Arranged

by Rynfinity

Summary

Thor AU - Odin does not steal Loki; the Jotun prince is instead raised to adulthood in Jotunheim. When Thor leads his friends to attack Jotunheim, unanticipated consequences ensue.

I'm not sure what this is, really, or if there will be more of it. I do, however, know it is inadequately edited. Corrections always welcome.
“Thor Odinson,” Odin’s powerful voice booms out across the observatory, “you have betrayed the express command of your king. Through your arrogance and stupidity, you have opened these peaceful realms and innocent lives to the horror and desolation of war! You are unworthy of these realms, you are unworthy of your title, you are unworthy” – Odin pauses, taking first one deep breath and then another before continuing his furious diatribe – “of the loved ones you have betrayed! In the name of my father and his father before, I, Odin Allfather, demand that you repay this debt through whatever sacrifice I may require of you.”

Before Thor can protest further, Odin turns on his heel and stomps away. Asgard’s crown prince stands frozen, in shock, trying to catch his breath and staring open-mouthed after his father. Sacrifice? If Odin had wanted Thor dead, he would have killed him where he stood. Or let Laufey do it.

Once he has a moment to recover his wits, though, Thor grins into the silence. How awful, after all, can a non-lethal sacrifice be?

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“I am serious, mother! Stop it,” Thor wails loudly in the face of Frigga’s not-quite-suppressed laughter. “You must help me; I’ve nowhere else to turn. There must be something I can do to forestall this mockery, this farce, this- this travesty against all we hold to be true and right and meaningful.”

Frigga pats his hand gently. “A wise and noble point, dear, if perhaps ill-timed.” When he wrinkles his nose in frustrated confusion, she continues: “You are certainly correct in thinking you could have prevented this, and I think by now you are well aware how you might have done so. However, my son, that longboat has long since taken oar and left the harbor. Your father’s mind is made up, and naught you – nor I – say will change it.”

“But- but- this cannot happen,” he splutters. “It simply cannot. It is too horrible to consider, even.” He sighs angrily, close to tears with the frustration of it all. “Why would father do such a thing to- to our family?” Even in his current state Thor knows it’s smartest to defend a less personal position. “He has to realize this will make us the laughingstock of the Nine.”

“Ah, but it can be considered, love. Can and has and will be, and rest assured none shall dare to laugh.” Her voice drops, her tone serious. “Thor, the ill-advised attack you led your friends to carry out in Jotunheim was an act of war. One not authorized by the crown, I might add, which makes your actions treason. You are lucky to have gotten off so lightly. I trust in time you will come to see it so. Until then, my son, you will just have to make do.”

“LIGHTLY, mother? MAKE DO?! But she is a frost giant!! A Jotnar beast, mother; a monster!”

“She, Thor?” The corners of Frigga’s eyes crinkle; her lovely eyes themselves sparkle in light of the wall torches. “Oh, no, I am afraid you are wrong there. King Laufey has brought forth only sons.”

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For the better part of two days Thor skulks about his chambers, angry and brooding. His life is ending, after all – he is to be wed, with no say in the matter, and to a monster to boot. And not just any monster, but a monster prince.
On top of that, he is supposed to act *pleased* - to act as though he feels fortunate, to be excited, to be diplomatic. To properly represent the honor of his house.

Meanwhile he knows, with the absolute and over-dramatic certainty of one who is being horrendously (but deservedly, though he would never confess it,) wronged, he’s never felt *less* fortunate – less of any of these things, really – in his life.

On the third day, the process – which has probably been underway throughout the compound for some days now, but has blissfully escaped his notice - begins. Thor, who was not anticipating the loss of his freedom for many an age to come and whose friends – save Volstagg, who succumbed early - feel much the same, has never really paid much attention to Asgard’s marriage rites. Nor, perhaps more to the point, has he noted the speed with which they can progress.

His servants tell him he will be wed within the week… and they wink and nudge knowingly, dropping lewd hints at what a consummated Asgard marriage involves, as they fit him for his ceremonial and wedding-night finery.

There is a great deal of buildup, and the servants take clear pleasure in Thor’s discomfort. Given all that, when the official Jotunheim delegation arrives, Thor thinks he can perhaps be excused for hanging off his balcony far further than decorum permits. He is, you see, hoping desperately to catch an advance glimpse of the beast that is to be his horrid fate. The creature with which he must share his life, his crown, his bed. If he can get a quick look at him? IT from this safe distance, Thor tells himself, he will have the time to better prepare himself mentally for the inevitable shock and will be far less likely to do something unforgivably awkward at first meeting.

Or, even worse, to do something unforgivably awkward on his wedding night.

That is, if he can stop vomiting long enough to manage anything in the bedroom at all.

Truth be told, he is just being nosy.

Thus, he is sorely disappointed when the delegates carry their noble born the length of the rainbow bridge in a litter – a litter, of all things; not only must he wed a monstrous Jotun male, but one that is fragile to boot – fully shaded from the hot sun and prying eyes of Asgard.

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“Mother, you *must* talk to father on my behalf. I simply *cannot* be made to go through with this. I cannot be required to wed something that is not even able to walk here under its own power. Must I push its invalid chair about? Carry it to and fro on my back? This is beyond ridic-“

“Thor, do stop. I must insist.” Frigga is not smiling this time. “Your future spouse – who walks quite nicely, I might add - is neither thing nor it. In fact, I had the opportunity to make his acquaintance a few minutes ago, as I helped ensure he – and his father – felt welcome in our home. He is not what you expect, I assure you.”

The look on her face, though, does nothing to forestall his doubts. “And how exactly do you purport to know what I expect?”

She pats his arm gently. “Oh, Thor, you are far more transparent than you like to believe. I am certain I can make a very sound guess as to your expectations, although I suspect you would rather I did not list them for you here.”

He can feel his face grow hot, all the way down his neck and up his ears. He tries for a quick change of course, hoping a diversion will give him a chance to get himself back under proper control: “But
do you like him, mother?"

She pauses for a moment before responding, clearly choosing her words with careful precision. “I think he will be good for you.”

As determined as Thor is to get a peek at his – his what, his groom? His steed? – before the wedding ceremony, it seems the rest of the court is even more determined to prevent him from doing so. From the highest commander to the lowest kitchen servant, one and all steer him firmly away from the guest quarters.

Everyone he sees is “it’s unseemly, Thor” this and “it cannot be done, Thor – your father orders it so” that. And the more he his efforts are thwarted, the greater a monster Thor’s intended becomes. Before the week is out, his imagination has made the thing – the prince; yes, mother, the prince - to be a great and horrifying four-headed freak with extra eyes, two rows of teeth and no fingers. Thor finds he cannot sleep, he cannot eat. He cannot even spar. In fact, he can scarcely function at all.

When all else fails, his mother long past the point of refusing further audience, he gives in and finally goes to speak with his father directly.

Odin is in his court offices, looking tired and gruff behind veritable mountains of parchment. “What is it, Thor? As you can see, I have much work before me, and I am sure you have business to which you should be attending as well.”

“Please, father,” Thor begins, voice threatening to crack embarrassingly. “Is there no other way? None at all? I understand now that I have made a grave mistake,” by not killing all the monsters where they stood before you could make me wed one, he does not add, hoping the Allfather is not reading minds today, “and I am ready to make amends in any way necessary. Any way, I promise you, but this.”

Odin sets a scroll, dark with runes, down on the desk before him. “Alas: Thor, my son, there is no other way. This is a fortuitous treaty, one that spares your life and goes a long way towards guaranteeing Asgard lasting peace. You should consider yourself lucky that Laufey has agreed to such an arrangement, and that you yourself are able to provide such great and honorable service to the people of your realm. And perhaps,” – his wrinkled face twists into what passes for a smile, the creases around his lone eye deepening – “you will come to love the Jotun prince in time. Your mother thinks highly of him, and even I must admit he was surprisingly well-mannered before the court earlier.”

“So everyone has met this- this creature but me. How is that fair?”

Odin’s smile vanishes. “This is not about fairness, Thor, nor is it about you. Rather, it is in keeping with the sacred Jotun custom that prospective spouses may not meet in the weeks before their nuptials, and as such it is something you must honor and obey. This custom, and many that follow.” Odin shakes his head, frowning. “You have much to learn, I fear, my son. Remember that understanding the Jotun way is key to maintaining the peace we all seek.”

The dreaded morning dawns. He’s left alone early on but, by the end of the midday meal, Thor fusses and fumes as his servants - the same servants who have been giggling and teasing all week – valiantly attempt to get him ready for his wedding ceremony. He does not want to be primped, he does not want to be prettied. He does not want his ceremonial armor, or his dress leathers, or his
formal cloak. He does not want to be bathed, or to have his hair braided or his beard trimmed. In fact, he wants simply to be left alone. He wants this to never happen. He wants to lie down in his own filth and die.

But it seems none of these choices is a viable option, as – when his own servants throw up their hands in defeat - his mother’s retinue hounds him mercilessly until he gives in.

Then again, he supposes, he should be grateful he’s not being dressed as the bride.

Be that as it may, though, he’s feeling anything but grateful presently.

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Quite some time later, and at the expense of much good humor among both his and his mother’s servants, Thor is in position and looking as good as possible. It is, however, pouring outside, the afternoon hot and dark, the sky is full of lightning; there’s only so much any one unhappy god can cooperate, after all.

He surveys the audience. The good people of Asgard – the ones for whom he is doing this duty, as Odin has missed no opportunity to remind him – pack the Great Hall wall-to-wall. Heedless of the weather they are dressed in all their finery, merry and boisterous and talkative. They are, no doubt, thrilled about the good fortune this event is purported to bring upon them all.

Thor tries reminding himself this is what he is here for – to ensure the good of his people.

It does not work, and sulking up here in front of everyone is expressly not an option; he tries passing the time by doing math in his head instead.

That does not work either.

Finally (all too soon!) the trumpets sound, their familiar fanfare mixing with unknown instruments Thor guesses must be Jotun. Here he is at last, he reminds himself, at the far end of the endless week of tortured waiting; he now stands upon the dais only moments from the arrival of his-… well, whatever this Jotnar prince will be. Determined as he is to keep a socially acceptable expression, he swears; if the thing is in a wedding gown, so help him, by the very Norns he will-…

-and then his breath catches in his throat.

Because the creature coming up to meet him, accompanied by a retinue of Jotun soldiers in skimpy metal-paneled skirts that must pass for dress regalia, is not at all what Thor expected. He – for he is unmistakably male - is quite short for a frost giant, perhaps half a hands span shy of Thor’s own height. He – not it, definitely he - is slender, proportionately broad of shoulder and narrow of hip, with shiny black hair. That’s where anything approaching normalcy ends and the true exoticness begins; the Jotnar prince is also deep blue marked in black, blood-red-eyed, naked save for a sparkling jeweled loincloth and- and comfortingly furious. He looks as though – given half a moment’s opportunity, which he most certainly will not be - he would eat Thor alive.

That, Thor almost likes and can respect. He actually manages a smile as he holds out a hand to help the prince up onto the foot of the dais. The Jotnar shows his perfect white teeth – by no means of reckoning can the expression be considered a smile in return – and, after an obvious beat too long, places his hand into Thor’s proffered palm.

So: Interesting. It seems both of them are beyond excited to be here. Thor briefly wonders what this one did to deserve such similar-natured punishment; then the music halts, the ceremony begins, and they are both of them forced to move on.
The wedding itself is a bit of a blur. The ceremony proper is like nothing Thor has ever seen, an odd mix of Aesir and what must be Jotun traditions. The only thing he can say for certain is that the whole process involves a lot of toasting. The crowd toasts, the dignitaries toast, the families toast, the couple toasts. Toast upon toast upon toast, over and over, and for each he and his husband-to-be are expected – required, really – to down a small glass themselves. A small glass, sure, but its contents are something dark and potent. After the sixth or seventh… Thor is starting to lose track, which cannot be a good sign… they finally get down to business and make their eternal vows.

He thinks that’s what happens, at least; by this point he cannot truly be sure anymore.

In fact he is, much to his own embarrassment, drunker than drunk. Whatever the dark liquid is, it goes straight to his head. It’s all he can do not to sway. When the officiant says his husband’s name – Prince Loki Laufeyson, of Jotunheim – Thor manages to- well, to make an ass of himself: “Loki,” he leans closer and stage-whispers. “Really? That’s your name? Did your parents hate you?”

For a long moment he thinks Loki (really?) might slap – or stab – him. But then his- his husband smiles nastily and leans still closer to give Thor the coldest kiss he has ever felt.

And Thor cannot help it; he laughs.

Which is likely at least partially why, later in the evening, their own part in the feasting done, Thor sits on his bed – drunken head spinning – as his husband stands regally, angrily, across their quarters, arms crossed and shoulders squared, staring out the window at nothing instead of coming to bed. Staring dead silent; the Jotnar prince has not yet uttered so much a single word in Thor’s presence.

“I said I was sorry. What more do you want of me,” Thor pleads, for the umpteenth time.

Loki at long last wheels around, expression dark and furious. “Good grief! Do you never tire of your own voice? Rest assured I want nothing whatsoever of you, barbarian. I, by point of fact, actually want far less of you than that with which I have been gifted already. In truth, if you must know, I want only one thing at all - to leave this gaudy wasteland and go home.”

The message itself fails to sink in, as Thor’s drunken temper has abruptly flared. Barbarian? Gaudy wasteland? Finally, words from the high and mighty Loki, and all he can do is level insults. Thor is annoyed beyond any vestige of politeness: “You speak the Allspeak? You can understand me?”

He’s too drunk even to realize these are fighting words, words he should immediately take back.

Loki huffs angrily. “You truly know nothing whatsoever of my people, do you? Yes, I speak the Allspeak. I also – and please, try not to die of shock as I am not certain I can lift you – read and write. Amazing, no? See the caged beast do tricks! Come one, come all. It’s truly astounding. How did I end up chained to such a cretin,” he adds, under his breath, then turns back to the window with an unhappy growl.

Thor flinches away from the cutting edge in Loki’s voice. He really had not meant to start a fight. In an effort to lighten the mood and make things better, though, he of course on manages to make them worse. “Tell me, Loki,” he teases, “do the Jotun bite?”

Loki spins to face him anew, teeth bared. “This one does, I assure you. Lay but a hand on me and you shall find out for yourself.”

That is more than enough; Thor feels the fight rising in him again. “Oh, do not flatter yourself. As if I
would put a hand to you, monster, but to choke the life from you.”

“I would like to see you try.” Loki enunciates carefully, as thought he’s speaking to a child, and Thor feels his anger leaping up to take on a life of its own.

He lunges off the bed and closes the space between them, three long strides putting him right in Loki’s face. He grabs his husband by the throat, forcing the lean blue creature back against the window frame. “Oh, you would, would you? How are you liking what you see so far?”

And then Thor stalls out. He’s still impossibly drunk, and Loki’s skin is surprisingly warm – not Jotunheim-icy, not at all what he expects - beneath his palm. Loki’s neck flushes darker blue, pulse pounding beneath Thor’s grip, and something primal in Thor responds. Lips loosened by drink, he stammers: “You- you are surprisingly attractive. Not at all like I had been told.” He looses his grip, stroking a thumb up the blue skin lightly. Thinks unbidden about how another kiss from that feisty blue mouth would taste.

Unfortunately Loki, it seems, is still furious. “Sadly,” the Jotun prince hisses, “I cannot say the same. In fact, as compared to legend, you are considerably more hideous than I anticipated.” Thor freezes; Loki seizes the moment and twists free, disappearing soundlessly behind a tapestry.

Thor shakes his head, sighing. Not the best start to a lovely life together. Mother would not be pleased.

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For many long minutes he waits patiently, sitting on the edge of the bed, certain his husband will calm down and return. Thor may have dozed off, even – the drink is doing odd things with his head – as the candles seem to have burned short awfully quickly.

He looks around. No Loki.

Finally, Thor hauls himself carefully off the bed and pads quietly out onto his balcony. There, he stills – his proud new husband is curled in a little blue ball at the far end of the long space, back to Thor, crowded between the end wall and the railing. And if Thor is not mistaken, judging by the way the shapely blue shoulders are shaking, Loki is crying.

It’s awkward. Thor has no idea what to do. The drunken urge to laugh wars fiercely with the urge to hold, to comfort. In the end he stands there helplessly, silent, and then turns and tiptoes back to bed.

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They do not really talk after that night, only speaking when they absolutely must. Most of the time, they do not even see one another; Thor gets the distinct impression Loki is avoiding him.

When at least he goes searching for Frigga, Thor finds his mother busy at her great tapestry loom. Her assistants are not at their own posts; when he comments, she ignores the observation and goes straight to the point: "You are troubled, Thor. May I ask; is all well?"

"I- I do not know." He does not. "Being married is not what I expected."

She laughs, but there’s no teasing in it and her eyes are kind. "Forging a union is always full of challenges. That is even more true when one has not had the chance to get to know - and, presumably, like - one's wife or husband beforehand."

The look on her face is oddly wistful. "But surely you and father courted," he offers, confused by her
"Oh, darling, no. Of course not. Those born to rule cannot have their bloodlines and successes left to chance." She shrugs. "Even those who manage to elude their parents' ever-watchful eyes long enough to meet someone special must ultimately come back down to earth and marry as ordered." She frowns. "Surely you did not think this was solely an act of punitive spite on the Allfather's part?"

Actually, that's exactly what Thor had thought. Thinks. But for the moment he finds his attention caught and held by her earlier comment. "So do you not love father?"

She takes his hand and squeezes it gently. "I have come to love him over time. But time it did take. Now tell me, dear; what is it?"

Thor sighs. "Loki is… not what I expected. And he- he seems very unhappy. I must confess we have not gotten off to a good start."

Frigga frowns delicately. "What happened?" Not what did you do, even though the question would not be unwarranted.

"I got rather drunk, with all the toasting, and I may have said some- some things I would rather take back. And Loki… seems extremely sad. He may have been crying the night we wed, and he has not really spoken with me since." He winces. "I was surprised he could speak our language so fluently. Apparently he is highly educated. He was- quite offended."

"Oh, Thor… your father would scarcely pair you off with an idiot now, would he?" Thor is not sure at this point that there's anything whatsoever Odin would not do, but he lets Frigga continue uninterrupted just the same. "But, yes, do keep in mind this transition is at least as hard for Loki as it is for you. He has been taken from his home, my son, and from his family. Nothing here – from the people to the climate to the food – is familiar. Of course he is sad. He is utterly alone, and you- you laughed at him, did you not?"

Thor feels the burn of a blush rising in his cheeks. "It is possible I did. He- he was surprisingly pretty. And feisty. I may have lashed out in response."

Frigga leans close, still holding his hand. "You should go to him, Thor. Be welcoming. Treat him as an honored guest, first. Only when you have gotten to know one another properly, and to win his friendship, do you earn the opportunity to treat him like family."

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She’s right, he knows. But still it is easier said than done.

For starters, his husband is nearly impossible to find; Thor wastes most of the morning looking. When he does finally locate Loki, nose in a dusty, ancient book in a distant corner of the Asgard Royal Library, the Jotnar prince rebuffs him with practiced skill:

“Thor! Husband! You must forgive my shock at seeing you here; I would not have expected you knew how to find the library.”

His mother’s advice still fresh in his mind, Thor lets the dig slide. "Oh, you will find I am quite familiar with most everything in the palace. I should be happy to show you around, if you would like."

His new husband snorts, sitting straighter and looking up at him. “I am reading, Thor. Or, at least, I was.” Loki fixes Thor with a pointed look, although this time he does not seem truly angry. In fact, if
anything he appears almost amused. They exchange a long look, and then back goes Loki’s nose into the book.

“Another time, then.” Thor turns to go, a bit disheartened but determined to be pleasant at any cost. But then curiosity gets the better of him, meaning he halts and speaks yet again without proper forethought: “So, do tell me: For what are you being punished?”

When Loki looks up from his book this time, every trace of pleasure is gone. “Excuse me?”

Thor plunges gamely on; there’s hardly any point in turning back now. “You heard me: What did you do? Why did your family do this to you? I mean, you must know what it is I did to-.”

“To what,” Loki finishes. “To what, Thor? To earn yourself the opportunity to be wedded to a beastly Jotun whore?”

In the space of a few short seconds the whole thing has yet again gone badly wrong. Thor growls in frustration. “That is not what I meant, Loki, and you know it.”

“I know no such thing.”

Suddenly uncomfortably aware that he's looming over Loki – and that he is being rather an ass - Thor invites himself to pull up a chair. "Look, Loki, let us start this again: I am sorry. I was drunk the other night. I meant no harm.” It's not quite true, but he hopes it will be close enough in spirit. "I am here today because I know I have been rude, and because I wish to get to know you better."

"To get to know me better," Loki repeats slowly. "Whatever for?" He closes the book again, thumb marking his page, and waits quietly with a falsely bright look of expectation.

Thor thinks a minute. This is rather delicate. "Well," he says at last, "our life together will be rather boring if we do not make better acquaintance, no?" He smiles, trying very hard for friendly.

Loki purses his dark blue lips. Thor thinks - briefly, guiltily - about how it felt to kiss them. "I did not do anything wrong to earn my place here," Loki says quietly.

"Oh," Thor blurts out. He's not sure what else to say.

"No, I am here as a spy. I am to learn your kingdom's weaknesses and bring it down from the inside." The faint hint of a smile plays over Loki's sharp features.

"Really?" Thor feels- abruptly cold inside. Almost afraid.

Loki groans, then smiles for real, teeth bright white in his startlingly attractive face. "if I was, would I tell you? Honestly, Thor, are all Aesir this gullible? It’s amazing your realm survives."

"It- it was a poor attempt at a joke. My words," Thor hastily – dishonestly - clarifies before his husband can take offense.

Loki nods. "Okay. Truth: I am here to guarantee peace between our realms."

"As am I," Thor responds, but then cannot hide a snicker.

"How exactly is that funny?" Loki arches an eyebrow dangerously.

"Oh, it is not," Thor says. "But we seem to be off to a sorry start, seeing as we cannot even guarantee peace between our persons." He makes another attempt at starting over, doing his best to be considerate. "You must be lonely here."
"It is very different, yes." Loki slips his thumb out of the book and rises gracefully, carrying it back to its shelf. "And you are right. We could surely do better. At this rate we will never be truly wed."

That catches Thor off-guard. "What??"

"Oh, do not think me unfamiliar with your laws. I know we must consummate this union" - Thor knows he must look as shocked as he feels, given the twinkle in Loki's red eyes - "before we are lawfully wed." Loki holds out an elbow. "You can start working your way in that direction by finding me a decent meal."

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It turns out that, perhaps unsurprisingly, Frigga is right - Loki is used to a winter-hardy diet of raw, fatty fish and is finding standard Aesir fare both strange and frankly revolting.

Which is what gives Thor a bright idea. "Let's go fishing. No, really," he continues as Loki glares, "while I am sure this realm not have the same fish you know, we have good fish nonetheless. We can catch some; you shall see. It might even be fun."

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It is fun, actually. Loki turns out to be amazingly quick with his hands, and able to conjure spare little knives that are perfect for fishing. He catches five fish to Thor’s one; when they climb out of the stream with their haul, the blue prince is grinning in evident delight.

Thor shudders. “Do you just eat them, now? Just bite into them, skin and all?” He truly does not mean to sound disgusted but he is and it probably shows.

Loki, thankfully, just laughs. “I can if I have to but, no, I would prefer to dress them properly. Unless you want your beast with blood in its teeth.”

It’s Thor’s turn to laugh. “Thank you, but no. Do you mind terribly if I cook mine?”

His husband does not, or so Loki says; he even lights a small fire for Thor.

When they are done eating, both of them stuffed and sleepy, Loki holds Thor’s hand and leans quietly against him; Thor counts the outing as a win.

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Over the next week or so, Thor makes a point of taking his strange husband out fishing several more times. Loki in the water – playful, grinning, charming – is so different than Loki in the palace, and Thor has fast come to enjoy seeing the Jotun prince so.

Loki, for his part, has been much less reluctant to dine with Thor and the rest of the royal family. He talks art and science with Frigga and war and economics with Odin, all with a graceful ease that greatly impresses Thor.

After several nights thus, on impulse, Thor grabs Loki’s hand as they walk back to their chambers. “Do not hide from me tonight. Please?” As Loki turns to face him, Thor catches his husband’s other hand and – before Loki can make any response – leans in to kiss the soft blue-black lips.

Loki freezes. Thor stops mid-kiss but does not pull away. “Is this okay,” he asks against Loki’s mouth. “You are very appealing, but I will stop if you so wish it.”
They stand there for close to a minute, at which point Loki yanks both hands free. Thor barely gets “I am sor-“ out before his mouth is suddenly full of Loki’s warm, wet, searching tongue. It’s not at all what he expected, but it’s good. Very, very good.

Loki’s eyes close. Thor slides a hand up the smooth slope of Loki’s back and into the lush black hair, pulling his husband closer. Loki, in turn, bites Thor’s lip hard. When Thor jerks away in surprise, Loki chases after him laughing. “I am a monster, you know. Do not ever forget it.”

They kiss with hungry abandon, Thor tracing the sharp lines of Loki’s face with big hands, Loki practically climbing into Thor’s mouth. When they pull apart, panting, Loki grins. “Nice. This is apparently something with which you have some skill.”

Thor grins in return. “Truly there are many things at which I have some skill. You might even be impressed. Come here,” – he tugs Loki into their chambers, and towards the bed – “and let me show you.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Oops, more?

Loki follows willingly enough, laughing and kissing and easily keeping pace with Thor, but when they reach the bed he stiffens and pulls away. "I do not like it here, you know."

And you have picked a fine, fine time to finally condescend to talk about it, Thor thinks. Striving to be diplomatic, he says nothing at first, instead giving Loki space to continue. Rather than speaking further, though, the Jotnar prince only hugs himself tightly – lean-muscled blue arms with their long, slender fingers wound around his own hunched shoulders - and begins pacing the length of the room.

Back and forth, back and forth.

"I am sorry," Thor offers after a few minutes of this. "I did not mean to catch you up in my- my own poor choices." It's true, as far as it goes - he didn't know Loki existed. Sure, he knew Laufey had sons and heirs - the big king won't live forever, even without Thor's ill-conceived help - but Jotun studies was never a subject he'd deemed worthy of much attention. Be that as it may he is sorry, a little bit for wishing Loki's people dead - for thinking of them not as people but as nothing more than a threat to be obliterated, a longstanding prejudice that is proving even now quite hard to unlearn despite solid proof to the contrary pacing before him - and (fair or not) a rather larger bit for dragging the prince out of his own home and familiar surroundings.

Loki collapses noisily into a chair near the door. Sometimes, Thor thinks, he really is more princess than prince. Still, Thor tries again: "I really am sor-..."

"Yes, husband, I know, you are sorry. But noble as that sentiment may be, see: I am still here, and I dislike being here no less." Loki sighs loudly; his head drops back, plunking hard against the chair back.

Thor stares at the blue length of Loki's neck and remembers how it felt under his hands that first night. He wants to cross to where his husband is sitting now, to run those same hands over the distracting expanse of very visible skin - claiming the entire realm to be excessively hot Loki waltzes blithely about the palace, from library to dinner to training grounds, clad in nothing save a loincloth and light sandals - and get to know Loki rather more thoroughly and personally than he’s yet had any real opportunity to do.

The way Loki is moping about, though, even Thor is quite certain any such investigation would be ill-received. He rolls to lie flat and focuses his attention on the ceiling instead.

Lavish as it is, it isn’t nearly as pleasant a view.

The two princes doze off that night where they are, Thor fully-dressed atop the covers and Loki sprawled limp over the chair. But if the Jotnar prince is stiff on waking - how could he not be, sleeping so? - he takes great pains to hide it.
For the next several days Loki is clearly in a mood. He refuses Thor’s every offer of entertainment or companionship; not only will he no longer go fishing, which Thor is certain he enjoys, but he even declines a desperate pitch for studying in the palace library.

Thor feels as though he must have missed an important cue somewhere... he knows not what, but it's set them back to where they started and that- that doesn't please him. Not in the least. He was rather liking the direction in which things were heading, and more than anything he misses seeing his husband splash about cheerfully among the fishes.

Frigga is (sympathetic as always, but) little real help: "He needs time to adjust, my son. Just do your best to be there for him."

*Be there for him?* It is nigh on impossible to *be there for* someone who pushes you away at every turn. But Thor just nods. "I am trying, mother, but Loki is- complicated."

She smiles. "Oh, that he is, I'm sure. Give him time," she adds, patting Thor's hand. "He will come around."

~

Despite his otherwise-reclusive manner Loki does still join the royal family nightly at dinner. He, to listen to him talk (which Thor does, with rapt attention - never has he more wanted something it seems he cannot have), is filling his days studying with various Aesir experts; Odin's chiefs of staff, the master librarian, several renowned artists and scholars. Talking so, sharing his new mastery with Frigga and Odin, Loki is bright and animated. Charming.

Still traipsing about the place like he owns it, clad in next to nothing.

Still appealing. More appealing, for all that he’s out of reach. Endlessly, frustratingly appealing.

When Thor pushes back from the table and offers a hand, though, Loki invariably declines. "You go on ahead, darling," he suggests, and try as he might Thor can never decide whether or not his new husband is mocking him. "I will be up in a few."

Except he isn't. No matter how hard Thor fights to stay awake, polishing his armor or even making the attempt to read, Loki rarely makes a pleasing blue appearance in their chambers until Thor has long since drifted off to sleep. He occasionally wakes in the night to find Loki sleeping quietly on the bed, curled neatly on top of the furs, but his husband is always up and about (and normally gone from their rooms) before Thor awakens.

Yes, he is clearly being avoided. And he has absolutely no idea why.

~

Loki

~

"Father, I tell you, I will not. I beg you, do not ask this of me. I love it here," - Loki sweeps a blue, whorled arm across the snowy landscape - "and cannot begin to imagine leaving. Not forever."

Laufey doesn't smile, but his red eyes are unusually warm and kind. "Nothing endures, my son, and *forever* is a very, very long time." He lays a cool, heavy hand on Loki's shoulder. "I would not ask this of you were it not crucially important. It is a chance to not only save our people from war, but to endeavor to gain back that which makes us strong. Self-sufficient. Competitive; a viable threat the
other realms will leave unmolested. A very real chance to recover that which will allow us to rebuild our cities and retool our armies... which will return our civilization to its prior glory. And in order to have any hope of accomplishing all of this, I am in grave need of your assistance."

Loki huffs. "But why me? Why not one of my brothers? They care far more for fighting, are markedly more skilled in classic combat, and would not be bored to death in Asgard," as I will undoubtedly be. He tries to picture himself actually bored to death, lying lifeless in a sweaty heap on the floor of a chamber he- he just can't picture. No matter how hard he tries, the most he can come up with is hot and coarse.

He sighs inwardly; he's never visited Asgard, and never wanted to. In fact he has never even met so much as a single Aesir; Laufey has kept him safely hidden away - you're a scholar and a diplomat, my son, not a warrior, and these are no times for scholarly diplomacy - during skirmishes, claiming concern for Loki's safety, and does not normally take any of his children with him to meetings and councils.

When they protest this sort of treatment Laufey tells them all they are too young. He tells them it would be inappropriate; that as king he is expected to appear alone. That he must be seen as a ruler, not a babysitter, to be taken with the seriousness his continued success requires. And whenever he says things of this nature Loki, neither for the first time nor the last, is far from sure he believes his father.

"Why you? Because you are the most suited to this particular mission." Laufey gives his shoulder a squeeze. "You are a far more appropriate choice than your siblings, for every possible reason."

"In other words," Loki grumbles, "I have been singled out because I am too small and weak-looking to be seen as a threat."

"No, because you are comely and intelligent, and politically-savvy."

"Ohhhhh," Loki responds with false enthusiasm. "Because I am the closest thing to a daughter you can claim among your sons."

If he hears the awful bitterness in Loki's voice, Laufey chooses to ignore it. The Jotun king laughs, a deep rumble Loki can feel through his father's hand. "Oh, none would mistake you for a female, Loki; not even the males of Asgard. Fear not. It's just that the Asgardian citizens have an unusual taste for beauty... and beauty is certainly something you possess in disproportionate quantity when taken in comparison to your brothers. And while your intelligence may garner less notice, it will be of significant use to us as well."

Both of those observations are undoubtedly true, but the whole business rankles Loki just the same. "So I'm to be bait," he spits angrily. "A pretty bauble to dangle before the ignorant barbarian prince, to distract him and his companions from your grander schemes."

Laufey laughs again, a little less kindly. Loki must finally be managing to get on his father's nerves. "If you want to look at it that way, my son, be my guest. But, again, no. You are to be our representative in Asgard. Which I trust you will do honorably, and to the fullest of your considerable abilities. And while you are at it I think you will find Thor pleasing in his own way, if you take the time to get to know him."

"They all sound like great brutish oafs to me."

Laufey releases his shoulder with a quick pat. "I trust you will ultimately find a way to be more open-minded." It's spoken gently, but Loki knows there's a threat buried deep in there somewhere.
There always is.

"It's so hot there," Helblindi tells him, laughing. "You will have to go about stark naked, little brother, just to stand it. That's really what Asgard wants of you," he adds as Loki turns to grab a towel. "They want your pretty blue bottom." He punctuates his utterly brilliant observation with a ringing slap on the ass; Loki stumbles forward, then turns to glare hotly at his smirking brother.

"I hate you."

Helblindi chuckles. "I hardly think you do. Spin around. Slowly." He gestures, miming a revolving motion with one hand. Loki does; his brother whistles. "I'll have to be more careful from now on. Father will be most peeved if he has to send you off to the barbarian hinterlands with a clearly-visible handprint bruised across your scenic hindquarters."

His comment makes Loki look... and that in turn makes Loki angry. "I'm not your toy, brother. And while you rot here, I will be-..."

"...the death of us all, more likely than not," Helblindi cuts in, still laughing, without any thought to letting him finish. "Go comb your hair, princess. You're a mess."

That's just about enough. Loki stomps out, winding the towel about his waist with furious tugs as he goes. Still, he does stop to eye himself critically in the polished obsidian mirror outside their bathing chambers. And whether or not he’s happy to hear it, Helblindi’s right, actually - his hair is everywhere. It hits him then: It will be- novel, really, to live among a hairy people; he won't be the oddity he is here.

*Except for the fact that you are bright blue, you idiot. Surely that won't stick out at all in a land of pink and gold. No chance anyone will notice you, none at all. You will just blend right in.* Loki frowns at his reflection. Out of curiosity he whips the towel free and turns, twisting to look back over his shoulder. Sure enough, his right buttock sports a huge black-purpling handprint. It's unpleasantly sore to the touch, too, he notes as he prods it experimentally. Wonderful.

Just now, he doesn't think he will miss his brother in the slightest.

~

It's all happening faster than Loki likes. Faster than he expected, faster than he can adjust. The final negotiations have been made - he's been bartered, pure and simple, like a shining, oily slab of fresh fish or a stack of well-cured furs... no matter the pretty cover father tries to put on the whole situation - and he's (doomed… cursed…) to be off to Asgard within the week.

He spends the last few mornings brushing up on his Aesir studies - the great libraries of Jotunheim were largely lost to the last Asgard War, the one where the casket, the same casket that so greatly interests Laufey presently, was taken - but as one of royal blood Loki has some means at his disposal all the same - and the afternoons... worrying. The more he refreshes his memory, the more new material he learns, the more concerned he becomes.

Asgard is not a place of anything that can pass for culture, from what he can see. Oh, they're a rich realm with host upon host of natural resources, but they value strength over finesse and manual skill over sorcery and male/female pairings over- well, other options. It's increasingly clear that Loki is going to be a curiosity at best and a pariah at worst.

Laufey and Odin can call it what they like, too, but Loki is not fooled, not for an instant - the
Odinson had acted rashly, coming here to Jotunheim to fight and kill and maim, and Loki is his punishment.

What could be better than a husband who hates him on principle? Oh, right, one who has probably never lain with a male before. And who hates him on principle. Oh, and who is a brutish oaf.

Worry turns to frustration turns to vexation turns to frank rage. On his last afternoons at home Loki stomps through the gorgeous, icy scenery unseeing, fur loincloth and boots his only protection against the welcome cold. He should be enjoying all of this while the opportunity lasts; in reality, the whole of it just leaves him more and more angry.

~

"This is beyond ridiculous," he storms as Laufey's assistants deck him out in the royal family's ceremonial betrothal garments. "I'm going to Asgard, where the people cover themselves in clothing and armor, with nothing but a jeweled chain between my buttocks and a few dangly gems over my not-the-least-bit-privates. Oh, and jewels in my hair, because goodness knows that needs covering. You know who dresses like this in mighty Asgard? Concubines. Consorts. Whores. Female whores," he adds with an angry stamp of one foot.

"Well, you have always been a little whorish," Helblindi – drawn to the chamber by Loki’s peevish ranting, no doubt – volunteers unhelpfully. "But seriously, brother," he goes on, looking anything but serious, “I thought father claimed you were the smart one in the family. They will have to honor our customs, as will we theirs. You will be hidden away until the wedding itself, making only the bare minimum” – he smirks at his own joke – “number of acquaintances. And during the wedding people will be thinking of things other than your sluttiness, I’m sure. Oh, and Loki?” He hooks a piece of gauzy material, finer than any fabric Loki has ever seen, up with one dark finger; a finger clearly visible through the delicate weave. “Do not trouble yourself about preserving your modesty, brother. You will of course be able to wear your robe.”

~

Hot. Hot and blindingly bright. That’s Loki’s first impression of Asgard as he peeps through the curtains of the royal litter. He hadn’t even known there was a royal litter until today; there hasn’t been much cause for celebration, or for pomp and circumstance, since the fall of Jotunheim.

The Bifrost was interesting enough, if a little nauseating, but here? It’s just hot. And bright. He squints, trying to sneak a look around without giving anyone an eyeful. Everything is golden and loud and colorful, unlike the life and home he’s just left behind in every conceivable way.

He’s a little terrified, actually, but damned if he’s going to let on.

Inside the - castle? Palace? His books called it a palace, if memory serves – receiving room it’s a little better; he’s out of the sun, for one thing. The walls are hung with dark tapestries, the windows blocked with heavy drapes. He’s seen pictures of these things, true, but in real life their vastness is nearly overwhelming. By the time he’s presented to his first real Aesir, Loki is just this side of crying.

Crying, which Prince Loki Laufeyson of Jotunheim simply does not do.

“Hello, Loki. Welcome. I am Queen Frigga, and I am here to make sure your stay is as comfortable as possible.” The tall, golden queen before him inclines her head politely. She, too, is both different and somehow more than what he’d expected. As she turns to greet his father warmly, Loki watches her out of the corner of his eye – if there is anything forced in her hospitality, which would be
understandable given the long and unfortunate history between their kingdoms, he is at a loss to identify it. In front of her, with her regal bearing and her elaborate clothing, he feels very young and very ignorant and very naked.

Laufey breaks him out of his anxious self-doubt with a rough push between the shoulder blades. “Loki, tell the Queen something of your interests. It is my understanding you and my son have rather much in common, Frigga” Laufey tells Frigga instead.

“Oh, how wonderful. Don’t tell me you are a sorcerer,” Frigga exclaims, turning back to Loki and positively beaming. “They did not tell me you were so gifted!”

Her excitement is a little contagious: When Loki replies formally – “I am indeed a sorcerer, my lady. I am also a scholar of history and science, and of politics. I am looking forward to bettering my understanding of your realm” – his voice is far less coldly dispassionate than he’d intended.

She reaches out a graceful hand, stopping just before touching his forearm. “Oh, my dear, no; it is your realm as well.”

He’s not sure what to say to that, or what to do about her hovering hand. “My temperature is- is safely modulated, your majesty,” he stammers, immediately regretting what amounts to an open invitation as her warm fingers close upon his wrist.

“Thank you, Loki. That is very considerate of you.” She looks him up and down, smiling warmly. “My son will like you. I know he will.” She nods, decisively, releasing his arm. “But enough chit-chat. You must be tired, and I know this must all be a very considerable adjustment for you. Please, Laufey, do let me show you and your family to your chambers.”

She leads the way, walking with one hand resting lightly in the crook of Laufey’s elbow. Loki trails behind, between Helblindi and Byleistr, acutely conscious of the Aesir servants and his own very naked rump. Everyone here is so- so covered, in long robes and fancy cloaks. His father’s own servants are just in light armor, but even that has metal plates and slats that leave something to the imagination.

As they walk, though, he can’t help but get caught up instead in the scenery around him. The palace is so ornate, and so varied – metals and woods and heavy stone, smoking torches and blindingly-bright windows and works of art the likes of which Loki has never imagined, let alone seen. The place is amazing. Fascinating.

Under different circumstances, Loki imagines, he would actually be excited to be here.
Laufey and the boys pretty much have the run of the place – both the palace and the city - coming back day and night with tales of meals and hunts, of fascinating sports, of people and drinking establishments. For Hellblindi and Byleistr in particular, it’s the first time they’ve been in Asgard under full diplomatic protection; it’s a great opportunity to both sight-see and carouse with complete impunity and, to hear them talk (not that they’re the most honest people out there, of course, but even given the inevitable exaggeration) it seems they’re taking full advantage thereof in every conceivable way.

Loki, by comparison (and he certainly is comparing, both thoroughly and frequently), is stuck - imprisoned, to put a finer point on it - in the Jotun royal family’s assigned guest chambers. The rooms are undeniably lovely, with spacious tiled ice baths and luscious silken bedding and beautifully-appointed shaded balconies from which cold-acclimated visitors can comfortably survey the spectacular Asgardian cityscape and the lush countryside beyond, but after less than two days kept - utterly captive, under lock and key - here he's ready to climb the solid, tapestry-clad walls.

Not that it’s his hosts' fault. From what Loki understands, most of the laws and customs that see him secreted away here, hidden and lonely and above all horribly bored, are Jotun. The Asgardians are just nicely playing along, for the sake of improved diplomacy.

In fact, they probably got the same crash course he did.

Because, point of fact: Up until a couple of weeks ago, when this whole mess reared up out of nowhere and wiped away all traces of normal life as he knew it, Loki’d managed to remain blissfully ignorant of his own realm's marriage customs. He had honestly never given the idea of being wedded to anyone – male nor female nor bird nor beast - so much as a second thought, personally, and his brothers hadn't exactly been falling all over themselves to marry off either. While – thinking about it logically; succession planning and all that boring ruling family garbage - it was something Laufey likely intended to demand of one them eventually, orders had yet to be forthcoming. Well, until the unexpected arrival of these orders, in all their wretched, awful glory.

None of this lack of marrying interest should be taken to mean, as his darling brother never misses an opportunity to point out, that Prince Loki hasn’t cornered his fair share of the action - Jotun attitudes on sex exclusive of marriage are apparently quite permissive, at least in comparison to what he’s read of those prevalent in some of the other realms. And in the heart of the coldest winter months, where the whole concept of daylight equates to nothing more than a couple of dim, dusky hours at midday, there is little to do save pair off and find ways to stay warm. Loki has always (carefully, intentionally) cultivated a reputation for offsetting smaller stature with inventive, acrobatic creativity; all in all, he has probably been the most consistently-sought-after bed partner of the three royal siblings. But, be that as it may, it was just a bit of fun (okay, rather more than a bit on occasion, but still); despite the quality sport it had never led to anything more, and he'd never wanted it to.

Now, though, it’s neither sporting nor fun. Not in the least. Loki is getting a thorough(ly unpleasant) steeping in his realm's surprisingly-prudish marital traditions... and not enjoying it in even the tiniest way. He can't even see his future husband, let alone give the boorish brute a test drive (or even have a quick conversation, to make sure the crown prince is not as completely stupid as his reputation would lead one to believe). Loki can't be seen at all by the male members of Thor's family - meaning he can't go with his father or brothers when they take audience with Asgard's king - or by any of Thor's friends. Loki's betrothed must be incredibly popular, too, as that last stipulation seems to rule out making the acquaintance of 99% of Asgard's citizenry. All of which pretty much guarantees Thor
will be loud, vapid, brainless, and terminally annoying.

So, basically, Loki is flat-out stuck here in these rooms. Waiting to be signed away to a life of misery, no less. Frankly put, it sucks and he hates every conceivable thing about it.

But even given that he does have to admit the view from the balcony, once his burning, watering crimson eyes start to adjust and the scenery no longer blinds him, is absolutely amazing. It’s the best thing about his chambers, by far, and the long, narrow space ends up being where he spends most of his time; despite the heat, he’s never imagined, let alone seen, anything like this realm and he just cannot see it enough. Day and night he lounges in the chairs or stands fascinated at the railing, hair streaming back in a windblown, tangled mess. On the balcony, if he even half tries, he can manage to forget why he’s here.

Sadly, though, his dear brothers delight in reminding him.

~

On the big day, dawn breaks hot and bright and clear. Like it does every day here, Loki thinks unhappily, which is why he’s surprised to see clouds and heavy lightning appear out of nowhere later in the morning. He puts a hand out into the rain, baffled by its warmth. Still, this is better than more hot sun.

He leans out from the balcony railing, letting the rain wash down his cheeks and soak his hair. Lightning flashes everywhere; deafening thunder shakes the very palace. It’s one of the most amazing shows of natural force Loki has ever seen, and he would stand in it all day if he could.

He can’t.

~

Laufey's aides try to get their prince to eat, but the food here is all strangely repellant - smoky and smelly and above all disgusting - and he begs off yet again. He fails to see why the aides are so concerned, or why this may constitute a Big Problem; one doesn't want to be bloated on one's wedding day, after all.

Ultimately they give up, instead settling him into the bath (this despite all his strident protests; he really can wash himself, you know, and does so with a regularity that amuses Helblindi. His brother has no idea how dirty hair can get, nor how fast it manages to do so) and scrubbing him purple. Then they fish him out, towel him dry, and oil him head-to-toe, braiding gemstones and fine gold chains into his hair and buffing his nails - fingers, toes - to gleaming black. It's highly likely he has never been so... pretty. Or that he's resented it all so thoroughly.

The more they touch him, primping and smoothing and glossing with their rough, unwelcome hands, the more he wants them dead. Somewhere among the Nine there must be a joining ceremony that encourages showing up like a berserker, teeth stained red and body streaked with blood. Let those Aesir bastards take that and see how they like it.

All this fussing about takes an incredibly long time, and Loki strives to cooperate. He does! When one of the aides attempts to thread delicate bits of jewelry through his piercings, though, he’s done. He slaps the aide’s hands away and shoves the fellow backwards with a hard strike to mid-chest, roaring out every last bit of pent-up frustration as the aide drops hard onto his rump on the polished stone.

Afterwards, the silence is both absolute and deafening. After a brief, blissful eternity, during which
everyone is frozen in place like graceless blue marble statues, the flustered aide scrambles to his feet and rushes out.

The whole thing is worth it, briefly.

Then King Laufey storms in, fetched by the bruised aide, and suddenly it's not quite so worth it after all. "Is there a problem here, Loki?" His father's voice is quiet and controlled, but the king looks at least as furious as Loki feels.

Loki hisses. "I don't want or need your lackeys sticking trinkets in my cock, father. I won't tolerate it. I understand there are customs involved here, I do. If I need to wear this ridiculous get-up, I need to wear it, and I will... but no one else is putting it in. Seriously, father. I have been beyond patient with all of this." Okay, perhaps he hasn't, but that's no concern of Laufey's and it doesn't warrant groping hands everywhere. He rolls his eyes. "It's not like Thor is going to knows whose fingers were here, now, is it?"

Laufey's jaw is set, rigid and forbidding. "Loki, listen carefully, as I do not intend to repeat this. I expect you to do exactly as you're told today. All of these rituals, taken together, are far more important than you seem capable of understanding," he adds, speech harsh and clipped. "There is no room for loose interpretation, nor for just not feeling like it. Do I make myself that clear?"

"But father-," Loki tries to push back, in vain.

"But father nothing. If I have to put you in irons, I will. Don't push your luck with me, Loki. I have been very patient as well, probably far more than I should have been, but know this: My patience is fast running out. In fact, it is nearly exhausted. I assure you, you don’t want to to be the cause of its failing entirely."

Fine. Loki grits his teeth and stands rigid as the aides finish decorating him - every inch of him - in jewels and chains.

Talk about wearing one's dowry. It is uncomfortable and humiliating and demeaning and wrong.

But there's nothing left to say. Or, rather, there is... but for once Loki musters the self-preservation not to say it.

~

The Big Event suddenly – all too quickly; what he wouldn’t give now for another lovely afternoon on that balcony - upon him, Loki is collected by his family party and escorted into the great hall. He enters the impressive space primped and shining and gorgeous and absolutely furious.

As he marches resolutely to the foot of the golden dais - ignoring the scenery, eyes stubbornly fixed on nothing whatsoever – the all-hating Prince of Jotunheim knows there's no masking the naked rage in his expression. So be it. His husband-to-be should know what he's getting himself into, shouldn't he?

Loki himself, on the other hand, seems to be getting into precisely what he expected: He sneaks a sideways glance, as he's still pointedly looking at nothing, and finds Prince Thor Odinson to be tall and broad and golden and heavily muscled. The crown prince’s ceremonial armor gleams in the torchlight - no awkward display of skin for Asgard's future king. He's big, both in stature and in presence, and his ridiculously helmet only makes him seem bigger. Which is probably the point, really.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, considering the whole carefully-not-mentioned punishment for past trespasses aspect of their union, Thor also looks about as thrilled to be here as Loki is. Except, from
the fake smile plastered on his face, Thor evidently thinks he's hiding own his feelings better.

*He couldn't be more wrong.*

As Loki saunters the last few paces to the dais, Thor's expression shifts subtly from anger to- to interest. His smile is a lot more warmly appreciative, and a lot more real. It's much as if he's pleased to see Loki, and somehow hopes his sentiments are reciprocated.

*As if.*

Loki does condescend to accept the offered hand up; with attitude, yes - never let it be said the Whore of Jotunheim is a pushover - but he takes it nonetheless. One only challenges Laufey so far. But one can hate it, even so, with every fiber of one’s naked blue being.

And Thor's expression clearly says it - he's registered Loki's anger, and very bad attitude, and he *likes* it.

That's- unexpected. As is the apparent fact he finds his soon-to-be-Jotnar-husband’s *utterly alien* form appealing.

Then Loki and Thor turn as one to face the assembly; the amassed crowd roars and there's no opportunity left for thinking.

~

There is, though, rather more ceremonial drinking than he anticipated. Perhaps skipping the noon meal was unwise; they're toasting with the heavy Jotun spirits usually reserved for quieting colicky babies and sedating upcoming sacrifices and he can *feel* it – both the dry-ice burn and the *medicinal effects* - from his jeweled head to his neatly-groomed toes.

Still, Loki tries. In fact, he really does put up a good front. Right up until his new husband *laughs* at him... and then all the earlier rage combines with the brand new intoxication to leave him rash and seething. He is a prince and sorcerer, not a child's toy. He will not be treated as property, or as a novel amusement. Not by the future King of Asgard; not by anyone.

As if a grown man who totes around a giant *hammer* has any right to be laughing anyway.

~

The feasting, once they get to it, isn't so bad. Loki has leveled out and is pleasantly stoned, rather than awkwardly drunk. The buzz makes both the weird food and the random conversation - with newly-bonded family and so-called friends; Thor is getting the best cold shoulder Loki can muster, which is to say *very, very cold* - far easier to swallow. He trots out his finest court manners and works the massive room alone, effortlessly making Thor look like a drunken, sulking idiot by comparison.

It's fun, really.

~

It's even fun for a little while once they return to their chambers; silently baiting Thor and winding him tighter and tighter is a game Loki can really get behind. When his new husband gets over-frustrated and tries to play the Poor Martyred Me card, though, Loki can no longer bear the whole thing in silence.
He says some things he should regret... and at first he really does regret them. Almost to the point of apologizing. He regrets them right up until Thor makes a crack - it must be intended as a cheap dig; the big dumb oaf can't truly mean or believe it - about his new Jotnar husband’s command of spoken language. That, Loki cannot and will not tolerate. He lets all his spite out in a scathing tirade.-

-and finds himself pinned roughly against the window for his troubles, Thor's powerful hand pressing dangerous and threatening at Loki’s throat. It’s a shock and not what he expected. He tries to concentrate, rather frantically gathering his seidr in preparation to fight back - if anyone's dying here tonight, it isn't going to be him; not if he has even the smallest bit of say in the matter - but just that fast Thor's anger turns to clear fascinated lust.

The speed of the change catches Loki too far off-guard. He lashes out, all blistering tongue and quick movements, and manages to escape not only Thor but their chambers. He rushes headlong onto a beautiful balcony, with the sparkling expanse of the city below and the crystal-clear, starry Asgard sky arched high and endless above.

It's all far too much - the change, the swarms of people, the arguing, the drink, the aggression, the naked hunger in Thor's expression - and Loki just can't take it anymore. Without even enough remaining presence of mind to cast himself a concealing spell, he collapses broken and sobbing in the farthest corner.

~

Loki wakes, stiff and sweaty and with a singularly impressive headache, at dawn. He peeks back into their chambers; sure enough, Thor yet snores. A long ice bath, nice as it is, improves Loki’s situation only slightly; headache or no, though, he knows he's now free to explore the palace… which is a tremendous opportunity, one he is not missing for anyone or anything. He picks the remaining gold and gems out of his hair (and various other places) and sets them on the counter before creeping silently back out to the wardrobe. After careful consideration he wraps himself in a soft black loincloth that's positively chaste compared to yesterday's ridiculousness, and pads silently past his sleeping spouse.

The huge doors are heavy but – when closed carefully – tolerably quiet; the palace halls dim and empty after what had likely been a near-unparalleled night of revelry.

It takes Loki all of ten minutes to find the Royal Library. For the first time since he first breathed Asgard's hot, wet air he honestly thinks he might have found something that feels a tiny bit like home.

~

Helblindi and Byleistr are the first to stop in and say their goodbyes. Loki comes inside from the balcony for them - they're his brothers, no matter how badly they sometimes annoy him, and Thor isn't around anyway - and the three of them exchange awkward, back-slappy hugs. Helblindi finally wraps Loki tightly in both long, strong arms, though, and squeezes him breathless. "I will miss you, little brother. The frozen realm will not be the same without you. Visit when you can, you must. Promise me you will?"

Loki simply refuses to cry for these two. He will never, ever live it down. He just nods his agreement - "of course" - and hopes the roughness in his voice passes for- for something, anything less embarrassing.

Laufey is practically right on their heels, the expression on his stern face far gentler than it was the day of the wedding. "I know this is a difficult thing I've asked of you, my son, but I have much faith
in you; I am confident you will make me proud. You will make us proud; your family, all of Jotunheim." He rests a heavy hand on Loki's shoulder. "Always remember; we need returned to us that which is rightfully ours... but in peace, not in war. Now, go forth and make it happen."

"I will do my best," Loki assures his father; a bit surprised to find himself actually meaning it. He tries to smile reassuringly but just can't pull it off.

"Chin up, Prince Loki Laufeyson," Laufey adds, looking back as he turns to go. "And do try to enjoy yourself. Thor is good-hearted, from what I can divine; despite your differences - and the nature of your duties - the two of you will grow to appreciate one another." He nods with a certainty Loki wishes he himself could even approximate and then, with just the echoing clang of the heavy metal doors for company, Loki is very much alone.

He doesn't go back to his own balcony, instead choosing a far-less-obvious empty, private banquet space cantilevered high above the sparkling Bifrost. From its jutting stone terrace Loki watches, carefully hidden from view, as his proud blue family and its compliment of guards and aides makes its way out to the observatory. By the far end of the long causeway they are but dark ants, identifiable as themselves only by their flat dullness against the glitter of Asgard's own forces.

The Bifrost lights up, shimmering bright against even these surroundings. He can't hear its roar from here, but he can imagine it... and the whole spectacle leaves him sad and- empty. Hollowed out, abandoned, with nothing to do and no one to see.

Except Thor. Loki could doubtless locate his husband readily enough, even without using seidr, but there's no telling the reception - laughed-at, lusted-after, observed skeptically from afar - he'll get. His pride isn't up to a heavy bruising just now, either, especially if he's meant to succeed by peace and not by war.

No, Thor is best avoided.

~

It's a sound enough idea, one that for several days works quite nicely. Which is why, some uneventful time passed since their last real encounter, Loki is extremely surprised to look up from his comfortable reading room perch and find none other than his very own husband looming over him.

They bicker, but Loki's heart is just not in it. The same old tired argument over his standing here - and over what Thor did to deserve this - is just that; same, old, tired. Loki barely even manages to surprise himself when he hints at the promise of sexual favors, or when he graciously accepts Thor's return offer of a good meal; Loki is quite starved after all, in more ways than one, and this might be a chance to get his needs met for once.

It's not like he's never gone on his belly for purposes of securing a deal before, after all, and sometimes for rather a lot less than a good meal at that.

Which, of course, his husband needs not know. Ever.

~

Fishing, though, Loki was not expecting. Fishing? This is something at which he's good, really good, and - even though the mountain stream doesn't remotely approach icy - the cool running water is pleasantly soothing. He and Thor have an excellent time and a wonderful meal - for the first time since his arrival, really, Loki feels satisfied.

He cuddles up to Thor, who makes a surprisingly nice cushion. Sober, though, his golden husband
makes no attempt to collect on the earlier offer. Carefully setting the storm of hurt feelings aside, Loki understands... there's surely a strong taboo against bedding monsters deeply ingrained here. Drunken (lack of) judgment out of the picture, Thor isn't going to be so quick to put societal norms aside.

No monsters means no monsters, ever.

Even playful monsters who catch you fish. And make you smile.

~

Dinner with the new family, now that Loki is feeling a little more at ease with the palace and its habits, turns out to be another thing at which he's really good. Of his new in-laws Loki is a lot more comfortable around Queen Frigga, but – having grown up in Laufey's court - he knows how to handily manage the king as well. Cultural differences notwithstanding, Loki is educated and poised and charming and quite capable of putting all of it to good use when he needs to.

Still, all the while, he can't help himself; at each and every dinner he stealthily watches Thor. His husband seems oddly, genuinely taken with him, and not at all in the way one is taken by a captive monster whore; Thor hangs on his ever word, rapt and quiet, as Loki chats up the Aesir prince's royal parents. Thor smiles with clear, real pleasure as Loki catches fish.

It's almost as though Thor is growing to like Loki. Which doesn't make much sense, but the idea proves to be a lure that's hard to resist. Which is why, when Thor catches Loki in the hall and finally - out of nowhere, utterly without warning - kisses him for real, Loki kisses back. With interest.

And it's good. Really good. Surprisingly good. Thor's mouth is hot and slippery and sweet, hands insistent along Loki's back and effortly powerful at the back of his head. As tempting as it is to give in completely, right here in the hall - Loki's gone without physical- well, relief for quite some time now, and his body has a mind of its own - he gives a sharp warning bite instead.

He needs to know that Thor really wants this; that his husband isn't just putting on a good act for the parents.

But Thor isn't put off by the bite. In fact, he seems to like it; he pulls Loki in even closer and kisses him harder, messy and thorough. They practically climb all over each other right out in the corridor; Thor tastes good and feels good and Loki wants. He wants and needs and isn't sure he will be able to stop.

Isn't sure he wants to stop, even, now that you mention it.

But when they do get back to their chambers, he finds he can't go through with the whole business after all.

Thor could have - probably has had - the pick of most any realm. He has no cause to settle for the runt of the Jotun princely litter, a creature possessing of little and in line for less. And on top of that Thor has made it amply clear they're only here at all because he's being punished for - is being forced by his parents to make amends for - past transgressions… transgressions Loki knows include a devastating, unprovoked attack on the monsters of Jotunheim.

No, either Thor is putting Loki on, playing the situation for whatever it may be worth, or it's a simple case of curiosity: Kiss the exotic blue thing, make it beg, make it crawl. Either way Loki has let himself get too involved and simply can't handle the idea of Thor rejecting him for a freak once he's finally surrendered. So, tempted or not, turned on like crazy or not, he puts on the brakes. He forces
himself to stop. Makes excuses... and then regrets them, but it's too late. He's done it, done the smarter - if more painful - thing and there's no turning back.

Which is fortunate, really, because turning back would be idiotic. Dangerous and naive and not worth the risk.

So he grumbles, instead. Paces. Whines.

And, for his troubles, spends the night in a chair.
After a few weeks of (not) dealing with Loki’s standoffishness, Thor at last gives up and heads out with some of his friends - the Warriors Three and a handful of others, the latter being friends of Fandral's - on a short hunting expedition. He intentionally doesn't invite his husband; it's not Loki's favorite kind of activity to start with, Thor's pretty sure, and if he's honest with himself he's quite thoroughly sick of all this looking but not touching. The whole situation has become nothing short of an unrequited obsession - Thor can't get Loki out of his mind, waking or sleeping, but Loki artfully dodges him at every opportunity - and it's driving him crazy.

A few days afield, riding hard through Asgard's endless forests with his lifelong friends in search of game, can only do his mental state good. The bunch of them will drink and laugh and tell tales, gathering around the campfire at night and remembering (an undoubtedly-exaggerated version of) the good old days. Thor will enjoy himself, and enjoy the friends with whom he spends quality time far too infrequently now that they're all expected to contribute to society and be responsible adults; now that Volstagg, the eldest of their little clique, has gone on to sire half the population of a small village and Thor himself has married...

And more than anything he will enjoy the chance to tear hunks of charred meat from a greasy, gamey haunch with his teeth, cooking juices smearing his mouth and dripping into his beard, without having to watch that pert blue nose wrinkling in disgust.

Yes, all told, Thor can pretend he’s back in those good old days, before he screwed up as only a hot-tempered warrior prince can and got himself tethered to a pretty Jotnar tease who wants nothing to do with him.

Honestly, at some level Thor knows he's not being fair; Loki is still adjusting, it's a lot with which to deal. He can't imagine it, personally; what it would be like to be ripped away from everything you know, everything you understand... friends and family and pastimes and familiar places. He feels bad for Loki - he does! But it's reached a point where he wants Loki so badly it hurts and he's at a complete loss as to what to do about it. For good or ill, that in itself manages to nearly completely drown out any sympathy he might (would) otherwise feel.

To top it off, when he tries to view the situation with sympathy - or even just feel sorry for his poor deprived self - he cannot help but notice going off hunting feels a more than a little like hiding, like fleeing his problems, if he thinks about it wrong.

So he tries hard not to think about it wrong. In fact, he tries even harder not to think about it at all.

~

The hunting party heads out in the first light of dawn, laughing and singing and trading barbs. It's all in good fun, and Thor finds he really is enjoying himself for the first time in months. That is, he's enjoying himself right up until one of Fandral's friends – a young soldier Thor knows only by face – brashly comes right out and point-blank asks him: “Isn't it awfully cold fucking one of those frost giants? Doesn't your cock freeze off? Seems like it would be like dipping your goods in a frozen pond.”
Thor bristles. "What Loki and I do is none of your business, and I would not refer to the prince in such a coarse manner if I were you. Not if you wish to continue living, at least."

Missing the edge in Thor's tone, another man snickers. "You have stuck it in the beast, haven't you," some ass asks loudly. With that the whole hunting party laughs, even his own friends, and Thor feels his face flush hotly pink.

"Leave it," he demands, tone dangerous, as he pulls his mount away sharply and spurs it ahead of the rest. And the group does shut up, finally, but the damage is already done – now all Thor can think about is Loki. The smooth blue skin, the sleek muscles, the shiny hair. The biting wit, the fiery temper, the bright out-of-nowhere smile.

The quick hands, the warm blue-black lips, the long curve of Loki's neck. Where he could be firmly planting his own lips. His hands. His teeth.

Except Loki doesn't want that. Doesn't find a big, hairy Aesir warrior appealing, it seems. And it's not like Thor can change who – what – he is to fix the problem, either.

He tries to put the whole conversation – the whole topic - behind him but there’s no helping it; for him the mood is spoiled, and nothing within his reach will improve it.

~

Working together (far better than they talk together, it seems,) the nine of them manage - much sooner than any of them had anticipated - to spear and bring down an impressive boar. The thing is near as tall as their horses and twice as broad, its chest massive and its curving tusks as big as an Aesir warrior's arm. When they finally drop the beast in its tracks, blood matting its dark pelt, they are to a man sweat-soaked and gasping for breath. None of them has suffered more than bruises or scrapes, though; it's a good hunt and they're justifiably proud.

Hogun, Volstagg, and three or four of Fandral's companions dig a coiled length of heavy dwarvish cable out of one of the supply panniers and use it – in conjunction with a lot of body weight and muscle - to hoist the mighty carcass. One they have it safely secured to a thick, sturdy branch - the creature is so large that it takes some time to find a suitable tree, even here where the forest is strong and ancient - they set about cleaning their quarry.

As the glistening, bloody guts drop to the forest floor, Thor can't help wonder if Loki might actually have liked this after all.

~

Meanwhile in a nearby clearing Thor and Fandral dig an ample fire pit, fill it with wood, and erect a well-reinforced frame for the spit as Volstagg, who is – based on his well-honed eating skills - of course in charge of cooking, supervises. "No, no, brace the crosses higher," the big chef corrects as they tie off the last of the framing. “This thing is huge. We need lots of clearance, unless you want to drag it through the coals with each turn of the spit.” They adjust. And adjust. And adjust, as the big warrior is ever an exacting taskmaster.

Finally, after several more rejected tries - they are still a bit tired from the chase and not at their best, after all - Volstagg pulls a big swig from his ale-skin and smiles. "Perfect," he pronounces their work, and then belches loudly. "Oh my, do excuse me," he says with a laugh as he pats his ample belly. "I've clearly not yet had enough to drink. Nor has either of you," he gestures. "Sit. Quench your thirst. Talk to me."
They light the fire – it needs some time to burn down before the cooking itself begins - and then do as instructed, practically collapsing against the nearest tree. "Yes," Thor asks, eyebrows raised, as he realizes his friends are both watching him expectantly. "Do you need something?"

"Only to hear how you are, old friend," Fandral responds. "I may not be the brightest star in the sky, and Volstagg here" - he points with his drinking-skin at their big frowning comrade - "is surely not either, but even we can tell something troubles you. We worry for you, Thor. Don't we," he prods as Volstagg just sits there visibly lost in thought.

"What? Oh, sorry. Yes, of course. Worry." Volstagg nods. "You are not yourself, o' princely one. And as a married man myself, I am not so quick to accept the usual lame excuses. So do not even bother giving one of them a try. Go on," he adds, "spill it. What ails you?"

Thor fully intends to let fly some innocuous rationalization - the stress of helping his father, who leans on him ever more and more, run their mighty realm; that sort of thing - but, when he actually opens his mouth to explain (lie), he is horrified to find himself literally whining:

"Loki does not like me."

Volstagg rolls his eyes. "Serious, Thor? You think that?"

"I know it," Thor responds, with conviction. He does.

Fandral pats Thor's thigh. "Beg to differ. Have you seen how he looks at you? I wager he likes you a great deal, especially taking into consideration how little a time the two of you have yet had to get to know one another."

"He is probably just homesick," Volstagg adds, nodding. "I must throw my lot in with Fandral; the pretty blue thing is clearly quite smitten. And from speaking with his brothers - sharing ale is great for inter-realm diplomacy... and gossip, I must assure you’ he quips, "their – now your - prince is quite talented at physical demonstrations of affection, if you get my drift." He waggles his bushy eyebrows suggestively, dirty smirk all but hidden in his coarse beard.

"The two of you should be well-matched, if your own reputation is anything approaching truthful. So, if you have not yet taken the opportunity to avail yourself of his rumored talents, I suggest you do so at your earliest convenience. That should drive this needless worry from your mind. Oh, and Thor," he adds in a conspiratorial tone, "those sordid rumors we've all heard about Jotuns? Not true, the blue princes tell me. They’re male and female just as we are, with only the very rare intersex individual born to their realm as well. So do not expect to investigate your husband and find a disturbing array of unfamiliar parts."

Fandral giggles, one hand over his mouth, but Thor has missed the joking entirely and is still stuck at smitten. "Why do you say this? He avoids me on every possible occasion. We did manage to have a small measure of fun together for a short while," he amends, thinking wistfully of their fishing jaunts, "but something went awry and now he will have nothing further to do with me. I think he actually prefers my parents' company."

"Now Frigga I can see." Fandral snorts. "But old one-eye? Sorry, Thor, but that I find ridiculous beyond belief. You are delusional, my friend. You must be far too sober."

"Hush, you treasonous boor. Do not speak so about our beloved King," Volstagg admonishes, but his own laughter gives him away. "He's right, though," he reminds Thor. "There is scarcely any way one such as Loki would prefer Odin's company to yours. He is probably just trying his best to win your parents over, as he now has a lifetime of dealing with them ahead of him. Worry not, not over this particular folly." He pauses for another big swallow of ale. "At the heart of the matter, though:
Do you like Loki? I know you had expressed considerable concern beforehand that you emphatically would not.”

Oh, wonderful. “Oddly, I do not recall” – Thor squints at his friends – “expressing these considerable concerns you mention to either of you.” He doesn’t. In fact, he is absolutely sure he only ever complained to his parents. Well, and at - not with, exactly – their staff.

“News travels, Thor. Surely such an wordly-wise, seasoned prince as yourself is no stranger to this phenomenon. News, especially juicy gossip, grows its own stubby legs and makes the round of the pubs and baths, you know. It might as well be a living thing, for how quickly it gets about.”

The pubs. The pubs. A sudden wave of anxiety leaves him breathless. What if Loki’s brothers…

Before he can even finish the thought, though, Volstagg butts back in. “But stop changing the topic. As much older than you two as I may be, I am not yet so feeble of mind as to be thrown off by your amateur posturing. Do. You. Like. Him?” He punctuates the question by slapping the heel of one big hand against the forest floor. “Answer me, Thor.”

He was! “I was, I was. I just found myself wondering- OWWW,” Thor howls as Fandral’s bony elbow connects with his ribs. “YES, ALRIGHT, I LIKE HIM! I like him very much, actually,” he adds in a more normal speaking voice. “I am surprised at how much, to tell the truth, but he is sharp and funny and fascinating and-.”

“-hot. He is most attractive. Do not leave that part out,” Fandral reminds, “and do be so naïve as to think you are the only one who has noticed.”

Thor chuckles, feeling a tiny bit better. “Yes, undoubtedly, he is that as well. But I was speaking more to his inner strengths. He is a most interesting creature and I want very much to know him better. Intellectually,” he clarifies hastily as Fandral snorts. “I just wish he felt the same,” he finishes, suddenly sad again. He is having the mood swings of an Aesir maiden these days. It’s ridiculous.

Fandral twists to frown quizzically at Thor. “Is this – your concern over his perceived dislike of his new husband - why you did not bring Loki along on this outing? We thought you didn’t want him mingling with the likes of your base and common friends.”

“I was tired of dealing with him,” Thor complains. It’s true, as far as it goes, on more than one level.

Both his friends burst out laughing. “You have much to learn, my dear,” Volstagg tells him, wiping watering eyes on a sleeve. “And I suggest you set to doing so as soon as you return home. Now, I see we have a far-too-distant dinner for which to start preparing,” he adds, deftly switching conversational gears as one of Fandrall’s friends calls over to report the carcass is cleaned and skinned and ready for roasting.

“Talk to Hogun,” Fandral suggests quietly as they get to their feet. “He knows what it’s like to be new to Asgard, and may be able to give you some worthwhile advice.” Thor nods; it’s good counsel and he really should take it, assuming he can find the chance to speak with the least talkative of their friends alone. None of this is anything he feels like airing publically, even if it weren’t ill-advised that he do so. And it is ill-advised; he can hardly imagine proud, haughty Loki approving of having their issues discussed like this, no matter how good Thor’s friends’ intentions… especially considering how Thor’s earlier extreme disenchantment with the whole arrangement may have made it to Helblindi’s and Byleistr’s ears.

And from there, predictably enough – the three are brothers, after all, despite their physical dissimilarities - to Loki’s.
Many hours of drinking and singing and (thankfully, far-less-personal) tale-telling later, the big boar is finally cooked through and ready for eating. Volstagg has brought along the makings of a fine sauce – which they make with ale shot from their drinking-skins, rather than water, because this is a party and no one more responsible is there to tell them no – and between that and the succulent meat itself, Thor finds himself hard-put to imagine a better meal. Except he misses Loki, and can’t help but think this would be even better fun with a sleek blue body curled against his side.

There’s a stream nearby; Loki could even catch and eat his beloved fish, all the while cringing at the barbarians ripping apart and downing charred and hideous flesh. He can practically see the disdainful expression on his husband’s face, and is surprised to find he misses that as well.

After they’ve eaten their fill, Fandral entertains the group with a last bawdy tale – a story they’ve all heard before, about one of his friends and a barmaid down near the coast, which gets both more lurid and more fascinating with each telling. The hour is very late when they finally drift drunkenly off to sleep, and consequently it’s (rather inconveniently) quite late when they rise as well. They set promptly to cleaning up after themselves, hangovers be damned; they need to pack the remaining meat and break down their campsite quickly, if they hope to return to the palace by suppertime.

Which is something Thor very much does hope to do; he’d originally planned to be gone at least three or four days, but now he wants nothing more than to talk with Loki. So he sets to work loading the panniers and saddling the horses as the others work clearing the remains of the fire.

“Need a hand,” Hogun offers, appearing out of nowhere at Thor’s side.

“Aye. My head is killing me,” Thor acknowledges with a rueful grin. “And I have been hoping to speak alone with you as well.” Hogun nods, then turns to pick up a well-worn bridle. “What was it like for you, coming to Asgard?”

“It was- hard.” Hogun lets Fandral’s horse take its bit, fingers nimbly dodging its big teeth, and slips the bridle over its head. “Do not take this wrong, as I am grateful to have been allowed to stay and have come to love it here, but it was a big change and not an altogether easy one.”

“You were lonely,” Thor prompts, flipping a stirrup up out of the way and fastening his own horse’s girth. He gives the strap a good tug, making certain out of long habit that it won’t slip when it shouldn’t, then gives the horse a comforting pat.

“I was, yes, but it was far more than that. Everything I thought I knew had changed; everything familiar was gone, and what was here was… wrong to me. Wrong for me. Uncomfortable.” Hogun tosses the reins over the horse’s neck. “I felt as thought I had no anchor.”

“I had not really thought of it that way. Thank you; I will need to consider the whole topic at greater length, but this has been very helpful.” He sneaks his horse an apple from a small pouch hanging from his pommel, chuckling as the pleased animal smears sticky juice along his own palm, and tosses a second plump fruit to Hogan.

“Is this about Prince Loki,” Hogun asks as he gives Fandral’s horse its own apple. “He must be going through a similar experience. Worse, even, because his home realm is all the more different from Asgard than was mine. Plus, to top it all off, he must be roasting.”

“Yes,” Thor admits. “Now that I realize what he may be going through, I wish to ease his adjustment. If such a thing is possible, I mean.”
Hogun nods. “I know this is difficult, and perhaps not what you want to hear – you are ever a doer, my friend, and not a wait-and-see-er – but the best thing you offer him now is your patience.”

~

The ride back seems eternal, as does getting the horses unloaded and stabled. Loki is not in their chambers; Thor’s first instinct is to rush to the library to find his husband, but he catches a glimpse of himself in the big mirror near the wardrobe and hesitates. He’s grimy and sweat-streaked, wild-haired, and – this he confirms with a couple of well-placed sniffs – stinking of stale ale and smoke and blood… and horse. He’s probably going to receive quite the cold welcome if he bursts into the library like this, and justifiably so.

First to the baths, then, especially keeping in mind Hogun’s parting words.

The warm water feels lovely, but Thor turns quickly to the task of cleaning his filthy self. There is nothing to be gained lolling about in the bath thinking, after all, and it’s going to take half an hour to get his hair clean to begin with. Sure enough; the water is so filthy by the time he’s done scrubbing that he ends up having to draw another tubful just to rinse himself anything approaching clean.

He neatens up his scruffy stubble and puts his wet hair up in a messy leather-tied bun, then strides purposefully back into the bedchamber and pulls on soft linen trousers and a loose tunic. At last he eyes himself critically in the mirror again – better; he looks much less like he just returned from battle – and sets off in search of Loki.

~

Sure enough, the prince is in the library. Thor pads quietly across the room, unnoticed: Loki is at one of the long tables, books spread everywhere. His hair is up a sloppy ponytail – the first time Thor’s ever seen it so; Loki’s nape looks good enough to eat – and he’s dressed only in his usual little loincloth. His worn, dusty sandals are long since abandoned under the table – slim blue feet tucked beneath him on the bench, Loki is utterly lost in concentration. So much so that he jumps when – after a few minutes spent in silent, rapt observation - Thor clears his own throat quietly, whirling about with blue feet flying every which way and expression accusing.

“Thor! You snuck up on me,” his startled husband snaps.

“I am sorry,” (he is) “for I meant not to.” That last is only partly true – while Thor certainly did not scare Loki on purpose, he must admit he enjoyed watching his husband lost to reading – but the sentiment is real enough. “Look, Loki… I- I missed you. I have missed you, even before this excursion. I do not know what I did to put you off, but I wish more than anything to make it right. I like you very much, you know,” he takes the risk of confessing when Loki just stares at him blankly, “and I want things to be well between us. But more than that, more than you can know, I want you to be happy here.”

“You like me.” Loki frowns. “No, you think I am a beast and a monster. You think you may as well have married one of your own dogs. Don’t for a moment believe your comments don’t circle back to me. I know I am just your punishment. Do me the courtesy of not pretending otherwise. I am no idiot, Thor, and I’ll thank you not to treat me as one.”

Oh.

Thor swallows noisily in the quiet room. “I- forgive me. I said some ignorant things before I met you. Things I would take back now if I could, as they could not have been less true. Loki, I mean this with all my heart: You are fascinating and lovely and I greatly enjoy spending time with you. The
afternoons we spent fishing were a true joy. It was not right of me to be so hasty in judgment, especially of something about which I clearly knew so little. I really am terribly sorry.” He truly is.

Loki’s expression is odd. “You don’t think I’m a monster, then?” His voice is unsteady; Thor hopes that’s a good sign.

“I do not. I think you are a person, and an interesting person besides.” He invites himself to settle on the long bench, a safe distance from his husband. “Can we give this another try? Please?” Thor puts every bit of feeling he can into the heartfelt plea. And then he is patient, just as Hogun advised.

Loki studies his face for what feels like hours, and then cautiously extends a hand. Thor takes it, lacing their fingers together; when Loki doesn’t pull away, he feels as though his heart may burst. He scoots a little closer, then closer still, until Loki leans slowly in to rest against his shoulder.

“Okay,” is all Loki says, but it’s plenty.
Chapter 5

Loki doesn't really consider what he just did oversleeping, so he's more than a little shocked to wake at daylight and find himself alone. Normally - always! - he wakes to find Thor snoring softly beside him, under the covers, legs splayed wide and one big arm shielding his eyes from the light. Loki looks him over, making sure all is well in the world, and then near-silently sneaks out before his own stirring disturbs his husband.

His husband in name only, who doesn't like or want him; who thinks him no better than a captive beast. Loki learned this depressing fact some weeks ago, shortly after they played at fishing and he thought things were improving – one boring afternoon he'd snuck into the servants' quarters just to prove he could and, entirely without meaning to, had amply (and then some!) proved the old Midgardian adage maintaining eavesdroppers seldom learn anything pleasant.

No, instead Loki’d learned that Thor hates everything about him. Coming to this ill-gotten realization should have roused Loki’s ire; left him trading hate for hate, focused solely on his Casket of Ancient Winters mission to the exclusion of all else.

It hasn’t, though; instead, it has only left him terribly sad. He had fallen hard, far harder than he’d ever intended, for the big golden prince and had thought - really, really thought, and it's not often he’s so dreadfully mistaken; Loki is ever slow to give his heart and therefore only most rarely gets it truly broken - the budding feeling was mutual.

So: Every day in the first light of morning, Thor sleeping peacefully by his side, Loki has a few short minutes to pretend everything is fine between them. Which is precisely what he does, for reasons even he doesn't begin to understand. And then the hurt comes flooding back in, at which point he has to leave.

Normally getting played angers Loki more than anything in the Nine. This time, though, it's crushed him and he doesn't know what to do about it. So he pretends for those few sweet minutes each day that things are as they should be, and the rest of the time he avoids the whole situation by immersing himself in his studies.

This pitiful little charade has become comfortably familiar; thus, today he's stunned to wake alone. He slips under the covers, enveloped in Thor's smell... but the bed is cold. Which unto itself wouldn't be unpleasant - he's far, far too warm in bed (and out, for that matter) here almost all the time, which is why he chooses to sleep curled atop the furs – if it weren’t for how, in this case, it means he's been alone quite a while.
Loki pops out of bed, feeling more than a bit frantic, and spends a few quick minutes making himself more or less decent. Normally he tries to avoid people this time of the morning, but today… today is different, frighteningly so, and he simply cannot stand to be alone. He even shows up for breakfast, hair in a sloppy ponytail and heart pounding. Sure enough, as he enters the private dining hall, there sits Queen Frigga as poised and calm as always.

"Loki," she exclaims, "what a pleasant surprise! Odin is stuck in council and I feared I might be greeting the day alone. Please," she goes on, gesturing towards the spot across from where she is seated, "do come join me!"

He does, slipping carefully into the big chair. "And Thor is?" Loki tries hard not to let his voice shake; he’s even mostly successful.

Frigga frowns, forehead creasing. "Why Thor- he's gone hunting." She frowns even harder. "Wait, he did not tell you?"

Loki shakes his head quickly. It’s hard enough to maintain eye contact; he doesn’t trust himself to speak just now. "Oh, Loki, I am most sorry," she says in turn, looking very much the part. "I assure you, I did not raise my son to be so inconsiderate. He and the Warriors Three, and a few of their friends, have gone into the woods seeking large game. They should be back well before the week is out." She lays a gentle hand on Loki’s arm, not acting at all as though she sees him as a beast. "I truly cannot believe he did not tell you they were going. He and I shall have words about his rude behavior upon the party’s return."

"Thank you," Loki acknowledges politely, "but there is no need. I am sure he had his reasons." He should probably consider himself lucky Thor didn't opt to use him as bait, all things considered.

Frigga shakes her head. "He may think he did, doubtless, but there really is no excuse. If he wished time away, for whatever reason, that is of course his privilege. But he cannot just up and vanish into the night with nary a word."

Loki shrugs, chewing his lip. "It is nothing with which to concern yourself, honestly," he tells her (rather dishonestly). "I can only assume you have far more important things with which to occupy your time." He forces himself to smile. "Like selecting from this lovely spread, for starters" he finishes, indicating the heavily-laden sideboard with a sweep of his free hand.

Frigga smiles in return, but something in her expression says she sees right through his false cheer like it’s not even there. Nevertheless, she plays along: "What did you normally eat for your morning meal in Jotunheim? Protein with no fruits and starches, I have to imagine," she guesses, looking skeptically at the arrayed food. "I can have the kitchen send up something more appropriate."

"Oh, no, do not trouble yourself; I am not very hungry this morning." It's true, actually - the whole thing with Thor has put him even farther off his food than usual. "And fruit is probably better suited to this climate anyway." He stands, smooth and graceful and mock-unconcerned. "Would you like something while I am up," he asks as he grabs the most innocuous-looking fruit he can find. He's still not quite sure what the protocol is here when it comes to mealtime, but he figures common courtesy can never go badly wrong. Well, perhaps never is a stretch, but the Aesir queen seems patient and compassionate and he doubts very much she’ll turn on him over a breakfast misstep.

Sure enough, Frigga smiles with her whole face this time. "Oh, thank you most kindly, but I have everything I need. Here; come, sit back with down. Let us speak of sorcery! King Laufey tells me you are most gifted. And most learned, of course," she adds, “well beyond most of your kin, if your
father is to be believed."

He does sit, and they do talk... for most of the morning, ultimately. Frigga's own knowledge of seidr turns out to be considerable - just this side of astounding, really - and she doesn't seem to share the prejudice against male sorcerers he's quickly learned no small percentage of Asgard's menfolk hold. She is especially fascinated by native Jotun ice-making - which is inborn, like walking, and not really seidr in the more common sense of the word; even those with neither training in nor facility for sorcery do it easily - and asks Loki to demonstrate several times.

Which he cheerfully does, making small knives and tools rather than traditional weaponry and, finally, a delicate flower… which he passes to her with a gentlemanly nod. “Oh, this is lovely,” she exclaims in return. “Thank you!” Her enthusiasm is contagious and despite himself Loki feels rather more cheerful.

All in all, it's a highly-enjoyable morning and he almost manages to forget his husband problem.

~

The afternoon, though, starts off quite a good bit less pleasantly.

Following his conversation with Frigga Loki heads out to the training grounds. He's not there so much to spar (although he can; while his own skill lies with light staves and knives - and, of course, seidr, but he has quickly learned that's considered cheating here in Asgard and is likely to earn one a solid beating… at least if one is not a prince, and the crown prince's husband, in which case it just earns one ugly sidelong glances and near-inaudible whispered insults - he is also quite accomplished at hand-to-hand combat) as to observe; to see who's around, and to get a good look at what all of them might be up to.

The only person around just now, though, is the Lady Sif. She is practicing her sword-fighting, full-on, against a training mannequin. The mannequin is clearly losing, which Loki makes the evident mistake of noting aloud.

Sif immediately whirs to face him, sword still at the ready. "And exactly what business is it of yours? Should you even be here unescorted? For all I know," she adds with a toss of her long, sweat-dampened hair, "you are but the latest of Jotunheim's spies and Thor is just too dense to realize it."

Loki grins. It's not a nice grin, by any stretch of the imagination, but Sif doesn't yet know him well enough to recognize that. "You are right - I most certainly could be. And I will learn a lot watching you. I can tell," he adds, smiling even more broadly. "So, tell me, how is it you are here while your friends are all on the hunt? I would have marked you for one who loved to destroy the lesser predators."

"And yet somehow you still live and breathe, do you not," she points out coldly before turning back to her mannequin. Something about her hostility makes him curious. "Were you and Thor paired off," Loki asks delicately (if unwisely; not that it's ever stopped him), "before I was unwittingly brought into the situation?"

She moves very fast, startlingly so; she has her blade shoved up under his chin before he can even try to defend himself. "Do not push your luck with me, Laufey-spawn," she warns. "I am not the sucker for your so-called charms," - she looks him up and down with clear distaste, not lessening her sword-point's pressure even the slightest bit - "that it seems our Thor may be. He has always been quick to
act and slow to think… and far too easily distracted by the shiny baubles."

Loki laughs out his nose as best he can - it comes out rather higher and airier than he'd hoped it would - and carefully raises his hands in a partial shrug. He can't speak without cutting himself on her sword, so he waits. When she finally releases him, though, he doesn’t flinch and stands his ground: "I am pleased to see my husband has friends he can trust to be so outspoken," he tells her, partly to see what she will do.

To his disappointment she doesn't rise to the challenge a second time, though – she makes no attack, offers no real threat. "Just you remember he does," she scoffs instead. "Now, if we are through here, I have training to attend to."

"Yes, thank you, Lady Sif." Loki bows low, letting her see he's not afraid of her (well, perhaps he is - she is strong and fast and could wound him badly - but he needs to establish a place for himself in the palace pecking order and he has no intention of settling for a spot at the bottom). "I have, as you just so kindly noted, taken well more than enough of your time." When she straightens, she has turned back to her mannequin again and is glaring at him over her shoulder; in return he smiles sweetly, nods his farewell, and heads off in the general direction of the royal stables.

~

He knows he has to make peace with the horses if he's ever going to find a way out of Asgard's central palace. Everyone here rides, from the lowest of the servants to King Odin himself… and, from what he can see, every single able-bodied Aesir in between.

Loki himself has never been on horseback - there are no horses in Jotunheim, after all; the realm’s lack of vegetation precludes most large herbivores - but he has ridden Jotun beasts. He's sure he can do it; can even master riding given time.

He’s less sure, though, that the horses will be up for letting him try. The primary issue at this point is that everything about him - even his smell - frightens them. He's not sure if it's instinct or training - either is possible; both, really - but from the outset all he has to do to cause mass horse hysteria is to poke his head into the stable.

Nonetheless, he has been coming here every day for the past several weeks. He's perfected the art of patiently sitting motionless until the horses calm, even if it takes hours. When the animals finally settle, he checks in with them one at a time; he's learned from watching Thor and company that these creatures like sweet things - apples, chunks of certain roots - and Loki takes care to bring a hefty pouch along with him at every visit. He makes sure, too, that each horse is forced to take its treats directly from his foreign-smelling blue hands.

Once he's bribed each horse with choice delectables in turn, he takes his time petting the royal animals. He runs his hands through their coarse manes, over their sleek ribs. They are beautiful creatures, and he is rapidly coming to like them. They are much nicer than most Aesir, really.

Not to mention more useful.

One in particular, a mid-sized mare with shiny black hair and a pretty white star - the stable master tells Loki her distinctive marking is properly called a blaze, but it's star-shaped and Loki persists in calling it a star inside his own head - seems to have developed a certain fondness... although whether it's for him or for the sugary treats he can't be sure. He hopes it's the former, as he’s definitely come to be fond of her himself and he’s had quite enough rejection of late.

These days when he comes into the stable - and today, he's pleased to see, is no exception - she is
always waiting for him: neck arched prettily over her stall gate, ears forward, expression alert. Loki makes sure to greet her first, laughing as she roots her tickling-whiskered muzzle between his wrist and his bare hip. "Hey now, none of that. My husband is an important man, I hear told, and he swings a mighty hammer."

The horse - Star to Loki regardless of her actual name - snorts in return, her breath hot and damp across his buttocks. He digs out the finest apple and palms it for her, laughing harder as she licks his hand. Yes indeed, the horses are much nicer than the citizenry.

"Prince Loki," one of the young stable-hands interjects. "She likes you! Did you wish to try your skill at riding her? Not right now, I mean," the child hurriedly qualifies. "With one of the instructors. On the morrow, maybe? I can find you someone. Only if you wish it, of course; I just think the two of you would be great together," he babbles, blushing furiously.

Okay, maybe not all the citizenry, then. "Yes, thank you," Loki says gently. "I would greatly appreciate it. I do wish to learn to ride, and she seems a singularly pleasant creature."

The young hand smiles, expression anxious and tentative. "She is. I will make it happen. Your instructor will send word." And with that he's gone, leaving Loki awkwardly thanking a little dust-storm in his wake.

"Have kind mercy on me, Star," Loki turns to whisper against the mare’s neck, "as I dearly wish not to be dumped unceremoniously on my Jotun ass for all the Nine to see. And if you can refrain from doing so, you will have my eternal gratitude. I look forward to spending time with you tomorrow, then," he adds with a last rub to her soft nose.

He does take time to stop and feed each of the other horses a treat in turn, though, as he makes his way back out of the stable. The big animals may talk to one another about him once he's gone, and he does so want to make a good impression somewhere.

~

Word comes at dinner, as Loki and Odin and Frigga are chatting quietly. Loki doesn't quite manage to hide his enthusiasm, and the Queen is quite pleased as well. "We have been saving that horse for someone special - someone who will treat her properly," she explains with a bright, happy smile. Even Odin seems- well, whatever passes for pleased in his world.

Loki smiles back, nerves definitely starting to get the better of him. "I most certainly mean to," he assures her, "although I am not sure I know how it is done."

"Worry not; you will be with our best instructor," Odin says between forkfuls.

Loki braces himself and waits for the gruff king to add something perhaps-unintentionally demeaning - "...the one who teaches all our children," for example - but nothing happens. Instead Frigga and Odin merely smile at one another, then return their attention to their remaining food.

~

He retires shortly after dinner and tries at once to lose himself in a book, but the place is crushingly empty without Thor. Loki is terribly embarrassed to find himself so lonely, so needy, but there you have it - he misses his husband. He wishes he wasn't alone, wishes there was a great lump snoring here beside him, beneath a mound of heavy furs.

Sadly wishing, he knows – growing up in Jotunheim, after all, how could he not? - does not make it so.
In the end he gives up and goes to sit on the balcony, legs thrust through the rails and feet dangling. After a long time spent stargazing, wondering if Thor is off in the wild looking at the same sky, Loki dozes off against the railing... only to jerk awake - cramped-up and sweaty, heart hammering in his chest - from a dream where he's slipped off his horse and is falling, falling, falling, falling...

Falling into the endless space between Yggdrasil's branches, lost forever.

~

At the first hint of dawn he climbs stiffly to his feet and goes to wash up. His face looks like death in the big mirror; red eyes sunken and black-ringed, skin ashen. He forces himself to take a short nap, on the bed this time. Even afterwards he's truly no prize. Maybe it’s a good thing Thor is away today after all.

He opts to skip the morning meal, going straight to the library to study up on horseback riding instead.

It sounds easy enough, although he suspects it is not, and the texts are full of pictures of tiny Aesir children posed comfortably astride plump, furry Asgardian ponies. By the time he needs to head to the stables, he feels like he's as ready as he'll ever be.

As in, not very.

Except riding itself is not where his instructor, a fit, soft-spoken elderly man with bushy gray hair and long, knobby fingers, wants to start. "Prince Loki, is it? Just Loki, then," he corrects after Loki rather unthinkingly makes a face. "Not so soon, not so soon. First you and your horse must befriend one another."

Loki tries to explain he's done that; the instructor smiles, not unkindly, but utterly refuses to budge from his original position: There will be no riding today; no riding until Loki has spent enough time grooming his horse, fitting her bridle and saddle, leading her about the yard, and otherwise being companionable that he and the horse can all but read one another's minds.

It's not like Loki has a choice, it seems, and brushing her sleek black fur in long strokes - over and over until his shoulders ache and the horse verily gleams in the sunlight streaming through the stable doors - proves surprisingly calming. Afterwards he learns how to lift and inspect her hooves without getting kicked or receiving a vicious tail-lashing, how to work tangles from her mane and tail, and how to inspect her mouth.

By the end of the lesson Loki is sweating and dirty and smelling of horse. His whole body aches, too, between the awful night's sleep and the new motions and steadily-held positions horse-caretaking requires. The latter is a good sort of soreness, though, and he's a bit surprised to find himself feeling quite accomplished.

Star - and his instructor, Norns bless the wizened old thing, lets Loki call her by that name and says it suits her - doesn't seem to have written him off either: When he's helped clean the tools and put everything away, he stops to bid her farewell and is graced with her customary near-groping. She takes his offered apple and chews it slowly, forehead resting along his arm.

When she's finished her treat, Loki drags himself back to his chambers for a nice long soak. By the time he's cool and clean and better-smelling (to his own tastes, at least), Loki feels a thousandfold better. This, this shows some hope of giving his days purpose.

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He wanders out into the dining hall and finds himself some food, alone with his (happier) thoughts this time. When he at last returns to the library Loki is quite pleased to find he can concentrate far more readily than he'd been able to earlier; he takes advantage of the change and pulls down book after book on Aesir sorcery. Before long he’s deeply immersed in the material, completely lost to his surroundings.

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Ahem.

The noise shocks Loki back to this realm in the course of a breath. He whips around in an panicked attempt to defend himself - how had he managed to let his guard so far down?! - but it's just Thor.

Thor who has clearly taken pains with his appearance, who has cleaned himself up and made himself most attractive. Loki is abruptly aware of his own messy state – the half-up hair, the circles under his eyes, and the darkening bruises, not to mention the way he'd just been slumped gracelessly across his book, chin propped on one hand and feet on the furniture.

Thor who wasn’t supposed to be back for days.

Loki is so startled to find Thor here, not to mention clean and lovely, that - at first, until his stalled-out brain finally jerks itself back to life - he can't even register what his husband is saying. There's something in there about missing him that Loki doesn't quite follow, and then an utterly puzzling bit about liking him that- that he- he can't even. But when he protests - You think you may as well have married one of your own dogs - and goes on to remind his husband of all the myriad ways he's either claimed or proved the proffered sentiment false, Thor does not recant.

In fact, he forges ahead all the harder, full to overflowing with apologies and sad faces and begging.

It's the begging that does it. Something painfully-knotted in Loki's chest starts to loosen. When Thor asks for another chance, and then sits carefully down and reaches out to touch him like he's the only creature that matters in the entire universe, Loki melts.

When Thor is finally close enough for Loki to feel the warmth, Loki leans against the soft, well-worn tunic and takes it all in. Thor smells nice and feels nicer, and Loki can't help but shiver as big arms envelop him. "I- I missed you too," he finally manages in a tiny, timid voice and is rewarded with a firm squeeze... and then hands, everywhere. Up and down his back, along his hips and thighs, back up his ribs and tugging his sloppy hair. Hands framing his face, cupping his jaw, pulling him into what quickly becomes a gasping, writhing, open-mouthed kiss.

"Gods, I have wanted- this so badly I could taste it in my dreams," Thor grits out between kisses so forceful they're almost miniature battles. Before he's even completely sure what's happening Loki finds himself in Thor's lap, his husband's big, warm hands cupping his bare buttocks and his own tired blue arms flung around Thor's shoulders.

Finally Thor chuckles into Loki's mouth. "Do you really want to do this here, among the dusty old books," he asks, lips sliding wet against Loki's. "I will do as you wish but, for my part, I think we should make haste back to our chambers. Before you change your mind again," Thor adds, suddenly somber.

Loki stretches to kiss the tip of Thor's nose. "I can- use my seidr to get us there. If that is okay," he adds very cautiously.

"And can we keep at this" - Thor dives in for another thorough kiss, teeth and tongue and insistent
Loki pulls back enough to scan Thor's face, arms still looped loosely around his husband's golden neck. "If you truly want it, yes; I would not dream of stopping."

Everything in Thor's face radiates sincerity, and he's clearly fighting hard not to dive right back in for more. He pulls Loki back against his chest again; even through his pants the hard curve of his erection digs into the muscular inner side of Loki's thigh. No; whatever it may be that Thor is feeling, it's clearly real. "Of course I want it. How could I not," Thor asks against Loki's shoulder, voice rough.

Loki twists to kiss Thor's forehead. "Good," he whispers, smiling into his husband's hair. "But first, though I hate to take the time to do it," he points out with heartfelt regret, "I need to set this place to rights". He idly waves one blue hand (purely for show) and, well before Thor can even open his mouth to protest, the books are already flying back to their places like so many great, ungainly birds. Loki gets to his feet, gently disentangling himself from Thor's clutches, then bends low to grab his sandals.

Thor seizes the opportunity to plant a solid smooch on Loki's backside and then squeezes a solid double-handful of flesh while he's there. His hands are big and warm and strong; Loki purrs aloud and whirls back around for another long, desperate kiss. "Bedchambers," he orders when they finally pull apart. "Seidr?"

"No, let us walk," Thor says as he wipes the saliva from his mouth and chin. "I want to talk to you. While I can still think, I mean," he clarifies with a sharp little grin.

Loki groans. "Out of character is it admittedly may be, I must say it is not really talking for which I am in the mood just now," he complains as he adjusts his loincloth.

Thor laughs. "Me neither, surely, but it is a talk we need to have just the same. Walk with me," he offers, reaching for Loki's hand.

Loki threads his fingers into Thor's and walks quickly out of library, sandals dangling from his free hand. "So, talk," he prompts as they enter the long, empty stone corridor. He's more than a little afraid of what he's about to hear, especially in light of the past few weeks, but it’s doubtless best to get it over with quickly.

"Um." Thor coughs. "Do- did you have- were you close to someone back home?"

Loki wrinkles his nose. "You mean was I- part of a couple? No."

"You were not in love with someone, someone you had to leave behind?" Thor's voice is soft and serious.

Loki snickers. "Only myself, husband," he teases. "Why do you ask?" It seems an odd question after all these weeks, but who knows... maybe deep in Thor's head it makes actual sense.

"Well, um-" - Loki sneaks a quick look over at Thor, who is blushing - "oh, this is most awkward, Loki. My friends drank with your brothers and heard- they heard... noteworthy tales of your- your skills. So I wondered..."

_Oh. Gods._

"My brothers are hardly trustworthy, Thor. Really, if you learn nothing else, _please_ learn that. And no," he reiterates firmly, "I was unattached. It truly is just the splendid fish and the familiar
surroundings I miss." It certainly isn’t his charming brothers.

"But you- you have- um," Thor stammers.

Loki stops abruptly, letting his husband's momentum spin them face-to-face. "Yes, Thor, I have fucking." he finishes on Thor’s behalf. He can only muster so much patience. “With regularity and enthusiasm, I might add. There is not much else with which to occupy one's time in the long darkness of Jotunheim's winter." Thor studies his face; his husband’s expression is difficult to read and Loki stops, feeling suddenly shy in the face of such thorough scrutiny. "Is that the right answer? You don't seem the type to demand a virgin."

At that, Thor smiles. "Yes, and hardly. Come here," he invites with a tug; Loki steps closer and lets Thor kiss him fiercely. "Thank you. You will doubtless be pleased to hear I am done with the talking."

"Thank the gods," Loki exclaims as he snaps his fingers. It's probably unfair to laugh at Thor for screaming when they touch down by the bed.

Loki can’t help himself – he laughs anyway.

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Thor
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Even when traveling via Bifrost, or flying with Mjolnir, there's always a sense of passage. This, though - this whatever Loki does - is instant. They're there, and then they're here, with nothing whatsoever in between. It's for all the Nine as if Loki folded reality and dragged them out into a new place.

The experience leaves Thor breathless, even more breathless than the kissing. It's terrifying and exhilarating all in the same instant; he stumbles lost across the stone floor of their chambers, paniced and disoriented and stupid with lust. He hears himself scream, the sound ringing in his own ears, and reaches out instinctively to save himself from falling.

The first thing he touches, he grabs onto for dear life. Loki laughs and yells and tries to pull away - hair! He has Loki by the hair, fingers tangled deep - but can't quite manage to yank free. Thor pulls his husband around and practically pounces against him, mouth reaching blindly for Loki's.

They collide with enough force to carry them both onto the bed, Loki mostly onto his back and Thor half atop him. He hesitates briefly, even now not wanting to push where he isn't welcome, but Loki arches up against him and pulls him the rest of the way down. "Please," Loki moans against Thor's shoulder, "come here. Give me more."

More. There seems no further point in second-guessing himself - Loki, whatever his reasons, is interested and attractive and his - so Thor just goes with it, letting Loki pull him closer still.

The first thing Thor learns, as they laugh and kiss and wrestle in the furs, is that Loki is far stronger – and markedly less fragile - than he looks; the second is that frost giants - his frost giant, at least - are rather more flexible than Thor expected. They end up tangled together, crosswise on the huge bed, with one of Loki's long blue legs around Thor's hips and the other somehow over his shoulder with its calf behind Thor’s neck. His clothes rub roughly against Loki's skin as they rut and grapple.

"Gods, you are so beautiful," Thor tells Loki between kisses that are practically bites. And he means it - he has never seen anything so captivating in all his life as the creature beneath him. Loki is wild
and powerful and graceful, all lean muscle and delicate whorls marking smooth blue skin.

"Mmm," Loki hums into Thor's mouth as they kiss again. His hands slip under Thor's tunic, sliding up-up-up and then *raking* sharply down over Thor's ribs. The drag of Loki's nails pushes Thor over an edge he hadn’t realized was there, and his low growl must do much the same to Loki; without further thought they are tearing off clothing and clawing at each other.

Finally Thor grabs Loki's slender wrists and pins them over his husband's head. Loki lies still beneath him, knee still hooked over Thor's broad shoulder and purple-black lips wet and puffy. "What do you want, Loki," Thor asks softly, struggling to keep himself under control.

"You," Loki breathes. "I want you. I have for weeks now. Please," he asks again.

They are too fired-up right now; they will hurt one another if this continues, Thor is certain. Instead he balances one-handed - Loki’s wrists still caught in his grip - and reaches between them, gathering both their stiff cocks in his free hand. Everything about this really does feel amazing - better than he could ever have hoped - and he would love nothing more than to bury himself balls-deep in Loki’s limber blue body, but it seems like too much, too soon, and he doesn't want to risk damaging this newfound peace they’ve finally won.

So he keeps his fist moving instead, stroking firmly and steadily as Loki gasps and jerks. Not long after his husband paints own chest with spend, Thor adds his own seed to the mess. And then collapses on the bed and pulls Loki close against him, smearing the sticky wetness everywhere.

They lie quietly like that for several minutes, catching their breath.

Finally, Loki chuckles. "Well, that does not quite solve our problem, but it gives me hope."

_Hope?_

His husband laughs harder, almost as if he is reading Thor's mind. "We are still not officially married, but we are _getting closer._" Loki grins and wriggles against him, smearing cooling semen everywhere. "And I must confess, I am finding this stage of our arrangement most enjoyable. Perhaps we can practice it few more times, until we have it completely mastered, and then move on to the next step?"

Thor nuzzles Loki’s hair, then licks sloppily along one sharp cheekbone. "I suppose, if we must..."

And then he too dissolves into laughter, Loki curled warm and sticky against him. They’re filthy, sure, but just now Thor’s far too happy to move.
"The queen will see you now."

Frigga's handmaiden is so unusually, stiffly formal - no your mother, no hint of a smile - that Thor, robe pulled hastily on over the smeared and drippy mess as he scrambles to get the door, feels for all the realms like a disobedient, naughty little boy. And he only feels even more like one – one caught red-handed - when, as he closes the door gently behind the departed servant and turns back towards the room, he's greeted by none other than the at-any-time-but-this-welcome sight of Loki sprawled blue and naked across the bed.

Sprawled. Blue. Naked. For anyone and everyone in the palace to see. "Have you no shame whatsoever," Thor snarls. "What if she tells mother?" Long-forgotten babyish guilt bubbles up and spills over as righteous anger.

But Loki just stretches, catlike, and smiles. "Oh, what if? What if the queen hears her son has been caught - in the conjugal bedchambers, of all places - conjugating?" Loki snorts. "My word, the unspeakable horror of it all. She may succumb. And what has gotten into you all of a sudden, husband," he asks carefully, the faint edge of seriousness creeping into his voice.

"I- I am not sure," Thor half-stammers. He isn't, either. "I am typically only summoned thus when I have made mother angry. And while I did go straight to the baths, one would think my queen would have understood my desire to see my husband."

Something strangely – unsettlingly, given the situation - near to remorse crosses Loki's sharp blue features. Thor steps abruptly closer, until he towers over his sprawling, naked, increasingly shame-faced husband. "Loki," he growls, one hand closing – hard and whiplash-fast - around the nearest ankle. "What in the Nine have you done?"

"Nothing, Thor. I have done nothing. I merely answered the queen's questions," Loki snaps knife-sharp. All the good-natured humor is gone. "She told me where you were and expressed surprise upon learning you had not shared your plans with me yourself. Now unhand me, you brute."

Thor does, at once, shoving the bruised ankle away but only feeling all the more childishly stubborn as Loki curls up to rub angrily at the cluster of purple-black finger-shaped marks left behind. "I should go," Thor says. He should - this is not a battle between the two of them, it's not, and yet they are dangerously close to making it so. "I am sorry," he tells his wardrobe as he grabs a fresh tunic and leggings.

When he does finally make to leave the chamber - he should rinse off but he doesn't think it's the smartest choice; better to face his mother newly out of bed, even if she's intending to deliver a tongue-lashing, then to risk offending Loki further at this delicate juncture - Thor spares one long last glance at his husband still glowering and ankle-rubbing on the bed. "I truly am sorry," he stresses again as he leaves. "I meant no harm. Truly. Please do wait for me here."
He stands awkwardly in Frigga's receiving room, acutely - uncomfortably - conscious of just how much he smells of Loki. For all his customary bravado, these - the finer details of his married life – do not constitute a topic of discussion he relishes sharing with his mother. "You summoned me? No no, please, for your own sake do not," he admonishes as she makes to hug him. "I must yet bathe."

Frigga stops as bidden, but her mouth quirks in a faintly evil smile eerily reminiscent of the prince in (he hopes – really, really hopes!) his bed. Their bed. "Oh, dear," his mother says without a hint of remorse, "I do hope I have not inadvertently interrupted something."

"No, mother," Thor grits, feeling his face redden. “Of course not. I was just cleaning up from my journey.” It’s a complete and total lie and he is absolutely certain she sees straight through it. How could she not?

"Pity, that." Frigga's expression turns mock-sad. "If you had only but come here telling me you and Loki had made up, you would have perhaps spared yourself a talking-to. But since it seems the two of you have not..."

Thor sighs. "We- um- we did make up, actually," he admits, cutting her off. “Except I reacted badly when I received this summons, and we may be on the outs again.”

Frigga shakes her head. "Loki has feelings, my son. You cannot treat him as your toy."

"Mother," he complains, right back to feeling like a naughty little boy again. "I truly do not need to be lectured about Loki and his feelings. I am well aware he has feelings, believe me." Most days it would be hard – no, impossible - to spend but a scant five minutes in Loki's company without somehow running afoul of the temperamental Jotnar prince's precious feelings.

"Do not make that face at me, my son," she scolds, patting his cheek just a shade ungently. "If you know he has feelings, as you claim, why would you do such a thing?"

Thor sighs again, with more force. "He was frustrating me."

"Oh. I see." She smiles, the kind of smile which completely guarantees this conversation comes with a price, a price he is without question going to pay. "Yes, of course, you are right; that is most mature of you. How could I have deigned to think otherwise?"

There is less than no point in continuing to challenge her; she will outmaneuver him at every turn. Knowing that – a lesson he has had many centuries to learn - he opts simply to capitulate. "Fine. You are right, of course. It was childish of me."

"And cruel," Frigga prompts.

"Aye. That, too." He studies the sweeping hem of her long gown. "I should have behaved better. But running away from my problems did help me see that- that my place is with him. And we had a good talk, after."

She chuckles. "A good talk, you say?" He looks up quickly, feeling himself reddening anew; she's cocking one eyebrow, eyes sparkling in clear amusement.

"Yes, a good talk. About our feelings. And about some misunderstandings. And- um. It was good."

She grins. "Oh, I do not doubt that, my son."
"If you are done entertaining yourself at my expense, mother, I should go back and re-establish peace. Before my absence causes any hurt feelings." He does his best to soften his words with a disarming smile.

She rolls her eyes. "Fine, fine. Go. Make more peace with your husband. Do consider yourself warned that your father and I expect to see both of you at dinner, though."

"Of course. I would not dream of missing the evening meal," he assures, despite how he'd just been doing that exactly. "We will see you and father later."

She nods. “Be sure it is not too much later. I find myself quite hungry.”

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When he gets back to their rooms and pushes the door cautiously open, half-expecting to have to duck a heavy book or a hard-flung goblet, Thor is surprised to find Loki sound asleep. In repose the striking blue face looks painfully young. Sweet, almost. Loki's pretty deep-purple lips are parted, his white teeth shining in contrast. His black hair fans out across the bed, long and thick and gleaming.

Thor takes advantage of the chance to study - really study, without embarrassment on his part or protest on Loki's - the ornate whorls and ridges that grace the blue skin. The longer Thor looks, the more he wants to feel; to run his hands over the lean muscles of Loki's belly, hips, thighs, down the long legs, up across the flat chest and along the slender arms. To feel all the marks, and all the skin between them.

And then he catches sight of the fresh bruises encircling one graceful ankle. The lasting impression of his own fingers, applied with at once far too much force and far too little forethought. I am so sorry, he thinks, for so many things.

In the end, though, he can't stop himself. He leans in and reaches down, running big fingers lightly alone the ridges tracing Loki's ribs-

-and jerks back with a strangled yell, fingers instantly, painfully blistered.

Loki shoots upright, sitting stunned and blinking among the furs. "What- what? Thor?"

"You burned me," Thor exclaims around a mouthful of throbbing fingers. "Ouch!" His fingers hurt, really hurt. "Why would you do that?!" It takes him a moment too long to realize that the last thing he did before he left was give Loki plenty of reason to hurt him, really.

But Loki doesn't point that out, or otherwise go on the offensive. In fact, perhaps even more shocking than was the pain itself, the sleep-rumpled blue prince tears up. "I- I was asleep. I did not know you were here. I did- I did not mean- I am so sorry. I- I...

Tears streaming down his face, Loki vaults out of bed and races for the balcony.

Thor's brain finally catches up. This is no different than his over-forceful grip earlier. In fact, if anything, it is even more innocent. He takes a last quick look at his blistered fingertips, shakes his head ruefully, and follows his husband outside. "Loki? It is okay. I should not have touched you. I- I did not think- you are always warm."

Loki snuffles, wiping his face hastily. "No, I am not. I keep myself warm- for you. When I know you are near. I- I did not mean anything by this, I promise you. I can fix it, too. Here." He reaches for the injured hand, wincing hard as Thor backs away. "It is- I am safe now. I swear it. Please. Let me help you."
Thor swallows hard. It's just a burn. He's suffered far worse. He lets Loki take his hand. Fights valiantly not to flinch.

But in the end there is no pain, just the faintest electrical tingle. His fingers buzz, nerves alight, and then they're fine. "Thank you," Thor breathes. It's amazing. He reaches out with both hands to take Loki's face, to pull the soft lips close. As their mouths touch he feels the same electrical tingle.

He's abruptly aware Loki is stark naked. Clean, somehow - more magic, maybe? It doesn't seem as though his husband could have found the time to both bathe and nap - and stark, stark, beautifully naked.

Which is how, without even meaning to, Thor ends up with his freshly-healed fingers in Loki's hair and his tongue in Loki's mouth.

And then his tongue on Loki's cheeks, tracing the shining path of his husband's tears. Running over the sharp edges of Loki's teeth, then dipping back into that vicious mouth. There's nothing cold about Loki now, nothing at all, and Thor could happily lick at him for hours.

But they are expected at dinner. He groans; Loki stiffens. "No, no, it is not you. It is my parents," Thor hastens to reassure. "We have been ordered to show up for dinner tonight. It is part of my penance for treating you badly." As if he doesn't regret that enough already. The whole situation is stupid. He half expects Loki to cry again or - perhaps more likely, and markedly less enjoyable - turn bitterly hostile.

Instead Loki laughs. "I married a mama's boy, did I?" He yawns, neatly covering his mouth with a slender hand. "Okay, dinner it is, then."

Before dinner, though, Thor really must bathe. Again. Or rinse off, at least - it won't do to appear at the royal table smelling of sex. When he says as much, though - just about the bathing, not about the why behind it - Loki just smiles naughtily and waves a hand. The same faint electrical sensation which scant minutes ago healed burned fingers buzzes over Thor's torso, taking with it the dried semen and sweat and deliciously-inappropriate Loki smell.

Thor chuckles. "Is that not making poor use of your seidr?"

Loki grins, rather less sweetly. "It is but making good use of my time. Our time. And so you do not forget me entirely in your happiness at dining with your dear parents, I shall use now make even better use my time to dress up a little." Loki looks Thor full in the face, eyes flashing. "But only for you."

Thor watches curiously as his husband roots through the contents of a small box at the bedside and selects several small bits of jewelry. They gleam in the blue palm. Before it really hits Thor what they are, Loki turns to him. "Shall I put them in, or will you? On second thought," his husband continues, closing fingers around the small, jeweled bars and rings, "we do not really have time to dawdle, do we?" Without waiting for an answer - fortunately, as Thor has abruptly found himself dry-mouthed and speechless - Loki takes himself in hand and, with deft familiarity clearly born of much practice, slips one bauble after another into and through the blue-purple flesh.

It only takes half a minute, tops; when Loki finishes his decorated cock curls sparkling, still flaccid, against one thigh. Thor is uncomfortably aware that his own cock, conversely, is neither sparkling nor hanging flaccid. He tries furtively to shift it into a comfortable, less-obvious position. Loki pointedly says nothing, instead looking at Thor with a knowing smirk that makes it abundantly clear that the attempt at stealth failed miserably. Quite miserably.
Thor clears his throat. No point dancing around the subject now. "Does that hurt," he asks quietly, willing his voice not to crack.

Loki prods a ring idly with one slim blue finger. "No. It just... reminds me this" - he holds his cock up for Thor to study more closely - "is here, when I am otherwise occupied."

Thor coughs again, thumping his own chest with a broad palm. The whole thing is serving - rather too effectively - to remind him Loki's cock is there as well. "You- you are not planning to dine like this, are you?"

Loki pulls a mock-shocked face. "Gods, no. Husband! What do you take me for? I shall of course clothe myself." Which he promptly proceeds to do, in a soft-looking dark green loincloth… a loincloth which proves loose enough to allow the jewelry ample room to clink and jingle faintly with every move.

"Not fair, Loki," Thor complains.


Thor shoots out a quick hand and catches Loki by the jaw. "And what is it you do want, then?" He holds firm, smiling to himself as his husband huffs through the nose and tosses that pretty head like a skittish horse.

"I told you before," Loki spits, wrenching himself free. "I want you." He shrugs, visibly composing himself. "But first, it seems, we must dine. Let us get it over with, shall we?" With that he whirls and strides for the hall, all lithe grace accompanied by the delicate bell-like sound of metal striking metal.

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When they get to the table, Odin and Frigga are already seated. Thor kisses his mother's proffered cheek fondly, exchanging quick pleasantries with Odin about the boar. As his father asks the customary questions, Thor is quite surprised to realize he'd very nearly forgotten the hunt entirely in his excitement at seeing Loki.

He's at least as surprised when, as his husband takes a seat across from him, the reddish-gold light from the torches glints off more jewelry. One ring per nipple, to be precise, each ring graced with a rich green stone the same color as the loincloth barely hiding the rest of Loki's finery.

Just like that, Thor's train of thought completely deserts him.

"-largest one he had ever seen, to hear the braggart speak of it," Odin finishes. It takes Thor an embarrassingly long, red-faced moment to realize his father is only yet speaking of the boar.

"Oh, do tell. Was it huge? Did it tower over you," Loki goads unhelpfully, eyes bright with mirth. "I wondered what it was you so liked about hunting."

Thor tries to kick his husband under the table; Loki reads the movement easily and dodges, jingling faintly.

Frigga and Odin exchange a long look, Thor all the while wishing he had the skill to vanish entirely. But when his father goes on, the topic is still safely neutral: "Loki, do your Jotun citizens not have organized hunts?"

Loki gives Thor a last teasing look and turns his focus on the king. "We do, but not as a matter of sport. We prefer to fish, too, with spears; if our supply of fish runs low, we are occasionally forced to
hunt for larger game. But our larger creatures are not your herbivores,” he continues, leaning in over the table. “Most are predators, far too dangerous to take on without urgent need. Our hunters are as likely to die as to bring home a meal; more likely, even, depending on the weather conditions and their skill.”

Thor thinks on that. “And you do not find the risk thrilling?” Bringing down that boar had been a grand rush, had left his blood running nearly as high as would battle.

Loki frowns. “Living in Jotunheim is risky enough on its own. Taking intentional steps to worsen the odds is not thrilling; it is simply stupid.”

Thor is beginning to find the whole discussion mildly annoying, and now his haughty, bratty coquette of a husband is calling him stupid to boot. He’s about to open his mouth and say something regrettable when Frigga steps in to save him from himself.

“I have been to Jotunheim only rarely, but the thing that always strikes me most is the majestic beauty of the landscape,” she volunteers, cutting through the tension like the sharpest blade. “It is so different from our rolling hills and greenery. You must miss it. I can only imagine I would.”

And just like that, they’re off talking easily about nothing again. Thor smiles to himself; his mother has quite the gift for diplomacy, far in excess of his own.

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Frigga
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Watching the two of them over dinner is fascinating. It’s quite clear something fundamental has shifted. Loki is playing Thor like a well-tuned instrument. Thor, for his part, may be flustered and annoyed now in front of family... but his intentions with regards to later could hardly be more plain: The moment the doors to their chambers close, Frigga knows without the least hint of doubt, the princes are going to be all over each other.

She smiles. It’s a beautiful thing to regards, after all: Her son happy again, really happy, and her new son-in-law finally starting to come into his own element. Frigga knew they would be good together - knew it, from the first moment she met the handsome, sharp-witted (and sharp-tongued, no doubt, but that only adds to his charm – Thor never liked the sweet ones, after all) Jotnar prince - but seeing things starting to come together is nonetheless reassuring.

She is rarely wrong, but even for those such as herself there is a first time for everything. It’s important, vitally so, that this not be that time.

Loki really is perfect for Thor; strong enough, mentally and physically, to stand up to her spoiled and selfish son. Independent and well-equipped - in every way - to be anything but boring. Her son had made it amply clear initially that he was not pleased to be saddled with a male partner, especially one from Jotunheim, but Loki is not like Aesir men. He's rather like the women Thor has always favored, really - beautiful, smart, strong, challenging. They have a sparkling array of enticements spread before them, both literally and figuratively, and she almost envies them their fun.

Okay, watching Loki flirt and Thor fight not to clamber right up over the broad table and into his husband's doubtless-jeweled lap, she does envy them a little. They are young and everything still lies before them.

Make no mistake; Frigga knows with utter certainty why Laufey has sent Loki here. The old king is a shrewd statesman; of course he must say his son is here for purpose of personal safety (there is
most emphatically no place for a runt in the line for Jotunheim's hard-worn crown) and especially to serve as a meaningful symbol of lasting, committed peace. At some level these things may even be the case - Laufey has long crafted his lies from the truest of truths, after all - but they are far from the whole story. No, point of undisputed fact: Loki is here to secure the safe return of the Casket.

She has seen it at her loom, plain as day.

But she has said nothing to Odin. Because Laufey is not entirely wrong, after all. If the Jotuns can prove themselves worthy - nay, she will even settle for marginally acceptable - allies, returning the magical artifact might actually be the best course of action. The ancient relic makes them not a threat to Asgard; against the boundless power of the Realm Eternal the thing is scarcely more than a toy. No, it is lowly Midgard the casket puts at risk, Midgard Laufey must agree to leave be. If Loki can serve as a guarantee of that - and once he and Thor truly win one another's hearts and souls, she suspects their bond alone will serve to guarantee many things - Frigga can weave of these many threads a future that benefits all comers.

It is important that Loki not reveal his trickery prematurely, though. If he and Thor are not well and truly bonded, a slip in that department will destroy any hope at trust. Any hope of a peaceful future, not just between what she is quickly coming to regard as her two boys but between the two realms as well.

So she is keeping careful watch. She does not wish to reveal her own plans prematurely either, though she will take Loki aside if she must. The best bond will be one he and Thor forge for themselves, built solely of their own shared intention.

And thus she watches happily as the two of them play. Loki is (un)dressed to kill and working it for all it's worth; Thor, from the knowing looks and the wolfish smile (not to mention his comportment in her rooms earlier), has quickly gotten over his loudly-proffered aversion to blue alien princelings. Truthfully, Frigga has never seen her son regard another with such naked, unabashed hunger.

For his own part, too, Loki seems to be playing for real. He does not look to be teasing Thor for purposes of tripping him up, she thinks, as she watches Loki wrap a dextrous purple-black tongue around a long, food-slicked blue finger. He is enjoying this just as much as Thor. While his reasons are of course his own Loki looks genuinely pleased, not with his own trickery but with its results. The more Thor drools, the happier Loki seems.

They are adorable, frankly. It's a nice change.

"Tell me, Loki," Frigga says brightly, "what is that gemstone? It is a color not seen here." Thor shoots her a sharp look as Loki looks down at his own flat-muscled chest.

"This?" He flicks the nipple ring idly with one black nail. "It is cut from a large specimen in Laufey’s royal vault. It does not have a name in the Allspeak, but legend has it these stones comes only at great risk from the deepest of mines near Jotunheim's core." He takes the ring between thumb and forefinger, tilting it to catch the light. "It is my favorite color. My dam had these made for me," he adds, the briefest shadow crossing his face. There is a story behind this, Frigga knows, but her intent was not - is not - to spoil the mood. She will save asking for another time, when Thor needs reminding that the universe can be a harsh place.

"It is lovely. Your mother had exquisite taste," Frigga says with a warm smile. The strained moment passes; Loki smiles back, the gold rings red and the stones ink-black in the glow of the torches.

"I believe she wished for me to feel loved."
"Had? Wished?" Thor shakes off his lust-addled expression. "What do you mean, wished?"

Frigga moves to speak but Loki silences her with a gesture. "It is fine, Queen Frigga. It is. My mother does not live, Thor. She has not for some many years."

"Oh. I-I am most sorry," Thor stammers, looking properly chagrined. "I knew this not." Frigga is pleased to see her son's big hand immediately hover over the table before settling gently onto Loki's slender one.

Loki looks up, visibly startled, but makes no move to pull away. "Worry not. It is an old thing. I am long accustomed." He turns back to Frigga. She gives him her smiling attention, noting out of the corner of her eye that his fingers lace carefully into Thor's. Good, good - the boys are fast becoming attached to one another.

Attached in ways the law can neither demand nor ensure.

"Are you coming to enjoy it here," she asks Loki in an attempt to steer the conversation back to happier places. "Have you found things yet that please you?"

Loki, to her delight, perks right up. "The library is beyond all imagination! And," - he looks suddenly shy as he turns to Thor - "I have found a horse. I aim to learn to ride."

This is Thor's turf. Frigga holds her breath. But no, her son just beams. "The black one! With the white blaze. This is the horse of which you speak!" When Loki's brow furrows, Thor reaches up to smooth the frown away like his parents aren't even there. "Worry not; no one told me. I simply saw she had been out today, when I brought my own mount back from the hunt. What," he exclaims, looking from one to another of them in turn. "I am smarter than you take me for. All of you."

They all share a laugh at that, even Odin. Shortly thereafter servants appear with the meal, and all thoughts - well, not Frigga's; most thoughts - turn to food.

She watches as Loki digs neatly into a plate of boned, raw fish. deftly handling the heavy cutlery as if born to it. Laufey has done an admirable job raising this one for his role, she must admit; she doubts she herself could have managed better.

Loki

The queen is studying him closely. Has been since he and Thor arrived, actually. From her faintly smug expression, she likes what she sees. Normally this would set him off - Loki hates being patronized, and her behavior comes dangerously close to patronizing. Oh, look, the little princes are playing nicely together.

But he is happy tonight - too happy to let things of that nature get to him. He has Thor wrapped right around his little finger, exactly how he wants him... and Loki does want Thor. The all-too-brief taste of things earlier has only served to whet the appetite and make Loki all the hungrier.

From the wrapt expression on Thor's face, Loki is not alone in this particular predicament. Good. He forks up a bit of fish. "Have you ever eaten it this way," he asks, licking his own lips suggestively. Thor laughs. "Like a barbarian? Hardly."

"Your barbarian is eating nicely, with utensils and everything. You could at least be polite, lest I opt to tear into it with my teeth instead." Loki works the fish off the golden fork, wrapping his tongue
seductively around the tines. "And you should try a taste, before you judge." He forks up a small, small bite and holds it out. "Just a small taste. For me." He smiles, leaning close and forcing Thor to look him square in the face. "Please?"
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Loki and Thor make it official.

The meal turns out to be rather more fun than he’d anticipated. Loki is actually able to get Thor to sample several kinds of raw fish without serious protest; it seems his husband likes the redder-fleshed, oilier species - the ones closest to what Loki would eat at home in Jotunheim, which he’s a bit surprised to realize touches him - well enough to serve himself a few bites and then consume them with neither sauce nor protest.

For his part – it only seems fair, after all - Loki tries some of the rarest portions of the roast meat with (what passes, in Loki’s world, for) an open mind and finds the taste and texture not half bad, really.

The two of them make idle chit-chat with the king and queen and play with one another: Loki manages to find a way to shift and jingle at every possible opportunity, long toes wrapped neatly around Thor's ankle where it disappears into the sagging shaft of a soft, low casual boot; Thor, in turn, leans in to feed Loki a choice bite of meat and sneaks the other hand so far up the closest thigh that Loki has to fake-choke in order to cover the embarrassing little squawk he can’t manage to stifle.

When at (long, long, long) last Frigga covers a yawn and shoos them off to their chambers, they barely make it out of the hall and behind the closest column before they’re tangled frantically together; Loki's mouth all over Thor's neck and Thor's fingers under the loincloth, tracing the rings adorning Loki's no-longer-quite-so-flaccid length.

Loki makes to hop up, arms around Thor's neck and legs wrapping his husband's hips. Thor laughs – all-but-silently, but Loki can feel the vibration against his chest. "Not here, my eager little friend," Thor whispers. "I know you are utterly shameless but I for one am expected to behave."

"And you always do what is expected of you?" Loki yawns broadly. "How tedious."

Thor laughs aloud this time. "Mother would without hesitation claim otherwise, I assure you. Really, it is just that I do not wish our first encounter to be a quickie behind- well, a statue of my uncle," he finishes, looking up at the column. "Not when we have such nice quarters at our disposal."

Loki drops gracefully back onto the balls of his feet and saunters off down the hall, leaving Thor hurrying to catch up. "Fine, quarters it is, then. For some tedious and utterly boring marriage-consummation, no doubt," he tosses back over one shoulder, just because he can.

When Thor draws even he delivers a well-aimed, stinging slap to Loki's bare rump. "I would not be so certain of that, if I were you," he growls in Loki's ear as the little metal rings and bars clink together. Facing away where he knows Thor can't see, Loki permits himself a very self-satisfied grin.

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Once they’re comfortably back in the their rooms and things really get underway, though, the two of them are faced with a problem it seems neither expected: They are not actually of the same species, obvious similarities in sexual structure and function notwithstanding. It's Loki's first time taking an
Aesir lover; he doesn't dare ask but, given Thor's clear initial anti-Jotnar bias, the reverse undoubtedly applies as well.

Sure, they'd managed a quick hand-job in the deepest throes of frantic passion. But this - the logistics, the assumptions, the outright awkwardness - is a different beast altogether.

For starters, while Loki was fully expecting to receive (and without issue - as the smaller partner in every Jotun coupling it's a rare chance he's gotten to penetrate indeed, but it's been simple physics and not some gross judgment against his manhood or his character), Thor has an evident fit of conscience and has to stop and ask about it.

The realization that Thor expects him to take offense – that there's a specific bias involved, one that makes him look weak - quickly results in Loki's doing exactly that. And of course, since he isn't even quite sure why he is offended, it proves rather challenging for Thor to calm Loki back down. In the end Thor throws big hands in the air in a clear gesture of defeat and drops to his knees on the hard stone, nuzzling - all hot breath, rough stubble, and probing, teasing tongue - Loki's groin. "We can do whatever you want," Thor rasps, at which point Loki thoroughly confuses the issue by wanting to be penetrated after all.

To his husband's credit, though, Loki doesn't once catch Thor in the midst of an eyeroll.

Then things somehow manage to get even worse: After some jockeying for position and quite a bit of spilled oil, on all fours on the bed and finally officially married, Loki loses himself just a little too completely in the utterly foreign sensation of having a hot, velvety-skinned Aesir cock up his ass. It's overwhelming… fascinating… so much so that he lets his concentration slip just a little. Thor shrieks like a little girl when, caught in the midst of a particularly athletic thrust, he skewers deep into Loki's suddenly-frosty body.

Loki near-instantly self-regulates, before Thor’s hot skin can freeze fast and hurt them both. But it's too late just the same - they are both shaky with nerves and laughing so hard their eyes are streaming. Thor rolls off Loki and flops on his back in the furs; Loki’s arms give out and he collapses face-down, laughing until he can barely breathe. "By the Nine," he finally manages to gasp into the bedding, still struggling to catch his breath, "you would swear we have never done anything like this before."

"Well, in a sense that is true, is it not," Thor asks, not laughing anymore. "I for one have never done precisely this, and I suspect that goes for you as well."

Something in Thor's voice gives him pause. Loki shifts up onto one side, facing his husband, and reaches out to comb fingers through Thor's bright hair. "Please do not think I was laughing at you," Loki says quietly. "I was just- anxious. I have never- I have- I forgot myself. I did not mean-." He feels awful, just awful. Now his husband will never-.

Thor's warm fingers close around Loki's own. "I am not upset with you. Just because your mind wandered..."

"But it did not wander. That was the- oh. You ass," Loki exclaims with a playful shove to Thor's shoulder. His husband is teasing, mood suddenly turned back around to playful. They share a calmer laugh this time. Loki shivers as Thor's fingers trace down chest and stomach, running over his markings and dragging along his skin. "Ohhhhh," he can't help but moan as Thor reaches the jewelry, catching the lowest piercing and tugging gently.
"You like that," Thor asks, voice rough again.

"Nnnnnn," is the best Loki can manage.

The whole universe has narrowed to a single point, a single golden connection between Thor's fingers and his own cock. Without even thinking he pushes forward, mouth reaching blindly for Thor's. *So good, so good.* Thor's tongue in his mouth, Thor's hands running over his erection, his hips, the backs of his thighs. So, so very good.

Without further ado Thor encourages Loki to lie back, legs splayed apart and up, and pushes back into his body with a soft groan. Loki hastens to set a spell this time; now his seidr will hold his body temperature, with no attention required on his own part. The difficult details taken care of, he gives in and lets the rush of sensation pull him under.

And it’s good. Very, very good. Truly not like anything he has done before, no, but *very,* *very* good just the same. Once the initial surprise wears off – Thor’s cock is so smooth and warm, the oil they managed to slop everywhere is so silky – Loki once again collects his wits about him and makes every possible effort to position himself *usefully.* About the time he gives up trying to work his feet over Thor’s shoulders and instead presses his outer thighs flat to the furs-

-Thor stops. “I can *feel* you thinking, Loki,” he complains. “What is wrong?”

Wrong? *Nothing is wrong, except that Thor has stopped moving and Loki wants more-more-more.*


Thor shifts to one hand and brings the other up to gently stroke Loki’s face. “*I am* enjoying myself. Immensely. You do not- there is no need for you to perform for me. Just relax and let whatever happens happen.” He down to kiss Loki sweetly. “Stop thinking. Let go.”

Loki tries; he really does, but he doesn’t know how to turn his mind off completely and just let his body take over. Especially after what just happened; even with the spell he is tentative. Hesitant. He doesn’t mean to be, he doesn’t. He- he just can’t.

Thor stops again. Loki winces as his husband pulls out, bracing himself for rejection. For the angry lecture his lack of cooperation has earned--

-and then *howls* in surprise when, instead of jumping out of bed or making scathing comments, Thor instead dives suddenly and takes the better part of Loki’s own cock in his mouth. *Oh gods oh gods oh gods,* Thor’s mouth is hot and slippery and *oh gods* Loki can’t help it – he screams again as a tongue wraps around one of the rings threaded through his glans and *tugs* firmly.

His cock springs free with a wet pop as Thor lifts his head. “Are you okay? I do not mean to hurt you. I just- I needed you to stop thinking.”

“It- it is- no one ever- I always had to-.” Loki gives up, head falling back onto the bed. His silver tongue has clearly completely deserted him, along with the larger part of his wits. Which is exactly what Thor wanted, isn’t it?

Thor kisses softly up the inside of one thigh. “Shh. Go easy. Did I hurt you?”

Loki makes himself focus. “No,” he tells the ceiling. Lifting his head to look at Thor is too complicated.

“Do you want more, then?”

“Oh yes,” he practically shouts.
Thor chuckles. “Good,” he says, and Loki can hear the smile in his voice.

It’s all the warning he gets before Thor’s mouth is on him again. His husband moves with less haste this time, tongue carefully exploring ring after bar after oh gods yes eager, eager skin in between.

Loki does as best he can to follow the instructions he’s been given – to just lie back and take what he’s given without thinking. Focus on Thor’s mouth, Thor’s hands… up and down his cock, nipping and kissing his thighs, playing over his sack, sliding into his oh gods-. “Please,” he rasps, unable to ask coherently for what he wants. What he needs.

Thor kisses back up one thigh to the knee. “Look at me.”

When he manages to look up, blinking hard as his eyes fight focusing, Loki finds Thor (blurry and) looking much more cheerful. Eyes half-lidded and dark, lips puffy and wet and grinning. “Much better. Can we carry on now? Because I may die soon if we do not.”

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Thor

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He'd first realized he was rapidly losing any semblance of control over the situation before they'd headed down to dinner. Watching his husband threading all that metal through that pretty purple cock – while his own hands verily itched to assist - had done things to Thor he hadn't even known were possible.

Put plainly, as the arguably-well-formed heir to the Realm Eternal Thor has never wanted for partners. Any itch he's needed scratched, any thirst quenched, any depth plumbed, someone has always been ready and willing. He has gone without only by his own choice, never had his wishes denied.

He likes to think he's led a varied, open-minded life sexually - cheerfully to sample anything that's been laid before him. And he has sampled: Women and men, various combinations, dominance and submission, positions and toys and acts too diverse and frequent to have any hope of numbering.

And yet in all his born days Thor has never hungered for a thing - anything - like he hungers for this. He wants that blue-purple cock in his hands, in his mouth. He wants to run fingers, lips, tongue over those sparkling ornaments until Loki can aught but scream for release.

To touch that skin. Run hands over those marks and tangle fingers in that hair.

To lose himself in Loki's strong, whip-thin body until neither of them can hope to recall where one ends and the other begins.

He wants it all, now. Right here on the table, parents shocked silent and food wrecked and squelching beneath their writhing bodies.

Every time he catches a hint of a flirtatious smile or the faint tinkling of gold decorations making happy contact, Thor loses the battle just the smallest bit more.

There is dinner conversation, he's sure of it. There must be. But all he's conscious of is Loki's mouth on a fork, Loki's fingers wrapping a knife. Loki's tongue winding its agile blue-black self around a morsel of fish or a long, grease-slicked finger.
By the time they get into the hall, effectively alone for the first time in hours, Thor is more than ready to split his husband wide open right here upon the pavers. Would have done, too, without a moment's thought had not a look up at the statues reminded him of his responsibility. Loki’s subsequent goading about rules and a boring nature actual serves to ground Thor - precariously, but it's grounding nonetheless - in something reeking faintly of reality. Of conscience.

And so back to their rooms they go. Once inside, Thor promises himself silently, there will be no more hesitation.

So things proceed nicely, right up until a shock like none he has ever experienced literally stops Thor cold. In one instant he is losing himself in the tight, oiled slide of his husband's body - its inner surface far more welcoming than he would ever have imagined, given how the outside tends to comport itself - and in the next his most sensitive parts are clamped in the frosty vise, the anvil/hammer crush, of an icy-hot horror like none other.

Except at that instant what races through his poor, lost mind is not nearly so poetic. Nor so lucid. Instead in that frantic moment his brain says *fucking Hel!* and his mouth says- some sort of ear-splitting wordless shriek.

When he comes back into his head by the smallest of degrees he expects Loki to needle and tease. So he fights ice with fire. Starts on the attack, even, hurt and shamed and frightened.

But Loki- withdraws. Apologizes.

Oddly enough, that actually returns Thor some modicum of control.

He can comfort. He can soothe. He can tease and laugh and play.

And then he can turn the tables and drive Loki to the very lust-addled edge of sanity.

It's surprisingly satisfying. Or, rather, it would be if his husband would just *stay* there. Unfortunately Loki doesn't; every time Thor has the prince losing himself, the balance shifts and Loki is once again play-acting.

Thor doesn't want play-acting. If he's in the mood for a skillful performance, he can pay for a courtesan like the next man... or not, as he can leverage his status as crown prince when it suits him. And in truth he rarely does either - something about paying for the dubious honor of false affection galls him.

Not that he is comparing his husband to a common whore. Except now he has, and that leaves him- sad. Something this beautiful, this special - and he's rapidly learning to see that in Loki, no longer needing anyone's prodding - should not have to pander to anyone. Should not work to be tossed scant scraps of affection.

So he points it out. Thor quickly explains, breathing heavily with the strain of *not fucking Loki for all the blue prince is worth*, that a *performance* is neither necessary nor welcome.

It still doesn't help. Loki will not be swayed from his sad mission.

Thor pulls out all the stops; he takes Loki into his mouth, licking and sucking and working tongue and teeth around the bars and rings. This, finally, does the trick. He makes himself hold up, briefly, when Loki makes a noise he can't clearly label as pleasure and not pain... and then, reassured, settles back in for a slow, deliberate inspection of every bar and ring. Every last bit of ridged skin.

So, this is what it takes. Finally, *finally*, he has Loki's undivided attention. His husband writhes and
moans and flails, hair in his face, finally out of control. Loki is hot and gorgeous and fuckable, and Thor's patience is really starting to fail.

~

Despite their earlier frolicking the whole thing is over embarrassingly quickly. Thor feels like he’s barely had time to get past the novelty of sliding in and out of the tight, cool - not freezing, now, but decidedly chilly just the same - squeeze of his husband's body when Loki screams again and cool wetness splatters Thor’s chest. That does it; he falls over the edge himself, wave after wave of hot pleasure coursing through him.

Afterwards he pulls carefully out and rolls off Loki, kissing along his husband's sweat-slick collar bone and shifting a long, blue leg out of his way. "Well, I guess we are- fully official now," he huffs, still fighting to catch his breath.

Loki, though, doesn’t laugh in return. Instead, his husband lies stiff and motionless beside him. Uh oh. "Loki? Did I hurt you," he asks, suddenly worried. "Are you okay?" He can hear his own voice cracking with concern. He runs a hand lightly up and down Loki's arm; his prince is trembling.

Thor’s throat constricts. "Loki," he insists, "talk to me. Please?" He stretches to get a better look at his husband's face.

Any trace of composed aloofness - not to mention bravado - is gone. In its place is something disturbing; Loki is silently crying, tears forcing out from between tight-squeezed eyelids. His long, black eyelashes clump wetly, blue cheeks streaked and shining in the low light.

"I am fine," Loki finally manages. "You did not- it- not your fault." He wipes at his eyes, hands still visibly shaking. "I am sorry," he adds, eyes still closed and tears starting to flow again. “It was good. I- I- nevermind. I am just- sorry.”

"Shh," Thor soothes, suddenly feeling very protective. "You need not apologize. That was- very good, yes." He reaches out and takes hold of the closest wet hand. Squeezes shyly, greatly relieved to feel Loki's fingers tighten in return. "I just want to be sure you are okay. It was- a big thing. An important thing," Thor clarifies. He leans in to kiss away his husband's tears.

Loki's face slides slick against his lips and then rather without meaning to Thor is kissing for real instead, his husband's mouth insistent against his own.

It's reassuring. Maybe this is just what Jotnar lovers do. Still; Thor can't quite let it go. "Did you enjoy yourself," he asks quietly against Loki's soft lips.

"Mmm," Loki murmurs in response, nodding a little. He is still shaking lightly, but he's stopped crying. When Thor shifts to kiss the tip of his nose, Loki opens his eyes and smiles, once again composed and smooth. "I did not expect it to mean so much," he whispers. "It took me by surprise. Nothing more."

Truth or falsehood, it's nice to hear. Thor hums happily, cuddling Loki close.

~

He lies awake long after Loki’s breathing evens out and his shaking gives way to sleepy twitches, though. Much as Thor’d like to think he’s starting to be able to read his husband’s moods… he isn’t. He cannot. Loki regular catches him completely unprepared; it is by equal measure endearing and frustrating.
They do seem to finally be over a hurdle, though, and not just in the bedroom. For this he is most grateful, as he had started to fear they would never come to be on friendly terms. He would of course honor their agreement regardless – it is his sworn oath, after all, not only to Loki but to all of Asgard – but eternity will feel a great deal less eternal if they are at least minimally capable of getting along.

Loki shifts against him, blue skin sharply colder. Right, sleep. Moving carefully to avoid waking his husband Thor works a fur between their bodies. He would like nothing more than to wrap Loki tightly in a full-body embrace. Mindful of how hot he must feel, though, he refrains. Instead, he rests against the warm bedding and closes his eyes.

The snowy landscape is dangerously featureless, white upon white upon blue-white nothingness as far as the eye can(not reliably) see. It’s slow going, too – the terrain is littered with crevasses and cliffs that appear out of nowhere amongst the deep slow, ready to swallow the unsuspecting visitor and deliver him to an icy death against the rocks far below.

They are here on a reconnaissance mission, Thor and his friends. They are not supposed to be here at all, of course – the Allfather would ground them or worse if he caught wind of their whereabouts – but that just adds to the excitement. They are spying, really, creeping carefully along in their heavy boots and dense furs with chattering teeth and stiff, chilled fingers.

Everything is going surprisingly smoothly. Aside from his customary warning about the safety of the realm Heimdall had made no comment, turning a blind eye to both their destination and their cold-weather garb. They’d landed in an empty corner of this barren wasteland of a realm, their unheralded (and unwelcome) arrival apparently going unnoticed. And while they are decidedly chilly, they have dressed properly and are not in grave danger as long as they watch where they’re going.

Of course, though, nothing is ever easy and this trip ultimately turns out to be no exception. Not long after they’ve hiked close enough to (what passes for) civilization (in this Norns-abandoned Hel-hole) to see the dim glow of torchlight, they are startled by a lone Jotnar. Thor barely has time to notice this warrior is quite short for a frost giant before the creature is on him… teeth bared, iced-up and deadly.

He feints, ducking under the blue arm with its heavy ice weapon, but loses his balance and falls with a sharp cry. He braces for the attack but Fandral strikes the warrior down from behind, leaving the Jotnar sprawled and bleeding in the snow. At first Thor thinks it is just unconscious but, when he clammers awkwardly to his feet and goes to inspect it, the thing is without breath. Too, the pool of dark blood under it is spreading at an alarming rate.

When prodding it with his boot yields no response, he squats stiffly and rolls the frost giant over-only to scream when he sees from the beautiful face that it is Loki.

Loki who is staring at him wide-eyed and startled across a sea of soiled, rumpled furs.

“Nightmare,” Thor explains quickly, sleep-muddled and shaken. “Sorry!” He fights not to cry. The idea – that he and his friends might have gone to Jotunheim and slain Loki unwittingly - is frankly mortifying.

"A nightmare." Loki's eyes are big and frightened.

Thor nods. Wrestles to get himself back under control. "I am sorry I woke you. I did not mean-...."

His husband flops back down, one forearm over his face. "Are you okay," Loki asks tiredly.
Thor thinks. It was just a stupid dream. "Yes. Do not trouble yourself," he continues, reaching out to squeeze Loki's cold hip. "Go back to sleep. I will be fine."

~

Except he isn't. Thor lies in bed awake for hours, obsessing - which is not like him at all; normally he puts things behind him easily, whether he should or not... Odin would undoubtedly cite it as one of Thor’s most persistent flaws - over the dream. He simply cannot get the image of Loki dead in the snow out of his head.

It didn't happen. It will not happen. And yet he cannot set it aside.

It sickens him.

Really, it sickens him because it all-too-easily could have happened, just scant months ago. Before his punishment Thor would have slaughtered Loki and spared the whole thing no more thought than he had the slain boar. Less thought, probably, because he’s never had the least interest (thank the mighty gods; recalling it would without a doubt have brought his dinner back up otherwise) in eating Jotun flesh.

One anxious train of thought leads to another and another. If he is this bothered by a stupid dream, does it signify growth, a wise and kingly progression towards maturity... towards broader cultural understanding? Or is it a weakness, a new blind spot? Is he falling in love with his Jotnar husband, and has it made him wiser? Or is it just making him vulnerable?

Hopelessly wide awake, Thor shifts onto his side and props head on hand. Loki's arm has drifted up over his head. The underside of his graceful arm is lighter blue than its upper surface, the whorls less pronounced. Thor's fingers twitch - he wants to reach out, to feel the smooth softness inside his husband's wrist.

He doesn't. He isn’t in the mood to talk anyway, and waking Loki again seems unfair. Instead he rolls over onto his back and lies there, willing himself not to think this time.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, willing doesn't work. The sky is pink at the horizon when Thor finally manages to fall asleep once more.

~

Spring days give way to the full glory - Loki would, and does at every possible opportunity, term it the full torture - of a lovely Asgardian summer: Hot, sunny days. Fields strewn with flowers. Birds everywhere. Steamy nights, stars near the horizon obscured by the haze.

With the change of seasons Thor and Loki quickly get in the pleasant habit of dining alfresco - a light meal on the balcony, where there’s at least the hope of a breeze - whenever their schedules permit. After they finish eating, they flop on the padded chaises with a glass of chilled wine and watch the heavens. Sometimes they talk; sometimes they lie in companionable silence. It's often too hot to curl together, but they always hold hands.

It's nice. And Thor does have to admit Loki is trying. His husband rides at least twice a week, even in this heat, and has reached a point where he's very nearly good at it. There is much less complaining. And they are irrevocably official now; once they managed to get themselves started, the two of them haven't looked back. Even in this weather they spend many enjoyable hours coupling.

Life would be perfect, truly, were it not for the nagging feeling that his husband is up to something.
Loki, you see, has taken on a second project. Seemingly not content to focus solely on his horsemanship, Loki has teamed with the - ancient, even by Aesir standards; the man truly may have come into being before the realms dotted Yggdrasil's branches - palace historian to catalog Asgard's historically-significant relics.

It starts out innocently enough, with weeks of rooting through storerooms full dusty scrolls and chipped of pottery. Loki shares his progress with Odin and Frigga - now that Thor and his husband tend to dine alone, they have been breaking the night's fast with the king and queen instead - regularly; Frigga is especially enthusiastic.

Before long, though, Loki has moved on to ancient weaponry. And then modern weaponry; he and the historian spend their mornings holed up in the weapons vault indexing Odin's most precious treasures.

The whole thing bothers Thor, and that bothers Thor.

~

"Should he be in the weapons vault, mother," Thor asks, sitting beside the queen as she works at her loom. "It makes me nervous."

Frigga turns to look at him, frowning slightly. "Do you not trust him?"

"I- I want to. But I am not sure," he confesses. "The idea of him near the casket- it concerns me. Should it not?"

Frigga purses her lips. "Would it be such a horror, really, were the casket restored to Jotunheim?"

Thor is shocked. Shocked. He does a bit of a double-take, shaking his head from side to side. "But-but- we- Odin- the war." He can't manage a coherent sentence.

In a sense, though, she could be right. The favor they might curry by allowing such a thing could perhaps be well worth the risk. And if Loki thinks it a game successfully played, so much the better?

Still, it bothers Thor. Perhaps it should not, but it does.
Loki makes the Casket's acquaintance.

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Loki
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The ancient scholar - doubly so, by both personal description and field of work - is a veritable treasure-trove. So far, Loki has posed no question the man has in any way been unable to answer. Better still, as a lifelong academic, the scholar values the pursuit of knowledge for none other than its own sake.

In other words, he listens to Loki's questions and answers them - to a one - with enthusiasm and completeness and more than a hint of wit. What the man does not do: Answer Loki's questions with probing, suspicious-minded inquiries of his own. The scholar - he goes by Frodr, but Loki has yet to determine if that's a title or a name - does not put Loki off with why do you ask? or has the king given you permission to know?

Rather, Frodr takes his pupil's curiosity for curiosity, his rapt attention for rapt attention. Anything Loki wants to learn, Frodr is just as eager to impart. Anything Loki wants to see, to touch, to marvel over from scant inches away, Frodr is just as excited to reveal. It's a perfect arrangement, far better than anything Loki could have anticipated.

Still, he paces himself. There is a boundless amount of knowledge to amass here, and he needs to look as if he's full-bent on amassing it. All of it. Too much attention paid to certain things, too quickly and/or to the conspicuous glossing-over of others, may not draw Frodr’s attention. It will, however, doubtless serve to alert others.

That, and single-minded pursuit of a goal almost always leads straight to defeat. To embarrassment. To a painful (if not far worse) tumble into a snow-masked crevasse, or an idiotic wandering into the hunting grounds of a hungry predator. The wise Jotnar surveys the entire landscape, not just the far horizon, before starting out.

~

There is much, it seems, to be learned along the way. Loki and Frodr spend weeks carefully cataloging priceless ancient texts, many of which turn out to be spell books long since lost to modern sorcerers. Loki is most pleased to find that he and Frodr are consistently cross-indexing magic light and dark alike - they are in pursuit of knowledge, not in judgment thereof.

Better still, Frodr's cataloging methodology lends itself beautifully to the leaving behind of tiny breadcrumbs; when Loki comes this way again, with perhaps less pure intent, he will need but follow a simple map of his own careful making.

~
The ancient weaponry isn’t quite as handy, but Loki stays focused by reminding himself it’s all a means to an end. He needs to build trust layer by delicate layer, to weave an honest demeanor thread by silken thread. All these long hours spent poring over spear points, arrowheads, and heavy cudgels will pay themselves back a thousand-fold once he and his tireless tutor reach Odin’s weapons vault.

Every time his blue fingers stutter over dull, rusted metal they are that much closer to touching the casket. Every time he hefts a famous Aesir warrior’s blunted old battle-ax, Loki is that much closer to taking the seat of all Jotunheim’s power in his own strong hands. Every time he polishes centuries of grime off a rustic crystal goblet, he is that much closer to seeing his grim blue reflection in the surface of the hard blue ice fortress he will one day build.

As long as he thinks about his lessons, his project, his work thus, there is nothing the least bit tedious about it. Well, okay, that may be an exaggeration… but, overall, his life has meaning again and he’s quite happy to endure whatever he must in order to achieve his greater purpose.

~

His careful attention to the bigger picture does pay off admirably from a political perspective, too. With the arrival of hot weather, Loki’s mornings are no longer his own - he must make suitable conversation with Frigga (and often Odin) most every day. The morning repast is more about sharing and talking than it is about drinking and leering; he and Thor cannot limp along on the cute new-couple-ness of licked fingers and groped thighs.

Which is not to imply, by any means, that licking and grooping and fingers and thighs have taken a backseat to political discussions and scholarly pursuits. No, with the loss of morning freedom has come a lovely reclamation of shared evening solitude. He and his husband are taking liberal advantage thereof. Fear not.

Still, morning is now for conversing and his project proves itself a fertile source of material day after day after week after month.

Thor seems a bit bored, but that would be Thor’s problem. Loki has a reputation to polish and a mission to accomplish, by peaceable means. If doing so means boring poor dear unscholarly Thor, so much the better.

Bored-to-a-near-stupor Thor is far less dangerous than is nosy, suspicious Thor, after all.

~

When he is not demonstrating his newfound knowledge of historic Asgard, Loki spends much of his time in the stables or riding Star. He’s still far from comfortable in the heat - riding, and stable-work especially, is sweaty, sticky business after all - but he’s getting good at horsemanship and that brings him joy.

Also, it so happens a black horse is no real fan of summer either, which gives Loki the perfect excuse to ride her in the forest. To wade with her into the various ponds and small lakes that dot the terrain, splashing and laughing as her paddling soaks them both. While he still generally uses a saddle when riding, swimming is the perfect time to strip off all the tack and - gear piled neatly ashore - wade bare-back into the sparkling water.

Star doesn’t much like fish, for eating or as bathing companions, but sometimes Loki dives for aquatic grasses and he and his equine friend share a fresh-caught meal.

Loki has watched others training long - and carefully - enough to realize he doesn’t really ride like an
Asgard native. He's strong enough, but differently so, and rather more acrobatic. Whatever - his instructor works with Loki, not against him, and everyone agrees Star is satisfied with what has to be a rather unconventional arrangement.

Still, even now, he's uncomfortable demonstrating his newfound skills in front of Thor. Loki's husband is spectacular in the saddle, solid and intimidating. Thor is every inch the battlefield commander, even just lazing through an empty field. So, Loki is more than a little surprised - not to mention embarrassed - to come back into the smallest ring, intent on cooling down after a particularly challenging lesson, and find Thor leaning on the railing.

Leaning, and grinning.

Loki braces for a ribbing. As he circles close, though, it doesn't seem to be the pleasure of impending teasing lighting his husband's face.

"Loki!" Thor sounds breathless. "You are fabulous! It is as if you and your horse are one." He reaches out a big hand to catch the reins. "You show me up, love, and I have been riding a lifetime. We must ride out together," Thor continues, smile practically incandescent. "Not today, of course - but soon, when you and this beauty" - he strokes Star's sweaty shoulder, surprisingly loving - "are fresh from a good rest. What of it, Loki? Will you ride with me? Please?" Thor's hand comes to rest on Loki's thigh.

The look on Thor's face is irresistible; in a fit of weakness Loki agrees. It's just about worth it, too... Thor looks as happy as Loki's ever seen him.

"Gods, you are gorgeous." Thor's hand is still on Loki's thigh.

Star shifts beneath Loki, tired of standing put. He snorts. "No, what I am is filthy." He is; he's covered with grit, sweaty and horse-fragrant.

"It is a good kind of filthy," then, Thor counters, stretching over the rail to kiss Loki's tired calf. "Go see to your mount, and then I will see you in the bath. Do not bother arguing," he adds as Loki opens his mouth to do exactly that. "I intend to bathe with you, and soon, if I have to sling you over my shoulder and carry you there myself."

"You would not dare," Loki says, half-laughing and half-threatening... but in truth Thor surely would dare and there is little point in putting it to the test. Instead he nudges Star with his heels, sending her side-stepping out of Thor's reach. "The bath it is, then. I will see you shortly." And without waiting for a reply - it's not like he needs one, after all, as he knows exactly what his husband will say - Loki rides away.

~

Grooming a horse properly is no quick task, and Loki means not to sell Star short on Thor's behalf. He wipes her down, curries her thoroughly, and then gives her an apple. Yes, his husband is waiting. No, he can't be bothered to care. Oh, perhaps he can, but a little waiting never killed anyone.

~

And when he gets back to their chambers, sticky and smelly and hot and tired, Loki can't deny he's pleased to be put forcibly against the heavy door... and then, as threatened (promised?), heaved up on his husband's sturdy shoulder and carted off to the bath like a sack of grain.

"You kept me waiting on purpose," Thor growls as he lowers Loki into the waiting water with a splash. "And now you will pay."
It's the kind of *paying* Loki is rapidly learning to enjoy - Thor's hands all over his slippery-wet body, tickling and groping and scrubbing. It's not long at all before Loki is up in his husband's lap kissing as if his very survival depends upon it. And then the tables are turned and Loki is on his back, shoulders scraping roughly against the tub's side, with Thor practically attacking him in response.

"Mm," Loki hums against Thor's stubble-rough cheek. "Apparently I need to ride for you more often."

"Ride *me* more often; that's what you meant to say, right?" Thor nips down Loki's neck and across one shoulder. "But, yes, to answer your actual question, you are quite the sight on your pretty black horse."

Loki laughs, head thrown back over the tub edge. "I doubt I am so appealing afterwards, though, when I am brushing sweaty horsehair or picking smelly hooves or otherwise dirtying myself up in the stables."

"You are always appealing."

Thor sounds so *earnest* that Loki can't resist a quick jab. "Who knew you would develop such a taste for Jotun monsters?"

Sadly, Loki finds, *he* hasn't developed nearly as much of a taste for Asgardian bathwater.

~

Finally, *finally*, they are going to start working in the treasure chest itself: Odin's weapons vault. Frodr leads off with an abundance of caution but, really, his primary concern seems to be that Loki not accidentally blow them to smithereens. He can't possibly have missed it that Loki is blue and Jotnar, after all. It really isn't something that could be more obvious.

In the end Loki isn't sure if he's flattered or offended. Just now, though, he's far too excited (and far too busy faking calm) to puzzle through it anyway.

The guards - a pair of big, blond Einherjar who have clearly been hand-picked for their brawn and not their brains - step aside, opening the huge metal doors as they do so. Unlike Frodr, they have clearly *not* overlooked Loki's ancestry. But Frodr apparently ranks them - interesting to see a scholar set ahead of soldiers in a culture like Asgard's, but Loki is too amped just now to give *that* much thought either - and, with no real protest, the men stand down and let the researchers pass.

They've hardly crossed the threshold, hardly stepped from out beneath the ornate lintel, when Loki has to forcibly bite back a moan. The casket *calls* to him; despite all the other powerful objects in the room, it's the casket's pulsing beat he feels in his blood. In his muscles. Sparking cool and dry across his skin. It takes everything he has not to prostrate himself on the polished stone in abject worship.

Not to run forward, Frodr scrambling in his wake, and throw himself upon the thing. The thing that, incidentally, he cannot yet even see.

Loki pauses in the doorway, taking a few moments to (do what he hopes looks like) look(ing) around. More to the (secret) point, he needs desperately to catch his breath; to get himself back under some semblance of control. It just may be the hardest thing he's done since he arrived... harder than wedding a big gold stranger, harder than eating the food, harder than being kept prisoner in a realm where nothing whatsoever makes sense. It's certainly harder than tolerating the heat, or even his own
mood swings.

Fortunately Frodr seems to be in no rush. He, too, stands silent in the entryway for well over a minute. And when he does speak, it's to teach - to warn - rather than to question: "This place is protected by a mighty weapon; a weapon which looks and acts like a sentient being to the untutored eye, but which is actually a powerful extension of the Allfather's reach and will. Be very careful, Loki," he admonishes, turning to rest a wizened old claw on Loki's nearest forearm. "If you make a move that Odin reads as threatening, the thing may without warning incinerate you."

*Good - now Loki has an excuse for his skittish behavior. "And what might *read* as threatening," he asks, not trying to hide the edge in his voice. *Incineration* is a fate worth fearing, is it not? It would be odder, more attention-catching, if he acted like it was nothing. So instead he lets his keyed-up feelings show. If they're not precisely the sort of *keyed-up* Frodr would expect him to be feeling, well, it's not like anyone has pressed Loki for details.*

Frodr warms to his subject. "Touching an artifact, especially attempting to heft it," he ticks off on one knobby-knuckled finger. "Threatening to attack a vault guard," he goes on. "Entering the vault without proper authorization, making threats against the throne, that sort of thing. The great weapon’s bonds" – fresh out of fingers, Frodr indicates the glowing mesh wall with a broad sweep of his skinny, wrinkled arm - "dissolve and it is on the intruder. And just like that you are naught but a tiny ash-heap."

Well, that's good to know. "Does it effectively act on its own, or does the king actively direct it?"

Frodr smiles. "Yes. Either, and both. It is not sentient, but it is capable of- pre-programmed, you might describe it, action."

"Look, do not touch," Loki summarizes.

"Precisely."

He considers for a moment, chewing his lower lip. "What touching specifically - for the sake of our safety - will cause this machine- this weapon-...."

"It is called the Destroyer," Frodr offers, as close to cheerful as Loki has seen the man get.

"-this Destroyer, then, to attack? Can one touch the walls? The storage compartments and pedestals?" It makes little sense, as the guards walk this hallway, but Loki cannot shake the feeling that stepping fully into the room will result in certain death.

"Oh, no, it is nothing so simple as all that. The Destroyer attacks in response to the king's command. If Odin Allfather – or by proxy the Destroyer itself, in that pre-programmed sense – detects what he believes to be malicious use, or malicious intent, it is that which causes the Destroyer to take action. You see?" Frodr's eyebrows disappear up under his grey mop of hair. "If a visitor’s intent is above suspicion, that visitor can lay hands upon the very relics themselves."

"But...", Loki starts and then stalls, thinking. Frodr had made mention of *lifting*; Loki is sure of it.

"But that does not fit with what you said just-..."

"It is complicated," the old scholar interjects. "Come, we are not here to study the security system, are we?"

Actually, Loki very much is. It's not something he wants to discuss, though, so he just shrugs. "Lead the way."
They stop at every single niche, box, shelf, and stand. At first it kills Loki a little more with every passing second... but ultimately he starts to adjust to the constant thrum of the casket and can actually think coherently again. Frodr provides the most fascinating explanations, likely half-tale and half-fact; it seems Odin is not so much building a deadly arsenal as he is striving to keep the other realms safe from themselves. From one another.

With a dose of humiliation at every possible opportunity, too, but focusing on that could be a little too dangerous in itself. So Loki strives not focus thus; it will serve him ill to let himself get sidetracked just now.

It feels like they have been poking their way around the vault for days when Loki and Frodr finally round a corner and *there it is*. This time he's not quite quick enough; he gasps, audibly, and has to cover himself with a suitable fit of manufactured coughing.

The thing is *beautiful*. Loki was but an infant when Asgard seized the casket; he does not really recall laying eyes upon it before. Perhaps his father took him to see it as a baby, though - it seems smaller than he expected, and that often happens with things one first sees as a child.

Smaller, but no less awesome. Between the handles, its surface is lined with ridged markings similar to those striping his own skin; amongst them, the thing glows and shimmers as if it houses a dancing blue flame.

Loki shivers. It's fortunate Frodr warned him about the Destroyer. Otherwise he would certainly be a little smoking ash-heap by now. As it is Loki has to clench his fists and talk himself silently down... it's far more difficult to stand here, the thing *in easy reach* like this, than he could ever have imagined it might be.

The casket is *his*, after all - his heritage, his birthright.

*His destiny.*
Ancient relics make Jotnar princes hot - well, cold - and bothered. Oh, and important talking happens.

Thor is out on his balcony enjoying the earliest evening breeze when Loki comes back from wherever he's been off poking around with the Asgardian antiquities scholar. The very instant his husband comes out to join him, Thor knows something is- is up. Loki is vibrating with far, far more energy than he can remember ever seeing before; Thor can all but feel it rolling off his husband, even separated as they are by the full length of the balcony.

"Good day," he asks, trying to judge the situation before taking any action. It just seems safest that way.

"Mm," Loki hums. "Great day." He's clearly beyond jacked but, as yet, Thor can't get a good read on why. Or on where all this is headed.

He sits up, swinging his feet down off the side of his chaise, and twists to look at his husband. "Well, whatever you have been up to, it clearly agrees with you," he observes. And it does; Loki looks even more appealing than he does after a day out riding. "What were you and-." "Frodr," Loki supplies, moving a few steps closer. The blue prince is hugging himself, gripping his own shoulders tightly, but it's summer-hot out here even this late in the day; Thor knows Loki has to be struggling with nerves rather than temperature.

"Frodr," Thor agrees. "What were you and Frodr cataloging today?" He half-expects Loki to lie - from his father's guards Thor already knows his husband was in the weapons vault today - but, surprisingly, Loki doesn't.

"We were in the weapons vault. It was fascinating," Loki exclaims, eyes glowing. "And I saw the casket for- well, I think it was the first time in my life, but I cannot be certain. I could perhaps have seen it as a tiny infant."

A little stunned by Loki's frankness, Thor blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. "It is very-blue, is it not." And then he laughs, because it sounds utterly stupid and he cannot help but know it.

Loki laughs, the sound bright and happy. "Yes, that it is. It is even bluer than I am. It is beautiful, Thor," he all but gushes. "Just beautiful. More so than I ever imagined."

_You are beautiful_, Thor thinks. "It is," he agrees; even as a child he found the thing oddly compelling, and he ever was anything but Jotun. "Come here."

Loki does. Thor runs his own hands up and down his husband's arms, gently dislodging Loki's own fingers. He groans as he pulls Loki close. "I am glad you enjoyed yourself," he says, a little surprised.
to find himself meaning it.

"Thank you," Loki whispers. His mouth is close, so close, and Thor can't stand it anymore. He kisses Loki hard, harder and longer than he intends; when he finally makes himself stop they are both out of breath.

"Someone might see," he worries aloud. This time of year the days are long; it isn't nearly close enough to dusk yet.

"So, let them." Loki sounds anything but concerned as he turns away from Thor and strolls over to look out across the city, both hands gripping the railing. "You come here."

Somehow Thor is not in charge of himself anymore. His feet do Loki's bidding, even as his mouth (wisely) protests. "We should not do this. Not now, not here."

"Do what?" Loki laughs, looking coyly back over one shoulder. "We are just talking. Are the citizens of Asgard so very, very bored that watching the two princes talk will raise a scandal?"

Thor steps up behind his husband; very, very close behind. "Alas, I do not remember talking," he purrs, pushing the long, black hair aside so his lips brush the shell of Loki's ear. "I remember something rather more personal."

"Then your memory is woefully short," Loki counters with a low laugh; he makes no move to pull away, though, as Thor mouths the angle of his sharp blue jaw. "Nnn. You feel nice. Keep at it. I care not who sees."

As he kneads and rubs, Loki leans against him and makes contented little noises. It's a shame to interrupt the moment, it is. Still. Thor wants to know - needs to know - more as to Loki's intentions and (short memory or not) he is most certainly not bending Loki unceremoniously over this railing until the day's light is a bit closer to departing the sky. They should converse now and fuck later. "But you are right; I do recall," he starts again as Loki groans in protest. "We were indeed talking after all."

"Yes, Thor. We were talking," Loki lists off, "and then we were kissing, and most recently you were admiring - closely admiring - my backside. And while it may come as a shock to you, I find myself greatly preferring the latter to the former."

Thor laughs - "Well, that is unfortunate, is it not?" - hoping a little jocularity will serve to hide his anxiety. He takes a deep breath. "Loki," he wades bravely in, pausing a short bit to nuzzle between his husband's shoulder blades, "are you actually here in Asgard to steal the Casket of Ancient Winters?"

Loki stiffens and for a short while Thor thinks they may fight. "No," his husband says at last, all traces of good humor gone from his voice. In its place Loki just sounds- tired. Drained. "I am here, specifically, to enjoy your company. I am here," - he leans back into Thor and sweeps both hands
gracefully across the skyline - "to ensure lasting peace between our two native realms. Yours," he gestures again, "and mine." He drops forward onto both palms, leaning out over the railing almost dangerously far, and looks down at the buildings far below. Thor grabs onto the blue hipbones almost without thinking, as if Loki were a too-fearless child.

"To ensure lasting peace," he muses aloud. "Lasting until when, I wonder."

Loki snorts, wiggling his rear. "Lasting until I murder you from sheer sexual frustration." He sighs. "Tell me, Thor: What do they teach you here of the casket? Of why your realm holds possession of it, whereas ours does not?"

That's an easy one, one Thor mastered long ago as a youngster perched atop Odin's knee. "Jotunheim is being punished. Punished for abusing power on Midgard," he continues in the face - the rear, to be more precise - of Loki's silence. "Your father and his armies invaded Midgard many seasons ago, abusing the casket's vast power to subdue the helpless mortals. My father - my father's people - put a stop to it."

"And...", Loki prompts. "Why does your realm continue to hold the casket, many seasons after such action was last taken?"

"Asgard continues to hold the casket to- well, to guarantee the Jotun people think long and hard before doing such a thing again."

"In your opinion," - something in Loki's voice makes Thor fear this whole discussion is going nowhere good, but he is the one who insisted on talking and he can scarce think of a reason to beg off now - "how have the Jotun people comported themselves since that time?"

"From what I have been told, well, except-.

Ahh, there it is: the trap. He stops. There is no safe course of action left, nothing more to say. Yet again he has let himself be led on blindly, like a stupid goat to the sacrifice.

"Yes, exactly. We behaved well, for many turns of the sun, until a certain brash and arrogant Aesir prince came looking for trouble," Loki tells the city before them in a patient, sing-song voice, as if he is telling a children's bedtime story. "And even then you may well and truly recall, as I am sure this story is almost as near and dear to your Aesir heart as it is to my monstrous blue Jotnar one..." At which point he pauses, but Thor at least knows better than to risk speaking again now. "Even then the Jotun people only did what was necessary to defend themselves. And the wayward Aesir prince? By rights he could have been killed. Instead, he was allowed to return home with his own father." It is not a pretty story, but Loki tells it well. "The Allfather is at least consistent, is he not? He punished his wayward son by taking away that son's freedom... and, in exchange, guaranteeing he would think long and hard before doing such a thing again."

After a pause so long Thor lets himself begin to hope this talk may actually be over and done, Loki once again continues. "These are two fine stories to consider together, are they not? The parallels between them are far too numerous for mere coincidence. In fact, the whole thing borders upon uncanny."

Thor and Loki stare off into the gathering dusk, Asgard's sun just about to set over the palace that looms behind them. Thor does indeed think long and hard before voicing anything further; he has bought himself far too much trouble already. "I do not think," he offers at last, hands still resting lightly on Loki's slim hips, "you are a fate in any way mirroring the loss of the casket." He kisses the crest of Loki's stiff shoulder carefully. "You may not believe this, but I find myself becoming most fond of you. I doubt your people have become similarly fond of the cold, powerless darkness that defines their modern-day lives."
Loki relaxes, if only very slightly. "Do you mean that, Thor… what you just said about my- about the Jotun people?"

Thor thinks quickly back. Going by his husband's body language, he can certainly imply he's said something positive - something sympathetic - but he'd been caught out far, far too readily earlier in this conversation. He's not eager to do it again, either; he's quickly tiring of the taste of his own sizable feet.

Darkness. Ah, yes, it comes back to him. "I do. I see your point. It does indeed seem as if the people of Jotunheim have learned their lesson."

"As you have learned yours?"

Thor takes a chance and spreads his fingers, sliding both hands around Loki's waist – trailing just above the loincloth - and pulling his husband back to settle against his chest. "I have learned" - and here he takes another chance, a big one - "to love my lesson."

And then he cringes. He was being very open just now, more than he normally allows himself to be, and it's going to hurt when Loki shoots him down.

But Loki doesn't. "Are you saying what- what it sounds like you might be saying?"

All or nothing. All; nothing.

Thor spins Loki to face him, letting his husband lean against the railing. He takes each of Loki's hands in his own, one at a time. And then he waits; waits until Loki makes solid eye contact. "I love you," he says, slowly and clearly. "You," he reiterates when Loki just stands there blinking. "I. Love. You." He squeezes Loki's fingers. His heart is pounding.


Thor's head spins. Oh, thank the Norns. Suddenly the casket doesn't matter. Punishment doesn't matter. Nothing matters. He hadn't realized just how important this – this relationship, this bond between the two of them - had become to him. But here it is – he's put everything on the line and- and Loki has met him there.

He lets go of his husband’s graceful hands and reaches up to cup Loki’s expressive face... and then just hugs him close.

"So you are okay with it, then," Loki says - a little strained-sounding, sure, because Thor is squishing him - "with my studying the Casket."

Just now, Thor would be okay with Loki eating the casket. "Yes," he grits out, his voice surprisingly gravelly.

"And if my research leads me to believe the casket should be back in Jotunheim with my people," Loki persists, pushing with both hands against Thor's chest, "What then?"

It's a difficult question, even when his mind isn't utterly addled, but it's clear from both expression and body language that Loki isn't doing any more cuddling until Thor comes up with an answer. "Then you explain to me your reasoning, and we come to an agreement. If we need to involve others in our well-reasoned discussion," he adds, "we will do so. But only if we must. I would very much like for us to work the whole thing through ourselves - together - first."

It seems reasonable enough. It's far more than Thor would have been willing to concede even scant
hours ago. Even so, Loki frowns. "But you will never understand how it feels to-," he complains, and Thor isn't willing to hear this out. "Then you will tell me, and I shall do all I can to envision it. It is truly not fair to ask more of me presently, Loki."

It's the wrong thing to say, for certain. Thor’s husband stiffens and twists out of his grasp, marching a few strides away down the balcony. Gods, I do love you; you and all your stubborn Jotnar pride, Thor thinks. "Can you guarantee the people of Jotunheim will not use the casket for ill," he asks instead; he is not ready to concede the battle entirely, not just yet.

Wrong thing again; Loki whirs to face Thor, fists clenched at his hips. "And can you guarantee the people of Asgard will do Jotunheim no wrong, regardless of the location of one precious relic?" Loki hisses. "Your realm's hands are hardly clean of blood."

Okay, they have made their points. Valid points all, but the battle will not be settled here, now. "You are unholy beautiful when you are angry," Thor remarks. "And I am sorry. I do not wish to fight. Can we table this tonight and consider it again when we-" - he backtracks hastily; he is trying to apologize, after all, and he can surely do a better job of it - "when I have had the chance to think on the topic more thoroughly? I truly am sorry," he adds earnestly when Loki fails to stand down. "What, do you wish to strike me?"

AHHH! A well-aimed, stupidly-unexpected blow to the gut drives the air from his lungs in a vicious rush. He doubles over, looking up at his pretty blue husband and doing his best to grin. "I guess that was a yes," he huffs out in response to his own question, after he can once again manage a halfway-steady breath. And then he guts out a weak laugh. "Loki, Loki. You are ever full of surprises. Forgive me my- my need to consider things thoroughly?"

Loki nods. "In this, there is nothing to forgive. I expect as much of a future king."

Oh. Oh. "Come here," Thor says, low and rough again, and the words are rather more plea than order. They have managed to talk a long while: The sun is down, the sky in front of them is a velvety deep purple, the night air is thick, and Loki is all but naked. Thor, his own adrenaline still running high after the surprise gut-punch, is suddenly sick to death of both talking and waiting.

"Come here," he says again, voice heavy with need. He extends one hand, still absently rubbing his sore stomach with the other. Loki studies hand, then face, then hand again, red eyes glowing in the last failing light of the day. Just as Thor is sure he is going to die of being considered, his husband steps forward and lays his own wrist in Thor's open palm.

That? That is a clear offer, and one Thor has no mind to refuse. He closes fingers around Loki's slender forearm lightning-fast and jerks sharply. Surges forward to catch his husband before Loki can really even begin to fall. They meet in the middle for once, mouths groping hungrily for one another. For several minutes the silence is broken only by the wet sounds of their sloppy kissing. That, and their increasingly-heavy breathing. Loki is still jacked-up, full of a burning intensity Thor normally only sees when his husband is beyond furious. It’s powerful, and a little frightening… and Thor quickly finds himself meeting Loki’s fevered lust with more of the same.

He normally tries to temper his own drive with caution; Loki is strong and fast, but Thor both outweighs and outmuscles him by a considerable margin. And while he's certainly gotten clear hints previously that his husband isn't one to shy away from a little rough treatment, it's nothing they've discussed – not, at least, when they are calm and rationale and not in the throes of passion. Thor has always opted to err - if it's erring he even does; he’s just not sure, which is precisely the problem - on the side of caution.
This time, though, Loki is pushing. He's using his nails, enough to raise stinging welts across Thor's shoulders and down Thor's muscled sides, and his bites have real force behind them. When Thor tastes blood – his own blood - for the third time, he casts caution aside: With one hand fisted in Loki’s hair and the other still clamped tight around that wrist, Thor pulls hard - arching Loki backwards - and bites deep into the muscle of his husband's exposed throat.

Loki chokes out a cry.

"Do you wish me to stop," Thor asks against the smooth, swelling skin.

"No, never," Loki pants out, nails of his caught hand digging painfully into Thor's own wrist. "Do not even dare to threaten so."

Well. Okay, then.

If it is rough Loki wants, it is rough Thor will deliver. Gladly.

He doesn't dare put Loki over the railing; it's much too great a drop, and his own control has slipped too far, too fast. Still, he can make a good go of this. He twists around and rushes Loki up against the wall, releasing the tangled hair at the last moment so as not to smack his husband's head against the polished metal. The impact knocks the wind out of Loki just the same, and Thor seizes the fleeting opportunity to catch the other wrist and pin both dangerous hands overhead.

Loki struggles but it's just for show; his chest heaves, sure, muscles tight and body gleaming with sweat in the low light of the evening torches, but he manages to work himself astride of Thor's big thigh. And once he’s there Loki ruts against Thor groin, wordlessly panting and grinding. His intentions truly could not be more plain if they were written in fire across the early night sky.

The tighter Thor grips, the more he overpowers Loki's attempts to escape his grasp, the more achingly desperate his husband's movements become. Wound up like this, the blue prince bites like a wild thing... Thor takes both wrists in one hand, clamping the other over Loki's vicious mouth in a futile attempt to save himself, and gets a torn, bleeding palm for his efforts.

That does it. He roars in surprised pain and slaps Loki hard across the face. Loki, who laughs. "Now we are getting somewhere," his husband wheezes, teetering somewhere between laughing and sobbing. "Show me: Show me why they call you the mighty Thor."

Thor finds he wants exactly that. Oh my, does he ever. But all the same he does not wish to injure Loki. Not for real. So he holds up, panting.

Loki searches Thor’s face and seemingly reads his mind, eyes dark even in the juddering torchlight: "Do not coddle me, Thor. I am no Aesir maiden."

With that as fair warning Loki bares his teeth, threatening to bite again, and Thor elects to take his feisty husband at his word.

After a slippery, hot wrestling match that leaves them both scraped and bruised, Thor finally manages to pin Loki’s wiry body face-down on a chaise by sitting unceremoniously on his husband’s shoulders. He doesn't even bother to try to work Loki's skimpy loincloth free, instead just tugging it aside as he spreads the firm buttocks wide and ducks down to lick experimentally between them.

Loki shudders and goes as limp as if he’d been knocked senseless. "You like that," Thor observes, rather unnecessarily. The broken little whimper he gets in return tells him everything he needs to
know; he dives right back in, licking and prodding and working Loki open with a spit-slick, enthusiastic vengeance.

They have uncharacteristically perfect timing: Loki’s patience – far from endless to start with - runs out just about the time Thor's jaw is really starting to cramp. "Please please please," Loki whines, writhing frantically. It's amusing, it is (or, rather, it would be most days), but Thor's feeling long past eager just now himself. Consequently it's only another minute or so before he's flipping around to kneel between his husband's legs and grab onto the bucking hips.

He sinks into Loki's body – not hot inside, but pleasantly cool in the summer heat - with a throaty moan.

Thor rests a moment thus, to see if Loki will protest. Loki doesn’t; instead, he rolls his hips and tries for more. Thor holds him still and pulls nearly out – pausing while Loki writhes and curses - before once again sheathing himself fully in Loki's body. And again, and again, over and over, building momentum until he's pounding away hard enough to hop the chaise across the balcony floor.

He has his husband hands - wrists crossed, fingers clenched in tight fists - trapped against the graceful inward curve at the small of Loki’s strong back; the long muscles alongside the spine shift and tense as Loki tries for the leverage to shove himself back to meet Thor's thrusts. Despite the tempting coolness of his skin Loki's sweat-soaked hair is plastered to his face and body: the moist summer heat is still too much for his winter-fit body. He is gorgeous like this, at once wild and trapped, torch-lit body streaked red-black with blood from Thor's injured palm.

Even as Thor admires what lies before him he can't help but make note of the fact that - with each thrust - Loki’s body is getting progressively colder. Little by little, sure, but it's enough of a change to be obvious all the same. It’s a slow progression this time; not nearly as shocking, mentally or physically, as it was before… and Thor knows what to expect now. He grits his teeth and sets (and keeps) a steady pace despite the chill, beyond pleased to find his husband is actually managing to lose all control over himself in the course of their rough coupling.

And then Thor, too, is lost in it… he’s no longer thinking at all; just pounding into the cold, slick squeeze in a race to- well, to climax before he freezes.

He's so consumed, in fact – by the competing sensations of icy flesh and hot friction, the smell of sex, the little whimpers and grunts the brutal pounding forces out of Loki, the relentless forward march of his own orgasm - that it's not until after he comes blindingly hard that he manages to notice he's called the storm.

Lightning flashes. A heavy, concussive thunderclap shakes the palace and the wind gusts, drenching them both with a veritable wall of warm rain that turns to slippery ice on Loki's skin. Just as Thor loses his grip on the ice-glazed wrists, he feels Loki’s body spasm around his own near-frozen cock.

And then he slides out and off entirely, scrabbling and clawing at Loki's gleaming legs - at the soaked chaise - before splashing unceremoniously in a shaking, gasping, laughing heap on the wet floor.

"Fuck, Loki," he rasps, shivering, when he has managed to recover to the point of attempting speech. "We are a natural disaster."

"That was you, was it not," Loki asks with a weak laugh of his own. "The rain, the storm. That was you," he asserts more forcefully. "Gods." He rolls rather awkwardly onto one side, struggles to sitting, and reaches a shaking hand down to try and help Thor.
The rain still washes over them in warm, stinging waves. When Thor takes the proffered hand, he finds Loki’s skin nearly back to ambient temperature. He laughs again. "I guess it is a good thing we did this outside, considering the mess we have made of it." He rolls up, letting Loki pull him to sitting, and then nuzzles his husband’s slick chest. "Was that- was it okay? Are you okay?"

Loki hums quietly; Thor can feel it against the side of his own face. "I am- well, I am near to speechless... but, yes," he continues, curling down to kiss the rain-drenched top of Thor's head, "I am fine. That was fine. New, for certain. Still, fine."

"Good." Thor stretches up to kiss his husband, still passionate but free now of the earlier all-consuming fire. “Good,” he repeats… and it is good.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Frigga checks in with Loki.

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Loki

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Loki is frustrated.

*He* wants to burn off some of this unnatural energy in the bedroom – or the bath, or the balcony, or all of the above; his research session spent in the casket’s compelling presence has left him feeling as though he could go all night without even beginning to tire – but *Thor*, it seems, wants to *talk*. And not just talk-talk, either: Thor evidently wants to discuss the casket in particular. The casket, which might just be one thing in all the Nine of which Loki is *least* inclined to speak just now.

Not because he isn’t interested in the thing, of course, but because he is far *too* interested. He has completely lost any semblance of detached objectivity. Everything in him – every fiber, every cell – is crying out to rush back to Odin’s treasure chamber and throw himself at the pedestal, to rub himself all over the shining blue relic, and Loki is terrified that he won’t be able to make even the smallest mention of the thing without his desire being laid horrifyingly bare. The last thing he needs right now is to babble on unthinkingly and tip Thor off that the casket is calling to him with a degree of raw *might* he can barely refuse.

Even if it is. *Especially because* it is.

Still, lying about it all outright seems even more dangerous. Thor can’t help but have noticed how keyed-up he is. So, when his husband leads right off by asking about the day’s activities, Loki vows to be as honest as (conveniently) possible. To lie in plain sight, as it were.

He’s a bit surprised when Thor meets him halfway, for once discussing the weapons vault in a thoughtful, considered manner that doesn’t feel like a personal attack on all things Loki. On the Jotun people, either. And he’s even more surprised, honestly, to find Thor getting as caught up in the power rolling off him as Loki himself is.

For a little while it looks like he’s going to get his way after all: right into bed – or maybe not quite to bed at all, as Thor has him up against the balcony railing, big hands all over his body – with minimal deception involved and minimal energy expended.

But of course not. That would be far too easy, and nothing about their life together (not even the good parts, which Loki has to admit are far more numerous these days than he’d ever dared hope the pleasant aspects of an arranged off-realm marriage might be) is easy. Consequently, right when things are finally starting to get going, Thor once again decides he wants to *talk*. *More*. About *serious* things, no less. And while it’s always good to be reminded his husband does actually have a head for more than just lust and war, this is not really the time for such a refresher course.
Seriously. If he has to talk just now, Loki may explode. Not least of all, either, because Thor seems to have chosen this particular moment to become shy. Modest. They are practically up in the clouds, the palace is so huge – the two of them cannot be but tiny ants in the sky to anyone going about his or her evening’s business is the warm, humid streets far below – and yet Thor has developed a sudden resistance to coupling on the balcony because people might see.

Before Loki can even begin to puzzle that out, though, Thor catches him entirely off-guard with an astoundingly blunt question: “Are you actually here in Asgard to steal the Casket of Ancient Winters?”

Blunt, yes, and loaded. Loki is so surprised that – before he can even register his body’s intent – he goes rigid and motionless along the railing. It’s the wrong response, he knows; it’s incriminating, falsely so because he’s not actually here to steal the Norns-cursed (holy) thing at all. Loki forces himself to relax, falling back on the politically-correct answer King Laufey had long since systematically drilled into him many, many cycles of the moon before Loki’d even been asked to leave his native land; he patiently reassures Thor that (he’s with his husband on the balcony with the full intent of being with him… on the balcony, ideally, if said princely husband hadn’t chosen today to turn uncharacteristically prudish), using the time spent so doing to calm himself further, and then carefully recites his Official Jotun Diplomatic Mission: He is in Asgard to ensure lasting peace between the great realms Asgard and Jotunheim.

He expects Thor to go on the offensive at that point – it wouldn’t be the first time, after all – but instead his husband just pushes back very, very gently. The non-fight in Thor’s response makes Loki brave; rather than evading, he instead opts to launch a serious conversation – one they perhaps should have had long ago, but he wasn’t nearly so brave in his early days here – about Asgard’s misconceptions… Asgard’s biases, even… about Jotunheim. The casket. The Jotun wars. Everything that went before, and everything that has come since.

It’s a good conversation, really: Thor listens and admits his own role in sustaining the unfortunately stereotype; in a manner of speaking, Loki wins. But neither of those things manages to be the truly astounding part, not at all. No, what knocks Loki completely off-course is all but unrelated.

In the middle of a fairly routine exercise in recognizing and admitting to one’s wrongs, Thor abruptly cuddles Loki close in a way entirely too sexual for the topic under discussion, and then positions them face-to-face and blurts out something so far beyond unexpected that Loki’s brain can’t even process it: “I love you.”

_Gods._ Loki is struck briefly speechless, doubtless at the worst possible time – Thor looks terrified. He repeats himself, all careful pacing and precise enunciation.


_Gods._

_Thor loves him._

_Thor LOVES HIM._

And because he’s feeling awkward and adolescent and ridiculous, and his _loving_ husband is trying to nuzzle and hug, Loki finds he’s unable to control his own mouth… instead of spinning sweet nothings like he ought to, he instead asks _more questions about Thor’s feelings about Loki, the Jotuns, and the casket._ Because what says _I adore you and never want to be parted_ like a few good
defensive inquiries around politics and xenocentrism?

Even worse, his husband is cheerfully understanding about the whole thing. Thor tolerates Loki’s questions with surprising good grace, gives thoughtfully-reasoned answers, and asks- well, infuriating questions of his own. Fair, true, but that only rubs Loki the wrong way all the more. Between frustration at his own discomfort and irritation at Thor’s unusual and unsettling lack thereof, all of it probably multiplied tenfold by the casket’s lingering influence, Loki is suddenly raring for a fight.

But Thor isn’t. So, perversely, when Thor offers Loki the chance to hit him- Loki does. Without giving himself any time to think the better of it, he punches Thor - right in that solid golden gut - hard enough to double the crown prince over.

And curse the Norns if it doesn’t feel good. Very, very good, from his stinging knuckles to his shoulder and right down to the warm feeling in his stomach. Somehow, Loki realizes, he has managed to knock some sense back into himself with it, too. When Thor asks for permission to think things over – Jotunheim and the casket, that is, not Loki – before proceeding, Loki finds he’s easily able to make the proper, mature response; to reassure Thor that it’s a good king’s way. Which it is, and Loki means it wholly.

~

They’ve talked so long night has fallen. Darkness is all but complete on what Loki has come to recognize as a classic Asgard summer night: warm and humid, the air hazy and close. Across the face of the palace torches smoke and gutter.

Everything – all the stress, from every source - comes crashing down around him at once, leaving in its wake a burning desire for- for, embarrassing as it may be, really rough sex. The kind of sex Loki hasn’t had since he left Jotunheim, where by comparison to his partners he was always the smallest and the weakest. The kind he knows with complete and utter certainty Thor will be able to beautifully deliver, if only his husband can be convinced to do so.

He looks Thor full in the face, trying to gauge the mood, and feels abruptly hopeful; his husband’s expression, plainly discernable even in the low light, is one of clear, powerful want.

The battle itself has come to a draw; here, in this, Loki is ready and willing to submit if it will get him what he needs.

Consequently, rather than taking Thor’s proffered hand, he opts to step in close and lay a slender arm – pale blue underside nearly gold in the flickering torchlight – across his husband’s broad palm. Do what you want with me, the gesture is meant to say, and judging from the look on Thor’s face Loki thinks the message may very well have accurately translated.

Indeed it has; his approach works. Perfectly, even. Thor yanks Loki forward hard enough to pull him clean off his feet, then catches him and owns his mouth in a very satisfying manner. It’s very good, it is, and Loki wants far more than just a taste.

So, he pushes. Harder than he normally dares, letting the still-lingering power of the casket drive him to claw. To bite, over and over, until his mouth is full not only of Thor’s tongue but of the warm, rich taste of Aesir blood.

With a low growl Thor yanks Loki’s hair hard and bites back in kind. Finally, Loki thinks with grateful relief as his own blood runs cool down his neck to pool in the hollow between his collarbones. After one more bit of hesitating and needlessly asking permission, Thor must manage to
move past whatever is holding him back; without further ado Loki happily finds himself helpless up against the wall, breath knocked out of him and hands pinned above his head.

It’s almost perfect. The more he tries to fight back, the more Thor catches on; just a little push and they’ll be there. So, the next chance he gets, Loki bites for real. Goads his husband, laughing, after a ringing slap for his efforts, and is beautifully rewarded.

They wrestle and rut, hotter and harder with each passing second. Thor gets Loki facedown, rump in the air; maybe due for a spanking and then a dry fucking. The latter especially is a bit more than he’d bargained for, but it’s all more than fine if it means he can have this again; Loki grits his teeth and prepares as best he can for the first strike-

-and is surprised again, far, far more than he’d been earlier. Rather than the sharp, sudden pain of palm to buttock, it’s the hot wet slide of his husband’s tongue into his anus that greet’s him instead. Oh gods oh gods. The sensory overload is so swift, and so very different than what Loki’d expected, that he can’t hope to control his own body’s reaction – he knows he’s whimpering and moaning and writhing, and is utterly powerless to put a stop to any of it.

Thor quickly drives – melts, really – Loki into a frenzy. He is ready, so ready, and yet he never wants this to stop. For the rest of his long life he wants to teeter on the brink like this, on his face with his hands pinned and his husband’s surprisingly-clever tongue working him over in ways Loki wouldn’t have dreamed possible. By the Nine, nothing in all the realms has ever made him feel like this before.

And then – again without warning, but it really doesn’t matter anyway because he’s as ready as he could ever be – Thor flips around and spears him, the warmth of the prince’s erection almost rivaling that of Thor’s departing tongue. Lost in the experience as he is, Loki still can’t help but notice there is a distinct lack of coddling this time… which is fine because it’s not anything close to coddling he wants anyway.

Not now. Not this time.

This time Loki is begging and pleading with everything he has to be taken; to be owned.

Thor thrusts into him, finally using the power Loki has always known his husband possesses. Hands trapped at the base of his own spine and face smushed into the chaise cushions, Loki is stuffed full and overwhelmed and overcome and overpowered by the sheer force of it all.

It's absolutely what he wanted. Wants. Needs. Or, rather, it would be if he was still able to pull together enough brainpower to pay any of it the least bit of attention.

He can't. His body has taken over completely; all he can do is feel. Roll with Thor's demanding fucking, and feel, his whole being reduced to raw nerves and animal desire.

Consequently, it's not until the rain - the rain?? - on his face falls shockingly hot, like nothing so much as the steamiest imaginable bathhouse shower, that Loki realizes he's let his body temperature fall. Considerably. Thor is still thrusting away as though the change matters not at all, though. And if his husband can’t bring himself to care, why should he? Loki gives in again and lets himself fall back under.

All too soon Thor cries out, barely audible over the driving rain, and ejaculates -hot and sudden - deep in Loki’s body. Lightning splits the sky, followed by a thunderclap that shakes the very palace itself. Soaked and icy and utterly wiped out, Loki can’t even find it in himself to cry out as his own orgasm tears through him.
And then Thor is on the floor, laughing, with ice and water everywhere. Loki is too worn to laugh in return, really, but he makes himself try - this was wonderful, all of it, and he only wants more. He's awed, too, to know he's partnering someone who can call down the unstoppable power of the storm.

And they're still managing to laugh about it, still happy together despite the serious topic under earlier discussion. Drenched and exhausted and sore... and happy. It's good.

~

Much as he would like to just flop back down and lie there, basking in the wonder of the moment and catching his breath, Loki knows he shouldn't. Can't. Thor must be freezing, even in the near-stifling night air. Loki wearily gathers his seidr, warms himself back up, and reaches out a hand to pull his husband closer; sure enough, even as he chivalrously inquires as to Loki's own wellbeing, Thor is icy cold and shaking.

Loki takes a long moment to cuddle and kiss and reassure, then sighs. "You, my dearest, are a lump of ice. We should get you into a nice warm bath... and the sooner, the better."

"And then supper?" Even with his teeth chattering Thor sounds hopeful.

Oh. Yes, they did manage to entirely skip their evening meal. "It is late. I will conjure something."

"Do not be silly," Thor gently admonishes with a quick laugh. "Our kitchens are always on the ready."

"If I were to intend to poison you, o' husband, I would be rather more subtle." Laughing quietly, Loki leans down to steal one last kiss. "Now, to the bath with you. With both of us."

~

He wakes up more than a little sore, for once pleased to realize he isn't expected to be riding today. As pleasant a feeling as "well-used" may be - and it is... oh, it is, especially after so long - Loki has to imagine it would suit him rather less nicely were he to find himself on horseback.

In fact, it's quite difficult enough to make it through the morning's food and family time without his difficulty making itself embarrassingly obvious. He's glad he put in the effort to get himself there, though, especially when Queen Frigga asks if they had a lovely evening and Thor turns redder than the flowers adorning their table.

As her son coughs and splutters, Frigga gives Loki a wide-eyed, innocent smile. "I could not help but notice the sudden downpour. Out of a clear, starry sky, no less." Her sweet smile quirks in one that's quite a bit naughtier. "I do hope my lovely boys were not fighting."

"No, mother, we were not fighting," Thor manages between coughs. He looks beseechingly at Loki.

Loki reaches for a truth that is at once a lie. "Your son was just showing me how he can call the lighting, your majesty," he offers, hoping the formality - and not so much the content - will catch her ear.

No such luck, it seems.

"Oh, that was sweet of him. I hope you greatly enjoyed the demonstration." Now it seems it is Odin's turn to choke.

Loki runs with the whole thing; what else can he do at this juncture? "Oh, yes. Thor can be
incredibly powerful when he sets his mind to it, I see."

They're only halfway through the meal, and yet Odin and Thor are somehow both struck with the odd simultaneous, urgent need to rush to their offices and balance the month's budget.

~

"You look happy," Frigga observes once she and Loki are alone. "The life you are forging for yourself clearly agrees with you." She smiles, without artifice this time. "I am truly proud of you, Loki. This is a very difficult thing you are doing."

He isn't exactly sure what they're discussing now; only that it is no longer sex. So he smiles in return, buying himself a little time. "Thank you," he responds when she does not continue. "You are most kind."

"Be that as it may or may not be, what I truly am is most interested in a peaceful resolution to our endless and tedious stalemate… which has long since outlasted any utility it might once have borne."

Well, put that way, the topic is certainly far clearer. Loki finds himself still at a bit of a loss, though, not sure if he is walking over solid ground or loose, treacherous new-fallen snow. He inclines his head, carefully going for a mildly-curious expression.

Frigga, for her part, just waits. She neither eats nor sips her juice; instead, she just smiles at him. And waits.

He fights not to look away. "Your son and I actually had a relatively good conversation about that last night. Before the—... storm," he adds with a complicit little smirk. "I think there is yet hope we may reach neutral ground."

"Oh, that is good to hear," she says lightly. Loki isn't at all sure if he's made the right move or a terribly wrong one. And Frigga isn't helping in the least; she just offers him some oil for his flatbread and returns to her own meal.

He swallows, more loudly than he means to. "This is what you want of me, is it not," he asks. He can feel his heart racing, and not with anything like lust this time.

She looks him coolly in the face a long, long, uncomfortably long time. "You are doing well. As I said, I am proud of you. Here, eat," - she pushes a plate of raw fish closer - "as I hear riding out the storm takes a lot out of a person."

If Loki could blush as beautifully as Thor, he surely would be doing so just now.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Loki's family comes a calling.

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Frigga
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Loki really is making excellent headway, and she truly is impressed. He's managing to accomplish everything she expected of him, and then some. She doesn’t really want to say he's surprised her… but, there you have it: He’s surprised her. She had high expectations, too, and was not expecting to be surprised. Not so pleasantly, at least.

The two princes may be playing at how their evening was nothing out of the ordinary, but Frigga knows better. She of all people grasps the full breadth of Thor’s elemental power; it had been an age or more since her son has called a storm down upon the city over a bedmate. Even the people he has plainly considered lovers have never come close to sweeping him off his feet like this.

It's the fact that Loki managed to take Thor entirely out of his own head directly upon the heels of what can only have been a strained, painful discussion around casket politics that really pleases her, though. Frigga cannot help but admire both the skill and the grace with which Loki is navigating very, very challenging territory.

She has been dealing carefully with Jotunheim’s king for much of her adult lifetime and can say this much with absolute certainty: What Loki has managed here, in the short few months he and Thor have been wed, is not just Laufey's teaching; this is something entirely new.

"So," she asks thoughtfully, once they have had a few moments to eat in silence, "what do you plan to do now? How do you intend to make use of your newly-won power?"

"Power?" Loki stops mid-bite and slowly, deliberately sets his cutlery down. His normally-expressive face is carefully blank. "I am not sure I follow your meaning."

She opts not to respond immediately. It will undoubtedly do her son-in-law nothing but good to find himself caught a little off-balance; to be reminded with just whom he is dealing. Frigga is, after all, no Thor.

"My son is no fool," she offers after a few more small bites of casserole. "But neither is he the most subtle of men. You have something he wants very, very badly; I doubt he will stop at anything whatsoever when it comes to getting it." She smiles, but with little humor. "And, please, do not pretend with me. You know this just as well as I."

Loki looks uncomfortable for the barest fraction of a second - weighing his options, it seems, and quickly - and then shrugs. "He has made his feelings for me plain, if that is what you mean," he says, voice solemn. "But they are feelings we share, he and I, and I have no plan to use them against him." He takes a deep breath, then lets it out slowly. “And, yes, he seems very attracted to me. We share that as well.”

Loki leans in and rests both palms on the table, gently, fingers splayed wide. He studies his own blue hands, then her face. "I love Thor and – he says, and I believe it – he, me. I am grateful for his love and for his- his willingness to be more open-minded than I anticipated about my- my ancestry. My people." There is nothing deceptive in his wide-eyed, serious expression... but he is good, this one and Frigga is not so easily convinced. So, when he carefully adds "I will not make use of your son's love as a tool to be wielded against him, I assure you," she promptly calls him on the omission:

"That is good to hear. I would expect no less of you." He smiles, but not - "You say that, and I believe you… but will you wield his newfound *open-mindedness* against him instead," she probes immediately, before he can really relax - for long.

His eyes narrow, just a bit. "I intend to work to our mutual gain. I do not think that constitutes a taking up of arms, be they crafted of metal or of feelings."

"Well-played," Frigga acknowledges, with a genuine grin this time. "You are very sharp. Never think I have forgotten this about you." And then she laughs, without an edge to it. "Oh, Loki, I do enjoy your company. You would of course be welcome regardless, given your relationship with my son, but I would be remiss in not letting you know that having you here as part of my family is a true pleasure. Now, please," - she reaches out to give his hands a quick squeeze - "I must insist: Do not let me keep you from your food any longer."

He eats prettily, her son-in-law does, even when he's not putting on a show for Thor. And his inherent grace nearly hides the apparent fact the night's entertainment had left him a bit battered. He is gorgeous and composed. Poised.

Still, there is a warrior's forged steel under that lovely, exotic exterior. As well as things are going presently, it will not serve anyone well for her to lose sight of that fact. Frigga makes a mental note to never, ever do so.

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Loki
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"But why?" Loki, rather uncharacteristically, blurts out the very first words that come to mind. "And why would he bring my brothers," he asks. "He never does that." It’s true. When it comes to visiting Asgard, Laufey would rather bring an ice beast than his two elder sons.

Odin smiles; whether at the idea or at Loki's failed composure, it's impossible yet to tell. "This is not an official visit, Loki. Your father and brothers are *taking a short holiday*, Laufey tells me, and they would like to visit with our family. To catch up with you, I am sure. Perhaps they wish," Odin continues, lone eye crinkling with evident good humor, "to reassure themselves their dear kinsman is not caged in one of my many dungeon cells."

"*Odin,* "Frigga chides, but she's smiling as well. "Your family loves and misses you, Loki darling." She squeezes his arm. "It is that and nothing more."

Privately he doubts this - Laufey, to the best of Loki's vast knowledge, has never once acted solely out of *loving and missing* - but he also knows saying as much would be highly unwise. Instead he nods, smiling himself. "It would be good to see my father," he acknowledges. When it comes to Helblindi and Byleistr, he's not so certain. So, instead of being an ass, Loki takes the high road when it comes to the two of them and says nothing.
Frigga, he has learned, is far, far too intelligent to miss several lies in a row. So he stops at the one closest to truth, and hopes fervently she will let the whole thing drop. "When should we expect them," he hurries on, just in case she wasn't going to do so after all.

"On the morrow. My servants are readying the cold guest chambers."

_Tomorrow._ Well, that certainly leaves little time for fretting. "Does Thor know," he asks, looking for an excuse to leave the table; to follow his recently-escaped husband out to the relative freedom of the royal training grounds.

And he gets it: "No, he does not," Frigga says. "We thought you might prefer to break the news to him yourself." She laughs. "And we are sure he will take it best coming from you."

~

Thor is in the practice ring already, working with a foot soldier Loki has not yet met; both of them are dusty and grimy and dripping sweat. When he first arrived Loki would have found the whole of it disgusting. Now he lets Thor pull him in for a thorough kiss, one he returns eagerly. When they pull apart Thor beams. "And to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from my lovely blue prince," he asks with a broad grin, kissing Loki lightly on the tip of the nose.

"A visit of another sort." Loki looks down at the trampled dirt, then off into the distance. He is really not sure how to put this. "My father. And my brothers. Tomorrow," he adds, feeling more than a bit uncomfortable. "Your parents just told me, over the last remaining scraps of the morning’s meal."

"Ah. Your family comes to see how well you have tamed the heathen." Thor laughs, then pulls Loki in for another long kiss. "Fret not," he adds, one calloused hand cupping Loki’s chin. "You have me wrapped right around your shapely blue little finger. I am confident King Laufey will be most pleased."

~

This time, everything is completely different.

For starters, Loki isn't caged up. His family arrives in the evening, too late for supper. And when his brothers want to head to the tavern, Thor in tow, Loki is free to join them. That's not the only difference, either; after a few flagons of ale too many, when good old Helblindi hauls off and slaps his little brother hard on the rump as is his wont, Thor pulls Loki into his lap with casual, friendly possessiveness and kneads his stinging bottom - in clear view of both brothers - until the pain fades. And then kisses him solidly, teeth and tongue and all, while Helblindi hoots and claps.

No, nothing is the same at all.

"It is most heartening to see you well and happy, brother," Byleistr says after Helblindi manages to settle down. "It seems marriage suits you after all." He hoists his ale high. "To Loki."

Everyone clunks his heavy metal tankard. "To Thor," Loki says instead, laughing. He feels _good_ this time; like he belongs. Here, and there.

The four of them drink long into the night. When he and husband get back to their chambers, having left Loki's singing, swaying brothers more-or-less-safely off in the guest wing along the way, Loki and Thor are well more than a bit too drunk to function. They fall into bed together, kissing and laughing and pawing clumsily at one another-
-and then promptly pass out, tangled together in their furs.

~

Or, at least, that's what Loki can only guess happened. He wakes up well after the sun has risen, groggy and dry-mouthed and powerfully nauseated - furs and Thor everywhere; hot and sticky - with a fierce case of beard burn and a stiff, sore back. Oh, by the Nine, he thinks, please do not tell me we laid together and I do not even recall it happening, as he rolls over with a pained grunt.

"Loki?" Thor's voice is nearly gone. "Ugh, gods."

Loki laughs and immediately regrets it. "How much did we drink last night," he asks as he sits hunched over at the edge of the bed with his spinning head in his hands.

Thor blows out a loud breath; even that hurts Loki’s ears. "Easily twice as much as we should have, from the feel. Three times, even. Is this something your magic can fix?"

It isn't. Gods know he's tried. "Sorry, no. Only one thing will help."

Thor cuts him off. "Time."

"Which the two of you simply do not have, lightweights," Helblindi laughs as they both jump and cringe. "Rise and shine, beautiful - and you, too, Loki. You do not want to keep father waiting on account of your idiocy, I assure you."

Loki rubs his stinging face. "How did even you get in here," he asks his never-less-welcome brother as Thor struggles to sit up.

"The doors were wide open. I called out, but no one answered. From there," - he smirks - "I followed the trail of clothing. Asgardian clothing, brother, as you seem not to be bothering to wear any."

"I always did hate you," Loki grumbles. "Now, would you mind leaving so we can wash up?"

"Oh, I assure you, there is scarcely any reason for you to bother with modesty at this late juncture," Helblindi points out, still laughing. He gets to his feet anyway. “You look good, Loki. He does, does he not, Thor?"

“Mm, that he does.” Thor wraps his arms around Loki from behind and nuzzles his neck. “Although he truly does smell a bit too much like a tavern for my tastes this day.”

“I would curse you both – and I do mean that, I do – if I only felt the smallest bit better,” Loki grumbles. He might, too, if he felt even marginally less like death warmed over. Maybe later. “Where is father?”

“Breaking his fast with King Odin,” Helblindi replies. “Something about blood sausage and fish roe.”

Loki’s guts roll ominously. He holds up a hand as Helblindi goes on – “And a leg of something with the fur still on” – then leaps up and sprints for the baths.

When his body is (at least temporarily) done turning itself inside out, Loki is very, very disappointed to find he feels no better. This has all the makings of one long day.

~
“I hear our happy couple showed my other sons a fine evening,” Laufey tells Odin as Loki and Thor finally manage to drag themselves to the Great Hall.

Odin smiles “Indeed, so it seems… and they appear to have paid in far more than coin.”

Loki crosses a little stiffly to give his father a hug. “It is good to see you.” And it is. He has missed Laufey, more than he had even realized.

“That it is. The palace is quiet without you. You look happy,” Laufey adds, pushing Loki to arm’s length and studying his face. “Hungover, perhaps, but happy nonetheless.”

Loki gives his father’s hands a quick squeeze and goes to take his place by his husband. Helblindi, fortunately, had exaggerated about the food – it’s a fairly typical Asgardian spread, the greasier bits of which actually appeal for perhaps the first time ever. He isn’t quite up to it yet, though. At midday, maybe. “I am happy, father,” he says, and finds he means that too.

They talk basic politics – news, strategies – for a while. Thor is unusually subdued, more than just a pounding head would explain; Loki can only wonder if their recent conversation about Jotunheim is to blame. Is to be credited? Either way, he is proud of his husband and scoots close to prove it. “I love you,” he whispers against Thor’s warm, pink ear. Surprisingly, given all (and only) the menfolk of both families are present, Thor turns and gives Loki a rather forceful kiss.

Helblindi snickers.

“Do not pay your other brother any mind, Loki,” Byleistr advises. "For he is only jealous."

This time it’s Thor’s turn to laugh, one big arm draped around Loki’s shoulders. “Perhaps I can find him an Aesir mate too, then,” he tells Byleistr. “Although it may be rather more challenging, as one must admit he does lack some of his younger brother’s polished charm.”

“Aye, that he does,” Byleistr agrees. “In fact, one could say he lacks all of it.”

For once in his life Helblindi is forced speechless by the situation; he can hardly spew anti-Aesir garbage in front of Asgard's king. Not with his own father there, especially; not unless he wants the sort of beating that leaves scars. Laufey is nothing if not proud, and he expects his sons to comport themselves accordingly.

Loki smiles gratefully at Byleistr. He’s really not up to a battle of wits this morning.

~~~~~

He knows it’s awfully warm in the gardens for Laufey, even in the shade – and to be honest Loki is nowhere near one hundred percent himself - so after breakfast he reluctantly leads the way to one of the giant palace library’s most out-of-the-way corners. He wants to talk to his father alone, subtly; making use of any of those rooms reserved for diplomatic encounters seems too blatant. Risky. Not that Loki is in any way allergic to risk-taking, but he prefers to pick his battles and this one just isn’t worth it.

"So," he starts in, quietly, once they've finally settled themselves at the far end of a long reading table, "what actually brings you to Asgard? I hardly think you have come here for a holiday, whatever your official excuse might be."

Laufey takes his time responding, a pleased smile spreading slowly across his craggy, battle-scarred face. "Always thinking, are you not? That has to be one of my favorite things about you, my son." He nods slowly. "You are wise far beyond your years. Wiser, truly, than your brothers will ever be."
"And all that," Loki asks, "flattering as it may sound, means what exactly?"

At that Laufey laughs, his gravelly rumble loud in the quiet room. "I needed to speak with you privately. Calling you to Jotunheim would raise suspicion."

"And the demon spawn? What of them?"

"Loki! I am appalled," Laufey chastises good-naturedly, both expression and tone giving complete lie to his words. "What a way to speak of your dear brothers. Your dam would be crushed. But, yes," he says with a nod, "everyone knows I make it a practice not to bring them on diplomatic missions."

"So their presence serves to lure Asgard into unwarranted complacency."

His father laughs again. "Smart, if perhaps a bit harsh. I truly am not here to attack Asgard." Laufey smirks. "Although I hear my children did manage to wage quite the war on its ale supplies last night."

It's far too soon for Loki to find that particular joke the least bit funny. He grimaces. "Noted. So, again, what brings you here? About which matter do you wish to speak with me?"

The old king steeples his fingers. It's a gesture very reminiscent of Odin; perhaps they teach it in monarch school. Laufey purses his thick purple lips, lost briefly in thought. "This summer has been uncommon harsh. As you know, my people- our people," he amends, with a nod towards Loki, "depend on the summer thaw to sustain life through winter's deep freeze."

Yes, Loki does know that. He has known it his entire life. He nods, carefully not interrupting.

"And you also know that, without that thaw, it is highly likely many Jotuns will not survive the coming winter. The old," Laufey elaborates, looking sad and solemn now, "the weak, the injured, the ill... and the young. And if we lose our young, Loki, our once-glorious realm may fall."

Loki knows the answer, but he has to ask anyway: "So, you need the casket. Sooner, rather than later, no?"

Instead of answering, though, Laufey opts to meet the question with one of his own: "So, tell me: How is your mission going?"

Loki plasters a smile on his face. "Which mission, father? The one forging a lasting and peaceful union, or the one restoring Jotunheim to power?"

Laufey smiles back. It's always difficult to determine whether his expression is false or sincere, even for Loki. "Either. Or both. Whichever you would prefer to discuss."

"Things are going well with Thor," Loki offers. "And my studies have put me in a favorable position when it comes to the king and queen."

"Good, good." Laufey nods his approval. "Your diplomatic growth pleases me. And it is always good to hear your personal life is satisfactory to you as well. And you are finding ways to keep busy?"

"Yes, several." There is no visible change in Laufey's casually interested demeanor but something about his father makes Loki tense involuntarily just the same. He makes himself go on as though nothing is wrong. "I'm learning to ride. On horseback," he clarifies as Laufey looks mildly puzzled. "I have a lovely mare that is for all intents and purposes mine. And I've been working closely with
Asgard's most noted historian.

They stare each other down across the table, which quickly becomes just this side of painful. Finally, moments before Loki would have had no choice but to look away, Laufey spreads his hands. "And? Do continue, my son."

Loki swallows. "Yes, father, I have seen the casket."

"Oh, yes, I know. I can practically smell it upon you."

He forces himself to laugh. "No, that you cannot, I assure you."

Laufey doesn't smile in return this time. "Did you touch it?"

Loki shudders. "No, and do not force me to. I swear, I am not yet ready."
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thor trades wits and friendly blows with the Laufeyson brothers.

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Thor

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It should come as no surprise that his mother made both prompt and thorough note of the previous evening’s storm. Of course she did: Frigga is always attuned to the natural world around her; never more so than when something is out of the ordinary.

He had very much hoped she might see fit to skip over the topic at the morning meal, though. But in this hope, as in so many others, Thor is sorely disappointed. It probably doesn't help, either, that Loki is moving a bit unhappily, as though he's been beaten... and grinning like anything but.

It certainly doesn't help that, when Frigga starts in with the thinly-veiled sexual innuendos, Loki hastens to join her… right down in the very bottom of the gutter.

Odin catches Thor's eye and nods, the subtle movement almost invisible but more than welcome just the same. At the next opportunity, the king pushes back from the table. "As lovely as it is to spend quality time together as a family," he says with a nearly-straight face, "I fear I must get to work. Enjoy your morning," he tells Loki, who smiles and nods. "And Thor, the western treasury head is stopping by to go over this quarter's granary quotas," the king explains brightly, like it's the most fascinating thing in the world. "You are of course more than welcome to join us."

Anything to escape further review of his sex life... by his own mother. "I would be most happy to attend, of course" Thor confirms. He has no doubt he sounds utterly sincere; he is, after all.

~

"Make no mistake, my son," Odin leads off as they walk together to the treasury offices. "I am naught but pleased to see the two of you getting along so well. It was a big change for you, a big thing to ask, and I am proud of you. Both of my sons, gold and blue, have come a long way these past months." He claps a strong hand on Thor's shoulder. "That said, however, I do believe my life to be complete without adding a clear mental image of the two of you in bed."

Thor laughs. And reddens; he can feel his face heating. Indeed, he does have to agree. "Loki is quite a sight, though," he teases. "Perhaps you know not what you are missing."

Odin snorts. "The way he dresses, I assure you; I know I am missing very little."

"Are you ogling my husband, father," Thor asks, smirking.

Odin shakes his head, still laughing. "I fear knowing Laufey all these many years has put me off the Jotnar entirely. Still, I do have eyes; as Laufey’s people go, yours indeed makes quite a pleasant view."
Thor simply cannot believe they are having this conversation. Cannot. "So, when is the treasury head expected," he asks, positively aching to change the subject.

"He is not expected, actually," Odin says with a smile. "I merely wanted a chance to speak with my son. Alone."

Thor groans. Not more of this! "Why, I ask you," he demands, "is what goes on in my chambers so incredibly newsworthy?"

"Is it? I must confess I had not noticed." Odin's tone is all chilly business now. "Instead, it is the casket of which I wish to speak."

_The casket. That is even better._ "And what of it, father," Thor inquires, abruptly feeling a little dizzy.

"Does Prince Loki intend to seize it for his people?"

The path ahead is abruptly steep and treacherous. "Loki has not shared with me any plans of the sort." Thor chooses his words carefully. "He wishes to better his people, but not by war."

Odin gives him an appraising look. "And what do you think of his plans; of his _wishes_?"

Thor frowns. "I think I should hear Loki out and work with him to reach an agreement that serves everyone."

"And can you do that, Thor, without sacrificing Asgard?"

~

The young soldier is fast, if not particularly skilled. Their sparring is giving Thor a healthy workout. The kid feints and then levels a two-handed swing at his ribs. It doesn't connect, but only misses by the smallest of margins.

"Take a break," Thor tells his training partner. "Get yourself some water." He turns to fetch a drink of his own, wiping his grimy face on his arm, only to spot his husband loitering along the rail. Gods, Loki is attractive; Thor isn't sure he will ever be shocked by that. He strolls over, takes his husband firmly by the jaw, and kisses Loki enthusiastically. And then again, just because he can.

~

_Laufey._ King Laufey is coming to visit, both his other sons in tow, with next to no warning. Eh, so be it. If Jotunheim's king wants to check up on his youngest, let him; Thor refuses to be intimidated. He has Loki's loyalty, and Loki's love, and those two things are all that matters.

Thor swallows down his unease and teases his husband gently. "You have me wrapped right around your shapely blue little finger," he tells Loki... and nothing could be more true.

~

The Jotunheim contingent arrives just past nightfall. Helblindi, of course, had made fast friends of at least three noisy, smoky pubs when he'd been in Asgard for the wedding; it hardly comes as a shock to find he wants nothing more than to become promptly and thoroughly reacquainted. Byleistr tags along, laughing. "My brother does what he wants to do," he explains. "Father spoils him terribly."

Normally Thor might point out a certain familial resemblance. Now, though, he feels both defensive of and possessive of his husband.
They're a little tipsy already. When Helblindi comments on Loki's skimpy clothing and plants a solid slap on his brother's firm rump, something powerfully territorial boils rapidly up in Thor.

He hauls Loki up onto his own thighs, glaring past one blue shoulder at his grinning brother-in-law, and sets to massaging away the hot handprint. Loki purrs and nuzzles happily, which serves to further encourage Thor to give way to instinct; with his free hand he tips Loki's chin up and kisses him.

Oh, yes, it seems his husband likes that too. Very much so. In a few short moments they are kissing passionately, with a degree of sloppy fervor the likes of which they normally save for the privacy of their own chambers.

Even with Helblindi's rousing catcalls, it's hard to stop. Thor's breeches pinch uncomfortably; he doesn't even dare sneak a peek at his husband's condition.

Byleistr thumps a big palm on the table. Helblindi actually obeys right away with the noise; perhaps there indeed is a bit more to the Jotun royal pecking order than meets the eye.

The pair of blue-skinned princes, led once again by Byleistr, raise their heavy tankards in toast. Thor cheerfully joins in, toasting his husband with unbridled enthusiasm. When Loki instead raises his flagon to Thor, Thor's heart leaps; it takes all he's got not to kiss Loki soundly once more.

~

All in all it's an entertaining evening. Loki's brothers are great storytellers; Byleistr, especially, has them laughing so hard their stomach muscles cramp horribly. And while Helblindi's stories tend to be a little meaner, a little more funny at the youngest prince's expense, Loki seems unfazed and laughs as hard as his brothers. It's not Thor's family, really, and not his call; he defers and lets his husband take the lead.

In retrospect he should perhaps have been more than a bit less quick to let Loki lead when it came to the drinking, though, Thor can't help but think - as much or as little as he can think at all - as they all make their staggering, stumbling way off to bed.

~

Thor wakes abruptly and unpleasantly - from a confusing-but-incredibly-arousing dream about Loki and odd sexual acrobatics, as best he can remember... which, just now, isn't very well - to find the sun scorching his eyes even through closed lids and dwarves tap-dancing in his skull. When he tries to speak his voice is hoarse and faint. Gods. He is so, so screwed.

He remembers coming home, more or less. He seems to have managed to undress. Quick inspection of his throbbing right hand reveals a ring of bruises on the fleshy portion of the palm; a ring oddly matched to the arch of Loki's teeth.

A wave of nausea hits him then and Thor groans. Whatever happened, he can only hope Loki doesn't remember... as he is entirely not up to a fight just now.

When he steals a look over at his husband, though, his worry fades; he is reasonably certain Loki feels just as rough as he does. Fighting does not appear to be on the morning’s agenda. Loki has his own head clamped in his blue hands and is wincing and groaning at every least sound or movement.

Thor has to assume magic isn't an option, when it comes to hangover cures, or Loki would have cured at least himself already. Still, horrible as he has to ask-
-and is startled out of his disappointment by none other than Helblindi. Helblindi, who is clearly feeling far better than he has any right to be... and who is enjoying rubbing it in as well.

And who should not be here, in the royal chambers.

Helblindi is even less easily-tolerated with a hangover than he is normally, which is truly saying something, but Thor refuses to let himself be embarrassed by his obnoxious blue brother-in-law. In fact, he seizes the opportunity to get in a good, anything-but-private Loki-groping he might well otherwise have had to forego.

There was a time when this would have bothered him. Nowadays, though, Thor is amply proud of what he shares with Loki and is all too happy to show it off, hangover or no hangover.

After all, even a killer headache can't lessen the pleasure of nibbling his husband's shapely neck, especially in front of such a perfect audience.

Unfortunately, Helblindi's mouth can. With a lifetime of experience to draw upon, the eldest prince knows exactly where to strike; he has Loki in the baths puking in record time.

~

"Leave him be," the Jotnar prince advises him when Thor staggers to his feet and makes to follow Loki. "Trust me, he will be fine. He truly will," Helblindi assures him as Thor hesitates. "This is far, far from the first time he has managed to drink himself ill. Look," he goes on, "you probably think I do not like you. But you should realize that – as, among my people, it is no secret – I am an- an acquired taste, I think you would term it."

Thor inclines his head. "Speak your piece, then."

"I love my baby brother very much. He is most dear to me, and to Father and Byleistr both." He smiles. "And, when father first unveiled his plan, I must admit I did greatly worry about your union." He gestures towards Thor. "About the effect you, and the situation, would have on our Loki. I feared for both his health and his safety here in Asgard."

Thor nods. It's a fair observation, and a fair concern. His friends were equally troubled, initially, after all.

"But now, after spending time with my brother and watching the two of you together? I am most pleased, Prince Thor. He is well and happy. He loves you, as deeply and truly as I love my grog." Helblindi smiles again. "Maybe even more so, although I must admit I am not certain that is even possible. And, while I surely cannot read you like I do my kin, I would be willing to wager you have become passing fond of him as well."

"And, were you to do so, you would be greatly underestimating me," Thor corrects. "For I have become far more than passing fond of Loki. So," he adds with a smirk, "be careful how you wager as you may yet lose. And do not think your status as a guest will protect your purse from irreparable damage. You are but family to me now."

Byleistr, who had been quietly listening without comment, laughs at Thor’s last remark. "It seems you have won yourself another friend, brother. What does that make it now? Three?"

They all laugh, heartily, and Thor feels a little better despite his throbbing head. "So," he tries, "what really brings the big blue contingent here to visit? Yes, you love your brother – and I am sure your father loves Loki as well – but why here, and why now?"
Something passes quickly between the two Jotnar. “We do not ask things like that of our king” Helblindi replies. “When father says we are off to the golden kingdom, we just fall into single file behind him and do as we are told.”

Byleistr snorts. “Do not pay Helblindi any mind, Thor. He has never once done as he was told, not in his entire life. But, yes, this trip was wholly King Laufey’s idea. We do not often get the chance to go off-realm in peacetime, so we jump at any opportunity that does manage to present itself.”

They are not telling the whole truth; Thor is certain of it. He is not at his best, though, and there is no reason to start the day off with a ruckus. If nothing is forthcoming at this morning’s repast, he will see what he can pry out of Loki later. When it comes to his husband, Thor knows he has far more in the way of weaponry at his disposal.

The sound of running water from the bathroom fills the chamber. Helblindi and Byleistr groan and get slowly – and a little stiffly, it seems, but perhaps that’s wishful thinking on Thor’s part – to their feet. “We are all expected at the morning table,” Helblindi reminds. “Go help Loki wash up, and we will meet you down there. Do not tarry too long,” he advises Thor as the two of them turn to leave, “or we will be forced to gossip about you.”

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“Ugh, gods, have they finally gone?” Loki leans on both hands on the long stone countertop, still looking very much under the weather. “I had quite forgotten how it is to have not a moment’s peace. I cannot honestly say I miss it.”

“They have headed off to find the rest of the family.” Thor twists the tap, splashing his own face with cold water. “In my experience, it is not wise – at least where my own family is concerned – to keep everyone waiting any longer than necessary.”

Loki groans. “No, you are right. I would love to crawl back into bed and die, but it would indeed be most unwise.” He sighs loudly. “Sometimes I think we should run away, somewhere no one can find us.”

It’s a nice idea, but ultimately not possible. “And I, as well,” Thor tells him wistfully. “Alas, I fear that is not our fate.”

At the word fate Loki frowns. “Let us not talk of fate this day. I am not in the mood for doom and prophesy.”

~

It is only the menfolk at the table; Frigga’s place is not even set, meaning she has chosen to take the morning’s meal at her loom. It is not that the queen can’t talk politics; she absolutely can, and regularly does. There are times, though, when Odin prefers to handle things on his own. Unlike their children, Kings Laufey and Odin appear cheerfully well-rested. There’s a little good-natured ribbing, and a lot of boring talk. It’s dull and dry and painful.

Thor, who would always rather take action than talk about it, quickly finds a hangover does nothing whatsoever to make peacetime strategizing more appealing. His mind wanders; he tries to pay attention, he does, but more and more he’s distracted by the warm, near-naked body of his very-very-close-at-hand husband. When Loki offers the least bit of interest in return, whispering endearments against his ear, Thor cannot help but kiss his husband dangerously. Enthusiastically, too; very much so.
Which serves to put an end to the boring talk, if nothing else.

~

After breaking the night’s fast, despite the already-late start, Thor and Loki’s siblings manage to sneak back to their respective chambers for another hour or two of sleep. Loki has gone off with his own father, and Odin has a private meeting to conduct, so no one is around to be any the wiser.

When the three princes reconvene midday, they are all quite a bit more lively; Thor can’t help but think his brothers-in-law might have greeted the morning feeling a bit worse than they’d chosen to let on.

To keep his mind off what Loki and Laufey might be up to, and Helblindi’s off his little brother’s sex life, Thor suggests they head down to the training grounds and spar. The Jotnar princes take up staves; both of them need a short while to catch on but, soon enough, they are more than holding their own.

It’s actually quite a bit of fun, albeit fun of a bruising nature. They smack at one another with gleeful abandon, jumping and blocking, parrying and spearing. What Thor lacks in sheer size, he makes up for in heat-tolerance – which, though he wisely opts to say nothing, probably explains why the Jotun people prefer to sit home and let those who would fight their kind come to them.

That, or they raid the colder parts of other realms… although such an act of defiance last happened long, long ago, before the end – before the start, really - of the last major war. It’s hard not to wonder, though, if they would do the same again had they the option. Loki, of course, assures him they would not.

More than anything, Thor hopes Loki isn’t wrong.

A wandering mind has no place on the field of battle and, sure enough, Thor picks up several painful bruises in quick succession once his concentration starts to slip. He laughs it off, joking about being a good host and treating his guests properly, but he can’t get his head back in the game and it’s a relief when Loki’s brothers opt to call it quits as well.

~

“How do you stand this heat,” Byleistr grouses as they walk back to the palace proper. “It is like sparring on the surface of the sun.”

Thor laughs. “I suppose it is, compared to Jotunheim.” He shrugs. “I am used to it. I know Loki is still struggling a bit, though,” he adds.

Helblindi snickers. “Loki could well just be looking for an excuse to walk around naked,” he says gleefully. “You are a dream come true for him, Thor – he has only ever wanted someone to follow him about, endlessly, drooling.”

“If that is all he wants from life,” Thor teases back, “then he must feel quite fulfilled. Seriously, though,” he adds “he is stunning. Especially hot and dirty and fresh from the stables, or the training grounds.”

“Off-realm tastes are so strange,” Helblindi tells his brother.

“Indeed,” Byleistr concurs. “You would fit in perfectly here yourself, brother dear.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

In which Frigga smells a rat, and makes the best of it.

Sorry yet again for the slow, short update. Between babes!verse and work it has proved hard to fit this in.

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Loki

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The longer he thinks about it - and he thinks about it long, long indeed in the hours and days following King Laufey's return to Jotunheim - the more certain Loki is raw deceit will fail. He has laid far too much groundwork, preparing for what he expected would be a slow, drawn-out game, along lines of establishing trust and demonstrating well-intentioned behavior. And in the process of so doing, he has been entirely too honest by short-game standards.

In essence, he has backed himself into a bit of a tight corner. Too many people know he has seen the casket... and some – even one constitutes too many here - know he has lusted after the casket. Too many, again, know his end goal is to find a way to see the ancient relic safely returned to its ancestral home. Peacefully delivered home, too, in a way that does his adoptive realm no ill, and that is a commitment he has made to his husband. To top it off, as if the rest of this wasn’t more than enough already, he's made it painfully (and honestly; until a few days it was utterly and unfailingly true) clear he is in no hurry to get the thing there.

Except now he is in a hurry, relatively speaking (yes, in both senses of the word), and he’s caught out with no good explanation for his abrupt change of heart. Of plan. Of direction.

It's quite a tight corner into which he's backed himself indeed.

~

Loki goes for a long walk in the gardens, on a cooler morning some ten days after Laufey's visit, far earlier than is his wont. Leaves and flowers still drip and sparkle with dew; birds are just beginning to stir. Thor, no doubt, is snoring away happily; that, sadly, is exactly what Loki would most enjoy doing just now as well. And then perhaps waking to a leisurely round of morning coupling, before drifting back off to sleep.

Not today.

It's worth every last little bit of suffering, though, because - halfway to the orchard, sun barely up and soft grass still fresh and damp beneath his bare feet - he finally has a workable idea: Let them think the choice is theirs. He will simply tell Frigga, given that she's at once the clearest-headed and the most understanding member of the royal family, what Laufey recently shared about- about his former (and yet also his forever, in ways Loki cannot hope to do justice) home realm. He will convey his
message sadly, as if he is worrying (which of course he is, even if his reasons are perhaps not quite as will be implied), and then let her come to her own conclusions. He will trust that her conclusions will be the correct ones. Or, at least, the convenient ones.

And if they are not, if she draws some meaning that stands at cross purposes to his own, Loki will need an alternate plan in an awfully great hurry... but he’s confident he can spin one if needed; he is an adept tale-teller, after all, even here among the Aesir. More than that, though, he has nothing but the utmost faith in his own ability to birth and nurture his idea. He must, therefore he can and will.

In the orchard he reaches up and touches not one but several plump golden fruits, running cool fingers over their flawless skin. He does not pick one. He is taking well more than enough risk already.

~

"My father is most troubled on behalf of his people. Of our people," he corrects without even waiting for Frigga to call him out on his unfortunate choice of wording. "As hot as Asgard’s summer has been... Jotunheim’s, as I am now led to understand it, has been nothing short of frigid."

Frigga's normally-smooth brow furrows. "You mean there has been no thaw," she asks, "and no retreat of the ice packs?"

Loki shakes his head sadly. "Not from what my father told me during his recent visit, no. The whole of the realm is still hard afrost. The very soil remains frozen," - Loki shivers, which is handy, though he’d be hard put to explain exactly why it comes over him the way it does - "and the rivers do not run. The season draws to a close soon, and from what Laufey claims it is as if summer never came at all."

"Eternal winter," Frigga muses. "And did your father perchance share with you why this might have come to pass?" Her tone is still neutral; curious, perhaps, and faintly worried, but not angry or alarmed.

Good.

"I do not think he yet knows, my queen," he offers, completely honest now. "It is a rare thing, yes, but not yet so rare as to be unheard of."

"I am sure such a turn of events is mightily unpleasant; that verily goes without saying," Frigga concedes. "But, do tell me; what might the full impact be?"

"After a Jotunheim winter stores - of foodstuffs, and fresh water - are greatly depleted," he tells her, gesturing across their well-provisioned table with his gleaming golden fork. "And summer is a time for replenishment. Fishing is impossible when the rivers stay frozen, however, and what little plant material we might normally manage to cultivate cannot sprout in dried-out, deep-frozen soil. The summer season should be a time when we put up those provisions we need in order to survive the next winter." He blinks and clears his throat. "Without such a chance to restock, many will not survive the coming season. The aged and the very young, especially."

She nods. "The weak will have the hardest time of it, yes." And then she leans close, almost uncomfortably so, and Loki’s heart skips several beats. "I do not doubt the essence of your story, Prince Loki of Jotunheim, nor your sincerity." She pauses; he sits motionless, as effectively frozen as his home realm. "However, you must always keep in mind I am no fool. King Laufey wants the casket returned now, does he not? And he has put you on a fresh mission to fetch it."
When Loki neither moves nor speaks, Frigga continues. “Yours was a good plan. Creative, well-crafted, and smoothly executed. But despite your valiant efforts I am not quite convinced. Consequently there is no point,” she advises, tucking his hair behind his ear with a bejeweled finger, “in continuing to attempt to play me.” She leans closer still, close enough to easily kill him if that was her intent. “I guarantee you will not win.”

She sits back, then, and forks up a dainty bite of meat.

The implications are chilling. There is nothing he can say. Loki concentrates instead on maintaining his now-fragile cool and simply waits for her to continue. Indeed, there is really nothing else he can do.

“What if I told you I would help you see this through,” she asks quietly. “Would you be honest with me then?”

“But why would you ever do such a thing,” he blurts out. She is not one to act frivolously and he’s sure she has her reasons; still, for the life of him, he can’t yet divine them.

“Ah-ah,” she chastises, expression serious, as she waggles a disciplining finger in front of his face. “I asked for your honesty. I did not promise you mine.”

Frigga

It’s not the timing she expected, or even quite the mechanism, but she can work with it just the same. Frigga smiles to herself, carefully maintaining her stern exterior; Loki’s play for her sympathy was skilled enough, but he is deeply afraid of something. She can feel it.

She sits back, plucking a small handful of grapes from the bunch nearest her plate. “Well?” She already knows the answer – he is both too fearful and too tempted by her offer to continue his lying now – but it will be good for him to be made to tell it.

Frigga watches Loki closely; he squirms. Not literally – he is still, still as a statue – but she sees it just as plainly as the food spread before her. This role he is forced to play leaves him profoundly uncomfortable.

She would not have it any other way.

“At the heart of it I want the same thing you want, Loki,” she explains after he’s suffered a good long time in silence. “I want peace between our realms. I want Jotunheim strong and healthy enough to serve as an ally, and I want a return to long-abandoned allegiance.” She spreads her hands, gesturing the length of the family table. “And most of all I want my family – and that includes you – safe and happy. If I give you this thing, tell me, will I not have bought myself the clearest conceivable route to seeing all of these wishes fulfilled?”

Loki considers briefly, then nods. He looks young and vulnerable just now, and she’s abruptly reminded that – while he may be an accomplished statesman, and both a great gift and an equal danger – he is her son’s dearly beloved.

“Fear not,” she assures him, “When I say I will help you, I do mean it. If anyone can sell your argument to the Allfather, it is I.”

He swallows hard. “And what price would you name?”
She should resist – she really, really should – but he is so earnest and so sincere. She simply cannot help herself. Or, if she can, she makes no effort to try. “I would ask that you give my son an heir.”

His reaction is a beautiful, beautiful thing. Loki chokes on his drink and turns the strangest shade of purple Frigga has ever seen. To his credit, though, the prince says nothing… although perhaps that’s simply because he cannot. Either way his expression is beyond priceless, but also horrified, and she cannot continue her jest. “I am sorry, Loki; that was needlessly cruel of me,” she offers, trying to assuage him. “I would simply ask that you do all you can to help keep Asgard safe from those in Jotunheim who might not yet view us kindly.” She laughs – even with all that, he still looks utterly stricken. “Loki, truly, I would never ask you to birth a child against your will.”

He visible struggles with something for close to a minute, during which time she helps herself to more bread and oil so as to give him the space he so clearly needs.

"You do know I am not intersex, right," he asks at long last, and it is not what she expected him to say at all. "You- you know that is an untruth spread by Jotunheim's enemies," he goes on, voice shaking, "and that we are no more likely to be both and nothing than are your Aesir kin."

Frigga is not sure she had ever seen him this distressed, at least not since he and Thor had first settled in. "Look, I am truly sorry," she starts. "I sought merely to catch you off-guard and to perhaps poke a little fun. I did not mean-."

Loki cuts in before she can finish. "Tell me," he stresses, eyes wide with something close to horror. "You did not think me-."

"Of course not," she hastens to confirm. "I have known your sex for many years. One must keep tabs on the children of one's fellow ruling houses," she explains in the face of his even more shocked expression. "What is it? What is it that has you so shaken?"

He opens and closes his mouth several times, then gives up without speaking and takes a sip of his juice. "I thought perhaps I had finally been shown the truth behind my welcome here. And I- your request- it is simply not a favor I can honor."

So this is it; he is ever wary, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Frigga reaches across the table to lightly squeeze his clenched blue hand, pointedly ignoring the way he flinches. "That has never been on the table, not from the very beginning." She smiles as warmly as she can. "You are welcome because you are my son's husband, and the – amply skilled, I might add - diplomatic representative of one of the Nine. But more so than any of that," she goes on, giving his hand another friendly squeeze, "you are welcome because I most enjoy your company."

He still looks sharply wary, and she feels an unexpectedly strong stab of guilt. "So," she says brightly, "put that worry completely out of your mind and tell me: can you deliver on my real request?"

He takes another sip, still visibly struggling to compose himself. "Of course. I will not knowingly bring you, or Thor, or the whole of Asgard to harm. But - my queen? - surely this is an actual concern. Thor must produce an heir eventually, must he not?"

Frigga grins, at the rather ridiculous thought of Thor raising a child just now rather than at Loki’s continued fear. She hopes he can recognize the difference. "Oh, knowing Thor, I suspect anything along those lines lies a long, long distance off. And yours is a very powerful sorcery, is it not? If and when the time comes, I am wholly certain the two of you will come up with something."
He is still reeling so hard from the shock of it all, of everything that just transpired, that - when Asgard’s queen asks him how he envisions she can best be of assistance with the casket situation - he cannot quite manage to formulate a useful answer.

"Do you wish me to smooth the way with Odin," she suggests, as if his silence is natural and expected. "Because I can do that. How much time do you suppose we have?"

Loki is not used to having viable, willful co-conspirators. Byleistr is too timid and too moral - he invariably insists on taking the high road, to the point Loki long since gave up including him at all - and Helblindi is a hopeless tattler who loves nothing more than to see his baby brother face down in the shit.

He really does not know how to play this as but one of an intentional team. He is not a team player, after all; no, he tricks to get his way.

*Then again: so, clearly, does she.* In fact, thanks to her trickery, he has not yet completely ceased his shaking.

"I think we have a standard month, maybe slightly more." He holds up a stopping hand as her face twists with concern. "Not to get the thing there - that can wait until the fading days of autumn - but just to show movement. To reassure my father there is a progressing plan in place," he explains. "That in and of itself will will give me enough to work with."

"Thor," Frigga exclaims, looking abruptly startled; Loki spins, frantic - *if Thor heard even a portion of this conversation, there will be much trouble afoot* - only to see his husband just striding in across the hall. "What brings you here," the queen inquires. "I thought you were taking your morning meal early and then spending your workday with the King."

"I was. I am," he corrects himself hastily, “but I felt the need for a short break." He stops at the head of the table, grinning. "And what are the loves of my life up to? The two of you should see your faces," he adds, laughing loudly. "Seldom has either of you looked so very guilty. And, with my husband in particular, I must say the bar has been set quite high."

Loki turns back to Frigga, grinning dangerously. "It is no cause for concern. Thor dearest. Your mother and I were merely discussing your sworn duty to bring forth an heir."

He must admit it: As difficult a morning as this has been, Thor’s choked spluttering is worth everything he has endured thus far.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Frigga apologizes (for Coney!) and Odin lays down an ultimatum.

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Thor

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Once the initial shock wears off, Thor realizes two things. Both - that there is clear strain in his husband's lovely face, meaning perhaps this casual morning meal is not nearly so casual as it might seem, and that the two of them really do need to have a conversation (or fifty) around this whole heir matter - are subjects he would much rather take up with Loki in private, so he makes careful mental note and sets the whole business aside.

Instead he gets his glass of juice - and his own coughing - back under control, wipes his mouth, and grins. "What was that, dearest; did I hear you say you wanted to make an heir? A princeling? Right here amidst the morning feast," he teases, pushing experimentally on the table with both palms, "in front of mother?"

Loki and Frigga both laugh. Still, there is a palpable air of coolness between them Thor hasn't noticed before. "Joking aside," he asks, "is something amiss?"

Frigga smiles, but to his practiced eye her good humor seems more than a bit forced. Loki's reaction is even more telling, too, in that he cannot even look his husband in the face. "Did you two fight," Thor asks, mildly incredulous. Loki likes the queen, after all, and Frigga... knows better.

"Of course not," Loki starts off, but Frigga cuts in before he can finish his sentence.

"Prince Loki came to me seeking a favor. In trying to impress upon him the serious nature of his request, I overstepped. He is being gracious now, but I must assume he is still rather thoroughly - and justifiably, I must admit - disenchanted with me." She touches Loki's hand lightly. "Going forward, I will pay better mind to this simple fact: Each of us bears a considerable burden. You have my word," she promises, “and my apology.”

~

"What choice would you make, Thor, if the proverbial shoe were on the other foot?"

"Beg pardon?" Thor is attempting to enjoy a before-dinner stroll with his husband, but Loki seems off and distracted. Just now this sort of talk really doesn't feel right. It simply isn't the proper time for a serious conversation, Thor judges, despite the relative seclusion of the orchard, so he plays dumb instead.

"If we had to leave here and live in my realm. In Jotunheim. To stay together," Loki clarifies, enunciating clearly.

Evidently, then, when it comes to the timing of meaty conversation his husband feels altogether differently.
"Would you choose me, or Asgard," Loki asks when Thor hesitates a bit too long before responding.

"That is a very complex question," Thor stalls, trying to puzzle out where this might be coming from.

"Actually, no, it is not," Loki disagrees stiffly, looking out across the rows of gnarled old trees. "In fact, it could hardly be more simple." He stops, still looking to the valley below, chin up and hands on hips. "We each have our respective missions, you and I. You are really the one intended to achieve lasting peace," he explains, somewhat unnecessarily, "and I am meant to - under all the pretense and the pretty lies - return the casket to my people."

Thor nods, even though his husband is not looking in his direction. "Yes, I realize that. I fail to see the connection."

Loki sighs. "What then? When we have achieved our respective ends, what then?"

"Then we live happily ever after, having found some magical means of filling the palace with cheerful, lovely pale blue, purple-eyed children... now that mother has so kindly informed us we need to? That's how the story plays out in his own head. He doesn't dare say any such thing, though; Loki, tense and angry, seems of a mind to crush his dreams if but given half an opportunity. "Then we make a life together," he says instead. "Why? Do you not think that so?"

"I think I am expendable," Loki counters. "Disposable. You are the crown prince, meaning you are better-protected, but what charm will a tarnished blue trophy hold once all is said and done?"

That catches Thor off-guard. "You are no blue trophy to me," he insists, "tarnished or otherwise. You are my beloved, my husband." He turns then, and reaches to cup Loki's jaw. "Look at me. I know we got off to an inauspicious start but we are well past that now. I love you. You belong with me." When Loki just stares him down, unblinking, Thor feels abruptly afraid. "Are you saying you no longer care for me in return?" Has he lost Loki's favor so quickly, so easily?

"Hardly. But of what interest is our love to kings?"

"My father would not cast you out," Thor exclaims, as if talking confidently of such a thing can make it so. In reality, Loki does raise a fair point; the prince and the casket could be considered offsetting bets. Collateral, one for the other. Once the one is gone, the other becomes a lia-… "And your father would never allow it," Thor offers, cutting off his own unfortunate line of reasoning and steadfastly pretending he is not reassuring himself as much as he is Loki.

His husband laughs, bitterly. "Actually, he has two far more useful sons. Once this is done, I mean. I scarcely think he would risk war with Asgard over me… or fail to sacrifice me if war were to come to us unbidden."

"I cannot let that happen," Thor says. It is unfathomable, pure and simple. "I fully intend to spend the rest of my life with you, or as much of it as you can and will tolerate. And I anticipate," he adds, with fervor, "that my life shall extend into the future quite some distance yet."

"And do you really think," Loki asks, studying Thor's face closely, "that you have such power?"

"I can call down the very lightning," he reminds his husband. "I know I have such power."

"Well, one can scarcely fault you for lack of ego," Loki points out, finally close to cracking a smile again. "But, all that aside, you have yet to answer my original question."

Thor sighs. "Here, let us sit," he suggests, gesturing to a rock outcropping nearby. Somewhat to his surprise, Loki – without argument – perches neatly atop the nearest stone. "I do not want us to be
parted. In fact, I will kill the one who tries to make it so, unless we part by your will.” He takes his husband’s cool blue hands in his own. “And if it be your will that parts us, I will be heartbroken. Now, I will be honest with you – the idea of leaving Asgard permanently is not one I have really ever considered. Too, I suspect anything that might render you disposable – it hurts to say it! – “here would leave one or both of us quite unwelcome in Jotunheim as well. But if that is what it takes,” he assures Loki, lacing their fingers together and holding tight, “then that is what I will and must do.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he reinforces firmly. “I simply will not be parted from you. Woe be it to anyone who tries.”

Loki’s eyes narrow; despite the full force of Thor’s genuine enthusiasm, his husband still manages to look quite skeptical. “And what of an heir?”

What of it? They have been together all this time and not breathed a word about it so much as once. “Where is this coming from? Was this what mother started,” he asks. He has never known Loki to want children.

“She did mention it, yes, but truth be told it should have occurred to the both of us previously.” Loki frowns. “How long will your people tolerate a union that does not bear fruit?”

“What say have the people of Asgard in our affairs,” Thor retorts, but it is indeed a valid concern; the very same one which dawned on him earlier. “Suppose I felt differently, though – inclined towards starting a family, which I assure you I am not… but now I am curious – what options have we at our disposal?”

“Suicide,” Loki says, but he’s grinning now. Finally. “I jest, I jest. I actually do not know, not for certain. I have heard tell of powerful sorcerers among my people shape-shifting for extended periods. I myself have never tried – I can cast images, and have shape-shifted briefly when I find myself in need of flying, for example. But that is all.”

“Wait,” Thor stops his husband, incredulous. “You can fly?”

~

It’s amazing. Astounding. Fascinating. Asgard is of course a magical place, and Thor has seen many things, but this is almost beyond believing.

He has made – well, asked that, as Loki has repeatedly complied with seeming good grace – his husband transform into a stunning array of beasts and birds. Loki has run though the orchard as a lovely black horse, similar in form and markings to Star. He has chased Thor as a tiger, a choice that, despite being Thor’s own idea, proved very nearly a dangerous misjudgment of the sort that requires the best healers. He has flown as an owl and a lark and a raven rivaling Odin’s own.

Thor cannot watch this enough. He cannot get enough, pushing for more and more until Loki is gasping for air and limp with exhaustion. Even then, he would observe longer if he could. If it weren’t for his husband leaning doubled over against the rocks, ribcage heaving and skin glossy with sweat, Thor would cheerfully watch Loki shift shapes forever.

“Please,” his husband pants at last, “I cannot keep this up. It is apparently,” he goes on, voice raspy, “far more work than it appears, given that you clearly think it easy.”

“Shh,” Thor soothes. “If you need to stop, so be it. I just cannot- this is so intriguing. How did I not know you could do such incredible things?”
Loki laughs weakly. “Turning into animals is little more than a so-called parlor trick in Jotunheim. I would never dare turn into an ice beast – they are far from the brightest of creatures – and anything smaller is simply a liability. It is a child’s game, nothing more.”

“Well, I am stunned. You are amazing.” Thor does not want his husband thinking about smaller or liability, not now. Not in the face of all this wonder. Not ever.

~

That night, after dinner, they rest comfortably – Loki reclining against his chest, sleepy and warm - on the balcony in Asgard’s early autumn twilight. “What happened this morning,” Thor asks, jostling his husband gently, “between you and my mother?”

“My father has asked for the casket’s return. Sooner, that is, rather than the later we both know I’ve been expecting.” Loki twists to kiss Thor’s shoulder. “Jotunheim has had no summer to speak of this year, and Laufey claims many will die if the relic comes not home. Queen Frigga has agreed to speak with King Odin about it, on my behalf. That last was a bit hard-won, let us say.”

Thor’s stomach sinks. “So that explains your sudden concern over your station,” he says sadly. They had not planned on being at this juncture any time soon. Everything he’d been considering theoretically is suddenly very real and very- well, very frightening. “I meant what I said earlier, dearest,” he is quick to assure his husband. “Whatever it takes, should it come to that, I am staying with you. As I said before, none will part us.”

“When that is sweet and noble of you,” Loki says dryly, “It would be quite the challenge for you to deliver. Consequently, I am actually hoping it does not come to anything approaching that.”

“Because you’re going to shape-shift and make us an heir,” Thor teases.

“Because I’m going to kill you and feed Odin’s ravens your body,” Loki growls, elbowing him in the side.

It’s a tactical error – or perhaps not – because Loki is clearly too tired to wrestle. Thor flips his husband off the lounge and onto the stone floor, pinning him easily.

And once he has Loki down, Thor makes the very best of it; he spends the next hour thoroughly demonstrating his abiding love in every way he can.

~

“Mother, you should know,” he advises, “that Loki and I strategize regularly. He has kept me apprised of his plans for the casket.” It may not be exactly true – Thor would not be surprised to find his husband keeping secrets from the both of them, really – but at this juncture he cares not. “There is no need for you to keep your conversations secret from me.”

Frigga frowns. “Actually, though you perhaps have cause to doubt my sincerity, I am pleased to find he trusts you so,” she tells him. “I can only assume he told you of my own plans to speak with your father, then.”

Thor nods. “He did. How goes that?”

She sighs. “The right time has not yet come upon us. You know how he can be,” she says, shrugging, and she’s right – he does. “Until he is in the proper mood, telling him will do far more harm than good.”
“What happens once he knows,” Thor asks, worried.

Frigga laughs. “If I knew that, my son, I would scarce need to ask him, now, would I?”

~

"As I told you earlier, once my usefulness has come to an end, I become a problem rather than a means to a solution." Loki twists to look at Thor, cocking an eyebrow. "Surely even you are not so blind to politics as to have missed the fact that problems tend to disappear."

Thor sighs. "I assure you I am not. But, as I told you earlier, I will not allow such a thing to come to pass. Now, enough of this. Tell me, what is it that you must do?"

Loki settles back in against Thor’s front. "My father expects to need the casket’s help within a month’s time... two at the very outside, and even that would require much making of excuses."

Thor nuzzles into his husband’s hair. "Forgive me, but that sounds simple enough. What is the hold-up?"

"Not dying?" Loki sounds a little exasperated. "A month is not nearly time enough to convince King Odin, not if all these many years of peace and quiet have failed to so do." He wriggles. "I would have to take the thing. And Frodr would never allow that, even if the Destroyer somehow might."

Thor takes a deep breath. If it has to be, it has to be. "I can let you get it."

"You can what?" Loki jumps, striking one knee on the chaise arm as he hastens to turn around.

"I can let you get it," he repeats. "The Destroyer will not do me harm."

After a long pause, Loki leans in to kiss Thor gently. "You would do that for me," he asks, cool forehead resting on Thor’s much warmer one.

I would do anything for you, Thor thinks. "Of course," he says instead. He can feel Loki smiling against his mouth.

"Well, I appreciate that, but I hope your mother makes it so you do not have to."

~

For two straight weeks Thor joins Loki and Frigga for the morning meal, hoping for some small scrap of news about Odin. As far as he knows, Frigga is not aware Loki has shared the full and gory details of the- well, it’s more a dilemma than a plan with him. Still, Thor thinks, she knows enough. She may easily offer some small tidbit he’s able to decipher.

She doesn’t.

Loki does not seem unduly agitated. That said, he has been rather reluctant to discuss the whole topic recently, which does make Thor a little nervous. Especially considering perhaps half their available planning time has now passed... with no evidence whatsoever of progress being made.

~

The next week, Odin schedules several morning commitments with which he has no choice but to comply. When he arrives in his father’s office on morning of the third day, the King peers at him rather strangely. "I could not be better, why do you ask," Thor offers in response to Odin’s question.
"Did you not break your night’s fast with your mother, then," Odin inquires, and Thor feels his heart start to pound.

"I judged it too early," he tells his father. "What is it I missed?"

"What? Oh, nothing. I was but curious. Pay a nosy old man no mind."

Despite Odin's smile, Thor finds himself feeling anything but reassured.

~

Concentrating subsequently turns out to be just this side of impossible. The columns of figures swim before Thor's eyes, and more than once Odin has to gently remind him to pay attention. There's nothing to be done for it, either; Loki has once again been spending long days with the scholar Frodr, and this day he is to ride as well.

Bursting in upon the queen at her loom, too, is most ill-advised. Thor is no longer a child; he is a grown man now and is expected to behave accordingly.

He tries to comfort himself with the knowledge that, if something major had gone wrong, someone would have come for him. Someone would have let him know.

It works about as well as he expects; that is, it works not at all

~

Thor arrives back at his chambers for dinner before Loki has returned from the stables. Much as he knows he should try to relax, all he can manage is to pace to and fro.

When at last the door creaks open and Loki's sharp-edged blue face peeks in, Thor's stomach sinks unpleasantly.

Even through the sweat and grime of a turn at grooming Star, he can see it: *Loki has been crying.*

"Baby, what is it," he hurries to ask, scooping Loki into a tight hug despite his husband's protests. "I do not care if you are filthy. Just tell me what is going on. I have worried all day," he adds, knowing he probably sounds a little crazy, "ever since father looked at me funny."

"He did not tell you?" Loki's voice wavers.

"Worse, he denied there was anything to tell. But in matters like this I trust him not."

Loki pushes away and flees to the balcony. After a few moments of indecision - he doesn't want to make whatever this is worse, after all - Thor cautiously follows.

His husband sits at the foot of one of the lounges, face buried in his own slender, dirt-streaked hands. "Queen Frigga spoke with King Odin on my behalf," Loki says, stiffly formal. "He has conceded. Wait," he grits out, one hand snapping up, as Thor can't help but make an excited little noise. "On one condition, and one condition only: For the first six months, none but I may wield the casket. Beyond that, he will re-evaluate and announce a new decision."

Thor frowns. "But you have wanted nothing more than to wield the thing, no?" Why would that be bad? There is clearly something here he's missing.

And sure enough, Loki bristles. "Do you not get it? He has for all intents and purposes banished me, for at least six months and perhaps indefinitely, to Jotunheim."

"Aaaauuugh," Loki growls, voice sharp with frustration. "Banished. Kicked out. Sentenced. However I put it, it all means the same. I will be in Jotunheim, and you will be-."

"-following through with my commitment rather earlier than I expected," Thor finishes. If it must be done, it must.

"You really do not get it, do you," Loki snaps. "I will be in Jotunheim. You will be here."

That simply isn't an option. "No," Thor exclaims. "I will speak to father. Either I am going with you, or no one is going anywhere."

"But if I do not go, we will both of us have failed in our respective tasks," his husband protests. "And that will come to nothing good. You know this."

"Fine, then we shall both go. Hush. I will hear nothing different."

"If only your ears ruled the Nine, then," Loki calls after him as Thor stomps off in search of the king.

~

"I am sorry you feel that way, my son, but those are the conditions I offered Prince Loki," Odin says - for the fifteenth time. or the fiftieth - in that special tone of voice he saves for lectures. For lost causes. "While you need not like it, you must grant me my reasons. The choice to accept my terms or refuse them lies entirely with Loki," he continues over Thor's growls of protest, "and he must choose one option or the other. There is no third choice from which to select."

Thor is so angry - and so distraught - he can barely think. "And what says mother of this," he demands. Frigga cannot be willing to tolerate such nonsense. It is simply unthinkable, all of it.

"If I were you, Thor, I would be spending time with him now," Odin warns, ignoring his question completely. "Because when Loki does the right and courageous thing, and you are left languishing alone, you will regret having wasted precious minutes of your time together standing here yelling at your father."

Thor opens his mouth more than once to speak in haste, finally thinking the better of it. In the end he merely asks "and, if he were to accept your offer, when must Loki leave?"

"I have given him a fortnight. Use it wisely. Now, if you will excuse me,..." Odin trails off, nodding towards the throne room doors.

"Of course," Thor forces out through clenched teeth. He sketches a quick bow - this is the throne room, after all - before turning sharply on his heel and striding as fast as he can for the great arched doorway.

~

His husband looks up, face bright and eager, when Thor rejoins him on the balcony. Something in Thor's storm-cloud expression, though, crushes all the joy right out of Loki. It is an awful thing to see. "So he will not budge."

Thor shakes his head, full of sorrow. "I am truly sorry. His mind is made up, and it seems there is nothing either of us can do to change it."
Loki comes up with something of a work-around.

"You are no blue trophy to me," Thor claims, "tarnished or otherwise. You are my beloved, my husband." The look on his face is one of earnest concern. It is a look which prevails throughout the rest of their conversation… which would probably be sweet in some vague way, except that Loki is in no mood to tolerate sentiment.

His patience is put most strongly to the test once Thor makes it clear they should be considering King Laufey their keenest ally; no matter how his husband romanticizes the situation, conditions being what they are especially, there is simply no way his father has any interest in collecting two more mouths to feed. Two more bellies to fill.

No, there is no room for sentiment in Jotunheim; in the frozen realm, pragmatism alone prevails. Like it or not, the weak do not survive.

They finally manage to escape that topic without coming to blows, but Loki is endlessly full of ways in which to be contrary. He has been having awful dreams of late - dreams in which all the realms are laid to waste before him, at the end of the universe… the end of all things - and even during the daytime hours he cannot escape the sense of dread that covers everything like a foul fog. "How long will your people tolerate a union that does not bear fruit," he asks his husband, ultimately electing simply to trade one unpleasant topic for another. He cannot tolerate Thor’s unwarranted optimism; he just cannot. The way things are going, they will be lucky to come out the other end of this alive.

He almost succeeds in bringing Thor’s mood down to the appropriate level.

But then he errs, gravely, and lets slip that he can fly.

Flight is not something Loki has yet attempted here in Asgard. He can only assume the warm, moist air will prove both a blessing and a curse; less cold to battle, but such dense air to breathe. With that concern in mind, rather than taking to the air immediately, he opts to change first into something earthbound; a stallion.

Shape-shifting is complicated. Loki remains himself, to be sure, but his senses are heightened and his thought processes blurred. His normally-nimble intellect is weighed down by powerful instincts; gut reactions he can barely fight his way past.

It’s not that - as a horse - he thinks like a horse; not exactly. He still thinks like himself, but with a horse’s fears and needs and - in the case of a powerful male such as this - anger coloring everything. Distorting everything.
All that aside, though, being a horse is *fun* and he races about with boundless energy. Hooves thundering over the ground, he tears across the grass and through the orchard, dodging trees and leaping fallen branches. Afterwards, lathered and rather winded, he circles back to nuzzle Thor.

"Look at you! Are you not a fine creature," his husband tells him, no small degree of awe showing. "Here, let me scratch you."

Loki does not have it in him, Jotnar or horse, to pass up such an offer. And scratch Thor does, strong fingers digging in. All in all it feels just lovely.

They play that way a while, chasing after one another amidst the gnarled apple trees. Eventually, though, his husband apparently starts to become bored with their game. "You know," Thor tells him, grinning a bit dangerously, "you would make an amazing black panther. Or, no, perhaps a *tiger* instead. Can you do that? Can you shift into a big cat, darling?"

Loki’s Jotnar brain would doubtless have spotted this immediately for the bad idea it is. His horse self, though, is a little more daring. More reckless. Fortunately - while his tiger form is at least as fast as Thor and, so it seems, a far better climber - tigers don’t take to the skies via Mjolnir. His husband escapes in the end, winded but otherwise only slightly the worse for wear.

By now Loki feels (tiger-arrogant, and) comfortable with the idea of flying. He cycles through a nice selection of birds, expecting Thor to bore quickly of this as well.

His husband, ultimately, does no such thing. "Another! Another!" Thor claps big hands with childlike enthusiasm, over and over, until Loki has no choice but to land on the closest boulder. It's that or shift without any control whatsoever and fall clean out of the sky.

He leans, gasping for breath and shaking, against the huge rock. Loki cannot recall the last time he was this exhausted, and with little wonder; looking around at the lengthened shadows, he judges he's been in the air for hours. Thor looks nothing short of *enthralled*, though - his own cynical grousing aside, Loki is far more flattered by that simple fact than he opts to let on.

~

All in all, it is a good afternoon. His spirits somewhat lifted, Loki lets Thor charm him out onto the balcony. They relax together, talking quietly. He’s struggling to stay awake, all those hours of exercise taking their toll, when his husband pokes him back to life.

And it’s to ask about the queen, of all things; specifically, about why she and Loki were fighting earlier. Rather than delving into that, exactly, he takes a chance and explains the underlying problem: His father wants the casket, and he wants it now.

Thor’s reaction is not quite what Loki expected. His husband is quite displeased, unsurprisingly, but still manages to be quick to suggest that they will find a way. “Whatever it takes,” Thor assures him, “should it come to that, I am staying with you.”

That’s a nice idea, and fine as far as it goes. Loki, of course, can’t resist pointing that latter part out. Not that he very hard to resist, actually. One thing leads to another – sarcasm to teasing, teasing to jostling, jostling to wrestling – and before long he’s pinned on his back as they rut in earnest on the cool stone floor. “I should let you prove your abject adoration more often,” Loki tells Thor afterward, as they lie together in a limp heap with sweat drying on their skin.

“Mmm,” his husband answers, face buried against his neck. Whatever he means, it sounds nothing like complaining.
Once they catch their breath and move back up onto the chaise, though, their topic of conversation returns to the casket. Try as he might to put a brave face on it, it is quite the struggle for Loki to avoid despair; this is a hard task with which he has been saddled, perhaps impossibly hard. Consequently, he is somehow quite surprised when Thor volunteers to help. It seems his husband can hold off the Destroyer, or so he claims, and by so doing afford Loki the chance to make a move.

It is risky. Beyond that, it is crazy to the point of being nearly suicidal. Even so, Thor’s confidence simply cannot be shaken. Loki, with considerable reluctance, files the insane idea away as a backup plan. He would far, far rather have it work out such that Frigga succeeds.

~

Succeeding takes the queen some time and, when victory finally arrives, it does not take any form Loki expected.

~

“Please join our Queen Frigga in her private quarters,” the servant – one of Frigga’s own, from her garb, but not someone whose acquaintance he has made previously – tells Loki from just inside the doorway. “At your earliest convenience,” the young woman adds, “as the queen tells me she wishes to speak with you before you first encounter your beloved husband the Crown Prince Thor.”

She’s tense, clearly nervous, and it’s contagious; now he is as well. Pulse hammering in his ears, Loki quickly makes his way to the queen’s sitting room and allows the servant to see him in. “Your majesty,” he says politely, sketching his best graceful bow. “You requested my presence?”

“So formal,” Frigga says, smiling a little. “You do not need to be that way around me; surely you know this by now.”

He does, even given what happened a few weeks ago, but he is horribly nervous today and just can’t seem to shake it. “I am sorry,” he tells her. “What was it you wished to discuss?” In the end he is simply far too tense for small talk.

Frigga, it seems, is similarly afflicted. “I am most sorry to be the one to have to share such troubling news,” she offers, reaching out to take his hand in hers. When he chooses not to respond, privately wishing instead to uncover far more detail before speaking, the queen continues. “I spoke with Odin Allfather late last night. He has agreed to let you take the casket, but at what I fear is a most lofty price.”

“And what might that be,” he asks her, profoundly grateful to discover his voice is only barely shaking.

She gives his hand a gentle squeeze. “Sit,” she suggests, tugging lightly. As he settles beside her on the bench, she smiles; rather than happy, though, she only manages to look sad. “You and you alone may wield it, for no fewer than six moons.”

He nods, mind whirling frantically. He can have the casket – can do what his father has requested and thereby save his people, at least for this season – but he must go with it. “And what of Thor,” he asks.

“Thor must stay here. He has a kingdom to help run. I truly am sorry, Loki.”

“Six moons, you said,” he confirms, trying his best to be all business. A prince of Jotunheim does not crumple under the least provocation. “Six months. What then?”
“Then, if you still wish it, Odin will doubtless allow you to return to Asgard.”

“Why would I not wish it,” Loki says a bit harshly, perhaps crumpling a little under provocation after all. He needs to keep himself under better control, he does, but this– this is a shock, a big shock, and he’s not quite sure how to handle it.

Frigga squeezes his hand again. “The casket is very powerful. As you spend more time together, you may find your heart cleaving to the relic instead of to that which you have left behind here. Pulling free of the casket’s influence will appeal to you less and less over time.” She pushes his hair back with her free hand. “And it will be right there, whereas Thor will be but a distant memory.”

“So you expect I will walk away from my husband? From my responsibilities? Is that the kind of person you think me;” he asks stiffly. It’s that or cry.

She sighs. “No, Loki, I do not expect that from you. In fact, I think nothing of the sort. But you must know… I have spent much of my long, long life working with magical objects. Do not underestimate the power of the thing. If you wish to escape it,” she cautions, “you must be ever vigilant.”

He nods. “Then I will be vigilant. Because I assure you; this will not stand in my way. Thor and I will be reunited.”

She smiles. “I am glad to hear you say that, Prince Loki. My son would stand for nothing less.”

Loki’s stomach twists. “Does he yet know?” While it is not a conversation he wishes to have, the idea of King Odin telling Thor- no. His husband deserves better.

“I do not believe he does,” Frigga says quietly. “He will take the news best from you.”

~

Thor does not take it particularly well, actually. Once his husband – stubbornly clinging to the idea they’re both going – finally catches on, that is. And once he does catch on, Thor storms off to address the whole unsavory matter with the King.

~

It is of course to no avail. Loki knows this with complete certainty from the very moment Thor rejoins him on the balcony; he can see in his husband’s face that there will be no movement from the king. He is to go alone.

“I cannot be parted from you,” Thor tells him, hugging tight. “I cannot. Six months might as well be six centuries. I shall die.”

Loki cannot help but laugh. “So melodramatic, my dearest. You lived many, many months before me. Almost more than you can count. I suspect you can live but a few more while I am gone.” Something in Thor’s face brings him up short, though. “What is it?”

“What if you do not return?”

Not this again. “Why do all of you doubt me so,” Loki snaps. He should not be taking his frustration with Odin – and with his own father - out on Thor, he knows, but he is tired of being considered and found wanting. “I am strong. I have tried to prove I am devoted. I will come back. There is no ‘if.’” He clenches his fists. “Would you be so quickly rid of me,” he spits. “If so, I will come back for my horse alone.”
“Shh,” Thor soothes, pulling him close. Loki struggles, but his husband is strong… and if he is completely honest with himself, Loki does not really want to win this particular battle anyway. “I do not doubt you; this, I swear. I will never doubt you. I have just seen powerful objects do a lot of damage, even in the presence of powerful men. Especially,” Thor adds, forcefully, “in the presence of powerful men.”

Loki nods. “I understand what you are saying. The thing has tremendous pull; I am not blind to that, I assure you. Be that as it may, though, I will come back to you.”

Thor swallows, his throat shifting against Loki’s cheek. “If you do not, I will come and take back what is mine.”

“The casket,” Loki cannot help but tease.

“You are evil,” Thor says, finally laughing. “And not only that: You delight in being so.”

“Maybe,” he concedes, lips brushing against his husband’s warm skin.

~

Ten days is not anywhere near enough time, not to prepare mentally to spend half a year apart. Loki’s mind is made up, right from the beginning – there is really no other option, after all – but both he and Thor are careful not to breathe a word of the decision to anyone. Not Thor’s parents, not his friends, not even the servants.

Because once he announces his choice, Loki knows Odin will ask him to depart forthwith. And if ten days does not even begin to suffice, a shorter number will only make their situation all the more intolerable.

So, they do their very best to carry on as though everything is normal. For Loki, that means riding and studying and helping Frodr with the artifacts; for Thor, it means working away in his father’s court offices. They do still take some of their morning meals, especially, with Frigga and Odin – to fail to do so would only serve to draw unwelcome attention – but, if they miss a few, Thor assures Loki on the second day of their secret mourning period, it will only be chalked up to what his husband describes as unseemly boyish sulking.

When Loki draws himself up to his full height, huffing about how a Jotnar prince does not sulk, Thor somehow finds the nerve within himself to laugh. In the span of two breaths laughter turns to coughing and spluttering, as Loki takes revenge for such an unacceptable display of insolence: A well-placed, hard shove between the shoulder blades sends his husband face-first into one of the palace fish ponds.

“It seems only one of us can fly after all,” Loki points out as Thor rises dripping from among the lily pads. “Pity.”

~

On the fourth day Odin makes a quick day trip to Jotunheim, unaccompanied by either prince. Based on the terse summary the king provides them all – him, Thor, and Frigga - upon returning, Loki can only surmise the two kings discussed options; whether or not Odin had attempted to pave the way for his successful return is in no way clear.

~

Midway through their far-too-short remaining time together, Loki and Thor saddle up and ride their
mounts out into the woods. Once they are safely away from the palace, Loki asks to stop.

“What is it,” Thor asks, face creased with clear worry. “Have you taken ill? I will not allow you to leave Asgard if you are not at your best.”

Loki smiles. “Do not be silly. First, I am fine, all things considered. Second, I must go, even if I am on my deathbed – which I assure you I have no reason to believe I will be,” he adds, hastily, as Thor sucks in a choked gasp, “– as, for all the reasons over which we came to agreement a week ago, this is by far the lesser of many evils.” He holds out a closed hand, curled fingers up. “But I have something for you, something which will ease the burden slightly.”

Now, his husband looks not only worried but puzzled. “Nothing will ease my burden,” Thor asserts. “Nothing but having you back here with me.” Still, he reaches for Loki’s fingers. “Show me?”

Loki opens his hand slowly, revealing a small metal amulet. “It does not look like much, I know, but trust me; there is rather more to it than meets the eye.”

“Does it do something,” Thor asks, reaching out a thick finger and carefully touching Loki’s palm. “Is it magical?”

“It is difficult to explain,” Loki says softly. “It will make the most sense if I show you, rather than trying to tell you. Here,” he offers, flattening his hand - to encourage Thor to take the amulet from him - in much the same way he would offer sugar to Star. “Hold it against your chest, over your heart, and wait here. I will be just over there,” he promises, “behind that rock outcropping.” When his husband hesitates Loki pushes the amulet towards Thor again. “Please? Take it. For me. I am certain you will like it.”

He watches closely until Thor finally does exactly as requested – picks the amulet up, slipping that hand beneath the unlaced neck of his tunic and keeping it there - and then makes for the rocks. The process involves but a simple spell, one he and Byleistr perfected as adolescents. Even so, sometimes the simplest solutions are the best ones. Can you hear me, Loki thinks, smiling to himself as he imagines how his husband must be reacting. If you can, go ahead and reply - just think your response, as though you mean to speak with me.

Thor’s first attempt is a garbled mess.

Patience, darling, Loki suggests. You do not have to think everything at once.

This is incredible, Thor manages on the second try. How does it work?

It is a simple bit of seidr, Loki offers, but it is very effective over great distances. My brother and I used these to communicate whenever we were separated. Byleistr, I mean, he clarifies. Even as a child, I always took great pains to avoid divining Helblindi’s thoughts.

He can feel Thor’s laughter. I am frankly amazed. You never fail to surprise me, Loki; you are full of secrets.

Oh, Loki assures him, you have absolutely no idea. He ducks out from behind the rocks and saunters back over to where Thor and the horses await. His husband stands, gaping, with one hand still shoved underneath the rumpled fabric of his own shirt.

“I know not what to say,” Thor offers aloud, beaming. “You are right; this will make things- well, not good, certainly, but tolerable. Yes, tolerable,” his husband repeats, pulling him into a bear hug.

“I do hope so,” Loki replies. “We were never allowed off-realm as children, so I cannot honestly say
I have ever tested these properly, but the seidr is sound and there is no reason they should not work as expected.” He hugs Thor back. “It is at best a poor substitute for time spent together, but at least we can converse from time to time.”

“Time to time,” Thor exclaims. “Why? This will let us speak constantly.”

Loki laughs, pushing off his husband’s chest with both hands. “Hardly, Thor. We both need to concentrate throughout the vast majority of each day. Otherwise you will be found out,” he admonishes, punctuating his words with both palms, “or I will blow up the universe.” He grins, leaning in to kiss Thor lightly. “I imagine you can see how either of those things might perhaps be unfortunate.”

Thor sighs. “We will converse daily, at least?”

“Of course,” Loki concurs, as cheerfully as he can manage. “Every evening, before we head off to our respective dreams.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Separation is not pleasant.

~ ~ ~

Thor

~ ~ ~

Six months is going to be an absolute eternity. It has only been six hours and Thor is already going completely out of his mind.

Six hours. Two lonely meals. One sad excuse for a round of sparring, the experience completely robbed of all pleasure by the knowledge Loki would not be joining him there. Not to watch, not to tease, not to exchange a quick kiss in the shadow of the equipment rack. And not simply today, of course, or even this week; two full seasons it is that Thor and his husband will be parted.

Somehow it has only taken that little bit of eternity – six long hours, even taken in total but a mere fraction of what he has left to endure – to render him utterly devastated.

He sighs loudly, flopping from belly to back with a resounding groan. Despite the time Thor is sprawled unhappily on their - now his, and that single solitary point may hurt worst of everything - big, empty, lonely bed.

Yes, it is but mid-afternoon. While the day may be no longer young, bedtime is endless hours away. In fact, it is not even close to dinnertime presently. All those seconds and minutes and hours ahead, and yet he's lost the will to so much as move. Thor wonders idly if he can do nothing but lie here the entirety of his husband’s time off-realm.

He sighs again. He does of course realize he’s being a touch melodramatic. More than a touch, to be honest. Far more, even. One could accuse him of being ridiculous, really, and not be far wide of the mark. He is a warrior prince, the seasoned veteran of countless battles. He has endured injuries too horrific to imagine, the loss of many men, days on the battlefield and even months off-realm conducting strategic campaigns far from family and friends.

An Aesir prince such as himself does not succumb to love-sickness.

And yet, here he is.

Lying in bed, unwilling and unable to move.

He is even disgusting himself.

~

Thor had not been allowed the chance to send his beloved off with a proper farewell. Odin – ostensibly to protect the rest of them from the uncontained power of the casket, which does make sense from a military strategist’s perspective… except that’s exactly the perspective Thor is unable to sustain just now – had forced Loki and Thor to say their hurried goodbyes before breakfast. In their
chambers, too; not on the Bifrost. Only Heimdall, by simple virtue of being at his assigned post as per usual, had been permitted to accompany the Jotnar prince during his last few steps across the soil of this realm.

Only Heimdall had seen Loki disappear into the multicolored vortex.

Thor had, by that point, been sulking mightily despite being neck deep in paperwork at his desk. Hidden away in the bowels of the palace, he had neither heard nor seen the burst of energy which had carried his husband away.

_For six months._

Six lifetimes.

~

Thor groans again, even louder this time, as he forces himself to sit up. Tempting as it may otherwise be, and it is, lying here all day will just make the time pass all the more slowly.

He hauls himself up and dons his leathers. It will not do to be caught mooning about the palace in nothing but his under-tunic and leggings, not in the middle of the day. There is bound to be a tremendous upswing in both the quantity and variety of gossip as it is, now that Thor is alone again and his puzzling blue prince of a husband has gone _back where he came from_; he does not need to fan the flames by wandering about looking like he has just rolled out of bed.

Even if, in fact, that is precisely what has happened.

~

“You are lonely,” Hogun points out. “It is only natural. You and your prince have become quite close, and the two of you are nigh on inseparable,” – which is not actually true; he has his work and Loki, his studies, but Hogun is doubtless trying to be helpful and so Thor does not dispute the point – “and it is only to be expected that you would be quite put out by this turn of events.”

Thor shrugs. “I expect I would be taking the whole thing better if I had been involved in the making of the decision in question.” This has been by far one of the worst sticking points, to his way of thinking; the Allfather had not offered either of them a chance to weigh in, give an opinion, or suggest alternatives. Odin had offered Loki what sounded on the surface to be a choice, sure. In reality, there was effectively no choice at all.

“Have you talked with the King about this,” Hogun asks. It is a reasonable enough question, Thor supposes. Hogun is ever the practical one, and tends to expect the same in others.

“I have tried to broach the subject, yes. He simply tells me this is how it has to be.” He frowns. “I cannot get a good read on his motive, or his intent. Is this perhaps a test? I know not, but I find myself wondering.”

Loki, of course, had been of the opinion this entire thing was but a _trap_.

Without quite meaning to, Thor finds himself sharing that with Hogun as well.

“He may not be wrong,” Hogun says quietly, seriously, when Thor has finished explaining. “Were Loki genuinely in the line for his own realm’s throne, it is most unlikely King Laufey would have risked sending him to us. To you. Odin and Laufey ever play a long game.”
“And we are all but pawns,” Thor grumbles. “In six months, my blue pawn will have all but forgotten me.”

“Do you truly think that,” Hogun asks, expression entirely skeptical. “the way he adores you? Will you so easily have all but forgotten him?”

That something like that could ever happen is, frankly, inconceivable. Unthinkable. “Of course not,” Thor exclaims. “Even if I never lay eyes on Loki again, I will never forget him. Not as long as I live.” He swallows, throat uncomfortably tight. “I so do not want that to happen. I miss him terribly, Hogun, and it has not yet been one day.”

His old friend smiles, then. “Trust, then, in how Loki can only hope to feel the same.”

~

Dinner is an endless sea of misery. It has been quite some time since Thor last joined his parents at the supper table – since before the start of the summer, really, when he and Loki had begun spending private evenings together – but eating alone had seemed the greater of great evils. So, he had come down to join his family for the meal.

Now, facing off across from his father, Thor finds himself a bit less certain.

“Did you finish the deed transfer for the far north pasture,” Odin asks as Thor forks a large slab of meat onto his own plate.

“It is nearly complete,” Thor assures the Allfather. “I need to review the figures tomorrow morning, and then it will be ready for the warden’s signature.” He truly needs to focus on his work tomorrow; he cannot continue to indulge himself the way he did today.

“Mm,” Odin acknowledges through an over-large mouthful of bread. “I did not get the impression your heart was in it this morning,” he offers, not sounding as annoyed as he probably should be, once he has finished chewing. “But I trust you will find a way to keep your word.”

Thor will, of course. Stirring the pot with Odin does not do Loki any favors. “I will finish it tomorrow, I assure you,” Thor tells his father. “I- I was not at my best today.”

Odin’s face softens, rather uncharacteristically. “You do understand there was no other way, do you not?”

Does he? Thor is far from sure. Actually, that isn’t true. He is sure; he is just sure he does not agree. He frowns, unhappily. “I understand nothing. Nothing, but that I am separated from my husband against my will. Against both our wills,” he clarifies. “Separated, endlessly with no clear hope of a reunion.”

His father’s expression is- odd. “You doubt, then, that he will want to return to you?”

Thor sets his silverware down, a bit loudly. “I doubt not his intent,” he states flatly. “It is but his ability to return in the face of endless challenge that gives me pause.”

Odin leans across the table to clasp him by the shoulder. “Do not take me for a monster, my son. If the two of you wish to be reunited, rest assured I will see it done.”

~

Finally, it is nearly bedtime. Thor washes up, studying his own unhappy countenance in the mirror,
and then climbs sadly into the cold, empty bed. Now that the time has come he is almost afraid to touch the amulet; what if its magic fails? He does not think he can bear six months of desolate solitude.

Even worse, somehow: What if Loki isn’t there?

In the end he does close his hand around it, stubborn and resolute. If Loki is not there, Thor will hold the stupid thing all night. And the next night, and the next, until every last moment of of forever lies behind him.

*I miss you terribly*, he thinks, as clearly as he can. The amulet is warm and smooth beneath his fingers. *I know this is silly, and not true, but it feels as though we have been apart for weeks.* He rubs the magical token gently with his thumb, the way he would Loki’s slender blue fingers. *I love you.*

Thor waits. And waits. After several minutes – long, miserable, lonely minutes in which no answer comes – he considers trying again, in case he has somehow managed to *do it wrong.*

He doesn’t, because he must leave himself the chance to hold out at least a little hope. He has chosen a rather early bedtime, after all, and Loki will have had to catch up with his own Jotnar family. Thor comforts himself – after a fashion – by picturing the hero’s welcome he and his fellow warriors have oft received when they have returned from exceptionally long or fruitful campaigns; the recovery of such a mighty weap- *such a mighty tool* can only be met with similar enthusiasm.

Ultimately, he abandons his failed little mission and rolls over, willing himself to sleep.

The more time he spends asleep, after all, the less time he spends awake and alone.

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Loki

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“Tomorrow we will begin,” Laufey tells him, gesturing up at the wrecked remains of the great stone arches, “by restoring this room to its former grandeur. And once that is done, my son, you will move on to the temple.”

Even in a state of emergency, it is all about symbols. Inside, Loki shakes his head and rolls his eyes. Outwardly, he nods. Nothing good can come of misbehaving, especially so early in his stay.

Because it is a *stay*, and not a return. He has absolutely no plan whatsoever to remain here so much as one hour beyond the point at which his duty has been fulfilled. If things change and he cannot return to Asgard, he will hold his husband to the promises Thor made in their last few sad days together; they will go forth in joint and forge a new life in a new place. Both of them.

“-with the same structure as this ceiling here,” his father the king is explaining. Loki forces himself back to the present. Like it or not, he really needs to pay attention.

“I am sorry, father,” he interrupts; it will not do to build something incorrectly – or even just not in accord with Laufey’s wishes - due to a brief moment of inattention. “I missed the first part of what you just told me. Would you mind-.”

“Oh of course he minds, you lovesick wench,” Helblindi cuts in, having just appeared out of nowhere. “The last thing any of us wants is the casket in your distracted little hands,” he claims, from the sound of it at once half angry and half mocking.

Loki straightens, turning to face his brother. “The state of my hands is no concern of yours,” he
points out, trying hard to swallow down his own anger. “I have a job to do, and I am well prepared to do it.”

“Well prepared,” Helblindi sneers. “But of course. What could better equip you to rebuild the great capital city of Jotunheim than a lengthy vacation in the Realm Eternal?” He reaches out to wrap a big, rough hand around the back of Loki’s neck. “A little rest and relaxation. Some time away from the savages.” Helblindi tightens his grip just to the point of pain.

“Oddly,” Loki tells his brother, steeling himself, “I have only ever known one savage here.” He will not stoop so low as to flinch, to make a face, no matter how hard Helblindi pushes. He is ever the warrior prince, whatever his brother may choose to assume.

Helblindi laughs. He shifts his hand, fingers still holding Loki in place. The calloused pad of his thumb scrapes roughly along the line of Loki’s jaw. “Always the silver tongue, baby brother. I do hope Thor Odison properly appreciates the dearest of your many gifts.”

That does not deserve an answer. Consequently, it does not get one. Loki pulls free of Helblindi’s grip. “I am sorry,” he tells his father a second time. “It seems my brother has lose none of his ample charm. Please do continue. I assure you,” he says firmly, “you have my undivided attention this time.”

~

As it turns out there are many rooms to restore and many structures to rebuild. Any faint hope Loki might perhaps have been harboring of an early end to this debacle vanishes in the wake of Laufey’s slow, detailed review of the work that lies ahead.

Loki has no real memory of the palace, or the city, from before the war. He grew up with the place looking largely the way it does today and, consequently, he does not find it remotely easy to envision it otherwise. His father, of course, is a different story; Laufey long ruled this realm in the time before its fall, in the era when sturdy columns supported impossibly high ceilings and there were – to hear the king tell it – markets and tradespeople’s shops and- and pubs throughout the imperial city.

He pictures the pubs of Asgard, loud and smelly and overflowing with warriors. Granted, his own people are no shabby tellers of tales themselves. Even so, try as he might, he just cannot imagine them gathering around great fireplaces and knocking back- perhaps not sloshing tankards of ale and mead, but shots of ice spirits instead. He thinks of his own brothers, drunk and ridiculous every time they visited his new home. Loki has never once seen anything comparable here in Jotunheim. Never.

Pubs. It is easier to picture markets.

~

“You must be hungry,” the king offers after several hours walking among the ruins of what were once exemplary examples of Jotun architecture. “I am but a poor host! What say you we call it an evening and adjourn to my rooms?”

“Indeed, I am famished,” Loki assures his father. And he is hungry, hungrier than he can remember having been in quite some time. While he has certainly not been lazy during the many day since his move, he has not dealt with this sort of cold. Or with the extra demands it places upon the body. “I am happy to eat wherever you wish to dine.”

Truthfully, he would be by far most pleased to eat wherever Helblindi is not likely to be lurking. Of course, he cannot give such feelings a voice, not yet. There will doubtless be plenty of time to return
to _sibling rivalry_ in the many long months ahead.

At least, with so much work to perform, the time will pass as quickly as it possibly can.

~

Unsurprisingly, both Helblindi and Byleistr are already waiting in Laufey’s private rooms when Loki and the king arrive. Byleistr’s hug and shoulder-clap seem most genuine; Helblindi’s ass-slapping, rather less so. Loki has never before been quite so glad to be wearing _leggings_ in his life.

“So,” Byleistr asks, forking himself a few pieces of fish, “how looks the task ahead? Has father’s imagination outpaced the casket’s capabilities?”

“I think not,” Loki says, helping himself to his own fish; obviously, he cannot know for certain, but the awesome power of the relic – the way it seethed in his hands when he brought it here, when he set it back into its socket – leaves little room for concern. “There is a great deal of work to be done, make no mistake, but the casket is undoubtedly up to the job.”

If it isn’t, he’s not sure where that leaves him. Failure, therefore, is not an option he is willing to consider.

“Good, good,” Byleistr offers, nodding enthusiastically. “And when you are done, what then? Will you return to the golden city?”

Loki smiles, a little coldly. “I will return to my husband,” he says rather than answering directly, “and my horse. Where exactly they might be found by then is hardly my concern.”

“And what if your husband and your horse find themselves well rid of you,” Helblindi asks, laughing. “Surely a comely prince such as Thor can find love – or, at least, _loving_ - when and where he stands. And how particular can a horse be?” He waggles his heavy brows suggestively. “Perhaps you will go back to find yourself cast aside.”

In the end there is only so much Loki can tolerate, after all. “And perhaps you will wake to find your lips have knit themselves together and by so doing have sealed that annoying mouth of yours shut,” he tells his brother, heedless of the consequences. “There are many who would pay to see that happen, _surely_.”

~

“Do not let him get under your skin,” Byleistr advises, later in the evening, when he and Loki walk alone under the sparkling stars. “Your brother is bitter and angry, and it makes him even more unpleasant than he might be by his own merits. You know this, Loki,” he implores. “You have dealt with it forever. Do not fall prey to it now.”

Loki nods. “It seems my Jotnar hide has lost some of its thickness in the time I have been away,” he explains, “at least where Helblindi is concerned. Thank you for your advice,” he continues, giving Byleistr’s elbow a quick squeeze. “I know I would do well to heed it.”

Byleistr smiles. “You would do well to punch him in the face, too. See, brother,” he points out, “you cannot lose for winning.”

_If only life were that simple._

~
When he finally retires to his chambers, eerily untouched since his departure, it is very late. Very early tomorrow, even. Loki undresses hastily, fingers scrabbling for his amulet. *I am so sorry, dearest, he thinks. My father and brothers kept me far later than I intended. I hope you have not given up on me.*

Alas, it seems that is exactly what Thor has done. Loki waits quite some time, long past the point by which it is painfully clear he will receive no response whatsoever. Crossly, he wipes away a tear. *I love you,* he thinks, in case his husband is listening in silence. *I miss you terribly, and I wish nothing more than to be with you once more.*

Still nothing. Loki lies on his old bed, furs over ice, for the longest time… but does not sleep.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Everyone gets down to work.

After a week of absolutely no evening communication success whatsoever, well before the end of which Thor has started to seriously wonder if something has gone wrong (to the extent that he is already mulling over various possible justifications for a short Jotunheim excursion just to be certain all is well), he decides instead to pursue an experiment. "I am feeling a bit unwell this afternoon," he tells his father, cautiously laying the groundwork - setting the stage, one might say - with a few hours yet remaining in their workday. "If this does not abate, I believe I shall skip dinner and retire early."

Odin looks at him a bit oddly - Thor is almost never sick; none of them are, and his father is undeniably no less aware of that than he is - while Thor does his best to look peaked. This is simply not his forte.

"Does this unwellness of yours require the attention of a healer," Odin asks, and Thor cannot help but wish his problem was anywhere near that simple.

"Oh, it is nothing like that," he assures his father, because despite his wishing the last place Thor wants to spend this of all evenings is in the healing rooms. "I fear I have simply worn myself down. I have been spending a lot of extra time on the training grounds, as it makes the days alone pass more quickly, and it seems I have overworked my body somehow." Thor knows that particular eventuality is, honestly, even more far-fetched than an actual illness would be. He is not nearly as good at spinning tales as is his husband. Fortunately, considering his story is already developing serious leaks, Odin opts not to press him further.

"What would you have me tell your mother," his father asks instead. "Because you know she never does let so much as a single absence pass unexamined."

At that, Thor forgets himself for a moment and laughs aloud. Because Odin, king or no, is by no stretch of the imagination exempted from the very same degree of scrutiny to which Frigga holds her son. "Just tell her I am tired and am dining in my quarters," he suggests. It is true enough, after a fashion. "And if she by some chance – and it's not a tiny one, either – “finds this explanation lacking, you may assure her I will field her questions on the matter in the morning.”

Father and son work in near silence for the rest of the afternoon, neck-deep in tedium, poring over dry, academic treatises and accuracy-checking long columns of figures. Growing up, Thor can say for certain, this is not at all what he imagined being king would entail. If only he known, perhaps he would have run off to serve as a wandering minstrel. Probably not, sure, but it is an appealing idea just the same.

At long last they roll up their scrolls, yawning and stretching.

As Thor stands to go, Odin places a hand - warm even through the course fabric of Thor’s tunic - on his son’s forearm. "My son, I do know your present situation aggrieves you," he says kindly. "You must trust me when I tell you the time will pass before you know it... and, even more so, you must trust me when I assure you this was the only way."
Thor sighs heavily, sinking back into his just-vacated chair. "Am I so very transparent as all that, father?" Loki would most certainly chastise him for wearing his poor, broken heart plainly visibly upon his sleeve, but he cannot help it just now. Not after a week of complete and total separation. "It is not that I do not trust you," he promises Odin. "When it comes to the running of this realm, you are a very wise king and none would be prudent to doubt you." He takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly, slowly before proceeding. "But I must confess; I still do not understand why it is that I am not even to be allowed to visit my husband briefly during his time away."

Odin leans back in his own carved wooden chair, fingers laced together and expression thoughtful. "Here, too, I am afraid, you must simply trust me. I have known King Laufey for many, many years. What I have asked of him this time - that he accept my conditions and touch not the casket himself in any way, leaving its control in the hands of one (and only one) of his sons - is almost more than he will be able to bear." He pauses; Thor gestures for him to continue. "Were I - were we - to make the situation that much more uncomfortable, that much more difficult than it is already by dropping you into the midst of it, well…” He pauses there, leaning over his worktable towards Thor once more, "I fear it might upset the delicate and hard-won balance of things and lead to discord - or worse - between Asgard and Jotunheim."

Thor snorts. "By which you mean to say you do not trust me. Not with this."

"Actually, that is not my point at all" his father tells him, frowning, his one pale eye fixed unblinking upon Thor's face. "It is the situation I do not trust. Notice I sent no other to serve in your stead."

"No other is married to one of Jotunheim's own," Thor points out. The longer they talk in circles, the more frustrated he becomes. "You would not send one of your other men away from his family for so long."

"Nonsense," Odin retorts, more than a little peevish now. "When Asgard is at war-."

"But, father, Asgard is not at war!"

"Indeed," his father offers. "And see that you keep it that way." With that, Odin pushes heavily to his feet. "Off with you, then. I will make excuses to your mother."

"Is this to be yet more of my punishment," Thor blurts out as he too makes to rise.


When Thor gets back to his (their, and that part makes him terribly sad) chambers, he is beyond ready to execute what he has been calling - to himself, and only to himself, because sharing this would make him the laughing stock of the palace - Operation Reconnect. Put simply, he is going to lie quiet – awake, of course, but without shifting this way and that, full of restless energy, and without engaging in the generation of pointless noise - on one of the chaises, because that is still where he feels most close to his absent spouse. While doing so he will hold tight to the amulet. He is prepared to hold the thing 'til morning, even, if that is what it takes not to miss Loki's signal. Because he cannot let himself think his husband’s signal may not come.

He brings along a pitcher of water, a tankard, and some fruit. Were he to eat a heavy meal, he would doubtless doze off as the hour grew later and later, but this at least will be enough to keep him going. It is pleasant outside, day just fading to evening; there won’t be any need for a throw blanket or skin. As he makes his way out to the balcony, though, Thor - on a whim - picks up one of the books Loki
had carted back from the library some time ago and takes it with him as well.

Before he sits, Thor studies the volume’s ornately-tooled leather cover. He has flipped idly through this book before. Its runes mean nothing to him, nothing whatsoever; they are in a language he does not understand, and – like the ancient texts his husband had spent considerable time studying before returning to Jotunheim (he cannot bring himself to say before returning home, because this - with him - is Loki’s home now) – they do not magically transform into the common tongue. Still, even just a quick skim through a few pages had revealed the presence of many, many fascinating pictures - bleak, rocky, alien-looking landscapes, strange animals and plants, mysterious artifacts which could perhaps serve as weapons - the likes of which he had never before seen. Clearly the giant text is worthy of further study and, tonight, he has all the time in the world to devote to such an endeavor.

Thor arranges himself comfortably for the long haul, fills his tankard with water (ale, of course, would be yet another invitation to lose the battle with sleep), and settles – book open across his lap - in to wait. With one hand he clutches the amulet tightly; with the other he carefully turns the thick, soft pages.

He is nearly halfway through the tome – which is both no small thing, and surprisingly packed with illustrations, glowing faintly now in the flickering red-orange torchlight – and the sun has settled very low in the sky when, finally, it happens.

Of course you will yet again not be there, and I will yet again be sorely disappointed, but I have not thus far reached the point at which I can no longer bring myself to try, he hears inside his head.

LOKI!! Thor thinks, because the whole thing is so like his husband that he half expects to be able to reach out and touch Loki’s slender blue hand. Thank the gods! I have been so worried. Tears of relief spill over unbidden and trail silently down his cheeks; he wipes them away with the other hand, the one not holding the amulet, losing his place in the big book as a consequence. It does not matter.

Everything, everything besides this wonderful, amazing thing, does not matter. It may as well not exist, even. I miss you terribly, he thinks, and it seems an eternity since we were first parted. I cannot wait to see you again. Oh, I am so pleased to hear from you. You cannot imagine, you simply cannot. And then Thor makes himself stop, because he is doing the mental equivalent of babbling. He is not letting his poor husband get so much as one single word in edgewise.

And sure enough he can feel Loki laughing, bright and cheerful. Actually, his husband counters, I do suspect I can imagine just fine. I have missed you as well, these several days. My father has set me to a lengthy and inconveniently-timed task, he continues, and I have to imagine you were seriously starting to wonder if I had lost the blasted amulet... perhaps had dropped it in the bath or some such.

The bath? Never, Thor assures Loki, laughing. I find it hard to imagine Jotunheim strewn with baths. So much frozen water! But I have in fact been here every single night, wondering after your absence. I can only guess we did a poor job of trying to align our timing.

So it seems, Loki agrees. Probably because I have not been coming back to my bed until close to dawn. Laufey tells me I will have but this one evening a week free, for the duration, he offers, sounding much less happy now. I am quite disappointed, I must say. But we will make the best of those evenings, I promise.

Oh, does Thor ever hope so. We will make do, then, he concurs, because he can feel Loki’s disappointment and wishes very much not to make it worse. But let us not waste our time dwelling on unpleasant things. Tell me, how are you? How has your visit been? Is everyone treating you well? Have you yet used the casket? And here he is again, think-talking nonstop. He wills himself to
mental silence, forgetting for a moment that his husband can undoubtedly sense that as clearly as his words.

Loki laughs anew, and the feeling-sound of it warms Thor’s battered, lonely heart. I could answer your questions better, dearest, if you were perhaps to pause even briefly between them.

You are right, of course. Thor concurs, laughing himself now. I just have so much to say… it is hard to control. He does his best to stop asking anything and to just send thoughts of—well, of love.

I love you too, so very very much his husband offers. I am well, as I hope you are too, and I miss you more than I have ever missed anything. This, of course, is a source of great amusement to my brothers. And, yes, I have started the city reconstruction, working in tandem with Laufey and Helblindi, as it seems Byleistr has not the necessary eye. Thor can picture Loki’s own eyes, red and bright, rolling. It is in fact that which has kept me away in the evenings, Loki continues, as nearly all the work must be done when my—when our people are in their quarters. It is a fascinating process, he adds, but it would be infinitely more enjoyable with you here by my side.

Thor groans. I tried to accomplish that today; to at least secure a short visit. But my efforts, sadly, bore no fruit. It seems Odin feels King Laufey would find me too much of a threat. While this is perhaps not quite his father’s choice of phrasing, his adherence to the spirit of the idea is at once both sound and true. He is afraid my presence would push the balance of things over into instability. Perhaps even into battle.

Hmm. Thor can feel Loki carefully considering. The Allfather is probably not wrong, sadly. I know my own father wishes very much to wield the thing himself, rather than to be stuck walking his untrained, unskilled son through every step of every way. He laughs again but it is far more about sarcasm than it is humor this time. If I were but to hand the thing over to him now, he could have me home in a quarter the time it will take me to stumble my own way there.

Do not be silly, Thor thinks. You excel at everything you undertake. Once you find your footing, I am certain this shall be no exception.

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Loki
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Aiming the blasted thing - its charm wears off about the time one’s fingers go numb, Loki decides, if one has not already managed to succumb to the considerable frustration inherent in accidentally plopping down giant ice lumps where nothing of the sort is needed by that point - turns out to be a lot harder than he’d anticipated. The first few attempts he makes to craft even the most basic of pillars (out in the snowfields, where he is not at risk of further destroying the ruined palace courtesy of his novice attempts to repair it), with Laufey’s broad, strong hands covering his comparatively small ones and helping steer the icy blast, are an unmitigated exercise in futility; even working closely together with his father in this manner, Loki finds he cannot manage to craft anything even remotely useful.

In fact, he is forced to acknowledge as he surveys the frank mess spread before him, most of his attempts resemble nothing so much as giant ice beast turds. Which might almost be amusing, were it not so humiliating.

"Is this always so difficult to master," he grumbles, warming his rapidly-stiffening fingers under his own arms.

Laufey laughs, breath fogging the frigid air. "I did not find it so. Then again, my hands are rather larger than are yours, my son."
"But my seidr rivals that of any," Loki huffs, offended.

His father grins broadly. "Yes, very good, Now, it seems, you are finally catching on."

Once it dawns on him that he can use his own power to shape the force of the storm - and perhaps Laufey could have offered up that one small tidbit of advice unprompted? - Loki's subsequent efforts prove much more successful. He quickly finds that, if he visualizes the shape he wishes to create, the casket's howling winds twist and curl and leave behind... well, a reasonable facsimile of what he'd just imagined.

A few hours' work leaves him (exhausted, sure - this is right up there on par with shape-shifting and flying - but also) proudly looking out over a little ice village, complete with an open-air market (not practical, no, but it is what caught his imagination just the same) and a shamelessly ornate temple. It's tempting to populate the place with small ice creatures, but his father is still keeping close watch. Wasting energy - even the boundless energy the casket possesses - is not well-regarded here, especially during the most difficult of times; that much Loki cannot help but remember.

"Much better," Laufey observes. "Go on now; have some food rest, recover your strength. We will start back to work late this afternoon, when the palace begins to empty out for the day." He looks at Loki. "It would not do to have you freezing my staff into your new construction," he explains, grinning mischievously, "although I can perhaps name one or two for whom exceptions should be made."

Loki, quick to catch the implications his father's intended schedule, stifles a sigh. "Will we always be working through the evening and into the night," he asks, fighting to keep the strain out of his voice. This throws a mighty, mighty wrench into his plans with Thor.

"Why," his father teases, still smiling. "Were you planning on cultivating an active social life during your stay? The Aesir tend towards hot-headed," he warns, still teasing, "and I hardly think your husband would approve."

"Nothing of the sort," Loki tells his father, forcing himself to return Laufey's smile. "Idle curiosity; nothing more."

"Ahh." His father nods. "Believe it or not I truly have missed your dissembling, my son." When Loki fails to honor that particular observation with any reaction whatsoever, Laufey continues. "In that case, no. If you are able to keep up a reasonable pace, we should be done with the public spaces in a standard week. I think we can trust your brothers to keep out of harm's way, no?"

Sadly, in Helblindi's case, Loki has to agree with Odin on that one. "So it is just this week, then," he inquires, hopefully.

Laufey gives him a long look. "No. I expect you" - no we this time, Loki cannot help but note, and he does not know whether to be angry or relieved - "will need to stick to a similar schedule throughout most of your time here. Now go get some rest. You shall need it."

Loki turns to go, relieved not to have to stick around and pretend everything is fine.

On his way back to the sleeping quarters he has been given, his former rooms evidently having been set to other purposes in his absence, he stops to choose a piece of fish from the food storage area one of the servants had showed him at morning meal. "You may take what you need, Prince Loki, without making recompense," the worker there assures him. "Though things have changed, we welcome you nonetheless."
I have hardly been gone long enough to warrant such drama, he wants very much to snap; he doesn't. Whatever has changed here to make things so odd, it can hardly be this tall, earnest-sounding Jotnar's fault. "Thank you," Loki says instead, nodding politely.

The fish is quite lovely, surprisingly so for such a purported bad season as this, but Loki is too worn out to savor it properly. He wolf's it down, unceremoniously (and rather messily). When he's wiped his hands and face he burrows into his bedding, clutching the amulet briefly and to no avail - of course; it is scarcely afternoon and Thor would still be at his own work - and then closes his eyes to sleep.

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"Rise and shine, little one." The voice is unmistakably Helblindi's; it grates like no other, and Loki does not bother to stifle a hiss. "Father has commitments this evening; lucky you, I am to watch you this time. Or perhaps it is lucky me," he quips, snide, as Loki drags himself out of bed.

Even without the unexpected (and unwelcome) addition of his charming brother, the evening shift is already off to an entirely inauspicious beginning. For starters, despite several hours of rest, Loki's body hurts pretty much everywhere. Wielding the casket well into the wee hours promises to be quite dreadful, really.

Something to that effect must show in his face; Helblindi laughs. "I would be happy to take this shift alone," he offers, "if you are simply not up to it."

Loki shakes his head. "Fear not, I am up to it," he says firmly, fervently hoping by the whole of the nine realms he's able to deliver. "Do not trouble yourself. I will be fine."

"Have it your way, then," Helblindi says with an exaggerated palms-up shrug. "I will be there to clean up your every inevitable disaster."

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In the beginning, between his brother's constant teasing and his own sore arms, Loki feels a bit as if his own bravado was completely baseless. But before long the two of them settle into a rhythm, Helblindi giving broad direction and Loki transmuting his brother's instructions into soaring arches of dark, gleaming ice. From that point forward the work is surprisingly satisfying – giving rebirth to the crowning achievements of Jotnar architecture is not a process in which Loki ever expected to find himself involved (he is, after all, a scholar and a diplomat) – and the evening moves along at a surprisingly fast pace.

Late into the night (or early the following morning; it's all a matter of perspective), Laufey stops by to pronounce the day's work done. "I am impressed," he says, looking this way and that. "Not only have the two of you done nice work, but you have managed not to kill one another."

This time it's Loki who laughs, while his brother doesn't.

His father turns out to be right after all. This work – physically and mentally hard, fast-paced but exacting – wipes Loki out completely, but it also passes the time exceptionally well. When several days later Laufey at last calls things to an early halt, as promised, Loki can scarcely believe it has been a full week.

He hurries off to his new rooms, not even bothering to stop for fish. It has been too long, he knows, and he has not once been able to contact Thor. Not that he hasn't tried; he has, every single night (morning), just as soon as his tired body has hit its nest of furs. Still, at best his bedtime has been the
middle of Thor’s night; at worst, it stretches to just before dawn.

This evening – for it still is evening this time, only slightly past the time he and his husband would normally be sitting down to their shared meal – he is determined not to miss the opportunity.

Thor will be there. Loki knows it. His husband simply has to be.

Except of course he doesn’t know it. After all, Thor could have given up trying. Or, worse, lost patience with what he mistakenly assumed to be Loki’s lack of follow-through. His evident dishonesty; that infamous dissembling Laufey had mentioned at the start of the week.

By the time he reaches his bedchamber and sits tiredly among its furs once more, Loki has very nearly talked himself out of trying at all. Of course you will yet again not be there, he thinks to himself, fingers tracking lightly over the amulet, and I will yet again be sorely disappointed. He sighs. But I have not thus far reached the point at which I can no longer bring myself to try. He wipes his eyes – he’s not crying; they’re tired! with his free hand. He’ll just lie here for a moment, sad and alone, and then he will give up and-.”

LOKI!! Thor’s voice echoes near-painful inside Loki’s skull. Thank the gods! I have been so worried.

Just like that, all is well with the universe.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Loki fulfills his obligations; Thor worries.

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Thor

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Three cycles. Three months. Half behind them, half still stretching endlessly on ahead.

_Three months_, Thor thinks as he gazes out over the hall. Everywhere before him, soldier and noble and lady alike, the citizens of Asgard are deep in their victuals and still deeper in their drink.

He has long since lost count of the number of feast days he has been forced to endure alone, not to mention the number of days given up to the endless tedium of working. He continues to try to go on about his business normally, but Thor cannot help but note that both labor and recreation suffer. He is feeling less and less _mighty_ these days, as more and more time separates him from his beloved.

It is easier to track the times he and Loki have made contact; these are comparatively few and far between, as the two of them are still only able to use the amulets to connect but once weekly. Thor has those days, past and future, marked on his calendar in gold. Gold and deep green, for the bright metal and dark stones his husband especially favors. Even those moments have been but brief conversations, though; the both of them are tired, feeling the strain, and the feeling of being inside one another’s heads is by turns uncomfortably personal and strangely distant.

_Can we not meet - even for a few hours - on neutral ground_, Thor had asked Loki when last they thought-spoke some four nights ago. _That would not be a violation of our agreement_. Even as he’d said it, though, he was already in sad anticipation of his husband’s reply.

_Ah, but_, Loki had started, and Thor’d felt his own heart plummet right into his toes, _I cannot leave the casket unattended_.

_And you scarce can tote the grand thing about undetected_, Thor had finished, sadly. _I know, I do_. He’d sighed, then, the air crushed out of him by the weight of his own dejection. _It is just that I miss you terribly._

_And I, you_, Loki had assured him.

Still, Thor could not – then, and cannot now - shake the uncomfortable sense that, with each passing week, their relationship becomes more and more distant and dreamlike. Less and less real.

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"This is too hard," he protests the next evening as he paces – back and forth, window to door and door to window - across his mother's sitting room, hands at his temples and fingers tangled in his own hair. "I do not think that I can bear it."

Frigga is frowning; she has been since he first burst in unannounced. "What would you have me
He doesn't know; it's why he is here. "I need to see him," he offers, which cannot be the answer she seeks. "I know it is what no one wants, but I- I need it." He looks at her, edging towards frantic and with tears welling. "I simply cannot accept that there is no way."

"As your father pointed out some time ago," she says, though despite her words she looks more sad than scolding, "it is not unusual for our warriors to be far longer away. You, even," she reminds him, hands reaching out in a gesture of beneficence. "You have been on many the longer campaign."

_In war Loki would be with me_, he thinks but dares not say. "In a military campaign I would not be so bored," he offers instead.

The very moment the words leave his lips, even before his mother brightens, nodding, Thor realizes the graveness of his error. "Oh no no," he corrects – Her? Himself? – "it is not that I lack for things to do. I just meant that battle hardly leaves time for missing anything. And I will be taking my leave of you now," he adds hastily, turning for the door. The more he pursues this line of reasoning, he knows – the deeper he digs this yawning hole - the worse the consequences will doubtless be.

"Thor." Frigga does not raise her voice. She does not need to. He freezes in the doorway to her outer chambers.

"Yes, mother," he says, not turning. He can feel his heart pound, straining in his chest.

"Look at me, my son," she insists, and he does. "Sit," she says, patting the cushion beside her. He crosses to where she sits and sinks onto the divan. "Thor, I know you are unhappy. It does truly pain me to see you so," she assures him, laying a gentle hand on his arm. "And you have my word; I will take no action that might make things still worse. But I must advise you to speak of this neither in terms of boredom, nor of battle, in front of your father the king."

He nods.

"You know exactly what use he would make of such an opening."

"I do," he tells her. "I would find myself lost forever to some infernal peacekeeping mission, mediating a land dispute between two minor lords that has spanned six generations" – he laughs – "and promises to drag on for yet another dozen or more. And all that would come into being long before I could even get halfway through _but that is not what I meant, father._"

The corners of her eyes crinkle as the planes of her face settle into a warm, caring expression that’s nearly a smile. "I see you take my point, then. Be careful, Thor," she warns. "I can only imagine you and Loki do not want to give your father grounds to extend your separation even further."

That he surely does not want, no, and he says as much.

"What is it that troubles you so, my dear," she asks as he makes to leave a second time. "You seem especially disheartened today."

He looks away, out the window and over the cityscape below. "Increasingly, I feel like my time with Loki was a dream. Like it never actually happened. And, by extension, like it will not come back into its own in the future." He shakes his head, frustrated. "I know I am being ridiculous. Every day now brings us that much closer to our ultimate reunion. I just- I cannot help but worry."

"Perhaps you must but take a bit of your own advice," she suggests. "Find something interesting, something to help you pass the time."
It’s good advice; he knows it is.

He forces himself into finding a way to take it.

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“You, my prince? You wish to study the relics? Forgive me for overstepping my position, your royal highness, but- but why?” Frodr’s genuine confusion would be amusing, were Thor but in a better mood. As it is, he does not have a good answer. At least, not one he is willing to share.

It irks him, beyond measure.

“I wish to better understand the history of my people,” he snaps. “Is this so incredibly amazing?” It probably is, considering how long he has managed to live without showing the least bit of interest to date, but Thor would love to see Frodr dare to say so.

Frodr shrugs. “I am ever happy to see a new scholar.”

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It isn’t until a full six weeks later – four months and two weeks; the end is finally getting closer, it is! – that Thor reaches a point where he feels comfortable parading his new knowledge about. While you have been gone, he shares as they clutch their amulets, I have taken up your research. Oh you have, have you? Thor can feel Loki laughing, and something pinched painfully tight in his chest loosens. He is being mocked, he knows, but it is the good-natured sort of teasing they have grown to enjoy. I am not sure I would ever have pegged you of all people for an academic and a scholar, Loki goes on, and Thor finds himself laughing in turn.

You can peg me for anything you like, he tells his husband, still smiling, but he is not here solely to jest. It is important to show he cares. How goes the reconstruction, he asks, as earnestly as he knows how.

Fast, Loki tells him, now that I have finally mastered the technique. My father largely lets me work alone, he adds, and Thor can feel the intensity of his pride. I am done with the palace entirely, and most of the surrounding city. Oh, and the markets. Honestly, after this coming week, there is little left to do.

Thor doesn’t allow himself to even dare to hope. I knew you could do it, he thinks instead. You can do anything.

If I didn’t know better, Loki offers, laughing again, I would almost think you wanted something.

Oh, he does. Only you, dearest, he thinks, meaning it completely.

And I you, Loki assures him. And I you.

For the first time in weeks, Thor actually feels a bit relieved.

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Loki

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“You have truly done fine, impressive work,” Laufey observes as he and Loki stand together atop one of the city’s highest battlements. ”You know I did have doubts about this plan of Odin’s, doubts
which numbered many, but over time all has come together quite well." He leans out to inspect the parapet, running calloused fingers over what can only be considered the finest of the new icework. "You have uncommon gifts."

At that Loki smiles, wry. "So you have ever said, father. You and my brothers both."

They are less than one cycle - scarcely more than two weeks to go, now - from the end of his assignment. His work, in fact, is complete, from the fortifications where presently they stand to the simple foot soldiers' huts and from the markets to the temple. Loki has – working in concert with his family early on, true, but on his own for these many weeks now - laid down more ice than he ever could have imagined. Looking back, he feels a bit like he built an entire realm. Which is really not surprising; in a sense, that is exactly what he has done.

Never let it be said his talents lie only in construction, either. Perhaps even more important to Jotunheim, at least in the near term, Loki has also used his casket-enhanced seidr to help bring forth the crops - grown far better late than not at all - and enhance the fishing. Over the past few days he has allowed the rivers to ice back over, returning to what would be their natural state this late in the season. The entire cycle prior, though, their waters ran fast and deep. There were many, many fish for the taking. And take his people did.

Days and weeks later the king's servants are still working long hours, busily stocking everything away. It will be a livable cold season this year, Loki is confident, if perhaps not a luxurious one.

Yes, All in all, his work is done. He has finished every last bit of what he was sent here to do, and done nothing untoward whatsoever in the process. The balance lies in Odin's hands now, Loki knows; the weighing of benefit and cost... the determination as to what may – what must - happen next.

"Walk with me." Laufey gestures for Loki to join him on the well-crafted ice steps leading down from this tower, talking as though they have not already been walking for an hour or more. "I have need of your company."

"What is it, father," Loki asks as they sit down - alone this time, Helblindi and Byleistr left to their own devices in the great hall - to dine. Their fare is ever plain despite the recent bounty; it is not Laufey's way to feast while his people go hungry, nor to indulge himself with treats while the masses settle for scraps. Food is plentiful now, but it has long been scarce and may at any point be scarce again. A good ruler needs to be prepared for every possibility; this Loki has long known.

Laufey gestures about his quarters, first with one long arm and then the other. "You mean to simply give all this up" - it's an odd phrase, here, but Loki knows it is not just their physical surroundings to which his father makes reference - "and to petition the Allfather to return once more to the realm eternal? This is your will?" At its heart is a simple question, simply delivered; Laufey does not seem angry. Only resigned. Perhaps a small part forlorn, if anything, but that last may yet be Loki's wishful, overactive imagination at work.

He nods - once, decisively. He has given this long, long thought, for many a week. "I will miss this place," he says, earnest and as open as he can be, "sorely, but my home is with the prince of Asgard; my husband."

"And if being with your precious husband means you must surrender this mighty, mighty power?"

This part is especially difficult. The casket sings to him. Its rhythm beats with his heart, its force
flows with his blood. It would be far too easy to let it hold sway over him, to let it keep him here. "I have held up my end of the bargain," Loki tells his father, dodging the meatier part of Laufey's question. "Now I would be with my husband again, at any cost."

"It is a great loss to Jotenheim," his father says, eyes locked on Loki's own. "Losing one of such talent back to Asgard."

And that makes it abruptly less difficult, really. Loki draws himself up, back straight and carriage haughty. "Perhaps," he says softly, "you should have given that greater thought before so readily trading your lesser son away."

Laufey nods, the hint of a smile playing across his craggy face. "Well played, my son," he acknowledges. "Well played." He sighs, then nods again. "So be it, then. If this is your wish," he adds, brisk and purposeful now, "and if you are certain you cannot be swayed, then I shall indeed request an audience with Odin King."

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"Am I to understand you are satisfied with the work performed," Odin asks Laufey. The two of them stand together, the Allfather surveying his surroundings impassively, as Loki hangs back at what he fervently hopes is a suitable distance.

"I am," his father rumbles. "My son has done excellent work, do you not think?"

"It is an impressive change, yes," the Allfather agrees, craning his neck to look up at the vast arches high above. He turns back to face Laufey, face stern, and Loki finds himself at once terribly anxious. "Heimdall assures me, too, that there was no misuse of the thing in all the time my son-in-law was here." Odin pauses, studying Laufey closely. "Can you be trusted with so mighty a thing?"

"Could you be," Laufey counters, head held high.

After that charged exchange comes a long, uncomfortable silence, during which the two old kings stare one another down and Loki feels as though he may verily suffocate.

Finally, Odin nods. "I will leave the casket in your guardianship, then, under two conditions."

Laufey spreads his big hands wide. "Do go on," he offers, not particularly kindly.

"You will not turn the thing against another realm, any other realm; were you to do so you should consider it an act of war, one which will result directly in the crippling of your people."

"And?"

Loki’s heart hammers hard in the cage of his ribs. Odin’s face is expressionless; his own father’s, guarded.

"And I will take back with me my son-in-law."

Laufey looks a bit shocked. "This is your second condition, Odin? This, of all things? My youngest has already made his wishes clear, as clear as the first blue ice of spring."

Odin nods. "Indeed."

~

This particular journey’s end feels very, very different from the first. While Loki cannot completely
escape the tug of sadness - of a life and land he does enjoy left behind yet again, of a fond farewell to
the father who has finally seen fit to treat him as a fellow adult, of (surprisingly enough) the loss of
time spent with (truthfully, one of) his brothers (although things with Helblindi have proceeded far
more smoothly since their time spent icecrafting together) - holding him back, the onward draw of
joy proves far greater.

Asgard is no longer a mystery, a place of legend full to overflowing with misery and cruelty and loss.
Loki had learned to love the place in his time there: to see the beauty in its lush landscape and the
hidden kindness in its brash and bawdy people.

This time there is no litter and no forced secrecy; it is just Loki and Odin, nodding their greetings to
Heimdall and striding - the Allfather's steps measured and patient, his own eager - along the rainbow
bridge leading from the observatory back to the bright, shining palace. The city glows in the late
afternoon sun, the angle of the light low and hot.

The change in temperature is still shocking, despite how Loki had peeled off his heavy furs at the
portal and left everything but a loincloth stacked neatly in his father's halls. Even so, there is no need
for jewels and baubles and diaphanous finery. No reason to act the maiden, the whore, the slave.

The deep-seated fear of the great unknown, of Odin King and the terrible Prince of Thunder to
whom he serves as a gift, is altogether gone, replaced by familiarity and anticipation and –
underneath it all - a not-insignificant concern over having been set aside forever during the course of
his long absence.

Loki and Odin walk together, not as a mighty ruler and a living dowry but as a king and a diplomat.
As a father and his son-in-law. As men.

This bridge is a stepping-off point to the entire realm, and Loki is full to bursting with swirling
emotions he cannot hope to name. There, off to the side, is the tavern district where his brothers
drank themselves stupid. Beyond Queen Frigga's lovely flowering gardens flows the crisp, clear
stream where he and Thor fished. Closer lie the training grounds, dust swirling up in dancing clouds
as two antlike Aesir spar. On the other side, low and sheltered, is the mouth of the weapons vault,
still strategic and secure despite the noteworthy absence of one ancient relic. The houses where
soldiers and their families dwell stand clustered tight around its base.

Far to the rear, at the start of the rolling meadows flanking the city's landward edge, the royal stables
sit proudly. The big doors are all thrown open, catching every last bit of hot breeze. While the
interior is too dark by contrast to see inside - and Loki's vantage point too far - he knows the horses,
his lovely Star amongst them, must be happily chewing their way through their evening feed.

All that is missing is- Thor.

"I have not told anyone of your return," Odin says, much as if he is reading Loki's mind. "Not even
my queen. You should know I did not journey to the land of the frost giants expecting to bring you
hence."

"It was not yet the end of my term," Loki agrees, nodding, for the end of the current cycle, the sixth
cycle, lies still more than a fortnight hence.

"It was not," Odin concurs, “but it is not that I meant when I spoke thus.” He halts; Loki turns to face
him. “Of two things, I was not certain; your strength, and your father's judgment.” He reaches out
and claps Loki firmly on the shoulder, face stern. “You have succeeded where many, many before
you have failed. I am impressed; you have cause to be most proud.”
At that Loki, who had expected something entirely different and, consequently, had been busily preparing a hot rebuke in the privacy of his own mind, cannot help but smile a little. “As long as it is not the other way around, your majesty,” he says, sketching a little bow. “If it was my father’s strength you were doubting, and my judgment, we would be having words.”

Odin gives Loki’s shoulder a little squeeze. “I must admit I underestimated you,” he offers, turning a little – back towards the palace with its sweeping golden façade - and steering Loki ahead with gentle pressure. “Welcome home.”
He cannot quite put a finger on it, not even after a good half hour's worth of careful study, but Thor - hard at work on a contract of protection for a beleaguered stone fruit farmer near the eastern gates when his father had reappeared after what had essentially amounted to a more than a half-day's meetings - is positive something is amiss. The Allfather is harboring a secret; of that, Thor is wholly certain. "How was your conference," he asks casually, still poring over the contract. He knows with complete certainty that even the most subtle attempt at prying is doomed to fail. "I expected you back some time ago."

Odin laughs, short and sharp. "Sometimes these things simply cannot be hurried along," he offers. "You have been in that situation a time or five yourself, if memory does serve. That said, yes, my meeting went well. Far better than I'd expected, honestly."

"I am most glad to hear that," Thor says, and of course he truly is. Regardless of what his father might be hiding, the aftermath of an unpleasant or unsuccessful audience will do nothing to improve the rest of their afternoon together. "Were you off-realm? I thought I heard the Bifrost activated, well over an hour ago by now." He keeps working throughout, diligently, making as though he is just offering up polite small talk in observance of the Allfather's return.

"Hmm," Odin says. "We do have Council less than a week hence; perhaps a delegation has made its way here early. Your mother would know; with Prince Loki away," – and at his husband’s name, Thor can’t help but look up – “those details have fallen to her once more." The Allfather laughs again, with greater humor this time. "As you can well imagine, she does in fact spare no opportunity to make me regularly aware of just how little that pleases her."

Thor frowns. "Frankly, I find myself little pleased by it" - by the entire situation, not to mention its seeming endlessness, he thinks, but whining yet again about that will only earn him a stern lecture concerning duty and the nature of true sacrifice; he swallows it down and says nothing of the sort - "as well. But this of course comes as no news to you. We need not speak of it anew. I shall inquire as to any diplomatic activities when I see mother, over supper perhaps. At any rate it will not be until evening, when my day’s work here is done."

"Speaking of work, and dinner, and the Bifrost," Odin says with what seems strangely like cheer. "I must thank you for jogging my memory. Heimdall himself mentioned an odd noise earlier; he said it sounded as though an object had perhaps struck the observatory’s domed surface. All appears normal from underneath; and his sight showed him neither damage nor anything else of concern," his father assures him, "but he hopes that - as your quarters overlook the dome's landward side - you might take a quick look before darkness descends tonight. No no, there was no urgency to his request." Odin continues as Thor makes to put away pen and contract and then shifts forward to stand. "Finish your treaty. You can stop up to your rooms before we gather for our evening’s meal and make a
If all is well from your vantage point, I will send a longboat out to check the side that faces the water tomorrow morning."

"If you think it can wait," Thor offers, a bit dubiously - the whole situation is more than a bit unusual; damaging the observatory’s shell would generally require seidr, which to him makes the very idea of it troubling - as he settles back into his chair.

"That I do," his father confirms. "I am reasonably certain it is nothing. I would just do Heimdall the courtesy."

"Of course," Thor agrees, nodding. "Before the evening meal it is, then."

Odin drops heavily into his own chair with a tired sigh. "I would do it myself, were I not so behind already."

"Worry not," Thor tells his father. "I will do whatever is needed, " including not stress over it now, he thinks as he picks up his pen.

~

They work together in silence for some time, Odin poring over a stack of beautifully-illuminated maps and Thor plodding through the endless dry legalese which comprises the contract.

It seems an age before his father finally pushes away from the imposing desk, stretching and yawning. "I should wash up," Odin admits, looking closely at his own hands. "I came here straight from my meetings, and your mother will be displeased if I am rather less than freshly groomed. Do you mind closing up here?"

Thor shakes his head. He does not care, actually; he’s clearly not going to uncover whatever his father is hiding, at least not today, and it’s not like he has anything better to do with his time. "Go on ahead," he offers. "I will be fine."

~

He waits until just a few minutes before the evening meal – it will only take a few moments to head up to his chambers and check the observatory’s outer shell, and these days he spends as little time in his own rooms as possible – before packing away his things and locking their office. Once the place is secured Thor makes his slow, sad way up to his chambers; this time of day, especially, he is hard put not to think of his missing husband.

He cannot help but wonder how long it may be before they once again set eyes on one another. The initial term – it is hard not to think of it as the initial sentence, even after all this time – approaches its end, with just a few weeks to go… but Thor knows there is no guarantee the two kings will find conditions favorable and count Loki’s duty fulfilled. Odin could effectively keep his husband away from Asgard – away from him - nearly infinitely. And with Loki in Jotunheim specifically to wield the casket, it’s not likely the usual diplomatic concerns around Odin’s treating Laufey’s kin unfairly would apply.

If Loki is banished to Jotunheim beyond six months, Thor knows, he will simply have to find a way to get himself there.

~

It is a busy time in the palace - those who conduct their business during the day are, much as Thor and Odin before him, putting their work to rest and heading home; those whose vocations take them
out at night are hurrying about, preparing to start their own shifts - and making way through the long chambers takes Thor quite some time. It does not help, of course, that he is the crown prince and well known to be a good ally when it comes to gaining audience with the Allfather. Thor is stopped by at least one citizen of Asgard for every few yards traveled.

He represents the realm, too, and must tolerate the onslaught with good humor. He does his duty to the best of his ability, all the while noting the sun's accelerating descent towards the horizon; at this rate he will gaze out over the golden observatory dome in full darkness and see nothing.

"Beg pardon," he offers the last (of far, far too many) a bit sheepishly. "I have been tasked with an errand which cannot extend past the sun's last light. Can this not wait until the coming of the new week?"

It can, apparently. The man bows low and Thor takes his leave, hurriedly noting the low, low angle of the sun. At the fourth turn he checks his surroundings quickly and, upon finding himself briefly alone, ducks smoothly behind a handsome tapestry. This particular hanging is more than just decorative in nature; it conceals one of the quasi-secret staircases ascending into the royal family's more private public spaces. Where, he fervently hopes, things will be rather less hectic.

~

Indeed, they are. He makes his way quickly across the utterly vacant reception suite and into the truly-private passage leading to his chambers, frowning and lost in thought. The heavy doors pull open with little protest; he steps inside and pulls them closed behind himself.

"You are a mess," Thor tells his scruffy reflection in the huge looking glass by the armoire. He rakes first one hand and then the other through his disheveled mop of hair, to little gain. "In fact, you are most fortunate Loki is not yet returned, as he might disown you."

Neatening up is as pointless as it is hopeless; his parents, in both theory and proven fact, love him much the same no matter how he manages to appear. Thor sighs loudly and turns away from the mirror. With one final sigh he plods sadly out onto what had fast become - when he and his husband resided in these chambers together - his favorite place in all the Nine. Now, though, it just leaves him sad.

He takes a deep breath and walks to the railing, carefully not taking in the rest of the broad, curving space. Thor is on a mission for Heimdall and will see it done, after which he will - after spending not one minute longer here than necessary - take his leave of these rooms entirely and join his parents for supper.

The dome shines in the last rays of failing sunlight, as smooth and perfect as ever. It is flawless, with not the least hint of damage anywhere. He sighs again and turns to go, striding purposefully back towards his indoor chambers.

"Norn's," he nearly shrieks, clutching frantically at his chest with one hand and flailing about for balance with the other.

He staggers another half-stride and stops dead, wobbling under the momentum still propelling him forward. "I- you- what-?" His heart races; he can only breathe in ragged gasps. Because his husband Loki leans – tall, svelte, blue and a bit more muscled through the arms and shoulders than Thor remembers - against the wall between two guttering torches.

"I missed you too," his husband tells him, smirking.
Loki’s shapely arms are folded stiffly across his bare blue chest. His eyes narrow. "You do not seem nearly as pleased to see me back as I had hoped," he says, not smiling now. "I had rather thought you might-.”

"Stop," Thor rasps. "Please." He needs a moment to collect his scattered thoughts. "It is not that at. You startled me, Loki." He gulps in another lungful of air, trying to steady himself. “I- it is just that I expected nothing less than to see you here, now. Please,” he says again, begging this time. “Let us start this again at the beginning.” He composes himself as best he can, smiling, arms spread wide. “Loki! Welcome home!”

And then Thor just cannot hold back any longer. He closes the distance separating them in two strides long enough to border on leaps and pulls his husband into a fierce hug. “Oh, gods, I have missed you so,” he says into Loki’s dark hair. “Never have I been more glad to see someone. It is you, right,” he asks, still clinging tightly. “Not a- not seidr?”

Thor feels his husband’s laughter before he hears it, even. “Yes, it is me, I assure you.” Loki shifts, trying to wriggle free. “Let go and let me look upon you.”

“No,” Thor tells his husband flatly. “I shall not free you until I have had my fill.”

Loki snorts. “By the time you have had your fill, I may starve to death.”

“Oh, I somehow doubt that,” Thor retorts, running his hands up and down Loki’s back. “You have come back quite solid.” His husband is still comparatively slender, but Thor’s hands confirm what his eyes had first reported; the muscles of Loki’s shoulders, back, and arms ripple as his husband squirms. “Jotunheim may claim to have needed your brains, but it appears your father made greater use of your brawn.”

“What exactly are you implying,” Loki huffs, twisting away.

Thor catches his husband’s turning head and guides it gently back. “Only this,” he says, covering Loki’s mouth with his own.

This time, it seems it is Loki who has been caught off-guard. He takes so long to react that Thor hesitates and almost stops. Finally, though, Loki shivers and presses close; he melts into Thor’s grasp and returns the kiss hungrily.

Loki’s mouth, unlike the rest of him, feels exactly like Thor remembers. Once he has a taste of it, he simply cannot give it up.

~

They finally do come up for air, though. “Are you here to stay,” Thor asks, pulling back just a little to watch his husband’s face closely. “Please tell me you have not just snuck back here for a quick visit.”

“I have finished my assigned duties,” Loki assures him, eyes glowing crimson in the fading light. “I am here to stay. If, of course, you will still have me.”

At that Thor laughs. “Oh, rest assured,” he tells his husband, smiling broadly, “I certainly do intend to have you. But not,” he adds quickly, “until you have eaten. And, of course, we have told my parents you are here. They would not want to miss such a- wait,” he adds, a little skeptically; things are truly not quite adding up somehow. Either that, or perhaps they are. “How did you get here?”

One corner of Loki’s purple-black mouth curls into an almost-smile. “The usual way,” he evades
neatly. “Through the chamber doors. There was no reason to employ trickery or evasive maneuvers.”

“No, here.” Thor clarifies, gesturing with his head at the world around them. “The Realm Eternal. How did you get back to Asgard, from Jotunheim?”

Loki raises both eyebrows. “My answer holds: The usual way.”

“The Bifrost.” He tries to picture Heimdall sending the bridge into the ice and snow, were his husband to call for it thus. “You took the Bifrost.”

“Oh, dear,” Loki says, reaching up to pat Thor’s head. “Have you lapsed back into stupidity while I was away? I do seem to remember your telling me you were spending your time studying, though, so that seems unlikely… yes, dearest, the Bifrost,” he says to Thor’s pout. “I rode the Bifrost, walked through the observatory, strolled along the bridge, came into the palace through the main doors, climbed-.”

“My father brought you,” Thor exclaims. “Near on to half a day ago now. And don’t lie,” he adds, looking quickly from Loki’s mouth to eyes and back again. “I heard the Bifrost myself. I just had no way of knowing who or what it carried.”

“Oh, did I forget to mention that part,” Loki asks, laughing now. “Ouch,” he complains as Thor squeezes him hard. “Yes, yes, King Odin brought me. Surely you did not think I would – or could, for that matter, not without risking war – just sneak my way back here.”

“So you think ill of me easily enough, but simply cannot believe the Allfather guilty of a little fun? That is how things are to be?”

Thor shoves back, backing his husband up against the stone. “I guarantee this; I think nothing of you which is not wholly deserved,” he says, reaching up to cup Loki’s face with both hands. “But my true beef,” he goes on, pausing for a moment first to plant a soft kiss on the tip of his husband’s sharp blue nose, “is with my father, not with you.”

“Actually,” Thor retorts, “I can very well see you doing exactly that. What I cannot believe is that no one told me you were here.”

Loki gives him a little push. “So you think ill of me easily enough, but simply cannot believe the Allfather guilty of a little fun? That is how things are to be?”

Thor does. He walks his husband through the whole story; overhearing the roar of the Bifrost, suffering his father’s excuses (and absence) none the wiser, surviving their tedious working afternoon, and finally - unwittingly - falling for the lame excuse Odin had spun to send him up here to the balcony afterwards. He tells the tale well, he knows, and the storytelling itself is made all the more enjoyable by the slow, gentle play of Loki’s fingers over his own. “So whose idea was it to trick me thus,” he asks afterwards. “Yours, or the king’s.”

“The king’s, of course. But I must confess I did think it funny,” Loki adds over Thor’s groaned I knew it. “The look on your face when first you spotted me…”

“So all that woe-is-me pouting, all that huffiness over my reaction,” Thor offers, “all that was-.”

“Quite deserved, to my way of thinking.” Loki quips. “But enough of this. I truly am hungry, and not solely for your many charms.” Right on cue, his stomach rumbles. “Oh, excuse me.”

“You did that on purpose,” Thor accuses. His husband’s faux-innocent shrug confirms it; he is clearly not mistaken. They laugh together, finally. “Oh, I have missed you so, Loki,” he says. He
well and truly has.

~

Much as he would prefer to dine (together, alone) in their chambers, Thor knows doing so is not a viable option. The long-awaited return of a prince of Jotunheim, one wedded to Asgard’s own crown prince and both a diplomat and now a storied hero in his own right, is not something Loki and Thor can hope they will be allowed to celebrate over chilled ale and plates of rich meat and strong cheese – and, of course, slabs of fresh, raw fish - in private.

Thus, after not nearly enough private time spent what can only be described as *cuddling* together, he finds himself walking back downstairs – via the official staircase, this time – with Loki at his side.

“We have all night and more,” his husband assures him as Thor mutters under his breath for the fourth or fifth time that there are simply so, so many ways he would rather be spending the rest of this evening. “I am here to stay. You will not be quickly rid of me again. We will make our appearances,” – Loki is of royal lineage, after all, and is no stranger to painful, dull duty – “and do as expected of us, and then we shall retire to our chambers and *get reacquainted.* How does that sound?”

It sounds very good, it does, for all that it would sound even better without the *dinner with the parents and in full view of all those adoring subjects* part preceding it. He wastes no time telling Loki so.

~

“Odin tells me the quality of your restoration work is simply astounding,” Frigga tells Loki warmly. “I should hope to pay King Laufey’s stronghold a visit before much time has passed, to see it for myself.” She takes a bunch of grapes and some soft cheese from the heavy golden platter and passes it along to her son-in-law. “Perhaps you can be my guide.”

“Ah-ah,” Thor chides from across the table, where he has been busying himself with playing what he hopes is a reasonably subtle game of *footsie* with his husband. “Anywhere Loki goes, you can expect I will follow. What happened this time will not happen again.”

Frigga laughs brightly. “Worry not. I’m sure your father can spare the three of us long enough for me to look my fill. But not today,” she assures the both of them, reaching out in a calming gesture with one hand and stopping to pop a grape in her mouth with the other. She chews neatly, then dabs her mouth with her cloth. “And not on the morrow. For now, we will simply be content to welcome Loki home.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Loki is happy to be home, home truly being where the heart is.

At long last – although Loki supposes it was in truth but a short visit, really only enough to regale him with the well-orchestrated plan which is intended to lure Thor unknowing to his own quarters (to what is once again their quarters, despite the certain truth that Thor knows this not; in fact, it is that very lack of knowledge on which the king’s nice bit of trickery hinges) and to gain his express (and, Loki cannot help but suspect, his tacit as well) approval - King Odin takes his leave.

Loki takes a moment to gaze out one of the tall windows, a pair of which flank Thor’s imposing armor chest. The sun is still high in the sky; it will be some hours before the long-awaited reunion. While every single minute of those hours is one he would prefer to spend getting reacquainted with his husband, he cannot help but see the merit of the Allfather's approach. The benefit, and of course, the humor.

All of that and Loki has one additional, not to mention essential, reason; one that is wholly his own.

It works this way, more or less: If Loki and Thor are indeed reunited in accordance with King Odin’s plan, Thor will come back to his rooms before dinner, utterly (whereas, hopefully not blissfully, but even that will be important – if painful – information to understand) unaware of Loki's return, and will stumble upon his Jotun husband as if by accident.

Their reunion will happen completely without warning, and it will happen while the two of them are – with the exception of one another, of course - alone. Thor will have neither the opportunity to plan nor the time to craft and refine his response; whatever transpires will take place naturally. The whole thing will unfold in real time, right before Loki's eyes.

And, similarly, the whole thing will take place within easy range of any of the other senses and/or magical means of assessment Loki might choose to employ. Any honest reaction there is to be had, he will witness… and any dishonest one, as well.

For while it is not that he doubts his husband's sincerity, Loki does always have to keep to front of mind that Thor is a crown prince and - noble promises and loving declarations notwithstanding – is thus highly likely (if not outright compelled) to keep his numerous responsibilities regarding Asgard's citizenry close to heart and near to hand.

The only thing Loki imagines he would appreciate less, at this juncture, than cold rejection is false welcome. And thanks to the Allfather’s ploy, he will at least be in prime position to (not only recognize both but also) distinguish one from the other if need be.

What he really, truly wants, though, is a warm and honest reunion. A loving reunion. Because he is - more than anything, beyond both wise politics and skilled scheming - most glad to be home.

~

Loki turns away from the window. His eyes, bred to cope with the blinding brightness of endless
snow, adjust quickly to the change in light as he looks - this way and that - about the high-ceilinged anteroom. It still has the messy, lived-in look of the living quarters of a busy soldier not particularly worried about the finer details.

In other words, it still reminds him in every possible way of Thor.

He walks slowly through the collection of rooms that comprises their marital chambers, keeping close to the wall. As he strolls along he trails cool fingers over rich tapestry and polished stone, hardwood and carefully-worked metal.

As best Loki can tell, nothing of substance has changed. Everything is exactly they way he remembers it, right down to the neat collection of jewels and assorted baubles resting on the table that stands by what had come to be his own side of the bed. His books are all still collected here together, too, albeit rather less neatly; as there was no purpose in trying to bring them with him to Jotunheim, he had left his many spell-books and historical readings in what can only be described as a bit of a jumble.

In addition, Loki cannot help but notice as he looks his books over, Thor had evidently been entirely truthful when he had gone on at length about continuing Loki's studies; several of the archival texts and scrolls Frodr had given to Loki weeks and months ago now lie scattered about his husband's heavy worktable. And if that is not enough proof, countless key phrases and stopping points are now flagged with Thor's markers in addition to his own.

It isn't until the second lap, though, that Loki finds what he can only (well, not only, but he is doing his best not to let his heart rule his head) call a truly crucial indicator of his husband's intentions.

At the epicenter of it all is a scrap of Loki's own writing - just a few words torn from a hastily scrawled note; something worthless, something he had long since ripped up and cast aside - neatly centered on a small square of ivory parchment. On said parchment someone - and the artist simply has to be Thor; any other explanation would be utterly ridiculous - had, using Loki's best quill and favorite rich green ink, painstakingly framed the original scrap of writing with carefully drawn characters of his own. Specifically, the artist in question had added three neatly rendered runes (Loki's runes; Jotun runes); those standing for love, fidelity, and eternity.

All of the runes are rendered correctly, if perhaps a bit shakily. The whole effect is both touching and painfully private. Loki realizes he is doubtless not meant to be seeing any of this- this testimonial to his husband's inner machinations. In fact he almost feels a twinge of guilt... except it is washed immediately away by a great, warm wave of happiness. Thor misses him. Thor loves him, even in those unguarded moments when none will know.

Loki kisses one finger and, with a complex little sign, touches the corner of the parchment. There, he thinks to himself as the paired parchment scraps briefly glow. You are preserved forever.

Feeling somewhat reassured at last, Loki turns to head for the balcony. He stops in the archway and looks back to smile over his shoulder at the little runes. He is still smiling when, out in the humid early afternoon breeze, he settles down to wait.

~

It is some hours later when Loki, half-dozing over his book in the warm early evening air, is startled to attention by the sound of the heavy chamber doors closing. "You are a mess," he hears faintly, in the distance. "In fact, you are most fortunate Loki is not yet returned, as he might disown you," his husband prattles on a little more loudly, and Loki is relieved to find Thor is indeed alone.
Talking to himself, it seems, but alone.

Loki climbs silently to his feet. He vanishes the book (temporarily; the books here are too precious to waste) and shifts to stand in the long shadows along the balcony’s back wall.

He has not long to wait. His husband comes outside and rushes blithely past him, single-mindedly heading straight for the railing. For perhaps the better part of two minutes Thor stares out into the distance, peering intently at the sun-bright observatory dome and all the while muttering quietly. Loki himself observes in careful silence. He does not wish to spoil the surprise. Besides, he is pleased enough at this point just to - finally - feast his eyes again on the magnificent Asgardian prince he’s made his husband.

And if perhaps that is not quite how things transpired, it is still what Loki likes to tell himself these days when he thinks back to the history of their relationship and to its inauspicious beginnings.

Thor sighs loudly, as though he carries the entire weight of the nine realms on his broad shoulders. At long last, he turns away from the city and takes perhaps five long steps back towards Loki.

On his sixth step Thor yells "NORNs," at the top of his lungs and skids to a stop. He clutches at himself, looking very much as though he is about to fall over. "I- you- what-," he stammers, staring at Loki wide-eyed and gasping a little.

Loki quirks the corner of his mouth, unable to keep a completely straight face. "I missed you too," he pokes, but then in the face of his husband’s shocked expression he loses his nerve. Perhaps the joke has gone too far. Perhaps it was not simply a harmless bit of fun after all. "You do not seem nearly as pleased to see me back as I had hoped," he observes, a little unhappily. "I had rather thought you might-.

"Stop," Thor cuts him off abruptly. "Please. It is not that at. You startled me, Loki." His husband swallows. "I- it is just that I expected nothing less than to see you here, now. Please," Thor repeats, "let us start this again at the beginning: Loki," his husband exclaims, arms out to the sides, "welcome home!"

Before he can even begin to respond Thor rushes closer and gathers Loki into an enthusiastic embrace. "Oh, gods, I have missed you so," he says, lips brushing against Loki’s neck. "Never have I been more glad to see someone. It is you, right," he asks, faint and timid-sounding. "Not a- not seidr?"

Loki cannot sustain his stern expression further. "Yes, it is I, I assure you." He laughs, trying to duck out of Thor’s arms. "Let go and let me look upon you." What little time he had to watch his husband earlier was not nearly enough.

Thor just pulls him all the tighter. "No," he insists, "I shall not free you until I have had my fill."

"By the time you have had your fill," Loki teases, I may starve to death."

"Oh, I somehow doubt that." His husband’s hands run all up and down his back. Loki shivers. "You have come back quite solid," Thor tells him, pulling him close and squeezing his rump with a degree of warm familiarity that makes Loki melt. "Jotunheim may claim to have needed your brains, but it appears your father made greater use of your brawn."

All the attention renders Loki suddenly, unexpectedly shy. "What exactly are you implying," he asks, turning his face towards the city lights.

Thor catches him lightly by the chin. "Only this," his husband explains.
And then kisses him.

It takes Loki’s body and brain a long moment to catch up with what has happened. His husband is here, in his arms. *In his mouth.* By the Norns he has missed this so. He gives in to the overpowering flood of feelings and kisses Thor back, with rapidly increasing fervor.

“Are you here to stay,” Thor interrupts, right in the midst of things. “Please tell me you have not just snuck back here for a quick visit.”

Loki takes a deep breath. “I have finished my assigned duties,” he promises his husband quickly, wishing more than anything they were still enjoying one another’s mouths in the previous sense instead of talking. But then he thinks back to how worried he himself had been. “I am here to stay. If, of course, you will still have me.”

“Oh, rest assured,” Thor offers, smirking naughtily, “I certainly do intend to have you. But not until you have eaten and, of course, we have told my parents you are here. They would not want to miss such a- wait,” he adds, eyes narrowing. “How did you get here?”

“The usual way,” Loki says, which is not untrue. “Through the chamber doors,” he explains when Thor just looks at him. “There was no reason to employ trickery or evasive maneuvers.”

“No, here,” his husband explain unnecessarily, gesturing out across the balcony railing to the great city spread below. “The Realm Eternal. How did you get back to Asgard, from Jotunheim?”

~

Loki does manage to stave off the inevitable for some time, teasing Thor about his studies and answering questions with naught but more questions of his own.

Ultimately, though his husband tires of playing the little game and guesses outright: the royal family already knows Loki is here… and Thor has a very good idea how and why.

They kiss a little more as his husband, clearly and fortunately unable to stay annoyed, does everything possible to be a good sport.

“I must confess I did think it funny,” Loki admits in the end. “The look on your face when first you spotted me…”

They share another laugh, and a bit of pushing and shoving. “Oh, I have missed you so, Loki,” Thor tells him.

It is a very nice thing to hear.

~

Unfortunately, it is not a moment Loki can savor; they must still attend to their royal duties, the most pressing of which is joining the King and Queen for the evening meal.

“We have all night and more,” he promises Thor as his husband bemoans their situation. “I am here to stay. You will not be quickly rid of me again. We will make our appearances, and do is as expected of us, and then we shall retire to our chambers and *get reacquainted,*” he goes on, catching hold of Thor’s arm and giving it a light squeeze. “How does that sound?”


~
As it turns out there is rather more feasting – followed, unfortunately, by ample helpings of those close but endlessly boring companions *pomp* and *circumstance* - than either of them had anticipated. The king and his family are collectively allowed to eat in relative peace, as befits their exalted station. However, once the occupants of the royal table have more or less finished picking over the last of their foodstuffs, the crowd rises expectantly. It seems there are to be *speeches*. Many speeches. And once they get started every noble, regardless of the importance of her role or the size of his holdings, clearly feels compelled to *say a little something*.

There is no denying it; this is by all appearances a far more propitious welcome than that which Loki had received initially, back when he arrived in Asgard as nothing more than a singularly exotic blue trophy. That much, and he will be the first to admit it, is both certain and good. However, the whole process is also rather more tedious... not to mention lengthy. They are not more than two tables’ worth in and Loki is already finding himself missing the days of the furtive glance and the hushed gossip. He *almost* misses Helblindi and his rump-slapping.

Almost. That last is perhaps a bit of an exaggeration, but he is terribly bored.

It seems coming home a hero is not at all what it is cracked up to be. Especially here, in the golden land of heroes.

~

After the interminable speeches come the handshakes and arm-patting, the greetings and personal expressions of deep and undying gratitude. Which, yes, are wholly as tedious as they sound. Most of it is just the exchanging of vague pleasantries, though – heartfelt thanks for avoiding war, innocuous compliments around diplomacy and seidr, gentle platitudes offering the royal couple many blessings and a belated happy life together - and Loki accepts each encounter with grace (and carefully hidden resignation). There is no reason he cannot manage to be a good sport for one evening, surely, especially if it helps cement his position within this realm.

On and on it goes.

Until it does not.

~

The husband and wife smiling and nodding before them appear cut from the same seemingly innocent cloth as all who have come before them, a nondescript older landholder and his garden-minding wife. Nothing about them warrants undue attention and, when they go on to offer the same bland blessings as the endless Asgardian multitudes that preceded them, Loki finds himself fighting not to yawn. As it is he is barely listening to the man's words, instead relying on tone and gesture to gauge his own responses, when the woman speaks up. "We hear tell you are a most powerful sorcerer, Prince Loki," she starts off, head bobbing, and Loki smiles pleasantly. "Surely one who can build an entire city can bring our beloved Thor an heir."

Loki fights not to make a face. To his right he hears Thor choke a little as an unnatural hush settles over the room. "It is hardly my place to-," he starts, trying desperately to steer clear of the gaping chasm opening before him.

"Oh, but it is your place," she says firmly, ignoring the gathered crowd’s collective gasp; it is not customary to be so frank with nobility, not even here. "To hear the talk it is yours alone and that of none other."

"Shh. We have overstayed our welcome,” the man tells his wife. “We wish you both a long and
healthy rule," he hastens to offer as he turns about, steering his wife firmly away by the arm. "Please pardon my wife; I fear the ale makes her most unwell." His expression is both horrified and terrified at once. The whole situation might almost be funny, under different circumstances.

"Then I wish her a quick return to health," Loki says, stepping - not particularly lightly - on his own husband's foot as Thor coughs. "It is good to make your acquaintance," he offers, turning to greet the next man in line.

~

"How dare they- she-,” Thor sputters as, at long last, the two of them are finally able to leave the hall. "You are not here as some glorified broodmare, destined for nothing but to bring forth my children. You have just singlehandedly ensured peace for our myriad future generations, and this is how my people thank you?" He growls angrily. "For once I am ashamed to be Aesir."

Loki laughs despite his own troubled thoughts. "While I appreciate your dramatic defense of my purpose and my honor, I do," he offers good-naturedly as he reaches out to touch his husband's flushed and scowling face, "it is a natural wish on the part of your citizens. You and I both know we have to face this at some point, however little we may like doing so."

Truth be told, during his time away, Loki has done research and made certain discreet inquiries. Still, the answer yet eludes him despite his efforts. And none of that even takes into consideration his - nor Thor’s - thoughts on the matter. He has learned enough to realize, though, that they may have options at their disposal which neither he nor his husband has yet to consider.

For starters, it is Thor’s genetic line that matters to the Realm Eternal. While there is some precedent for a mixed-heritage union - Odin himself is said to have some Jotnar blood – Asgard could well be tolerant of a surrogate as long as the matter was handled discretely. Loki cannot help but worry, though, that such an arrangement would leave him unprotected at the hands of a fickle people.

No, he would really prefer that any child be half-Jotun. Ideally, too, half his Jotun.

Which, yes, means any solution will involve sorcery. Because, as he’d told Frigga months ago, he is in no way intersex (and is not overly interested in changing that, frankly, seidr or no!).

The best option at their disposal appears, to Loki’s way of thinking, to be a merger of their genetic material followed by what he has hear Asgard’s healers refer to as a gestational host.

Except for a few small things, of course:

First and foremost, the process requires seidr so complex Loki is not entirely certain he fully understands it, let alone has the skill to attempt taking it on.

Then, too, there is no guarantee Asgard would accept such an approach, unless perhaps they hid the process via a glamour.

Last, but not least, it’s not clear either of them is ready to parent. Which is rather significant; even if they can find a way to make a child, they are certainly not going to be able to magically raise it.

Loki sighs. None of this is what he wanted to be considering, let alone doing, on his first night home. "Let us speak no farther of this," he insists. "Not tonight. I have not seen you - or this place - for many cycles of the moon, and I have no wish to spend my first night home thus." He frowns unhappily. "Not fighting, not worrying, not talking of upsetting things. I had better plans." He stops a moment to study Thor's face closely; after so long away Aesir expressions are once again a bit difficult to read. "Did you not?"
Thor wipes his mouth with one broad hand. "Do not forget you had the advantage here; I had no plans, as I for my part had not the benefit of prior warning."

Despite himself Loki pouts. "And you thought not of me while I was gone?" He does his best to hide the fact he is not actually teasing. "Was it truly out of sight, out of mind like some say? Because if you wish me to-" At that last his voice breaks. So much for keeping his feelings to himself.

"No," Thor exclaims loudly. "Say it not. Think it not. Shh," he adds far more gently, placing two thick, calloused fingers across Loki's lips. "Of course I thought of you. I thought of little else, to the point I was most worthless. If you cannot take my word for that, just ask my father." He traces with surprisingly tender delicacy over and around Loki's mouth. "I have missed you so," he whispers, leaning in close. "I- please," Thor begs, as the very, very tip of Loki's tongue touches his finger. "Just kiss me."

Loki briefly - most briefly - contemplates sulking further. In the end he finds he simply cannot, not with his husband so real and so near. Instead he licks experimentally, poking his tongue between Thor's fingers. "I fear I find myself unable to comply," Loki tells his husband, and he truly is teasing this time. "It seems someone's hand is in my way."

Thor hums, a low, rough sound Loki is not certain he has ever heard his husband utter before. "Here, let me take care of that," Thor offers, damp fingers trailing across Loki's ridged cheek and into his hair. "There. Is this better?"

They are so close. Thor's lips are nearly touching his own. Loki laughs brightly and pivots out of his husband's grasp. "Let us go outside."

~

Out on the balcony, he stretches, fingers interlaced and arms overhead. "Oh, I have so missed this view," he observes, happily. It is full dark now, the only light in the sky that of the city's many torches. Little pinpoints of flickering orange-red light stretch off to the horizon.

Thor comes up behind him and catches him by both hips. "Did you miss the view more than you did your husband?"

Loki relaxes back against Thor's hot, solid body. "Do not be an idiot." He wriggles against his husband's front. "I just love it out here. I love it out here with you. Here," he adds, steering them both away from the railing, "I shall show you. But first, let us get comfortable."

Thor lets go of him and settles onto one of the chaises with a groan. "What if we have forgotten how," he asks, torchlight playing over his wrinkled brow.

"Forgotten how to get comfortable? Oh, I find that extremely difficult to believe," Loki teases as he swings a leg up and over. He settles very comfortably indeed onto his husband's lap. "Ohhhhh, yes." He has missed this so, so much. Enough, even, that he is struggling to concentrate. He does not want a mishap; to be on the safe side, he closes his eyes for a moment and sets the spell that holds his body temperature safely steady. That done, he grins again and shifts to lean forward. "Or did you mean something else by your question?"

"You know what I meant," his husband rumbles as he reaches up to catch Loki by the shoulders. "Come here. Let us test and see."

~

For once Loki finds himself not in the mood for rough coupling. His heart and his head are- too full.
He curls the rest of the way down, moving easily as Thor pulls him closer, and kisses his husband full on the mouth. “Mm,” he hums against Thor’s lips, “I do not think I have forgotten a thing. You?”

“I may have,” Thor admits, laughing, mouth slippery against Loki’s own. “Perhaps you should refresh my memory.”

~

They stay like that a long time, kissing slowly and lazily. Thor’s hands explore Loki’s back, touching ribs and whorls and solid new muscle, before drifting down to cup his rump. “Do you want more,” he asks, finally, giving a nod to their very first time. “Because I would be happy to-.”

That is as far as he gets before Loki silences him with a deeply passionate kiss.
Finally, a proper homecoming.

These two have the most awkward- well, you know. It's a good thing they like it anyway.

/sighs

Does he want more? *Does he ever! Is it not obvious?* He *knows* it is. Loki cannot help but smile thinking about that, his curving lips sliding slick and wet against Thor's hot mouth. "If you are offering," he says between messy kisses, "I find myself very much inclined to accept."

Thor's hungry, insistent kiss in return is for sure answer enough.

It is hardly any time at all before Loki finds himself no longer feeling the least bit patient. Thor, especially, is altogether too *dressed* and that simply must change. Loki does not even bother to make the (usual and customary, but entirely unnecessary) show of visibly casting; his husband’s bulky cape and leathers (and his own wristlets, loincloth, and dusty sandals) simply vanish, only to reappear in a neat heap – just barely visible in the flickering light of the closest torch - a yard or three away.

When he and his husband are at (what feels terribly much like at long last) laid completely bare, Loki pauses and considers their situation for the briefest of moments. Rather than summoning the customary vial of oil he - in the space between that flurry of disrobing activity and another frenzied kiss - opts to directly and liberally coat all applicable bodily surfaces… and, of course, a few spots which are not quite so *surface* in nature. His Jotnar tutors might cringe at this particular sordid use of his seidr, to be sure, but certain things – comfort, for one, and safety – simply must take priority.

Loki is surely no stranger to coupling, both with regularity and with displeasing rarity. He knows, after their recent hiatus, he and his husband must be willing to allow for no small amount of uncoordinated movement and awkwardness; it is simply bound to happen, especially after such a long time apart.

Thor starts, flinching in surprise as his fingers unexpectedly slip and slide in their journey across Loki's rump. He is quick to catch on, though; almost instantaneously Loki can feel his husband’s lips curve into a wicked grin. "I must say," Thor offers, mostly into Loki's mouth, "I do very much like these new ideas you have brought home with you." He licks at Loki's nose with a wet, hot tongue. "Do you mean me to believe every Jotun, from your father king to the smallest poor-born child, is this smart?"

Loki licks back, flicking just the tip of his husband’s nose. "*We are* a wise people. That said, I have been told I am a special case," he admits, and then frowns. "I have missed speaking with you, for certain. Could we perhaps get on with this, though? I have oil running everywhere."
"And I suppose this problem of yours must somehow manage to be my fault," Thor jokes lightly. His fingers slide back into proper, useful position, though, and it takes only a subtle shift for Loki to maneuver them precisely where they need to go. Thor only laughs again, breathy and rich. He trails his fingers down the inner back of Loki's thigh. "By the nine, Loki, you truly were not jesting," he teases, newly slippery fingers everywhere.

Loki's mildly scathing retort dies in his own throat, elbowed aside by a sharp gasp and then a hiss as his husband's slick fingers close gently over his scrotum.

After that he does not bother speaking further. Even if he might otherwise have wished to do so, which is simply not the case, he and Thor are once again far too busy sloppily kissing. Loki does cry out once, softly, when without warning two of his husband's callused, blunt fingers finally breach him as one. At the sound Thor stills for not a few long moments before resuming his gentle efforts, this time advancing and retreating in small, careful, measured slides until any element of sharpness to the pain is gone.

Even then, when all is well and then some and Loki is ready and wiling for more, Thor changes neither the pressure nor the pace; rather, he simply keeps up his patient, careful ministrations until Loki is half crazy with need.

"Yet more," Thor asks at very, very long last, the tip of the third finger tracing lazily around its brothers and sliding a little in the oil.

Loki cannot even begin to find the words to answer. All he can do is shift his hips in encouragement, inching towards his husband's palm... and then moan as that particular hint yields him exactly the results he had hoped for.

~

Under inky cover of darkness, they start about their marital business - right there on the chaise - with Thor reclining comfortably against the cushions and Loki riding astride. It is most enjoyable, for sure, and he truly relishes everything about it; the pressure and the element of control and the perfect oiled slide of their bodies as they shift and flex in powerful unison. In fact, Loki finds himself enjoying it, thoroughly, for quite a bit longer (considering their recent and lengthy separation) than he might have thought himself capable of doing. So much longer that, after a bit, he decides what they are doing is unto itself not quite enough. Loki sits back a little and holds himself nearly motionless, with his husband fully sheathed within him, and waits.

It does not take long. In fact, it is almost immediately that Thor's eyes – formerly squeezed tight shut against the steady and unremitting onslaught of pleasure - fly open. "Is something amiss," his husband asks, tone breathy and strained. “Are you not well?”

Loki throws his head back, laughing. “Oh, dearest, I am most well indeed,” he cheerfully assures Thor between gasps for breath. “But, since you are so kind as to inquire, I must tell you; I would be even better if you were taking me up against the wall.”

Thor joins him in laughter. “As heavy as you are now,” he retorts, struggling to catch his own breath as well, “I am no longer sure I can even heft you.”

“I could simply go pleasure myself in the baths, you know,” Loki retorts, knowing full well his grin gives away his true intentions.

“Indeed you could, my plump husband,” Thor jests. “But I know you will do no such thing.”
"You know nothing," Loki huffs.

"Up against the wall, you do say? So be it; your wish is my command." Thor grunts and groans and makes a dramatic show of struggling to his feet, erection still seated to the hilt and slippery hands cupped under Loki’s equally slick rump. "But first we must let it be known that, if we should happen to somehow fall to our embarrassing and untimely deaths, this mighty tragedy will be upon your head."

"The wall, Thor," Loki points out, flatly ignoring Thor’s teasing. "Not the railing. And sometime this age, if you would."

Thor does.

~

This is so very, very ripe with promise, Loki thinks as Thor carries him - with surprising grace, as he surely (with his legs slung about his husband's hips) is no lightweight burden despite all his vain protests - the remaining span of the balcony and puts him firmly up against the wall with a low, wordless growl. It is indeed most pleasing. The angle is better, the surface of the wall (and it is most thoughtful of his husband to have chosen one of the smooth, angled metal uprights over the far larger expanse of rough-hewn granite stretching between; Loki will make a special effort to express his gratitude later, one way or another) pleasantly cool against the flat planes of his shoulders and upper back.

Nicer even than the coolness of the wall against his skin, Loki’s wet-tipped, twitching erection rubs against Thor's belly with each hip-snapped thrust... rather than bobbing unattended and lonely in the air between their shifting bodies as it had been.

The very pinnacle of it all, the golden apple atop the whole of this splendid endeavor, is the way Loki is now most conveniently and perfectly positioned to explore Thor's face - his strong neck, his impressively-chiseled shoulders and solid upper arms - with lips and hands and probing tongue. And teeth, of course, because such is his naughty and spirited Jotun nature.

Their journey from the chaise to the wall was only a few steps. Even so the small project of repositioning, with its walking (Thor) and talking (Loki, yes, although he must surely share the credit here), serves to tamp down the fires just enough to (barely) slow the relentless onward march of pleasure.

Loki takes the opportunity to catch his breath while he can, knowing for certain that they will be back at one another with a vengeance soon enough.

And sure enough, the change in pace proves but a brief lull; within no more than a few minutes’ time they are grinding near-violently together as Loki peppers his husband's neck and jaw with sharp nips. He might likely have been a bit embarrassed to have spilled so quickly, his seed splattering cool and drippy across both their stomachs, were it not for how very, very closely Thor follows along behind.

~

This time, even as they gingerly disentangle themselves and Thor stands him carefully on his own two feet again, Loki does accompany the unleashing of his small bit of seidr with a dramatic hand-flourish. "I am not in the mood to be messy," he huffs as his husband laughs. "Lest you think otherwise, o’ mighty prince of Asgard, not everyone relishes the warm drip of your- mmph."

It is a good kiss, and he has missed his husband so; for now, he is willing to put up with being so
Once they are at long last able to breathe comfortably again the two of them, still in a welcome state of complete undress, settle at the balcony's edge. Loki's legs dangle, poked into the space between metal spindles; Thor, whose own massively muscled thighs are simply too large to afford the same option, instead slumps lazily with one shoulder resting against the railing. They sit very close, his husband with one leg folded tightly, its shin pressed alongside Loki's thigh and the other leg bent at the knee less sharply, leaning solid and overwarm against his back.

"I truly have missed this view," Loki observes once again, resting his temple tiredly against the railing and gazing out across the sea of flickering lights below. In the distance the observatory dome glows dimly in the humidity-dulled moonlight.

"Only the view," his husband asks softly, reaching out to tuck a stray bit of hair behind Loki's ear and tracing the raised markings along cheek, then jaw.

At first he assumes Thor is just making fond mockery of their earlier discussion. Loki turns just enough to kiss the tip of his husband's finger. "I trust you but jest," he offers, looking quizzically at Thor. While it is admittedly hard to be certain in the dim, flickering torchlight, Loki could almost swear something akin to worry still flashes across his husband's flushed brow.

"Of course," Thor huffs a bit grumpily, perhaps covering his concern with annoyance. "What do you take me for?"

Loki stretches to plant a kiss on his husband's wrinkled forehead. "Only my everything, dearest; not much, you see, at all." He smiles. "Truly, Thor, I am most glad to be reunited. Most, most glad indeed."

"What plans have you made for the morrow," Thor asks some time later as the two of them recline comfortably together in bed.

Loki stretches, from the tips of his fingers to his blue toes. He yawns. It has been a busy, eventful, tiring day, but he does not yet wish to succumb to sleep. It is lovely to be back, and he cannot help but want to savor each moment. "Well, unless you are up and about early I intend to have a good long sleep here by your side," he starts, curling contentedly against his husband's warm torso. "And then I should visit Star." He nuzzles Thor's chest gently. "And after that, if you are free, I would very much like to go fishing. And perhaps after that back to bed."

Thor laughs, the sound a low rumble beneath Loki's head. "Fishing. That is something we have not done these may moons. You are right," he agrees perhaps a little more seriously, pulling Loki close and kissing his temple softly. "It is how we got well-acquainted in the beginning; it is a suitable way to reacquaint ourselves now."

"I somehow got the impression we had already become reacquainted." Loki replies, laughing himself. "But if you think not, I am of course happy to try again." Another yawn escapes his mouth, largely unbidden. "Tomorrow, I mean. Not now, I am afraid."

"Sadly, I must concur," Thor offers, barely suppressing a yawn of his own. He rolls onto his side and pulls Loki with him, until they rest curled together back to front. "Before anything else whatsoever,
we simply must sleep.”

Lying cozily in bed together is so different from anything Loki had experienced in Jotunheim, even if one expressly discounts the sheer warmth of it. Something about being here, with his husband wrapped around him, he finds deeply comforting. In fact, despite the excessive heat of his husband’s body, Loki is quickly on sleep’s very doorstep. “We shall resume this in the morning, then,” he tells his husband.

“Which this,” Thor asks groggily.

Loki is so close to sleep himself that he cannot be sure he even answers.

~

He struggles awake as the first bright rays of morning sunshine find their way in through the tall, arched windows. After months in Jotunheim, where the hours of daylight are short and the light is always filtered and blue and pale, Loki is going to need time to adjust to the bright Asgardian day all over again. Not to mention the heat, of which they are fortunately well past the year’s worst.

Loki takes a long look at his peaceful, sleeping husband and decides it is best to let Thor slumber on. As much as he would not mind a repeat of last night (albeit inside, very likely, as he doubts his husband would be game for spearing him out there on the balcony in broad daylight), Loki knows he would be most unhappy himself to be dragged out of his dreams this early. In fact, he is a bit disgruntled about it, even considering his own situation is no one’s fault. Or, at least, he would be displeased, were it not for how it means he will be visiting his beloved horse shortly.

It is easy enough to dress silently, considering how little he needs wear - next to nothing, in other words - in this sweltering climate. Loki roots quietly through his things, pleased to find even his clothing right where he left it six months prior, and collects the loose, rather battered loincloth he has always favored for riding. With it slung over his shoulder, he pads soundlessly off into the bath.

*You are more than a bit of a fright*, he tells his own reflection in the big mirror over the washbasin, shaking his head mock-sadly. In truth he is quite the mess – his hair is wild, and he sports more than one obvious bite-mark. Not that Star shall care he reminds himself as he does the best he can to gather his hair into something which only distantly resembles a braid.

After splashing his face with water – while Loki can and does use his seidr for the mundane rituals of personal hygiene, he tries not to do so without good reason – and cleaning his teeth, he gives his reflection a last displeased once-over and tiptoes back across their bedchamber. Thor looks most peaceful; Loki, for his part, is rather jealous.

~

Once he arrives at the stables, though, only to be greeted by the excited snorts and gentle huffs of not just Star but stall after stall of royal horses, Loki quickly finds his way past even the worst of his malaise. “It seems all of you missed me as much as did my husband,” he tells the sleek creatures, laughing delightedly. “I’m afraid, however, that I must ask you not to demonstrate your enthusiasm in the same manner in which he did.”

The horses do not laugh. He imagines they would, were they but able.

Loki conjures a woven basket and fills it with crisp, sweet apples plucked shiny and fresh out of the ether. He hurries to give Star hers first, with a pat and a whispered promise to come converse with her properly once everyone has received a treat. After that, he makes his way from stall to stall,
doling out treats and petting soft noses.

Star has long since finished her apple by the time he finds his way back to her. No matter; he gives her another and then a special gift… one of the candied sweets she (probably does not need, but) so favors. Loki lets himself into her stall and leans up against her warm, well-groomed side. “Someone has taken most excellent care of you while I have been away,” he says, eyeing her glossy coat approvingly. “I trust I have not been replaced, though, and have not lost my treasured place in your affections.”

As though she can read his mind Star turns to rub her long face against Loki’s chest. “Good,” he tells her happily. “I am most pleased to see you as well. What say you we head out for a run?” She snorts and tosses her head; while he does not speak her language, Loki feels safe assuming she agrees.

~

Out in the sunlight Star’s coat is blue-black and shiny, save for the fresh white blaze that led to her name. Loki takes ample time to saddle her properly, working a little more slowly than usual and concentrating hard to be certain nothing slips past his attention. He makes sure her tack is all comfortably secure and then swings up and over with- well, if not grace, precisely, at least a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Riding, it turns out, is something Loki has missed as well. He and Star do not waste their time in the practice yard; the day is far too beautiful to be wasted circling in the dirt. Instead – even though the muscles in his thighs already feel the strain and he knows he will suffer for his choices later - they head through the orchards and then off to the cool and sparkling stream where he and Thor oft came to fish. In fact he does both yearn and intend to return here later in the day, with his husband, and spend some time in the water. Fortunately, this does not in any way preclude him from enjoying a few quiet moments riding Star along the near bank in the golden light of morning.

Everything is lush and green and lovely; even after months away, spent back in the realm from which he hails, Loki cannot help but think this golden place really does feel like home.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

In which there is more breaking of news than Thor would personally prefer.

Thor is truly certain he has not known pleasure to rival this before. Never, not in all his many years of living. Not only is his husband home, and whole, and very much not moved on to shinier prizes or to more fascinating pursuits, but Loki - having somehow oiled himself both creatively and generously with some obscure trick of seidr Thor himself could not even have dreamt up - feels splendid in ever conceivable way… to a degree no partner before him has ever managed.

By any measure, be it Thor's fingers, his mouth, or his proud and eager cock, Loki is sheer perfection in every manner imaginable. Each motion, each sound shoots straight and true, directly into the very core of his pleasure. So much so, in fact, that he cannot be bothered to care who might hear. For once it matters not who might be encouraged to look up at the sound, only to see the golden and blue princes - not one, but two pressed obscenely together – of the Realm Eternal silhouetted against the warm, flickering torchlight.

Thus, when his husband bids him stand - the better to take his hard-won prize against the palace walls - Thor surges up without a single thought given to propriety or decorum and does exactly as Loki has requested.

He levers his husband carefully – in light of their present state of arousal, at least, his near-frenzied movements surely count as careful - against one of the broad, slanted supports that collectively frame a row of narrow windows set high in the wall above. While Thor is doubtless not reasoning at his best, he is still confident in the suitability of his choice; the metal’s bright, unseasonable chill will in no way trouble his Jotun spouse, and the smooth resting place the sweeping upright presents is slick and pleasant compared to the rough-hewn stone around them.

They shift and writhe against the metal, jockeying for the best angle as they kiss and paw at one another. Even after they are comfortably settled into position Thor keeps one big hand tucked beneath his husband's gyrating hips - it is not necessary for technique or safety, as between the wall and his own death-grip on Thor's shoulders Loki is in little danger of going anywhere, but Thor very much loves this most shapely of all bottoms and is loathe to miss a chance to lay his hands merrily upon it - and plants the other palm firmly against the metal upright not far above Loki's tossing head.

Doing so provides him the perfect amount of leverage, and frees his wild blue husband to bite eagerly at every bit of skin within reach. Thor does his best to start back in slowly and carefully, for naught; he finds himself almost immediately unable to sustain anything approaching a sensible pace. In what feels like no time at all, the tempo is almost too much and the course of their lovemaking almost too fast; Thor is just about make a valiant attempt to slow things down once again when – with little warning save for a soft groan - Loki spends into the narrow, sweat-slicked space between their muscled bellies.

Gentleman that he of course is - or so he cheerfully assures himself - Thor follows very close to immediately after.
Not long afterwards, when Loki has effortlessly neated the both of them up with a lazy flourish of his long blue fingers and they are sitting companionably together at the balcony’s very edge, Thor and Loki amuse themselves gazing off into the starlit darkness.

"I truly have missed this view," Loki tells Thor, not for the first time even since his return. His eyes glow faintly in the moonlight reflecting from the observatory dome. He means no harm by it, of that Thor is certain. Just the same, hearing it leaves him sad.

"Only the view?" He traces the raised markings along Loki’s temple and down his husband’s jaw. Thor wants very much to think it is him his husband cherishes, and not just Asgard’s visually stunning scenery.

Loki must sense that something is amiss; he shifts a little and kisses Thor’s wandering hand. "I trust you but jest,” he says, watching Thor’s face closely.

Thor had actually not been joking, point of fact, but he sees no gain in admitting so now. Not if his husband thinks this is a laughing matter; he does not wish to be made the fool. "Of course," Thor grumbles, tone perhaps a bit more gruff than he had intended. "What is it that you take me for?"

"Only my everything, dearest,” his husband offers. “Not much, you see; hardly anything at all." Loki kisses Thor’s forehead, the flat plane right between his brows, and smiles sweetly. “Truly, Thor, I am most glad to be reunited,” he insists. “Most, most glad indeed.”

~

When Thor comes reluctantly back to consciousness, blinking against the golden glare, he is abed and Asgard’s mighty sun is already high in the sky. He sits up slowly and surveys the room: Loki is - unsurprisingly, it is doubtless fair to say, but he finds it upsetting nonetheless - long gone. Even so, though his husband appears not to have left so much as a scribbled note behind, the faint electric hum of Loki’s magic permeates the room. That alone is enough to calm his fears.

Ah, yes. Gone to visit the horses, Thor belatedly remembers. He and his husband had discussed this very thing (albeit briefly) the evening before, between what might best be described as renewing their nuptials and retiring for the night. And then after the stables, perhaps fishing, Loki had suggested. It is a sound idea at that, one Thor can happily get behind.

First, though, he must get himself up and ready for the day.

Thus, yawning and idly scratching his naked chest, Thor swings both legs over the edge of the bed and stands.

~

It is not until he is washed up and dried and busily digging amongst his tunics for one that will cover as many of the purpled imprints of his husband's sharp teeth as possible that Thor is mildly startled by a sharp knock and Frigga's servant appears in his outer chambers. "Good morrow," she tells him politely, inclining her head in the requisite gesture of respect. "Frigga our queen requests that you join her in her sitting room for a late morning meal.”

Thor cannot help but yawn again; he does his best to cover his gaping mouth with one hand. "Tell her I will be forthcoming shortly," he says a bit absentmindedly, studying himself in the huge mirror alongside his armoire. “Thank you,” he amends, remembering his manners just as she turns to go. It is not, after all, her fault he is not at his most prepared.

~
“Mother,” he greets Frigga pleasantly as she rises from one of her chairs. He offers his cheeks for kissing, one and then the other. “You sent for me?”

She nods, smiling. “I did. Sit.”

He does, as always, choosing his seat as she sinks gracefully back into her own. He has been summoned here with enough regularity over the years to have long since stopped trying to second-guess his mother. Instead, once he has settled himself into another of her soft chairs, he folds his hands neatly in his lap and waits.

“It is good to have Prince Loki home,” Frigga says, adjusting her own billowing skirts about her. “Is it not?”

“Very much so,” Thor agrees wholeheartedly. “I am committed to seeing to it we are never again parted.”

“Let us speak not of parting,” she says, “not so soon on the heels of a fond welcome.” As Thor nods his agreement, his mother looks pointedly at his neck.

“And I cannot help but notice the two of you put the remainder of your evening together to good use,” she observes, smiling all the more broadly even as Thor feels his own face flush. "Do not think you can put things of this nature past me, my son. Despite what you may think I do remember what it is like to be young."

Perhaps the only thing he wishes less to dwell upon than the most intimate details of his recently renewed acquaintance with his husband is the idea of his mother and father being-young. In this manner, at least. Does one ever wish to think this of his parents? "Be that as it may," he says quickly, desperate to change the subject, "I doubt you have brought me here solely to remark upon the evidence of my-happiness. Nor," he adds, stretching a bit in order to reach the small plate of fruits and soft cheeses nearest his seat, "to spare me the ignominy of being caught out in the public rooms breaking my fast at noontime."

The queen takes up her own plate and samples first one and then a second ripe, red berry before responding. "Loki has come home quite the hero," she reminds him when at last her mouth is empty, "As you well know. And like it or not it is a blade that cuts two ways."

"Or a mighty hammer with two faces," Thor thinks. "One with which to destroy, one instead to build."

"How so," he asks, struggling a bit to talk politely around a good-sized bite of cheese. He blots his lips on a lap cloth, to buy a bit of chewing time and to hide his subsequent overeager swallow. "Of what precisely do you speak?"

"He is certainly far more welcome among our people now," Frigga explains. "He is a hero in his own right, to both realms, rather than a simple bauble for a spoiled crown prince to wave gaudily about."

"Loki was hardly my bauble," Thor protests, stopping short when she waves him off. He knows of what she speaks, but it rankles just the same.

"We are speaking of perception, Thor, not of fact. People often see naught but what they want to see and then form their own opinions. This is not my point, though; humor me while I get to it, will you not?"

He will; he does. He has, truth be told, little choice in the matter. And even if he did, Thor has no wish to be rude to his mother. "Do go on," he offers. "I will make a better effort to eat more and talk less."
Frigga laughs, bright and melodic, but the look in her eyes is solemn. "People will revere where once they barely tolerated, and that reverence will prove a source of great power," she tells him. "But, on the sword's other edge, the citizenry of Asgard – and of Jotunheim, for that matter - will be increasingly less patient in seeking an heir."

This last is a reasonable assumption; it comes as a powerful blow to the gut just the same. "An heir," Thor repeats, keeping his voice neutral only with considerable difficulty. "I fail to see how this changes our situation in that specific regard." In truth he sees it fine. This does not make the new view any more palatable. Perhaps talking it through with his mother, then, can somehow make the situation different. Less inevitable, He is not ready to face this, not at the present juncture. Not at any future juncture he can yet fathom.

"Alas," Frigga tells him gently, "I am not among those you can so easily fool with your illusions of false idiocy." Thor does smile at that, even as he shakes his head ruefully. "But if you wish me to lay it out for you despite that, I shall." She takes a small sip from her goblet. "Our people have gone, over this short time, from worrying about their future in your hands to eagerly awaiting your ascent to the throne. And while some of this is no doubt based upon your own merits," she continues, the corners of her mouth turning up just the slightest bit, "no small part is due to Loki's new role as your fitting partner." She stops and takes another sip, then blots her mouth neatly. "And that means your union is finally and definitively one the good people of Asgard – the so-called rank and file – wish to see sealed."

Thor sighs, heavily. "I cannot say Loki and I have not discussed it," he admits, and his mother nods her encouragement. "And while we have talked about several options, he seemed most taken with surrogacy."

At that she laughs aloud. "Would not you be?"

Try as he might - and he does try hard, for certain - he cannot picture himself spelled to maidenhood and swollen with child. "Aye," he concedes after considerable thinking. "But I am safe from such happenings; our people would never allow it to be so." No king of Asgard has ever mothered an heir, and Thor has grave doubts one ever will.

His mother smiles, the same sort of sharp, knowing expression he sees rather often on the face of his husband. "And there you see to the heart of the matter," she tells him.

Frigga is, as always, right and true. That said, he does not wish to sell his husband short… especially with Loki not here to speak for himself. "Could he not instead use his seidr to disguise his appearance," he inquires, "while still making use of a surrogate?" He knows even as he speaks the question, though, what she will doubtless say. And sure enough:

"There is too great a risk of discovery," she counters. "Even were Loki to go off-realm, you are now both people of no little renown. There would be much fame and fortune to be had in accidentally revealing your secret."

Thor sighs, again. "And who is it that gets to break this wonderful news to Loki," he asks her.

Frigga smiles. "You may if you would like, but I hold out the hope he will come to the same realization himself."

"Yes," Thor agrees, nodding enthusiastically. It is far too easy, otherwise, to picture his own abandoned body smoking in the dirt. "He is smart. He will catch on."

"He likely will," his mother agrees. "And, if recent history is any guide, he will be more reasonable
about it all than you are.”

Frigga lets him eat several chunks of cheese and an entire bunch of grapes in sullen silence. “It would be just my luck, would it not, to find that Jotun gestation spans several years and is accompanied by a murderous rage the likes of which our people have never seen,” he complains once the worst of his hunger is sated. “I will be slaughtered in my very bed, all in an effort to grant this realm its heir. How would our people like that, mother? Would that satisfy their bloodlust, do you think?”

It is right about then that Thor realizes he is proving Frigga’s point, amply. And then some. He makes himself stop. “I am sorry,” he says, though he is far from sure he feels anything resembling even the faintest traces of sorrow. Taking his temper out on his mother never ends well. “That was a bit rude of me. I am simply frustrated… while I do hear what you are saying, it seems this should be a private thing.”

“And yet it never is,” she reminds him, “not when one is born to be king.”

~

When Thor does not bother to continuing to disagree, Frigga changes course a bit and goes on to provide him with exactly the sort of education he can guarantee with absolute certainty he has never once wanted.

To listen to his mother talk – and she is certainly the expert here, in every conceivable way - it seems Jotun gestation is actually quite short; pregnancy during the long stretch of the harsh winter moons is too dangerous, so Jotun babes grow during the comparative warmth of summer and spring forth in only four months. It seems everything about the process is accelerated, compared to that that which Thor is more familiar. He is of course not speaking from personal experience even then; he has only seen his friends’ wives and lovers with child. Volstagg’s wife, especially, seems to have spent her entire adult life in a family way; perhaps she would consider such a short term a blessing. Thor, who needs as much time to adjust to parenthood as possible, does not feel blessed in the least.

“Jotun mothers-to-be are notoriously fierce and dangerous,” Frigga goes on to tell him. It does make sense; even in the best of times the Jotun people have long dealt with a paucity of resources, the sort of generalized hardship which renders the mildest among them combative near to a fault. “While it is hard to know how Loki might behave, as he of course will be a dam through magic only, you would be wise to gird yourself for battle.”

Thor smiles nervously, as he cannot be sure she is teasing. “Mother,” he warns her, “you are doing nothing whatsoever to sell the whole idea to me.” He shudders. “And you’ve not even gotten to touching on raising the thing. I know nothing of Jotun childrearing customs and little enough of my own.” He tries to grin more broadly but doing so makes his face hurt. “Do Jotnar mothers, for example,” he makes a lame effort to kid, “eat their young?”

His attempt falls entirely flat; Frigga gives him a withering look. “Do not let Loki hear you say that, my son,” she admonishes, “or your life as a parent will be altogether too short to even being feeling long.”

He sighs, yet again. “This is difficult for me,” he admits sadly. “It is not a bridge I had planned on crossing at this juncture.”

“None do,” she assures him. “Bringing forth children is rarely a thing for which one feels ready. And yet we all find our way. You and Loki will make fine parents; of this, I am confident.” She reaches out and squeezes his hand. “And you should feel good about it as well.”
Her reassurance is comforting. It is. Once he takes his leave of his mother’s chambers, though, Thor abruptly finds himself at a bit of a loss. Mind full to its brim with swirling thoughts, he is verily unable to determine whether he wishes to hurry off to (find and then) commiserate with Loki or to simply keep his own troubled counsel.

~

Thor opts to walk awhile alone, in hopes he might find the chance to work his way through the worst of the tangled mess that his thoughts have become before the time comes to seek out Loki and take the two of them fishing.

He lets his feet go where they may, which they repay badly by leading him directly to Frigga's gardens. His recent conversation with his mother hangs over him like a raincloud, obscuring the bright beauty of the flowers and casting everything into dull, muted shadow. The effect is such that for once he has no interest in lingering among the cheerful plethora of growing things; he opts instead to head off to the orchards as fast as his legs will carry him.

There, sadly, things are no better. The soft sounds of birds and of leaves rustling overhead should be soothing, but Thor hears nothing of comfort in them. He finds himself able to concentrate only on the plump, roundness of the trees’ ripe fruit. He cannot look at so much as a single apple without thinking of his husband, similarly swollen. Loki may take the news in stride - his husband has, after all, a far longer history of suffering for the sake of one duty or another than does Thor - but, truth be told, he is not sure that is a good thing.

While he has always known he would someday be called upon to sire his successor. someday has always been sufficiently vague as to feel- unreal. As though it all belongs to someone else's life, one he never reaches in the confines of his imagination.

That, and above all he has always had a vaguely-defined idea that someone else would be doing the actual childrearing while he was off to this skirmish or that battle. Someone who lives for the children, for the small and fragile living things, and has little discernable interest in politics or warfare or- or Thor, for that matter.

None of which, of course, describes his husband; not in any imaginable way. Loki is involved and fascinated and demanding, and he both puts Thor at the center of his own orbit and expects nothing less in exchange. No, Loki will most certainly expect them to share the burden; to raise their child together. There will be no leaving his blue husband alone with a baby while going cheerfully off to defend this land or attack that one.

That can only be all the more true considering the duty of bearing the wretched thing – and if that is not a fine way to view Asgard’s future king (because in Thor’s head it could never be a queen; the fates have been far too cruel already), he knows not what is - to term will have fallen to Loki alone.

All in all, the very idea of starting a family now – and having to be there for it! - is so distant from what Thor had originally pictured that, at first examination, it hardly feels fair. When he takes the time to really think back to his own childhood, though, he does have to concede that his own father had indeed been a fond and regular presence. Not so much as was Frigga, nor truth be told the nursemaids and tutors and instructors, but certainly the king had not been absent to anything approaching the degree Thor has personally envisioned himself being.

Evidently it simply does not work that way.

~
An hour’s walking grows quickly into two. Thor knows he must go find his husband soon, if he wants any hope of salvaging a peaceful afternoon at least. Perhaps this, too, is one of those things for which he will never feel ready.

~

Thor finally locates Loki in the royal stables, brushing Star until she shines like polished stone. “You spoil that horse beyond all reason,” he tells his husband. “She is so clean you could eat off her back.”

Loki’s face twists into a little moue of disgust. “You could, Aesir beast,” he huffs. “I for one prefer my fare free of horsehair.”

His husband looks so earnestly revolted that Thor cannot help but laugh. “It is so good to have you home,” he tells Loki. “Nothing makes a bad day better than a few minutes spent in your company,” he lets slip in a moment of lazy inattention. He means the comment as a compliment. Still, the very moment the words leave his lips, he can immediately see the folly in them.

“Whatever do you mean,” Loki asks, eyes narrowed in speculation. “You slept in. It is lovely out. You have the so-called love of your life back in your clutches. What could possibly make any occasion such as this a bad day?”

Thor had not meant to go there; now he has left himself little choice. He has backed himself gracelessly into a corner, sure as sure. “Mother wished to speak with me,” he explains.

Loki snorts. “Ah, yes, I see it now. Nothing wrecks a perfectly lovely morning like a conversation with one’s mother.”

“You do not understand,” Thor complains, leaping ill-advisedly to his own defense. “She thinks the citizenry wants you immediately with child,” he blurts out, before covering his mouth with one big hand.

“With child,” Loki repeats, eyes narrowing. “That is not what we agreed.”

“None of this has anything to do with agreement,” Thor acknowledges. “Not on my part, at least. I am told this is the price of our- of your improved standing.

“I save a realm and in reward I must-.” Loki stops as Star grunts; he has been brushing too roughly, almost to the point of viciousness. He takes a deep, shuddering breath and then sighs. “I do not know why any of this surprises me. It should not.” He shakes his head as if to clear it. “I just- I am sorry.”

Thor grabs his husband and pulls Loki’s slender blue frame close against himself, hair-laden currycomb and all. “No,” Thor tells his husband, “I am the one who should be sorry. I should not have brought it up. I did not mean to spoil your day as well.”

Loki shivers. “No, it is best this way. I have come to know you well; it is not like I could have overlooked the way in which you doubtless would have been acting strangely. And to be honest I must admit I suspected this would be forthcoming.” He cuddles against Thor a moment more and then pushes away, straightening. “Never you fear. We shall make it work somehow, dearest, if we must. Which indeed it seems we do.”

~

They stick with their plans and ride down to the stream, eventually. Even with all that has transpired, Thor has to admit it is truly nice to get away; to steal a few hours of solitude, with just their horses and his husband.
And, of course, all the lovely and tasty fish.

They are, happily, able to set aside some of their new burdens. Watching his husband in the cold, clear water, catching fish with a deftness Thor still finds difficult to believe, he is pleasantly reminded of their first visit to this place. Then, as now, Loki is transformed.

Thor does not even bother trying to catch fish himself this time. “You are so much better than am I,” he tells his husband when Loki asks why, “that there is no reason for me to bother getting wet.”

“Oh, I do not know about that,” Loki teases, pausing mid-hunt to send a cold, seidr-fueled wall of water surging up over the bank and soaking Thor from waist to feet. “What,” he asks mock-innocently as Thor roars in surprise. “I should not want for you to feel left out.” With a careless wave of one hand he undoes the damage, leaving Thor warm and dry and sputtering for no reason whatsoever.

“You are enjoying this far, far too much,” Thor tries to lecture, but given his husband’s gleeful demeanor he soon cannot help but laugh as well. “Come, let us make quick work of those fish you are so skilled in catching.”

~

As before, Loki kindles a small cooking fire for Thor. He conjures a small, sharp knife and has his catch gutted and fileted in no time. Still, he waits patiently for Thor to sear half the fish before digging into his own raw portion. “This is one of my favorite spots in all this realm,” he tells Thor as the two of them dig into their respective servings with all the enthusiasm fresh-caught fish rightfully deserves. “We will have to see to it our child learns to love it as well.”

Thor smiles. “How could anyone not enjoy it here? I somehow suspect that will be the least of our worries.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Loki and Thor start their journey towards parenthood.

Well, at least, Loki does.

Loki

The process, as it turns out, is rather more complicated than even Loki, with his far greater breadth and depth of sorcery-related expertise, had been anticipating. And before anything can even begin there are forms to be completed, some in Asgard's spiky runes and others in an archaic Jotun script even he himself needs a legend to decipher.

Only once the seemingly endless paperwork has been submitted does the true fun begin. A page comes for Loki, to inform him he must report to the healing rooms. There the healers collect samples, both of the common sort a prince might have readily anticipated and of a rather less typical nature. The latter group includes many which must be gathered from places Loki had not previously known existed, let alone had any intention of offering up for purposes of said sampling. The whole process is degrading and uncomfortable. His mood – admittedly a bit volatile on the best of days, which this is decidedly not - descends quickly into a state of chronic irritability.

In fact, it really is not until Thor finally must report (and begins to fall victim to similar poking and prodding) that Loki's temper even marginally improves.

The following day involves a tedious – albeit painless - afternoon spent once again in the company of the healers, with Loki trying with all he has not to drift into a doze as a sparkling golden cloud (the nature of which he cannot discern, and it seems no one here is at liberty to discuss it with him) swirls gently above his exam table. The sparkling haze shifts and hums like a swarm of tiny bees, which only conspires to make him all the sleepier. He stifles yawn after yawn and, to his annoyance, does have to be prodded awake eventually.

The final verdict surprises no one: Loki, because he – despite the fact that he did not naturally develop as actively intersex himself - is the one genetically predisposed to intersexuality in its full capacity, ends up classified the one most suited to take on a seidr-augmented pregnancy. It is simply too much of a stretch for his husband, who possesses neither the talent for shape-shifting nor the unfortunate contingent of latent, undeveloped female systems hidden deep within his powerful body, to host a baby.

Just because it is unsurprising, that of course does not mean Loki has to like it. He, as a matter of fact, does not like it at all. This is what he must do, though, and this prince of Jotunheim is not one to shirk his duty; he simply nods and says nothing.

With what they've termed the first front conquered (though it scarcely feels a win, at least from Loki's
admittedly biased perspective), the two of them must subsequently make a series of short forays into Jotunheim. There are potions to acquire, sorcerers to consult, and an extensive suite of obscure artifacts (the majority of which must draw power from the casket before they can be gainfully used) to be tuned and collected.

“Is it always this complicated,” Thor asks Loki quietly as they lug yet another pouch of amulets and small metal weights back to their temporary quarters for safekeeping.

Loki rolls his eyes. “Even among the comparative savagery of my home realm, Thor, most people choose to have those who are naturally female – or, at minimum, intersex - to bear their children,” he lectures. “The males of Jotunheim are not quite so obsessed with making their own dams as are certain Aesir princes.”

When his husband tries to protest, Loki stalks away. Thor may well be the one in the right, but Loki is in no mood to be reasonable.

~

Next on their distasteful itinerary is a lengthy consultation with an elderly Jotun dam who is widely proclaimed the expert in such covert endeavors, during which Thor (to hear his husband talk of late the whole endeavor is turning out to be much like being partnered with a woman again, and not in ways Thor had evidently found himself missing, so it is perhaps all for the best he is banned from these proceedings) is left to pace the cold, blue-tinted hallway outside her workrooms alone. At least, Loki feels that way initially. When the old dam begins to touch Loki’s body in ways he finds far too familiar coming from an ancient stranger, all the while muttering incantations in a gravelly voice just too soft to make out, he sorely misses having a hand to hold and a shoulder to sob into.

When she finally releases him back to the world at large, Loki feels groggy and sick. It comes as an embarrassingly great relief to find he needs not visit her but this once.

This time when Thor asks him what is wrong, Loki refuses to comment.

~

Over the course of two successive Jotunheim visits (just to collect the remaining potions and artifacts, thankfully, as Loki has had more than his fill of being examined) the prices do make time for a quick meal with King Laufey, during which conversation feels a bit strained. Loki does everything in his power to avoid his brothers, though; the very last thing he needs on top of all this is an endless stream of witty commentary from the two princely future sires (each of whom is being allowed to remain both future and sire). Consequently he is quite pleased when his husband turns out to be entirely supportive and in fact makes equally little effort to press for social family time.

Of course, the pubs on Jotunheim- well, they do not really exist at all, let alone rival those of Asgard. Hence why his brothers do love to visit the realm eternal so.

Whatever the explanation, Loki is grateful.

~

When at last he and Thor depart - their final time, at least for purposes of this campaign - for the golden halls of Asgard, Loki finds himself unpleasantly weighed down both mentally and physically. Given the correct spell-casting, the proper tools, the right supplements, and the ideal gestational environment, all of which they (and a supporting cast of many) have worked their hardest to prepare, he will spend the next four or more months of his life as- as something he has spent what feels like a
lifetime hotly decrying.

Every single time he once insisted he was entirely male, up to and including his argument with the queen, comes bubbling back up to haunt him now.

_Such is the price of greed_, the elder dam had admonished Loki when he had made the error of bemoaning his sorry fate. And yet he finds it hard to see how wanting simply to keep what he has - Thor, his beloved – for himself can really be considered greedy. Everyone wants to be loved. If this particular mess can be claimed to be the result of _anyone’s_ avarice, it would rest wholly on the broad shoulders of two old kings.

Two greedy old kings, neither of whom will be condemned to bloat and cramp and swell.

For their greed, Loki finds himself sentenced to force a new life violently out through borrowed parts he would give anything to return untrammeled.

And then he must raise the thing – the child – with a husband who claims to feel just as unready for parenthood as does he himself. It is not fair.

Indeed, once again, if there is any trace of fairness hidden here he completely fails to see it. Sadly, he is long accustomed to that by now.

~

Upon their return Loki is called upon – alone, not in Thor’s company - to promptly seek Queen Frigga's counsel. He cannot help but wonder if his thoughts are not quite as private as he might otherwise assume.

"This weighs greatly upon you," Frigga observes as Loki enters her weaving rooms. "Leave us, please," she tells her ladies, gesturing towards the entryway. "Go to the dining hall to avail yourselves of some light sustenance, and hurry not in returning. I would speak alone with my son-in-law privately."

They rise, one after another, and carefully secure their shuttles before departing. Most of them simply incline their heads politely to their lady and her borrowed son. A few smile and offer their thanks, or their good wishes. Loki, for his part, only nods in return. He is tired and concerned and not in the right frame of mind for idle chatter.

“How many I assist you,” he inquires when the last of Frigga’s weavers has departed. “What is it you ask of me?”

She frowns. “It is the other way around,” she tells him. “I hope that I may be of assistance to you, both now and as you continue preparing for your new role. For your difficult assignment,” she amends as he says nothing, “because I very much do understand it will be difficult. As deeply as I adore my son, know this,” she goes on. “The road I walked to get him to the intersection of his life and your own was oft far from easy. It is easy for no one. Rest assured: somehow we all find a way.”

He laughs a little at that. “I am not entirely sure I am up to birthing and raising Thor in miniature,” he tells her. “I cannot hope- I am not the mother you are.”

“Please take no offense,” she starts, “but none of us can rightly gauge the mothers we will be until the time comes. And you will not be a mother beyond your child's birth; you will be a father, and I am sure you will be a fine one. I did not call you here to lecture you, though,” she apologizes. “I truly did only wish to offer my assistance with some of the less pleasant aspects of what you are about to undertake.”
Loki sighs. “You speak not of the joys of childrearing now,” he confirms.

She shakes her head. “There is much to be done before you can bring forth a child to rear. Have you ever shape-shifted across sexes before,” she asks.

He stops a moment, thinking. “When I shift into animal form, I am concentrating far more on the mechanics; the feathers, the muscles, the intricacies of flight or the subtle motions of gait.” Loki thinks back to the times he’s flown, or stalked through the tall grass, or raced over the ground as hare or steed. “I would hazard the guess the rest of me stays as is, given I pay no attention to adjusting it, but I cannot claim that as the certain truth.”

Frigga nods periodically as he speaks. “That is a fair assessment,” she agrees. “It takes considerable focus to shift from one sex to another, even at a superficial level. If you have not been applying that level of focus, at least in this specific arena, it is reasonable to assume you have been consistently male in every form.”

Loki fixes her with his best baleful glare. “If I am to be intersex strictly for the duration of this- this experiment,” he hisses, “then I will be for all intents – if not purposes - male in this form as well.”

She smiles gently. “It is not that simple,” she reminds him. “You will be both, and neither, in every imaginable way. It is this,” she adds, “which makes the whole process so challenging.”

“I like being male,” Loki protests, startled into sounding considerably more petulant than he intends. “Life is complicated,” she tells him, which is neither agreement not argument. In the end, he really has no choice but to nod.

After that, the talk turns to physiology. If anything, it is less pleasant than was philosophy. Loki finds every bit of the ensuing discussion highly displeasing, although he does his best to keep his thoughts out of his face. Fortunately, Frigga makes no further inquiry into how he feels.

Perhaps, of course, she has no need. Loki puts that thought quickly aside.

~

"So," Thor asks at the heavy, dirty-smudged railing when Loki stops by the practice ground later that afternoon to watch his husband spar, "what did mother wish of you?"

Loki thinks a moment, searching for an effective way to summarize. "The queen wished to help me better understand what lies ahead," he explains. "The logistics, as it were."

Thor's face twists in sympathy; it is amply clear there is little (or nothing, perhaps, as his expression is that pained) he would like less than to discuss this particular sort of subject matter with his mother. It has been a long few days; Loki is not about to let the opportunity for a bit of comic relief pass.

"Dam to dam," he explains, smiling despite how the conversation itself had been singularly unfunny. His husband's reaction is quite priceless. "She gave me some idea what to expect and helped me understand each of my alternatives," he tells Thor. "I have a surprisingly large number of things I must decide." He does, although most of his choices lie on the dull spectrum that extends from banal to trivial.

"Except the small part regarding whether or not to bring forth a child," his husband points out, unnecessarily.

Loki rolls his eyes. "Yes, of course. We have already discussed our distinct lack of flexibility - well,
not ours personally so much as that of our people - in that specific matter." He shrugs and looks away, past the armory and toward the stables, feeling abruptly a bit guilty. "It serves us badly to allow this to make us bitter," he reminds Thor. "We must do this either way. What benefit do you see in letting it drag us down?" He is a fine one to talk, he knows, and yet this should be said. They clearly both need to hear it.

Thor sighs. "You are right," he admits, taking Loki’s hands in his own rather filthy, sweaty ones. "I must do better."

"We will make it work," Loki reminds his husband. "That, and I am rather more caught up in the gory details presently." It is true. Frigga, while she likely intended to reassure, did little to ease his growing horror at what he will soon be asked to endure. He smiles broadly in an attempt to cover his own discomfort.

"I would not have this hurt you," Thor warns, reaching up to stroke Loki’s hair and toss the long braid behind one shoulder. "I simply would no-.

"Hush," Loki orders. "I have no need of anyone's pity, least of all yours." He straightens and squares his shoulders; he knows he should not lash out, but he finds he must. "The queen has promised me any undue discomfort can be controlled." He swallows rather dramatically, knowing full well the effect it will have on Thor. "But she also warns me my new parts may- I may not find them pleasurable. Can you find it in yourself to stomach that?"

"Stomach?" Thor looks briefly puzzled and then aghast. "Cannot we do that part via seidr? I do not think I am willing and able to couple with you in a way that- that brings you pain."

Even though it is what he wanted to hear, Loki finds this goes down wrong as well. "If I must birth this thing," he snaps, "surely you can do your part without complaining." He turns to go. "I have a horse to attend to."

"Darling, please; I simply-," he hears his husband start to say. Before Thor can finish his sentence, though, Loki is halfway to the armory and well out of unaugmented earshot.

~

The healers advise that he will most definitely not want to be awake during the transformation. Loki is not normally one to shy away from discomfort but, after Eir herself insists, he concedes. He drinks - starting with a tentative sip, then downing the rest in healthy gulps - the sweet, berry-rich concoction one of her aides sets before him and lies down carefully. Before he is even flat to the pad, his head is spinning.

"Hold this, please," someone tells him from what sounds like very far away. Whatever the aide places in his palm is icy cold, even against his Jotun skin. In the distance he hears people chanting, but their voices are too faint for him to-.

~

"Ugh." Loki groans and tries sleepily to roll over. It is a huge mistake; everything about his body feels horribly wrong. His stomach rolls. He tries to flatten back out but it's too late.

Cool, soft hands hold his hair out of the way as he - Loki briefly hopes he is still he but is too busy retching into the proffered basin to be certain - doubles over in dizzy, nauseated agony. When the worst of it subsides, Loki collapses in a sweaty, shaking heap as someone wipes his face with a moist
cloth. "Shh," the healer soothes. "This will pass. Just rest."

Loki thinks he does.

~

This time, he awakens drenched in sweat. Loki is not sure he has ever been this thirsty. "Water," he croaks, and then "Thor?"

"In a few hours," a soft voice assures him. "First the spells must set."

Loki struggles to lift himself up on one elbow - what he can see of himself looks little different, if at all - but before he can shift far enough to really see he loses his balance and thuds limply back against the sweat-soaked pad. "Am I-," he tries to ask, but he cannot force out the words.

"You have undergone your transformation," one of the healers tells him. This time he recognizes her voice; it is Eir. "We have augmented your seidr, so the strain of maintaining your shift no longer rests with you alone." She leans into view.

Loki blinks. His eyes feel gritty, as if they are filled with the sand of the riverbanks.

"But you are not yet with child, no," she goes on. "Your pregnancy will progress least eventfully if your body has time to prepare itself naturally."

Loki blinks again. He is not sure how anything about this can be considered natural. "I am terribly thirsty," he tries again.

"Patience, dear one," someone says. The voice sounds like that of the queen. He starts to speak and-

~

The lights are very low. The room itself is silent. Empty. Loki tries once more to sit up, very, very slowly this time. Once everything stops spinning, he looks around and spots the carafe and glass on the small tray at his bedside.

The water tastes faintly astringent. His mouth puckers. Still, drinking anything at all is an incredible relief. Once he finishes the entire container, Loki tries to get up but quickly realizes he is too exhausted to stand; instead he lies gingerly back down and shuts his eyes.

~

"How are you feeling?" This time he is certain it is Frigga speaking. Even through closed eyelids the room appears far brighter; try as he might, Loki simply cannot force his eyes open given the glare.

"Why has Thor not come," he rasps. He is ill. His husband should be here beside him.

"You needed the rest," Frigga tells him. "And perhaps more even than that I felt it best you had time to reacquaint yourself with your own body first. Alone."

He shivers. The burning heat and drenching perspiration of the night have given way to a bone-deep chill. "Am I unwell," he asks, wincing at the sound of his own broken excuse for a voice. "I feel awful."

She picks up a soft wrap and helps him arrange it about himself. "No, alas, you are naught but hormonal. Here." The queen holds out a heavy metal flagon of something steaming hot and spicy-sweet. "This is not drugged, I promise you," she says gently as he pulls away. "It will only help
warm you, and settle your stomach. Not least, too, the apple juice will aid your body as it heals. Go easy," she advises as he accepts the warm tankard. "Too much, too fast will just set you to vomiting again."

He thanks her and lifts the large mug first to his nose – he inhales deeply; it smells of cooking spices, and of apples - and then to his lips.

She is right. He sips it slowly, enjoying the warmth cupped in his hands between swallows, and feels much more himself by the time it is halfway gone.

"I must make use of the toilet," he whispers after a few more sips. The carafe of water of which he had made such quick work earlier is coming back to haunt him now, and then some. "May I?"

She laughs softly. "Of course. Here," she adds, offering her arm. "Take your time and be sure to steady yourself. Your body has been through a great deal in a very short time."

"A great deal of sleeping, perhaps," Loki grumbles. His voice has begun to come back to its normal tone, at least to some degree, in the wake of the apple-flavored draught. He shifts his weight forward, balances cautiously on his own feet, and teeters there a minute. "I am fine," he tells the queen as he rests one hand atop her arm and uses the other to clutch the soft throw about his hips. Loki has never been particularly shy, or the least bit uncomfortable baring his body in front of most anyone, but Frigga’s cautionary remark about becoming reacquainted has left him feeling awkward and nervous.

Loki steels himself, takes a step, and freezes. "Huh." It is the strangest thing. He takes another, more tentative step. His gait feels- off. It is as though his legs have been removed from his torso at their respective hips, broken down into their component parts, and reassembled slightly askew. Perhaps he is not waddling for real, but it feels oh so very much as though he is. "What is wrong with me," he asks.

"Nothing whatsoever," the queen reassures him. "Your body is just adjusting and preparing itself for its new job now. Rest assured we will between us put you entirely back to rights when this is done."

Somehow, Loki cannot help but suspect, he will never quite be put to rights again. To whine thus would be unseemly, though, and he does not do it. He simply draws himself up as straight as he can and walks stiffly into the small bath that adjoins his healing suite.

A large mirror with a smooth, golden frame hangs over the veined marble counter. There is no sink to speak of, just a basin and a large golden pitcher. Loki sways to a halt, lets the throw pool about his feet, and inspects his reflection carefully. He looks little different than he had- was it yesterday, or perhaps the day before? He has no sense of the time that may have passed while he was lost to deep, drugged, troubled sleep. His hips seem a little less slim – not layered with fat, just shaped differently, as though the bony structure of his pelvis is now spread slightly wider than it had been before – and his face looks a bit drawn, but everything else is the same. His belly is flat, his ribs ridged with muscle. His shoulders are broad and strong, his nipples flat against the wall of his chest without any visible swell of breast.

His limp penis still curls against his inner thigh. Loki widens his stance a little, partly borne of curiosity and partly of the need for stability.

Right there, normalcy ends.

Where his sack should be, nestled wrinkled and blue between his thighs, there is- nothing.

Loki bends carefully forward at the waist, curling down to better see. A wave of dizziness hits him,
whether from the position or the shock he is not sure. It is not so much that there is nothing, he supposes. Instead, he is no longer clearly male nor female. What could be his testicles – are, from the way they shift away from his incautious touch – are now just two raised eggs of hardened flesh on either side of… of something he’s never seen before. Loki supposes it could be a vulva (it must be; what else could possible have taken residence there?), but it looks nothing like anything he’s seen before. Aesir or Jotun or both.

Neither.

“What am I,” he asks the mirror, by turns too horrified to look anew and yet just as afraid not to.

“Is something wrong,” Frigga inquires from just outside the door. Her voice is full of strain. “Loki?”

He squats slowly and carefully. When he pushes back to standing Loki is once again wrapped in the soft fleecy throw. “I am a freak,” he tells her sadly. “I do not know if I can do this after all.”

“What do?” That voice is Thor’s. “What is going on,” his husband asks. “Mother? What is it? Why do you not let me see him?”

Loki leans his suddenly-warm forehead against the golden tan marble wall. “I am not sure I am a him any longer,” he calls out to his husband. “I am more of an it, I fear. A thing. I have let myself be turned into some kind of monster.”

Thor’s head pokes around the doorframe, followed quickly by the whole of him. “Loki, do not be ridiculous,” he chastises. “You are yourself. You look no different than you ever have; just worn and tired, as if you had been ill. Why do you say you are-.”

“Hush.” Loki lays a cool hand against Thor’s lips. “This is not the time, and not the place. We shall talk elsewhere.”

“Please tell me my husband is free to return with me to our quarters,” Thor says out the door to Frigga. “I wish very much to take him home.”

“Loki, the choice is yours. If you wish to go off to your rooms,” the queen offers from her post just outside the bath, “I will not keep you.” Her voice is muffled, whether from the thickness of the palace walls or the way Thor - large and solid as a mountain – is taking up the entire room Loki is not certain. “You are indeed sufficiently recovered to leave the healers, as long as you promise me you will rest quietly abed for one more day. It is entirely up to you,” Frigga tells him again, the sharp tone of her voice silencing Thor as effectively as any hand gesture might have done. “Yes, Thor, and thank you,” she continues, although – while he had indeed opened his mouth to do so - her son had not yet actually spoken. “But this is Loki’s call. I do believe you have already made your own preferences abundantly clear.”

Despite his tired, uncomfortable state, Loki finds himself fighting to stifle a snort. “Thank you for your support, and for your kindness earlier,” he tells Frigga. “But I am happy to go home with Thor.” It is not quite the truth – just now, he is beyond anxious taking this new body anywhere - but he has no desire to be a cause of further stress. That, and he really does wish to rest in the comfort of his own bed. “To sleep,” he stresses, lest his husband read his intentions wrong. “It is all I am up to this day, I fear,”

“I will not push you,” Thor assures him, leaning in to give Loki a silent kiss on the forehead. “Mother,” he turns and calls over his shoulder, “I only would see my husband comfortably home.”

The queen pokes her head around the doorframe and peers at Loki from between Thor’s big
shoulder and the door itself. “Loki,” she asks once more, “are you certain?”

He really is not, given the unfamiliar new state of- of everything in his newly reconfigured life - but Loki has no urge to stay in this place. “I am sure I will be fine,” he assures her, and then smiles up at Thor. “And if I find I am not, I am even more sure my husband the crown prince knows exactly how to locate you.”

Frigga looks first as though she may argue. In the end, she does not. “Of course,” she says quietly. “You should do as you see fit.”

“Thank you,” he tells her. “I wish to go back to my rooms, with Thor.” He smiles at her, a bit tentatively. “He is stubborn and will not be denied; I know he will see to it that I rest.”

This time, it is Frigga who laughs. “Because moderation is one of his strongest virtues,” she mock-agrees. “Oh, yes, I can see that.”

“Mother,” Thor admonishes. “I can see Loki needs rest. I will ensure he gets it. I am not some child in need of supervision.”

At that Loki laughs outright. Doing so pulls at his abdomen and makes him wince.

Thor is immediately down on one knee, supporting Loki’s shoulder with one hand and gently touching his face with the other. “What is it? Are you ill? Do you need to stay here after all?”

Loki shakes his head. “No. I am fine,” he insists for the umpteenth time. “My body is just- adjusting. It is not like I have been struck down in battle.” Privately, he is not sure the latter would not be preferable, but he knows better than to share such a thought with his husband. “Find me a robe and we can go.”

Thor does; Loki is not sure from where it comes, but his husband produces a perfectly serviceable silken garment (which Loki immediately wraps tightly about himself, over the wrap). He feels little better.

“What is so funny,” Loki grumbles as his husband tries and fails to stifle a smile.

“Nothing,” Thor claims, but it is clear from his face that he is lying. “Fine, fine. You look lumpy.”

“With that, I do believe I shall leave my boys to their own devices,” Frigga says, backing out of the doorway as Loki glares daggers at Thor. “If either of you needs so much as a single thing, do not hesitate to ask.”

“We will keep you informed,” Thor assures her as Loki mouths LUMPY?! “Lumpy.” His husband points. “From the wrap bunched under your robe. Why, what did you think I meant,” he asks far too curiously as Loki cannot help but make a wry face.

Thor hastens to join his mother the queen in the royal healer’s suites, at her express request. He is well more than a little frantic when he arrives there, as the handmaiden who came to fetch him was not able to share anything at all about the queen’s wishes save that he should come quickly. Of course, he does. He skids to an off-balance, arm-waving stop in the middle of the healing room, gawking uncomprehending at the empty bed and then at Frigga where she stands alongside the small inner doorway. If he is too late, and something has gone awry, he will-

“What am I,” he hears Loki – voice scratchy, weak and faint – ask, from beyond the narrow threshold, and Thor’s own knees go wobbly with relief. Frigga turns to look at him, her expression beseeching, and then twists back to face the little entrance.

“Is something wrong,” she asks his husband. She sounds tense. Concerned. “Loki?”

“I am a freak,” Loki announces, sounding sad and on the verge of tears. “I do not know if I can do this after all.”

“Do what,” Thor asks. While he is ignorant to the situation, having been spared the finer details of what was to take place during Loki’s transformation, he certainly cannot bear to hear his husband sounding so upset. “What is going on, mother,” he asks Frigga, trying to pull gently free of the restraining hand she’s placed atop his wrist. “What is it? Why do you not let me see him?”

Loki answers before the queen can. “I am not sure I am a him any longer,” he complains. “I am more of an it, I fear. A thing,” he spits. “I have let myself be turned into some kind of monster.”

Thor can stand the whole of this no longer. He steps quickly through the doorway and into what turns out to be a small bathing chamber. His husband, standing in the middle of the tiny room with a soft blanket looped about the hips, looks- rundown. Exhausted. Otherwise, Loki looks exactly the same as always. Which is to say as male as ever, and not monstrous in the least. There is no clear cause for concern, none that Thor can see. “Loki, do not be ridiculous,” he insists. “You are yourself. You look no different than you ever have… just worn and tired, as if you had been ill.” When Loki makes a face Thor looks him quickly over again, in case he had somehow missed something. Still, nothing is visibly wrong. “Why do you say you are-.”

“Hush.” Loki silences him with two fingers. “This is not the time,” his husband insists, “and not the place. We shall talk elsewhere.”
Thor needs to talk, and soon, elsewhere or no. “Please tell me my husband is free to return with me to our quarters,” he asks of his mother, who still lingers at her post outside the door. “I wish very much,” he points out, “to take him home.”

They talk it over at some length, the three of them, and while Frigga does take some convincing she finally concedes.

“Find me a robe,” Loki insists, which is such a foreign sentiment that Thor almost reconsiders, “and we can go.” He takes the dressing gown Thor hands him and pulls it around himself as tightly as possible, blanket and all. The end result is both unduly and unintentionally comical.

“What is so funny,” Loki grumbles as Thor, reassured despite himself, cannot help but smile.


Loki gasps. He glares furiously at Thor.

“With that,” Frigga announces as she backs away, “I do believe I shall leave my boys to their own devices. If either of you needs so much as a single thing, do not hesitate to ask.”

“We will keep you informed,” Thor calls after her, wishing he had not been so quick to shoo her away.

LUMPY?! mouths as Frigga’s footfalls fade to silence. His expression is nothing short of stormy; were he Thor, no doubt the sky would be split asunder.


Loki stiffens again. “Nothing,” he insists, despite the fact there is clearly something wrong. “Never mind,” he tells Thor. “Please, just- let us go.”

Thor does, and they indeed do.

Back in their chambers Loki continues his peculiar, evasive behavior. He refuses food and a massage and both warm drink and cold and yet when Thor attempts to leave him in peace - "here, rest a spell; I will be on the balcony should you need something" – he is offended and takes all of it badly.

"Fine," he snaps, stiff back to Thor and robe still clutched tight about his shoulders. "Just abandon me here when I am no longer fit for any purpose." And then just as abruptly he bursts into tears and weeps as though his very heart is broken. "Go," he choking out between harsh sobs. "Leave me to die alone."

"What," Thor exclaims, utterly confused. "Die? Loki, no. What is going on? Should I send someone to fetch Eir? Please," he begs, pulling Loki to his chest and doing his best to ignore the way his husband is pounding cold, slender fists against his tunic. "Talk to me, Loki. Darling. Please?"
Thor holds tight until his husband finally gives in and sags weeping against his front. "Shh," he soothes, over and over, hugging Loki close and softly kissing his husband's tousled black hair. "What did they do to you," he whispers against Loki's cheek. "Please tell me."

Loki sucks in a loud, wet breath. "I am lumpy," he grumbles, and then breaks into a fresh round of tears. "Lumpy and revolting and hideous and deformed."

"You are no such thing," Thor assures his distraught husband. "You are beautiful and handsome and perfect, just as always. The only flaw I can discern," he tries teasing gently, "is that you are far too clothed."

The mild humor backfires badly. "Unhand me, you brute," Loki wails, ripping free of Thor's embrace. He flings himself facedown onto the bed, hard enough to bounce three large pillows and a fur onto the floor. His robe rucks up and takes the edge of the wrap with it. Both lovely, muscular blue legs stretch across the bedding, ridged and whorled and bare to the upper thighs.

Nothing in sight looks in any way revolting. On the contrary, Thor has to turn away to keep himself from wrapping a warm hand around Loki's nearer ankle and kissing his way up to his husband's firm rump. "I must apologize," he offers sadly, back still turned, "for I fail to see a single flaw, beyond how drained and heartbroken you seem."

"I am a dam," Loki bellows, slamming a fist into the nearest pillow. "And a freak at that."

Thor turns around and takes a moment to look his husband over yet again, more thoroughly this time. A dam? "You mean you are female," he asks, feeling a bit lost. "But was that not the goal? Not to mention," he adds, and then (perhaps stupidly, yes) goes on to mention it anyway, "you do not look the least bit female to me."

Loki roars, a long, angry, wordless growl. And then he flips over almost violently and yanks robe and wrap away with such force they both tear. "I have a cunt, Thor," he snarls, legs flung wide. "There, are you happy? Now will you leave me be?"

"Well. Sure enough, Loki has been- adjusted. Revised. Even so, he still looks like no woman Thor has ever seen. More than that, he looks good."

"You simply look different," Thor promises, trying his best to keep the sudden flare of excitement out of his voice. "Not worse, and surely not horrific." And then once again he just cannot leave well enough alone. "Have you touched it," he asks. "If it was mine, I would have touched it."

"Noooo," his husband wails, fists clenched in the bedding. "I am a monster. I cannot stand to get anywhere near it."

"This is getting nowhere, Thor thinks. "I tell you what we will do," he suggests. "You will take up less of the bed, and together we will rest. Perhaps after a nap you will feel better."

"As if I can nap a slit away," Loki mutters, not looking at Thor, but he does roll to one side and scoot over. "Suit yourself."

"No," Thor says. "I will not. Instead I will nap, as promised."

And he proceeds to do just that, leaving Loki to seethe unmolested.

~

It takes Thor well over a fortnight to talk his skittish husband into a real kiss.
A full moon later, they remain at least as far from having sexual congress as they have ever been, Thor's certain. The situation feels even worse than it was when they had first met, partly because Loki is even more inscrutably remote and partly because- because this time Thor knows what it is he's missing.

And he is missing it, nearly as much as he misses the (comparatively speaking) happy-go-lucky Jotun prince who loves to ride and fish and flirt shamelessly. Because presently Loki is doing none of that. Instead he is moping about their rooms, calling himself various muttered insults under his breath and alternately piling on clothing and ripping it back off only to fan himself frantically.

"Is this normal," Thor makes the very serious tactical error of asking the third or fourth time his husband collapses onto the bed in a pale, sweaty heap.

"No, Thor," Loki snarls, "it is not. Nothing about this is in any way normal. Get out," he orders, face contorted and tears threatening to spill over. "Get out of here and leave me in peace."

Predictably, in hindsight, following his husband's instructions to the very last letter only brings that much more trouble.

~

Today, though, when he arrives home after a day of contacts and meetings something is different. Thor can sense it the moment he opens the door. ... not a smell, precisely, but a feeling in the air that both sets his heart racing and simultaneously goes straight to his groin. "Lo-," he starts to call out, but before he can even finish the name his husband's arms are twined around his neck and Loki is climbing him like a tree.

"Well, hel-," Thor tries, startled and off balance, only to end up with a mouthful of his husband's warm, insistent, slippery tongue.

"Mmm," Loki pulls back to hum against Thor's bottom lip. "I have missed you so,"

"I cannot help but notice that," Thor agrees, trying to joke away his own confusion, but Loki pounces anew. He kisses Thor roughly and laughs at the yelp his cool hand shoved unceremoniously down the front of Thor's leggings earns him.

After several more minutes of kissing and groping, Thor recovers his own sanity. "Hold on," he insists, pushing Loki out to arm's length and pulling his writhing blue husband free of his trousers in the process. "What is this about," he asks, frowning at Loki. "Whatever has gotten into you?"

Loki grabs Thor's wrists and tries to wrest himself free. "It is what has not gotten into me that is the problem," he snarls, trying to fight his way back to Thor. "And I shall not be denied!"

"Alas," Thor tells him sadly, "you indeed shall, until you tell me what this is about. You have not so much as let me lay a finger upon you since your- your transformation, and yet now you would have me believe you've gone mad for want of me? You will tell me what is going on, or I fear I must fetch a healer."

Just as suddenly Loki sags, his hands slipping limp from Thor's forearms. "You no longer want me," he whines, looking away. "Is that it? Is it? You cannot bed a monster?"

"That is expressly not it; not in the least," Thor tells his husband. He is worried, and a bit afraid. "You are no monster, and I would bed you in the span of two heartbeats. But this is not like you and I must first understand what is going on." He does not try to hold Loki this time, instead he gently hook Loki's chin with two fingers. "Please," he asks, turning his husband's sharp face carefully back to center. "I
"Adore you," he says, studying Loki’s stony expression, "and you are scaring me."

"Fine. I am scaring myself, too," Loki admits on the tail end of a huge sigh. "It is like my body and mind are no longer my own."

Thor feels at once worse and better. "Perhaps, then," he suggests, "we should talk to my mother."

After a long, strained silence Loki nods. "It is probably for the best," he agrees.

~, ~

"Fear not," Frigga assures his husband as Thor lurks nervously in the background. "It is to be expected. Your first heat will doubt-."

"My first heat," Loki interrupts. "I am in heat, then, like some sort of lowly beast?"

"No, Loki," the queen tells him softly, brow creased and expression worried. "You are in heat like any Jotnar dam. I simply assumed- know you not the way of your own people?"

Loki huffs. "My father found little enough reason to share with his sons the ways of dams, I am certain," he tells her. "I rather doubt he expected any of us to become one. I know I," he adds, a bit nastily, "never did."

Thor steps up behind Loki and sets a hand lightly on his husband’s back. He can feel the radiating tension. "Tell me how this works, mother," he suggests, because maybe things will be easier if his own ignorance is the driving factor. "I believe I may have skipped this part of Jotun studies."

"My son," the queen says, smiling up at him from her cushion, "I rather think you skipped every part of any studies that did not end in war."

It is simply not true, not in the least, but just the same Thor is relieved to feel his husband relax slightly. He lets her kidding go. "Of course, mother," he says, smiling. "I had better things to do with my time. Go ahead, then, and tell me what it is like to be Jotun."

"Aesir women," she starts, and Thor rolls his eyes because of course he knows about the Aes and their cycles; as crown prince he has long had to trouble himself with avoiding the clutches of those among the court who might choose to use an unsolicited heir-to-be as leverage to improve their own circumstances. His husband listens intently, though, and Thor stills… perhaps he can see his mother’s point after all.

When she gets back to the Jotnar, too, Thor finds it easier to pay attention.

"In your home realm, the first taste of comparatively mild spring weather brings it on," she explains, "and with it great fecundity, such that dams can be with child well before the start of the warmth – as you know it," she clarifies, laughing, "considering my own citizenry would consider even those temperatures unpleasantly cold at best - of summer and will deliver their babes while good weather yet persists." She pauses for a moment, face thoughtful. "Indeed it is not rare for Jotnar dams visiting the other, more temperate realms to spend much of their time there immensely fertile."

"So," Thor points out carefully - he does not wish to be written off as self-serving, whether or not there is truth in such an accusation - "does it not mean this would be an ideal time to- ." He is not sure how to politely make his point, and his sparkling-eyed mother is no help. She smiles at him, nodding. "Were we to conceive a child now, you could return to your normal state most quickly. Rather than waiting for your next- your next cycle," he stammers. This is very uncomfortable, especially given how volatile Loki seems to be. "Because if we wait, you are stuck- like this," he offers, lamely.
Loki laughs nastily. For a moment he looks as if he might rip someone's face off. "I suppose one could view it in that light," he concedes, ultimately, "if one were so inclined." He stops to tug at his tunic; Thor cannot help but notice how out-of-place traditional Asgardian clothing, even of such a well-fitted nature, looks on him. When Loki is on Asgard, he belongs in his loincloth. When he is on Jotunheim, he belongs in his tribal furs. Anything else is simply wrong. Out of place, like scales on a bird or feathers on a horse.

"I am inclined to see it in whatever light you prefer, Loki," he assures his husband. "As you have pointed out, I am not the one who must endure this." In actuality he in enduring quite a bit, from his own worries to Loki's moods to the way he's been relegated to the far side of their shared bed, but he knows his own inconvenience does not compare to what his husband has gone through. Is going through, to this day, for that matter, and will continue to go through over the course of their child's gestation. And even if it did, saying so would be a serious mistake. So, because he is treading very carefully, he keeps his own counsel.

"My queen?" Loki looks off into the middle distance, neither at Thor nor at Frigga, but he sounds a bit less hostile. "What is your opinion?"

Thor watches as his mother chooses her words with great care. "In the end you must do what you know to be right," she tells Loki, "for you. But there is truth in what Thor says. And because of our seidr," she continues, brisk and matter-of-fact, "and your age, I see no reason to wait through several cycles. If it is now you wish to act, it is now you should take action."

"And if it is never," Thor asks, to spare Loki from having to bite back the question.

"Then I shall be a monster a very long time," Loki answers, before Frigga can respond.

Thor sighs. "I wish you would not speak of it that way," he complains.

"And I wish I was a bird," Loki tells him. "A magpie, maybe. Free to fly away at my choosing, free to ride the updrafts to my heart's content sans rules and responsibilities."

"But you are a bird," Thor reminds him, thinking fondly back to the first time he saw his husband fly. "And a hunting cat, and a horse, and whatever else you please."

"No," Loki disagrees, "I am but a vessel."

And if that is how it must be, I will see to it you are filled, Thor thinks. And then he feels his face heat. This is not a conversation they should be having in front of his mother. "You are that and so much more," he assures his husband. "So much more."

~

Later that evening, Loki and Thor share a meal out on the balcony. It is the first time they have dined so pleasantly together in quite some time, certainly since they embarked upon this- this endeavor. It has all the makings of a pleasant night, neither too hot not ridiculously humid, and the air smells faintly of flowers.

The kitchen has prepared the two of them a lovely spread - rough country breads, rich, salted cheeses, ripe fruits - and Thor takes his time enjoying the fruits of the cooks’ labors. It is festival fare, much of it nothing his husband has ever eaten, and at first Loki - finally divested of all that extra clothing and resting lithe and barely covered on the far chaise - is tense, reticent to relax and truly taste what lies before him. Gradually, though, Thor is able to coax his husband into trying bits of
honeyed fig and dripping wedges of soft-cured, tangy cheese.

The slow, measured pace pays off, in the end, as one thing leads to another and it is not long before Loki is gently licking Thor's fingers clean.

"Mm," Loki intones. "What is this? I like it."

Thor smiles. "My fingers," he asks, "or the cheese?"

"Both." This time, when his husband smiles in return, his face is relaxed and his enthusiasm looks both genuine and honest. "Together," Loki clarifies. And then he leans close to steal a kiss, one Thor gives up willingly. "It tastes good here, too," he points out. "Especially here," he adds, kissing Thor again with more force.

They spend a long time exploring the planes of one another's faces and necks with teeth and lips and eager lapping tongues. When Thor at last pulls back to check his husband's expression, Loki's lips are puffy and full. In the light of the torches they are deep, rich purple tending to the edge of black. "You are so very, very lovely," he cannot help but whisper, touching a finger to Loki's angular cheekbone. "Come here. Please?"

Without hesitation, Loki does. He clammers up onto Thor's lap, one long, slender, muscled leg slung over Thor's thighs. He settles down heavily and then stiffens.

"What is it," Thor is quick to ask. "Have you hurt yourself?" Something in his husband's posture is off. "Are you okay?"

Loki buries his face in Thor's shoulder. "My body wants- strange things."

Oh, Thor swallows. "Well, then," he says a bit roughly, because his husband is very near and very appealing, "let us find out if we can satisfy it, shall we?"

“Maybe,” Loki says, but he does let Thor struggle to standing and carry him carefully to bed.

~

It takes considerable time and patience but Loki finally gives in and lets Thor explore - delicately, gently – his changed body.

Thor starts with the familiar, focusing his ministrations on his husband's face and long, sculpted neck. He licks and nips his way along one collarbone and then the other. He nuzzles into Loki's armpit, letting his whiskers tickle and scrape, and breathes deeply of his husband's sharp, brisk scent.

"Stop," Loki says, laughing and pushing Thor away. But when Thor does stop, wanting most of all to heed his husband's wishes, Loki squirms against him and drapes a leg across his back.

"Tell me what it is you want," Thor insists, voice low, lips dragging along Loki's chest and brushing across the peak of one purple nipple. His husband shivers and writhes beneath him.


Thor does not need to be asked twice, especially considering how much time has gone by since he and Loki were last abed. He licks happily down the middle of his husband's flat, muscled stomach and pauses briefly to edge the loincloth aside. He plants a soft kiss along the shaft of Loki's erection before nudging his husband's leg - the one not (yet) wrapped around him - away to the side. "Let me see you," he begs, voice hoarse and thick with need.
Finally, thankfully, Loki does. He unfastens his loincloth altogether, hitches it free, and flings it across the room. Then, naked at last, he shifts until his foot rests flat upon the bed. His knee tilts slowly outward, revealing his- his new conformation in all its glory.

And it is glorious, despite Loki’s persistent unease. His cock still bobs proud and firm against his belly, but beneath it lie plump purple-black folds Thor can hardly wait to explore. Much like the rest of Loki’s body, save his head, they are hairless, smooth, and marked with whorls and seams.

Everything about his form has always been very different from Thor’s own, with its heavy muscles and its dusting of hair and its pink-gold glow; this essential difference is part of what first drew – and still draws - Thor to him. One more dissimilarity just makes things all the more intriguing.

Thor kisses the inside of his husband’s thigh, slow and sweet, and Loki trembles. He edges higher, and higher, and higher, still kissing lightly, until his whiskers brush his husband’s newly-divided sack. And then he pops up, straining against the encouragement of Loki’s heels. “Have you still not explored it yourself,” he asks, feeling a bit stupid and a larger bit embarrassed. “Your new- your-… you know.”

Loki laughs, sounding breathless. “So we are back to the awkwardness of adolescence, are we? Shall we name our naughty parts and pretend they are talking one another?”

Thor fights the temptation to laugh, or perhaps to nip his cheeky husband somewhere sensitive. “You have not, then, I take it. So be it. I was simply hoping for some advice on what it- on what you like.”

“Try whatever suits you,” Loki suggests, rather impatiently. “All things considered you are surprisingly good at determining what I do and do not like. And Thor,” he orders, head dropping back against the bedding, “do get on with it.”

You have done this before, Thor reminds himself, with plenty of maidens. It cannot be that different. And with that he does get down to work, mouth on his husband’s shaft and fingers investigating the warm, resilient, slick place where his own cock will – Norns willing – soon go.

Thor quickly realizes he must be doing something right; under him Loki bucks and moans, heels digging into the muscles of his back and head thrashing to and fro. Encouraged, he keeps doing what he has been doing… with perhaps a shade less caution.

~

After several minutes of steadily building frenzy, during which he makes himself focus on the job (literally) at hand and willfully ignores the strong urge to palm himself, Thor once again stops sucking and leans up. Loki groans, and not with pleasure. “What is it now, Thor,” his husband grumbles. “I must say you are doing altogether too much thinking.”

Thor laughs. He clears his throat. “Are we doing this strictly for pleasure,” he asks, feeling a bit silly, “or are we starting on our- our mission?”

Loki sighs. “The latter, I suppose,” he huffs out between breaths, “though I wish we could still do the former.”

His husband is right, of course. On both counts. “Do you wish to try it, then,” Thor asks. He does not intend to be inconsiderate and force himself where he is not wanted. Too, especially in light of some of their earlier conversations, he – regardless of what Loki expects – is still unwilling to cause his husband any undue pain.

“Yes,” Loki says decisively. “And now.”
“Then you will have to let me go,” Thor tells his husband, trying to shrug off Loki’s feet where they crept up to wrap around his shoulders. “I can only bend so far, you know, especially when I am so very out of practice.”

“No one is perfect,” Loki reminds him.

When Thor at last kneels up and pulls his husband to him, though, so as to spear Loki properly, the false casual banter ceases.

It is different indeed; not like sex with his husband has ever been before, but also not in the least like pumping into a soft, well-padded Aesir maiden either. He simply has no frame of reference.

Loki insists it barely hurts at all, and he is so enthusiastic that Thor cannot help but believe him.

Thor quickly finds he very, very much likes it.

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Point of fact, it turns out, they both do.

They like it so much, actually, that they spend most of the next three days doing it in every imaginable position. And then they try some Thor is certain he would have been far, far too embarrassed to ever imagine.

By the end of Loki’s heat they are sore and exhausted, sleep-deprived and starving.

And they are not quite sure how to take it when two weeks later they learn (in what Eir promises is complete, if perhaps temporary, confidence) - after Loki is suddenly stricken with an inability to stomach even so much as a few sips of water – that they are indeed expecting.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Being intersex is not so easy.

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Loki
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Thor is clearly doing his best to look gamely past Loki’s situation. To pretend that things are normal between them, and that nothing has changed.

All of which is nothing short of infuriating. He himself has not the luxury of forgetting his way into any semblance of normalcy, not with his hormones a mess and his body- ruined. The queen has repeatedly assured him the change is only temporary, and he is sure she means no harm by any of it, but Loki simply cannot imagine all of this damage undone. No, he is certain, he is doomed forever.

Thus, he cannot help but bite Thor’s head off when his husband blithely suggests a massage. Even though, secretly, Loki thinks he would very much enjoy one; his body is stiff and sore in ways of which he did not realize it was even capable. Instead he sulks over by his wardrobe, torn between the desire to hide his body evermore and the equally compelling need to shred his robe into tattered bits and pieces.

“A mulled cider, perhaps,” Thor suggests, undeterred. “The apple crop was especially delicious this past year.”

Loki’s stomach rolls. “Thank you, no,” he says as politely as he can. “I do not think a hot drink would sit well just now.”

“Chilled cider, then, or water?” His husband takes a few steps towards him, as Loki sidles over to the window. “I cannot help but think you might feel better if you tried a little something.”

Yes. Then again, he might sprout an extra head or erupt like the most terrifying of Muspelheim’s volcanoes. Perhaps both, simultaneously, so his two heads can vomit in tandem. “I have no need of drink,” he tries, turning away from the window to look at his frowning husband. “I just need time.”

Thor brightens. “Here, rest a spell,” he offers altogether too cheerfully, and in that moment Loki hates him. “I will be on the balcony, should you need something.”

Hates. Loki simply cannot keep silent under the rush of anger that courses through him. "Fine," he snaps, whirling back to the window with his robe pulled tight around him. Hot on the heels of his anger follows a crushing wave of self-loathing, self-pitying loss. "Just abandon me here when I am no longer fit for any purpose," he intends to snarl, but the effect is lost when he finds he can only sob… like the spurned Aesir maidens of whom he has heard many tales told. "Go," he tells his husband as hot tears stream down his cheeks. "Go and leave me to die alone."

Thor blurts out something that is probably meant to be soothing; Loki is crying too hard to hear much of anything over his own noise. When his husband pulls him close and tries to cuddle him, he roars
in frustration and shoves at Thor’s chest in a vain attempt to escape. And then he gives up entirely, lost to bawling.

"What did they do to you," Thor asks him when he is nearly out of tears. "Please tell me."

Loki means to insist that he is fine. He most certainly does. When he opens his mouth, though, "I am lumpy," comes tumbling out instead. He starts crying anew, partially because he is a ruined mess and partly because some sort of weeping alien being has taken over his body. "Lumpy and revolting," he insists, struggling against Thor’s front, “and hideous and deformed.”

"You are no such thing," his husband insists. "You are beautiful and handsome and perfect, just as always. The only flaw I can discern," Thor purrs, "is that you are far too clothed."

Oh, no. Oh no no no. There will be no fraternizing. Not when he is soggy and dehydrated and hideous and mutilated beyond all recognition. There will not be. Perhaps there will never be again, even, not if they live ten thousand lifetimes. "Unhand me, you brute," Loki screeches, finally able to tear himself free of Thor’s clutches. He throws himself on the bed almost hard enough to break something. The bed, maybe. Himself, maybe.

"I must apologize," Thor tells him after a long silence broken only by Loki’s own wet breathing, "for I fail to see a single flaw beyond how drained and heartbroken you seem."

"I am a dam," Loki shouts, unable to refrain from punching one of Thor’s pillow’s. "And a freak at that." His body is no longer his own, and he hates that this is the only way. Hates himself. Hates everything.

"You mean you are female," his husband asks. "But was that not the goal? Not to mention," Thor adds, with far too much humor in his voice, "you do not look the least bit female to me."

Loki cannot even formulate a response. He bellows, and then manages to simultaneously flip over and tear of his clothing in one violent move. "I have a cunt, Thor," he growls, spreading his legs almost painfully wide. "There, are you happy," he bellows at his husband. "Now will you leave me be!"

"You simply look different," Thor says. He clears his throat. "Not worse, and surely not horrific," he adds, which might have helped had he not continued: “Have you touched it," he asks, awed. "If it was mine, I would have touched it."

Oh, by the Norns. Good grief. "Noooo," Loki howls, digging his fingers into the bedding and thrashing his head back and forth. Everything is ruined. Everything. "I am a monster. I cannot stand to get anywhere near it."

"I tell you what we will do," Thor says, speaking now in what Loki knows to be his husband’s matter-of-fact official business voice. "You will take up less of the bed, and together we will rest. Perhaps after a nap you will feel better."

Much as it irks him Loki forces himself to concede. He truly is exhausted, despite all of the rest he has had since his- his mutilation. "As if I can nap a slit away," he still complains as he shifts out of the way. "Suit yourself."

"No," Thor says drily. "I will not. Instead I will nap, as promised."

And his husband does; it is only a matter of two or three minutes before Thor is snoring. Loki is furious. He will not tolerate being-. 
Except, when he wakes up hours later with a dry mouth and a pounding head, he cannot even remember what he’d intended.

They settle gradually into an uncomfortable, strained routine, one where Thor tries at every possible opportunity to grope and taste and squeeze and Loki snaps and ducks and dodges. The more his husband tries to touch him, as though nothing has changed, the more he is reminded that in actuality everything has. His body is an inhospitable foreign land, his mind nearly as hostile and unfamiliar.

"It is just your system adjusting to all its rebalanced hormones," Frigga assures him when he at last goes complaining to her. "Give yourself time. I know my son; Thor will be there for you whenever you are ready."

"Well, he is certainly here for me when I am not ready," Loki observes, a little more hotly than he had really intended. "I am sure he means nothing ill by it," he concedes as she frowns, "but- but all of this is at best unsettling. It is as though I went to sleep myself and woke up another. Forgive me for being disagreeable, my queen," he adds, because she is his queen now and he over and above all of this wants no trouble... a Jotun half-dam sent home in such a state could hardly expect to avoid ill treatment, or worse. "I just- I am lost in my own mind and body. I can scarce fathom adjusting."

Frigga smiles warmly. "Having been with child myself, and having assisted countless of my staff and servants with their own similar duties - and fool yourself not, darling; we were and are nigh on as duty-bound as you, despite our perhaps not having to go to such visible extremes to fulfill our own obligations - I can promise you that you will come around." She sets a warm hand atop his colder one and, as her touch actually offers some small comfort, he does not jerk free. "It may not be in the time or manner you prefer, Loki, but you will get through this."

He sighs. "I know. It is not as though I have a choice, is it?"

Frigga gives his hand a gentle squeeze. "Alas, we cannot all be born kings of Asgard."

Loki snorts. "I do not wish to be Thor," he tells her. "I just wish he would let me be. But only a little," he adds, a bit sheepish. "See? I cannot even get my own mind sorted."

"Patience, dear one," she reminds him. "This is a most important thing you do. I am hardly surprised it does not come easily."

"I do not expect easy," he huffs. Out of nowhere something - her compassionate tone, perchance - leaves him with the beginnings of another tear-storm burning just underneath his eyelids. "I just did not expect to be- revolting."

Frigga frowns sharply. "Did my son tell you that you-?"

"No, it is nothing like that," Loki cuts in, the sport of getting Thor in trouble outweighed by the need to escape her chambers before he starts outright bawling. "It is only my sorry self. It will pass, I am sure, just as you said."

He is far from sure, actually, but Loki is also feeling more and more weepy. That, and a bit sick besides. He lurches gracelessly to his feet, beyond awkward in all these unfamiliar layers of clothing. "I should take my leave," he tells her. "Thank you for your time."
The longer he keeps his husband at arm’s length, the more unlikely and uncomfortable a return to their normal marital relationship – one full of play and sex and time spent enjoying one another’s company in every sense of the word – seems. He cannot get used to his new body, can no longer see himself as a sexual being. He- he disgusts himself and, despite Thor’s insistence to the contrary, Loki finds it difficult to believe the same is somehow not true for his husband.

And all of that is before things really go haywire.

~

Loki can be eating, or chatting, or simply minding his own business over a book or scroll in the deep reaches of the main library when it happens; his body, normally the coldest thing in any Asgardian room, near-instantly transforms itself into a raging furnace. The first time it happens he rips off his clothing without any thought to who may be watching, the end result being his frightening two small children and their young nursemaid (none of whom were prepared, apparently, to encounter a smallish, sweat-drenched Jotun stripping violently naked in the main corridor nearest the kitchens). The next time, he runs to Frigga, certain something has gone wrong with the spell and his body has taken to destroying itself.

To her credit, she does not laugh (although it is likely she very much wants to do so; he realizes afterwards, once the heat has passed and he is limp and shivering on the closest divan, that he must have looked utterly ridiculous). “I do not doubt this is difficult to fathom,” she admits, “but I assure you it is all to be expected. You will be fine.” She hands him a soft towel. “Here, clean yourself up. And then have something to eat; you will feel better.”

After a few sweet plums and a good rinsing off, he does.

Sadly, it does not let up. Loki’s days devolve into what feels like an endless cycle of dressing and stripping, freezing and roasting. In the end he abandons all hope of a return to normalcy and holes up in his quarters, alternately rolling about naked and flailing and wrapped in the warmest blankets he can find.

"Is this normal," Thor asks him after yet another round of miserable, sweat-soaked disrobing.

"No, Thor," Loki roars, "it is not. Nothing about this is in any way normal. Get out," he demands. He is sick of everyone and everything. "Get out of here and leave me in peace."

Thor, rank idiot that he is, promptly packs up his things and makes himself scarce. In the gaping void he leaves behind, Loki can only sob bitterly.

He would do anything - anything - to have his husband back.

Until Thor comes back, that is, and then Loki wants only to rip his earnest, concerned body limb from limb. “I hate you,” he snarls. “If you cannot see your way fit to leave me alone, I shall return to Jotunheim.” It is an empty threat, convincingly delivered; this time his husband is the one who cries, while Loki stands stiff and aloof by the windows.

Until the next wave of heat, that is. After that, he is nothing if not worthless.

~

Thor is already gone when Loki awakes, groggy and yawning. His husband’s side of the bed is long cold, the heavy drapes still pulled tightly closed against the bright Asgard morning. He pulls himself to sitting and then springs out of bed, still unused to the feel of rumpled sheets - of anything - brushing over his- his bottom. The parts of his bottom that simply are not his, specifically.
Loki pulls one of the long draperies aside just slightly, only enough to let a long ray of golden light spill into the dark room. There is a pitcher of sweet juice on the low table near the door, and a steaming platter of eggs, cheese, and meat. His mouth waters; for the first time in weeks he is truly hungry. Ravenous, even. The food smells so delicious that he is even inclined to forgive the servant who likely woke him while placing it all neatly here.

He stuffs a large forkful of eggs and cheese into his mouth. By the nine, it is most tasty. Loki takes several more large bites without really stopping to chew; there is no point in bothering to be neat and civilized, not when he is here alone.

It is several minutes - and nigh on half a platter of food - before he remembers he does not even like hot, heavy, cooked victuals. This body. It betrays him at every turn.

After a few more forkfuls Loki makes himself stop. It will certainly not do to swell up like a horse before Thor's seed has even found his fertile soil. Brimming glass of juice in hand, he walks idly over to look out the window. Asgard is a riot of sunshine; he has to squint against the glare.

The fleet is out today, with airships and longboats circling the observatory and tiny battle crafts flitting in and out. He leans against the sill and sips his drink, wondering what it might be like to fly one. Jotunheim's troops are all land-based; Loki has indeed flown – well, more like ridden - the occasional airborne beast, and has of course flown under his own power on happier shapeshifting occasions, but he has never been aboard a bonafide flying machine. Fandral, if one listens to the tales, is a gifted pilot. Thor, too, although his husband claims to prefer his mighty hammer. Loki smiles into his juice. He rather fancies he should like a ride in one of the things once life returns to some semblance of normal.

What little is left of the morning passes uneventfully. At last the waves of awful heat seem gone. Loki finishes his drink, plaits his hair into a messy braid, and pulls on the lightest tunic and leggings he can find before padding quietly down to the training ground. Rather than pushing his luck by allowing his body to overheat, he limits himself to some light stretching and then a solid round of throwing. Even in need of a washing it feels good to move again, after weeks of sickly, embarrassed hiding. Once he adjusts his stance to compensate for the tunic's pull, Loki quickly finds himself throwing his small knives on a par with his usual level of skill. It is a huge relief, and one he is pleased to share with no one; the grounds are perfectly, blessedly empty of all save himself.

He first notices it in the stables: a strange, crawling feeling, as though his skin is somehow at once too big for its clothes and also too small for its owner. Loki is filled with the - brief, thankfully, when he stops and considers how far away his chambers lie and how public would be the way there - urge to tear his clothes off and- what, exactly? He is not even hot this time, The feeling passes as quickly as it came on, leaving him puzzled and the tiniest bit dizzy. He cannot shake the sense that he wants for something, in much the same desperate way a drowning man wants for air.

The strange sensation comes back again just a few short minutes later. This time, while it does ease off somewhat as he concentrates all of his attention on currying Star, Loki finds he is unable to rid himself of it entirely. It nags at the edges of his consciousness and leaves him fidgety and incautious.

About the time it gets to be too much Star shifts her weight unexpectedly – at least, it is unexpected from the perspective of someone so distracted – and steps down on Loki’s toes. He shrieks; she is frantic. Once he has her as calmed down as he can, he huffs out a loud, exasperated sigh and stomps – well, perhaps it is more like limps, thanks to his unhappy foot - back to his rooms.
Loki draws a cool bath and sinks into the water neck-deep with a quiet moan. He takes a deep breath and holds it; his body, buoyant from the trapped air, floats up to bob gently just below the surface. He paddles idly, just enough to stay centered, and lets the tiny waves paddling creates splash lightly against him. For a few moments it is lovely. He floats suspended, mind quiet and body calm. The cool water soothes his toes. But then he feels it come over him again; this time he recognizes it for what it is; a rush of want so strong it propels him to his feet and back out of the bath before he truly realizes what he is doing.

And this time Loki knows what it is that he wants.

Thor.

It is hours before his husband comes home. Long, long hours spent panting and drooling and pointedly not touching his own strange, mutilated body. By the time Thor finally pushes the door open with a tired groan, Loki is beside himself with lust.

~

"Lo-," Thor calls, not seeing him at first. But Loki is already in motion; as his husband turns towards the sound of his hurrying feet, Loki throws himself onto Thor with all he has.

"Well, hel-," is all Thor manages to get out before Loki puts a stop to all the talk with a wet, forceful kiss.

"Mmm," he hums against his husband’s warm, firm lips. "I have missed you so,"

"I cannot help but notice that," Thor teases, before Loki silences his husband again. Even with his mouth firmly planted over Thor’s, he is unable to completely muffle the squeaks and growls his icy-cold hands elicit. He cannot bring himself to care; he needs this, needs it like breathing. All his body wants is more.

Just when things are finally starting to reach a pitch sufficiently fevered to begin to address Loki's need, Thor pulls back. "Hold on," he demands, pushing Loki away and holding fast to both shoulders. "What is this about," he asks, brows knit together. "Whatever has gotten into you?"

Loki takes hold of his husband’s wrists and tries to twist out of Thor’s firm grip. "It is what has not gotten into me that is the problem," he accuses, ducking and struggling in his husband’s powerful hands. "And I shall not be denied!"

"Alas," Thor says quietly, "you indeed shall, until you tell me what this is about". He gives Loki a quick shake. "You have not so much as let me lay a finger upon you since your- your transformation," he points out, "and yet now you would have me believe you have gone mad for want of me? You will tell me what is going on," he threatens, frowning all the harder, chest still heaving as he tries to catch his breath, "or I fear I must fetch a healer."

So that is what the problem is: try as he might, Thor in not able to handle Loki's metamorphosis either.

"You no longer want me," Loki whimpers. He lets his hands fall back to his sides. His toes are throbbing. He can no longer look his husband in the face; he cannot bear to see disgust and horror written across Thor's handsome features. "Is that it," he asks. "Is it? You cannot bed a monster?"

Thor gives him another shake. While this one is no harder than the first, Loki is limp and docile now; his head wobbles, his chin collides painfully with his shoulder. "That is expressly not it; not in the least," Thor insists. "You are no monster, and I would bed you in the span of two heartbeats, but this
is not like you and I must first understand what is going on." His husband takes him carefully by the chin, fingers warm against Loki's skin even now, and tugs his face around. "Please," Thor begs, "I adore you, but you are scaring me."

"Fine," Loki snaps. He sucks in a deep breath of his own and sighs loudly. "I am scaring myself, too," he admits, because now that he stops to give it some thought - now that he has gained a little distance from his all-consuming lust - he is afraid. "It is like my body and mind are no longer my own."

Thor squeezes Loki's shoulders. It is a kind and loving gesture, and Loki feels a bit ridiculous.

"Perhaps, then," his husband suggests, "we should talk to my mother."

Ugh. He is by now thoroughly sick of trotting his marital difficulties past the queen. Thor is right, though; she is a far better judge of this than any healer. Less bound to gossip, as well, and Loki is in no mood to have lusty maiden stories overtake the palace. Despite some lingering reluctance, he nods. "It is probably for the best," he admits, shrugging out from under his husband's hands.

This time, Thor lets him.

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The queen feels his forehead with the back of a slender hand. She checks his neck carefully, shifting the tunic he'd hastily donned out of the way, and then makes him open wide and show his teeth and tongue. Loki is gratified to find his body not reacting violently to her touch; all is normal. "I am sorry to have troubled you," he says. "It seems whatever it was has passed." He opts not to share the way in which Thor's gentle, steering hand at the small of his back - not five minutes ago, as they had made the short journey through her quarters - had lit his body up like summer lightning. "I am sure all is well."

"Fear not," Frigga assures him as he turns to fetch Thor and go. "It is to be expected. Your first heat will doubtless be a shock."

"My first heat," Loki interrupts, so shocked he loses sight of his court manners. "I am in heat, then, like some sort of lowly beast?"

Frigga frowns sadly. "No, Loki," she corrects, not unkindly. "You are in heat like any Jotnar dam. I simply assumed--" she does on, and then pauses to study him closely. "Know you not the way of your own people?"

Loki huffs. His own people are not given to freakish magical changes of sex. Nor do they waltz about sans boundaries like the royal house of the Aesir. "My father found little enough reason to share with his sons the ways of dams, I am certain," he tells her. "I rather doubt he expected any of us to become one. I know I," he insists, not caring if he sounds rather snippy, "never did."

Thor comes up close behind him and strokes his back lightly. It is all Loki can do not to moan; as it is, he can feel his cheeks heating. He knows he must be flushing purple.

"Tell me how this works, mother," his husband suggests, as calm and unflustered as he might be were they simply having a normal conversation. "I believe," Thor adds, cheerfully self-deprecating, "I may have skipped this part of Jotun studies."

"My son," Frigga chides him gently, smiling, "I rather think you skipped every part of any studies that did not end in war."

Her smile – and her lightness of attitude, as though this truly is nothing – somehow helps Loki feels a
little calmer. He is able to bear his husband’s touch without panicking. “Of course, mother,” Thor says, matching her easy tone. “I had better things to do with my time. Go ahead, then, and tell me what it is like to be Jotun.”

Frigga’s explanation is lengthy and detailed, but also objective in a way that continues to prove oddly reassuring. It seems that Aesir women have regular cycles and came become pregnant many times a year, whereas Jotun dams are predisposed to be with child only at the first onset of warm weather. Now that Loki thinks about it, which he had never really had occasion to do previously, Jotun children do seem to appear in waves. He’d always assumed the area surrounding the ruined palace was full of the realm’s young in summer because of the nice weather – which, to hear the queen talk, is not entirely untrue – but the sons of Laufey never really mingled with the commoners and consequently he had never noticed how Jotunheim was practically devoid of babies at most any other time.

“Indeed it is not rare for Jotnar dams visiting the other, more temperate realms,” Frigga warns them both, “to spend much of their time there immensely fertile.”

"So," Thor offers, "does it not mean this would be an ideal time to-.” He wisely abandons that approach and tries changing course: “Were we to conceive a child now,” he tells Loki with a nervous smile, “you could return to your normal state most quickly. Rather than waiting for your next- your next cycle. Because if we wait, you are stuck- like this," he offers, looking more and more uncomfortable. "Longer. No?"

Something in his husband’s demeanor puts Loki off. It siphons away the warm feeling Frigga’s attention had left behind and replaces it with a fresh load of anger. Here he is yet again; so much meat. Loki laughs coldly. "I suppose one could view it in that light, if one were so inclined." His clothing feels tight, awkward and suffocating. His life just now feels tight and suffocating as well.

Verily everything about this topic leaves him feeling both embarrassed and hostile.

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"I am inclined to see it in whatever light you prefer, Loki," Thor says politely, apparently having failed to notice Loki’s change in mood. "As you have pointed out," his husband adds, "I am not the one who must endure this." That much is true enough. Loki tries to calm himself, to temper his reaction. This was no more Thor's idea than it was his own. Less, really.

"My queen?" He gazes at one of the tapestries gracing the tall walls of Frigga's sitting rooms, still willing himself to be calm and reasonable. "What is your opinion?"

She carefully considers what he has asked before responding. "In the end you must do what you know to be right for you. But there is truth in what Thor says," she offers. "And because of our seidr, and your age, I see no reason to wait through several cycles." Frigga pauses a moment as if to review what she has just said and then nods once, assured and decisive. "If it is now you wish to act," she tells him, "it is now you should take action."

"And if it is never," Thor asks, which is not anything Loki expected to hear his husband utter, ever. "Then I shall be a monster a very long time," he tells Thor a little sadly.

Thor sighs. "I wish you would not speak of it that way."

"And I wish I was a bird," Loki counters. "A magpie, maybe. Free to fly where I might, at my choosing," he adds, picturing himself spiraling into the sun. "Free to ride the updrafts to my heart's
content, sans rules and responsibilities." Free to be someone else, living a different life entirely.

"But you are a bird," Thor points out. In his peripheral vision Loki can see his husband smiling sweetly. "And a hunting cat," Thor adds, "and a horse, and whatever else you please."

"No," Loki cuts in, once again annoyed at how flippant everyone but himself can afford to be. "I am but a vessel." He snaps around to glare at his husband, whose face sports the strangest of expressions.

"You are that and so much more," his husband assures him warmly. "So much more."

None of this is what he wants, and yet Loki knows deep down they have no choice. Even with the protection of the king and queen, he is not safe in this realm unless he bears the people an heir to the throne. And while Thor may endeavor to pretend otherwise, that is all it is; pretense, and weak pretense at that. "I shall consider my options," he tells Frigga, which of course is to admit he has none. "Come, darling," he demands, taking Thor's warm hand. "Let us leave your mother to her duties."

Back in their quarters Loki finds himself ravenous in every conceivable way. His mind may wish to die a little; his body, though, wants to feast and drink and fuck until it is full to overflowing. He strips off his constricting Aesir garments and strews them across the floor. As uncomfortable as he still feels about his new form, he must admit he is relieved to be clad once again in just a soft silk-and-leather loincloth. He stands on the balcony and looks out over the city, enjoying the feel of air against his skin.

When Thor suggests they take their supper there, the way they had once done every evening (in happier times, times which now feel impossibly long ago and far away), Loki concedes. It is a lovely evening, and he is most hungry; he can think of no good reason to they should avoid spending it enjoying one another's company.

The kitchen sends up a rather frightening spread, even given Loki's oddly altered palate: a bit of raw fish, yes, but also coarse-grained, floured breads; heavy cheeses whose odor is faintly reminiscent of the sea; and bright, succulent fruits in every shade of purple and red, green and gold, orange and brown. There is very little of Jotunheim amidst the bowls and platters. He is starving, just starving, and yet there is barely anything here he dares to try.

Loki lets Thor settle onto the foot of his chaise, though, and bit-by-bit his husband persuades him to try first the cheese and then some of the bread. The cheese tastes nothing like it smells; it is soft and lovely and it melts in his mouth in a way that reminds him unnervingly of- of their coupling. He eats another bite and another before giving in with a low groan and sucking the last of it off his husband’s fingers.

"Mm," he hums, a little surprised to find himself the happiest he has been in- in weeks. "What is this? I like it."

Thor smiles at him. "My fingers," he asks, tracing over Loki’s lip with his thumb "or the cheese?"

"Both." He returns his husband’s smile. "Together. It tastes good here, too," he adds, half-kissing and half-licking cheese off Thor’s mouth. "Especially here." He steals another taste, and then another, and then they are simply kissing one another deeply with no pretense of eating.

"You are so very, very lovely," his husband tells him when at last they must stop to breathe, one of
Thor’s big hands cupping his cheek. "Come here. Please?"

Loki does not need to be asked more than once. He wants, so badly. When he settles into his husband’s lap, though, things once again feel off; it startles him into stopping.

"What is it," Thor queries anxiously. "Have you hurt yourself? Are you okay?"

He hides his face in his husband’s golden hair. "My body wants- strange things," he admits, not even sure where to begin explaining.

Thor swallows loudly. "Well, then," he rasps, "let us find out if we can satisfy it, shall we?"

The idea is both wonderful and terrifying. “Maybe,” Loki tells Thor, but he is careful to put up no fight when his husband carries him off to bed.

He lets Thor lay him gently down into a veritable nest of bedding. Even though they have been exactly here countless times, he is so tense that his hands are shaking. “Close your eyes and try to relax,” his husband whispers. “I promise I will do nothing to hurt you.”

It feels good to have Thor’s mouth on his cheekbone, his ear, the curve of his neck. "Stop," Loki protests when his husband nuzzles scratchily into his armpit, but he is laughing even as he says it. His body wants more of what Thor is selling; when his husband tries to pull away, Loki is having none of it.

"Tell me what it is you want," Thor pleads, dropping back onto both hands and kissing all the way back up Loki’s chest.

He tries to pause and think a moment, which is not easy; between the stress and- and all of this, Loki’s brain is impossibly muddled. What does he want? More of this. Much, much more. "I want to become reacquainted," he tells Thor, finally, struggling a little to catch his breath. "With you. Please."

It takes some persuading on his husband’s part – quite a bit, actually, even now when he is lust-fogged and not thinking clearly – but Loki finally condescends to let Thor inspect his changed body. Closely. Very, very closely.

"Have you still not explored it yourself,“ Thor asks from between Loki’s legs. “Your new- your-… you know."

Loki cannot help but laugh, and that clears his mental fog a little. Sometimes his seasoned warrior of a husband can be such a child. "So we are back to the awkwardness of adolescence, are we,“ he teases, in part to conceal his own embarrassment… because, no, he has not felt brave enough to touch himself – his new self – yet, not at all. “Shall we name our naughty parts and pretend they are talking one another?”

Thor smiles good-naturedly. “You have not, then, I take it,” he points out, seeing right through Loki’s flimsy cover. “So be it. I was simply hoping for some advice on what it- on what you like.”

“Try whatever suits you,” Loki instructs. He is once again tired of talking; with his husband’s face right there, his body wants to move. “All things considered,” he points out with increasing impatience, “you are surprisingly good at determining what I do and do not like. And Thor, do get on with it.”
About the time Loki is considering strangling his husband, Thor does get on with it. The hot mouth wrapped around his cock, humming and slurping, is almost enough to distract him from the way Thor’s thick fingers have worked their way inside him. Loki’s breath catches and he tenses warily, but it feels nice. More than nice. He cannot help but moan; his body is hungrier for this than he could possibly have imagined. With little enough additional encouragement his husband settles into a rhythm that has him marching steadily towards.

“What is it now, Thor,” he complains as Thor stops. He cranes his head to see what is wrong; his husband looks up at him with renewed apprehension. “I must say,” Loki points out, because he indeed must, “that you are doing altogether too much thinking.”

Thor looks sheepish. He clears his throat and shifts to wipe his mouth on one hand. “Are we doing this strictly for pleasure,” he asks, “or are we starting on our- our mission?”

Loki sighs. Ah, yes; the ever-present call of duty. “The latter, I suppose,” he admits, “though I wish we could still do the former.”

“Do you wish to- to try it, then,” his husband asks, face earnest and open. Cast in that light, duty does seem rather more appealing.

“Yes,” Loki says, firmly. “And now.”

Thor is – on some occasions, at least, and this is clearly one of them - nothing if not good at following orders. And, while the whole experience starts out strange and a bit uncomfortable – every time Thor thrusts, however gently, Loki feels a bit like his insides are being rearranged… which is all the more unsettling for its being true – it is not anywhere near as long as he had expected before he finds himself enjoying it.

A great deal, even.

His new body proves impressively versatile, too. It reaches climax more slowly than Loki is accustomed to doing, but is ready and willing to keep going immediately. By the end of his heat – which lasts less than a week, fortunately; anything more and they might both have succumbed – he is sore from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. He is no longer able to spill more than a drop or two, and he is sure he has never been in greater need of a good washing.

It is a full day, even then, before either of them feels up to getting out of bed.

“Not that I am complaining,” Thor tells him when they are finally able to make their stiff, sticky way to the baths, “but I do hope that did the trick. I am not sure how many more rounds of it I am up to.”

Loki briefly considers slapping his husband, but Thor is laughing. It is contagious; they are both still howling when they slosh gracelessly into the hot, lovely water.

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“I do not know what it is,” Loki complains weakly between heaves. “I do not think I ate anything unusual. And you have scarce left my side these two weeks.” He has to pause to vomit again. And again. Whatever is going on, it is awful. That, and it is his alone; his husband is annoyingly hale and hearty.

“We must fetch Eir,” Thor insists. “Your life may depend upon it. I swear; if someone has seen fit to poison you, dearest, I shall see to at that the whole realm is turned inside out until we learn the source of it.”
“Oh no, my princes,” Eir assures them altogether too cheerfully (as she cajoles Loki into sipping an unpleasant-tasting herbal concoction she insists will calm his digestion, utterly harmlessly). “It is not a poison that has gotten into Loki, Thor. It is simply your seed.”

“My seed sickens him now,” Thor asks. He sounds horrified. Loki is still too weak and nauseated to either laugh or be angry.

Eir laughs enough for all of them. “No no,” she says. “Nothing like that. Loki is with child.”

Oh.

They stare first at the healer and then at one another, shocked into silence. When Thor comes unstuck first and leans in to kiss his sweaty brow, Loki is surprised to find himself noiselessly weeping.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Loki feels worse, and then better. Everyone does better with his mood swings than anticipated.

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Loki

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For the next two weeks - by the end of which the first month mark is upon him, meaning that nearly one quarter of his pregnancy has already passed into dust; while it has been easily long enough to marvel at how fast the time flies by, he has not yet had even close to long enough to fully come to terms with the twist of fortune that has befallen them - Loki is constantly, relentlessly, impressively ill. Such a broad range of smells make him retch and heave that no food is safe. Neither are the stables nor the twinned stinks of sweat and leather (among many scents; nay, odors) which intermix at the training grounds. Even the soaps and oils in the baths leave him with both hands clapped firmly overtop his mouth.

In short, most everything that once brought him joy now brings him utter misery.

For if he is not hanging over the toilet, Loki is hanging over the sink. Or a spittoon. Or, if he is caught out in the stables, a bucket. And if he is not near any of the above, he often finds himself nearly-dry-heaving little trails of saliva and bile into the grass.

More than once, much to his embarrassment, Loki doubles over in the middle of a conversation and pukes right onto the plush rugs that warm the stone floors of Frigga’s chambers. Each time the queen smiles as she neatens up with a flick of her hand. “I assure you,” she tells him, “this place has seen worse. Do not for a minute trouble yourself about it. I only wish you felt better. Soon, they tell me,” she promises him as he wipes his eyes and struggles to catch his breath. “Very soon.”

There is a horrible irony, Loki cannot help but note, in how seidr can clean up his many messes and yet cannot let him keep so much as a single mouthful down. “Certain things in nature cannot be undone,” Frigga explains, and Loki opts not to pursue the question further.

He sucks ice chips to stave off utter dehydration and ultimately comes to spend much of his time alternately sulking and gagging in the bath.

Thor does try hard to be attentive, but Loki is not fond of company when he feels like he should be dying. He prefers to crawl off somewhere like the wretched beast he is and have the one last luxury of expiring in peace and quiet. So, most often, the story unfolds in the same sorry manner: He slaps Thor’s hands away, curses in the face of kind words, and then spends his hard-earned time alone crying because he is positive his husband will banish him.

Killing him would, of course, be too easy and too undeserved a kindness.

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Even the very idea of traveling via Bifrost doubles him over straightaway, which is how it is Loki comes to be drooling and spitting on his own feet as he, Frigga, and Eir land rather gracelessly on the frozen ground outside the main gates of the royal palace of Jotunheim. "I apologize for the unheralded visit, but we just wish to have Prince Loki checked by one of your healers," Frigga tells Laufey once they have been brought to the foot of the throne. "He has been most unwell, and our own healers worry. Together we can accomplish far more than we can on our own, think you not?"

Her diplomacy – or perhaps it is Loki’s pale green-grey complexion - is not lost on the Jotun King. Laufey sends a runner. While they wait for the healer to arrive, Laufey bids Loki approach. "You do us a fine service, my son," he says, carefully tucking a stray strand of Loki’s hair into one disheveled braid. "I am proud of you."

Loki dips his head in acknowledgement. He dares not unclench his jaw; his father smells faintly of fish and by consequence even attempting a word or two is much too risky. The king is so rarely kind and caring, and Loki does not wish to spoil such a rare moment. No, he will save any emesis for Helblindi.

After a few minutes Laufey’s runner returns with two healing assistants in tow. “Come with us,” they instruct. “It is not far.”

The chamber to which Loki and his entourage are directed is cool and quiet and dimly lit. It houses four ice-and-stone cots, one of which is draped with thick white fur. Each cot stands well off the ground, clearly intended for bigger patients.

There are no steps and, as he is decidedly in no mood for strenuous exertion, Loki lets the assistants help him up. Eir and the master healer converse quietly in the far corner, their voices too low to carry back to the cot.

Loki sinks gratefully into the fur. He is dwarfed by the pelt-draped exam table; there is easily room for at least three of him to lie comfortably, and that is just taking into consideration the space from side to side. Another Loki could probably curl up and nest at the feet of the first one without wanting for space.

With a hand from one of the assistants Frigga pushes herself up to take a seat beside him. Her skirts rustle as she, too, settles herself comfortably to sit cross-legged amidst the furs. “Is this okay,” she asks, taking his fingers gently in her own. “Mm,” he hums. Just now, it is most – if perhaps unexpectedly - reassuring not to be alone. In fact, Loki wishes they had thought to bring Thor.

The healer comes over and asks him two or three easy yes/no questions, after which he is subjected to a long examination during which he is poked and prodded far too thoroughly. Loki grits his teeth and squeezes the queen’s hand so hard in his own that he at last fears he might maim her. “Worry not; it is fine,” she tells him when he offers his apologies. “Rest assured I have suffered worse.”

He tries to return her smile, with only limited success.

At last, it is over. The healers converse briefly again, and then Eir tells him "all is well." The Jotun master healer nods agreement. Loki looks to Frigga; she nods and smiles as well.

"In not a few days' time this will pass into the light at the end of the ice," the Jotun healer tells him, settling on a phrase Loki has not once heard since first leaving Jotunheim for Asgard. "You will wake with an uns lakable thirst, and even that will be followed in short order by a hunger the likes of which even Prince Thor has likely never known. Until then, my sweet," she adds with what – for a
frost giant – passes for a soft smile, “keep this near.”

She hands him a small pouch, about the size of his own closed fist, tied with dark cord. "Bring it to your face and breathe deeply of it whenever you begin to feel the sickness come over you," she instructs. "It will ease your suffering, I promise you."

He takes the pouch from her and holds it tentatively to his nose. It smells faintly herbal, seemingly more reminiscent of Asgard than of Loki’s home realm. The healer is right, though; after just a few sniffs, each one deeper and less cautious than the ones that came before it, he can feel can feel nausea’s relentless, overarching grip begin to ease slightly. Not that he would dare to eat, far from it, but overall it is an incredible relief.

Eir frowns. “It is helping?”

Loki nods. “Very much so,” he says. It feels nice to be able to speak freely and comfortably again; these past few days he has been too sick even for talking.

Frigga looks horrified. “Could he have been using this all along,” she asks the master healer, “had we but thought to bring him here sooner?”

The Jotnar healer shakes her head. “No, your majesty,” she explains. “Your timing could not have been more perfect. Much as our dams would love it to be otherwise, this medicine only begins to have any effect around the turning of the quarter.” She frowns sadly. “Nothing we have yet found helps earlier on and, although my colleagues do continue the search for a better approach, over these many millennia not so much as one viable remedy has risen to the surface of the ice.”

Frigga breathes out a sigh. “Then I am grateful we came when we did, for certain,” she tells the master healer.

Eir nods in agreement. “Anything to help our poor prince, here.”

For once in his life Loki would love to kiss them, each and every one.

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Just as the healer said, Loki wakes up a few days after the Jotunheim visit to discover that a mysterious switch - one he did not know his body possessed - has been flipped. Where only as recently as the night before he had been sicker than anyone could have imagined possible, so loathe to let the Jotun herbal sachet out of his clutches that he had taken to screeching at Thor any time his husband made so much as a move to lay one finger upon the thing, this morning he is cheerful and chipper and thirsty.

He takes his chances and yawns, a big, slow yawn that leaves his jaw a bit sore and yet amazingly does not result in any puking. His mouth is drier than dry, though. He is parched, like a fish left to die on the river’s banks. “Thor,” he rasps. “Water.”

Thor shifts, still nearly asleep. “Are you well,” he asks Loki, looking by equal measure worried and confused. “What is it that you need?”

“Water,” Loki says again. His own voice is hoarse and rough. “Please. And quickly.”

His husband struggles up out of bed and hefts the flagon near the door. “This is still quite cold,” he tells Loki. “Will that suit you? I do not want to upset your-.”

Right now Loki thinks he might drink from the horses’ trough if no other option presents itself
quickly. “Cold is fine,” he cuts in to assure Thor. “Warm is fine. Both at the same time would be fine. But I need water.”

Thor pours a big goblet full, grinning to himself.

Loki makes a mental note to slap Thor once he is a little less dried out, just because – his own sudden, unexpected return to good cheer notwithstanding - this is not funny.

After eight full goblets of water, he feels a bit better. Enough so, at least, that he can relax back onto his pillows and lie there quietly. He rubs one hand gently over his stomach, down to the point of one hipbone and back up. Loki knows he is not yet showing, and he has certainly not managed to put on any weight while turning himself inside out day after day at even less than the slightest of provocations, but nonetheless his body feels different somehow.

When he looks up, his husband is smiling down at him. “Are you sated for now,” Thor asks, “at least enough so that I might lie back down and join you?”

“I am,” Loki tells him after a moment’s consideration. “And you may.” He smirks. “But the price of coming back to bed will be one backrub.”

He really needs it, too; his entire body aches. Where at first he had at least tried to get out and about, the past week he has spent the largest portion of each day curled up somewhere in the baths wishing himself dead.

“Now that is a price I am happy to pay,” Thor tells him, laughing. “Can you roll safely over?”

“I am not an invalid, Thor,” Loki complains, despite how he knows he has been behaving rather like one. “I am simply with child. With your very large and noxious child, at that.” Neither of those things, of course, is true; at this point the child is still very small, hardly a child at all, and healers from both realms have already assured him this is a normal Jotnar pregnancy, sickness and all. Still, he cannot resist a small jab at his husband… the one who put this problem here and who has subsequently been able to waltz away unscathed.

“Good,” Thor says, not sounding bothered by Loki’s quickly shifting mood in the slightest. “Settle yourself comfortably and I shall have at it, then.”

Loki rolls carefully over, face buried in his pillow and hands tucked underneath it. His body still feels strange, more than the bellyful of water alone can explain; he can only imagine in a few weeks he will be longing for these fine days when he could position himself so easily. It is good to enjoy himself again. When he is settled as comfortably as possible, he nods. “Do your best,” he instructs, still teasing his husband, “and I will forgive your debt.”

“Do smells still put you off,” Thor asks, “because this cries out for oil. You are so dry,” he points out, running a finger lightly along Loki’s spine. “Without something to ease the way a good rubbing will hurt you.”

“Hmm, I think not,” Loki says, lifting his head slightly and sniffing around. His pillow smells of the sweet oil he uses in his hair, and of his husband. After one last deep inhale he flops back down. “The almond oil will be fine,” he confirms. “Please.”

Thor pours a generous puddle of oil into the dip at the small of Loki’s back. He takes his time spreading it over Loki’s dry skin – taken collectively all of this (more than two solid weeks of vomiting at every turn, topped off with a visit to dry, frigid Jotunheim and the accompanying two windblown Bifrost trips through the moisture-robbing paths of space) has done Loki’s blue hide no
favors – in a thin, even layer and then starts paying off his debt at the top. Thor kneads the back of Loki’s neck gently, working the muscles and mapping the fine bones of the upper spine, and then lets his hands glide smoothly down to the curves of Loki’s shoulders.

“You have lost a surprising amount of weight,” he scolds. “Mother says we must fatten you back up, so the baby is nourished properly.” All the while he makes sure to soft his sharp tone with steady kneading, his fingers working every last kink out of Loki’s shoulder muscles and upper arms. When he finishes there, he moves to Loki’s ribcage and traces each rib slowly, slowly from backbone to sides and then back up.

“It is such a relief,” Thor says, “to see my poor blue husband relaxed and not vomiting.”

The repetitive motion, along with the soft almond scent and the warmth of Thor’s hands, lulls Loki most of the way back to sleep. “Mm,” he hums on a particularly firm, satisfying stroke. “This is truly wonderful.”

Thor kneads his buttocks, first the left and then the right. Loki purrs and wriggles; his husband laughs. “Not until we have gotten some food into you,” he warns. “Much as I have missed you, I will not be the one explaining to mother that you passed out during our lovemaking on accord of your weeks of starvation.”

Getting once again reacquainted does sound appealing, as does eating, surprisingly - it has been some time since they put one another’s assets to good use, two weeks now and probably even slightly more, and not coincidentally about the same amount of time since he last enjoyed food – but right now Loki wants nothing (nothing that comes to mind, at least) more than the rest of his rubdown. “After this lovely massage, we shall have both,” he promises, “assuming I continue my recovery.”

“At your service,” Thor teases lightly. “Now lie still and be quiet.”

Loki does. He concentrates on the feel of his husband’s big, strong hands on the backs of his thighs. Working the knots out of his calves. Smoothing his ankles and feet – one toe a time – with, as always, enough pressure not to tickle. Thor is very good at this sort of thing, and Loki loves his husband all the more for it.

After that he struggles to even stay awake, blinking and sighing while Thor stretches back up and works every last knot out of his arms and soothes the dry skin of his fingers.

And after that, apparently, Loki surrenders to the urge and naps.

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“And how is he feeling?” Frigga asks softly from over near the big windows. She sighs. “I cannot tell you what a relief it is to see him resting comfortably.”

Loki keeps own his eyes shut. He is still only half-conscious at best, and it feels good to be fussed over.

“He was very, very thirsty earlier,” Thor tells her. “He drank enough water for an entire day when he first awoke this morning. He seems much more himself again, though.” His husband is pacing; Loki can hear the scuff of soft leather boots across the floor. “I am most glad,” Thor tells the queen, “for I was worried. It has been awful seeing him so ill. I wish I could take away some of his suffering and carry part of the load, no?”

“Alas,” Frigga says, “such is not the way of these things.”
“That seems most unfair, do you not think,” Loki asks his pillow.

“You are awake,” Thor and his mother exclaim in perfect synchrony. All three of them laugh. They are all, it seems, relieved; that, and it is nice to be happy again.

~

Three good sleeps and untold gallons of water later, Loki finds himself feeling much, much better. Better, and starving. For what may be the first time in his life he wakes unassisted far before his normal hour, curled against Thor’s chest and wrapped in the warm, muscled arms of his still-sleeping husband. Loki lies as still as he can, petting his belly gently with one hand and trying to think happy thoughts, but it is all to no avail; his stomach insists on growling far, far too loudly. It is like a wild beast has come to bed with them.

"Thor," he asks, tentatively. "Are you awake?"

Of course not.

On the fourth or fifth try Loki manages to elicit a reaction. Or maybe it is the fact that he accompanies his request by reaching over and delivering a solid pinch to his husband's warm, fuzzy posterior.

"Mmph," Thor grumbles into Loki’s hair, but he does ultimately haul himself up on one elbow. He blinks in sleepy panic, his forehead creased into a frown and the imprint of his own fingers still clear upon his face. "Loki? Are you all right? Dearest? What is it?"

Loki pouts. "I am hungry."

"Hungry," Thor repeats, like it makes no sense. "Is that all?" A smile spreads across his face, quick and bright as the morning sun. "You frightened me."

"Hungry," Loki reminds him. "Very hungry." His stomach underscores the point with a loud rumble.

Loki freezes, briefly mortified by the way his own body continues to betray him – he once had manners, better manners than most Asgardians - and then he and Thor both laugh. "Norns," Thor teases, voice still rough with sleep. "What are you growing in there?"

"An ice beast, I think," Loki says, still laughing. "That, or I could eat one. Perhaps your first instinct was good, and you were right to be afraid."

Thor smiles and traces the bridge of Loki's nose with one finger. "It is good to see you well again," he says. "What would you like to eat? I shall have it brought up posthaste."

~

Loki eats grapes, and cheese, and three kinds of sweetened bread. He eats cured meat and cooked meat and fish so fresh and raw Thor worries it may not be safe. "This child is half-Jotun," Loki has to pause briefly mid-bite and remind his husband. "Fish will most certainly do it no harm." He eats rich, buttery soup thick with root vegetables and cream. He eats eggs and sour red berries and some of the most delicious desserts he can ever remember the palace kitchens creating.

When they finish breaking their fast, Loki burps delicately and fades off into a nap with the pleasant tickle of Thor's fingers skimming lightly across his skin.

He wakes no more than two hours later, to a freshly-laid-out feast; Loki eats that, too. In fact, he
comes quite a bit closer than he likes to eating one of his own fingers.

~

“I am not growing a full-fledged frost giant in here, am I,” Loki asks Eir worriedly. “My eating is starting to concern me.”

Eir consults her books, and then – with Heimdall’s help – the Jotun master healer.

“No, Loki,” she assures him the next day. “It seems – and I mean no harm by this; for you, for us, it is a good thing – among the Jotnar runts breed only more runts.”

Ah. It stings, but perhaps he can see Laufey’s wisdom in this arrangement after all.

Not, of course, that he regrets the way his fate seems to be unwinding. He likes it here, and loves his husband. It is more that some small, hidden portion of Loki – one he keeps to himself, and deep inside – still resents his father’s choices. Or, rather, resents that such crucial choices were Laufey’s to make rather than his own.

Would he have made them better?

That is not the point.

~

By the end of the ninth week Thor can - and does, at every possible opportunity - cup the growing swell of Loki's belly in his broad palms. Loki, for his part, encourages this behavior; his husband's hands are unfailingly warm and soothing. Loki is still eating for what feels like five, but some of the urgency has gone out of his hunger and he can actually conceive of enjoying some semblance of a full life again.

As timing goes it is fortunate; while he can still lie mostly prone for the comforting press of Thor's fingers along his spine (or the rather differently comforting slide of his husband’s erection between his thighs) at the moment, doing so is (in both examples) starting to feel awkward and uncomfortable and Loki can only guess he will be off his belly for the duration in at most a few weeks' time. If he can only lie on his back and sides, bed will be much less pleasant; consequently the promise of finally able to get out and about again soon is a good and welcome thing.

For his part Thor, having spent quite a while neglecting his administrative duties in favor of standing (and sitting, and lying) guard over Loki, has to return to the his office. He complains and frowns and lavishes Loki's face and growing belly with kisses, but he does go. "It pains me so to leave you here alone," he says, making reference to the way that Loki’s constant sickness had meant becoming increasingly reclusive over the early course of the pregnancy and as a result rarely seeing anyone save for Eir and family. "Will you not be bored?"

"If I am, I shall have the queen summoned," Loki promises. "She will keep me company." And soon I will be back on my feet, he thinks. Loki keeps it to himself; he does not wish Thor to worry.

~

Many days Frigga does visit with Loki, actually. As he recovers his strength - if not his balance; the changes he is going through, as rapid and constant as they are, leave him feeling uncharacteristically graceless (and when he cries about it Thor reminds Loki it is coltish and endearing, which leaves him warmer and happier than being teased by any right should) - he and Frigga spend part of each afternoon strolling in the gardens together. They stay in the dappled shade of the trees, as Loki
cannot tolerate the heat even as much (as little) as normal in his current state.

Sometimes, on the warmest days, he soaks in one of the pools. The river itself is a bit too far – there is no way he can ride when he is so wobbly – but the pools are a nice substitute and he spends many pleasant hours basking in their cool water as fish nibble gently at his toes. Invariably the queen sits beside him on the soft grass with her feet dangling beneath the surface. The fish seem to like the taste of Loki better, which is rather ironic considering. He and Frigga share a laugh about it nearly every time.

"You are taking this all very well," she tells him today as they sprawl together under the sweeping canopy of an ancient tree. There is a pleasant breeze and for once Loki is not feeling overheated. "I do not think I was nearly as good-natured when I was expecting Thor." Frigga sets a hand lightly upon his knee. "I do hope my son is taking good care of you."

Loki smiles. He trails one hand idly through the grass while his other cups the lower part of his belly. He cannot keep his hands off it now; what the last weeks of his pregnancy will bring, he cannot imagine. Perhaps he will have to be fed, as he will need to touch the baby through his own skin and muscle at every single moment of each day. "He is being utterly lovely," Loki assures her. "This has sat heavily upon him, but he does his best to show it not."

"I trust you would accept no less," Frigga says, squeezing his knee gently. "After all, it sits heavily upon both of you."

Loki shrugs. "Watching me suffer is not easy for him," he tells her. "We do what we must, but he struggles with it."

"He will be a good father," she says, nodding. "As will you."

"Mother," Loki corrects. "I will be a good mother. Or, at least, I will strive to do so." He is bearing this child; there will be no escaping it. "I know that in the eyes of Asgard I will henceforth be Thor's bride." It is true. Few saw him as a man, exactly, before; now there is less than no hope of it.

Frigga lets go his leg, instead reaching up to smooth his hair. It is growing long and lush now that his appetite has returned. "Perhaps it is your destiny to become nothing we have ever seen instead."

That much is doubtless true, albeit not in the way she means, but dwelling thereon will do him no favors. "Perhaps," he concedes. "Alas, we must go in. I am hungry. Again."

Frigga stands, dusting her skirts with wide, sweeping strokes. "Here," she says, offering Loki a hand. "We shall enjoy a late lunch, then, you and I."

~

At fifteen weeks Loki - while he is still lithe and strong, as he is once again well enough to train (carefully) in the ring - has developed a distinct waddle. He has also largely abandoned his strappy sandals for the sort of soft, padded boots that are more accurately termed slippers; his joints are sore and over-flexible and a every little bit of protection from the royal palace of Asgard's stone floors is quite welcome. When he is outside, in the soft grass of Frigga's gardens, Loki largely goes about his business barefoot; he finds himself more confident moving about when his feet are in contact with the ground directly.

He once again makes it to the stables most days, if only to spend long, sleepy hours chatting with Star. Loki still does not trust himself to ride, not until after the baby comes, but he loves his horse and refuses to spend this time completely apart from her. To make up all the early weeks of inattention,
not to mention the way he can no longer take her out to play, Loki brings Star sweets and braids her mane into complex horsehair masterpieces. On cooler days he takes her out on a lead and they enjoy a short walk together in the gently rolling field beside the stables. "You should have gotten yourself pregnant this year too," he teases her, "for all the exercise you are not getting,"

Star huffs softly into the meat of his shoulder. "Not by me, silly," he teases her. "Not by me. You deserve better," he reminds the horse, serious now, "and someday I will make sure that you find it."
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Watching Loki suffer morning-sickness worries Thor.

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Thor

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Thor feels incredibly guilty. They are ostensibly in this heir creation business together, he and his very unhappy blue husband, and yet there is nothing equal about it. Once you look past the coupling that started it all (and even before that point, Loki had undergone a great deal; all Thor really had to do, as always, was show up at the agreed-upon time), his own contributions have been confined to hand-wringing and brow-blotting. Now he is only able to hold Loki’s long, black tresses – with such a large portion of each day spent in bed, keeping Loki’s hair braided is no longer worth the effort - safely up out of the mess while his husband vomits.

Loki brings up everything that crosses his (chapped, sore) purple-black lips. Even the smallest sip of water sends him into paroxysms. Thor hurts just watching him.

Initially the healers - even Eir, and the very best midwives among her staff – assure Thor and Loki this is perfectly normal. It is to be expected, they still tell the expectant couple as the days and weeks drag by, although Thor is no longer entirely certain he is imagining the faint shadow of concern that passes over each and every healer’s face when he asks the same questions ten times too many.

His husband’s situation is perhaps not entirely unique; if he does take time to think on it, Thor can recall more than a few comrades at arms whose wives and consorts have suffered through pregnancy – the earlier portions, especially – in a similar manner. Volstagg’s wife in particular, with each of her many children, endured her share and then some of wretched morning sickness. He tries to keep in mind that, while hearing about it (whether that be from Frigga’s weavers swapping stories or his own friends and fellow soldiers reporting back on their various wives and sisters) has in no way prepared him for what it would be like to watch a loved one suffer so, every one of those men has gone on to be graced with both a happy babe (or six, in Volstagg’s case… or is it seven?) and a wife who lived to share the story with her friends.

Even so, he simply cannot recall ever having felt so helpless. All of the spark has gone out of Loki, leaving little behind but a miserable greyish shell. The two of them do not even argue; his husband has long since lost the energy for petty bickering and Thor himself has not the stomach to inflict any further (mental or physical) pain. He tries to soothe Loki, to rub out the cramped muscles and work oil into the dry, lackluster skin, but his husband protests weakly. "I know not what to do,” Thor pleads, carefully dabbing at Loki’s tired, drawn face with a soft, damp washrag and then ducking as his husband tries to slap his hands away. "Please tell me how I may ease your suffering. I will do whatever it is you need."

"Fine,” Loki rasps into the pillow, his body curled in upon itself and his clawed hands digging into his own shoulders. "You may kill me, then." He pauses to drag himself to the edge of the bed and retch painfully into the ever-waiting basin. "You may put me out of my misery,” he goes on when he can, pausing every few words to pant and spit, “like one of the king's hounds."
"You know I cannot. I could never do you ill," Thor protests. "I only want to help you."

"Then you and your whatever are of no use to me at all. Take your worthless sympathy and take your leave. Let me get back to dying on my own time," Loki orders. "Go. Shoo." He flaps his hands weakly. "I jest not. There is nothing for you here, and I wish to be alone with my wretchedness."

When Thor goes to his mother for advice – since he has been for all intents and purposes banned from his bedchambers, he may as well use his time in as productive a manner as possible - Frigga suggests ice chips. She has seen it help many a pregnant woman here in Asgard, and she thinks it might make even more sense in this case given that Loki's Jotnar constitution should take to ice less gracelessly than it has to water and food.

Not just any ice chips, though; the queen wants Loki to have proper Jotun shavings. She and Eir send word ahead and a Jotnar healer apprentice is already waiting for them when Thor and Eir arrive at the Bifrost landing site. Despite using both hands the healer struggles a bit as she hoists a bulging leather satchel. As Thor takes it from her, Eir draws the top open to reveal a large, steaming block of blue-green Jotunheim ice. "In case the water here is different," Thor tries explaining to the apprentice in an awkward mix of Allspeak and wretchedly bastardized Jotun.

The healer tilts her ridged head and thinks a moment, then smiles and nods. "Will help," she assures him. "For now."

He ignores the latter part in favor of the former. Thank the Norns, and the many mighty gods. Thor does not hug the apprentice, though he is surely more than grateful enough to do so. The last thing anyone needs right now is an unfortunate diplomatic incident brought on by his own lack of culturally-appropriate social graces.

It turns out to be a sound enough plan, as far as it goes (which is not nearly far enough, but Thor will take what small victories he can eke out just now).

Loki is still mightily unhappy and completely miserable, but he is able to suck a few chips at a time - freshly knocked from the master block, kept cold and untainted in its safe resting spot behind the creamery - of shimmering blue ice without vomiting. He is no more interested in company – in fact, he is still insisting on dying alone - but his red eyes are increasingly less dull and his skin no longer tents in place when Thor gently pinches it.

This tiny gain comes as a great relief, especially considering it is so little a thing. It is a move in the right direction, after what feels like an eternity without one. Thor very, very dearly hopes not to lose his beloved, nor for that matter the babe-to-be growing within his husband's tortured body.

Like it or not the Jotun healer was right, unfortunately, in more ways than the one Thor chose to hear.

"Will he be okay," Thor asks his mother for the umpteenth time when Loki begins vomiting yet again. "I only want for him to" - live, he dares not say, because it feels far too much like tempting fate, and - "rest easy."

"He will indeed," Frigga says, squeezing Thor's hand. "This will pass soon, and all will be well again. Patience, my son. You will see."
Except for this: It does not pass.

After a few more days of constant setbacks, of endless vomiting and listlessness, even the queen’s legendary patience wears thin. “Perhaps we should let the Jotun healers take a look at our prince,” Frigga tells Thor. “They must have more experience dealing with this than do we.” She looks exhausted; he knows they both do, and are. They have been up around the clock now for half a week, as Loki is once again sick enough to drift in and out of parched, mindless delirium. Between them, Thor and his mother are nearly out of options… and of Jotun ice, as well. When their supply is completely exhausted Thor does not even want to think about what might happen.

~

He does not make the journey with them. It is not so much that this is women’s work; it is more that Loki is sick and uncomfortable and would rather be in the company of healers than people for whom he has to keep up appearances. Or so Loki tells Thor as his makeshift entourage, such as it were, is preparing to depart.

In the end Frigga simply takes Eir, and Loki, and Thor’s good wishes.

~

Days working with the king’s treasurer in the counting rooms, or the cramped treasury offices that adjoin them, are invariably among the dullest. As a child Thor had oft imagined spending his adult life here, reveling in his money; tossing printed currency in the air and biting gold coins like the beggars and merchants out near the city walls do to verify the metal’s purity. When he was but a young boy, he had mistakenly thought doing so would be the very best part of ruling.

Oh, how wrong he was.

Reality has turned out to be nothing whatsoever like his childish daydreams.

For example - though his family is wealthy nearly beyond measure in ever sense of the word and he has rarely wanted for anything – this is not really his money. Thor better understands as an adult that most of the currency in these rooms (and it is not piles of coins and well-used slips of paper money, like he had always imagined; no, it exists primarily as drawer after drawer of filing) belongs to the realm eternal. And he and the treasurer are simply masters of the ledgers.

These chambers should really be called the ledger rooms, he supposes. The Great Assemblage of Dull and Boring Ledger Rooms at that.

Thor smiles, despite himself. If Loki was here with him, his husband would be laughing. Well, in happier times Loki would be laughing, back before baby-making (in the very literal sense, not the awkwardly euphemistic one) and sickness collectively took over their lives.

He forces his mind off his husband and gets back to work.

Reviewing accounts and reports, Thor thinks, might possibly be the most boring pastime in all the nine realms. He is a smart man with a decent head for numbers but, unlike the treasurer himself (an old, wizened clerk who looks as though he might not have left these chambers in all the many centuries since Thor’s birth), he derives no joy from their taming.

He has been doing this audit for years now, and never once has he caught the treasurer in even the smallest error. The man’s work is beyond reproach. “Why is it that we must waste our time with this,” he had asked the Allfather after the last counting season. “The treasurer makes no errors. Never has, never will. The books will be right until the day he dies. Why, then,” he had complained, “must
we babysit him like one would any common child?”

“It is not to catch errors alone, Thor,” Odin had told him, in the mildly annoyed tone of voice that always means the old king has repeated this same story at least one too many times already. “It is to show our commitment to honesty, and to banish the specter of impropriety. What if we left the treasurer to his own devices year after year and then found out he was siphoning off funds to his friends and family? Or, worse yet, to ours?”

It is a paper-based system. *To do any such embezzling, the man would have to actually leave this wing from time to time,* Thor remembers having thought to himself. He was wise enough then to keep his opinion safely quiet, though. No good could possibly come of having shared it.

On this particular day, working on the audit is doubly awful in that it fails to provide even the least hint of distraction. As he reviews the columns of figures, Thor finds he has to keep turning his mind back to the job at hand. He would rather think about Loki, but that leads to worrying about his husband and wondering if everything is okay with both Loki and the baby-to-be. Before long he is tense and a bit frantic and concentrating on the ledger in front of him is next to impossible. He has started his work over more times today than he can count.

Fortunately the old treasurer is so set in his was that he pays Thor very little mind and does not even seem to notice his princely auditor daydreaming.

~

When Odin stops down from the king’s main offices – the rooms where the two of them normally work - and asks him to lunch, Thor verily jumps at the chance. “I thought your stomach would never tire of working,” he complains, only half-jokingly. “I was preparing to waste away and die in here, unfed and bored into oblivion. In fact I was well on my way.”

The king laughs. “Matters of finance have never really been your favorite,” he observers, “have they? I worry that I cannot allow myself to really sleep because you will run Asgard right into the ground. Or, rather, that you will step aside and allow Asgard to run itself under.”

Thor groans. “Of course I would allow no such thing, father.” He grins, then, and inclines his head much the way he has noticed Loki does when feeling a bit smug. “But, then again, I would never dream of taking ownership of anything our treasurer loves so thoroughly.”

Odin grins broadly. “I bet that is your very, very first concern. You have all the makings of a generous and just king.”

“Oh, I most certainly do,” Thor agrees, even though he knows this is all for fun. “And you would do well to remember it.”

“Ah, yes,” Odin pretends to recall. He puts a finger to his own temple. “Of course, it is not as though you ever give me a moment’s time to start forgetting.”

They share a short bit of laughing and eye rolling, after which point Thor finds his father turning somber and quiet. “Is our blue prince feeling any less poorly,” Odin asks him. “Your mother worries, you know.”

Thor stiffens. Frigga ever hides her fears well, at least when it comes to not burdening her children. “How do you mean,” he asks his father. His heart starts to pound, more than a little.

“She fears Loki’s body may not prove up to this task,” Odin explains, “and that whatever happens will be her fault for encouraging the two of you. For not standing up to those with unfair, unrealistic
expectations. Between us we have little personal experience with inter-realm marriage; our own child of course came into being in a more typical manner…and had the luxury of so doing without the support of such powerful and intrusive magic. But don’t mind me. I can see,” he adds, catching a quick look at Thor’s face, “that I have said too much. My queen will be cross with me.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” Thor tells his father. “Mother is sometimes too careful with me.”

“She wants nothing more than for you to be happy,” Odin reminds him. “To that end, she will do anything necessary. Come, let us find ourselves something to eat.”

Thor is no longer sure he is all that hungry.

"Did mother go through this, with me," he asks as they make their way up to the small balcony on which Odin prefers to take his midday meal in good weather. It is a pleasant day, sunny but mild and breezy; the kind of day Thor knows Loki would love were it not for the morning sickness... and what a misnomer THAT is, as his husband is mightily sick all day. They have climbed the whole long, sweeping flight of stairs and crossed the balcony to their waiting table by the time his father answers.

"You were a big baby, hard as that may be to believe," Odin says, lowering himself just a bit stiffly into his chair. "We worried for quite some time over how the delivery would go. And to be fair, your mother was quite ill early on." He shifts to sit a bit more upright. "But that passed fairly quickly - though I imagine my dear queen might well argue otherwise - and the rest of her pregnancy went on to be quite uneventful. Of course,” he clarifies, nodding to the servant who is attempting to unobtrusively shake out their napkins before pouring them each a flagon of light ale, "she and I had our seidr... and that situation was rather less complicated than this one."

Thor sighs. "Has anything like this been attempted before, anywhere?” He feels rather as though he should have taken the time to ask more questions before embarking on this one-way journey. "Surely someone must-..."

Odin holds his hands out, palms up, like a balance. "Plenty an Aes has sired half-Jotun children," he starts, weighing that out in his left hand, "whether by intent or by accident. During periods of peace - and, I am not particularly pleased to admit, far more than the occasional time of war as well - a little Jotnar blood has found its way into nearly every Asgardian family line. But," he goes on, now weighing with his right hand, "as far as I know all of them laid down with naturally-intersex Jotnar or with Jotnar dams. I am not aware of anyone’s having tried something of this particular scope or scale, no."

Of course, were he not royalty, Thor would not be attempting any of this either. He and Loki would simply live out the remainder of their lives peacefully childless. All in all, their conversation is not proving reassuring. "And what if Loki’s life were in danger," he asks his father. "What comes then of this unique little experiment?"

Odin's brow furrows. He studies Thor, not unkindly, with his one good eye. "Rest assured your mother will not let him die."

"And she has that kind of power?"

"In things of this nature, yes," Odin says firmly.

Thor takes a big pull of ale and blots his mouth neatly before continuing. "In the end, whose choice would it be?"
"Yours, of course." his father assures him. "Yours, and Loki's."

"That," Thor says, on the heels of a pained groan, "is precisely what worries me. I know Loki would," he explains when Odin's eyebrows rise, "rather die than live out his years as a failure."

His father takes a swallow of his own ale, wiping his mouth rather less delicately on the back of one hand, and smiles. "Worry not. As I am sure you know all too well, your mother can be incredibly persuasive."

Thor laughs despite himself. "Indeed she can," he agrees. What he has to say next is not funny, though. "But Loki can be at least equally stubborn. Thank you," he turns to tell the servant who has come to lay out their meal: a carving board laden with assorted cured meats and salted cheeses, accompanied by a platter of fruit and a tray piled high with coarse bread and oil. With Loki off- well, food in general, Thor is surprised to find himself missing a bit of fresh, raw fish with his own meals. There is a lovely, spicy relish for the meats, though, and he suspects it will go a long way towards easing his suffering.

His palate's suffering, that is. His mind is still most worried.

Odin makes quick work of a small bunch of grapes. "Give it time, my son. Your mother is doing the right thing. Let us first hear what the experts have to say, and then we will decide how to best proceed. Premature worrying does no one any good."

It is sound advice. Thor wishes he know how to force his mind to accept it. "I know," he says, around a mouthful of crunchy, well-oiled bread. "I just- I love him. I cannot bear the thought of having something like this part us."

"If only," Odin teases gently, "the thought could not bear you. Life would be much easier."

Thor shrugs. It is no lie.

~

Once the remaining hours of his long, boring workday at last lie behind him, Thor takes a quick, light supper on his way past the kitchens and retreats up to his - to their - chambers to read. It is not yet late; the light is still good. He could go to the training grounds and spar, were he so inclined. Thor knows he is not in the mood for the ring, though; he would far rather be here when word comes that his husband and his mother have returned. Safe and sound, the both of them… Norns willing.

Sadly, he finds it nearly as hard to concentrate on pleasure reading as focusing on bookkeeping had been. The minutes crawl by. It is not until dusk finally starts to settle, the sky turning deep blue and the last shadows stretching the full width of the room, that Thor finally hears the sharp crack of the Bifrost. He is out of his chair and out onto the balcony with nearly the speed of his own hammer.

From this height, in the failing light, he cannot see much. Still, it is enough: Loki is among the three who have returned, and Thor is much relieved to note that his husband walks nearly unassisted. Frigga has offered Loki her arm, but they are all chattering together and her gesture could be as much one of friendship as it is an offering of aid.

~

His initial impression proves correct. The queen has indeed brought Loki back to him - nearly a full day after their small party had originally departed Asgard, but it has clearly been time well spent – noticeably improved. His husband is nearly smiling when Thor meets the group down by the main doors.
Loki clutches in both hands a soft little pouch, its fabric dyed the faded colors of winter gardens. “What is this” Thor asks him curiously, trying to take it.

“Magic,” his husband says reverently, quickly snatching the thing away. “They tell me that, with it, I may actually sleep again.” He turns to hug Frigga and Eir. “Thank you both. Now,” he demands, with so much more personality than he has had in days that Thor wants to cheer, “let us go upstairs and put it to the test.”

~

Thor has no idea what – beyond actual enchantment, if that part is even true – might be contained within the small bag Loki has brought back from Jotunheim, but he loves the little pouch with his whole heart just the same. The thing works a far greater degree of magic than the rest of them taken in aggregate. As long as it is near to hand, where Loki can hold it up and breathe its (surprisingly mild; to Thor, who expected powerful medicine and the stench to go with it, the thing has next to no smell at all) scent, things are so, so much better. His husband is still wan and a bit pale, but Loki keeps down sips of water for the first time in weeks.

After a few minutes he is even up to small swallows of watered juice, and after that to the ginger candies and dry crackers expecting Aesir women favor. While he must still move slowly from supine to sitting, and the same from the side of the bed to standing, the beautiful little sack puts a complete end to rushing unsteadily to the bath and to heaving into a basin when even that task proves too challenging.

They do not go right to sleep. After a few crackers and a full glass of juice carefully downed one tiny sip after another, Loki has a little more energy again. The two of them enjoy a surprisingly pleasant evening spent relaxing near-silently in one another's company, Loki reading and Thor just watching his husband happily.

At bedtime they work together; Thor helps Loki rig up a means by which to keep the small bag close to his face overnight. It works, too, and they manage an uninterrupted night's sleep for what may be the first time since Loki first found himself with child.

It is nothing short of glorious. In the morning they both feel so much better.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

The big day has finally arrived. This part of the story is really Loki's, but Thor does his best to tell it.

*Slightly more than half of this was written on a bouncing train by a motion-sick writer - that would be me - so the editing is probably not top-notch. Please let me know if you see any glaring errors, thanks!*

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Thor
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With his husband much improved and his own excuse for lazing about their rooms consequently gone, Thor reluctantly returns to his office work. All the many pressing duties to which he normally attends – which of course have proven amply capable of waiting in his absence – have once more turned urgent upon his first day back. All in all, it means he is faced with a mountain of paperwork large and dense enough to stop a charging bull.

_How did you ever manage before I came of age, father_, he wonders. It is ridiculous, the amount of work running a kingdom entails. Not only ridiculous but utterly insane, and then some. Thor sighs. All the time he has spent recently nursing Loki back to a reasonable facsimile of _the bloom of health_ has left him with even less tolerance towards administrivia than he harbors normally.

Which is to say, none whatsoever. His patience is completely shot, and then some… and he has no interest in working to fix it. _A fire_, he thinks to himself, annoyed. _A fire is just what all this paperwork needs._

It is out of the question, obviously, but still pleasant enough to contemplate just the same.

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"How is our young pregnant prince," Odin asks a week or so later as they walk through their administrative quarters after yet another pointless council meeting. "Your mother tells me that at last he makes fair headway."

Thor smiles. To hear his husband tell of it, things are indeed much better. Loki is finally able to leave their rooms again and join Frigga in her gardens. Even someone with Thor’s comparative lack of seidr - his own magic is elemental and raw, far removed from his husband’s careful, studied casting - can feel the strength of the deep, ancient powers gathered there. It is the perfect place for Loki to rest and truly relax, all the while building his reserves and strength back up as he does so.

That, and it provides a splendid and beautiful change of scenery. After week upon week spent in bed, the fresh air and lovely flowers - and the greenery that frames and supports them - have done nothing but good for his husband’s flagging spirit and (justifiably) wretched mood. For his own part,
Thor cannot imagine so long spent abed. Loki has done much better than expected, really.

"It is such a relief," Thor tells his father happily, all the dragging misery of their combined ruling duties long since forgotten. "I had been so very worried. But he is himself again," he continues as the king nods. "I am beginning to feel quite a bit more confident that we will survive this. All of it."

Odin sighs. "I can share this with you now," his father tells him, "though I would prefer you kept it in confidence. Your mother was worried sick herself, early on, and you know as well as I do how rarely that happens."

Thor does know. He smiles. Smiling for real is something he only recently has regained the rare luxury of doing. "It is no secret, father," he points out. "Not, at least, one kept from me. Even with Loki himself she did not hide her concerns completely. But let us trust we are beyond that now."

Odin does not deign to answer. Instead the king studies Thor’s face for close to a minute, so long that he cannot help but writhe a little under his father's through inspection. "What is it," he finally cannot hold back from asking. "What is wrong? Have I done something to displease you?"

"What? No," the king exclaims. "I was just thinking about how swiftly and thoroughly the idea of fatherhood seems to be growing on you."

_Ah, that._ Thor shrugs. He needs to choose his words carefully, lest his father jump to the wrong conclusion. "Right now," he starts, aiming for levity, "we just want the babe out, where it will wreak less havoc."

His father snorts. "You think that, do you? Less havoc? A child of yours? I expect you will all too soon find out that life does not work that way."

Right now Thor cannot bring himself to care. He just wants Loki to be- not so much _well_ again, as his husband has indeed been feeling much better. Comfortable, then.

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"You are starting to show quite magnificently," he tells Loki over dinner. "No one with eyes will miss your condition now."

The swell of his husband's belly can no longer be completely disguised under their usual clothing, and Loki has taken to wearing a loose, flowing robe over the usual loincloth. Frigga has seen to it that his husband has a lovely robe collection; this one, its background of soft green waves colorfully bedecked with a wide variety of assorted birds and fish, is one of Loki's favorites. Thor likes it as well, though he would not dream of admitting why; like this pregnancy itself, the fine cloth and airy, draped cut work in tandem to soften his husband's sharp edges.

Of course, Thor knows, were he but so foolish as to point that out to Loki... he would likely find out his husband has not in truth been softened at all. Still, he can and does enjoy the view quietly for himself.

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A scant week later Loki is finally improved enough to return at long last to the training ground. He does not spar - his coordination is off and the risk is clearly too high, and Thor is just thankful that Loki has the sense to concede on his own without any unpleasantness between them - but is able to tolerate basic strength and fitness drills with increasing ease. It comes as a relief to both of them, as Loki has been feeling (unjustifiably, as far as Thor can see, but no amount of words would convince him so) fat and miserable after so many weeks of lying about followed by an abrupt and zealous
return to eating. Also, even (perhaps especially) in his current state Loki training is a thing of considerable beauty. Thor has lost several hours (this week alone) to simply watching, under guise of making sure Loki is safe and sound.

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With their child’s gestation about three quarters of the way along, Loki is unmistakably pregnant. His body as a whole is still svelte and lean, but there is an endearing new softness in his face and his belly is round and firm like a summer melon. Thor loves it, and misses no opportunity to tell Loki so.

Unfortunately, Thor also cannot help but notice the varying reactions of his- his father's people.

Not a few still look at his husband with a mixture of fear and disgust, which (the two of them have both accepted, and) he expects cannot be helped. Deep-seated prejudices are sometimes not eradicated in the whole of a lifetime, and all he and Loki can really do is strive to set a good and positive example in hopes that the children and grandchildren of these people will look upon the Jotnar differently. And even just doing such a small thing as that is not easy - there are plenty of times he would love nothing more than to crack a few Aesir heads together, and Thor harbors little doubt Loki often feels the same - but, as his husband is so very fond of saying, they do what they must.

Loki’s pregnancy, though, is drawing a new kind of attention from a different group of people. These are the ones Thor almost likes (no, truthfully, does like) even less; the people who now look at his swelling husband the way they might any off-world concubine or exotic bride: with badly-concealed hunger and not nearly enough pity. Not that Loki wants (or needs) anyone's pity; far from it. But Thor knows his husband’s life has its many challenges, and he hates the way people now look at Loki like his husband is a prize. Chattel. Something to be consumed or used. Not a person, but a collection of things that serve a purpose.

If he is being honest with himself, Thor knows, there was a time in his own past where he might have felt the entire race of frost giants did indeed have a purpose… and that their purpose was to provide a landing point for the business end of his war hammer. It was a time when he saw the Jotnar as things himself, rather than as people, and it was not his proudest moment. In fact, it shames him to admit – even to himself - that he once thought that way, but he has done his best to make up for it and to put that sort of idiotic reasoning (all of it, every last bit) behind him. Perhaps that more than anything leaves him intolerant of the same flawed thinking in others; he knows it firsthand to be the willful ignorance it is.

Whatever the cause, Thor despises it and wishes he had the power to stop it. Now, that is, not in the achingly slow way rivers reshape the rock that forms their beds.

Because Loki is - all told - his equal. His husband, his lover, soon to be the one birthing their child. No a concubine, not a slave, not an animal.

Not a whore and not a monster.

Definitely not a thing.

No, his husband is a person and the two of them are- shopping.

As he and Loki make their way through the market stalls - they do not want for food, ever, or anything else... but Loki has developed a love of poking through the market hunting for trinkets and after all his husband has endured during the past months Thor usually welcomes nothing more than the opportunity to indulge it - Thor glares at the gawping commoners and at the sly, knowing nobles.
Loki is wearing a jeweled silk loincloth under a delicate, gauzy robe that skims all but the plump blue mound of growing belly. His husband is beautiful like this, impossible to ignore, and Thor quickly finds he has never liked the sense of being Asgardian property less.

"What troubles you," Loki says, forehead furrowed and a cool hand wrapping Thor’s much warmer wrist after he has inadvertently ignored his husband's observations about this or that small glittering object one time too many. "Have I finally outlasted your patience?"

Thor smiles. He turns Loki’s fingers over and ducks to nuzzle his husband’s palm. "No, dearest," he assures Loki. "You are infinitely amusing. It is the rest of Asgard that tries my patience sorely."

Loki shakes his head. He looks Thor full in the face for some half a minute and then rolls his eyes. "We have been through this, you and I. We are - I am - the stuff, the belongings of this realm. Whatever you may wish, that is never going to go away."

"I know, I know," Thor says. “Believe me, I know.” It has been true all his long life, although never before has it irked him so badly. He sighs. "That does not mean I have to like it. Now, what were you saying about that," he asks, pointing to a tiny gold-embellished green crystal bottle. "We can get it, if you fancy."

“It would be lonely, do you not think,” Loki points out. He hefts it, and an equally small silver-bedecked red one. “We shall get two.”

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"The time draws near," Frigga tells Thor when he mentions that Loki seems to be nesting. His husband has been moving things around in their rooms for days now, and just this morning Thor had caught Loki - with the help of three of the servants - quadrupling the (already sizable) number of pillows crowding their bed. "He will deliver in a week, maybe less. You would do well to follow his example, as you will want to be ready."

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His mother is of course right. Three days later, Loki awakens far earlier than normal. Thor wakes before it is even fully light out to find his husband pacing uncomfortably, belly cupped in one hand and back supported with the other. "Are you unwell," Thor hurries to ask. "Do you need anything?"

Loki stops. His face is drawn. "I- I think it is happening."

"It- oh!" Thor sits bolt upright, sending pillows flying everywhere. "I should summon mother. Come sit," he insists, patting the bed.

His husband backs away. "No," Loki says. "I do not feel I should sit. In fact, I must keep moving."

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"We need to send for the Jotun master healer," Frigga says briskly. "And we need to move you to the birthing suite, Loki. I know that is not what you want," she concedes as Loki starts to protest, "but Eir will demand that she see you there and not here among your impressive collection of pillows. Please humor me.” She follows Loki about the room as he paces. “And keep in mind that this is new to all of us; we must take every precaution. The last thing any of us wants is for something to happen to you, or to the baby."

"Mother," Thor chastises, "do not order him-."
Loki cuts Thor off before he can finish his defense. "Leave it. She is right," his husband admits. "This is the future of our realms' collective peace I am carrying." He pats his stomach gently. "We do need to do what will be best and safest, even if I personally hate every bit of- ahhh!" Loki doubles over, gasping.

Thor is at his husband's side in two giant steps, nearly elbowing Frigga out of the way in the process. "Mother, we need Eir," he demands. "And hurry."

"Oh, Thor," she says, and as he turns to her Thor cannot believe she is smiling. "It is never easy work, giving birth to a baby. Believe it or not, this part is normal, my sheltered son. Go, go ask your friend Volstagg if you do not trust me. Everything will be fine." She does step to the door and send one of her maids for a healer, just the same, and Thor is not sure even Volstagg could make him believe her.

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"I hate you. Were it but in my power I would lay a curse down upon you, and all of Asgard with you," Loki roars, "for doing this to me." His fingers dig into Thor's forearm sharply, hard enough that Thor feels a few small trickles of blood.

Frigga has long since told them both that, in the heat of delivery, Loki may say things - hurtful, awful things - he does not truly mean. Still, the heat of his conviction shocks Thor.

It takes considerable self-restraint (and an elbow in the side from his mother) to keep his own opinions to himself, but Thor does ultimately manage. "I am sorry to have put you through this," he assures his husband contritely as Loki pants and grimaces. That much he is, too, never more than right this very moment… even when his apology does nothing more than unleash a fresh torrent of wrath and outrage.

All told, it is almost a relief – at least briefly - when Loki stops bothering to form sentences at all.

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"I realize you are in pain, Prince Loki, but you must calm yourself and listen to me," Eir demands of him. "The sorcerers who have supported you until now - Queen Frigga, here," she goes on, with a tip of the head in Frigga's direction, "and all the others, for these last few months - will continue to do until the baby is born. Even so, you must keep up at least the smallest hint of your own sorcery. It is crucial that you do so. Can you, for me? For the baby?"

Loki grits his teeth. His face is dripping sweat and flushed purple, clumps of black hair worked loose from his braid and sticking to his cheeks. From the looks of his mutinous expression, anything is possible. They teeter together on the brink of failure. Thor sucks in a quick breath and holds it.

And holds it.

And holds it some more, until he starts to see spots.

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After what feels like in insufferably long time Loki nods. Then he squeezes his eyes tight shut and screams.

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Thor is not sure he has ever felt quite as useless as he does right now. Frigga had warned him a few
days ago not to let Loki hold his hand during the delivery, lest his husband crush his fingers. He had laughed at the time and reminded her he was a mighty warrior; as such, he was certainly up to whatever might be asked of him. Today, though, as he turns his arm this way and that to inspect the bluish bruises Loki's fingers have left behind, he is embarrassed to admit that she might have had a point after all. Just in case, every time his husband claws blindly for him Thor gently redirects Loki's hands to the metal framework that spans the bed.

"Is there nothing you can do for the pain," he asks Eir (yet again) when she comes over to check Loki's pulse and breathing. His husband is no coward when it comes to discomfort, far from it. Thus, seeing Loki in agony like this is both awful and a bit frightening.

"Like your mother told Prince Loki earlier, we have great and specific need of his seidr," Eir says, shaking her head. "Without it the other sorcerers lose their anchor points and his body could revert abruptly to its normal form."

"And," Thor prompts when she does not continue.

"The consequences for both Loki and the baby could be quite dire," Eir says, too quietly for the others to hear. "But worry not. Worry is simply wasted energy. Concentrate instead on helping ensure nothing of the sort happens."


"Keep him engaged," Eir says. "Use whatever means you must. He needs to stay with us, that is all. Now, if I may, I really should get back to my duties."

"Of course," he tells her, stepping back up to Loki's bed to let her slip behind him. "Dearest? Loki? Go on, now," he suggests, as his husband’s tear-streaked face contorts into an angry mask, "and tell me once again just how very much you hate me."

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Some ten hours later, even Thor is fading well more than a little. They've been at this a long time, having settled about two hours ago into a routine of pushing interspersed with panting and grousing about how uncomfortable the whole process is - and Thor is starting to idly wonder if he might actually be able to fall asleep on his feet without anyone noticing.

Loki no longer requires much in the way of prompting, as he clearly wants very much to push nearly constantly and (even though no one has made any attempt to stop him) is far too busy telling everyone in earshot - which, given his volume, could be nigh on half the city - to be at any risk of slipping away from them.

Thor weaves a little. He pinches himself to keep from dozing.

"If you can find it in yourself to stop kicking us for a minute," Eir tells Loki as she and the Jotun master healer struggle to better position one of the busy blue feet in question, "I will check to see where the baby's head is."

"You presume the baby has a head at all," Loki snarls. "For all we know - ahhh!! - the thing could have tentacles."

Thor smiles at Eir. "He - or she - will not have tentacles, Loki," he chides. "I am sure of it."

Eir smiles in return. "I must side with Prince Thor on this one," she tells Loki. "For if the baby had tentacles, it would have made its way out hours ago."
They are both right, too. A few minutes later when the baby finally crowns, its so doing accompanied by noises Thor had no idea his husband could even make, everyone present agrees it has a perfectly normal-looking oval, black-haired top to its little head.

Suddenly Thor finds he is not the least bit sleepy anymore.

"If I- cannot- push again soon- I swear- I shall kill- you all," Loki pants.

From across the bed Frigga laughs. Thor cannot; he is too nervous. "Lucky for us, then," Eir says, "you can. But carefully," she stresses, "and only when I tell you... which I have not!" She spends a few moments checking the baby's head and Loki's stretched, swollen flesh. The Jotun healer points here and there; the two of them converse quietly in a language Thor is not able to translate. "Loki, can you stop when I ask you to?"

"I am stopped now, am I not," Loki grits out.

"Then go ahead and push again," she suggests.

He does. Fortunately for everyone, she sees no need to stop him.

Three pushes later, Thor and Loki have what even Thor can see is a son.

“Oh, how lovely,” Frigga says, voice soft and reverent.

_They have a son._ A pink-faced, wrinkly, slimy, squalling son. Thor does his best to inspect from over their shoulders as Frigga and Eir clean and see to the baby; it – he - has ten fingers and ten toes and gives no sign of being intersex. Or blue.

Thor is not sure if he is relieved or disappointed. A bit of both, maybe.

It all takes maybe two minutes, but even that is too long. Loki struggles up onto his elbows. “Is everything okay,” he asks loudly as the women fuss over the baby. “Is my child okay?”

The Jotun master healer is at his side in an instant, before Loki can ask a third time. “Shh,” she says. “Your son is fine. He is perfect. Can you not hear his cries?”


Thor hurries back to his husband’s bedside. He leans over the bed to give Loki a gentle kiss on the sweaty, frown-wrinkled forehead. “It is true,” he assures. “We have a perfect, lovely son.”

“And is he-…”

He does not wait to hear his husband’s question. “He looks Aes, at least now. He has your hair. He is as male as- well, you, or I. As you in your typical form, I mean,” he clarifies quickly. “He is beautiful.” His own voice cracks. “You will meet him in a moment, when mother has him cleaned up a little.”

Right on cue Frigga places the baby – cleaner and loosely wrapped in a soft, warm cloth – in Loki’s waiting arms. “Be careful with your temperature,” she warns. “We do not yet know how the baby will react to cold. For now we must keep him warm, until he is able to show us otherwise.”

Loki’s flesh warms under Thor’s hand, until he cannot tell their skin apart. His husband holds their son close, wrapped in blue arms and supported gently. “See,” Thor says. “Perfect.” He kisses his
husband again, on the lips this time. “You did it, my love. You did it.”

The baby grumbles, and then outright howls. He mouths frantically at Loki’s hands and collarbone. Even to Thor, whose prior experience with small children is largely limited to teasing Volstagg over the size of his ever-growing brood, their son is clearly hungry. Despite how they’ve rehearsed this – over and over, in the months of Loki’s pregnancy, because evidently they are both slow learners when it comes to childcare – Thor feels a quick burst of panic. “Mother,” he exclaims. “We cannot feed the baby.”

She smiles. “Worry not,” she advises. “The wet nurse you and Loki approved, the one you met a fortnight ago, is on her way now.” She leans past Thor to smooth the baby’s flyaway hair. “She should be joining us here any minute.”

“I hope so! Our son is strong,” Loki says as the baby suckles one of his fingers. “If she does not arrive soon I think he may gnaw my finger off instead.”

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“I am so proud of you,” Frigga tells Loki half an hour after the delivery, as the baby nurses enthusiastically at the breast of one of her maids and the healers hover around him. “You did it.”

He smiles. Thor is a little frightened by how worn he looks. “I had to,” Loki says. “I only hope everything works out for the best, and our two old kings think it was worth it.”


Frigga and Eir trade looks. “His duty as a dam is ended.” Eir tells Thor. “We will work with him to end the transformation and set him back to rights. It is best if you are not here when it happens.”

Loki looks surprised to find himself crying. Thor remembers how much as his husband had initially hated that transformed body, and how eagerly Loki had awaited becoming fully (and solely) male again. Still, it must come as a shock now, regardless of whether or not he is excited to have it all behind him and to be (nothing but) a man again. An Aesir man, a Jotun man.

As Thor smoothes his hair back Loki swallows, hard. “Is this going to be as difficult as was my initial transition,” he asks a little anxiously, “because I do not think I can cope with that just now. I need to be able to spend time with my son.”

Frigga takes his hands in hers. “You will want to sleep through the process itself,” she admits, “but it will be far quicker and also far less terrible. And while you recover, Thor and I will look after the baby. It should only be a day at most,” she quickly clarifies when he protests. “The nursemaid will be sure your son is fed, and your husband and I will make sure he is well-loved. The sooner the better, Loki,” she reminds him. “Do not be afraid. This is nothing compared to what you have thus far endured.”

As his husband nods, expression by turns a bit sad and quietly resigned, Frigga turns to Thor. “You should leave now,” she tells him. “Go. Spend some time with your father; let him know all is well,” she suggests when Thor is slow to start moving. "He will be eagerly awaiting news of our first grandchild."

Thor hesitates, fingers of one hand lingering lightly on the point of his husband’s oddly warm, sweat-soaked shoulder. He is not used to Loki’s skin feeling anything but cool. He wonders privately if the baby will like the cold better. "But I should be here with Loki," he protests, "while you do whatever it is you must-."
"Go ahead, Thor," Loki says quietly. Thor winces; his husband's voice is raspy and hoarse from all the earlier screaming. "See to the king. I do not think this will be something to share with onlookers, no matter whom they might be."

"But what if-," Thor starts to protest.

Frigga lays a hand on his arm. "Thor, my dear, I was not kidding. Sooner really is better. Go. I promise I will send for you if you are needed, for any reason. When our Loki here awakens, he will be nearly as good as new."

Thor frowns. He shifts to grip his husband's shoulder a little more firmly. "Nearly?"

"Alas," Frigga tells them both, smiling. "There is no better cure for stretched-out skin than time. Time, and some of Eir's lovely unguents."

Loki turns to look up at him. "She means I am going to be a saggy old man when you and I are reunited," he grumbles. "I will bag everywhere."

"Oh, hardly," Frigga says. "Thor, if you will excuse us, we do need to get started. Drink up," she tells Loki as one of the healers proffers a cup of reddish liquid. "This will help you rest."

Thor watches as Loki accepts the cup and takes a tentative sip. His husband smiles. "Go ahead, love," Loki says. "It is over. We will be okay, and I will see you soon."

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"And?" Odin studies Thor's face, his one eye sharp. "All is well?"

Thor nods. "Everyone is busy reversing the seidr," he says. "I have been banished to wait this part out with you."

Odin laughs. "I am honored to serve as a key component of your punishment, then," he teases as Thor hastens to explain how that- that was not what he meant at all. "Worry not. Come, tell me: have I a grandson or a granddaughter, or a bit of both for that matter?"

Thor clears his throat. He feels as though he might cry, after everything that has happened in the past day. "Our child is a little boy, father," he explains. "I looks Aesir, except that his hair is as black as Loki's. It is too soon to see which of his parents he most favors. But if the loudness of his cries serves as any indication, he is hale."

"Well, he is your son," his father reminds him. "And if my memory serves, given the right incentive your beloved has quite the voice as well."

Thor smiles. That is certainly true. A baby of their making can hardly be expected to remain quiet. "He is perfect. I- I feel bad for Loki that he does not look more Jotun, though."

Odin nods. "Given the life that lies ahead of him, though, I think it will be easiest for the boy this way."

It is true. They all know it, his husband perhaps best of all. Still... "I should have liked him to be pale blue," he says, a bit wistfully. "I do not want Loki to feel that he had no part in making him."

At that, Odin laughs aloud; a big, deep belly laugh that echoes in the small chamber. "After these last several months, I hardly think that needs to take up residence in the mighty halls of your worries, my son." When Thor only smiles faintly in return the king sobers. "And Loki? He is well?"
"He is strong," Thor says a bit ruefully, showing Odin his bruised arm. "But very tired. Even so, they tell me he will be fine. And I am looking forward," he adds, feeling selfish, "to having him well and capable again. Of riding," he stresses as Odin smirks, "and fishing, and swimming, and generally being himself. Do not presume I meant otherwise."

Odin sighs. "Forgive an old man for teasing," he says. "You are as tense as a bowstring. I only seek to cheer you."

"I fear that I will not relax until I see Loki again and confirm with my own senses that he is on his way to recovery," Thor admits. "It is not that I do not trust mother, or Eir, or the Jotnar healer. I- it is just- good as they are, they have never done this before. There is no way they can be certain; this, there is no way I can be certain. I just want to be with him. With him, and with our son."

His father rests a weighty hand on his shoulder. "I can only imagine," the king admits. "But you can see your boy again as soon as he has eaten. And, if you are willing, I shall meet him."

Thor leans gratefully into Odin's touch. "Of course," he tells his father. "Of course you shall meet him." He takes a deep breath. "But it is only fair that we wait for Loki to wake before making introductions."

He braces himself, but his father only pulls him closer. "Of course," Odin agrees. "What was I thinking? Were our places reversed, mine and Loki's, I would feel very much the same. Come, let us trespass upon your mother's oh-so-very-sacred planning instead."

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Custom dictates, they have both been told, that the baby be shown before all of Asgard on its nameday. There will be a huge celebration, which they are (thankfully; Thor loves a good party as well as the next Aes, but he cannot imagine putting Loki through a feast just now) not expected to attend; at its inception, he and Loki and the newly-named baby - whose name they have privately agreed will be Mothi, although that is a close-kept secret to which only the two of them (and the baby, if he has been listening in utero to their endless negotiations) are privileged - must appear on the balcony high above the festival grounds. "That is it," Loki had asked when Frigga had first explained it. "We just have to stand there and look pretty?"

"Well, you must smile and nod as well," the queen had teased his husband gently. "But I am confident you can uphold your royal duties. It is this one," she had gone on, poking Thor with her elbow, "that worries me."

Loki had smiled broadly, teeth gleaming against purple lips. "Fear not, my queen," his husband had told her. "While I am not sure I can make him pretty, he cleans up well enough for distance viewing. And I guarantee you I shall keep him in line."

Now that the baby has arrived there is much to be done in final preparation; the palace staff must be ready to feed the realm in its entirety. The new parents' own role in preparing is largely done, though. Thor will wear his ceremonial armor; Loki has been fitted for loose robes. "It will not be necessary, no," Frigga had explained when they had questioned her. "But I think it wise not to overemphasize the oddness of the situation... nor the unnatural quickness of the prince's recovery. Many among our people have borne babes or watched their mothers, sisters, or wives do the same; they know a new mother does not simply snap her fingers and spring back to health. Trust me," she had added at Thor's petulant frown. "Loki has endured a great deal - all of this, and more to come - to prove his role in your child's parentage. We must not undue all his hard work through vanity or poor planning."
"But mother," Thor had started, only to feel his husband’s cool palm cover his mouth.

"Oh, hush, Thor," Loki had demanded. "It is not like you will be donning a grotesque, baggy dress for the occasion."

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Now, Thor smiles at his father. "Much as it pains me to admit this," he says, "we should for once avoid meddling with her plans." He is not sure who he fears most, his mother or his husband.

"Look at you," Odin says, beaming. "You are both a good son and a good father already."

*I am aiming to be a good husband,* Thor thinks instead. He keeps that to himself, though, and simply nods his thanks.

"Prince Thor? Oh, excuse me, Allfather," the maid says, dropping to the floor.

"Rise, child," Odin tells her. "We are all one on this special day. Go on. There is no need to stand on ceremony. What is your message?"

"The new prince has finished his first meal," she tells Thor. "I have been told to ask you if you would like to hold him."

Thor shoots a quick look at his father, who smiles. "Go," Odin insists. "Get to know your little boy. You and I will catch up later."

~

Thor listens impatiently as the healer tells him how to properly heft his infant son. Eir has made both him and Loki practice with dolls for weeks now. "I will not leave the fate of two realms unprotected in the clumsy hands of its menfolk," she had explained the first time when they had groused about being bossed around and made to play with dollies. Loki had nicknamed the faux baby a Jotun term for *delicate flower* that Thor had never quite mastered but, that aside, they had each ultimately reached the point where they could cradle, burp, and transfer it to Eir's satisfaction. "You can thank me later," she advises them, "when your child makes it through its first year unscathed. And even if I have not earned your gratitude, I assure you your mother appreciates me."

He bites his tongue. The healer is only trying to help. He has no grounds for being unpleasant.

The baby is warm and soft. He wraps tiny fingers around Thor's pinky and then promptly drops off to sleep. His little lips, redder even than Thor's, open into a small *O*. "He is so peaceful," Thor whispers. "I had been told babies wail nonstop and steal every minute of rest from their parents."

"Many do," the healer agrees, nodding, "and yours may yet be numbered among them. I would not be so quick to count my blessings, were I you."

Thor laughs as quietly as he can, to avoid startling his sleeping son. "And how is my husband?"

"The master healers have finished with Prince Loki," she tells him. Thor can feel his heart start to pound. "He did well. All things considered it was over with much more quickly than what most who deliver infants must endure. Now, please make yourself comfortable here; when the prince has slept off more of his draught, they will send for you. It should not be more than a few hours."

Thor is in no mood for further waiting, not after the last day. "Why can I not go to him now," he presses.
“You must not,” the healer warns. “Eir says he senses your presence,” she explains. “She wants him to rest now, and heal, not try to wake and come to you.”

Thor has to admit it makes sense, even as much as he does not like it. And he certainly does not want to impede his husband’s recovery. “Come with me, my little one,” he whispers to his sleeping son. “If you are very, very good, I might be persuaded to tell you a story.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Loki gets it done.

This has been edited on the train back home from Gotham, without a mouse, after I stayed up until 2:00 AM and would rather be sleeping. So, sorry for the mistakes that have doubtless crept in!

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Loki

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He is an ice beast: huge, bulky, slow-moving. There is simply no way to sugarcoat it. Now that Loki is finally able to keep food down again, he swears he must have eaten his weight in sharp cheeses alone… and that just over the course of the last day! He is torn between intense relief – he can eat again; he feels good and is no longer scraping along on sheer will to live alone – and equally powerful disgust. It really should not be possible for one person to eat this much food. It should not be possible to want to.

And yet no cake nor fruit nor fish nor bread has passed him by this week. Everything within reach of his arms – everything too slow to outrun him (which, at this point, is a much shorter list than it might once have been; still, it is plenty) has gone into Loki’s gaping maw. And stayed there.

~

He is rather pleased, consequently, when Eir finally clears him to return to the training grounds. He is not to engage in combat – not only is he far less steady on his feet than he ought to be, his center of gravity has shifted considerably and with it has gone the better portion of his balance – and is absolutely not to make use of even the smallest bits of his seidr, but she is both encouraging and supportive of anything (else) that will help restore his core strength and stamina.

Perhaps even better, the look on Thor’s face when he arrives ringside - dressed only in a loincloth and soft boots - brightens Loki’s day considerably.

~

Less pleasing by far is the immediately-evident fact that what now passes for aim when it comes to his throwing knives is nothing short of pitiful. It is fortunate that no danger is afoot, as it is painfully clear (he will not be outrunning anyone or anything any time soon, and) the most he can do with a thrown blade right now is amuse his assailant. “Perhaps mine enemy would laugh himself to death,” he tells Thor after missing the target entirely for the umpteenth time.

To add insult to injury he can neither readily stoop (forget bending from the waist, or even the hips; his waist has long since gone the way of every extinct creature known to the nine realms, which is to
say it has died and will never again appear before man nor beast again) to retrieve his daggers nor use his seidr to summon them. No, he is reduced to squatting awkwardly and then having to claw his way back up to standing by clutching and grabbing at the target to steady himself.

And as if that on its own is not humiliating enough, Thor quickly develops a veritable sixth sense for the whole thing as well. Every time Loki has nearly managed to straighten back up and is finally clinging like a lost child to the target’s chest or shoulders, his husband appears out of nowhere to hover at his elbow.

“You need but call me next time,” Thor chides, the fourth time he has come over this session alone, “and I will put down my armaments and hasten to collect your wayward knives for you. Do not strain yourself this way, love!”

“I am here to regain my long-lost fitness,” Loki hisses. “How might I do that, pray tell, if I let you do every last bit of actual work for me?” He rolls his eyes. “And how do you even know? Maybe I am missing on purpose, just to be sure I work my legs properly.”

Thor mock-pouts. “Maybe you are overthrowing the target on purpose because you have missed me. You simply want to spend more time in my company.”

Loki rolls his eyes. “Or perchance it is a plot, in preparation for which I am working to convince you I am harmless. One of these times I might stab you.”

“I am terrified,” Thor says, looking anything but. “My life is in your hands, husband.”

“And they call me the overdramatic one,” Loki kids. “The good citizens of Asgard have clearly never seen one of your finer performances.”

Thor grins broadly. “Indeed, for I save the best for you.” He leans against the target, solid and golden and streaked with dust from the ring. “Seriously, it is a pleasure to see you well enough to be out here again. I do not think badly of you, or consider you helpless. I cannot resist any excuse, however flimsy it might be, to come speak with you.”

Loki cannot really hold lasting fault, not over that sort of flattery. “I suppose I shall have to overlook your behavior, then, given the relatively severity of your difficulties,” he says. “But do not make a regular thing of it, or I fear I shall have to hurt you after all.”

“You are still not scaring me, dearest,” Thor says, smiling. But he does finally turn and make his way back to his sparring partner.

~

The market bustles around them. Loki can sense that Thor is wary; consequently, he feels relatively comfortable relaxing in turn.

While crowds never truly thrill him – although the Jotnar do gather in much the same manner, if perhaps less frequently, Loki’s small stature invariably meant public events posed a bit of a threat to his safety; his fear is a learned reflex of long standing, and not one he can shake free of easily – he does love this place. After the first few uncomfortable moments, he is able to once again acclimate to the close press of bodies and to focus instead on the endlessly fascinating bounty that surrounds him.

A Jotun market is a solely practical thing, all slabs of fresh-caught fish and serviceable clothing. Even in the royal palace, off-realm trinkets are so rare as to be almost unheard-of. Indeed, there are few ornaments of any nature. A life of cold and hardship has effectively robbed the Jotun citizenry of any passion for art they once held; a people struggling to stay alive through the realm’s short summers.
and harsh winters is in no position to waste energy – let alone other valuable resources – on anything beyond mere survival.

Here in Asgard, the proverbial Realm Eternal, no such constraints apply. This particular market just beyond the palace walls – while Loki knows there are others further afield, he had not really been given the opportunity to explore the baser portions of his surroundings; there is no way his husband and in-laws would even consider allowing him out into the city proper now, either, not in his present state… these days he considers himself fortunate to be outside the golden spires at all – is full to bursting with everything from art and craft, jewelry and lush, beautiful fabrics and spices and potions to most every conceivable sort of handily portable weapon.

Given his role as an ambassador of peace, Loki does his best to focus on something other than the weaponry.

Even so he would spend the entire day here if only his husband would let him. He makes his way slowly from stall to booth to table, trailing his fingers idly across draped silks and stopping to sniff potent seasonings.

When he cannot quite make himself set down a lovely red glass light-catcher, Thor promptly lays down two gold coins.

The merchant does not test them with her teeth while Thor is looking. When Loki twists back for a last look and catches her at it, though, she hurriedly pretends she’s just scratching her face. He grins at her with teeth bared, sharp and nasty.

She shapes a quick ward against evil and turns away.

Perhaps it should not be funny. Loki laughs anyway. When Thor asks him why, he smiles again (sweetly, this time) and simply says nothing. He cannot fault an old woman for being afraid. In fact, he rather enjoys it.

~

As they continue to make their way through the market, Loki cannot help but notice his husband’s attention – not wandering, exactly, but refocusing. Where before Thor had been cheerful and attentive, his husband’s mood turns increasingly short-tempered and restless. Loki does his best to tune it out, in much the same way he turns a blind eye to the endless throngs of fellow shoppers.

It does not work, thought, not well and not for long either. Loki has evidently become too attuned to Thor’s (considerable) energy. He sets down the necklace he’s been admiring and sighs loudly. "What troubles you," he asks, laying a hand over top of his husband’s wrist and letting his fingers curl around and in. Thor’s pulse beats fast and strong. Loki leans against his husband’s warm skin. "Have I finally outlasted your patience?"

Thor gently pries Loki’s fingers free and dips his head to plant a bristly kiss on Loki’s palm. "No, dearest," he says, pleasantly enough. "You are infinitely amusing. It is the rest of Asgard that tries my patience sorely."

Loki looks around them, made abruptly (and unpleasantly) aware of the many Aes men and their ugly gawking. He swallows down the urge to protectively cup his heavily swollen belly. There is no point in fighting any of this, alas, much as he might want to. He exchanges a long look with Thor, who looks positively wrathful; by contrast, his husband does not stand down so easily.

It is a noble battle, but not one worth undertaking. Loki rolls his eyes. "We have been through this,
you and I,” he reminds his husband. “We are - I am - the stuff, the belongings of this realm.” Like it or not, they are. He is. In face he is nothing but property, when one cuts straight to the heart of it. Fancy, showy chattel, but chattel just the same. “Whatever you may wish of it,” he points out as Thor grimaces, “that is never going to go away.”

"I know, I know," Thor says, shaking his head. His expression manages to be at once both angry and sad. “Believe me, I know.” He sighs heavily. 'That does not mean I have to like it. Now, what were you saying about that," he asks, pointing to a tiny gold-embellished green crystal bottle in the next bin over from the one where Loki had been browsing. "We can get it, if you fancy."

To be completely honest, Loki had not been saying a thing about the bottle; he had been too busy chattering on about the necklace he had been holding. Really, he had not (yet) noticed the delicate little thing. But it is a lovely bottle, and he himself is nothing if not flexible. “It would be lonely, do you not think,” he suggests, because on closer inspection the pretty bottle just happens to have an even prettier neighbor. He carefully scoops both of them up and shows his new collection to Thor. “We shall get two.”

~

The week starts off much like any other. Any other in recent memory, that is; Loki still cannot spar or cast or otherwise amuse himself, at least beyond walking about in the gardens and throwing his knives with what is finally once again nearing an acceptable degree of precision. He will not be winning any medals, or any real admirers, but he is once again comfortable that he could defend himself should doing so be necessary.

Not that it is likely to, not with Thor hovering constantly.

“Is this normal,” Loki teases. “Do Aes husbands always stalk their pregnant spouses so? Given the number of children here it is a wonder that anything gets done at all.”

Thor leans in to kiss the very tip of Loki’s shoulder, where his wrap has slipped aside. His husband’s well-more-than-stubbly beard – proof positive of exactly the point Loki had been half-jokingly making; Thor has been so busy watching over him that the finer details of personal grooming have largely been set aside – rasps lightly against his skin. “I cannot speak to that,” Thor says. “Perhaps they are not so fortunate as to have spouses this mesmerizing.”

Loki leans his head into Thor’s. “It must be that,” he agrees.

~

Midweek, he wakes from a troubled, dream-wracked sleep with the immediate and frightening knowledge that something is different. For starters, it is still dark. He has been up once already, to urinate; even pregnant, waking more than a single time overnight is not like him. Frigga has credited that to his large male bladder, but he privately suspects it is a protective Jotun adaptation.

As Loki lies quietly in bed trying to puzzle out what might have disturbed him, a powerful wave of cramping pain rolls through his abdomen. The worst of it is probably over with in less than half a minute, if that, but while it continues he feels very much as though he might die. When it does pass he is sweaty and shaken.

He slips out of bed, careful not to wake his snoring husband, and wobbles into the bath on shaky legs. Once he is safely there, he takes stock: a little nauseated, maybe, but nothing like he had been earlier in his term; no real pain when he pokes and prods his belly through the tight-stretched skin. He might be able to move his bowels – in fact, he does feel a bit like he needs to – but the sense of
urgency that would normally accompany cramping of this magnitude just is not there.

Loki examines his own face in the large mirror along the basin wall; he looks perhaps a bit paler blue than normal, and very, very apprehensive. He laughs at his own reflection.

~

It stops being funny a few minutes later, when another wave of pain even worse than the first nearly brings him to his knees on the polished stone floor.

This time he does make an attempt to use the toilet. Straining against the pain feels like the right thing to do, but even that proves frustrating and largely unproductive.

~

By the fifth time or sixth iteration, the sun is just coming up and Loki is reasonably certain he knows what is going on. He has abandoned the dark bath for the relatively bright spaciousness of their bedchamber and is pacing slowly back and forth panting when his husband blinks awake.

"Are you unwell," Thor asks, instantly awake like the warrior he is. His voice sounds worried. He props himself up on one side and watches Loki’s labored pacing. "Do you need anything?"

Loki stops and turns to face the bed. He steadies himself against Thor's desk. "I-," he tries as another wave of pain starts. "I think it is happening."

"It- oh!" Thor jolts up. Two pillows hit the floor. "I should summon mother. Come sit," he orders Loki, patting the bed beside his thigh.

"No," Loki squawks. He has been overtaken by a powerful urge to walk – no, to run – away from the relentless pain. Just now little in the universe sounds less appealing than does sitting. "I do not feel I should sit," he tries to explain in a more reasonable tone of voice. It will not to do to have Thor thinking he has lost his faculties… even if perhaps he is starting to. "In fact, I must keep moving."

“That is ridic-,” Thor starts, but something in Loki’s expression must stop him. “Fine,” he concedes. “If walking is most comfortable, do not let me stop you.”

As if there was ever any risk of that, Loki thinks. I would like to see you try. There is not time to say as much, though.

As Loki hisses and half doubles over, Thor swings both solid legs over the side of the bed and hurries to his side. When his husband suggests sending one of the servants for Frigga, Loki finds himself too busy trying to catch his breath to even bother arguing.

~

By the time Frigga arrives, he is feeling rather frantic.

Two waves of pain ago, a warm surge of liquid down the insides of his thighs had left Loki thinking the baby was clawing its way out and he was going to die after all. Upon closer inspection, though, the fluid had not been blood. Thor had reminded him then of their preparatory birthing sessions with Eir; of how she had talked of water breaking as a clear sign of their baby’s imminent arrival.

“The baby is coming,” Loki tells Frigga as she chases after him to give him a hurried hug. “I have lost my water, and the pain is awful.” It is; what was once just uncomfortable, in much the manner of the morning after eating something a bit rancid, has become very, very close to unbearable over the
past half hour. “I do not know what to do. I do not think I can go through with this after all.”

“Shh, my sweet,” she soothes. “As you have with everything else, you will find your way past it and make us all proud.”

Loki is wracked with pain again before he can respond. “Mother,” he hears Thor say, sharply. “He cannot go on like this. Something must be done.”

"We need to send for the Jotun master healer," Frigga says briskly. Loki feels her hand at his elbow, guiding him as he tries to straighten. "And we need to move you to the birthing suite."

“No,” Loki huffs. “I must stay-.”

“I know that is not what you want,” she concedes, "but Eir will demand that she see you there and not here among your impressive collection of pillows. Please humor me.” She follows as he pulls free of her fingers and walks away. “And keep in mind that this is new to all of us; we must take every precaution. The last thing any of us wants is for something to happen to you, or to the baby.”

Loki stops moving. She is right, much as he might dislike it. And dislike – hate, even - it he does.

"Mother,” Thor tells her, stepping as ever to Loki’s defense… which is sweet, and not what Loki had expected under the circumstances. "Do not order him-.”

"Leave it. She is right," Loki cuts in. Much as he might like to continue to sulk and pout, he really does need to pull himself together. He is a prince, and he sets the example by which all of Jotunheim is judged. "This is the future of our realms' collective peace I am carrying,” he reminds his husband, cupping his own enormous belly. “We do need to do what will be best and safest, even if I personally hate every bit of- unh!” The pain hits again, its arrival abrupt and even more intense than before. Loki doubles over as best he can, struggling to catch his breath.

"Mother, we need Eir," Thor orders from somewhere nearby. "And hurry."

Loki wants to assure his husband that this is just more of the same, nothing worth panicking over. He cannot get the words out, though.

Frigga comes to his defense. "Oh, Thor," she says instead, "it is never easy work giving birth to a baby.” Her voice sounds lighter now, less businesslike, and Loki wonders if she is really just carefully controlling her emotions for Thor’s benefit. “Believe it or not, this part is normal, my sheltered son,” she assures him. “Go, go ask your friend Volstagg if you do not trust me. Everything will be fine.”

All the same Loki is relieved when Thor opts not to leave him. Relieved enough, in fact, that his temper does not even rear its head again when Frigga sends one of her maids for Eir.

~

Once he is ensconced in the birthing suite Loki no longer feels the need to keep up any sort of facade. He is in increasing pain, pain the likes of which he is not sure he has ever felt before, and his tolerance for the whole things is eroding rapidly. Deserved or not, Thor takes the brunt of his newly-unleashed anger; his husband is both nearby and complicit in the situation which led them both here.

“If screaming helps, young sir, do not hold back,” one of the healers instructs him. She is old and wizened and he can only imagine her hands have helped bring thousands upon thousands of Aes into the world.
It’s easy enough to follow her instructions, especially when he very much wants to.

~

"I hate you,” he screams at Thor in the midst of his next contraction. “Were it but in my power I would lay a curse down upon you, and all of Asgard with you, for doing this to me.” He tries to claw his way up Thor’s wrist, in a frantic attempt to get away from his own body.

In the long pause that follows, Loki dares his husband to fight back.

Thor, it seems, is still on his best behavior: “I am sorry to have put you through this,” he says. Maybe that is proper, Loki thinks as he pants through the last bit of pain; Thor is not the one their child is endeavoring to split in two.

Proper or not, it does little to assuage Loki’s fury, or his pain. For as long as he can still think enough to talk at all, Loki makes sure Thor understands exactly where things stand.

And when he no longer can give words to his feelings, Loki simply howls instead.

~

More and more, the fabric of reality frays. At some point, Loki begins to hear voices. He cannot focus. He is not able to discern whether the speakers are in the room with him, or exist solely in his head.

He wants this to be over. He wants to rip his abdomen asunder with his own bare hands and tear the baby out from inside.

He wants to die, and he no longer cares who he takes with him.

~

Loki is dimly aware of someone touching his shoulder. Shaking him, maybe. He tries to tell her – him? – to stop but only manages a wordless shriek. “Loki, listen to me,” a voice near his shoulder insists. "This is Eir. Do you know who I am?"

Eir. Healer. Loki makes himself nod.

“I realize you are in pain, Prince Loki,” Eir continues, “but you must calm yourself and listen to me,” she says. Her voice is stern. Commanding. Not the gentle person she tends to be. "The sorcerers who have supported you until now - Queen Frigga, here,” she goes on, and she angles her head towards a dim shape behind her but he cannot really get his eyes to focus, "and all the others, for these last few months - will continue to do until the baby is born.” She stops for a moment; he squints at her. Even his face hurts. “Even so, you must keep up at least the smallest hint of your own sorcery. It is crucial that you do so. Can you, for me? For the baby?”

Loki clenches his jaw. He could let go, right now, and everything would all be over. It could scarcely hurt more than he does already, and would certainly be finished far more quickly.

But then he would never see Thor again. Never walk in Frigga’s lovely gardens. Never return to Jotunheim to admire the rebuilt capitol in all its new glory.

And in dying he would take the baby with him. And maybe he does care about that after all.

Choice made, Loki nods. “I will,” he whispers. His mouth is so dry.
The pain comes again, almost immediately, and for a moment he deeply regrets his decision. He barely has time to rest between the waves now. But he has given his word, and Loki is not the sort of miserable coward who would go back on such a crucial promise.

He is only so tough, though. There really is no way he cannot scream.

~

Thor’s face swims into wobbly, blurry view. Just now, Loki despises his husband. He is not even certain why. He growls.

"Dearest? Loki? Go on, now,” Thor suggests. His voice is nearly as wobbly as his face looks. “Tell me once again just how very much you hate me."

Loki can barely string words together into coherent sentences. That does nothing to stop him from trying.

~

There (finally!) comes a point – it could be hours later, or days; Loki has completely lost track of the passage of time – where all he wants to do is push. The baby needs to come out, and it needs to come out now, and he is not feeling the least bit shy about making people aware of it. The pain has not lessened, but it carries with it a far clearer purpose now… one Loki is loath not to satisfy.

He and Eir and the Jotun master healer – he has no recollection of her arriving, but she is with them presently and that gives him one more person to lecture – have settled into some semblance of a routine, and that helps as well.

Pain. Rant. Complain about not being allowed to fulfill his life’s purpose, which is to push. Rest very briefly in a panting, soggy heap. Begin again. It goes like that for some time. Every now and then he breaks the monotony by complaining all through his resting time as well.

~

Loki feels a hand on his knee, which is neither welcome nor allowed. He lashes out with that foot but does not connect with anything. He roars his disappointment.

Something (someone?) grabs him firmly by the ankle. "If you can find it in yourself to stop kicking us for a minute," Eir admonishes, sounding a little out of breath herself, "I will check to see where the baby's head is."

He is abruptly and irrationally furious. He is a monster. The baby is a monster. They are all deluded, sniveling fools. "You presume the baby has a head at all," he growls. "For all we know” – a fresh wave of pain makes him gasp, but even that is not enough to shake him free of this line of reasoning – “the thing could have tentacles."

Thor laughs. Loki tries to kick him, too, but both feet have been captured and pinned. "He - or she - will not have tentacles, Loki," Thor chides. "I am sure of it."

“And I must side with Prince Thor on this one,” Eir agrees. She is laughing as well, as is the Jotun healer, and for the life of him Loki cannot figure out how any of this can possibly be funny. “For if the baby had tentacles, it would have made its way out hours ago.”

~
Finally, they let him start to push, and a great many sins are all at once forgiven.

Just a few short minutes later, so brief a time that the main event is almost anticlimactic after all that came before it, Loki gives one last long push and the pressure largely vanishes. For a moment he is terrified, wondering if he has lost the thread of his seidr and is teetering in the moment before his body rips itself apart.

But then… “oh, how lovely,” Frigga says, in a tone of voice Loki has never heard before.

Oh. It is done, then.

Everyone is talking at once, and someone is shrieking. Loki cannot make out meaningful words. He tries frantically to sit up but only manages to prop himself onto his elbows. “Is everything okay,” he demands in the best princely voice he can muster. The healers have clearly forgotten who is important here, and it his job to remind them. “Is my child okay?”

The Jotun master healer lays a large, cool hand on his shoulder. He tries to shrug it off, but she is too strong. “Shh,” the healer says. “Your son is fine. He is perfect. Can you not hear his cries?”

A son. He has a son. They have a son. A real live child. A baby. In his present state, at least, Loki cannot quite get his head around the idea. “My son,” he says aloud, just to see how the words feel in his mouth. And then it hits him: this child is his child. It is bound to be a monster. A huge wave of panic rolls over and through him, drowning out all but the worst remnants of his physical pain. “Thor? Thor!”

Thor is there in an instant. Loki feels his husband’s warm lips against his own sweating forehead. He frowns. “It is true,” Thor reassures him, quickly and without prompting. “We have a perfect, lovely son.”

Loki cannot quite get his head around that, either. His brain is the oddest mix of sluggish and frantic. “And is he-,” he starts, still desperate to know how much of his own unfortunate inheritance has passed down to their child.

Thor cuts Loki off mid-sentence. “He looks Aes, at least now,” he says, voice warm and easy. “He has your hair. He is as male as- well, you, or I. As you in your typical form, I mean,” he explains when Loki flinches. “He is beautiful,” Thor continues, voice filling with something close to awe. “You will meet him in a moment, when mother has him cleaned up a little.”

~

And then Loki does. Frigga appears at his side with a little, wrapped bundle. “Be careful with your temperature,” she admonishes as one of her hands brushes hot against Loki’s cool arm. In the aftermath of giving birth he has let his skin return to a more normal temperature in hopes of restoring some of his equilibrium. “We do not yet know how the baby will react to cold,” she explains. “For now we must keep him warm, until he is able to show us otherwise.”

It is still a bit hard to focus, but Loki does manage to warm himself. He uses Thor’s hand on his shoulder as a gauge, not quite trusting himself to get it right by memory alone. When Frigga at last lays the baby in his arms, he- he cannot contain his feelings. A tear streaks down his cheek. “See,” Thor tells him. “Perfect.” His husband leans in for a soft, real kiss. “You did it, my love,” Thor says, warmly. “You did it.”

~

Before long the baby begins to fuss, which throws Thor into a bit of a panic. If he was not so worn
out, Loki thinks, that in itself would be amusing. Even now he does manage a bit of a laugh as Frigga has to patiently explain (again; clearly Loki is not the only one who has lost his mind as a result of childbirth) the concept of a wet nurse to her son.

It is both relief and exquisite torture giving the baby back up to Frigga when said wet nurse arrives.

“I am so proud of you,” Frigga tells him once the baby is settled in and nursing happily. As she talks, Thor comes over to squeeze his hand. “You did it.”

Loki tries to smile. He is so very tired. “I had to,” he tells her. “I only hope everything works out for the best, and our two old kings think it was worth it.”

“And I am sure they shall,” she promises. “Now, we must set things right with you.”

He has been awaiting this moment – eagerly, and constantly – since the very instant he was graced (cursed) with this intersex body. All through the pregnancy, whenever things were especially difficult, he had consoled himself (and Thor, too, had striven to console him) with the promise that all of this would soon be behind him and that he could return to his real self with nothing more to show for his struggles than a few stretch marks and a host of deeply disturbing memories.

Now that the time has come, though, he feels- an overwhelming sense of loss. He blinks back the tears that have sprung up out of nowhere.

“Shh.” Thor lets go of his hand and instead pets his hair gently. “You did so well. I am so grateful.”

It is a lovely enough sentiment, but one Loki is simply not ready to entertain. “Is this going to be as difficult as was my initial transition,” he asks, stalling and not even caring (for once) if his attempt at deception is a bit too obvious, “because I do not think I can cope with that just now. I need to be able to spend time with my son.”

The queen collects both of his hands and squeezes them lightly. “You will want to sleep through the process itself,” she assures him, “but it will be far quicker and also far less terrible. And while you recover, Thor and I will look after the baby.”

Loki knows an excuse when he hears one. “No,” he says sharply. “I will not be separated from my son. Not so soon! This can wait. What harm can a few more days do?”

Frigga shakes her head. “It should only be a day at most,” she says. “The wet nurse will be sure your son is fed, and your husband and I will make sure he is well-loved. The sooner the better, Loki,” she points out when he glowers at her, and he does remember discussing this before; how the drain on everyone’s seidr – not to mention the strain on his own body - has been considerable and should not be sustained any longer than needed. “Do not be afraid. This is nothing compared to what you have thus far endured.”

Loki sighs. Just now this is not what he wants, but he is in no shape to be arguing convincingly.

“Plus,” she says, smiling, “why would you want to suffer the misery of this form while it heals, when you could simply erase all the overtaxed areas?”

The wet nurse laughs. “Oh, Prince Loki, that is a deal you simply must take our queen up on.”

“She is right, you know,” Frigga says. “After giving birth to this little one” – she pats Thor’s biceps – “there is little I would not have given to have been able to turn into a man for a while.”
In the end he lets her convince him. It is not as though he has a real choice in the matter, after all.

~

Winning over Thor, though, proves nearly as difficult.

"But I should be here with Loki," his husband protests, not for the first time, "while you do whatever it is you must-." Thor holds one of his hands, thumb rubbing over his knuckles.

"Go ahead, Thor," Loki tells his husband quietly. It is hard to whisper; his throat hurts and his voice feels as utterly worn out as is the rest of him. "I do not think this will be something to share with onlookers, no matter whom they might be." He does not want any more reminders of this part than absolutely necessary.

"But what if-," Thor protests. His grip on Loki’s hand tightens.

It takes several minutes more, during which Loki continues to feel extraordinarily sorry for himself – first about nothing at all and then (after the queen inadvertently broaches the topic, which turns out to be one he had somehow never managed to consider) about how awful his once-svelte body will look once he is back in his original form - for Frigga to convince Thor it really is necessary to leave them alone with the healers.

Finally, she gives up trying to reason with his husband and pulls rank the way only a mother can. "Thor, if you will excuse us," she says with flat finality, "we do need to get started. Drink up," she orders as one of the healers hands Loki a small goblet. Its contents are reddish and smell of pomegranate. "This will help you rest."

He takes a tiny sip. It is sweet and thick and soothing; as he takes a larger swallow, nearly half the glass this time, he can already feel his eyelids growing heavy. "Go ahead, love," he assures Thor. It is a little difficult to speak clearly; for his husband’s sake he does the best he can. "It is over. We will be okay, and I will see you soon."

Loki is not sure if Thor goes or stays; he can no longer stay awake at all.

~

“Prince Loki, can you wiggle your fingers for me?” Eir, from the sound of it.

He had been in the middle of a lovely dream – something about fishing with Thor, barehanded, in an icy cold stream… the banks of which are lined with smiling pink babies – and wants nothing more than to return to it. So, rather than doing as requested, he squeezes his eyes tight shut and wills the speaker to go away.

“Loki, dearest, I know you can hear me. Open your eyes.”

Disobeying his queen is harder, not to mention pointless. While her approach may be softer and more subtle than his own, she is every bit as stubborn as her son. Loki sighs – which feels very odd; for the first time in weeks now his lungs can expand fully, and the sensation is very different than what he has become accustomed to – and does as he is told. He blinks a few times as the room swims in and out of focus.

“Good,” Frigga says brightly. “Now wiggle your fingers.”

This time he does it. Again, there is nothing to be accomplished by resisting her.
“And your toes,” she instructs.

He does that as well. His hands and feet feel unlike his ribcage, they feel completely normal. Which is to say they are still a bit swollen. He flexes his fingers again and then says as much.

Frigga laughs. “There is no need for a peeing spell, Loki,” she tells him. “As your body purges itself of the hormones that supported your pregnancy, the extra water in your system will naturally follow.”

It seems some of the extra water will be leaving via his eyes instead of his bladder; something about the past-tense finality with which she says supported sets him off, and before he knows it he is bawling.

One of Eir’s helpers hands him another goblet. He downs it without sipping this time. It is sharp and sour and smells strongly of apples.

He does not even feel his eyes close.

~

Loki wakes up to find Eir sitting beside him. The room is very quiet. “Good morning, Prince Loki,” she offers. “How are you feeling?”

He misses Thor. He misses his son. He really wants to be out of the birthing rooms. “Well enough,” he tries, tentatively. “What day is it? How long have I slept?”

“Just until morning,” Eir promises. “The queen felt it would be best for your mind and body to rest alone a little longer. Here, take my hand,” she suggests, reaching over the side of the bed. “I will help you up, if you think you are ready.”

Loki does. He takes her hand and lets her guide him up to sitting. The muscles of his abdomen feel stretched and sore, as though he has been sparring all day. He presses his other hand against his midsection, by rote, and jumps when his fingers touch loose, saggy folds.

“Worry not,” Eir assures him. “I have a lovely salve to help with that. The ladies of Asgard have long sworn by this particular concoction.”

“I am no lady,” Loki grumbles, daring a quick look at his belly. Sure enough, he resembles nothing so much as a cachectic old man. “What makes you think it will work on me?”

Eir pats his hand. “Well, for starters, this” – she gestures in the direction of his stomach – “was nearly twice as bad last night while you were resting. Just two doses applied and things have improved helped considerably.” She holds up a small glass vial filled with something thick and golden. “But if you do not believe it will be useful,” she goes on, “we need not waste it further.”

“No,” he yelps, lunging for the thing as she makes to slip it back into the folds of her robe. He catches her by the wrist instead. His reflexes are a bit off, or perhaps the issue lies with his eye-hand coordination. Either way, Loki vows, he needs to train with renewed vigor. As soon as he can out of here. “I am sorry,” he tells Eir. “I will not doubt your skill again.”

She rubs her wrist and smiles. “It is good to see you have lost naught but a little of your strength,” she tells him, rotating her hand and wincing a little. “You shall be back to yourself in no time.”

“Good,” he says. It is a relief to hear, really. Despite his tears, Loki knows he does want to be himself again and not- not a broodmare. He returns her smile. “I truly hope so.”
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

The future makes itself clear(er).

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Warning: Very brief, mild, fleeting suicidal thoughts. If anyone things I should tag it, let me know and I'd be happy to.

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Thor
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Life with a new baby means quite an adjustment, even for a prince. Two princes. There is only so much that even the truly best staff in the universe – and Thor knows Asgard’s palace boasts that very staff, and not idly – can accomplish, especially for parents who treasure time spent in the company of their children. And in Thor and Loki’s case it is not so much that their little one behaves badly. Point of fact, at least if what both Frigga and Odin claim can be believed, Mothi is actually surprisingly well-mannered. Thor is forced by his mother to admit this child does not take after him so very much, at least not at the present point in time; Loki smiles smugly and announces that, if history is any predictor, they should count their blessings now because payback will certainly be coming later.

And of course, after all that Loki had gone through previously, Thor expects he has his fair share of payback coming regardless of how their son changes (or does not, for that matter, as his debt truly has little to do with the boy) with the accelerating passage of time. He wisely opts not to tempt the Norns by so saying, though. Sometimes fate can prove fickle, Thor knows. He can but hope. Although, if he does get what he deserves, he will dutifully accept it.

It would be highly ill-advised to do otherwise. Lest Thor forget that at any point, he knows he can rest assured his lovely blue husband will be all too happy to remind him.

No, Mothi is a good boy. He eats well - "our future king has me earning my keep already," the wet nurse tells both Thor and Loki regularly - and seldom cries (although when he does, the results border on earsplitting). While he shows a clear and prevailing preference for Loki, Mothi will condescend to let either of his parents console him. And if their young son thinks having two fathers is odd - and at this age Thor is not even sure, if Mothi were of a mind to take issue with the situation, that the two of them would even know - he keeps his fledgling opinion well and truly to himself.

What makes the change in their lives challenging is... well, how thoroughly they have lost control of their own time. Where once they could (within, of course, the limits imposed by appetite and duty) rise late and spend their days together as they each saw fit, now they must do Mothi's bidding precisely when Mothi wants it done, and where, and how. And if he proves fickle and – no sooner have they accomplished something - immediately wants that very same thing undone, they must scramble to comply with those wishes as well.

Already there have been a number of days (and by now they are far too numerous for easy counting, really) where the newest prince in the royal house of Odin has done what felt like naught but that –
making them do and undo, over and over, to little gain and much frustration – from the first glow of mornng through the last fading light of dusk. Not four days ago, in fact, Thor had sat helplessly by as Mothi had, with swatty, splashing hands and unhappy sounds, run Loki absolutely ragged in pursuit of the perfect temperature bath water.

"Does nothing please you, darling," his exhausted-sounding husband had asked the baby after tweaking the water – Thor and Loki had both long since given up on the taps themselves and switched to making their adjustments using Loki's seidr - the twenty-seventh time. Yes, Thor is counting. He hardly doubts they both are. "Because if that is the case I will simple fish you out and save us both an amazing amount of trouble."

Mothi giggles. Thor makes mental note to give Loki a backrub later, once their little bundle of joy has finally gone to sleep. Assuming, of course, he and his husband can even manage to stay awake that long.

Nothing lasts forever. Thor expects life will once again be nicer when their young son is finally able to provide them a meaningful answer to questions such as Loki’s. He continues to hold out hope despite what had happened when, a day or two ago, he had told his mother precisely that: she in turn had laughed and laughed. When she had finally regained her ability to speak without choking, Frigga had gone on to remind him that he really should be far more careful what he asks for.

~

Loki recovers from his pregnancy surprisingly quickly. At least, this is Thor's view on the matter; his husband is rather less pleased about how everything has unfolded. "My," Loki snaps when Thor makes the mistake of commenting, "it must be easier to overlook this" - he gestures dismissively with both slender blue hands at his equally svelte stomach, with its (rapidly fading, to the point of already being all-but-imperceptible) stretch marks - "when one is so fortunate as to not be doomed to live forever caged within it."

Thor smiles. He will not be so easily put off his mission. "You are beautiful, dearest. There is nothing to overlook. Unless you mean the circles under your eyes, and in that arena I am far from one to be meting out judgment."

Loki rolls the eyes in question. "You seriously expect me to believe that, do you? Have you been struck blind? Look at me, Thor." He gestures again, this time smacking himself in the stomach. "I have the body of an old hag."

"Hardly. And even if you did, I doubt I would ever notice… because if nothing else you have the face of a god," Thor teases his husband, mildly. "What say you we see feed that body of yours, if you are done cruelly and falsely disparaging it for a while." The spread of grapes and cheeses before them looks (and doubtless is; the princes seldom want for anything) delicious, and there is some of Loki's favorite fish on the sideboard as well. Perhaps lunch will turn his husband’s mind to other things. "I know I for one," Thor tells Loki, "am peckish. Come. Humor me."

At that Loki finally smiles, albeit briefly. "As if there could ever be a time when you are not hungry. I sometimes wonder if your belly alone drives the entirety of Asgard's economy."

Thor ducks to plant a wet kiss on Loki's stomach, just below the long curve of his husband’s ribcage. "And maybe I will have you for supper instead," he teases, kissing his way lower with each word.

Just like that, right on cue, Mothi – tucked safe in his crib across the room – starts crying.

"Like father...," Loki says, drily.
Thor laughs. "He has two fathers," he reminds his husband. "It is no wonder our darling son is such a challenge."

~

At first, Thor thinks it is his imagination. Surely Volstagg's many progeny have grown this fast as well. And a child of Loki's stock - and with it his husband's wit and intellect - is bound to be precocious. But when they are out walking about in the main promenade, though, they spy one of Sif's fellow swordsmen out and about accompanying his cheerful redhead wife. Together the young couple take turns pushing a stroller much like Mothi's, if perhaps a bit less ornately decorated. Loki likes things that sparkle, after all.

It is impossible to ignore how their son Erik, born two full moons before Mothi, is scarcely more than two-thirds Mothi's size.

"The prince is so big and strong," the swordsman - Duk, Thor thinks his name might be - exclaims. "My sweet! Look at how well he is able to support the weight of his own head."

"He takes after Prince Thor," Loki says, smiling. "And your child is a handsome little man, is he not!" He is still smiling as they part company with Duk's little family and go on about their walk.

"Takes after me, you say," Thor tells his smirking husband as they stroll along the covered walkway. "I think he is taking a bit more after you. He is growing abnormally quickly, is he not," he presses when Loki does not freely offer comment. "He is so much more advanced than baby Erik."

Loki shrugs. "To me it feels as though he develops unusually slowly," he says carefully. "By his age a child of the Jotnar would be walking... and likely talking as well. I have been worried about his- his lack of progress, but Eir continues to assure me all is well."

Thor cannot fully hold back a relieved huff of laughter. "Perhaps we should have compared notes earlier, then," he suggests, "and by turns spent far less time worrying in the process. So," he adds briskly, feeling better already, "what else should I know about Jotun children?"

“As I have been forced to tell you countless times before,” Loki complains, “the rearing of Jotnar brats lies entirely outside all of my many, varied areas of expertise. I had managed to live most of my life in ignorant bliss, as it were. But the Jotnar as a whole do grow quickly and the smart ones master language fast and early.” His eyes flash. “Tell me: does that come as a surprise to one who has known my people mainly in battle?”

Thor leans in to nuzzle Loki’s cool cheek. “It hardly comes as a surprise to one who knows you,” he points out. “There are few Aes you would not put to shame, in that department alone.”

“You no longer need curry my favor,” Loki grouses; despite the pleasant weather and the nice walk, he still seems displeased, maybe, or angry. Clearly he fishes for something Thor has not yet provided. “You already have your heir.”

“Oh, Loki.” Thor stops where he is in the middle of the pathway. “Surely you cannot think that is what- that is all, rather,” he corrects, because – while it was indeed not his original desire – now that they have Mothi it is no longer fair or accurate to say he is not pleased with this particular route their lives have taken, “I want from our partnership.”

“It is what your father the king wanted,” Loki says. He stands facing Thor, expression stony, still gently (if absentmindedly) rocking the baby carriage back and forth with one blue hand. “It is all he cares about.”
“I am not sure that is entirely true,” Thor corrects, gently. More and more, he hears Odin speaking of his Jotun husband with the same fondness normally reserved for Thor himself. “But, regardless, I am not my father.” He rather thinks Loki’s own father is no less culpable when it comes to taking a narrow view and to treating the two of them as little more than a means to an end, but he’s well aware this is not the time to be making a competition of their twinned struggles. “And that has never been all I wanted of you. Never. Not now, not before, not ever.

He pulls his stiff, frowning husband in for a hug. “I love you. You are an asset to me in my daily affairs. You are beautiful and fascinating. You are already a good parent to our son, and with time I am certain you will be an outstanding one. And of course you have many talents I am most pleased not to share with our family and friends.” He pulls Loki closer still, ignoring his husband’s half-hearted wriggling attempts at regaining freedom. “Do not for a moment think my parents undervalue you. More important, never think I would take their word against yours, or honor their wishes above our own.”

Loki rests his head against the side of Thor’s face. His hair is thick and smooth and smells faintly of mint; Frigga must have given him something new for it, after he had complained to her (and in the process anyone else within earshot) earlier that week about how the combination of pregnancy and extensive, draining seidr had served to rob his tresses of their famed luster. While Thor honestly had not noticed any such issue, whatever Loki has taken to using now is very nice. There will be no complaining, not where Thor is concerned. In fact, there would be no complaining even if Loki’s hair smelled of dung.

“You are just trying to curry my favor,” Loki tells Thor’s shoulder. “You like me better when I am happy.”

“I like you all the time,” Thor corrects. “I do greatly enjoy knowing you are happy, of course, because I want you to take pleasure in your life here. But that does not mean I care about you any less when you are angry. Or hurting, for that matter, or sad.” Frigga had warned them both that the aftereffects of Loki’s pregnancy could linger for several months and could lead to serious mood problems. Thor is not at all sure he can stave any of that off with simple reassurance alone – his mother has told him several times that such simple-sounding magic is actually not possible – but, just in case she is wrong this one time, he is determined to make the best effort possible. “Come,” he suggests against the cool shell of his husband’s ear. “Let us take our son to the royal stables. Star invariably enjoys a visit from you, and I know you and Mothi typically share her enthusiasm.”

It is a good idea, too. In the end Thor finds himself unable to decide which of the three is most excited.

~

Far earlier than Thor had anticipated, the two – well, three, although at this stage Mothi’s primary contribution remains just showing up – of them find themselves working hand-in-hand with Frigga to sort out the best possible combination of tutors. Thor wants Mothi to have every possible opportunity to work in the training ring; to identify his innate skills and build upon them, while also ensuring he learns to defend the inevitable weaker spots. Loki, on the other hand, makes no secret of the way he clearly prefers that their son focus more heavily on what Thor loosely terms "the intellectual building blocks."

"He will have plenty of time to build strength and hone physical skills as he gets a little older," Loki insists. "We do not live in the frozen tundra where early physical self-sufficiency is key to survival. And his developing brain will only be this plastic once."

Thor sighs. "If he is at all like you, dearest, he will learn easily all his life."
"And if he is unfortunate enough to take after you instead," Loki jabs, "we cannot let him waste this opportunity. I am told it may never come again."

"So very funny you are," Thor says, fighting desperately to keep the straightest possible face. "I can scarcely catch my breath for laughing."

~

"I hardly think these two endeavors need be thought mutually exclusive," Frigga suggests. "Long have we known both are important, and both benefit from an early start." She looks first at Thor and then at Loki. "It is to all our advantage that Mothi's education be as rich and comprehensive as possible," she reminds them. "Seidr, knowledge, battlefield strategy and battlefield skill. Never forget that the future of the nine as we know it rests on his tiny shoulders."

The idea is daunting, nigh on to the point of being overwhelming. "Cannot he just be a child for a little while," Thor begs, knowing even as he speaks that this is a battle he cannot win.

"You were awfully eager to help him cast aside that precious veil of childhood of his in the ring just an hour ago," Loki points out unhelpfully.

That does not go down well, not at all. "Training is fun," Thor argues. "It is not work, not like spending long hours with a tutor."

"Speak for your-," Loki fires back.

"Do not even-," Thor cuts in.

"Both of you," Frigga raises her voice over the two of them to say, "Stop. Surely you know I would not recommend you pursue any course that might somehow hurt my precious grandson. He will learn a little bit of everything, and all of it in ways he truly enjoys. This is not the first child I have raised, after all. Now, please... be gone from my chambers, the two of you. And for all our sakes, find some more pleasant way to spend your time!"

~

Most afternoons they take Mothi fishing. Thor is infinitely pleased at how well their son takes after Loki in this; from the very first trip down to the water, Mothi has invariably splashed about with happy abandon. His little hands are oftentimes quick enough to catch a fish, but not yet strong enough to keep a grip on one. He squeals and giggles as their sparkling gold and silver-scaled bodies dodge his flailing arms and disappear back underneath the water.

"Should I catch one for us," Loki asks Thor this time, in the softest of whispers. "I always loved to watch my elders fish, and to eat fish... but I do not want to upset him."

Thor smiles. "Just grab them and let them go for now," he suggests. "You can always sneak back here and secure yourself a snack later."

They spend several lovely, hilarious hours crafting an imaginative game out of catching fish, until even Loki – and Thor would not have thought it possible, had he not heard it with his own ears – complains of being a little chilled.

Once they have dripped dry and pulled their clothes back on, the three of them make their slow way to the training ground, where they warm themselves back up with light stave drills – they meaning Thor and Loki; Mothi drags his stave around making long, curving trails in the dirt - and calisthenics.
“He takes after you, Prince Thor,” a grizzled old drillmaster says, clapping Mothi gently on the shoulder. Mothi ducks against Loki’s hip, smiling shyly into his father’s thigh. “Prince Loki,” the man goes on, “you have your work cut out for you.”

Loki smiles, one hand cuddling Mothi close. “Oh, yes,” he agrees. “Never for one moment think I do not know it.”

~

"Papa Loki! Papa Thor! Look!" Thor turns to glance at Mothi, catching his husband beaming in the process. Their son has both hands outstretched, and between his palms hovers the very passable facsimile of a bird. From a few feet away the delicate creature manages to simultaneously be perfect in every detail - the soft serrations along the edges of its feathers, its downy breast, its tiny nostrils and seed-cracker's beak and sparkling black eyes – and yet also a completely unnatural peach-and-green color that rivals anything Thor had ever seen among the flashiest of Midgard’s tropical avians. Loki squeals with delight; Thor whoops and claps as Mothi twitches a finger and the bird somersaults and dives. "I see our son's spell-work is going to give yours a fair challenge in time," Thor tells his husband, "and yet his eye for color - sadly – more closely resembles mine."

Loki grins. The bird loops past his face, its bright features impossibly gaudy against his blue-purple skin. "Perhaps Mothi knows better," he suggests sweetly, "but simply aims to please you."

"Say what you like; I found you," Thor teases back, "so it cannot be said that I am entirely blind to beauty."

"You did no such thing," Loki jabs in return. "We both know full-well we were forced upon one another."

It is a sensitive topic, one they generally try to avoid revisiting. "Nonetheless," Thor offers instead of directly addressing Loki’s point, "no one can deny that our son is a fine sorcerer in the making." He is feeling especially generous this afternoon, as just this morning Mothi had soundly bested not one but three of Volstagg's sons in the training ring. And while the young prince clearly prefers Loki’s knives, Mothi is deadly accurate with a stave and nearly as sharp in hand-to-hand combat. Slender like Loki and well on the way to being strong like Thor, Mothi has already outpaced all of the children's tutors and moved on to (frustrate, to hear told) the man who had once helped both fathers understand the storied nuances of Asgard's history.

Thor and Loki are each getting their wishes met, it seems, and neither at the exclusion of the other. It is of course something about which Frigga never misses the opportunity (coupled not infrequently with more than a hint of smug self-satisfaction) to remind them.

Mothi claps his hands and the bird vanishes in a shower of shockingly bright feathers, each of which explodes into a tiny fireworks display when it hits the ground. "Honey, you have gotten very good at this," Loki tells him, swooping in to give Mothi a big hug. He stands taller each week, it feels like; already he comes up to their chests and is easier and easier to embrace without ducking. "Grandfather Odin King will be most pleased."

Grandfather Laufey King as well, Thor suspects, once the old Jotun is granted an opportunity to see it.

~

Mothi’s first trip to Jotunheim comes when he is nearly as tall as Loki’s shoulder. Laufey had of course come to visit a few times each year, as diplomatic obligations allowed; the two, young and
old, are far from strangers to one another. Still, the visit is a big thing; it represents the first opportunity most of Laufey’s people have had to lay eyes upon the living symbol of continued peace.

They get the formalities out of the way early. Mothi fidgets through his introduction ceremony. Loki shushes him periodically, but Thor - who wholly understands and is capable of far worse court behavior himself - gives Mothi's shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "It will be over soon," Thor whispers into Mothi's dark hair, "and then your father and I will take you exploring."

At that point, Loki shushes them both.

Thor lets his husband take the lead. They visit the fish market, the commanding palace spaces Loki had helped rebuild, and the Healers' chambers (where everyone gathers 'round to fawn over the handsome young fruit of their labors). Finally, Thor and Mothi bundle up (Thor in the warmest pelts, Mothi in something lighter) and follow Loki out into the blue early evening landscape. "This is amazing," Mothi tells Loki. "Tell me: why would you ever leave?"

"Ah," Loki says, "but we have told you. It was our duty to forge lifelong peace between our realms. ‘Tis why we wed, you know."

"Why will I wed," Mothi asks solemnly, looking up at the first stars just appearing overhead.

Thor ruffles Mothi's hair. The boy is nearly too big for such casually childish treatment, so both fathers are doing their best to get their fill of it while they still can. "If the Norns are kind, you will marry because you wish it." Personally, he doubts the Norns know kindness. Mothi is not yet old enough to need to know that.

~

The three of them dine with King Laufey that evening, at a lavish table set in Laufey's private quarters. While Loki expresses surprise at "learning" his brothers are abroad, Thor cannot help but catch the faint hint of a smirk that flits quick as Mothi's bird across his handsome blue face.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Thor says, mostly to poke at his husband. "I was looking well forward to a night of carousing." He tenses, girding himself against what is undoubtedly coming.

Sure enough, Loki elbows him sharply in the ribs. "Alas, dearest, you are a parent now. I fear your carousing days are over."

Mothi giggles as Thor groans. "Fear not, Papa Thor," he says. "Soon enough it will be my turn."

"Somehow," Thor tells his son as everyone laughs, "I do not find that reassuring."

~

Back in Asgard, at the next cycle of the moon, Odin pulls Thor aside. "As I grow every more old and weary," he says, and Thor's heart skips a beat, "you in turn grow wise and capable. I have consulted the Norns, and your beloved mother; together we believe the time fast approaches when I should turn Asgard over to you."

Thor does not think he could be caught more off-guard. "B-but I am hardly w-worthy," he stammers. As long as he has dreamt of hearing those words, now that the time is coming he simply cannot picture himself ascending the throne. "And what of Loki?" Asgard has long had King and Queen; there is no provision for King and King, heir notwithstanding.
"Loki will rule at your side as Prince of Jotunheim and father of the Crown Prince of Asgard," Odin assures him. "Our people have long become accustomed to his presence before the court. I doubt they will take issue."

"And if they do? If they want a Queen instead?"

"They but want a deserving heir to carry on the line," Odin says. "And such an heir in Mothi Loki has given them. I could not want a better grandson. And such an heir in Mothi Loki has given them. I could not want a better grandson. I promise you: the three of you will all be fine."

Thor swallows hard. His eyes are burning. "But what of you and mother," he asks. "Mothi needs you both, and I cannot bear to lose you."

Odin smiles. "Fear not, my son. We will make Asgard our home until Mothi comes of age and is able to rule in your stead. And then I will sleep. No, no," he adds quickly as Thor's eyes fill with hot, unbidden tears. "Do not think yourself rid of your father so easily. I assure you, I have much life left in me. I shall but rest as I have before. And then after I wake your mother and I will indulge our love of travel."

"Your mind is made up," Thor says. It is not really a question. His father nods anyway. "And I suppose there is no way I can sway it."

That is not a question either. This time, Odin simply smiles. "Preparations are already underway. In fact your mother is on her way to your quarters as we speak," he says instead of commenting, "and her finest tailors are no doubt struggling to keep up with her."

*Oh, no. That will not do, not at all.* "Stall her, then," Thor pleads. He leaps to his feet. "Give me a few moments to tell Loki."

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Loki

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After many years away (at least as a family; both Thor and Loki have made the occasional quick trip to the frozen realm as necessary), the three of them have at last come together to Jotunheim to let Mothi become acquainted with Loki’s home realm and its people. It has been a good trip, and Loki has largely enjoyed it. That said, in the life of a prince duty always needs attending.

“I know this is not what you wanted, father,” Loki admits as he and Laufey walk the palace halls together. While he has done what he firmly believes to be the very best he could, the whole of his journey has been through unfamiliar territory and he holds out little hope that he has managed to avoid making a mess of it somehow.

Father and son walk both together and alone. Not long after lunch two Jotnar tutors had mentioned within earshot that they would be taking a group of soldiers’ children out to the river to learn the basics of ice fishing. Laufey claims these excursions - a source of nothing but fond memories from Loki’s own childhood - remain a popular activity, made up as they are of half fun and half real training. Even with the return of the Casket fishing remains one of the key ways in which most youngsters will ultimately contribute to keeping their economy whole and their people fed. Not everyone can rule, after all, Casket or no.

Upon hearing Laufey’s description Thor had asked if Mothi could tag along. Loki had given their excursion his blessing and had so far as to suggest that the two of them – just Thor and Mothi – go
alone. “You will be less frustrated without me there rolling my eyes and yawning,” Loki had assured his husband, “and it will give you and Mothi a chance to bond over learning something interesting together.”

None of which is a lie, of course, but the whole truth was this: Loki had wanted to get his own father alone and to spend an hour or two in private conversation.

Laufey frowns, his heavy brow creasing. “Of what madness do you speak,” he asks. “My grandson is a good boy. He is doubtless one who will go on to make both our realm and Odin’s proud. I hardly see how that is not what I wa-.”

“For me,” Loki cuts in. “I know the ultimately point of your many political moves was something altogether different. Still, be that as it is, I am happy.”

“Never, ever mistake my duty for my wishes, Loki.” Laufey stops short and sets a heavy hand on Loki’s bare shoulder, forcing him to do the same. “As I have long told you, yes, my duty is to our people. But you – as I have long told you as well - are both the most intelligent of my sons and the most charming. It would be wrong of me to claim to love you best; you and your brothers are all my children, and for that alone I hold each and every one of you most dear. However, I can admit this: that you have found a way to save our people and yet still carve out a good life for yourself brings me boundless joy. And I assure you that your mother would feel precisely the same way, had she only lived to see your life unfolding.”

At the sound of his mother’s name Loki’s planned sharp retort catches in his throat. He cannot even recall the last time Laufey made mention of Farbauti. For as far back as he can remember his mother, long since lost to them (not alongside the Casket, precisely, but instead during the first horrifically harsh winter that had followed in the wake of its departure… or so he has been told, by his tutors and his brothers; not only was Loki himself almost too young to keep close any memory of Farbauti at all, but one of the tutors claims he the infant prince was almost claimed by the bone-deep cold as well), has been something his father simply could not discuss at all. He is not sure how to take it. “Truthfully,” Loki demands, doing his best to meet his father’s stern gaze. “You wanted me to be happy? Both of you? Lie not,” he insists, “or I shall know.”

“You are a parent now yourself, my son,” Laufey reminds Loki. He sighs, heavily. “Surely you know of what I speak. Would you not hold Mothi’s happiness above everything that lives and breathes, above every treasure the realms can hope to offer, if only was your hand not forced by the relentless, awful pull of duty?”

For the second time in hardly more than as many minutes, Loki finds himself forced to swallow down his own harsh words. Yes, the idea that he might ever choose duty over Mothi’s wellbeing pains him beyond compare… and yet, as the wedded spouse of a future king – and not only that, but also the next Allfather in an unbroken chain… one into which, Norns willing, Mothi’s own link will someday be forged - he knows the good of the people must always take precedence. As it does for him, so did it for his own father and mother. And while it does not make Laufey’s choices easier to bear, Loki can no longer turn a blind and angry eye to what must have lain behind them. “You are right, of course,” he admits.

Doing so stings. To his credit, though, Laufey makes no attempt to rub salt in the wound. Instead he simply squeezes Loki’s shoulder. “Come, my son,” he says, turning to face down the long corridor once more. “Let us view the progress our people have made, after you built them a fine, strong foundation.”

They walk in silence for a long time. Gradually, a small and evil thought comes to Loki and in its wake even melancholy starts to fade. As he and his father come out into the once-again-grand
entryway, Loki can no longer control himself; he snickers. “Is it wrong of me,” he asks as Laufey turns a questioning face in his direction, “to hope the weight of the Jotun crown falls squarely on Helblindi’s rock-hard head?”

Laufey gives Loki a long, searching look and then grins in turn. “Let us just say that, if it is indeed wrong, ‘tis a crime we share.”

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“And where are Prince Helblindi and Prince Byleistr,” Thor asks when Mothi inquires curiously after his uncles.

“Byleistr is on a diplomatic mission,” Laufey says quickly, leaving Loki to bite the inside of his own cheek. “Helblindi had hoped to be here, but was called away to help train some of our new recruits at the very last minute. One of the usual trainers was taken ill,” his father explains, and Loki feigns shock. He’s careful not to meet the king’s eye, lest the two of them burst into complicit, damning laughter. “We only have so much reasonable weather,” Laufey goes on as Thor nods, “and consequently training cannot be postponed. I fear there simply was no viable alternative.”

“Well, then, tell them both hello for me,” Mothi suggests. “And be sure to tell them we missed them.”

“Oh,” Laufey assures his grandson solemnly, “that I shall.”

Loki does not hold up the front anywhere near as well against his own husband; when Thor teases – for it must be teasing… Thor cannot mean it! – about missing an opportunity to go out drinking with Loki’s brothers, he cannot resist jabbing an elbow straight into his husband’s muscled side.

He may pay. It is worth it.

Right after dinner, they are able to send Mothi and his grandfather off to the throne room with Laufey for a tour worthy of a future king, as Laufey terms it. Laufey steers Mothi on his way, then turns and winks at Loki as the two grown princes stand up from the table. “This will take at least an hour,” the king assures them. “I trust you will find a worthwhile way to entertain yourselves while we are gone.”

They do. It starts innocently enough, with a little more poking and jabbing, but heats quickly – they only have an hour to themselves, after all, and even princes (who want to be good, attentive parents, at least) have considerable difficulty finding nearly enough time together… alone – until Thor has Loki bent over the closest bit of fur-strewn ice furniture and is enthusiastically confirming both their cocks still work properly. “I have- missed this- so,” Thor huffs into Loki’s shoulder, speaking in cadence with the thrusting of his hips. He has not even bothered to remove Loki’s fur-and-leather loincloth; instead he has just shoved the thing out of the way to bunch rumpled and lumpy (and not particularly comfortable, if Loki were not beyond caring) above the meat of Loki’s rear. “You- have no- idea.”

Loki cranes his neck as far as he can; from the feel (and the taste) of it, his open-mouthed, gasping smile is still mostly hidden in the thick furs. “Oh,” he pants as Thor’s movement forces the air from his lungs, “I think- I can- imagine.”

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“You will be king. You. Now.” Despite the open windows and the warm Asgardian breezes, all the air seems to have gone from their room. Loki cannot breathe properly, nor think, nor even truly feel.
“You jest not? This is no game?”

Thor shakes his head, a few strands of hair pulled free from his braids bobbing and fluttering in time with the motion. “I would not dare tease about so serious a thing,” he says. “My father has consulted the Norns and feels the time is right to step aside. To step down, more precisely. He and Frigga will provide counsel when needed, but he intends to pass the crown to me. And sooner rather than later, if I believe what he tells me.”

Loki’s heart pounds in his ears. That this time was bound to come – that he has known thus since first he set foot on Asgard – does not make its arrival any easier to face. “So this is it,” he hisses. “Even with Mothi still scarcely more than a child, it is over.” He whirs away, evading Thor’s grasping hands, and races for the balcony. Were it not for their son, continuing out over the railing in a graceful, fatal diving arc would be so very, very easy. Easier than crawling home. “No,” he cries dodging as his husband tries to catch him by the shoulder. His own voice is embarrassingly shrill. Loki makes himself face Thor, chin high and back to the long drop. “Do not make this worse than it has to be.”

Thor stops cold, blinking in evident confusion. “My dearest,” he begins, “of what do you speak? I do not like any of it either, but in the end it is just a coronation.”

“It matters not to me what you call it,” Loki growls, trying to sound more like a wronged prince and less like a frightened adolescent. “I, you know, shall not be here.”

“What?” Thor looks if anything more puzzled than before. “Of course you will.”

“Have you lost your mind,” Loki blurts out. Perhaps he has been wrong all this time and Thor really is this stupid. “Coronation? Kingdom? You must now take a queen. It will not do to have you ascend the throne in the company of your Jotun whore.”

Something sheepish and guilty-looking passes ever so quickly across Thor’s face. “And that is where you are wrong,” he says. “I spoke with my father about exactly this – well, not exactly, as I cannot bring myself to use such language where you are concerned – and he assured me not half an hour ago that you and I will rule together; I as king and you as my consort, Prince of Jotunheim and the father of our son. You will sit at my side, Loki, and be my trusted advisor.”

It is Loki’s turn to blink and stammer. “I- trusted- what?!” Perhaps it is more than Thor alone that has gone completely crazy.

Thor steps carefully closer. Loki does not shrug off his husband’s hands this time. Neither does he interrupt as Thor carefully, softly repeats the same message. “My father is king and Allfather,” Thor reminds him afterwards. “This is what he wants. It is what I want, save for how I would much rather spend our days together without the burden of ruling. It is of course what mother wants; she has adored you from the beginning. It is what is right, and Odin will make it so.”

“You are serious,” Loki cannot help but ask. Because this is not the ending, nor the beginning, he has long expected.

“Of course,” Thor says. “I wanted you to hear it first from me, before mother and her tailors show up to fit us both – and Mothi, too… he will be the Crown Prince now; can you imagine? – for our coronation finery.”

Right on cue, Frigga – after so much time spent here, Loki would recognize her touch anywhere - knocks lightly on the door. He wipes his eyes on the back of one hand and smiles. “Then I think I should like to appear before all of Asgard as I once did,” he says, grinning even more broadly as he
watches realization dawning on his husband’s golden face, “clad only in the jewels of my station.”

“Oh no you will not,” Thor starts, with the beginnings of his own grin. His hands are warm and solid on Loki’s shoulders. He is blushing. “You will do no such thing.”

Loki spins free, but he is laughing this time and the taint of death is nothing more than a memory. “You think not, do you? Just try and stop me.”

~Fin~

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