and they went out into the garden. And for a while, he could almost convince himself things were normal again.

88888

After dinner with Loki, Helblindi and Fandral, Frigga decided it was time to let her husband off the hook. She hadn’t spoken with him all day, and she found him in his study, feet up on his desk, a raven on each shoulder, reading a book.

“I leave you alone for a few hours, and you give up all pretences of being civilized,” she said.

“Woman, this is my sanctum, my retreat from you and all the responsibilities I carry on my shoulders,” Odin said. “So, you’re speaking to me again?”
“I figured I must,” Frigga said, placing a hand on her husband’s arm.

“Did you speak with Loki?”

“Yes,” Frigga said.

“How is he?”

“Hurt and angry,” Frigga said.

“That isn’t new,” Odin said.

“No, but it’s turned toward Thor now, not himself,” Frigga said.

“With good reason,” Odin said. “Did you tell him yet?”

“Almost,” Frigga said. “But I don’t want them coming together out of obligation.”

“Are you mad, my wife? Those two coming together because of obligation? They can be dutiful, but that, never,” Odin said.

“I simply told Loki to have faith,” Frigga said.

“Have you seen something?” Odin asked.

“Odin...”

“Frigga, I know your dreams of late have not been pleasant,” Odin said. “Nightmares. It isn’t good for you, or our son. I remember what you told me at Yule, Frigga. I’m worried.”

He stood, pulling Frigga to him, standing so their foreheads were touching.

“If you know something, tell me,” Odin said.

“I know our sons are stubborn,” she said.

“At least he finally knows his own heart,” Odin said. “I thought it would never come about the way it has, but I’m glad. Relieved, actually.”

“That it’s Thor he loves, or that Loki can love?” Frigga asked.

“Both,” Odin said, kissing her on the cheek. “Come, Frigga. It’s late, and you need rest. Don’t worry about our sons. I worry enough for both of us.”

88888

Frigga lay awake, one hand resting on her belly over her growing son, the other held fast by Odin even in his sleep. Like she’d told Loki, her husband wasn’t angry over what transpired because of the dragons. As the Allfather, Odin hadn’t said anything about it, but as a father, he was concerned. So was she, but her views on the matter of her sons being together was more liberal than most Asgardians. Born and raised Vanir, she was willing to accept it if it happened. No blood was shared between them. Odin had considered it in the beginning, but changed his mind. Thor and Loki were always closer than any siblings had a right to be, so possibly it would be the natural progression of their relationship. Loki showed little interest in anyone, and Thor was always generous with his affections, but never fickle. Thor was easy to love and trust, and Loki was the opposite. Thor had always given generously with his love and trust, and loved and trusted easily in return. Loki was
difficult to love and did not make it easy for others to trust him, and he gave neither easily or foolishly.

Frigga knew Isond helped soften Loki’s sharp edges, thaw his heart. For that, she would never be able to repay the dragon. And it was the dragons who drew her sons together. Now, only time would tell.

88888

Elsewhere in the palace, another member of the royal family couldn’t sleep. Loki was bedded down with Isond, craving the warmth and companionship her bulk provided. Not the warmth and bulk he’d shared so fleetingly the past few nights, but it was enough. Isond wasn’t going anywhere.

Quit making yourself sad, Isond said. I thought we were past this. Frigga isn’t asleep, either. I could call her. . .

“Don’t,” Loki said. “She needs her rest. So do you, come to think about it.”

*I’m not egg-heavy yet,* Isond said.

“No, not yet,” Loki said.

*I told you I would find a way,* Isond said, suddenly sounding smug.

“What do you mean, Isond?” Loki asked.

*I told you I would find a way to make Thor understand. And I did.*

Rather spectacularly, Loki mused.

*You had no reason to complain,* Isond said. *You had what you wanted.*

“And likely will never have again,” Loki said.

Why?

“Isond, get some sleep,” Loki said, pulling the covers up over his head.

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Thor settled against the crook of Kjalvor’s neck, pulling his cloak tighter, sighing. He was exhausted from a day of fighting, and wanted nothing more than to sleep, but he was not going to let his people down.

*If you’re tired, sleep,* Kjalvor said. *I will keep watch.*

“We're not getting caught unaware tonight,” Thor said. “We're not going to lose anymore weapons or supplies to those marauders.”

*Let me flame them, and problem solved,* Kjalvor said.

“Haven’t you flamed enough enemies today?” Thor asked.

*Hardly,* Kjalvor said. *They mean to hurt innocent people, and I won’t stand for that.*

“Neither will I,” Thor said. “By the way, how is your wing?”
I've told you countless times today I am unhurt, Kjalvor said. Besides my fear at watching you fall. From now on, we fight together, or not at all. You should have stayed closer, and saved yourself a trip to the healers.

“I'm all right,” Thor said. “It was only a few ribs, and some cuts.”

You hurt. Quit trying to hide it, Kjalvor said. I can help you with it. You know that by now. You hurt less when you share your burdens with me. And do us both a favor. Quit lying to yourself.

“Fine. I miss Loki,” Thor said. “He'd be useful here right now. He could ward the camp, so everyone could get some sleep.”

But he can't come here because of the scepter, Kjalvor said. You don’t just miss Loki because he would be useful.

“Of course,” Thor said.

Still lying, Thor, Kjalvor said. We should not have left so soon. You need to talk to Loki, fix things.

“What’s to fix, Kjalvor?” Thor said. “Loki started all this.”

That may be so, but you had no small part in what happened between you when I chased Isond, Kjalvor said. YOU panicked. YOU were afraid. YOU ran to Loki.

“And I ordered you to leave, didn't I?” Thor said.

Where was I to go? And without you? I was not going to leave without you. Now you know how Loki truly feels, and you've done something about it, Kjalvor said.

“Loki is my brother,” Thor said. “And I only did something about it because you didn’t give me a choice.”

You had a choice. You made it. I would have left if you would have come with me, Kjalvor said. But Isond and Loki needed us. And Lady Freya's husband is her brother, is he not? Kjalvor asked.

The dragon would pick up on that.

“Stubborn brat,” Thor said.

I'm your stubborn brat and you love me, Kjalvor said.

“I do,” Thor said, leaning his cheek against the dragon's, and scratching Kjalvor's chin.

The dragon rumbled in contentment.

Sometimes you don't know what's best, and I do.

“Such as?” Thor asked.

Kjalvor didn’t gratify his partner with a response.
Chapter 29

Flight
Chapter 29--Infliction
Disclaimer: I do not own Thor, Loki, or the Avengers. They belong to Marvel/Disney.

Alfheim

The warmth and chaos of Abroen and Halleah's home brought a smile to Loki’s face as he entered. Calania hugged him, dragging him toward the table, where the family was sitting down to dinner.

“I hope you're hungry,” Calania said, shoving Loki toward a chair.

A plate was set in front of him, and food passed his way. Abroen smiled from his seat at the head of the table.

“It's good to see you,” he said. “I know why you're here."

Loki frowned, and Halleah answered for her husband. “He guessed,” she said. “He’s never wrong, not about the dragons. We’ll talk more about it later."

Halleah ignored how Lere waggled his eyebrows at her. Her son, always so curious, would not be present for that discussion. Loki grinned at the boy, and Halleah just sighed.

Loki is glad to be here, Isond suddenly said. So am I. He was getting tired of ‘doing nothing’ as he called it. The Allfather is keeping us both busy enough, but Loki does not think council meetings and planning are what we should be doing. And he is angry with Thor, but we can’t go to Vanaheim to help he and Kjalvor.

“Your brother and Kjalvor are in Vanaheim?” Halleah asked. “So the fighting there continues.”

Abroen kicked his wife under the table; she also ignored him.

“It’s only getting worse,” Loki said. “How are things here?”

“Trolls and colder than normal weather, even though it is fall,” Lere interjected. “Father and the dragons say it’s because of the coming convergence.”

“The convergence. You have to find a way to bring that up, don’t you?” Calania asked, throwing a piece of bread at her brother.

“Don’t,” Halleah cautioned. “If you have the twins start throwing food in mimicry of your actions, I will find a suitable punishment for you both.”

“What about Fandral? You bring him up at least a dozen times a day,” Lere shot back.

“How fare Fandral and Ivik?” Calania asked.

“They're both well.” Loki said. “Ivik is growing fast, and Fandral is doing fine. They wanted to come, but Fandral has his duties.”

“And you don’t?” Lere asked.
“I do,” Loki said. “More than you can imagine.”

“Lere, leave him alone,” Calania said.

“Isond finally had her first mating flight, didn’t she?” Lere said.

Calania smacked him in the back of the head, and he glared back. “What, why else would he be here? It’s as good a guess as any, isn’t it? Just because I don’t have a dragon doesn’t mean I don’t pay attention to what’s going on. Awyr’s from the clutch before the one Isond came from, and you keep wondering when your dragon is going to…”

Calania clapped a hand over Lere’s mouth.

“Thank you, daughter,” Abroen said. “Lere, your skills of observation are appreciated, but please keep silent the rest of the meal, or you will regret it.”

Loki bit his lip to keep from laughing, despite the somewhat personal turn the conversation had taken.

“Pay Lere no mind, Loki. My oh so very clever son has not yet learned the value of tact,” Abroen said.

“It’s all right,” Loki replied. And it was, for the moment. He would be glad of the normal of the elves’ home for a few days, considering the current upheavals in his own life.

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The next morning, Loki watched as Abroen laid a hand on Isond's flank, and his hand glowed white a few seconds, and he pulled away.

“Congratulations, Isond, you are indeed carrying” Abroen said. “And she'll clutch in about three months. You will bring her back here for that. Isond will let you know when it's time.”

The elf patted the dragon on the shoulder.

How many eggs will I have? Isond asked, excitement tinging her voice. How long will it take? Can we keep one to give to Midgard?

“You’ll have to wait until you clutch to see how many,” Abroen said. “The laying of the clutch depends on how many eggs, and you will both have to spell them so the dragonets within will sleep until they find their chosen partners. You’ll be here several days at least. And as for Midgard, that is not your decision, nor mine. It will depend upon the rider council and other circumstances, considering.”

“Everything is well, though?” Loki asked.

“Yes,” Abroen said.

Will we be able to go to Vanaheim if we need to? Loki thinks I won’t be able to fight or do any of the things I usually do, Isond said. Is that so?

“Does she need to be grounded?” Loki asked, echoing the dragon’s question.

“You mean she can fight if needed?”

“Yes,” Abroen said. “Isond, you will find herself sleeping and eating more toward the end of your
pregnancy, but you can fight. I hope it’s not necessary to put yourselves at so much risk right now, but I fear luck is not going to be on our side.”

When is it ever on our side? Isond said, laying down, and closing her eyes.

“You could have come here before she rose,” Abroen said. “You could have made a different choice.”

“As I told Fandral, what happened happened, and I can’t change it,” Loki said.

“Would you want to change things, then? Feeling regret, Loki?” Abroen asked.
“I haven’t really taken time to deal with everything,” Loki said. “I haven’t had the time.”

“My friend, you need to make some kind of effort to make peace with yourself and everything you’ve faced these past months,” Abroen said. “I won’t press you. I’ve seen how stubborn you can be. Come. You can help Lere with some spells he’s having difficulty with. It will keep you both out of trouble for a while.”

Over the next several days, Loki and Isond found themselves flying on patrol with Calania and Awyr or by themselves. Helping the healers again, or working in the training ring with other dragonrider pairs, learning new tactics.

And fighting together with those other pairs when the trolls came, remembering instinct over thought when it came to combat a dragonback.

Watching Isond flame them to ash gave Loki a certain satisfaction. Then working to the point of exhaustion to pull people out of the wreckage and heal those that could be saved.

Vanaheim

Kjalvor hovered, the air around himself and Thor smelled of ozone as the dragon and warrior focused their lightning on the raiders below. Another village taken, more lives lost. Their enemy was given the chance to surrender, but of course, they did not. Kjalvor's jaws snapped shut as lightning from Mjolnir arced overhead, hitting the hammer as Thor sent it downward, and Kjalvor streaked across the sky, now in full flight, banking so the enemy on the ground received the full force of rider and dragon.

Thunder broke the sky and as suddenly as its rumble came, Kjalvor heard the hiss of the arrow in its flight before he saw it, and it struck Thor. Another followed after the first, and Mjolnir fell from Thor's hand even as he slipped from Kjalvor's back.

He was gripped with panic as Thor's pain and surprise sliced through his own mind. Kjalvor dove, wings folded against his body as he cut through the air, trying to get beneath Thor as he fell. And he caught him, wings snapping open to stop their fall, and the dragon leveled out, flying over the heads of the enemy as he rained fire down on them, daring them to try and wound him.
Kjalvor landed, and Tyr raced over, throwing off his helmet as he knelt down by his fallen prince.

_I caught him_, Kjalvor said.

“That you did, Lord Kjalvor,” Tyr said, putting a hand on the dragon's snout even as he beckoned for healers. “Are you hurt?”

_No_, Kjalvor answered, sides heaving from his efforts and the overwhelming desire to panic. _But please don't make me leave Thor. I can't leave him._

“I'll not separate you from one another until I have to,” Tyr said, keeping a hand on the dragon as a pair of healers came running. They quickly started to examine their prince, who was still in Kjalvor's clutches. Tyr's grip on his helmet tightened as he watched the concerned glance exchanged between the healers.

If he could see the immediate change in Thor, he knew something was wrong. Their prince was had gone pale, sweaty and beneath the fingers of Tyr's free hand, Thor's pulse was weak and fast, and his wounds were bleeding more than a usual arrow wound.

“Get him back to Asgard,” Tyr said to the healers, before turning his attention back to the dragon.

“Lord Kjalvor, you must let the healers take Thor,” he said. Kjalvor let the healers ease Thor out of his grip, and placed him on litter. “Go with him. Keep them all safe.”

The leader of the Einherjar called for Heimdall, and moments later, the sky cracked open with the blinding light of the Bifrost. The healers entered, Kjalvor following.

Kjalvor was half-mad with fear and Thor's pain as they came through the Bifrost. The dragon knew Tyr was afraid, so were the healers. They said they would do what they could, and Kjalvor trusted them. He crooned, as best he could, as much for himself as Thor. His partner was stubborn, and blind sometimes, but he was brave and strong, and Kjalvor loved him with his very being. The dragon watched, trembling, as Thor was loaded into one of the flying longboats for the journey to the healing rooms when suddenly he wasn’t alone.

_Frigga was there_, in front of him, hands on his muzzle.

_I know I can't go with him but please can't I he's hurting and hurting and the healers said he would be fine but I know what they didn't say out loud..._

“Kjalvor, focus,” Frigga said. “Thor is going straight to Eir. You know she is the best healer in the realm. She healed Loki when he returned, and she will do what she can for Thor. Dear one, I
promise you we will do everything we can for Thor.”

Where are Loki and Isond? I don’t sense them, Kjalvor said.

“They're in Alfheim,” Frigga said. “I’m sending Ivik after them. He will be here any moment. I’ll stay with you until Loki and Isond arrive, then I’ll go to Thor.”

She stood, silent, with the dragon, waiting, hearing the faint sound of wings as the younger dragon landed.

And in Alfheim, Loki and Isond looked at each other when thy felt the Bifrost’s touch, and the tinge of fear as Ivik touched both their minds.

You must come, Ivik said. It's Thor and Kjalvor.

No words. Loki placed a hand on Isond's shoulder, and they were gone.

Frigga managed convincing Kjalvor to move from the Observatory to his space in Thor’s chambers, and he was alone, the queen having been called away to Thor’s side.

Kjalvor thrashed in his wallow. Thor’s pain and fear bled through, and he fought to send his partner his strength and calm, but he could not. He was terrified. Thor hurt.

Then Loki and Isond were with him.

Loki kneeling beside him, and Isond snaked her neck over his, trying to hold him still. She crooned, and Loki hummed an old-remembered song from his childhood, trying to help calm the other dragon.

Poison. They say it's poison and they don't know what to do and the Allfather won't talk to me and Frigga went away and hasn't come back and no one will tell me anything, Kjalvor said.

“Kjalvor, show me what happened,” Loki said, giving Isond a grateful look as she curled up against the other dragon.

Loki closed his eyes, and Kjalvor showed him. The battle, the arrows, and Thor falling.

“It's not your fault,” Loki said. “They will find new ways to fight against us.”

Kjalvor, stop, Isond said. Loki is right. You could not stop Thor from being hurt, anymore than I could have helped it when Loki was taken in Jotunheim. We are strong, but we cannot stop everything.

I know, but it doesn't change how I feel, Kjalvor said.

Then try and stay calm for Thor’s sake, Isond said. Loki will go to the healing rooms, and find out what he can. I will stay with you.

“I’m only a thought away, Kjalvor,” Loki said, caressing the dragon’s chin. “I promise I will find out something.”

Kjalvor only blinked, and Loki left Thor’s chambers, walking to the healing wing instead of transporting himself. He needed the time to try and compose himself. Kjalvor panicked, and Loki could only imagine what was indeed going on with his brother. Truly a grave situation if he was called back as he was. And he was trying not to panic, trying to keep calm for his own sake and that of the dragons.
Steeling himself, Loki entered the healing wing, only to find even his way barred from the room where the healers were working on Thor. Odin himself shoved Fandral out the door toward Loki, barely sparing his younger son a glance before going back inside.

Fandral had blood on his hands and tunic, shaking his head.

“It's not good,” he said. “Will you. . .”

“I'll be fine,” Loki said, trying to ignore the blood covering Fandral. Thor’s blood. “Get cleaned up and see to Ivik.”

“Kjalvor?”

“As well as can be expected,” Loki said. “Why did they let you inside and not me?”

“They needed an extra pair of hands,” Fandral said. “And I was with your father when word came, so I followed him.”

The door opened once again, this time Eir stepped out, closing the door behind her.

“Loki, please, come with me,” Eir said, taking his arm, dragging in him the direction away from Thor. “We need your help with the other wounded.”

“Lady Eir, why can't I see my brother?” Loki asked, stopping.

“Not yet,” Eir said.

“Why aren't you with him?”

“Your parents are with Thor,” Eir said. “Your brother requires their magic more than my healing skills at the moment.”

“What? If it's magic they require, then why. . .” Loki trailed off, jerking away from Eir, turning to go back, but she grabbed his arm as he passed by, her grip like steel.

“I have been ordered by the Allfather to make use of your skills where they are needed. Your mother called you back so you would be aware of what has happened to your brother,” Eir said. “Now, as a prince of Asgard, and trained healer, will do as you are commanded. Will you not? Your parents, and your brother do not need your anger or disobedience.”

Loki sighed, knowing she was right. Eir was wise.

“Yes, my lady,” he said as the healer guided him to another room, where injured members of the Einherjar waited, injured from the same battle as Thor. Eir turned Loki over to Folka, one of her assistants, giving Loki a stern look before she left him.

Loki did not remember making it back to his own bed, but that was where he woke, still in his clothing, minus his boots. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, noticing it was still dark outside. He heard Isond moving around in her wallow, torchlight glinting off her blood red eyes, casting a warm glow on her golden scales and wings as she stretched.

It’s a few hours before dawn, Isond said. To answer your question about the time. Fandral dragged you back here only two hours ago because Eir and Frigga thought you needed to rest.
“How can you be so calm? How is Thor? Kjalvor?” Loki asked.

“Kjalvor is sleeping. Fitfully, but he is sleeping, Isond said. Your parents and the healers have managed to make Thor comfortable for now.

“For now? What does that mean?” Loki said.

The arrows were tipped with poison, Isond said. The healers have not seen it’s like in recent memory. They are in disagreement over how to deal with it.

“And in the meantime, my brother could be dying,” Loki said. “I have to see him.”

You’re to stay here and rest, Isond said. Queen Frigga’s orders. I’m to sit on you if you try and leave your chambers.

“Also my mother’s orders?” Loki said.

No. My idea, Isond said. So go back to sleep. I can be strong for all of us right now.

The dragon reached out, nudging Loki back toward his bed.

“Isond. . .”

I know you love me. Why is that word so hard for you to say? Isond said. Sleep. Now. I will wake you if anything changes. I promise.

Loki sighed, trudging back to his bed. Why was Isond always right?

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Thor fought his way awake. His head felt as it if was stuffed with Midgardian cotton, as Stark said, and he could not rouse Kjalvor from his terrible dreams. Thor only felt the dragon’s fear as he woke.

He crawled out of bed, staggering to his own chambers, shoulder and side on fire and legs unsteady, spurred on by the need to be with Kjalvor. He couldn’t wake the dragon, but what he felt from Kjalvor was enough to get him out of bed and to the dragon as fast as he could manage. Sheer terror, so strong it made Thor want to vomit.

His chambers, finally, and he managed making it to the dragon.

“Kjalvor,” he said. “I'm here. I'm all right.”

Kjalvor lifted his head a fraction. You’re not all right. We are not all right.

He wrapped his good arm around the dragon's head, holding himself up, as much as he could, while sending comforting thoughts to the dragon.

You’ll leave me and the darkness will come. I know you'll go, Kjalvor said, and the dragon shuddered from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail. And the darkness will follow.

“I'll not leave you,” Thor said. “I'm here now, aren't I?”

Not now, but soon.

“I'm not going to die,” Thor said. “We will be all right. Fever dreams, Kjalvor. That's all.”
Except Thor did not feel all right. He sank down, welcoming the blessed darkness.

Loki was brought awake by Isond's panic and the sound of Kjalvor's roar. It reverberated through the palace, and Loki threw a pair of pants over his leggings, running for the door, and Kjalvor. But once again, Loki found his way barred, gently shoved back his father as he tried entering Thor's chambers. And Odin was not alone. Annar was beside him, nodding at Loki as the Allfather opened the door to Thor's chambers, letting himself and the Jotun in. The look Odin gave Loki made him stay where he was.

"Loki, go back to your chambers," Odin said. "Please."

"Why can't I see my brother? Just a few moments?" Loki asked.

"You can't see Thor right now," Odin said. "The poison in his veins has not been seen in this realm since the war with Jotunheim. Even the smallest amount would kill a full-blooded Jotun, my son."

Loki blinked. "You're half-Jotun," he said. "And why get Annar if it's so dangerous?"

"Because he knows how to counteract the poison," Odin said. "And as to my lack of fear for myself, if one recovers from the poison, they are immune to its effects."

"Will Thor be all right then?" Loki asked.

"Only time will tell," Odin said. "Loki, go."

Loki did as asked, heading back to his own chambers, finding Isond was not alone. He found Frigga and Helblindi with Isond, his mother and brother having made a nest of his bed coverings with the dragon.

Helblindi ran to him, hugging him, eyes big with fear.

"Loki, bring him here," Frigga said.

Loki picked up his little brother, carrying him over to his mother and the dragon. He set Helblindi down on the other side of Frigga before taking his own seat by his mother.

"Have you seen the outcome of what's happening now?" Loki asked.

Frigga closed her eyes, wrapping an arm around Loki, and pulling Blindi close.

"It's a passing storm," Frigga said, hoping that would satisfy. "Loki, rest."

"I'll not lose him," Loki said.

"You can't stop fate," Frigga said.

"What do you mean?" Loki said.

*Loki, quit pestering Frigga*, Isond said.

"Mother," Loki said.

"I've already said too much," Frigga said. "Loki, get some sleep. Or at least pretend to sleep. What kind of example are you setting for Helblini?"
They boy giggled, and Frigga stroked his hair.

“Both of you. Sleep,” Frigga said.

Listen to your mother, Isond said with a rumble.

Later, Frigga was still awake, Loki asleep with his head on her shoulder, and Helblindi was curled with his head in her lap. Isond also slumbered, leaving the queen alone with her thoughts.

She was certain Thor would survive. The thread of his fate was still strong. She could see that. Other futures were still in flux. And that uncertainty frightened her. But she would not voice it aloud. The dragons understood her fear, but did not push further. For that, Frigga was grateful, because she knew something dark was coming. But for the moment, she could breathe a little easier as she heard footsteps coming closer. And she smiled up at her husband when he appeared.

Odin knelt down beside her, scooping Helblindi up in his arms.

“I'll put him to bed,” Frigga said.

“Thank you,” she said.

“What of Loki?” he asked.

“I'll stay here,” Frigga said. “How is Thor?”

“Annar said the worst is past,” Odin said. “He saved Thor.”

“And Kjalvor,” Frigga said. “We owe the Jotnar a debt of gratitude, my husband. Don't you think it's time we returned what is rightfully theirs?”

Odin's gaze strayed to Loki. “He won't take the throne without a fight,” he said.

“That's not what I meant, and you know that,” Frigga said, her grip around Loki tightening.

“I already promised Loki he can return the Casket, and he's given his word to his brother he will,” Odin said.

“I will hold you to that,” Frigga said.

“I know you will, my love,” Odin said. “Get some rest.”
Loki was spared from his father's latest meeting with the war council. The Allfather's reluctance to face his wife's temper was the main reason, the reason he gave Loki. But the younger prince knew that wasn't the only rationale. Frigga was a wise queen and mother. She knew her youngest son was not in the mood to sit through a meeting, not when his attention was centered elsewhere. Loki was grateful for the respite, albeit temporary.

*Just go, Isond said. You finally have permission. Kjalvor is awake, and won't stop asking me when you're going to come see him. He wants to see me, too, but as Frigga suggested, hopefully you'll have better luck with Kjalvor.*

Rolling his eyes, Loki stopped in front of the doors to Thor's chambers, where, for the first time in three days, his way was not barred. Reaching out, he opened the door, stepping inside. From beyond the antechamber, he heard Kjalvor rumbling and moving about.

Loki steeled himself as he walked into Thor's bed chamber, where Annar was reading a book.

“I figured you'd be along sometime today,” the Jotun said. “Thor is finally out of danger. I'm hoping he'll wake soon. The fact Kjalvor is up and around already is a good indicator your brother will hopefully be conscious sometime today.”

*Thor isn't having dark dreams anymore, Kjalvor interjected. I wish he would wake.*

“Give him time,” Annar said. “Loki, you can come closer if you like. The poison is gone, and poses no danger to you anymore. It's burned through Thor's body, but he'll be feeling its affects for a while. It makes wounds slow to heal, but that's a small price to pay for what he's been through.”

Loki edged closer to Thor's bed, where his brother was sleeping peacefully. Loki gently brushed back some stray hair from his face.

“See? He's well,” Annar said, watching as the tension drained from Loki's frame. “Which is more than I can say for you. You're paler than usual. Have you even slept the past few days?”

“Not much,” Loki said, sparing Annar a look before turning his gaze back to Thor. “I don't think I, or my parents will ever be able to thank you enough for saving Thor.”

Annar shrugged. “Gratitude is enough for me,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Being indebted to the royal family of Asgard is probably going to be worth something,” Annar grinned. “I'll think of something. . .well, that's not completely true. I do have something in mind.”
“Do I even want to know?” Loki asked.

“Later,” Annar said. “I thought your purpose here was two-fold. Now that you've seen Thor, see to Kjalvor. He will not listen to me.”

The Jotun nodded in the dragon's direction, where he was giving Loki an innocent look. Or what he thought was an innocent look. Kjalvor was good at it.

_What do you want of me?_ The dragon asked.

“My mother and Isond tell me neither of them can convince you to budge from your spot,” Loki said.

_I'm not leaving Thor._

“Annar will be with him, and you know Isond and I can have you back in an instant,” Loki said. “Kjalvor, only for a little while. You need to eat, keep up your strength. Thor will need you as he heals.”

_Isond said she can be strong for all of us. Isn't that enough?_ Kjalvor asked, butting his nose against Loki's chest.

“You still need to stretch your wings and hunt,” Loki said. “So does Isond. She told me she wasn't going to hunt if you didn't go with us, and you know she needs to eat.”

A lie, but anything to get the dragon up and moving. Stubborn creatures.

_Fine,_ Kjalvor said after several moments of silence. _I give up. Isond said her eggs won't be many and her hatchlings weak if she doesn't eat, and she will blame me._

Loki let out a bark of laughter. “Kjalvor, you know you can never win against Isond when her mind is made up,” he said.

Loki sent Kjalvor off after making sure the dragon ate his fill. Half a dozen sheep later, he returned to the palace, leaving Loki and Isond alone.

_Very creative, lying to Kjalvor,_ Isond said.

“It was a white lie, and you poured on the guilt,” Loki said, leaning back against his dragon, scratching her eye ridge.

_We are a good team, Isond said. Thor is better, Kjalvor is being almost sensible, and you're not worrying anymore._

“I'm still worried about Thor,” Loki said.

_We both heard Annar. Thor will be well, Isond said. He just needs to wake up now. Then you can talk._

“And before long, he'll get sent back to Vanaheim, Isond. Or he'll take off to Midgard. We both know it's just a matter of time,” Loki said.

_Why can you not be content for more than a moment?_ Isond asked, voice tinged with red. Loki winced at her anger. _Thor is home for now. Be glad of that._
Loki sighed. “I’ll try. Is that enough for you?”

*Try harder,* Isond said. *You need to trust me, especially when you know I’m right.*

“I do trust you,” Loki said.

*Then don’t worry all the time. Frigga worries enough for all of us.*

Thor woke with a start, trying to get up, weakly kicking at the bed coverings wrapped around him, but feeling a hand on his head, he opened his eyes, seeing a Jotun standing over him.

“Annar? What are you doing here?” Thor asked, batting at Annar’s other hand as he tried to shove him back down into bed. “Let me up just a moment—I want to see Kjalvor.”

“I saved your life,” the Jotun answered, taking his hand off Asgard’s crown prince long enough for him to get a glimpse of his sleeping dragon.

“What do you mean?” Thor said, frowning up at the healer.

“The arrows you were shot with contained a very deadly poison,” Annar said. “A terrible death for anyone with Jotun blood. For a normal Aesir or Vanir, it’s still potent, but the healers have more time to work with. It’s only because of your parents’ magic and my healing skills you’re still alive.”

“How long have Kjalvor and I been back home?” Thor asked.

“Three days,” Annar said. “I’ve been here almost two, making sure the two of you were going to live. You’ve scared the life out of Kjalvor, your parents, Loki and Isond. Especially the other night, leaving the healing rooms to get to your dragon. Don’t you remember? You and Kjalvor were half-mad with your fever. You were raving about how you weren’t going to leave him.”

“I remember reassuring Kjalvor, but not much else,” Thor said, sitting up, turning so he could talk with Annar and still see Kjalvor. The dragon didn’t stir as Thor tried to wake him.

“If you’re trying to wake Kjalvor, let him sleep. This is the first good rest he’s had since you came back,” Annar said. “Loki and Isond made him hunt this morning.”

“Loki was here?” Thor asked.

“Only long enough to see you a few minutes, before dragging Kjalvor away from you,” Annar said. “It was the first time he’s seen you two since you returned, because your father did not bother explaining why your brother couldn’t see you.”

Annar knew Loki had been turned away from seeing his brother more than once, and he supposed that explained the desperation and anguish on the other man’s face the night he’d arrived in Asgard with the Allfather. He knew Loki and Thor were close, or had been once, but something in the look on Thor’s face and Loki’s behavior suggested something was not right. He would delve into it. Loki, was, in a way, family, and Annar did not like the way Loki was acting.

He’d spoken with the head Asgardian healer, Eir, who said Loki had worked himself to exhaustion over the past three days, helping with the wounded from Vanaheim. He also assisted with placing some of the refugees displaced by the fighting there. Byleistr had the same habit when he was worried about something—finding a distraction and letting it consume his time and energy until he was used up. And having witnessed Loki do the same thing in Jotunheim, and now, Annar
figured it was a family trait. Something to share with Byleistr when he returned home. But he wondered what was eating at Loki. Possibly Thor would know, or he was the reason.

“Are you feeling all right?” Annar asked. He’d work his way into the more unpleasant topic.

“Weak, exhausted, and my shoulder and side hurt when I move,” Thor answered.

“Hungry?”
“No,” Thor said.

“Don’t move, and you won’t hurt,” Annar said. “You’ll have to eat something eventually. I’ll get someone to bring you some broth later.”

Thor made a face at the thought. “I told you I’m not hungry.”

“You will be,” Annar said.

“How soon until I can be up and around?” Thor said.

“As long as it takes,” Annar said. “You nearly died. Do you know how close you came? A few of the elder healers who were consulting on your case suggested to Eir they give you something to end your suffering. That is how close you came to death, Thor.”

Annar watched as the blood drained from Thor’s face, and noted how the prince’s gaze shot to the dragon sleeping nearby.

“What kept them from it?” Thor asked.

“Eir and your father’s intervention,” Annar said. “Perhaps I should have said nothing, but you needed to know how serious your situation was.”

Fine. Nearly died. Time to change the subject, so Thor did.

“Did Byleistr finally agree to your offer of courtship?”

“He’s coming around,” Annar said, grinning. But it faded. “Don’t change the subject. Has something changed between you and Loki?”

“You could say that,” Thor said, gaze dropping, his good hand worrying at the edge of the sheet covering him.

Annar's eyes narrowed. “Explain,” he said.

“It's personal,” Thor said.

“Fine. I'll ask Loki,” Annar said, getting up and heading for the door.

“You win,” Thor said. “Sit down, and I’ll explain.”

Annar sat down on the floor beside him.

“We... crossed a line we should not have crossed,” Thor said. “It was because of the dragons, but I don’t know what to do now.”

He hoped Annar could understand what he was not saying, because he did not want to have to repeat himself. But in a way, it was a relief. It was out, and possibly, that meant if he could discuss it
with Annar, he could eventually face Loki. And he was not going to break his promise to his brother, that they would have the talk they so desperately needed.

“You’re worse than Byleistr when he doesn’t want to explain himself,” Annar said. “Is speaking about your emotions so terrible? If you’re afraid I’ll repeat what you say, I won’t. I’m a healer. You have my confidence.”

“Fine. Kjalvor and Isond mated, and Loki and I were caught up in their emotions, and. . .”


“Have the two of you talked about what happened? Does it bother you?” Annar asked.

“Yes, it does bother me, and no, we have not talked,” Thor said.

“Was it so terrible an experience?” Annar asked.

Thor closed his eyes. “No, it wasn’t terrible,” he said. “It’s just that. . .Loki is my brother.”

“Not by blood, and even if that was the case, you’re royalty, and the queen is Vanir, so it’s not exactly setting a precedent,” Annar said. “Or that anyone would be surprised, possibly.”

“Why do you immediately assume this is going to be the basis for the shape of my future with Loki?” Thor asked.

“I’m not,” Annar said. “You are.

“The point is, Annar, I do not feel for Loki the way he feels for me, and besides, I am in love with another,” Thor said. “Have you any advice to offer?”

Annar shrugged. “Only you know your own heart,” he said. “I hope I’ve helped you lighten your burden by at least listening to you. Get some rest.”

The Jotun stood, walking out of the bed chamber, leaving Thor and Kjalvor to their rest. It was time to go check on Loki now that Thor was out of danger. At least with his wounds. He was now in a place that could mean disaster of another kind. If he hurt Loki, and Annar was thinking it was looking more like that, Byleistr would kill Thor. Maybe not. Suttung would. Annar would hold judgment. With that thought, he knocked on Loki’s door. The double doors swung open, and Annar entered, finding Loki poring over books spread on his desk.

“So,” he said. “ Anything you wish to speak about? Anything new going on, interesting or unusual happenings?”

“No,” Loki said. He didn't look at Annar, but his gaze skipped over to where Isond was sleeping in her wallow.

“How is Isond?”

“Hale and healthy,” Loki said.

“Are you?”

“I’m getting by,” Loki said.

“That doesn't sound like you're very happy, then,” Annar said.
Loki looked up, glaring at the bigger Jotun. “One does not need to be happy to get by in life,” he said.

“No, but it helps,” Annar said.

“Don’t you have someone else to go bother?” Loki asked, hopeful.

“No,” Annar said. “I need to show you how we make healing stones in Jotunheim, but that can wait.”

“Then go check on Thor,” Loki said.

“I just left him. I told him to rest, and Kjalvor was sleeping,” Annar said.

“Go see Eir or my mother then,” Loki said. “I have work to do.”

“You know, you remind me so much of Byleistr right now it’s uncanny,” Annar said. “It must be one of the few bearable traits the two of you inherited from Laufey. Your stubbornness and way of dealing with denial is almost endearing.”

“What are you talking about?” Loki snapped.

“How you both deny there is something you want, and you don’t deserve it,” Annar said. “I know what happened between you and Thor. I won’t say much more than that, and if you tell him I broke my confidence, it will not be pleasant.”

“Butt out,” Loki said.

Annar snorted. “Byleistr knows I want to court him, but he just won’t say yes. Such a simple thing,” he said. “But your situation, and mine, aren’t all that different, I think. I already know how Byleistr feels. I’m just waiting for him to come around.”

“Thor is in love with a mortal on Midgard,” Loki said.

“He said as much, but how long did he know her?”

“A few months,” Loki answered.

“I’d say you have the advantage, then,” Annar said.

“Hardly.” Loki said, sparing Annar a glance. “If Thor thinks his mortal is worth the sacrifice, he’ll do what he must to be by her side.”

“Including dragging Kjalvor to Midgard? You know how they fear the unknown, and what they see as monsters,” Annar said.

Loki didn’t answer, instead turning through the pages in the book in front of him.

“So you’re not going to say anything?” Annar said. “Fine. Let me tell you a little about your parents. Your birth parents.”

Loki looked up, a flash of interest on his face, but he went back to glaring at his book, and Annar did not bother hiding the smile on his own face.

“Farbauti didn’t let Laufey forget for a moment what he wanted,” Annar said. “Their courtship is legendary among the Jotun. And never forget you’re the product of that courtship.”
“One parent's blind devotion and the other's madness?”

“Hardly,” Annar said. “I was just a boy, but I remember it. If you don't want to hear it from me, ask Byleistr when you have a chance.”

“Go on,” Loki said.

“The council and clan elders were pressing Laufey to take a consort to provide a legitimate heir, and after a long search, Farbauti was the only candidate who caught Laufey’s interest,” Annar said. “But Laufey actually listened to the wishes of the council, and passed over Farbauti. He was from a clan that had little power and influence, but their bloodline was ancient and strong. Warriors, but more importantly, a line strong in magic. Farbauti was feared and respected because of his magic. It’s where you get your strong magic.”

“So what happened?” Loki asked.

“FARBauti wore down Laufey,” Annar said. “Remember Jotunheim was at war with Asgard at the time, so Farbauti was causing a distraction that Laufey couldn’t ignore. And it wasn’t overt all the time. Subtlety. A way with words. A look, a gesture. Always there. He never let Laufey forget who he was, and what he wanted. Laufey started that fight, but Farbauti finished it.”

“So Farbauti was as power-hungry as Laufey,” Loki said.

“Not so,” Annar said. “Farbauti wasn’t perfect, but he was not like Laufey. He had compassion for others, which Laufey considered a weakness. Like how he cared for Byleistr, who Laufey only saw as a commodity to be exploited if he could prove useful someday.

“FARBauti wanted to claim Byleistr as his own. It wouldn’t have made Byleistr heir, but it would have been something better than what he had. Farbauti would have pressed the claim, if he hadn't died.”

“Having me,” Loki said. “Correct?”

“FARBauti was wounded in battle,” Annar said. “You came early because of it. My father couldn’t save Farbauti, but he saved you.”

“Annar, do you actually have a point?” Loki asked, crossing his arms, leaning back against his desk, waiting.

“I do,” he said. “If you want something, don't give up. Fight for it, tooth and claw.”

“My mother told me to give Thor some space and time,” Loki replied. “That's not fighting for what I want.”

“Queen Frigga is a wise woman,” Annar said. “Love is a battlefield, my friend. Her advice is another tactic in that battle. Besides, you're enough like Byleistr that I know you'll wait things out, think them through, correct?”

Loki bit his lip, suddenly staring at the floor. “Not exactly. Not this time, I mean,” he said. “I did decide to take the direct approach in this instance. Thor favors it, and after trying to explain, several times, how I felt, more drastic actions were appropriate.”

“Like letting your dragon speak for you?” Annar said, eyebrow raised in question.

“I didn't mean for that to happen,” Loki said. “I kissed Thor before that.”
Annar rolled his eyes in exasperation, drawing a heated look from Loki.

“Please, I’ve suffered more killing looks from Byleistr than I can count,” Annar said. “At least you were willing to try something to get through to that thick-headed brute next door. Which is more than I can say for Byleistr.”

“Are we finished?” Loki said.

“For now,” Annar said. “I need to go see Heblindi. I left Aima and Venni with him this morning. I hope he hasn’t gotten into any mischief.”

“My mother will see to it they haven’t,” Loki said.

“That boy finds trouble as naturally as he breathes,” Annar said. “Another gift from Laufey, to his sons, I think. Speaking of Blindi, did he tell you what he wants for his name day?”

“A ghost bear cub,” Loki said, through gritted teeth.

“I take it that’s not a suitable gift?” Annar said, smiling back.

“Wolves and dragons in the palace are one thing, but a ghost bear? From Jotunheim? They can be bigger than Sleipnir, can’t they?”

“Yes,” Annar said. “How about a wolf?”

“Books,” Loki said.

“A trip to Jotunheim to see us when things die down?”

“That, too,” Loki said. “Go see Blindi.”

“I will if you go keep an eye on Thor later,” Annar said.

“I will,” Loki said.

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Thor moved from his bed to be near Kjalvor once he was alone, and promptly fell asleep once he’d made himself comfortable next to the dragon. Even that bit of physical effort was enough to tire him out, and he wasn’t sure how long he slept, waking to find Kjalvor staring down at him. The dragon’s tongue snaked out, and he gently licked the side of Thor’s face, before reaching down, nuzzling his cheek against his partner’s.

Shouldn’t you be in your bed? Kjalvor asked.

“I’d rather be with you,” Thor answered, reaching up, rubbing the space between Kjalvor’s horns, earning a sigh of contentment from the dragon.

You frightened me so much when you fell from my back, Kjalvor said. I caught you. Tyr said I saved your life. Then, at least.

“It’s not your fault I fell,” Thor said. “I remember that much. And your fear. I told you I won’t leave you. I kept my promise, and I will continue to keep that promise.”

Loki says you shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep, Kjalvor said. You promised him you would talk when you returned. We’re home, and you must speak with Loki. I know he’s been so
afraid for us, for you, these past few days. He wouldn’t tell me, but I could feel it, and Isond told me.

“Of course Loki was afraid, because he’s my brother, and he cares about us both,” Thor said.

You know what I mean, Kjalvor said. I will hold you to that promise, too. Leaving me...that’s a promise you can’t really keep. If one of us goes, the other will follow. You remember what Abroen said about dying. If something happened to me, you could survive, but would you want to? I know if you died, I would not want to continue living.

And that was the moment it finally sank in, for Thor, the depth of the bond between himself and Kjalvor. Sinking in, finally, they were one. If anything happened to Kjalvor, he would never forgive himself. Most likely he wouldn't be around, beating himself up if it happened. He knew he wouldn’t be. Abroen had told them of elven riders surviving the death of their dragons, but they died by their own hand, unable to go on without the other half of themselves.

Now he truly was confused and conflicted. Thor felt ill. He was foolish, and brash, nearly getting himself and Kjalvor killed because he didn’t consider every possibility.

You could not have foreseen getting wounded as you did, Kjalvor said.

“We nearly died,” Thor said.

But we’re here, together, alive, Kjalvor said.

“If it weren’t for that damn scepter, Loki and Isond would have been with us, and possibly we would not be in this situation,” Thor said.

Which situation? Kjalvor asked. You wounded and me grounded with you, or Isond and I mated?

“You and Isond are not mated because Loki and I are not together, nor will we be,” Thor said.

Kjalvor snorted.

“Wretched beast,” Thor said, closing his eyes, dropping off to sleep.

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Thor was awakened by the sound of a crash, crockery breaking and profanity. Sitting up, rubbing his eyes, he was greeted by the sight of Loki covered in various liquids, and Herja, their mother’s cat, sitting a few feet away, suddenly very interested in licking her paw.

“Damn demon,” Loki snapped, glowering at the cat. “I know you did that on purpose. I should feed you to one of Annar’s wolves.”

Thor watched as the cat gracefully walked over to Loki, winding between his legs, rubbing against him, purring.

“Did she trip you, brother?” Thor asked.

“I didn't mean to wake you,” Loki said.

“It's all right,” Thor said. “It’s good to see you. I’m sorry I was asleep when you came by yesterday.”

“You need your rest, if you’re going to heal,” Loki said. “It’s understandable.”
“Do you think you could heal me so I can get back to Vanaheim?” Thor asked.

“Eir said you need to rest,” Loki said. “She and Annar have already healed you as much as they can. A few days, Thor. The fight will be waiting for you when you return.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing you can do to quicken the process?”

“No,” Loki said. “And don’t ask me again.”

“How fares Isond?” Thor asked, hoping the dragon would be a nice, neutral subject.

“She’s well,” Loki said.

“And you?”

“I’ve been better, but we both know that,” Loki said.

“Loki, if it’s about . . .”

“Thor . . .”

“What? I promised you we’d talk when I returned, and we finally have time, and now you turn away?” Thor said.

“I’ll not have you discuss what happened between us out of obligation,” Loki said.

“It’s not,” Thor said. “Then when?”

“Thor, get some rest,” Loki said.

“Loki, I’ve sleep for most of the past four days. I think I can stay awake long enough to talk,” Thor said.

Loki silently counted backwards from 10, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“I’m going to go get cleaned up, and I’ll send someone to bring you more breakfast,” Loki said. Turning on his heel, he left Thor’s chambers, heading to his own. And of course, Isond couldn’t leave him alone.

_He is exhausted_, Isond said. _He's just very good at hiding it. I know you don’t want to force him, Loki, but at least he was willing to try and talk things out. Why did you walk away? You could have started, and finished later. He's not forcing you to talk about what happened to us in Jotunheim, so do not force him on this. You baited him with your words, and your tone. So be happy Thor made an effort. I know you're angry, but as much as you're angry, Thor is in denial._

“Meaning he’s rejected me,” Loki said.

_Stop it_, Isond said. _Denial is not rejection. Even Kjalvor knows that._

“What do you mean?” Loki said.

_Get yourself cleaned up_, Isond said. _Eat. Then we’ll go get Fandral and Ivik and patrol._
Loki murmured into Sleipnir’s ear as the horse nibbled at his hair. He wasn’t threatening the king of stallions, but his careful wording let the horse know what he would do to him if he hurt Helblindi, who was currently sitting on his back. Loki wouldn’t hurt the stallion anymore than Sleipnir would injure him. They had an understanding. The conversation was a formality between Loki and steed, more of a game than anything. Conversation over, Loki vaulted up behind Helblindi,

“Thor promised he would help you teach me to ride,” Helblindi said.

“This isn't me teaching you how to ride,” Loki said. “This is me taking you for a ride.”

“That's lying,” Helblindi said. “Byleistr says lying is wrong, but Annar said it's OK sometimes.”

“They're both right,” Loki said, touching his heels to Sleipnir, and the stallion set off at a gentle pace. “One day, little brother, you will learn the difference.”

“Why is everything so far away?” Helblindi asked. “Frigga said her baby won't be born for months, and even then, it'll be forever before he's big enough for me to play with.”

“Did my mother tell you?” Loki asked, surprised.

“Yes, but she made me promise I wouldn't tell anyone, and I couldn't talk to it about anyone but you, and only when no one is around,” the boy said.

“You have Gudrun, and her brothers,” Loki said.

“I don't get to see them all the time,” Helblindi said.

“You could, if you like,” Loki suggested. “If Hildegund doesn’t mind having you around.”

“What about my lessons with Frigga?” Helblindi asked. “And when the baby comes, do I get to be his brother? Like you and Thor?” he asked.

“That's up to my mother and father,” Loki said. “He'll be your friend, at the very least.”

That seemed to content the boy, and they rode in silence for a while, Isond watching with interest as the Allfather's war horse plodded around the ring.

He's not afraid of me, Isond said.
“Sleipnir fears nothing, not even you, my dear Isond,” Loki said. “Although Sleipnir does strike fear in the enemy.”

Helblindi laughed.

“Why should anyone be afraid of Sleipnir?” the boy asked.

“Ask Thor,” Loki said. “He’s not very fond of him. But Thor just doesn’t understand what a sweet boy Sleipnir can be.”

He patted the horse's neck, and he whickered back, as if in agreement.

“See, he agrees with me,” Loki said.

“When can we visit Thor?” Helblindi asked.

“Later,” Loki said.

Except “later” turned into “sooner” as Helblindi wouldn’t stop pestering him after their ride with Sleipnir was finished.

Loki let them into Thor's room, Helblindi holding on to his hand, but he let go, running for Thor, scrabbling up onto the warrior’s bed, throwing his arms around his neck. Thor patted him on the back with his good arm, throwing Loki a look.

“Helblindi wanted to see you,” Loki said.

“And you didn’t?” Thor asked.

Loki ignored the question, and thank the Norns Helblindi couldn’t contain his excitement over finally getting to ride a horse.

“I met Sleipnir,” Helblindi said.

Thor sighed at the mention of their father's warhorse, and Loki stuck his tongue out at Thor.

“So mature, Loki,” he said. “And Blindi, was Sleipnir kind to you?”

“He's nice,” the boy replied.

“You bribed him, didn't you?”

“I have no need to bribe Sleipnir, Thor,” Loki said.

“We gave him apples,” Helblindi said. “Is that a bribe?”

“Horses like apples,” Thor said, shooting Loki an amused look. Loki glared back.

*Play nice*, Kjalvor interjected, making sure both men heard him.

*Yes, be nice, Loki*, Isond said.

Loki relaxed a little, but knowing Thor needed his rest, they had to cut the visit short. “Blindi, we should let Thor rest,” he said.

Helblindi frowned back at his brother, but he hugged Thor one more time.
“I’m glad you’re better,” he said.

“Thank you, Blindi,” Thor said. “Loki, you should stay. I’m not that tired.”

*Yes, he is*, Kjalvor said, giving his best dragon glare from his wallow.

“Thor, rest. We’ll return later,” Loki said.

“Fine,” Thor muttered, watching as Helblindi scampered back to Loki’s side, leaving he and Kjalvor alone.

It was late, and Loki knew he needed to rest himself, but he was going over supply requisitions the Allfather gave to him to approve. Odin was heaping more and more responsibility on him, trying to make him feel useful, as he was not letting his youngest son set foot in Vanheim for anything short of Ragnarok. Loki appreciated it, but he did not relish the extra work. Helping in the healing rooms was keeping him busy enough. And neither he nor Isond looked up when his mother entered his chambers.

“You and Thor are finally on speaking terms,” Frigga said as she made her way over.

Loki snorted, not looking up from his work.

*They speak, but they say nothing of import to one another*, Isond said.

Loki’s head snapped up, glaring at his dragon.

Frigga touched his cheek with one hand, smoothing the hair back from his forehead with another.

“Isond is right, Loki,” she said. “Thor told me he offered to finally have that talk, but you refused. Why?”

“I’m not ready,” he said. Nearly living out his nightmare—the vision forced on him repeatedly by the Chitauri. The sight of Thor dying before him, either by his own hand or theirs, or any of a hundred creative ways was one of their favorite forms of torture while he was in their hands. So no, not ready to discuss that or anything else. Yet.

“Besides, Thor needs to rest. Hearing what I have to say is not what I could call conducive to a good rest or healing,” Loki said.

“You could always tell me,” Frigga said. “You used to tell me everything.”

Loki sighed, and did not pull away from his mother as she pulled him into an embrace.

“Isond has told me some of it,” Frigga said. “Not all. Only some of what she experienced, what little she remembers.”

Loki turned around, looking back at the dragon, who was suddenly feigning sleep.

“She has, has she?” he asked.

“Isond only wants you to move on. So do I,” Frigga said. “Loki, I know you were hurt. . .tortured. None of that was your fault. You need to forgive yourself. The rest of us already have.”
Loki closed his eyes, sinking down, taking a seat on the edge of his desk.

“How did you find out?”

“How, Loki? I’ve lived a long life, and I’ve seen many things,” Frigga said. “As much as I wanted to deny what I saw with my own eyes, I could not. I would gladly assist your father in laying waste to the realm and the beings who hurt and used you.”

There will be a line, Isond said. If ever they are in my presence I will kill them.

Frigga smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. “This is one truth you cannot deny, Loki,” she said. “They will pay.”

“If Asgard can stand against the Chitauri and their master,” Loki said.

“Asgard will not fall to the Chitauri,” Frigga said, her expression darkening for a moment.

“Mother,” Loki said.

“Don’t worry about the future,” Frigga said. “Don’t you have more than enough to occupy you now, in the present?”

“Father seems to think I need more work,” Loki said.

“He’s probably right,” Frigga said, patting her son’s cheek. “Although I think you should be making a little mischief every now and then.”

“Maybe,” Loki said.

“Good,” Frigga said. “Good night, my son, Isond.”

A few days passed without incident. Loki was on speaking terms with Thor, although they kept matters civil with small talk, or discussing their dragons, or Loki and the dragons passed on the latest gossip from around the palace.

Except at the moment, Loki longed to set fire to the whole mess on his desk. Long neglected trade agreements, a few treaties in draft form (one was a formal peace agreement with Jotunheim he was neglecting), and supply lists and logistics reports from Vanaheim. His father was having him manage aspects of the campaign from afar, hoping to make him feel included in the war effort.

He’s only trying to help, Isond said.

Loki knew that, turning his attention back to the report he was reading. At least Tyr’s missives were somewhat entertaining. Except he felt the slight impression of draconic panic seeping into his conscience, and it was not coming from Isond.

Heimdall is asking for you, Isond said. He says you need to come to the observatory. I’ll see to Kjalvor.

Loki winked out, appearing a few seconds later at the end of the Bifrost, finding Heimdall kneeling down by Thor, who was trying to lift Mjolnir, but the hammer wouldn’t budge.

“He flew here with Mjolnir, but she’s not answering him now,” Heimdall said, talking over Thor.
Loki grabbed his brother by his good arm, nails digging in deep enough to leave a mark, shooting the watcher a grateful look as he helped him haul Thor to his feet.

“What the Hel were you thinking?” Loki said.

Thor grunted in pain, ignoring his brother’s question.

“Thor, answer me,” Loki said.

“I only wanted to ask Heimdall a question,” Thor said.

“Until you're well enough to be out of bed, have Kjalvor pass along any requests,” Loki said, transporting them back to Thor’s chambers.

*He went to ask Heimdall about the mortal, Kjalvor said. Thor can't hide his thoughts from me. He's not as good at it as you. And that you can makes Isond angry.*

“Kjalvor, how could you let him out of your sight?” Loki asked.

*He was asleep, so I decided to sleep, too,* the dragon snapped. *He snuck past me. You know how Thor is.*

“Will everyone quit acting as if I’m not even here?” Thor said.

“You're an idiot,” Loki said, dragging Thor toward his bed, easing him down on its edge. “I'm going to have to call Eir and Mother. I can stop the bleeding, but you're getting another fever.”

“A minor setback,” Thor said.

“What were you thinking?” Loki said.

Thor's eyes flashed with anger, and he started to stand, but gingerly sat back down, wincing in pain. And he didn't answer.

*He just had to know how the mortal fares,* Kjalvor offered.

“She has a name,” Thor said.

“Which does not matter right now,” Loki said. “How can you endanger yourself and Kjalvor over something so foolish? You're still not well enough to be up and around. Even Mjolnir is unhappy with you, and that’s saying something, Thor.”

Thor opened his mouth to say something, but he did not voice his thoughts as his mother and Eir entered his chambers. The look on the queen’s face said it all, and Thor shrank back against his pillows as his brother stepped away and his mother and the healer took his place.

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The next morning, Thor knew he was in trouble when he saw Herja sitting on the foot of his bed, green eyes boring into his own.

“Go bother someone else, lady,” Thor said. “Loki. Yes, go to Loki. I will give you the finest collar and treats if you leave me to my rest.”

He hoped bribery would work, but the cat kept staring. Making him paranoid. His mother's cats, though she would deny it to her dying day, were much like his father's ravens and wolves—an
extension of her eyes and ears. He did not know how it worked, because Odin never bothered explaining how that magic worked. Now that Thor knew of his Jotun heritage, and having seen some of them with their own beasts, he suspected it was something to do with their affinity for wild things.

He was afraid to ask. Even Loki didn't know.

And Kjalvor refused to rouse when he tried waking the dragon, leaving him to turn his attention back to the cat. Who hopped off the bed, running for the door when it opened. Thor groaned, seeing his mother, but perked up when he saw Helblindi holding on to her hand.

“I don't need a baby-sitter,” Thor growled. “I know that’s why Herja was here.”

“Until you can prove otherwise, you will have one,” Frigga said. “Helblindi minds better than you, a grown man, and a warrior of Asgard. Shameful.”

Thor reddened at the reprimand, and Blindi howled with laughter. The boy laughed so hard he was in tears, and coughing because he couldn't breathe.

“Kjalvor can watch over me,” Thor said.

“He can't spend every minute with you,” Frigga said. “He has his duties.”

Thor frowned at his mother.

“Don’t,” Frigga warned. “As I said, Helblindi has more sense than you. I should turn over to Isond.”

Heblindi started giggling again. “She said she'll eat you.”

“Isond won't eat me,” Thor said.

_I might_, Kjalvor added.

“Where would that leave you?” Thor taunted.

_With some well-deserved peace and quiet_, Kjalvor said, standing, stretching his wings. _I'm going to patrol with Isond and Ivik. Have a nice morning._

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Helblindi sat cross-legged, perched on Loki's desk, Herja purring in his lap as the two watched Loki with interest. The cat was with him because Kjalvor was watching Thor. Isond kept passing along the better parts of the argument, which made Heblindi want to giggle, and Loki was trying to ignore. He cursed under his breath at the work he was doing, going over troop movements.

“I'm hungry,” the boy said.

“Really?”

“No,” Helblindi replied. “I'm bored.”

“Take the demon outside and go play,” Loki said.

“Can we go see Thor? Or take Kjalvor flying? He said I can ride him by myself,” Helblind said, hopeful.
“No on all three counts,” Loki said. “For now.”

“Kjalvor is bored, too,” Helblindi said. “Please? Kjalvor wants to see Isond. He said he could eat, and you're ignoring him.”

“I'm not ignoring him,” Loki said. “He won't starve if we make him wait a bit.”

“Can I go to Alfheim and try for a dragon?” Helblindi asked.

“When you're old enough,” Loki said.

“I'll be six. Isn't that old enough?”

The thought of his baby brother with a grown dragon was a sobering one. Only the dragons' good sense kept them from letting the boy fly with them by himself. It wasn't a matter of trust. Loki trusted the dragons with Helblindi. The boy had an adventurous streak to rival that of many an Asgardian warrior. And himself.

He went to his bookshelf, pulling out a book of tales he and Thor enjoyed when they were boys.

“It has pictures,” Loki said. “I'll read to you later.”

“Why not now?”

Yes, why not now? Isond asked. It will give you something to do besides curse and worry.

Five minutes later, Loki was helping baby-sit Thor. Helblindi was sprawled between them, head resting against Loki's arm as he read. Thor was propped up on pillows, trying to keep from nodding off. Loki knew the dragons were listening, the only other sound besides his voice was the sound of Herja's purring. The cat was perched on one of Thor's pillows. It was pleasant. Comfortable.

You're content. Isn't it nice? Isond asked, causing Loki to pause for a moment. He didn’t answer, only kept reading, a smile on his face.

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Trying not to buckle under all the stress he was under was testing Loki’s mettle. Isond was
damningly calm about everything, even when it came to Thor. Patrolling with his dragon and the rare
instances they could convince Kjalvor to come with them, spending time with Fandral when time
allowed, or teaching he and Ivik about dragon lore were the only respite he received. Sitting in on
court and council, fulfilling the other duties his father set aside for him left Loki little time to spend
with Thor.

Probably a good thing, considering, he was spending a rare night out with Fandral and Volstagg.
Hogun tagged along, and Sif was still in Vanaheim, helping organize things there in Thor’s absence.

Loki tried not to glare as Hogun sat down across from him, placing two tankards of ale in front of
himself. He slid one across to Loki.

“What's this?” Loki asked, eying the tankard and Hogun with suspicion.

“You look like you could use it,” Hogun said.

“Thank you,” Loki said, downing the tankard's contents in one draught.

Hogun watched, torn between fascination and concern. Normally, Loki wasn't such a drinker.

“I'm sorry I haven't been a very good friend,” Hogun said. “I hope I can change that.”

He offered a hand, and as Loki stared, Fandral elbowed him in the ribs.

“You’d be foolish not to accept his apology,” he said. Loki frowned, but shook Hogun’s hand.

“You’ve been on edge lately, more so than usual,” Hogun said. “What's the matter, Loki?”

“That's a loaded question,” Fandral muttered.

“Isond is pregnant, and my dolt of a brother seems to think that is to blame for my recent emotional
state,” Loki said.

Fandral's sharp intake of breath brought Loki back to reality. His friend’s face was white and Hogun
was giving them both a strange look.

“Who's pregnant?” Volstagg asked, bounding over, placing an arm around both Hogun and Fandral.

“How did he manage to hone in on that one word?” Fandral asked.

“Volstagg has five children,” Loki said. “He's bound to be sensitive to hearing that word
mentioned.”

Hogun looked especially pensive, gaze on both Fandral and Loki.

“No one is pregnant,” Fandral said.

“I distinctly heard Loki utter the word,” Volstagg said.
“Herja is pregnant again,” Fandral said.

“The cat? What has that to do with anything?” Volstagg asked.

“The demon's spawn will overrun the palace,” Loki said. “That's what. Helblindi is especially fond of the creature.”

“So you went to Alfheim then?” Hogun asked.

“Yes,” Loki said. Omission, in this case, was not the same as lying.

That seemed to satisfy Hogun, who ordered another round of drinks, and Volstagg launched into the familiar story of how he won his wife's hand. Loki let himself relax, pretending for a little while he was fine and there was nothing wrong with his life.

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And of course, he stumbled across the reason for his ire on the way back to his chambers. Loki was tired, but thankfully not drunk. No, that was Fandral, but finding Thor leaning against the wall in the corridor between their rooms was a sobering matter.

Loki stopped, gaping down at his brother, who did not have any sense at all.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I went for a walk, and my leg gave out on the way back to my chambers,” Thor answered.

Loki turned away, starting back toward his own rooms.

“Loki, help me up,” Thor said.

Loki ignored him.

“Brother. Please?”

Cursing under his breath, Loki turned back to his brother.

“I don't do this for you, you stubborn ox. I'm doing this for Kjalvor,” Loki said, heaving Thor to his feet. “You're only allowed to be in your own chambers so you can be close to him, not sneak off whenever you feel like it. We're not children. You have more than just yourself to consider. Or do I need to send word to Halleah that you need another talk?”

“Norns no, Loki,” Thor said. “You wouldn't.”

Loki gave him a vicious smile. “I will if you don't quit being so insufferably stupid,” he said.

“Remember I'm not the clever one in this relationship,” Thor said.

“You're clever enough in your own way,” Loki said.

Thor stopped, looking at Loki, head tilted. “You think me clever?”

“Didn't I just say that? You are, in your own way,” Loki said.


“Don’t let it go to your head,” Loki said, opening the door to his brother's chambers.
“What about being my equal?” Thor asked.

“We are equals, just in different ways,” Loki said. “I know now my mistake was in comparing myself to you, thinking I could never measure up.”

“You do measure up,” Thor said.

Loki eased his brother down on to the side of the bed, and Thor made himself comfortable, and he caught Loki's hand as he tried to move away.

“Thank you, Loki,” Thor said.

Loki sighed. “You wouldn't have to thank me, Thor, if you think before you act,” he said.

“That's what I have you for,” Thor said, giving his brother one of his best smiles.

“Get some rest,” Loki said. “I'll bring Helblindi by in the morning.”

“And you'll read me to sleep again?” Thor asked.

“I'm doing Mother a favor by baby-sitting you,” Loki said. “It's a job I'm sure Helblindi could manage.”

“He would be fine company, and I can watch him while you’re busy,” Thor offered.

“You would do that for me?”

“Of course,” Thor said.

After all, what trouble could Thor, a five-year-old and a dragon cause?

End Notes

Just a bit of info--I started writing this because I wanted Loki, Thor and dragons. The dragons in this story are going to be similar to those in Christopher Paolini's "Inheritance" series with some characteristics borrowed from Anne McCaffrey's "Pern." With apologies to both authors, I hope they don't mind the liberties I'm going to take, and will give credit where it is due.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!