Ragdoll

by Lizardbeth

Summary

When Hulk slams Loki into the floor, Thor must hurry to Asgard with him to save his life. To heal a broken Loki, they must heal this broken family.

In the shadows, a Titan waits.

Notes

I started this ages ago after a comment by someone that one of the reasons the Hulk-smash-Loki scene is so funny is because we, the audience, are surprised but also reassured that he'll be fine. So what if he weren't? I wrote about the first half, but then put it away.

But I saw someone on Tumblr (lizardbeths.tumblr.com) request other stories with this idea, I figured hey, why not put up at least the whump part for the holidays? there's more to come.
Hulk grabbed Loki and slammed him against the floor, again and again.

At first, the floor was the one to give, as the immortal's body was strong. But Tony had built his tower well, and Hulk's strength and rage proved the stronger.

A wood-like snap joined the slamming of god against concrete underfloor, then another crack and another, like twigs, as Loki was thrown from side to side.

Like a child abandoning an unwanted broken toy, Hulk dropped him there in a hollow of shattered tiles and wandered away.

Natasha was the first to find him, creeping near to the hole in the floor warily, a pistol held before her. Her eyes widened in astonishment and she lowered her gun at the lack of threat presented -- the lack of threat he would present ever again.

That green and black leather outfit was sodden with red blood, and his limbs splayed wrongly, broken, one bone shining white out of his lower leg.

She touched her communicator bud in her ear to reach one of her companions, whoever was close now that the battle was finished. "Tell Thor – Loki's down. He needs to come here at the top of Stark Tower, ASAP."

"Understood," Steve answered.

She could see from the bubble of blood at Loki's lips that he was still alive, and she was fairly sure – immortal god or no – he wasn't going to stay alive for very long.

Only moments later Thor arrived in a crash of wind that rattled the windows and he hurried in through the sliding door, hammer swinging at his side. "Lady Natasha! The Captain Rogers has given me to understand--"

His voice died away utterly as he glimpsed Loki in the smashed hollow of the floor. "Loki! No, how can this be?" he whispered in horror. "What occurred?" he asked her, not taking his gaze away from Loki.

"I didn't see it, but my guess is Banner," she answered.

Thor threw himself to his knees at Loki's side.

In that instant, Loki's wrongs were immaterial to Thor – everything he'd done to Earth, to Thor himself, didn't matter as his voice went hoarse, "No, little brother, not like this... Please...." He leaned forward, fingers to touch Loki's cheek and push back a bloodied strand of his black hair.

Natasha considered whether to tell him he was mistaken. It was only a matter of time, and if she
said nothing, Thor would sit there and grieve until it was true, but she offered, "Thor. He's breathing."

Thor was startled with the information. "Is it so?" But then they both saw Loki's eyelashes flutter.

"Loki." Thor put his hand on Loki's cheek and bent over him. "You must hold on," he urged Loki in a hoarse voice. "Please hold on... I will get you home."

Loki's eyelids cracked open, creasing at the corners with pain, and his lips trembled.

"Yes," Thor urged him. "Loki, I will take you home."

Loki said something unintelligible as the effort to speak pushed a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. Then, he tried again, and the word was perfectly clear, if soft, "No."

Thor shook his head, blue eyes glistening now. "No, Brother, we will get you home, and you will be fine. Everything will be well again, you'll see – Mother will fix it..."

Loki whispered again, "... no...." His eyes shut again, tears slipping free, either of sorrow or pain. Barely audible, he added, "let... go."

"No! No, I will not, and I will not allow you either," Thor implored. "Not again, Loki, please, hold on." He bent closer and slid his hands beneath Loki's shoulders and legs. "Forgive me, I know this will hurt you, but we need to hurry."

He lifted Loki in his arms, carefully bringing him in close to his body. Loki jerked several times, head hanging back, and a terrible whimpering noise came from his throat as if he was trying to scream but couldn't. His shattered legs dangled, as did his arm, hanging oddly, the elbow dislocated.

Thor froze, as if the feel of Loki's body in his arms was too strange, because it bent in the wrong places. He had to close his eyes and gather his strength. Then, tenderly he maneuvered Loki's head to rest against his broad shoulder, as Loki wheezed for shallow breaths.

Natasha bit her lip at the sight of the back of Loki's head – his black hair was wet with blood as well, from a head wound that was bleeding freely down his neck and onto Thor's forearm.

Thor brushed his cheek on the top of Loki's head. "We're going home, Loki, rest easy."

He stood, carrying Loki's body without much visible effort. He told Natasha, "I will return for the tesseract, as soon as I can."

After the funeral, would be her guess. The halting breaths were slowing, and he'd slid into unconsciousness. Blood was dripping from Thor's gauntlets, and there was enough pooled in the hollow where Loki had been to kill a human. Thor might be able to get him back to Asgard before he bled out, but Natasha would not lay money on his survival. Even the myths agreed that the gods could die, and quite plainly his immortality or healing or whatever he had, had been overwhelmed by the Hulk's attack.

It was a chill reminder of what the Hulk could do.

Thor headed outside to the balcony. She felt strangely bad for Loki's arm, hanging down, it had to be hurting him like that and so with careful grip she took his wrist and lifted it to rest on his stomach. He didn't react to the touch, and his skin was chill and lax with shock, keeping the imprint of her fingers.
Thor watched her and nodded once. "Thank you. Keep back," Thor warned then he tipped his head back to bellow. "HEIMDALL! Bring us home!"

It was … amazing. Even after everything she’d seen in the last few days, it shocked her – a bolt of lightning crashed down from the empty sky, and in a flash of rainbow colors that dazzled her eyes and flashed back upward again. Thor and Loki were gone, leaving behind blood and a ten meter circle of ornate burnt design like a great wax seal had been impressed on flooring.

She glanced up at the sky reflexively, but there was nothing up there to see. It was all over.

Frigga ran to the healers the moment she heard that Thor and Loki had returned, and Loki was hurt.

Arriving, it was nothing like she had imagined. In the past, both boys had been injured, battle wounds that had hurt them but healed swiftly, but this was utterly different.

A gasp flew from her throat, seeing the broken form Thor was laying on the transport bed. "Loki! Oh ancestors… Is he still alive?" The words barely made it from her throat, as her fear that it was too late choked her throat.

"Yes, my queen," Eir said, glancing at the diagnostic readout. "We must take him for treatment, now." Her sharp eyes set on Thor. "Do you require treatment?"

Thor looked down and Frigga noticed the blood on his armor. She felt dizzy and cold, fearing that Thor was hurt, too, but he shook his head. "It is none of mine."

She gripped his arm in gratitude that he was well, even though she was horrified to realize all of that reddish stain had to belong to Loki.

"We will do what we can," Eir promised and activated the stasis field as the team pushed the bed toward the treatment bay.

Frigga watched them go, cold with dread. The stasis field was a tool of last resort, to put those on the edge of death outside of the passage of time. The transport disappeared from view, and she blinked, finding her fingers gripping Thor's arm so tightly they refused to let go. She pried them away, and he stirred from his own dark thoughts.

"How?" she asked him. "How could this happen?"

"The one they call Bruce Banner," Thor answered. "He is akin to the Eternals, though I know not what exactly created his alternate form. But in that alternate form, he is … strong. Very strong. And he was in a rage from the attack on his city. I came upon them in the aftermath, but it seemed as if Banner slammed him into the floor, and both floor and Loki shattered in the impact."

His eyes were sad and troubled. "I do not understand, Mother," he whispered. "I implored him again and again to come home, to stop his terrible plan, and he refused. He brought the Chitauri to Midgard, in conquest and death, and many were slain. If we do not lose him to death, I fear we have lost him to his madness, to hate--"

She smoothed his hair. "There is still hope, Thor. He is here, now. He lost his way in anger and despair, but he may yet find a path back to the light."

She hoped so, but she was more worried that Loki would see no path but the one that led to death.
He had taken that path once before, and a path once taken was easier to find a second time.

She turned to Thor. "Go change. He will be in treatment for some time yet, and I will look upon you more easily without his blood on your armor."

Thor departed, with a backward glance toward the double doors that led to the healers sector.

That left Frigga alone, to wait.

She had never been so aware of time, as she waited for word from Eir. She sat down, she paced, she embroidered, she read – nothing held her attention more than minutes before she had to do something else, as anxiety held her in clammy fists and would not ease.

Minutes crept past, and Thor finally returned with clean clothes. "Is there word?"

She shook her head. "Nothing yet." She folded her fingers together in her lap, trying to hold to queenly calm. Her concession to worry was to rub one thumb against the other, until Thor laid his hand around hers. She glanced at him, surprised, especially as he gave her a little smile.

"I never realized, Loki does that, too," he murmured. "But there is no need to be anxious. He will be well," he told her, as if he had no doubt.

She nodded, trying to believe. "Then, while we wait, you must tell me of Midgard. The truth," she warned. "I cannot help him if I know only what he tells me."

"It is... difficult to hear," he warned.

"I think we have been ill-served by comforting lies," she murmured, glancing toward the inner door. "Speak." She gestured for him to take the other seat, and sat down on the padded bench that circled the pillar. "Help the time pass, my son."

He told the story, which saddened her but was not a surprise after what she'd sensed of Loki's mind that brief moment she had touched it to learn he was still alive.

The left-side door opened and Frigga's head snapped around to see Eir entering. Frigga was on her feet and halfway to the door, before she had judged Eir's expression. Eir was not grim enough to bring news of death, but nor was she smiling. Frigga's breath caught and she swallow down the lump in her throat. "Eir? How is he?"

Eir glanced at Thor, who was standing at Frigga's side, and met Frigga's eyes, with sympathy. "He is badly hurt, my queen. He suffered numerous bone fractures, something I was not sure was possible for one of the higher races, internal injuries, and immense blood loss. We have spent this time stabilizing him, and I believe he is out of immediate danger."

Thor gripped Frigga's arm. "See, I told you, Mother. He will be well."

But Frigga wasn't fooled by Eir's statement of 'immediate' danger. "And? What more?"

Eir nodded her head. "Indeed. Of his many injuries, my queen, the most serious is a skull fracture. There has been cranial swelling. While it is not worsening it is also not improving with treatment, and he is deeply unconscious and unresponsive. Even if he awakens, I do not know at this point what damage there may be."

Frigga inhaled a shaky breath, hand on her chest to keep calm.
"Damage?" Thor repeated, shocked. "What do you mean "if" he awakens? Why would he not? He should heal."

"He is healing, my prince, but in essence, his gift was overwhelmed and he became mortal. That will take some time to grow strong again. He may not heal completely, as severed limbs or the Allfather's eye do not return. We are tough, my prince, but not invulnerable."

'may not heal completely' - Frigga heard the words and felt that she could not understand them. How could that be that his injuries might not heal fully? But that was not even the worst of what Eir was telling her.

"You believe the coma may persist?" Frigga asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I warn you of the possibility. It is not unknown, especially...."

Eir trailed off and wouldn't finish. Frigga prompted. "Especially?"

"Especially in those who believe they have nothing to live for, my queen," Eir finished softly. "He awoke briefly when I released the stasis field, and he said, let go. He was not actively willing himself to death, or he would not have survived from Midgard, yet I do not think he is fighting to live either. I do not know if he will wake again."

Frigga clutched Thor's arm again as the dread news settled on her like a weighted blanket, making the air seem close and hot and unbreathable. "What do we do, Eir?" her voice was barely a whisper.

"We wait, my queen. I have done all I can, but now it is his choice: he will wake, or he will let go of this life and he will die."

Frigga nodded, unable at first to find her voice. "May I visit?"

"Of course."

Eir led the way back and through an open archway, where Loki lay. He was suspended in a glowing energy field, meant to support him gently and keep all his shattered bones in alignment while it monitored his vital signs for the readouts against the far wall.

Frigga saw none of them though, going forward until she stood beside him, close enough to look down. Even through the veil of the brightly orange light, his face looked translucent and gaunt, lashes like jet against the snow-pallid skin. Eir had cut his hair very short and shaved it off the side and back where the injury was hidden beneath a monitor patch. She caught her breath to see it, words like skull fracture and brain damage tumbling through her thoughts again.

"Oh my darling," she whispered. "What happened to you? We can fix it, all of it, please come back. You don't have to be lost."

She didn't expect a response, not with his coma and the induced paralysis of the restrictive field, but it was still disheartening that there was none.

"He will be well, Mother," Thor declared, and she started with surprise, not having realized he'd followed her in. She glanced at him, and Thor forced a smile. "He is stubborn and contrary, and he will awaken just to spite us."

"I hope so," she murmured, her gaze drawn back to Loki's body before her. "Never have I seen either of you hurt so grievously."
"Yet he holds on," Thor pointed out.

She opened her mouth to correct him, but in the end said nothing. Perhaps in some deeper stubbornness he was holding on, despite his conscious desire to let go. Glancing at the display, she amended that -- perhaps his injuries made his will utterly irrelevant. His spirit might yet flee from such damage and pain. "We can only wait now, as Eir said. Nor do I wish him to wake yet, when he will know only pain."

Thor nodded his understanding and they stood together in silence, until Thor broke it. "Father has not come."

She glanced toward the monitoring window, though she could sense Odin's absence. "No. Nor will he."

"Even though Loki may lie on his deathbed?" Thor asked, pained.

Frigga felt too frayed to defend Odin from Thor's incomprehension. "The last time he visited Loki during illness or injury was so long ago I cannot remember. He will not come now." Yet she had no doubt that Loki had kept a tally; he had not hidden his hurt from her, though he had stopped commenting on it years ago. "But I will go speak with him, and warn him that Loki may yet pass from us."

"I could speak with him," Thor offered, when her feet refused to stir from Loki’s side.

She forced herself to draw a deep breath. "No. I must."

"I will stand watch here, then."

She was grateful for the offer, but it seemed a little absurd. "He will not wake today, my son."

"No matter. I will stay. He may not hear me, but perhaps he will, when I speak to him. Perhaps the truth will finally batter its way inside that he remains my brother, no matter what."

She gripped his arm. "I pray that it does, Thor."

Wanting desperately to kiss Loki’s forehead, she had to take solace in saying to him, "I will return soon, my son."

I will hurry back and pray every step that you do not leave when I have no chance of holding onto you.

... tbc...
Frigga entered the receiving hall, anger surging the moment she saw Odin in his throne, as if nothing had happened. Odin was conducting ordinary business, as if Loki had not been hours with Eir, while his mother and brother waited anxiously.

She wished for the power to put the thought in his head: You should be with your son.

He didn’t hear it, but he knew her moods well enough to bring the audience to an end and remove to the scriptorium next door.

He dismissed the record-keepers to have privacy and seated himself at the great table, gesturing her to the nearer chair. “Be comfortable and speak. This is of Loki, I presume?”

She sat, perched on the edge, too anxious to be comfortable. “I shall not stay long. And yes, of course I will speak of him, as you have not visited him.”

His eye flicked down, not meeting hers. “The business of the Realms is of more urgency than--”

“Your son?”

“-- than a criminal,” he finished, now glaring at her. “Or a madman, who sought the destruction of two Realms.”

Her jaw tightened. “Who is still your son. And he lies near death in Eir’s care.”

Odin hesitated, but because he didn't wish to speak, she knew. He had already decided. He straightened in his chair and brought Gungnir closer. “So the vengeance of Midgard takes its course,” he declared finally. “He attacked them and pays the price. The healers will withdraw their assistance.”

Frigga stared at him, astounded and horrified. "But … he surely shall perish without it."

"For his crimes he would deserve execution. This is a more fitting end."

Her heart was leaden in her chest as she searched for words, but found none at first. She rose to her feet, hands curled on the top of the table, as her heart beat in sudden anxious rhythm. She had feared that Loki might slip away because of his injuries or his own will; she had not thought to fear her own husband's decisions.

"No. It is not right," she protested.

"You think as a mother--" he began, with infuriating condescension, and she would not – could not – understand how he was saying any of this.

"As you should as a father!" She pointed in the direction of the healer's chambers, fingers shaking. "Your son lies in there, in shattered pieces, in a coma from which he may never awaken, and that is not enough? You want his death, too?"

"I am the king!"

She raised her voice above his angry bellow. "You acted as a father, for a thousand years, while Thor was reckless and did as he willed all across the Nine. The king did nothing.” She clenched a jaw, waiting, and when she saw no softening in his visage, she reached for the last arrow in her
quiver and launched it. “You acted as a father and preserved the life of another of your blood who did far worse.”

He recoiled in his seat, as her rhetorical arrow struck, and his hand tightened on Gungnir as if for a moment he considered wielding it to defend himself. Another time she would regret the strike, but she would not show mercy to him now, when he had no use for it himself. “Yet now, when Loki needs you the most, when he is back with us from unknown trials, and when we might heal his mind and heart, you wish him dead.” A worse thought struck that this was not the first time. "Is that why you would not save him at the Bifrost? Did you want his death even then?” she accused bitterly. "Why did you not let him die on Jotunheim if you will not care now?"

He didn't react to her harsh accusation, and it made her more angry. Feeling her blood heat inside her skin, so intent was her rage, she paused and looked into his face, promising in a low voice, "If you murder my helpless son, I will live as the lowliest beggar in all the Nine before I endure the sight of you again." She pulled off her marriage band and threw it to the table. It landed with a metallic clang and rolled a little ways before falling to a stop right before him. She was pleased to see him flinch, finally, as he realized he would not get his way without consequence. Her voice was tight. "If your heart has grown so cold, you have no need of a queen or wife."

She turned on her heel to head for the doors.

"Frigga, do not turn your back on me…” he growled, a low warning rumble as if she should be afraid now.

Looking back at him, she retorted, "Or what? You will forget you have a wife as quickly as you have forgotten you have another son? Or you will bury us as you did your daughter? If you remember we exist, I will be at Loki's side and ensure Eir does not obey your foul judgment. If you want him dead, you will have to do it yourself."

His fingers groped for the ring, but she didn't want to wait and see what he would do with it. She didn't want to look at him anymore.

She whirled back around and left, hurrying back to the healer's chamber where Loki lay within the energy cocoon.

Thor stood beside Loki and he turned his head to see her come in. He shook his head a little. "There has been no change."

She glanced at the readout above the head of the bed to see for herself. He was so quiet. His heart was slow, breathing barely measureable, and even the depressed signals of the brain itself seemed barely there. It would take so little to stop all of it.

He floated within the energy field, touching nothing of the bed beneath him, held still to keep all aligned to heal properly. His skin was marred with wounds and bruises, raw and discolored in places. He’d always been lean, but now seemed mere skin and broken bones.

It came to her that he would dislike being displayed in such a way. He always took care with his appearance, choosing his clothes with care to look strong and in control. He would hate everyone being able to see him naked and vulnerable as a babe, his injuries in full view.

But of course he was unaware, and she could do nothing about it for him until Eir allowed him a bed.

If--- if it was the end, Frigga resolved to spread a sheet over him, so others would only see his face,
pale but little touched by the attack.

She thought of the energy cocoon shut off and the suppression of his pain withdrawn, and she had to dig her nails into her palms to keep control. She would not allow weakness, not now, not when Loki needed her most.

Thor was more perceptive than he once had been and frowned at her in concern. "You are upset by something, Mother. Something more than Loki's condition."

She inhaled a deep breath. "Your father – your father intends to tell the healers to withdraw their support and let your brother die. To – to punish him."

"What?" Thor asked, in shock and disbelief. "No, he can't."

"He can, Thor. I... I have threatened to divorce him if he goes through with it, but I – I can do little more than that. If he truly intends to enforce his decision...." Her voice faded on the words, and she pushed her fingers through the field to touch the back of Loki's hand and caress it gently. His skin was so cold…. He was not blue, but he might as well be. Or dead.

She closed her eyes, holding her lip between her teeth as she forced herself to take a normal breath.

"No, I will not allow it," Thor declared staunchly. "We can – we will take him somewhere else. Far away."

"He would not survive the journey," she told him, her own voice turned to sand in her throat, yet her eyes were wet as she stared at Loki, looking not just at his broken body, but the soul within. "You cannot see it, my son. But his life hangs by the slimmest of threads, shines with the dimmest of embers. He will not fight, letting the current take him where it wills. Perhaps," her voice was a ghost now. "Perhaps the king is right, but for the wrong reasons. Perhaps we should... let him go."

Thor’s voice was appalled. "Mother!"

"What is there for him? Truly?" she asked. "I had hoped, if he came home, to show him he remains part of our family and thereby bring him back to us. And now..." she shook her head, unable to find her voice for a moment, as tears pricked her eyes with heat again. Thor put a hand on her shoulder and she turned, leaned into him. "Now I know Loki saw more clearly than I. That he is no son to Odin, that there will be no mercy for him... Even if he wakes, he's lost to us... He will never – my little-- my little--"

Her voice choked in her throat as Thor's arms went around her. "Mother..."

She rested her head against his shoulder as the tears flowed under her eyelids and down her cheeks, and she gasped for breath, feeling as riven to the soul as she had that moment Odin had told her that Loki had fallen from the Bifrost. Except then at least she'd had a little hope that she might find him; but now, she could look right at him, body shattered and mind wandering far afield in shadowy places, and she knew he was doomed.

"Mother, we will not give up," Thor murmured, stroking her hair. "I have to believe there’s a way to bring him back to us. Whatever madness seized him, we can help him. And if I have to fight Father to stop him, I will, this I swear."

She sniffed and inhaled a deeper breath, raising her head to wipe her cheeks. "I could not bear it if you two fought, Thor."

He glanced at the quiescent form wrapped in its glowing cocoon and did not take back his oath. "I
did not lift Loki out of a pool of his own blood and carry him home to watch him die now.” He kissed her forehead. “Keep him safe. I will take care of this.”

As he left, he held out a hand to bring Mjolnir to him, and she bit her lip to keep from calling after him. Heart in her throat, she looked back to Loki, praying Thor might talk sense into his father without further grief.

tbc...
The entry hall mocked Thor. All those statues of past glory towered high above him, but the more he looked at them, the more he hated them. He hated what they represented, and more, he hated the obvious hypocrisy.

He stopped at the statue commemorating Bor’s victory over Svartalfheim. It was imposing and grand, but Thor knew the conquest had been bloody and terrible, and left much of Svartalfheim in ashes. He squirmed thinking of how little he would’ve cared before his visit to Midgard and experiencing Jane's bright fire and his own weakness – but was that not the point? He had been raised not to care, and it was wrong and unjust for Odin to change his mind and want Loki to die for doing exactly what these statues had shown him was the noble and glorious thing to do.

It was infuriating, and Thor gripped Mjolnir tightly, tempted to shatter that statue into a hundred pieces.

The sound of boots on the tile floor broke into his rage, and he looked toward the far end of the hall, where the giant doors had swung open from the throne room.

He saw his father, carrying Gungnir and resplendent in his golden armor and red cape approaching, trailed by four Einharjar. As soon as he saw Thor, his step paused, then he sent the guards away and came to meet Thor alone.

Thor didn’t let him speak first. "You made Mother cry," Thor accused.

Odin's lips tightened in a sort of flinch. "Loki—"

"No," Thor interrupted sharply, not wanting Odin to cast any more blame on others. "You did. She had hope until you snatched it away from her."

Odin ground the end of Gungnir into the stone floor. "There is no hope. You and your mother persist in believing there is something to save, but there is nothing. He is an enemy of Asgard, of Midgard, of every living creature in the Nine Realms. A monster."

"He’s my brother!" Thor shouted at him. "Your son. How can you give up on him so easily?"

"He is not my son!" Odin bellowed back.

Thor had expected that, from what Frigga had said, but the words still shocked and horrified him. "So he was right," Thor said, barely able to push the words out. "Over and over again on Midgard, I told him he’s my brother, I told him I love him still… but he never believed me, because he knows
all those times you told him you were his father, were a lie. He loved you, and you threw it away. And like Laufey before you, now he has no more use, you want to leave him to die."

Odin twitched at pairing him with Laufey, and returned, "I saved him, and he betrayed me, trying to destroy and conquer other Realms."

Thor hurled Mjolnir into Bor’s thigh. Odin flinched back and lifted Gungnir defensively. As Bor’s leg smashed, Thor exclaimed, “This has nothing to do with other Realms!” He caught Mjolnir again and heaved a breath, saying through gritted teeth, “You want him gone, so you don't have to look at your failure. Easier to pretend he never existed at all; easier to pretend he did not become what you made him.” He was pleased to see Odin flinch at that. “Well, he did exist, Father. And he is your son, even if you deny him now. And he’s my brother, and I will not abandon him.” He settled into a stance, Mjolnir held ready, and clenched his jaw. "If you want him dead, I will fight you."

He had never fought his own father before, nor had he previously imagined such a thing, but for this, he would not surrender.

"You would fight for him?" Odin demanded, incredulous. "He tried to murder you."

That was so distant from what Thor expected him to say, he stared, feeling as if some curtain had just been lifted. "Murder me? Is that the root of your fury? He attacked me, and you wish to punish him for that?"

Odin didn't answer.

Norns, was it true?

Thor took a moment to reformulate his thoughts and put away his anger. Give me your words, Brother, because I sorely need them.

Dampening his dry lips, Thor said, "You call him monster, but that’s what he thinks he is. Because you kept a secret from him that struck him to the heart. He rejects us, because he feels rejected by us. In his rage, he attacked me and Midgard. Maybe he truly hates me, I no longer know.” It hurt to think it was true, that Loki rejected their bond as brothers. But Thor would keep the hope that Loki’s heart would mend along with his body.

Thor tried to keep his voice calm. “None of that matters now. He’s broken and bleeding and suffering. If you want him punished for what he did, he is being punished most sorely. His bones were shattered in so many places Eir could not count all the shards. He will be in pain for months or- or years to come, and may not ever be as he was.” Thor had to stop as his voice frayed, imagining Loki never able to rise from his bed, and inhaled to start over. “Because of the trauma from his skull fracture, there may be damage more significant still, and that we will know only if he wakes."

Odin's gaze flickered away, and his lips pressed together, as if he hadn't heard the full catalog of Loki’s injuries. Thor had his first hope that maybe Odin hadn't entirely cut Loki from his heart after all.

"Father, look on him," Thor pleaded. "I carried him from Midgard, my armor awash in his blood, and I feared every second it would be his last. He may yet die. Without your help." He choked out a laugh. "You and he are in strange agreement. He told me, with what might be his final words, to let go. To let him die. But I lost him once, to the void between Realms, to madness, and I will not lose him again."
He fixed his eyes on Odin, pleading, but hopefully making clear his determination as well. Push this and he would fight, and hold nothing back. Odin would still win in the end, since Thor was not such a fool to imagine the Odinforce would not triumph in a real fight, but in that victory he would lose everything else. Thor was betting Odin would know Thor wasn’t bluffing.

He did, and he wasn’t willing to fight. “Very well,” Odin said abruptly. “You and your mother’s staunch defense will be my mercy. As you say, his injuries shall serve as his punishment. But you and Frigga are blind to the truth of him: he is not the boy he once was. His heart has grown twisted with malice and lust for conquest. He serves himself and our enemies, not Asgard. Nothing good shall come from this mercy, in the end.”

He turned from Thor, heading back the way he came and not toward the rooms of healing.

Thor didn’t try to call after him, but when he was gone, he said, “One of us is blind, Father, but it’s not us. We’ll bring him back.”

Those brave words proved too optimistic, as he returned to the healer’s hall. They couldn’t bring Loki back; he would have to wake on his own, and he showed no sign of doing so yet.

Loki floated inside the golden energy field, as if were a cocoon, and Thor could only pray that he would emerge renewed. But he didn’t like how gaunt Loki’s face was, especially with his hair trimmed so short, and Thor remembered Loki having more muscle on him before his ‘death.’ Worse, his skin was bruised and swollen oddly, he barely breathed, and his usually-restless fingers never twitched. It was unnerving, as if Thor looked on a preserved corpse, not his brother’s living body.

Frigga glanced at him as he joined her. “You saw the king?”

“Did. He said these injuries,” he nodded toward Loki’s frail, broken form, “will be punishment enough. He will not attempt to withdraw aid.” She nodded, briefly closing her eyes in relief that Odin had given way. More quietly, trying to keep Loki from hearing though Thor had been told Loki was so deeply unconscious he knew nothing outside his cocoon, he said, “He said Loki was a monster. Denied him. Why is he being so cold?”

“I suppose because he knows where desire for conquest and power leads,” she answered, not looking away from Loki as if the strength of her gaze could bring him back.

“Because Bor destroyed Svartalfheim?” Thor asked, though it wasn’t much of a question.

“Because,” she paused and then corrected him, "Odin himself conquered. It was not Bor who united the Nine Realms.”

“But,” Thor frowned and set Mjolnir down, “Grandfather had victories over all of them. That’s what I learned. And Father was the one who brought peace after all the wars under Bor.”

Her lips twitched in a sort of smile that Thor thought very reminiscent of Loki. “That is the story, yes.”

Thor glanced at Loki and considered a lifetime of believing himself Aesir and discovering it was a story. “It’s not true.”

“There are always secrets, my son. Especially when people do things they later are ashamed of doing.”

Thor mulled that over. “So Father was the true conqueror.”
“Not that Bor did not do his share of battle, of course,” Frigga allowed. “Odin learned from him. But… he grew tired of the wars and when he had a new son,” she touched Thor’s arm and smiled, “he wanted you to know peace.”

He shrugged her off, not mollified. “Then why did he teach us war?”

She lifted her brows. “Because a king may not always choose when war comes, or be able to avoid it, Thor.”

He supposed that was true, but it was unsatisfactory. The glories of Bor and war were still celebrated, even if the peace of Odin was, too. “And yet Loki genuinely believed destroying Jotunheim would be--” He almost said ‘right’ but he didn’t think Loki had thought that, not even when he’d had the Bifrost spun up. He hadn’t thought of right or wrong at all. “-- something Father would approve. So he knew what Father did.”

She grimaced, and glanced back at Loki. “He knew some of it. The histories could not all be altered, and much is not a secret, so much as not celebrated. So yes, I suppose he believed he was proving himself loyal, while instead he proved himself," she hesitated to choose her words, "beholden to old ideas of conquest and destruction.”

Thor snorted. “Though he’d been the one least in favor of it before. He cautioned me to leave on Jotunheim, not start the war.” He shook his head, heart pained with regret. “If I’d done as he suggested, how much of all this could have been avoided?”

She sighed and patted his arm. “You were reckless, but this is the fault of others far more than you: Loki himself, Odin, me…If we had not let the truth fester, it would not have emerged in such a shocking way. We tried to mitigate the damage, but too little, too late. Seeds were sown for this long ago.”

He opened his mouth to ask why she’d kept the secret of Loki’s heritage for so long, but then changed his mind, on seeing her face, pale with worry and regret. This was not time for recriminations or blame. He wrapped her in his embrace, offering what comfort he could while they waited.

Frigga wished her tongue were not quite so agile, and the truth not forbidden, so she could tell all of it to Thor. Loki would have noticed her evasions, but Thor was still learning the unfortunate lesson that neither of his parents were the paragons of virtue he had thought.

He would have to learn the truth, and the time was coming rather more urgently than ever before, but she was also in no mood to fight with Odin about it. Loki needed her protection for now, so the truth, as always, would have to wait.

Her hand pushed through the field to touch Loki’s, needing that contact to reassure herself he lived.

Other movement drew her attention, as Eir and two assistants entered. They bowed their heads politely before moving to the monitors to examine the results. Frigga could see enough to know he was beginning to heal. It was slower than it should be, but at least the process had begun for improvement.

The healers murmured together, and Frigga let the sound wash over her, watching Loki’s face. His
chest barely rose for his breaths, and it was difficult to match hers to his, they were so slow. But still she tried, finding it calming. He would heal. He would wake up. She had kept her hope when he had been completely lost from sight and Odin and Heimdall and all the rest had told her he was dead. She would not lose hope now.

“All-Mother?” Eir’s quiet voice stirred her from her thoughts. She found the healer had come to stand beside her, and her expression held something new and grave. “If you both would come to the monitors, I have something to show you.”

Her chest tightened with sudden anxiety and she exchanged a glance with Thor, as she withdrew her hand from Loki’s to follow the healer and hear her report.

tbc
Frigga stood beside Eir in front of the displays, with Thor on her other side.

“Apprentice Leidl found something disturbing on the detailed scan,” Eir said. Frigga expected her to indicate the brain scan, but instead she gestured to a view of his legs, pulling a more detailed image out before them. “This is his right leg. You see the current fracture here.”

Frigga swallowed back her grief at the image of the ragged break at the knee and nodded. “Yes, of course. He was struck with immense force.”

"Indeed. But as you can see it was not the first time," Eir said and gestured the image wider to show greater detail. "Look here. Faint, healed, but his bone retains the mark of a previous fracture."

"In battle…?" Thor started.

But Eir shook her head. "No, my prince. I have records of all the prince’s injuries before. It is possible there is an error for one, but we found several for which there are no records. They are recent enough to retain a distinct shadow of healing."

"What are you saying?" Thor demanded, then his eyes widened in realization. "His fall from the Bifrost hurt him so badly?"

"They are not from before so must be after," Eir confirmed, her words too careful. And she pulled another image before Frigga’s gaze. At first Frigga thought it was a duplicate or mirror-image of the first until she understood what she was seeing. Frigga’s gaze snapped to meet Eir’s, and the healer nodded with grim agreement.

Frigga looked again at the images. There were marks in his bones, remnants of breaks no more than two years old. The two on his legs, mirroring each other, as if some giant had snapped them in two. There was nothing natural about the location or the precision of the healed breaks.

"He fell with such force?" Thor asked, brows drawing together in distress in confusion.

Frigga put a hand on Thor's arm. "No, my son, look again. That isn't what these show."

"What then?" he asked.

She didn’t answer at first as Eir paged through to show her the others. “My poor child,” she whispered. Her eyes pricked with tears as she turned to look at him, floating unconscious in his healing cocoon. Sniffing, she inhaled deeply to settle herself again and answered Thor, “These were no accident. Someone or something applied enough force to his limbs to break his bones. Not once, but multiple times."

Thor turned horrified eyes to the scan. "No, but how? What are-- I--- This cannot be….""

"After he fell from the Bifrost, someone tortured him," Frigga confirmed, her voice barely emerging from her throat, as it clenched in pain. "They left no scars on his skin, but his bones still keep a record."

"Tortured him?" Thor repeated in blank dismay. "But who?" He blinked and frowned. "The Chitauri?"
"Perhaps," Frigga said. She did not think so, as the Chitauri were historically foot soldiers for greater powers. Nor did they have the ability to hide Loki from her sight. He had only appeared as the attack had begun, away from whatever shield had covered him. She had thought he had done it himself but it was plain now, it had been someone else hiding their foul work.

"Even if he were weakened by the void," Eir mused, frowning at the scans herself, "this is beyond most of mortal reach. To break and heal in this way, would require advanced technology, or at minimum, great strength."

"Like Banner," Thor said. "But without anger. To do such harm deliberately."

"It is malice. Evil with a purpose," Frigga agreed.

"To what purpose?" Thor asked, frowning in confusion and dismay. "And who?"

Frigga snapped the display closed and wrapped her fist around the spark to carry it with her. "We will find out. But first, I have a report to make to the king."

She stalked the corridors, anger a burning coal lodged beneath her ribs, as she sought Odin. She found him in council with Tyr and Hogun. "Gentlemen, you will excuse us," she said, staring at Odin, who had the wisdom to look alarmed by her re-appearance.

Both left with a bow, seeing she was in no mood for anything but the most basic pleasantries.

When silence fell in the wake of the door closing behind them, he greeted, "My wife." His tone slipped at the end, near a question. when she didn’t speak immediately, he offered, "Thor told you my decision, I believe? That the healers may continue their task."

"They would always have continued their task," she said flatly, "either with your approval or in spite of it. Especially once Eir found this." She thrust out her hand and pulled out the images into full display above the council table.

"You will look at this," Frigga demanded and flicked the top image in Odin's direction, then the next, until he faced them all. "Eir found this in Loki’s scans. Some great power deliberately broke his bones and let them heal, at least eight times, while he was lost in the dark between Realms. His bones show a record of malice and cruelty. Of torture."

He looked at her instead, brows drawing together as the import of her words sunk in. "Torture? Nonsense," he insisted, "it is a trick..."

She slammed her hands on the tabletop. "Look at it," she insisted. "It’s the truth. Something we would never have known if you'd had your way-- if you had let him die to punish him, without query or investigation as would be accorded the lowest Aesir. So tell me, All-Father, is it only Jotnar hostages, who are sentenced to death without defense?"

"That is not so!" he objected, but she was having enough of his evasions and denials.

"No? Look at the scans. They tell a different story than the one you told yourself."

He finally looked. At first he seemed only dutiful and full of doubt, but as he paged through the scans, he grew more grave until his hand dropped away from the display at the sight of Loki’s slack and pale face, limned in orange light. "This... " he started, but his voice failed. His hand rose to cover his mouth and stroked his beard. She was glad the image shocked him and reminded him of who it was he was condemning -- not some nebulous fear or legendary monster or remnant of ancient failures. It was Loki, his son, who lay close to death.
“This is far worse than I thought,” he admitted more softly, looking down with a shadow of regret across his features. “How could that mortal hurt him so badly?”

Her temper cooled some at the evidence that he felt pity. “It was not the mortals who hurt him the first time. Someone or something powerful held him, hid him from us, and did this.”

He shook his head a little, more in sorrowful agreement than opposition. He raised his eye back to the image of Loki’s face. “I knew,” he murmured. His free hand curled on the surface of the table. “I knew he did not act alone. But Loki seemed too angry to be other than willing ally.”

“It was not so simple. The truth rarely is, my lord. For Loki most of all. How have you not learned that in all this time?”

He shook his head in dismay, beard brushing the collar of his surcoat. “I did not see truly.”

“You saw the past overlaid on the present,” she said. “But the past does not repeat so neatly.” She could offer no absolution. He had, indeed, believed the worst, and it was for him to make amends. She could not, and would not, do it for him.

Without looking at her, he murmured, “What else did they do? To bend him to another’s rule of him, what more did they do?”

She could only shake her head, but she was afraid he was right. There was more. “We will not know until Loki rouses. Or perhaps if Eir finds another scar.” She glanced at the image showing the damage to the side of his head, the thin crack that would likewise scar. Such a tiny thing to be so terrifying.

But Odin was still thinking of the unknown perpetrators of the first harm. “Who would dare to torment my son? How would they risk my wrath and do this?”

“Was it a risk?” It was a reasonable question, though meant to cut. Would he want to avenge this attack on a son he was claiming now, but had refused not long ago?

He got her point, offended. “Yes, of course! This,” he gathered the images together with a wave of his hand, “shall not go unanswered.”

“They hid well enough it very nearly did,” she reminded him, not impressed by the vengeful declaration. “Loki dropped in their lap, already wanting death.” He twitched, lips flattening at the reminder. She remembered when Odin had come to her, to confess that Loki had not ‘fallen’ as was the story, but that he’d deliberately chosen to fall. He’d held her as she’d cried, his beard wet with his own tears, whispering that he was sorry he’d failed to save Loki.

It was the only time she’d seen his grief. That guilt and sorrow had been locked away, hardening his heart further when Loki reappeared, a creature of rage and war.

She added, “Was he not a perfect weapon to point at Midgard, weakened by the fall physically, and mentally by the secret that cut all his moorings to himself? I wonder they had to torture him at all, to do their bidding.”

It occurred to her that perhaps they hadn’t done it for that purpose, but only for sport. There were beings in the universe who found pleasure in such evil, though it made her ill to imagine such a thing happening to her son.

He stilled and his brow creased. “Midgard? That was, I think, only relevant for the Space Gem. That force was never enough to conquer Midgard entirely; Loki alone might have embraced such a
tactic of chaos and destruction, but if there is another? No. It was meant to fail. The question becomes, why?” His gaze turned outward, as he pondered. “I wonder if we were meant to find this.” He gestured at the scans. “If I am meant to know they broke him and sent him as their hound against Midgard.”

That hurt, thinking of Loki being used in such a way. “Perhaps they failed to realize we would find this out.”

But Odin shook his head. "I hope so, but better to prepare for the threat."

She nodded agreement. The king had to plan for a competent enemy, while hoping for the best. “Someone powerful who hates Asgard.” Which didn’t narrow the possibilities very much, if she were honest. The tesseract was a prize for almost everyone, and the list of Asgard’s enemies was long and ancient.

“I must find out who.” He stood, energized by this suggestion of a threat.

She held up a hand. “But first, my lord, come see your son.”

He glanced at the image of Loki’s face and agreed.

tbc...
Thor stayed in Loki’s room while his mother went to confront Odin again over this news. Thor wasn’t sure what she intended to accomplish by doing it, but he wouldn’t want to be in his father’s chair when she was this angry.

Thor was angry, but it was a simmer right now. He wanted to be angry at his father, and he was, but he was far more angry at the mysterious entity that had hurt Loki before his arrival on Midgard. He kept thinking back to the confrontations on Midgard with Loki, wondering if this explained why Loki had seemed so unstable and conflicted.

“Who controls the would-be king?”

He’d said that, knowing Loki wasn’t planning the attack alone. He and Odin had both known that, before Thor had gone to Midgard. But they had never stopped to think why. Why would Loki ally himself with anyone to conquer Midgard? Why did he care about Midgard at all? Thor had tried to explain it to himself that Loki’s resentments of him had led him to want to take it from Thor, but wouldn’t that end in Loki wanting to destroy it, not conquer it? So then he wanted to be its king, embittered by the realization that his blood kept him off Asgard’s throne. But Loki was too smart not to know his would be a short reign even if he had somehow succeeded against all of Midgard’s defenders, since Odin himself could have come to take him down himself, if necessary. So Thor had decided it was simply madness. Loki would never make sense, because the broken Bifrost had driven Loki mad, and that was all.

But that was not all. If there was madness, it had been inflicted on him by another. No one needed to torture a willing ally.

Thor put his hand through the field as he’d seen Frigga do, to touch Loki’s pale, cool hand. What else did they do to you? Are they the ones who gave you those hateful words? Some were your own, I know that, but some were so strange…. so wrong. And when I implored you to stop, you wanted to, but you said it was too late.

Why didn’t you tell me there was a monster holding a leash on you? We could’ve fought them together, Loki.

Thor looked at Loki’s sleeping face and mourned the change that could have been. If only Loki had told Thor what was wrong. If only Thor had stopped him earlier, Hulk wouldn’t have done this.

He remembered the whispered plea to let go, and Loki doing just that at the Bifrost. The parallel made him wonder: had Loki intended this? His face had been desperate when he’d said it was too late. Thor believed the emotion had been real at that moment. If he’d believed it was too late to stop what was underway, yet he’d also known Thor was right and the Chitauri defeat was inevitable, would Loki have made the same calculation again, that he’d made at the Bifrost. Did he believe it was better to die and escape the trap? Or worse, perhaps he’d been terrified of returning to whoever hurt him, having failed the task he was given, and had preferred death to that possibility?

Thor rubbed his face with his free hand, trying to put the dark thoughts aside.

They would find out the truth when Loki roused. They’d find the one who’d hurt him, they’d learn the plan, and they could help Loki recover here where he was safe.
There was the sound of footsteps in the anteroom, to heavy to be Frigga returning alone. Thor pulled his hand from the healing field and turned to confront whoever dared pass the guards outside. If this was Volstagg come to pay his respects, Thor would have to send him away. He had no stomach for being invited to carouse when Loki lay so ill.

But it was not Volstagg, it was Odin, stepping through the archway with Frigga at his heels.

His heart lurched at this betrayal, that she would bring him here. He held out a hand, to feel Mjolnir’s handle slap into it instantly as he walked the paces toward him to plant himself in the way.

Odin didn’t notice at first, his single eye staring at Loki enshrouded in the glowing orange-tinted energy. His lips parted and moved without speaking for a moment, before he lowered his gaze and noticed Thor before him.

He raised a hand. “Peace, my son. I mean no harm,” he murmured.

“You mean no harm?” Thor repeated incredulously. “You did. Now you brazenly enter here, as if he matters to you?”

“He does matter to me, Thor.”

“Does he? Until when? Until he wakes up and says something you don’t like, and you decide he’s not worthy of your affection again?” Thor demanded. “You should go. You have no right to be here, after you were so cruel.”

Frigga spoke, her soft voice cutting through his anger. “Thor. Let him pass.”

He didn’t want to but he wouldn’t defy on her on this. He drew away, clearing Odin’s route to Loki.

Moving more slowly, Odin came up to the bedside where he looked down at Loki’s face. “So quiet,” Odin whispered. “So still. How strange and unlike him.” He lifted his head again. “Eir. When will he wake?”

The Healer approached. “I do not know that we will, my king. Not soon, I think.” She glanced at Frigg and her lips made a soft smile of sympathy before addressing them all, “I fear, Prince Loki may not find his way back at all. His spirit travels afield, nearly untethered to his bones.”

Thor gaped at that, hoping she was being poetic for effect, a quick look at his mother’s face revealed a deep worry as she stared blankly at Loki to examine him with senses beyond sight. After a moment, she swallowed hard and closed her eyes in pain. “This is worse than it was when he arrived.”

Thor stammered, “But -- but how can that be? He still lives.”

“Lives, but does not fight,” Odin added heavily, and leaned on Gungnir. “He awaits only the snap of the last tether.”

“So you get what you want after all.” The bitter words snapped out of Thor, unstoppable. “He’s dying and you will stand there and let it happen.”

“No,” Odin countered. Thor stared at him, rendered speechless. “I will not.” He glanced at Eir. “If I use the Odinforce to retether his spirit, is it best to do so in this form or his true skin?”

The healer considered, while Thor could not believe that Odin meant it. Did he really intend to save
Loki’s life -- or only pretend to do so, to re-ingratiate himself with Frigga and Thor, so he could protest that he had tried while he let Loki slip away? Thor hated that he could not trust that Odin meant no harm, but after today, how could he not?

“As he is, I think, All-Father,” she answered. “A reversion might weaken him too much.”

Odin nodded once, but when he tried to step closer to the bed, Thor grabbed his shoulder to hold him back, “Swear to me,” Thor demanded, somewhat breathless with his own anxiety, “swear to me, that you intend only to help him.”

“Thor, it’s all right,” Frigga promised, but Thor didn’t take his eyes off his father.

“Swear it, and I will let you.”

“What oath would satisfy you, my son?” Odin asked.

“One you mean to keep,” Thor retorted. “One unlike your oath to protect him and be his father, before.”

Odin looked down, but Thor didn’t entirely believe the regret. “I was angry, Thor,” he explained. “He caused much death and destruction. Not even my own child can be spared for such villainous acts.”

Thor remembered his own exile - difficult as it had been at the time, he felt that actually had been sparing him, in comparison to the reaction for Loki’s deeds. But this wasn’t the time to argue about that. “And do you feel that way now?”

“Now we know another harmed him. What was his own will is in question. As is how much threat Asgard faces, which only he can answer.”

Frigga moved between them, laying her fingers on Thor’s hand where he held Mjolnir. “Thor, let him bring Loki back to us. He’s the only one who can.”

“You can,” Thor insisted.

She shook her head once. “I can call for him, and perhaps he might answer me and return on his own, but I cannot bring him back.”

“Are you sure we should?” Thor asked. When she jerked, dismay flashing over her face, he rushed to clarify, “I mean, so soon. Why not let him rest and heal first?”

“He will heal more swiftly with mind and body and soul aligned,” Frigga told him. “If he can awaken, Eir can send him to normal rest. But right now, he dwells in a twilight and may linger there until he slips away.”

Her voice faded at the last and Thor’s heart ached. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, drawing her tight, and moved out of Odin’s way. “Fine. Help him. Be at least a king, if you will not be a father.”

Odin’s lips parted as if he wanted to argue, but turned back to concentrate on Loki. His hand tightened on Gungnir and the tip began to glow. That glow brightened until the head of the spear seemed ablaze, and Thor could feel the power thrumming in his own blood and bones. It seemed to echo within the bowels of Asgard itself and deeper still within the structure of the universe itself, the borders of life and death.
Thor had to set down Mjolnir as he found himself trembling, at the echo of that power running through him. He stared into the raw power his father controlled and felt the echo of awe, the unfettered Odinforce lighting up *everything*.

Yet within that power something else was happening -- tiny sparks were coalescing, green and gold fragments merging together and turning into larger flames. As they joined, their brightness eclipsed even the Odinforce as Odin raised Gungnir and shouted his command.

Thor had to look away as the brilliance seared his eyes like lightning, and when he looked again, all seemed normal: the orange-field still surrounded Loki, Odin stood motionless as the glow at the tip of Gungnir faded away.

But Loki seemed…. better. Thor couldn’t quite identify what had changed, he was too thin, too pale, too still -- but he looked *alive*, where before he had looked already dead.

“*It worked?*” he asked, having to clear his throat.

Frigga slipped her hand inside the field to touch Loki’s forehead, and turned a smile on Odin and Thor. “*Yes. It worked.*” She glanced at the display. “*Eir, there is more activity.*”

Eir checked and nodded. “*Indeed, Allmother.*”

She had barely confirmed when Loki’s eyelids twitched. “*He’s waking up!*” Thor exclaimed.

“We must put the field down for him to wake,” Eir said and slowly lowered him to the bed beneath. “*I will restore it when he sleeps.*”

The orange light disappated from around his head, letting the skin show its true pallor. He was also making a sound, a soft mew in his throat, and Thor looked to Eir. “*He’s in pain.*”

“One moment,’ she said and touched some controls. The wrenching sound stopped and his eyes flickered more strongly, finally opening about half. Thor wasn’t sure what, if anything, he was actually seeing. He didn’t show any awareness.

“*Hello, sweetheart,*” Frigga murmured and drew closer so he could see her face without moving his head. “*You’ve been hurt, but now you’re home and everything is going to be fine. Hold on, my little one.*”

He blinked again and this time focused on her. His lips twitched into a faint smile, and Thor was relieved.

“*Do you know your name?*” Frigga asked him, and Thor tensed as Loki didn’t answer right away.

But it seemed to be his voice, or perhaps the pain in his chest, keeping him from speaking, as he gathered up strength and mouthed “Loki”.

“*That’s right,*” she smiled, at him. “*do you know me?*”

“Ma--” he started to say, forehead knitting, and his eyes squeezed shut. Shallow gasping breaths of agony were all he could manage.

Frigga's smile at his recognition fled as she caressed his cheek. “*Hush, love, be at ease. It will pass...*” Her touch did not seem to console him.

“*Put him out,*” Thor ordered Eir, roughly. “*He hurts. It’s too much.*”
Without waiting for anyone else to agree, Eir tapped the controls and in a moment, Loki’s eyes closed. The field surrounded him again and the tension drained out of his face and neck, as he fell asleep.

“He will sleep now,” she pronounced. “It is best he rest in quiet.”

“Then we will go,” Frigga murmured. She brushed her fingers across his forehead before she withdrew. “I will be back soon,” she whispered.

Thor took the hint, grabbing Mjolnir in one hand, and offered his mother his arm before Odin stirred to follow.

tbc...
In the outer waiting hall, Frigga poured water for herself and for the other two. She had to keep her back to them, as she attempted to regain her composure. But hearing Loki struggle to speak to her and the pain being so overwhelming he was helpless against it, was tearing at her heart.

Behind her, Thor spoke, his voice subdued, “Was his spirit truly almost lost? Was it wrong to pull him back?”

“It was adrift. As to the other, I will not profess to understand the ways of the Norns,” Odin answered, his voice a low weary murmur, “but unless I were certain he was destined for Valhalla, I would say it was better to bring him back.”

“He was hurt in battle! How could it not be?” Thor protested.

“And if he ended in Niflheim instead?” Odin asked, and Frigga’s head snapped around and she nearly dropped her cup, struck by that new horror that had not occurred to her before.

Hela’s imprisonment left her able to interact with the dead. Had Loki’s spirit gone there, she would have found him. Who knew what sort of torment she could deliver upon him. Worse, if -- when -- she were ever freed, Frigga had no doubt that Hela, in her spite, would drag her adopted brother back across as her thrall.

At least when Loki had fallen off the Bifrost, Frigga had been able to confirm he had not touched the Paths of the Dead. It had given her hope that he was still alive, even if she couldn’t find him.

“We cannot know, Thor,” Odin finished, his voice weary. “And not knowing, I would not risk it.”

“Truly?” Thor challenged. “Why not? You thought he deserved it, did you not?”

Odin smashed Gungnir’s haft down on the paving stones, making Frigga jump. “He attempted to conquer Midgard, killed mortals by the bushel, and attempted to destroy Jotunheim! Do not attempt to make his deeds nothing by your pity. That he suffers his reckoning and that I have softened my stance, does not mean he did not deserve a reckoning at all.”

“Father--”

Frigga was about to try to make peace between them, when she saw they were no longer alone.

“No,” Odin refused sharply. “Enough. I have explained myself; it is done.”

“You haven’t explained anything,” Thor retorted, but was interrupted by a Frigga’s touch.

“Thor.”

He turned to see Eir had entered. The healer was silent at first, her expression disapproving.

“All-Father,” she greeted first, “All-Mother. My prince.”

“What news, Eir?” Frigga invited.

“He rests. Now that we know he can awaken, I intend to keep him in deep sleep for at least two days and accelerate the healing as much as I find safe. You may visit him in this time; however, I will not permit the hostility present earlier,” she declared with soft but unyielding command. “He
has always been sensitive, and I am concerned tension between you will make him anxious. Any agitation will cause him pain and perhaps further damage, so everyone near him must be calm and considerate of what he may sense of your emotional state.”

Thor opened his mouth to object then shut it again, looking down and feeling ashamed. “I understand.”

But Eir wasn’t finished with them yet, facing Odin without a qualm. “All-Father, so there is understanding between us, while my respect for you is vast, I would not have obeyed your directive to withhold my aid, if you had given it. I am a healer, not your executioner.”

He jerked at the final harsh word, but after a moment, he nodded to her. “You are correct, Healer. I was in error, and I should not have suggested such a thing. I am grateful for your care and attention to Loki.”

Eir bowed her head to them and took her leave. Silence fell in her wake, all three of them rebuked.

Odin pulled in a breath. “Very well. If he will not wake soon to tell us what happened to him, we must find other information. Thor, you are to return to Midgard.”

“But, Father, if Loki should --”

“He is out of danger of death, Thor. The tesseract must not remain in mortal hands. They have already proven themselves incapable of resisting its allure, and will draw further danger to themselves.”

The tesseract, yes, Frigga knew that was important, but she thought not the most important item Thor should bring back to them. “Also, retrieve that scepter Loki used,” Frigga added. “Perhaps some clue to its origins may be found in it. It was not a weapon of his devising.”

She knew that from her brief touch before his invasion had begun. When he’d laughed at her coldly and shut her away, but she’d still been thrilled to touch him at all and know he lived. But there had been another power with him, some bright new thread entwined with his that shone golden. With the revelation of torture, she was intensely curious to find out what it was and where it had come from.

Odin nodded agreement. “Yes. Take the Warriors Three and Lady Sif with you, and do not accept refusal. These objects of power belong to Asgard, and I will have them back.”

Thor cast his eyes toward the doors behind which Loki lay but then nodded his acceptance. “I understand.”

He kissed her cheek and she touched his dearly loved face, promising what he was about to ask, “I will care for him. Have a care for yourself, too. They may not choose to give up these prizes,” she warned him.

He barked a laugh. “No, I doubt they will. But it will be done. Father.” With a respectful nod, he took his leave.

When the door shut behind him, Odin released a breath. “I appreciate his fierce defense of Loki, but not his stubborn resistance.”

“I surely know no one in this family who is goat-headed stubborn,” she returned, almost smiling.

He looked her in the face and held out his hand. In his palm was her ring. “Am I yet forgiven?” he
asked.

She hesitated and folded his fingers back around it, her momentary humor fled. “No. When Loki is awake and with us again, perhaps. But now all I see is the helpless child you wished to let die.” Her eyes filled with tears. “You said that, even knowing what she would do to him, if she found him beyond death.”

He knew who she was talking about. She’d been on both their minds, a secret kept between them more fiercely than even the secret of Loki’s ancestry. Bound by spell, bolstered by ignorance, it was a secret that now loomed with the threat of Loki’s death.

Odin dampened his lips and lowered his hand to tuck the ring carefully in his tunic pocket. “I did not consider that, at the time. I was hasty in my anger, too concerned he was following in her footsteps to bloody conquest.”

She shook her head, not interested in his excuses. “She must loathe him, that you chose a Jotunn changeling child, over her. She will tear him to pieces and make him into her thrall for all time, if she ever gets ahold of him.”

He nodded once, in sad and weary acknowledgment that she was right. “I will not let her, Frigga.”

“I want to believe you,” she whispered, looking at him and blinking back the wet heat in her eyes. “But I did not marry the pitiless conqueror, and I cannot bear to see him return. You may keep my ring until his shadow has been banished once again.”

She turned, and awaited his attempt to call her back, but perhaps he knew that she would not go, so he kept silent. She could feel his eye on her as she reached the door, and she heard him draw breath as if to speak. But he said nothing, so she slipped through the door to return to the one who needed her.

---

Thor didn’t have much to say as he gathered his friends and headed for the Bifrost. He explained shortly that they were being sent to Midgard.

He didn’t realize how preoccupied he was behaving until Fandral touched his arm. “Thor? Could you let us know what’s happening? The rumor --”

“Loki was dead, then he wasn’t,” Sif finished for him, “and now I heard you carried him, and he was dying? How does he fare?”

Thor’s mind returned the memory of Loki in his arms, the feel of it all wrong. “He was dying,” he answered, voice rough. “Father said his soul was barely housed in his flesh. The Odinforce brought him back, but he now lies asleep to heal. As best he can, at least,” he added. “We do not know how fully he will recover-- his injuries are severe.”

“How?” Volstagg demanded. “Loki is such a slippery devil, I can’t see how anything caught him at all!”

He meant the words to be jesting, Thor thought so he took no offense, but found nothing to smile at. “One named Banner, who transforms into a giant beast, slammed him into the ground until everything shattered.”

Fandral drew a sharp breath of dismay, while Hogun and Sif exchanged looks.

“Ah,” Volstagg said, now much subdued. “Poor lad.”
Thor cleared his throat, trying to force himself to a less dour mood. “I must retrieve two objects of power I had to leave behind when I carried him home. You four are coming with me to impress upon the mortals that Odin All-Father will not be refused.”

“And if they do refuse?” Hogun asked.

“We are sent to retrieve them,” Thor said, and that was all the answer they needed.

“Hopefully they’ll be reasonable,” Sif said.

Thor thought of Nicholas Fury and grimaced. He would hope so, but not expect it. “They used the tesseract and drew danger upon themselves. They are curious and quick, but like children, rush into danger, unwise in the ways of the greater worlds.”

“We will follow where you lead us,” Fandral promised and touched the hilt of his sword.

At the Observatory, which was still unfinished, though the mechanism had been replaced, they met Heimdall, standing with his great sword before him. He gave a nod to Thor. “My prince.”

“Father sends us to retrieve the tesseract and Loki’s scepter,” he said. “How close can you get us?”

Heimdall’s golden eyes sought the far distance before flicking back to Thor. “They sit together but are in transit. You will need assistance.”

Thor wanted to swear. The mortals had already taken them and tried to hide them away. “Send us to Tony Stark then.”

“As you wish.” Heimdall turned and stepped up onto the control platform.

It was odd having no roof overhead as the system whirled and the power built, but as the Bifrost snatched him away, he saw the gleam of the city beneath him, and smiled.

The Bifrost slammed them down on the landing platform he’d taken Loki away from, not long ago.

Tony Stark was already there, half in armor, watching from within the glass. He lifted his eyebrows, noticing the warriors accompanying Thor, but waved them to come in.

“Thor, buddy, you brought guests.” He smiled at Sif, who returned it politely. “Come in, welcome to Stark Tower. I’m Tony Stark.”

“Sif,” she nodded her head to him, and he snapped his fingers.

“Right! I know who you are. You were all in New Mexico with Coulson, I saw the report. Well, come in, make yourselves at home, mi casa and all that,” he waved a hand behind him to the large space, including the long bar area.

“What brings you back?” Stark asked Thor. “I figured -- well, Romanoff said that she didn’t think you’d be back for awhile because your crazy ass brother was-- wasn’t going to make it.”

“He still lives,” Thor answered.

“Uh, I guess I’m glad for your sake?” Tony said, “and don’t hammer me if I also hope that you all keep a tighter leash on him. You know, for Earth’s sake.”
Thor cast a glance toward the wide windows and the damaged buildings he could see from this high vantage, and sighed. “You should know, during the examination by our healers, they discovered that before he came to Midgard, some other … entity had broken his bones in what she said was an act of deliberate torture.”

His friends, who had drawn near to listen to the story, exchanged looks at the news and Fandral mouthed, “Torture?”

Stark was less dismayed. He frowned. “Really? He seemed pretty with it, honestly. A bit nuts, but not like he was programmed. Not like what he did to Barton anyway.”

“We don’t know what was done to him. Or why. And he can’t answer. So to that end, my father has dispatched us to retrieve the tesseract and Loki’s scepter, which were left here in your keeping.”

“Well… not in my keeping,” Stark demurred. “I tried to keep them, but SHIELD was not impressed by me saying ‘finders keepers’. They took both, yesterday.”

“I need them back.”

“I’m sure you want them but--”

Thor cut him off. “You don’t understand. The scepter Loki used was not his own, it may have clues to the one who hurt him and directed this attack on your world. Whether Loki chose his path or it was chosen for him, make no mistake, there was another hand that sent him here, Stark.”

“I put a nuke in his face, I think it’s done.”

“No.” The look on Stark’s face at that denial would’ve been funny another time. Volstagg snickered to his left.

Thor explained, “You destroyed the Chitauri strike force, but I do not believe you touched the leader. One able to keep my brother from the sight of Asgard for at least a year would not have been unwise enough to be close to a portal of that size. I do not think it’s done, not at all.”

Stark turned away and blew out a breath. “No? Well, that’s just great.” He wandered to the bar, pulled out a bottle but put it back without opening it. “What is it you want from me?”

“You can find them for us.”

“I probably can,” Stark allowed. “Why don’t you take the glow stick, and leave us the tesseract?”

Thor gave him a look. “You disapproved of Fury’s creation of secret weapons, as I recall.”

“Well sure, before aliens invaded us and wrecked shit! He was right - we’re outgunned against what’s out there.”

Sif glided nearer, drawing Stark’s attention. “Your people rapidly advance, Tony Stark, but you are not ready to face the powers out there. Not yet. The great star empires are kept from your world by the threat of Asgard and your relative insignificance, but if it is known you possess the tesseract, they will come for it.”

“That is what drew Loki here in the first place,” Thor reminded him.

“Great star empires,” Stark murmured, a wistful smile briefly on his lips, before he wiped it away.
“All right. You have a point. But only because it makes me mad that they snatched it out from under me.”

Thor patted his shoulder. “Thank you, my friend. Let us search for these artifacts together.”
Scepter'd

Thor waited on the highway bridge with his friends hidden down below. Stark’s voice came through the small communications device in Thor’s right ear, “Here they come. Half a mile.”

Thor replied, “Understood. We are ready.”

He was wearing Midgardian clothes for subtlety, but the hammer was hard to disguise, so he held it out of sight behind the railing. Cars passed beneath him but not the ones he wanted to see yet.

It had taken a full day for Stark’s program to find the tesseract. He had kept the five Asgardians in the Tower, reporting to Fury that Thor had returned for the details of the timeline and deaths of the invasion, since it turned out Loki hadn’t died, after all. Thor had folded his arms and looked disapproving, but Stark had shrugged. “Look, Thunderarms, I can’t tell him what you want, what you really really want, so you’re just gonna have to suck it up. Loki’s not returning to Earth anyway, so what difference does it make?”

Thor had to agree with that, especially when he looked out from the balcony of the Tower at the wreckage left by the Chitauri beasts. Hopefully when Loki roused, he would tell them the whole story of what had happened to him. But certainly Thor had no wish to tell the mortals all this, yet.

So the Asgardians had made themselves at home in the tower. They had disposed of several roasted fowl and a great quantity of the Midgardians weak ale, and been entertained by Fandral flirting with Pepper.

But then the monitoring devices had located the tesseract. To Stark’s surprise, it was moving on the highways, taken from New York and headed south on a circuitous route avoiding major highways. But finally Stark had spotted them on a road with few useful exits, and they’d hurried in one of Stark’s helicopters to get ahead of vehicle carrying the tesseract.

There were three vehicles in the SHIELD convoy -- one truck, containing the artifacts, and two black SUVs on either end to guard the truck. Thor would take the truck, two friends would each take care of the cars and their occupants, and Stark would hover above and only interfere if necessary.

Thor hadn’t wanted him involved in the actual battle. The Asgardians would be leaving Midgard as soon as the artifacts were in their possession, and Thor did not want Stark to take all the SHIELD backlash for helping them. Stark pretended not to care about it, shrugging that he could handle it, but when Thor had insisted he keep back, he had accepted the decision.

His voice came over the comm, “Asgardian heist movie, ready, in thirty seconds.”

Thor spied the convoy, heading their way. “I see them.”

Ah, his first plan would work. The lead car left plenty of space, as it passed beneath.

Thor dropped Mjolnir, head down, right in front of the truck.

Mjolnir hit the ground, scarcely a second before the truck hit it.

The heavy armored car slammed into the immobile hammer with a tremendous crash, and the back end flipped upward, right at the bridge where Thor was standing. He ducked, arms up to catch it, as it slammed into the railing and the force of it hurled him back a few steps.
Another car on the bridge squealed its tires, skidding as it tried not to hit him, but Thor paid little attention, as the bridge shook from the impact of the truck.

More slowly than it had flipped up, the truck slammed back down on its wheels.

In his ear he heard Stark’s comment, “Uh, you didn’t mention your plan was to pancake the armored car, Thor.”

“It seemed the quickest.”

“Well, sure, but you know humans are kind of fragile creatures, right? We don’t take rapid deceleration all that well.”

Thor peered over the railing and recalled Mjolnir to his hand. He could see the airbags had filled up the front seats, and there seemed movement within. “They appear undamaged. I will assault the truck, the rest of you watch the escorts.”

The two escort vehicles had squealed to a stop, the one behind the truck pulling into an awkward angle to avoid hitting the truck. Other cars on the highway also screeched trying to avoid collision. He couldn’t see the lead vehicle, but assumed it was also stopped, having noticed the truck’s accident.

He jumped down, landing with a heavy thud on the truck’s roof and then the ground at the rear.

Two men, wielding weapons leaped out of the car, and fired at him. But Sif captured their projectiles on her shield and she and Fandral stalked forward to handle them.

Thor hit the truck door with Mjolnir. To his surprise, the steel was only dented. Some kind of armor, apparently. That just meant he needed to hit it harder.

He grinned and hurled lightning at it, then hit it again. The locking mechanism surrendered, and then the door caved in.

There were two armed men inside, and they fired at him immediately. The bullets stung, but did not damage him. Throwing Mjolnir at them ended the threat, and he jumped in the truck.

One of the soldiers was trying to hide a case behind his back, as if Thor couldn’t see it. The other pulled a pistol and tried to shoot him at close range; Thor ripped the gun out of his hand and threw it from the truck.

“Enough!” he bellowed at them. “These artifacts belong to Asgard, not to you. And I reclaim them now.”

Stark’s voice came over his comms. “Someone called HQ. Quinjet incoming. Hurry up.”

Thor took the case from behind the one trying to hide it, and didn’t need to open it to sense the tesseract inside. “Where is the scepter?” he asked.

Both stared back at him, trying to be brave and silent, but it wasn’t hard to figure out where it had to be, since it was too long to be put in a case the size the tesseract was nestled within.

Thor pulled the metal box out from under the forward bench and when he found the lid locked in place, slammed it with Mjolnir, too impatient to waste any more time.

The scepter rested within, the crystal in the tip glowing with eerie power. He heard a whisper then,
faint but strangely alluring. He couldn’t tell what it was saying, but it seemed to be some kind of
promise. No, eagerness? It wanted to battle. It wanted him to crush these two enemies staring at
him like dull cattle. Use Mjolnir, crush their skulls…

Blinking he stepped back and shook his head. Not just a source of seidr power then, something
else.

He threw the tesseract’s case out of the truck and grabbed the haft of the scepter in his left hand,
flinching as a strange power coursed through his hand, and it felt barbed traveling up his arm, pain
in its wake.

How had Loki carried this monstrous thing? Thor wanted to be rid of it as soon as possible.

At the door he saw Fandral kicking the other vehicle into the path of two more guards, so they had
no choice but duck.

“So soon?” she shouted back, the flat of her blade dropping another guard and with a twirl she
cought more projectiles on her shield. “But this is so fun!”

Despite her enjoyment, she disengaged. Hogun and Volstagg trotted back from where they’d been
fending off soldiers from the front. “You have it?” Volstagg asked.

“Let’s go. We have what we came for. Heimdall! Open the Bifrost!” he called. He lifted a hand
toward the more distant flying form of Man of Iron, knowing Stark could see the gesture of thanks.

His friends gathered together as the Bifrost slammed down and took them all back home.

Heimdall greeted them with a bow of his head, but his golden eyes fixed on the glowing stone of
the scepter.

“You should bring that to the king immediately, my prince,” the Watcher advised in his deep
voice.

“What is it, Goldeneyes? You look as if you’ve seen a spirit,” Volstagg jested, his voice echoing
off the unfinished walls of the Observatory.

Heimdall did not raise his voice in turn, or look away from the scepter. “Before, it was difficult to
see,” Heimdall said, “but here I see it clearly.”

He glanced toward the city and back at Thor. “The All-Father awaits you in the reception hall.”

The others started for the entrance, and Thor turned back, “And Loki?”

“He sleeps.”

Thor thanked him and they headed across the bridge.

Approaching the palace, his footstep hesitated and he lifted the scepter to examine the stone at the
tip. It didn’t seem to be doing anything anymore, not whispering or hurting him, so was there really
any urgency to take it to Odin? All Odin would do with it was put it in the Treasury, and that
seemed to be a waste.

Hogun, who was carrying the tesseract case, frowned at him. “Thor?”
“Is everything all right?” Sif asked.

“Everything is fine,” he snapped. “Why do you ask?”

Sif and Fandral exchanged a glance.

“You stopped, lad,” Volstagg explained.

“I am not your lad,” Thor informed him, then felt a little ashamed he was being so sharp. But he didn’t feel like apologizing. Sometimes Volstagg was a bit too familiar. “Come on, we need to take the tesseract to my father.”

He stomped off, ahead of them, irritated that they were delaying him. He wasn’t sure why he’d even wanted them to come in the first place. What had they done during the battle? He’d retrieved the tesseract and the scepter himself.

In the entrance hall, his grip tightened on the scepter. “Hogun, you take the tesseract to the king with my compliments. I intend to go visit Loki.” The lie rolled off his tongue. No, not a lie— he would visit Loki, but first he would go to his quarters and find a place to display the scepter properly. Or hide it so Odin All-Father wouldn’t take it.

Sif and Fandral exchanged another look and Fandral said, “I thought we were supposed to bring him both, the scepter and the tesseract?”

“No, we were only supposed to take them from the petty Midgardians,” Thor answered. “The scepter is mine, now. Father can have the tesseract.”

“Yours? What would you want with it?” Volstagg asked, sounding astonished, as if he wouldn’t want it for himself.

Thor narrowed his eyes at his friend. “It’s my war prize.”

“I thought we needed it to find out where it came from,” Sif reminded him. “To learn who hurt your brother.”

Thor thought of Loki, lying so helpless and still in the infirmary, and lowered the scepter. What had he been thinking? They needed to know the full history of the scepter. “Yes, of course.”

“Then you should let the All-Father look at it,” Hogun suggested. “He will be able to tell much more than we can.”

“And help Loki,” Sif added, touching his shoulder. The feel of her hand seemed grounding, and he took a deep breath.

“Yes, we need to do that.”

“Let’s all go to the receiving hall then,” Fandral suggested cheerfully.

Thor didn’t miss Hogun dart a look at the scepter, his dark eyes avaricious as if he was contemplating taking it from Thor. Well, he could try, but against Thor, what chance would he have? It was laughable.

Same with Odin, wasn’t it? He would just have to accept that this belonged to Thor, now.
In the receiving hall, Odin was sitting on his throne as Thor and his friends entered. He had a tight grip on Gungnir, and beckoned Thor to come closer once they’d passed through the main doors.

Hogun went first, kneeling, and he set the case on the ground before him.

“Open it, Hogun, I would see the cause of our troubles,” Odin declared.

Hogun opened the case, setting the room ablaze in that bright blue-tinged light. “The Space Stone,” Odin murmured and shook his head ruefully. “I should have known leaving it on Midgard was no solution.” His eye sought Thor next and Thor knew to come closer. “I see you carry the other artifact. I would look at it.”

Thor went no closer. “This is near enough.”

Odin’s gaze snapped to his, eye bright as one of his raven’s. “Is that so, my son? Bring it to me.”

“I think not,” Thor declared. “You’ll only throw it away. Or leave it to rot in the Treasury. But it is more important than that.” His hand gripped the haft of the scepter in a white-knuckled grip, and he felt the charge in the air, ready for Mjolnir to call and direct the lightning.

The horrified gasps at his disobedience were easy to ignore as the nothing they were. Only Odin mattered in this room.

The king stood and came down the dais steps. He looked old and weak to Thor’s eyes, hunched over and leaning on Gungnir.

“Heimdall sent word of what he saw,” Odin murmured, looking at the jewel at the tip of the scepter. “Your reaction tells me he is correct.”

Thor took a step toward him, raising the scepter to point it toward Odin. “It is time to step aside, old man. As you intended a year ago, it is my time to rule.”

Odin lowered his head to look at the pointed end of the scepter directed at his abdomen, and he did not seem very alarmed as he raised his eye back to Thor. “And if I choose not, would you fight me?”

“I would have fought you before, to stop you from murdering Loki, lying helpless in his bed,” Thor bit out through teeth that wanted to grind together. He enjoyed the shocked gasp that ran through the room at his words. “And I would fight you now, if you put yourself between me and the throne that belongs to me.”
“It is not yours yet, my son. And if you do not recover your senses, it may not ever be yours.”

Thor laughed at that, since his senses had never been so clear. To demonstrate his utter contempt, he turned his back on Odin and held both Mjolnir and the scepter high. “It is time for a new king! Time to restore Asgard’s glory! Kneel to me, and we will become warriors again!”

Strangely his left arm was suddenly having trouble holding Mjolnir, as it became heavier and heavier in his grip until he had to let go. The head thumped to the floor.

Shocked, Thor turned to face Odin again. “You dare--”

“Mjolnir judged you unworthy of holding her,” Odin replied, his tone quite bland as if he weren’t the one who had done it. “Let go of the scepter, Thor. Before you do something you truly regret.”

“Only not taking you down earlier!” Thor exclaimed and leaped to attack with the blade of the scepter thrust outward to stab his father in the chest.

Gungnir smacked the scepter so the blade passed to his side, without Odin moving his feet. The spear twirled, somehow binding itself to the scepter and twirling it too, until it was wrenched from Thor’s grip and flung across the room. Before Thor could even think to retrieve it, Gungnir found the back of his legs and dumped him to the stone floor.

The impact jarred something loose, as if some sliver had come free from his skin, and he stared up at Odin, wondering what the hell he had been doing.

Odin called sharply, “No one touch it! I will tend it myself.”

Gungnir’s point glowed with soft golden light that was nonetheless threatening, pointed at Thor’s chest. “You should practice more with a spear, son. Your brother would have provided a more sporting opponent.”

Thor grimaced, and his cheeks felt hot. Perhaps if he stayed on the floor it would part beneath him and he would never have to look anyone in this room in the eye again. Both because of what he had tried to do, and because Odin had so handily stopped him. He cleared his throat and tried to make some amends for the first part. “I-- do not know what came over me. I am… woefully sorry, Father.” He forced himself up to one knee and bowed his head.

Odin touched his hair with his free hand. “You are forgiven, my son. Let this be a lesson to you that you are not omnipotent. Artifacts of power are not trinkets to be treated carelessly.”

While Thor remained kneeling, Odin dismissed everyone else, telling Hogun, Volstagg, and Fandral to take the tesseract to the Treasury.

“Rise, Thor. We must discuss this.” Odin glanced at the scepter, still lying near the wall. Thor’s gaze followed, and had to look away quickly as his chest tightened with a desire to pick it up.

“It is an old artifact, Thor. I recognize it now, though its outer form is changed from when I saw it last. It was always strong and encouraged discord, but it has grown tainted in its years of absence. I am relieved that your association with it was so short.”

“Loki’s was days. At least,” Thor said, keeping his eyes fixed on Odin so he wouldn’t turn to look at the scepter again.

“Yes,” Odin said, his eye thoughtful on the scepter before turning to look at Thor. “Find your mother, and both of you join me in the family solar. I must shield this before it causes more
Thor nodded and held out a hand to call Mjolnir, and take the hammer with him. But the hammer did not move. Frowning, a cold dread crawling up his spine, he tried again, and then walked up to it and wrapped his hand around it to lift it up.

It didn’t budge.

He stared in consternation, open mouthed in shock, before looking to his father. “Why-- why isn’t Mjolnir coming back to me?”

Odin was halfway to the scepter but turned around and said, “That is for you to discover, Thor. Until then, it will remain a decoration in this hall.”

“But--” he started and had to swallow back the rest of the complaint. He’d tried to kill Odin, so he supposed just saying sorry wasn’t enough.

But it had been the scepter, hadn’t it? He hadn’t wanted to do it; the scepter had made him do it.

His thoughts were interrupted as Gungnir let out a stream of golden flame that encased the scepter and lifted it off the floor, so Odin didn’t have to touch it at all. Thor watched with a quiet amazement as Odin manuevered the scepter before him like a hand cart toward the far door.

At the arc, Odin looked his way and said, “Tend to your brother, Thor. The answer will come to you.”

Thor had little choice but bow his head again and go.

tbc...
hey all, it's been a little while and this is still shorter than I'd like, but at least I'm feeling better so the next chapter should be a bit more timely!

Thank you to everyone who's written comments, I do appreciate them so much, even if I wasn't concentrating well enough to respond! <3 you all!

Unworthy.

Again. But why? He’d apologized, and it had been the scepter making him do it. He’d never attack his father in his right mind.

A treacherous whisper reminded him that he had in fact intended to do that very thing to protect Loki. But Mjolnir hadn’t reacted so it had been the right thing to do then, so it wasn’t that it was always wrong to consider fighting the All-Father.

So why was Mjolnir punishing him now?

But all those thoughts got put aside as he entered the healer’s hall and Loki’s room. Frigga was sitting near Loki’s bed, reading, and Loki appeared unchanged within his cocoon of light.

Thor kissed her cheek, happy to let her smooth his beard at the side of his face with her hand. “How went the quest?” she asked.

“It went well enough. I brought back both.” He thought of what he’d done and decided to mention that part later. “Father would like to see us soon, though. How does Loki fare?”

Her eyes narrowed, letting him know she didn’t miss the hesitation, but she glanced back at Loki. “The same. He stirred a little while ago, and I thought he might be waking. But he settled again.”

Unease pinched his gut. “When I brought the artifacts back?”

Her lips parted and she glanced again at Loki. “Perhaps,” she allowed after a moment’s thought. “I should not like to think so; it would mean he could sense them from afar, even asleep. But it seems possible.”

“Coincidence?” Thor tried in a weak attempt at a jest, but it was enough to make her smile.

“We should be so lucky. Come, Thor, we shall attend Odin and you will tell me all that happened.” She smoothed back Loki’s shorn hair. “Back soon, darling. Keep resting.”

On the way, he told the story of the action to retrieve the scepter and the tesseract, and he was glad to see the guarded double doors to the family wing appear before he reached the embarrassing part of the tale.

The family solar was a spacious room of many columns, featuring an oval table of glossy wood and one wall open to the balcony overlooking the western city.
Frigga dismissed the servants after they had poured drinks. “What news?”

Odin’s expression, grim when they entered, lightened to see her, as he met them at the table. He’d left Gungnir against the nearest column, taking up a goblet of mead in that hand instead.

“The tesseract is secure in the Treasury,” he announced. “And I took the scepter there myself, as well, and put it under shield.”


Odin glanced at Thor, who felt his cheeks burning at the reminder and the humiliation that he hadn’t brought himself to tell her what he’d done. But he said nothing, merely gestured above the table, so that an image of the scepter formed above it. “Because it is dangerous,” he answered. “Far more dangerous than we had known, perceiving it from a distance. Close to it—” He used a finger as if to snip the stone free of the haft and the image expanded of the pale blue gleaming stone. “It’s clear that what Loki carried was, in fact, the Mind Stone.”

Thor stared at it. The Mind Stone? One of the infinity gems, like the tesseract? He had held one of them?

He had held one and it had taken control of him in a breath. Humiliation rushed through him, and he lowered his eyes and then the rest of him into his chair at the table, feeling weak and cowed. No wonder Odin had warned him against taking power artifacts lightly.

Frigga gasped in dismay. “But -- no -- the Mind Stone is not blue, that cannot be.”

Odin shook his head, beard rustling. “The case for it is changed, from what we knew, but it is the Stone. There can be no doubt. Worse, the power of the stone has merged with taint in its crystal housing.” He grimaced. “It is now malicious in its intent.”

He didn’t look at Thor at all, as he said, “I felt it myself, a whisper in my mind of glory and power. I put it under shield, to keep it contained.”

“The Mind Stone,” Frigga whispered and seated herself in her chair, staring at the slowly rotating image, before bestirring herself from dark thoughts for what was most important. “How did Loki acquire such a thing? It has been lost for millennia.”

“That we will not know until he wakes. But,” he leaned against the table, one hand flat on its surface, and gave a soft sigh, “it does suggest another reason our enemy would torture Loki, if he carried such a prize. They would wish it back.”

Thor shook his head, still confused. “He held it, and I think did little with it that he could not have done himself, without it. He did turn Selvig and Barton and a few others into his minions with it, but surely such power could control thousands, not the paltry few he used?”

Frigga frowned at him. “What do you mean, Thor?”

“I wonder if he knew what he held,” Thor answered, then reconsidered, remembering the argument on the Helicarrier before the attack had come. “Or perhaps his plan was more subtle than brute force. It did sow discord among us and when Banner took it, he would not have relinquished it, without the attack’s intervention. But how much more could it have done and did not? As short a time as I held it, it… clouded the mind,” he confessed, looking down at his hands. “It was so much stronger than I expected.”

Frigga laid her hand over his and gave it a squeeze. “You both are strong, Thor, but not
invulnerable. Such an artifact is difficult to fight, even for one aware of its power; unaware, you had little chance."

“And Loki? If he was unaware of what it was, how little chance did he have?” Thor insisted, looking to Odin.

“More than you,” Odin answered. “His magical defenses are far more skilled.”

“If he were in position to use them,” Frigga reminded him.

Odin nodded acknowledgment of their point and let out a sigh. “I suppose it matters little, if he knew what he held or not -- his holding it seems part of the greater plan. Perhaps it was to have him turn the stone’s might against us, but only unexpected severity of his defeat stopped that from happening. We will learn the answers when he wakes. In any case, Asgard must now protect two Infinity Stones from all those who would misuse them.”

“And find this enemy who threatens us,” Thor declared, “hurt Loki, and attacked Midgard.”

“I have set Heimdall the task of watching the Chitauri. Their movement after defeat may tell us more of their allies. But still…” Odin trailed off, his single eye distant with thought, “much remains in the shadows, hidden from all Sight. This is no accident.”

“Our enemy knows us,” Frigga said.

“Fears us,” Thor added, clenching a fist. “Or must be made to fear us again.”

“Oh, he fears us, my son. We possess two Gems now. I cannot believe that was the desired outcome. Our enemy will move more carefully now and regroup, before challenging two Gems and the might of Asgard.”

That sounded promising to Thor, before remembering that this enemy had thought nothing of hurting Asgard’s prince, and had remained unseen the whole time. The only reason they knew the enemy was out there at all, was because of the harm he’d done to Loki. That was not the act of someone who feared Asgard.

A glowing blue light began to blink in front of Frigga, interrupting what more they could have said. She touched the light. “Yes?”

Eir’s face appeared, and she reported, “All-Mother, Prince Loki is waking. Do you wish me to send him back to sleep, or allow him to wake?”

Frigga glanced at the image of the glowing stone, and she licked her lips before instructing, “Let him wake, Eir. He was restless earlier; perhaps he has something he wishes to tell us.” She waved a hand through the healer’s face, breaking the connection, and admitted, “I hope it is that, and not that he senses the Gems.”

“He always did dislike lying abed doing nothing,” Thor jested lightly. “But give him a book and he wouldn’t stir for a flock of dragons.”

Her lips twitched in a smile. “I hope that remains true.”

Thor followed her more slowly, but still faster than Odin, as she hurried back the way they’d come. At the door to Loki’s room, she was waiting for them, and held up a hand to stop them from entering. "I will go in, myself. You two may watch on the monitors."
"But, Mother--"

Her expression was implacable. "No, Thor. You know what Eir said, and he does not need you both... looming over him. Watch from afar, and I will tend him."

The door opened just wide enough to let Thor glimpse Loki, still enwrapped in his golden light, before it closed again behind her.
Frigga slipped inside Loki’s treatment room, where Eir and two attendants had already prepared him for waking by lowering him down to the bed and shrinking the restraining field to support only the areas that needed it most: hips to ankle, left arm, and ribs. His head rested on the mattress, a bandage cushioning the wound at the side.

His skin still held that worrisome pallor, indicating all was not well within, and his breathing was shallow and halting through parted lips.

But he was waking -- Frigga could see the fingers of his right hand twitching, as she spread the sheet over his lower half.

His eyelashes fluttered next, letting Frigga glimpse his eyes beneath as he pulled himself to consciousness. Before his eyes opened though, his brows drew together and he made a soft sound in his throat as he became aware of his body again.

Frigga touched the tablet to increase the blockers and a new silence fell while he relaxed. She thought he might return to sleep, but after a some shallow breaths, his eyelids fluttered and opened. They only opened about halfway, before he shut them again tightly, and he whimpered.

Before Frigga could do anything, Eir ordered, “Lights low.” The room’s lights dimmed to half, and Loki cracked open his eyes again to check that they were safer now.

He looked up, tired awareness back, and she had to smile, glad to see him awake at last. She bent nearer so he could see her without moving his head. “Hello, my son.”

His lips parted thought it took a moment to find his voice and whisper hoarsely, “Amma?”

Her heart ached and her eyes suddenly burned with an impulse to cry at Loki’s childhood name for her, even as she tried to keep smiling at him. “Yes, sweetie. I’m here.”

“It hurts,” he whispered.

She pressed her lips together, upset that he was still in pain even after the neural blockers were at the level they were. “I know. You were injured, but you’ll heal and be well, son,” she reassured him. She took his good hand in hers, relieved when he was able to grip her fingers lightly.

His gaze left her to wander up to the ceiling, and she let him take his time. If he wanted to fall back to sleep, it would probably be best for him, but she still wondered what had pulled him awake.

His eyes were following the line of the roof support when he saw her again. His brow furrowed in some confusion, but he took a moment more to voice it, “Amma? What hurt me?”

She hesitated to answer for a moment, wondering what was the best explanation for him right now. Simpler was better, if he didn’t recall it. Eir had warned that the head injury had likely taken his memory of that, it had simply not been stored at all that the Banner creature had hurt him.

“In battle, little one.” His frown deeper as he tried to remember it. Her free hand brushed his forehead to ease the tension there. “Don’t worry about not recalling it. It may come back later, when your body is healed. But tell me, what is the last thing you remember?”

His eyes slid to the side, frown returning, as he tried to remember. Frigga caressed the back of his
hand with her thumb.

His eyes almost closed as he thought. Frigga waited patiently, knowing his mind might find it difficult to sort through it yet.

“Vanaheim?” he said, tone rising to uncertainty.

She tried not to react, keeping her touch a constant soothing stroke, even as everything inside her froze up. Vanaheim. She had expected Midgard, if not the battle with the one who hurt him. But Loki hadn’t been to Vanaheim in years.

“What happened on your trip to Vanaheim, little one?” she prompted, hoping if he thought about it, it would prompt later memories. Or perhaps, somehow, he’d visited there after his fall from the Bifrost.

But no. IT was worse.

“I -- we went to Hogun’s family, a… wedding?” he answered slowly. “And then… Sif? Something happened with Sif?”

Luckily he wasn’t looking at her to see the alarm that must have shown on her face, before she cleared it away. Nonetheless she felt a cold lump of dread form in her chest. She had no idea what he was remembering. A wedding and something happened to Sif afterward? "Anything else?” she prompted carefully.

He continued, his voice growing ragged in greater confusion, "Sif... did something? Said something? No, someone said something to her, some insult...or they attacked her? There was a fight? There were many of them, but only a few? I … don't recall... It's all confused... Why can’t I remember?” He tried to lift his head and his skin went ashen.

Gasping, he choked as he reflexively dry heaved. She reached for him, frantically, to prevent him from moving further. "No, Loki, stop, you need to stay still." She eased his head back down to the pillow and touched the control to give him another blocker.

His breathing was unsteady, and he bit his lip, brows knitted, and his hand trembled in hers uncontrollably. "Everything hurts so much," he whispered, his whole face naked with pain and confusion, and tears leaked from his eyes.

She brushed them away. Ordinarily her proud peacock of a son would be embarrassed to cry in front of her, but he wasn't strong enough to care about it. "Oh, darling, I know, it breaks my heart to see you hurt. Close your eyes, let the medicine take you away," she murmured, caressing his cheek with her fingertips. "You will be better soon."

When his eyes finally shut and he relaxed, she kissed his brow and cast a gentle comfort spell to send him into peaceful sleep. She didn't let her expression falter until the door had closed behind her.

Her eyes met Thor’s and she read the same dismay in his that she felt. He wrapped his strong arms around her tightly to comfort her. She let herself lean into him for a moment, drawing calming breaths again.

When she pulled back, he let her go and she glanced at Odin, whose eyebrows were frowning deeply as he looked again at the monitor.

“Vanaheim,” she repeated with a heavy breath. “That was… ten years ago?” she questioned Thor.
“I recall nothing about a wedding in your tale, but I remember how those brigands set on Sif and you defeated them? Is that what he recalls?”

He hesitated, glanced at Odin and licked his lips, before shaking his head. “He confuses two visits--the one for the wedding was more than a century ago.” He turned his head to look at Eir. “Is that possible?” he asked. “That he has lost so much?”

“You heard him, my prince. I think he was speaking the truth.”

“Yes, yes, I’m not saying he’s lying,” Thor corrected. “I just--I don’t know what--What do we do?”

“Do you think this loss is temporary?” Odin asked, overriding Thor’s distressed question.

Eir faced him, her tone more businesslike. "While I do not doubt his memory of the battle that injured him will not be recovered, there is no way to know about the rest."

"I need to know what happened in the past year, since he was lost," Odin insisted.

She folded her hands and returned his look calmly. “It is early days, All-Father. This will require further testing before I can make any pronouncements of whether those memories are lost permanently or not.” Eir frowned and cast a glance through the narrow window in the door where Loki slept again. "But I will say, the confusion of those memories concerns me – as if there is more than loss. But as the swelling decreases, we will see what is recovered.”

Thor stirred beside Frigga as if he wanted to speak, but settled again into silence. She patted his arm, trying to reassure him and herself.

"I will scan him again and keep watch. I suggest,” she addressed them all, “that you do not do or say anything to suggest to him that he has such a gap in his memories at this time. It may make him... distraught."

Frigga nodded, feeling she was distraught enough for all of them.

Eir gave her a small encouraging smile. "Still, I would remind you that he woke on his own. He remains with us. This is in itself a sign that he wishes to live, so keep that in your thoughts. He chose to return."

That did help ease her heart a little bit. Not remembering some of the past, though distressing, was still much improved from dying or not waking.

His voice more uncertain than Frigga had heard in a long time, Odin asked, “Is there something to be done to help him recover his memories or heal more quickly? Some use of power, or spell perhaps?”

“I think not now,” Eir said. “As the damage heals, it may reveal somewhere such aid would be of use, but for now, time would be best.”

Odin’s shoulders slumped on hearing that, and Frigga felt hardly less disappointed. There would be no magic fix, not for this.

Eir gave them nods and returned to the observation area, leaving the family in the waiting room alone.

Silence fell, each wrapped in thoughts and emotions to weighty to express.
“There must be something we can do. That someone can do,” Thor said. “There are mind-readers among the alfar, perhaps one of them can fix—”

Frigga set a hand on his arm and squeezed. “You know Loki would never agree to such an invasion.”

“Then we do it without his agreement; he will thank us in the end,” Thor declared.

“We will not,” Odin snapped. “Have you forgotten the Mind Gem and its foul work so soon?”

“That is not the same thing!” Thor squared up against Odin, ready to argue, but Frigga intervened.

“It is an evil thing, Thor. I would not trust any Ljosalfar who agreed to it.”

Thor turned to her and said, his voice more plaintive, “Mother, we have to help him, somehow.”

“We will,” she said, “by being his family and supporting his recovery, as long as he needs us. But throwing ourselves at quick-fixes and spells is not the answer, my son.” She flicked her eyes at Odin, including him in that.

He nodded. “Of course, you are right. Yet to have all the power of Asgard at my command and be unable to do anything…. he trailed off, letting out a disgruntled heavy breath. “Since there will be no easy answers from Loki, I will examine the scepter more thoroughly, and see what more may be learned.”

“Carefully,” she cautioned.

He waved a hand in acknowledgment and took his leave.

Frigga moved to the niche that held the beverage service and poured herself a cup of water, but she didn’t drink as she watched Loki sleep on the image projected on the wall. He was resting comfortably at least, though remembering his tears made her wish she were drinking something stronger.

"Maybe it is better," Thor said finally. "That he not remember. He seemed like his old self, that madness I saw in him is gone, Mother. Perhaps this is… a strange blessing."

She shook her head. As much as she might like the convenience of it, it was not right, nor very practical. "And then he finds out, again. Angry that we hid it again. Where does it end, my son?" She sighed and thought of other secrets, still kept. “He will have to learn the truth again, if he has forgotten it."

"But not soon."

"No, not soon. Not until he is well enough." She looked into the water, heart heavy. “We will find out what he remembers and then help him with what he does not, even the difficult parts. And perhaps this time the truth will be easier.”

This was why she’d never told him before. How could she tell him the truth? One secret led to another and another behind that one, until all would be exposed.

But it was time all the windows were opened and the truth set free. Her sons deserved no less, after Loki had paid such a price for the lies. She just hoped they would both forgive their parents for hiding the real story.
Frigga returned the next morning early, bringing tea and some needlework, to keep Loki company while he slept.

Eir confirmed that he was healing well. The swelling had decreased for his head injury, and the bruising of his internal organs from being slammed so violently was likewise improved. With that easing she was hoping he’d be able to drink something when he woke.

He looked better to Frigga’s discerning eyes – less pale, less fragile – though his short hair still looked strange and made his face too thin. Day by day, hour by hour, he was improving. It wasn’t as fast as it should have been, given his blood and power, but as Eir had explained, sometimes their healing was simply overwhelmed.

He stirred a little while later, blinking himself slowly alert. The lights were dim, in consideration of the ongoing pain in his head, and even that seemed bright as he squinted against it.

But he saw her there and his lips lifted at the corners in a tired approximation of a smile, and seeing it lifted her spirits.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” she greeted, keeping her voice soft. “How are you feeling?”

“Head hurts,” he answered hoarsely, after unwisely trying to move it to look at her more directly. She stood up instead and smiled down at him.

“Yes, you were injured,” she reminded him.

“What happened?” he asked, frowning, trying to remember and obviously coming up blank. “A dragon?”

He didn’t remember what she’d told him before. She rubbed her thumb across the back of his hand, and shook her head with a bit of a smile. “No, not that. But it was a battle.”

“Oh.” He noted her alarm, though she tried to bury it. “You told me that before, I think? I do remember,” he reassured her. “It’s just… vague.”

She was a bit relieved that he remembered waking up yesterday. “It’s all right. You were badly injured, little one. Take it slow.”

He listened and his gaze wandered up to the ceiling and back down to her, wheels turning slowly in his mind. “This battle – Did I win?”

Her smile widened and she chuckled, shaking her head at him. “You are definitely your father’s son. I wish I could say yes, but I don’t think this is winning, darling.” The smile faded as she looked at his face. “You took a hard blow to the head and Eir wants to check your memories and skills, all right? Can you answer some questions for me?”

“All right,” he answered, frown tightening between his brows at the implication there was something wrong with his mind.

“Even if we find something, it could be temporary,” she reassured him. “But we need to check.”

She started the questions with what he remembered of the past – general things from childhood and
moving more forward. There seemed to be no gaps which was reassuring, even when she asked about the wedding in Vanaheim a century ago, he didn’t mix it with any other event.

It was when they reached more recent times the problem rose— he still remembered nothing past the trip to Vanaheim about ten years before, when Sif had been insulted and attacked, and they’d fought and ultimately had the victory over the attackers.

“What about your father stepping away from the throne, and crowning Thor to rule?” she asked.

Loki let out a choked laugh, wincing in pain after and holding very still until it eased. “You are trying to trick me, Mother. There was talk of that, but Father would never be so foolish as do it. Thor is too reckless. He thinks of battle and adventure, fighting. Nothing more.”

He closed his eyes, resting, and didn’t see as she bit her lip. So that was confirmation he didn’t recall the coronation.

“Do remember how to form a flame?” she asked.

He turned his good hand, palm up, opening his eyes, but she hurriedly reached over to grip that hand in hers. “No, don’t make it. I only wanted to know you remember how. No need to spend your energy on something so frivolous.”

“I remember,” he confirmed. He let his hand relax beneath hers, but his frown tightened. “Did father really crown Thor? That seems big – to forget… How much don’t I remember?”

She lifted his hand to her lips, regretting her question. She should have been more careful. “Just a little, sweetheart. There was no coronation, though, you were right. You’ll learn the rest in time, as you improve.”

He didn’t buy it. “Something’s wrong with me. That’s why you are so worried.”

“I’m worried because you were hit on the head hard enough to damage your skull, little one. You nearly slipped away from us. Whatever gaps you may have are nothing compared to that.”

He tried to move his other arm, the one restrained while the bones reknitted. It was as if some awareness of the rest of his body cracked open, and he tried to move his legs, too. But he couldn’t with the field wrapping them. His eyes went wide with a sudden terror. “I can’t move – I can’t – my legs--”

She leaned forward, hand on his brow to try to keep him from moving his head, hushing him as his breath grew ragged. “No, no, it’s all right. They’re immobilized to heal, it’s all right – shhh, it’s nothing permanent.”

She managed to reassure him back to calm, but the distress exhausted him so his eyelids were sinking, as his breathing smoothed out. He was pale again, his good hand lightly on his chest as if to hold himself together.

“You need rest,” she coaxed him gently. “Go back to sleep.”

He forced his eyes open. “No, I want to – know – what….” But his eyes sank shut and he was asleep before he finished the question.

Once she was sure he was deeply asleep again, she moved her chair back, and left the room to relax, as well. It tore at her to see him in pain, and then to see the fear that his legs were immobile had hurt even more.
Thor was waiting outside, his expression morose though he tried to perk up when he saw her. “He seemed a bit better?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “And the memory loss seems confined to about ten years, which is … better than I feared. He may still remember.” She thought about it, and pursed her lips. “It’s odd that battle on Vanaheim is where his memories stop. Was it significant in some way?” she asked Thor.

He gave an uncomfortable shrug and went to pour himself a drink. “Nothing I know of.”

“Perhaps it is simply the last exciting thing he recalls, later memories blend too seamlessly with the mundane here in Asgard. But nothing of Jotunheim, nothing of Midgard…. All is as it was, then, to him. I think you should visit when he awakens again.”

Thor lifted his cup and turned it idly in his hands. "If you think it will not upset him. What if seeing me reminds him of what happened?"

"It may," she admitted, "But I think it unlikely right now. He is still too weak. And he will notice if you never appear."

Loki was also going to notice that Odin never visited him, but there was nothing she could do about that. He seemed to remember enough that he was unlikely to ask her about why his father would not visit him.

"But try not to let on that his memory gap is so large. He will push to find what he’s forgotten, and I fear touching near the truth will reveal it to him, and he’s not ready yet.”

Thor nodded and looked miserable. "If you think he wants to see me... Even without his memory he thinks so little of me."

Ah, that was what had him so unhappy. He’d heard his brother’s harsh judgment of him, stripped of its usual veil of jest and argument. She crossed to Thor. "You misunderstand. He has always thought highly of you, that is why when you fall short he is so terribly disappointed." He flinched and looked down, ashamed. She caressed his cheek. "You are wiser now than you were then. He will learn that, too. Wisdom is never bought with silver, my darling, only tears."

He shook his head, resisting. “No. It’s not true. Father took Mjolnir away again, Loki almost died – this is all my fault.”

“Your father did what?” she asked shocked. How had neither of them managed to mention this to her?

Thor swallowed hard. “When I was carrying the scepter, I – I tried to take the throne from him. I was going to fight him for it. And now I hear Loki say the same thing, that I’m not-- I’m not worthy.”

“Oh, my sweet son, while no doubt your father has a lesson in mind, or perhaps punishment for this reckless act, but you can’t let a magical hammer determine your worth. Mjolnir is but a tool. Carrying it does not make you good, anymore than Loki’s ancestry made him bad, as he believed. You are more than wielder of Mjolnir; perhaps it’s time you remember who you are without it, while your brother remembers who he is.”

Thor hesitated, mulling it over, and then shot a look at the monitor displaying Loki’s sleeping form. “I want to be a better brother,” he murmured.

She smiled, charmed by the determined jaw and set to his shoulders as if he was going to make
everything fine by sheer force of his will. "You've always been a good brother."

To her surprise Thor shook his head, looking a bit pained. "Not always."

She frowned, curious, when he seemed to have something specific in mind, but didn't ask. Thor would tell her if he wanted; she had to remind herself he was a man grown now and could make his own choices. "If you feel that way, then begin when he wakes. He does love you, you know." She patted his shoulder. "You're brothers, and you've always been stronger together than apart. Be there for him."

"I will, Mother."

"I'm going to find a book to read to him. If he wakes in the meantime, go on in," she instructed and slipped outside the waiting room. First she would fetch the book, and later have a discussion with Odin about what he was thinking, taking Mjolnir from their son.

tbc...
Better Things

Thor padded into Loki’s room as quietly as he could, so he wouldn’t disturb Loki. Sitting on the chair beside the bed, Thor reached out to touch Loki’s hand, but pulled back to only watch.

Thor tried to match the shallow, slow breaths, falling into a sort of hazy calm. He rested his head on his hands, wondering how long it would take for Loki to be well again. He’d need patience, since Loki was a poor patient healing or ill at the best of times, and this was certainly not the best of times. He was stubborn and deceptive about his progress, always wanting to be stronger and fitter than he was. None of them liked being ‘weak’, but with Loki it had become something deeper. Thor could look back and see it now -- it wasn't just the stubborn pride of a little brother always chasing after his bigger, stronger sibling, but the gnawing fear that if he wasn't strong enough, no one would like him anymore.

I should have helped, but I made it worse, Thor knew now, with some despair. Echo of his previous words came back to his ears, “We fought together, played together, do you remember none of that?”

Now those words held new meanings, not just because Loki had lost part of his memory, but because Thor had a better understanding of what he’d been telling Loki to remember.

I will be better, Loki, I swear to you. I know what snapped, and I swear I’ll fix it, brother. Please just give me a chance to show you.

A hoarse voice interrupted his dark thoughts. "Thor?"

Lifting his head, he saw Loki was looking at him with drowsy curiosity.

"You awaken!" Thor exclaimed and he had to smile, because Loki wasn't looking at him with those glinting, mad, lost eyes, but with the gaze Thor remembered from years ago before it had all broken.

"You’re here. I thought you might be hurt, too," Loki murmured.

"I am well," Thor reassured him. "This is the first time you have been awake to see me. But I am here often."

"Oh." Loki's gaze drifted absently to the ceiling and his eyes closed again. Thor set his hand gently over Loki's and tucked their fingers together. Loki's hand lay limp in his, he was asleep.

"Loki?" he asked softly, wondering if he would wake again.

Loki's eyes opened and wandered back to him, and the mild surprise when he saw Thor was a blow to the chest. "Thor? You came?" he asked, as if he didn't remember seeing Thor a moment ago.

"Always, brother," he whispered, lump in his throat.

It was both blessing and curse that Loki accepted being called ‘brother’, when he’d rejected it so angrily not long before. At first Thor hadn’t understood why he was saying such a mad thing, now he wished he might hear it said again, since the only reason he wasn’t saying it now was because he didn’t remember finding out the secret.
Loki’s eyes, the only color in his face, went to Thor’s. "Am I dying?"

Shocked and appalled by the question, asked with only interest not any alarm, Thor hastened to reassure him, "No, no, Loki, you are hurt but you will be better."

"Oh. You look so upset."

"It’s hard to see you in such pain," Thor said, and tried to smile in reassurance. "We all worry for you."

"What happened?" Loki asked, frowning. "Nobody will tell me what hurt me."

Thor smoothed the back of Loki’s hand with his thumb, watching that instead of letting Loki see any of the truth in his face. "I … am not supposed to say. Eir says we must not bring the memory back until you are strong enough to deal with it."

Loki turned that one over his mind - slower than he would have normally, but still the same dry wit emerged, "It was that terrible?"

"It … will haunt my dreams for many, many years to come," Thor confessed roughly. He wished he had been there to stop Banner, but a part of him was also glad he had not had to watch it happen, only come upon the aftermath. "I feared you were dead."

"Can’t die. Who else … tell you … you’re a moron?" The teasing insult was welcome, reassuring that this was still Loki, even if the faintness of his voice and the effort to find enough breath to speak was difficult to hear.

Thor chuckled, though his voice caught on it at the end with grief, for how close it had been. "Only you." He bent to rest his forehead on their joined hands, reminded of that year he had believed Loki gone into the void and then come out nearly a stranger, lost to him. But now his brother was back, and Thor needed to find a way to keep him this time. He had to heal Loki’s heart before it shattered so utterly, to chase away the shadows, and hold him here.

"There must… have been a spell," Loki murmured, musing aloud. "To weaken me. Or something very... strong….."

Thor lifted his head sharply. "Stop. Stop thinking about it," he ordered and then in a more pleading voice, added, "Loki, please. I know you are curious, but trust me that it’s not time yet. Put it aside. Think of… peaceful things. Better things."

Loki didn’t argue. "Like?"

"The river," Thor offered, knowing the river was one of Loki’s favorite things. "The archives and the scent of the books you love so dear... The sky and the fields and the mountains, all those things about our home that are beautiful and fair..." He watched as Loki’s eyes closed, as the quiet words lulled him back to sleep. Thor stopped talking, but didn’t yet let go of Loki’s hand, cradling it in his own, glad that this hand at least was unhurt.

He’d almost lost Loki twice now, and he promised, not again.

Frigga ordered a family dinner for herself, husband, and eldest son, and at the appointed time, she waited for them to arrive.

Surprisingly, Odin was first. She barely let him get inside when she demanded, “Mjolnir. Why?”
He stilled and then turned to face her, before sitting in his chair with a sigh. “It was no doing of mine.”

“How can that be?” she asked, frowning at him. “You took it from him. You can give it back.”

“No.” He shook his head. “The charm lingers from his banishment. It found him unworthy for seeking the throne under the thrall of the scepter, and it still does. I think I know why Mjolnir refused to return to him, but it was not me, but rather Thor, who set the new requirement. Only he can undo it.”

Thor had judged himself unworthy, and Mjolnir was following his lead, that was what Odin was saying. She let herself down into her own seat and looked at Odin across the table, for letting out a soft breath of resignation. She could not blame him for what was not his doing. “What a tangle.”

“Indeed. Though it is probably past time he learn to do without it.”

“Past time for so many things,” she murmured, and met his gaze. “They will have to know about the past.”

“No.”

She laid her hands flat on the table and kept her voice calm. “Think of how close Laufey came to your death.”

“Because Loki--”

“-- did not know,” she interrupted, forcefully, to get to the point. “He didn’t know the full consequence, because you have not told him. Or Thor. They must know. Or Thor will inherit a war he knows nothing about and a throne he cannot keep.” She softened her voice. “Odin, the time draws near. You cannot put it off forever.”

For the first time, he didn’t react with a fierce denial of the point. Perhaps he was finally recognizing the foolishness in keeping the truth from their boys. They would have to deal with the Realms when Odin was gone, and if he left them unprepared, they would suffer for it.

In fact, he nodded once in agreement, beard rustling against his surcoat, but didn’t speak, as the sounds of Einharjar pulling themselves to attention outside the doors announced Thor’s arrival.

He entered, coming to kiss her cheek. “Loki was awake, briefly,” he announced. His brow furrowed with worry. “He asked again about what hurt him. We’re going to have to tell him something or he’ll worry at it like a hound on a bone. But, he did call me a moron, so he’s coming back to himself.” He seemed pleased by the insult, which made her shake her head.

“That is good news.” She added with a smile, “I think. Though I wish you both would stop such teasing.”

“But he still lacks his memory of the past decade?” Odin asked, and Frigga’s smile slipped away as Thor nodded.

“We didn't discuss it, but he spoke to me as if it were then,” Thor confirmed. "There was no trace of knowing the truth of his blood."

Restlessly, Odin stood, paced to the window, and turned. "What happens when he remembers that?" Odin asked. "I fear he will persist in his rage-fueled vendetta, and put others at risk again."
"Will he?" Frigga asked, her tone thoughtful. "First, we do not know that he will ever remember. Eir says it is just as likely those memories are unmoored by the physical damage and he will never recover them. But more importantly, for now, we have ... an opening."

Husband and son looked at her curiously, as she stood up, too anxious to remain seated when the other two stood. "He believes it’s still ten years ago." She paced to the end of the table to stand where Loki's chair had once been placed before they had feared him dead in his fall from the Bifrost. She would have it removed from storage and returned to its place. "He knows there is a problem with his memory, and he must suspect a gap we have not admitted. Still, in his mind, no time will have passed since then. There is a void. He does not remember the coronation which spurred him to bitter fury, nor the trip to Jotunheim that followed, and he does not remember the truth he stumbled on then and shattered his sense of himself. Those things have not happened, for him. But we know. We know where the cracks are, and now we have a chance to heal them and make him stronger. So that when he learns the truth from us, it will not be such a blow."

Thor agreed, but she could see Odin’s doubts still lingered, that telling Loki was a wise choice, even now. Or perhaps doubting that they could manage the aftermath this time, when it had gone so poorly before.

She curled her hands around the back of her seat, trying to explain. "This... horror, did not spring out all at once. We -- all of us -- closed our eyes and did not look behind the face he presented us, to see the shadow growing within his heart. Already, with the medicine and pain loosening his tongue, he has admitted more turmoil than he ever revealed then. And this gives us opportunity to show him where he errs, and to manage where he has just complaint."

"'Just complaint'," Odin repeated. "He has none."

"Of course he does," she returned sharply.

Thor held himself very still before he straightened in his chair, as if he'd made a decision. "He was right that I was not ready," Thor said. "You refused to listen to him. And he was also right that only a mistake as great as Jotunheim would have proven it to you. Because," he hesitated and drew a deeper breath of resolve, "He knew the truth of that last visit to Vanaheim, and you did not."

"The truth?" Frigga repeated, confused, as Odin's frown deepened in disapproval. "What we know of that trip is not the truth?"

"What is the truth?" Odin demanded, in a tone that suggested Thor not refuse to answer.

Shame-faced now, Thor looked down at the wood of the table before him, shined to a high gloss. "I do not understand why he remembers nothing past it, but... I know why he is confused about what happened." He didn’t speak for a long moment before inhaling a deep breath and saying, "Because what we said happened and what actually happened were ... different. Sif was insulted, yes, but she handled it. It was I who provoked the boorish warrior and his friends to a fight, in spite of Loki’s counsel to let it be. I called him coward for not wanting to fight them. It was no glorious fight, Father. They were overmatched from the start. Two died. After it was ended, Loki said we owed their families, and I said no."

It seemed that the confession was finished, but Odin’s eye held his, and Thor added, not looking at anyone, only the table, "I told him, if he revealed the truth to anyone, I would spread the tale that he had run away from the battle, and we would see who was believed."

"Oh, Thor," Frigga exclaimed softly, profoundly disappointed. "Why?"
"Because I wanted to make the battle more than it was. It was a rout, but I wanted a story. Something exciting and glorious," he admitted, lips twisting with disgust at himself.

Odin slammed a hand on the table, making Thor jump and finally face him. "So not only was your tale of the battle of Vanaheim a lie of self-aggrandizement," Odin growled, expression severe, "but you forced Loki to support it by threatening his reputation?"

Thor continued, with some awkward confession, "He was angry, but I apologized after, and he seemed to let it go. But now I think he didn’t."

"No. Of course not." She knew her youngest too well to think he would forgive such an attack on his vulnerability so easily. "You showed him what you were willing to do, and he could never unlearn that, could he?"

She looked at Odin. "And yet you say he has no just complaint? For not only did you swallow this tale and laud Thor for his victory, but from thence sprung your desire to make him king sooner. Based on a lie."

Odin took a moment, before he nodded once and glowered at Thor. "When he is ready to listen, you will inform him of the truth of the matter, and that your story was, in fact, only a story. You will alleviate any confusion he has on this," Odin ordered. "Is there any other confession you wish to make?"

Thor swallowed. "No, Father. Though I can now see where I behaved less as a brother, than I should have." He inhaled and lifted his chin. "Though you should ponder your own part of this, and that you were less of a father to him than you were to me. And if you don’t try to correct that before you tell him the truth of his begetting, he will not forgive you."

Frigga saw the sharp words rise in Odin, a stiffening of offense that he had no need of Loki’s forgiveness, but the words passed, unspoken. His shoulders slumped again. "What is there to do?"

Odin asked. ‘What is done, is done.”

Her lips parted, shocked by what sounded like an admission of defeat. She reached across the table to take his hand. “Be his father, now. While you still can.”

Odin looked up at her, brows contracting. "And do what? He has listened to nothing I say for at least two hundred years."

“Perhaps because you never tell him anything he wants to hear,” Thor pointed out. "He is a great sorcerer, Father, and I remember few words of praise."

Frigga shook her head, since that wasn’t the point, not really. She squeezed Odin’s hand. “You can mend this distance between you, I know it. He wants your attention, to know he is your son, not only your subject. It cannot be so difficult to give him that, is it?”

He couldn’t admit that it was, since he hadn’t for so long, but he didn’t try to argue with her about it either, so she took that for his agreement and withdrew her hand. He would have to choose his own way forward with Loki, though she thought he understood the wisdom of closing the distance between himself and Loki.

She wandered to the outside window, thinking of Thor’s tale and what it might mean for Loki’s memory.

"I think it is not an accident that Loki’s mind has stopped his memories there. He knows, somewhere within, that was the moment where all went awry. While the rest of his body is
damaged, his mind holds there, free of the despair and anger that followed.”

“When I broke the bond between us,” Thor murmured, sounding miserable. “I was such a fool. I thought so little of that day, and I had no idea it was so important to him.”

“Perhaps on its own it wouldn’t have been,” she said. “But it wasn’t alone. A slow drip will fill a bowl, too, just more slowly.” She returned to the table, setting both hands on Thor’s shoulders. “Thor, be his brother, that’s what he needs, right now; not your guilt.”

She leaned down and kissed the top of his head. Thor turned in his seat, enough to wrap an arm around her back and pull her closer, his head against her chest as if he were a young boy again. He didn’t care that his father was present to see him seek reassurance, which she thought proved his maturity.

She smoothed his hair. “We will make everything right, Thor. It’s never too late.”
The fox that stole the moon

Frigga sat beside Loki, her needlework in her lap untouched as she watched him. He’d been restless since she’d returned after supper, stirring enough to crack open his eyes but they shut again without alertness. She’d tried to soothe him to deeper sleep, both with her voice and a little magic, but neither worked for long.

Eir checked on him when Frigga told her, but shook her head. “All seems normal, All-Mother. I think it a good sign that he is more wakeful.”

“But he’s not waking.”

“He will, when ready. His brain and the rest of his body is healing.” Eir moved away, and Frigga gave a little sigh, not content with that answer.

She looked down at her needlework, finding herself still distinterested in it after a few plucks of the needle. What she wanted to do was make something to calm him, like the baby blanket she’d made him long ago, not this useless decorative piece.

Loki moved his head, causing a pained noise in his throat, and his eyelids fluttered. Caressing his face, she murmured, “Everything’s all right, little one, go back to sleep.”

He settled again, and she eased back in her chair, wondering if he was having nightmares. She considered touching his forehead and probing to find out, but withdraw her hand. It was too dangerous, right now – the trauma might very well trap her in his mind. She would have to wait until he was at least able to distinguish his mind from hers if they touched.

But later, it might help to know if he remembered what happened to him, if only in the twisted nature of dreams, even if his conscious mind did not recall.

The sound of the outer door opening drew her attention and she turned in her chair to see Odin entering. He stopped next to her chair, and for a moment, looked at Loki in silence.

“How does he fare?” he asked finally, voice soft.

“Restless,” she answered. “He may wake.”

Giving a small nod, Odin watched a little longer. “Would you give me a moment, with him alone?” he asked, not turning to face her yet. Sensing the surprise she tried not to express he added, “That is what a father should do, is it not?”

He was here. He was trying. She smiled at him, eyes pricking with tears, as she murmured, “Yes. It is.” They traded positions, Odin sitting in the chair with her standing nearby. She gripped his shoulder in silent appreciation and left the room.

In the observation area outside, she stopped and watched.

She didn’t think Odin did anything, but it was only a few minutes after she had left that Loki stirred again. His hands both twitched, good hand curling against the covers, while his eyelashes quivered until his eyes snapped open.

For a second there was fear there, as he stared at the ceiling. His breath came ragged.
Odin told him quietly. “It was a dream, Loki. All is well.”

Loki’s head turned, and he went white to the lips at the spike of pain in his head from the movement, but the shock of recognizing his visitor was even easier to see.

"All-Father?" he asked, voice formal and tentative as if he was uncertain what Odin was there to do or if he was still dreaming.

They looked at each other for a time, Loki’s face too pale and his brows drawn down in tired confusion, and Odin seemingly paralyzed under Loki’s gaze.

The king cleared his throat, finding some words to break the silence. "You appear better. How do you feel?"

Frigga knew the honest answer would be something close to terrible, since there was still so little they could do to ease his pain when he was awake, especially in his head. But Loki insisted bravely, “I feel well.”

Odin gave him a stern look. "I think the truth is, your injuries pain you."

"Only a little," Loki answered, and added with a more honest tone, curling a lip in wry humor, "Only when I … breathe."

Odin's smile was small but genuine. He looked down at Loki and didn't say anything.

Loki looked back and swallowed, before saying in a carefully polite tone. "Thank you for visiting me."

That was meant as an opening for Odin to give his wish for Loki to be better, make his excuses and leave, but Odin's lips pressed together in a grimace, recognizing what Loki was trying to do. He asked, "Would you care for distraction? I could read to you."

Loki stared at him, as if Odin had grown a second head or was speaking in a new language he didn't understand. His gaze flickered to the door, in hope someone would come rescue him from this stranger masquerading as the king. "You would? I – uh – I'm sure you have something more important to do..."

"Other tasks I could do," Odin answered, "But nothing pressing. Nothing more important than visiting you."

Loki’s lips parted in astonishment, as Odin pulled the visitor's chair nearer the bed and settled himself in it.

Frigga put a hand over her mouth, eyes suddenly welling with tears. This had not happened since Loki had been a young child. Many years had passed since Odin had chosen to spend time with him, and him alone.

Odin noted his expression, so raw and open with confusion and even suspicion that someone was about to pull a trick on him, and softened. "You nearly perished," he murmured in explanation. "And in that moment, I saw the distance I had let grow between us, my son. I realized I had given you only harsh words untempered by softness, and that was unjust and unkind. That was not what I intended, but it was what I became to you. I wish to make amends, if it is not too late?"

"N-no," Loki answered, in a voice of wonder at this miracle happening next to him. "No, of course not, Father. I – would like it..."
Odin pulled a slim volume out of his cloak pocket and held it up. "I recalled this was your favorite when you were small. The fox one, you insisted again and again."

"You remember that? I barely recall it myself."

"I could probably recite the tale, so many times did you hear it, even these many years later," Odin said, with a flicker of a smile. "But in case my memory fails, your mother kept the book in her casket of remembrances."

"They're Midgardian? I think I remember that much," Loki said.

Frigga looked carefully but saw no flash of recognition about Midgard on Loki’s face. He still had no idea he had stepped foot there.

"They are," Odin said. "Close your eyes, Loki, and listen." He read the story about the brave wolf who joined with the wily fox, and together they defeated a bear and stole the moon from the grip of a grumpy snake. By the time the fox had curled up in his den to rest, Loki was asleep, too.

Odin closed the book and simply watched him for a time, his expression heavy with regret. He left the book on the small table and joined her outside.

"I –" He started in a rough voice. "He did not believe I would visit him."

"Why would he?" she asked. "The last time you did anything with him alone I think he was still learning his letters." His gaze swiveled to pin hers, and she returned it calmly. "We reap as we sow, my lord. Do you know how many times he came to me, disappointed and resentful that you saw only his faults? And how many times I reassured him of your love? Yet was I the one deceived, not your child?"

He looked to the image again, and he had lost all trace of anger as he replied, “No. No, you are not.” He sighed. “But in taming his power, trying to control his willfulness, I made this chasm.” He turned back to her, brows lifted. “Do you think the story helped? I worried he might be offended to be read a children’s story, but he seemed accepting. Do you think?”

The uncertainty in his voice charmed her, reminding her of a young king, courting her after a battle and trying to impress her with his deeds.

“I think he was glad you were there, no matter what you did.” But as he began to smile back, pleased with her approval, she let her own smile fade. “But that is only once. To have him believe you mean it, will take more than one story.”

“Of course,” he agreed.

But as they both watched Loki sleep more peacefully, she wondered if Odin meant it only for the moment, while Loki was so unwell. Only time would tell whether Odin would retreat to old ways with Loki, or not.
Seeking some respite from everything, Thor wandered outside to the balcony overlooking the training yard. He considered going to spar, but found himself not in the mood. He watched the fighters, but he remembered the battle on Vanaheim. They’d won, easily, blood all over the ground, his own voice cheerfully proclaiming victory.

Later, however, Thor had gone to find Loki, who had left the celebration early, much to Thor's confusion. “What victory?” Loki had challenged, instantly deflating Thor’s mood. “It was a slaughter. You didn’t have to kill them.”


“A warrior doesn’t stoop to murder. Which was basically what this was!” Loki’s eyes were bright as he spat the words. “You owe their families blood-price. And I will tell--”

Thor had reacted with rage, slamming Loki into the wall of the barn so hard the wood rattled. “You will tell no one, brother. Or I will tell everyone you ran away from the battle. And we’ll see who is believed.”

Loki’s face had gone white to the lips, so his eyes seemed the only color in his face, against his black brows and eyelashes stark against his skin. He stared at Thor, lips parted but, nothing had come out for a few weighty seconds.

His voice when it had finally emerged had been soft and calm, “You would do that?”

And Thor, fool that he had been, had pushed Mjolnir against Loki’s chest and threatened, “Don’t ruin this victory, little brother.”

“Fine. You can have your story,” Loki hissed at him. “But don’t you forget, which of us is the liar.”

The remainder of that trip, Loki had barely spoken a word to him, and treated him with chill politeness when they were home. He had gone along with the tale, saying nothing when Thor had reported to Odin nor the numerous recounts afterward. Weeks later he had complained that Loki seemed to be avoiding him, and his apology had, in retrospect, been rather half-hearted, saying, “Everything is fine, is it not? You’re not still angry at me, for making the story more exciting?”

How had he not noticed at the time as he could remember it today, how false Loki’s smile had been? “No, of course not. I’m not angry with you about that.”

Instead of noticing what Loki had actually said, Thor had clapped him on the back and brought Loki to the tavern, and he’d thought it was finished.

I am every bit the fool you said I was, brother. Every bit.

“Thor!”

The cry of his name drew his attention down below, where he saw Sif and Fandral, who were dressed for sparring, but when he shook his head at their invitation to come down, they came up the stairs to the observation deck instead.
“Well met, Thor,” Sif greeted with a smile. “You will not spar with us?”

“Well met, Thor,” Sif greeted with a smile. “You will not spar with us?”

“Not today friends.”

They accepted that easily enough. “I see you evaded any serious consequence from your mad coup attempt?” Fandral jested, spreading his hands to indicate here Thor was, not locked up. “We feared you might be exiled again.”

But Thor couldn’t smile at that. “No, not that.”

“What happened?” Sif bent her head nearer, her gaze softening in concern.

Thor held out his hand in his gesture to bring Mjolnir, and both of them reflexively turned and stepped out of the path. When nothing happened, he let his hand fall back to his side.

Fandral gasped. “He took Mjolnir again from you! But that is unfair, my friend – we should speak to him, protest that you were not at fault, the scepter --”

“Stop,” Thor interrupted then again more forcefully when Fandral continued to speak. “Enough! He is not wrong in his judgment, Fandral. And it is not only the scepter that makes me unworthy of that power.”

Sif gaped at him. “Why would you say that?”

“Because I am not. Because I lied for glory and I know that now.” He swallowed and told them, “I finally told Father what truly happened on Vanaheim. He was… displeased.”

Fandral and Sif exchanged a look. “Why would you say anything about that now?” Sif asked. “That was years ago.”

“Because Loki remembers nothing past that. And I had to confess what I knew about why his mind fixated on our lies. I was cruel and broke his trust in me. And I didn’t understand what I’d done. I do now.” The other two looked confused, since his threats to Loki had been private, but Thor was not interested in explaining his shame.

“He’s lost his memory?” Fandral asked, shocked. “Everything back to that quest?”

“Yes. He was struck a hard blow to the head, and Eir warns there may be other problems we have not found yet.”

“Oh, Thor, I’m sorry,” Sif murmured. “We should have asked after him first. How does he fare? Otherwise, I mean? He must have awakened, at least, for you to know this?”

“Yes, he’s been awake, only for a few minutes each time before he must rest. And his injuries heal too slowly and cause him great pain. There seems so little to help him!” Thor burst out, slapping a hand against the railing. “What good are we in Asgard that we can do nothing!”

“He’ll be better, Thor,” Fandral reassured him. “And remember, it wasn’t so long ago that everyone thought he had passed on already, fallen off the Bifrost. He’s back home, and the Healers will do their work. He will be fine, just have faith.”

Thor listened and after a moment, had to nod his acceptance. He still was unsure about Loki being ‘fine’ - it seemed such a distant destination – but he would keep hope for it.

“You two should visit him,” he suggested. “When Eir allows more visitors, at least. He will need
some distraction, I suspect.”

Fandral exchanged a worried look with Sif, who chewed on her lip in uncertainty before answering, “I’m not sure he wants to see us.”

“But you are his friends,” Thor insisted.

“He sent the Destroyer not just at you,” Fandral said, “but at us. He was king, and we ignored that to come fetch you.”

“I would still do the same,” Sif said. “But, knowing what we know now, I think we should have seen the All-Mother first. We assumed he had done something to the king and stolen the throne, and she would have told us what was happening.”

Thor listened to this and shut his eyes in pain, now able to see what else had happened. Norns, he had been happy to see his friends in his exile, confused and hurt that Loki had lied about Odin’s death, but never once had he stopped to wonder why Loki was behaving in that way. *Oh, it was madness, he snapped, he was always odd, and on and on,…* All the stupid things he had told himself to smooth over the questions and ignore the deeper problems.

He inhaled deeply and let it out as a weary sigh. “If he recalls all that, we will deal with it. Until then, let us all try to repair our relationships to him, so if those memories come back, he will have a firmer foundation of brotherhood, and friendship.”

“Of course, my friend,” Fandral reassured him. “We will do what you wish, whatever you think will help him.”

Thor nodded at both of them, pleased that Loki would find himself not so alone in his recovery.
The paper dragon

Chapter Notes

So we get Loki's POV in this one.

just to warn you, he's got some dark thought processes including some suicidal ideation, so if that's an issue you might want to skip this one.

There was something wrong with him.

Each time Loki clawed his way back to consciousness, he knew that. His injuries of course, but it was more than that. It was more than the shooting pain in his head every time he tried to move it, or the strange web of blue light that occasionally flashed across his vision, or the sharp fragments of bad dreams that felt like they slashed his mind to ribbons right before waking. It was something besides his lack of appetite or interest in rising, or the weariness that made him want to sleep the second his eyes opened.

He didn’t know what it was, but he saw its reflection in the eyes of the people looking at him. It wasn’t normal, and that meant he wasn’t normal. There was a secret they were keeping, and after Odin’s visit, he figured out it had to be something that was making them try to make amends with him.

The only explanation was that he was dying. His injuries hadn’t killed him quick and clean, but left him in this lingering pain state to die slowly, but inevitably.

He couldn’t ask Frigga or Thor; they would lie to him. But when he awoke and found only Eir at his bedside, examining his legs, he thought he could ask her.

“My prince, it is good to see you awake,” she murmured, with a polite nod. “I need to shift the position of your legs within the restraining field, to ensure a proper healing. I regret that this will require some movement that will hurt. But it should pass.”

He didn’t want to move his head to nod understanding. “Eir, am I--” Dying, he meant to finish, but at that moment she released the field so his legs impacted the bed below.

Jarring in his knees and hips sent a shockwave up his whole body, and a cry escaped his lips, head shifting in spite of himself.

Eir’s hands were on his legs while she watched something on the monitor floating above his body, and she said, “Almost done, my prince. One more.” Something in his right knee shifted then, cracking pain this time, leaving him helpless beneath the onslaught.

She re-engaged the field so the sharpness eased, leaving behind a deep, distracting throb. Eir said something to him, but he couldn’t hear her over the thumping in his ears of his own heart racing. The pain made nausea curdle in his stomach, and he concentrated on simply not retching, knowing it would only make him hurt worse if he gave in.
It lasted forever or only a few minutes, until he was able to blink, finding his eyes wet. He could lift a hand to wipe them, though his attempt was halted by fingers gently wrapping around his hand.

He looked up to find Frigga watching him. “I’ll do that, sweetheart.” She helped guide his hand back down and dabbed at his eyes with a soft cloth. “Better?” He made an affirmative noise. “Eir told me what she had to do. I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help you.”

“I’m okay.” His voice was hoarse and he had to clear his throat.

“No, no you’re not,” she answered, shaking her head with a brave but tearful smile. “You will be, but you’re not okay yet.”

“Yet” – there was the lie, wasn’t it? The promise of healing and recovery that had to be false.

He remembered then what he’d intended to ask Eir, but he wasn’t going to ask Frigga. Bad enough she knew; why would he want to break her heart further by making her lie to him, or worse, make her tell him the truth? Let her dote on him for whatever time he had left. Perhaps it would help her later.

“Amma?” Her fingers idly smoothing his cheek paused.

“Yes, son?”

“I… I’m sorry,” he whispered.

She frowned curiously. “For what, darling?”

“For… whatever I did that made this happen. For… not being strong enough to stop it.” For dying, he wanted to add, but kept that part back. That was the part he was most sorry for. She was already so stricken, he wished it would hurry up and not drag out to hurt her more.

“No, no,” she started shaking her head, eyes shining. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Loki. Nothing. Don’t think about it like that. You just concentrate on getting better.” She kissed his brow, smoothing his hair back with her hand. He let himself be comforted by her touch, but for the first time, stayed awake beneath it.

“What hurt me?” he asked. It wasn’t the first time he’d asked, but this time she gave a better answer.

“A … strange creature,” she answered. “Powerful, unknown. Thor said you were taken completely by surprise.”

“I thought it was a battle.”

“It was. Your other opponents were not so strong, which was why this one was such a surprise.”

He frowned and tried to coax his mind to recover that. It seemed he ought to remember something so dramatic. But all he could recall was that – whatever it was – with Sif and the brigands on Vanaheim. He thought there had been a fight, but it was indistinct, like a half-remembered dream and then nothing. Trying to remember the battle, if battle it had been, made his head throb.

“Was that on Vanaheim?”

She shook her head, but her gaze was wary and her tone too careful. “No, it was afterward, sweetie. Don’t push yourself to remember yet. Let your mind heal itself.”
“And if it doesn’t?” he asked.

She paused before she smiled. “Then it doesn’t. Perhaps you never will recall what you don’t now, Eir doesn’t know. But they are the past, sweetheart. You make new memories.” She kissed his forehead, so he couldn’t see her wet eyes.

She knows there won’t be any, that’s why she’s so sad.

He lifted his hand to touch her hair, finding his fingers were trembling. “It’s all right,” he whispered. “If the Norns will it, it will be.”

The worst part of his injuries was that over the next day, he found himself awake more. He would doze, but then try to shift in his sleep or barely waking, and pain would spark him awake. The position, flat on his back and held rigidly, was also a growing discomfort of its own, and he could feel his mood sour.

How long was this going to take? And the answer he came to was, too long. This was dragging out the inevitable and he despised that – it was turning his mother into a ghost of herself, all pale and wan, and Thor was a sodden mess most of the time, accepting Loki’s mildest jibes with watery smiles as if he didn’t dare snap back.

Loki decided enough was enough. So the next time, Eir came in while he was awake and alone, he called her to him.

“Is there something we can do to speed the outcome?”

She blinked at him and answered, “I am doing all I can, my prince. I understand you find it slow and painful, and I wish I had a magic way to quicken--”

He rolled his eyes, and she fell silent, frowning at him.

“You don’t need magic. You need… a dagger. Poison. Something to make it quick.”

Her frown deepened and she asked, “A dagger? To make what quick?”

Sighing with impatience that she was making him say it aloud, even though the deeper breath spiked in his ribs, he answered, “My death.”

Her eyes widened and mouth parted in shock. “Your-- death? You want--”

He cut in, “I want an end to this lingering, intolerable slow slide. I obviously can not do it myself, but I can make my wishes known.”

She hesitated, braced her shoulders, and answered, “I am a Healer, my lord. I cannot and will not assist you with such a request. I will do all I can to make you as comfortable as possible, but I will not deliberately hasten your death.”

Cold rage welled up inside and he hissed at her, “Then get out.”

She bowed her head and left.

He wanted to throw things, but there was nothing to throw and gripping the sheet felt so useless it was absurd. He blew out a breath, angry and awake, with nowhere to go, nothing to do, only the
high curve of the white ceiling and arches to look at.

He held up his good hand high enough he could see it without moving his head too much. He tried to call seidr – just a measly light – but saw not even a flicker. He could just barely sense seidr at all, and trying to reach for it felt like grabbing water.

His hand fell back to his side, weariness stealing through him, but not enough to sleep. *I want to read. I want to watch something. I want to sit up. I want to escape this place. I want an end to this. I want to stop hurting.*

Tears were slipping out from beneath his eyelids, and he brushed them away. *If Eir won’t help, I’ll have to find someone who will.*

But who? No one came in here except for the Healers and his family.

He must have dozed off because he woke up when Frigga hurried into the room, her familiar step rapid on the hard floor. “Loki!”

Very slowly he turned his head toward her, pleased that it seemed not stir the pain this time, only made the throbbing intensify briefly. “Mother.”

She seized his hand and peered into his face, her own expression riven with dismay. “Darling, Eir told me – Eir told me you asked her to-- to --” she choked on a sob in her throat and could barely push out, “to end your life. Sweetheart, no.” She shook her head desperately. “Why? Why would you want to leave us?”

He had to look away from her grief-stricken face. “Because … I see how much this is hurting you-…”

“*Your death* would hurt me a lot more, little one. I can’t – I can’t go through it again.”

He frowned. “Again?”

That brought her up short and she bit her lip, her expression suddenly shutting down and her eyes darting. “You-- were so close to death when you were brought here, sweetheart. You didn’t actually die, but it seemed like you might.”

It sounded true, but there was some edge of falsehood to her words there; that hadn’t been what she’d originally been talking about.

She didn’t stop though, chasing that idea away. “Which is why I don’t understand why you would- - would want it now? Is it the pain? Eir could put you into a deeper sleep again, until you heal-”

“Enough.” His voice cold and sharp silenced her. “Stop lying!”

She had the gall to look confused. “Lying about what, Loki?”

“That I’m going to heal,” he snarled. “That I’m going to be fine. That I’m not dying. *I know the truth,* Mother, and I decided I don’t want to lie here, helpless, while my body slowly creeps toward its inevitable ending. I know you want to keep me here, and I love you for it, but I don’t want it!”

His voice rose, echoing off the walls, until it broke, and he shook in the grip of the overwhelming emotion, shutting his eyes tightly, while tears leaked off the sides of his face.

For a moment there was absolute appalled silence. Then he felt Frigga’s fingers on his face. “No,
Loki, no. You’re wrong, sweetheart. You’re not dying.”

He snorted, not believing her.

“It hurts, little one, but you are healing. If you could see your own scans, you’d see how much better you actually are. I know it’s slow, and you’re impatient, but I swear, Loki, I swear to you on my life, that you are healing.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, pushing out the tears, and then looked at her, blinking. “You mean it?” he asked hoarsely.

“Yes,” she confirmed, wiping his face with her fingertips. “Yes, I promise. Please, little one, don’t give in to despair. Hold on, keep holding on, and all this—” she lifted her chin at the healer’s room, “all this will pass. And you’ll be well again.” She cupped his cheek. “All right? Do you believe me?”

He did believe her. “Yes. I do.”

She regarded him, forehead still knotting in worry. “What made you think you were dying, Loki? Surely no one told you that.”

“No. I just – You’re all keeping something from me. And I thought that was the only reason Father would want to make amends,” he admitted. “So if I’m not dying, what is it?”

She settled back, considering. “I thought it might be too hard to hear, but— if the truth will keep you from imagining something much worse, I suppose I should. What is the last thing you remember?”

The deliberate question made him draw back in himself, and feel cold. His lips parted for no sound and he had to swallow to find his voice. “How long ago was it?” he whispered. “How much have I lost?”

Her hand gripped his more tightly, and she answered calmly, “About ten years, little one.”

Ten years. He’d forgotten ten years of his own life. Ten years of memories, wiped from his mind. Ten years of things he did, that he couldn’t remember anymore.

“Will I get them back?” His voice sounded so young, so helpless. A little boy begging his mother for comfort, *are there monsters under the bed, Amma?*

But she was honest. “We don’t know. Your brain is still healing after the fracture, so it’s possible.”

“But it might not.”

“True.”

Ten years. He turned his eyes up toward the ceiling again, trying to think it through.

“Is that why Thor’s different?” he asked.

“Like your father, he also nearly lost you, Loki. That’s why they’re so eager to make amends,” she explained softly. “But yes, Thor has also been through some trials that have matured him from what you remember. So be gentle with him, he’s still learning, but he’s trying, Loki.”

“Oh.”
He felt strangely unmoored now, free of what had supported him and now he was just… floating. He’d built up this dragon in his mind, to find it was nothing but paper. It wasn’t real. The truth was something quite different, and yet somehow more shocking. He knew what to do with death, but not with lost memories.

“Amma?” his voice was small, but she heard it.

“Yes, little one?”

“My dreams are so dark. Are those my memories? Are they real? Is that why I don’t remember?”

It took her a moment to answer. “I don’t know,” she answered and her voice caught.

And he knew the true answer was ‘yes’.

tbc...
Frigga kept her composure steady with Loki, but when he finally dropped off to sleep and she was able to go outside, all that she’d been trying to control, suddenly rose up in her chest. Her eyes burned, blinding her so she would’ve run into someone before firm hands caught her.

“Frigga.” Odin’s voice was low and concerned. “What has happened?”

She lifted her face to him, blinking furiously. “He – thought he was dying. He thought because you were making amends with him, that he was dying. It was the only secret that made sense to him!”

Odin flinched back, but not letting her go. It wasn’t enough.

“How have we failed so deeply that my son believes his father would only make amends with him at death?” she demanded furiously. “How can he think it is better than anything to have Eir put him down like a feral animal! But he did! He did.”

Odin pulled her against him, letting her fists beat at his armor while she heaved sobbing breaths, until she calmed down enough to rest her head on his shoulder and her hands opened. His hand smoothed her hair at her back. “But he is not dying, Frigga. We know that, and I presume you told him so.”

“I did. But that he should believe it at all--”

“He has ever believed the worst. It is a shadow within him, this refusal to believe or trust in goodness.”

She lifted her head, wiping her wet eyes with the cuff of her sleeve. “Because he’s always felt, in his heart, that we were lying to him.”

He pulled from her with a sigh. “You agreed it was for the best.”

“I know. I did. I believed it was. But not now. I told him of the gap of his memories, though nothing of what happened in between. He said he has bad dreams which he fears are the missing memories.”

“They probably are. Did he give you any specifics?”

“No. Merely attempting to recall them made him fearful, so I didn’t persist.”

He nodded, expression thoughtful. “We know there was much evil done, and he suffered much as he does now.” She agreed, because it was true that the damage they knew about was similar. Odin looked toward the monitors, to check that Loki still slept. “He remains fragile in both body and
mind. We must tread carefully.” Off her somewhat sceptical look, he added, “Of course I want to
know who hurt him and what threat they are, but he should be stronger before we open that bottle.”

She found herself relieved. “I agree. Did you get anything useful from the scepter or the Mind
Stone?” she asked.

“Nay, though its eagerness for darkness is telling on its own. There is much evil in it that was not
present in the stone which I first beheld it with my father. It is under seal in the treasury, but it
should not be kept near the tesseract for long.”

“You intend to scatter them again.”

He lifted his brows at her. “It was certainly never my intention that half of them appear on
Midgard,” he said with a rather amused disdain. “But I think I shall send some of our warriors
outside with the task to search out the history of the Mind Stone. Someone knows into whose hand
it passed.”

“Thor, too?” she asked.

Odin looked again at the monitor. “Perhaps. If he regains Mjolnir.”

“He won’t wish to leave until Loki is better, I think,” she said quietly.

“I would not send him until then,” he promised.

She curled a hand around his arm and leaned against his shoulder. “I see my husband,” she
murmured. “I am glad to see him again.”

Thor heard from Frigga about what Loki had believed in his family’s silence and his heart felt as if
it would shatter and break.

“I could’ve done it, Father!” rang in his ears and he saw the terrible calm steal across Loki’s face
just as he let go of Gungnir’s halt, all over again.

He would not lose Loki, not like that, not to despair.

But when he went to tell Loki this, the words were wiped right out of his mind by the sight of Eir
tilting the upper half of the bed so Loki could sit more upright.

She paused when the bed was angled, and asked, “How is it, my prince?”

“Better,” he answered. “The change in position is much improved.”

“Good. I will have the apprentices bring you something to eat as well, and we shall build up your
strength again.”

Eir left, and in the quiet moment that followed, before Loki noticed Thor was present, Thor was
able to look at him. His hair was ridiculously short, mussed and curly on one side where it was a
little longer. His face was still pale, though the bruising had faded. His left arm remained
immobilized and was now held across his chest, while the restraining field was keeping him from
putting all his weight on his healing hips and legs.

Nevertheless his jaw tightened and he held himself motionless, not even breathing, and Thor knew
the position was not as comfortable as he had claimed.
Thor rapped lightly on the door and approached eagerly, pretending he hadn’t noticed. “Loki! Look at you, sitting up!”

“Leaning up,” Loki corrected with a wry look, and a wave of his good hand down his body.

“No matter, this is still fantastic.” Thor bent over him to kiss his forehead, and had to smile as Loki frowned at him in response. Thor cupped his cheek in one hand to look in his eyes. “Mother told me you feared you were dying. Brother, do not be alone with fears so dark; we want nothing more than your recovery.”

Loki moved his head, looking away, and Thor let him. Loki picked at the blanket over his lower half with his good hand. “It doesn’t matter. I know it’s not true.”

“But it does matter,” Thor insisted. “For so long, you have kept your fears here,” he touched Loki’s chest lightly, “to yourself. You hide your unhappiness. Tell us, so we might ease you.”

Loki didn’t look at him, chewing on his lower lip in absent thought. “This is bizarre,” he admitted. “What is?”

“You.” He frowned up at Thor. “Has it truly only been ten years? You seem so much,” he paused to pick the word, “… older.”

At first Thor took him seriously – did he really look older? Had he visibly aged?-- but the faint smirk on Loki’s lips gave it away, so Thor folded his arms. “You mean wiser.”

Loki scoffed. “Wiser? You?” But seemed to be a reflexive retort because immediately he added more seriously, “Yes. What happened? Mother said you had some experience that taught you a lesson, what was it?”

Thor debated how much to tell him. “I did something rash and immature.” When Loki snorted his lack of surprise at that, Thor nodded. “Yes, exactly. But when it nearly caused a war with Jotunheim, Father exiled me to Midgard, without most of my powers so I was nearly mortal. It was… humbling. And then, just a little while ago, I ..” he had to swallow hard, remembering, “I found you, in a pool of your own blood. I thought you were already lost, and I saw what my life would be without you in it, and I saw all that I had done in my arrogance to hurt you. When you survived, I swore,” he seized Loki’s hand in both of his, “I would be a better brother to you. I won’t let it happen again, Loki.”

Loki dampened his lips with his tongue and tried to pull his hand free but Thor didn’t let him, so he curled his fingers around Thor’s, holding on instead. “Thor – I --- this is so strange,” he muttered under his breath. Then he looked up at Thor and confessed, “I don’t know what to say.” Pleased to have caught Loki so completely by surprise, Thor smiled. “Usually you scoff at my sentimentality.”

“Do I? I suppose I do,” he agreed after a moment and glanced down at his hand still engulfed by Thor’s own and murmured, “I wonder if you mean it.”

His voice was so soft, so lost, it made Thor’s heart hurt. “I do, Loki. You are my brother, always.”

Loki’s small smile seemed sad. “I suppose if I must dream, at least this is a good one.”

“It is no dream. You will soon be well, brother, and we will have many adventures together. You’ll see.”
Loki might have replied, except the clatter of several approaching footsteps, silenced them both. Eir and an assistant pushing a cart entered through the archway from the healers’ main room, and came right up to the bed. Thor found himself maneuvered out of the way so they could bring the cart up to the bed and extended the surface of it, so Loki could reach the items on it.

“Broth,” Eir pointed to one of the cups, then the other, “Minerals and sugar.” Neither cup held much liquid, though at least the broth looked more appetizing than the greenish milky substance. There were also a few small cubes of crustless bread on a plate. “Bread, if you wish to try some.”

Loki’s lips pressed together. “I don’t want it,” he refused. “I’m not hungry.”

“Try a little, my prince?” Eir suggested. “It would help you heal.”

“Loki, just try?” Thor asked and held up the broth cup. “Please? For me?”

Loki rolled his eyes at the blatant manipulation, but held out his hand. “Fine.”

He took it from Thor, but the cup was only halfway to his lips, when his hand started to shake. The tremors grew, threatening to drop the cup. Thor wrapped his hand around Loki’s. “I’ll help you.”

“I can do it myself.” Loki tried weakly to tug free, but Thor didn’t let him.

“You can do the next one,” Thor said, and held the cup to his lips. Loki sipped some of the broth, but, after he swallowed it, pushed the cup away.

“No,” he whispered, hand over his stomach and eyes shut. “No more. I can’t.”

“That’s all right, my prince,” Eir told him. “If you can keep that down, that’s enough for now.”

Her expression said otherwise, that she’d rather he eat the contents of his tray, but she had to accept it. She explained to Thor, “The head trauma makes him queasy. It is not unexpected.”

He looked pallid to the lips, and Thor noticed his hand was trembling merely resting on his abdomen.

Eir saw it, too. “I will lower the bed for you to rest.”

“I’ve only been up for a few minutes,” Loki complained.

That got him no reprieve. “You may have it up again after you’ve rested.”

Loki groaned and met Thor’s eyes, seeking help against her tyranny, but Thor had no intention of interfering. He smiled. “Then you rest, and I’ll be back later. Mother and Father will be so pleased to hear you ate something.”

"Ganging up on me," Loki muttered, but that was all the complaint he had as Eir lowered his head. He closed his eyes and the tension in his face and neck eased as she touched the controls to strengthen his pain relief and help him back to sleep.

Thor patted his hand in farewell and hoped he’d have better dreams, now that he had proof he was improving.

tbc...
The dark and the light

Chapter Notes

This is short, hopefully sweet. I'm moving houses so my place is a mess of boxes and it's possible but unlikely there'll be an update next week, I'm sorry to say.

Anyway, enjoy for now, and I'm not done with it by any means. It's just RL being a pain. Hang in there, readers! <3 to you all. :)

There was nothing. He saw nothing but darkness; there was no light anywhere and yet he knew his eyes were open and he could see, there was just nothing there.

There was nothing to touch, either. His fingers felt nothing, no air against his cheek. No hot or cold.

He was there, but there was nowhere. He was nowhere. His heart was beating too hard, too fast, but there was no air to breathe.

The darkness took a form, a shadow of something huge. It was smothering him and he couldn’t move.

And then he felt something. A hand on his head, fingers digging into his skull, pressing, and squeezing. His skull would be crushed. The pain was excruciating. He opened his mouth to scream…

.. *Loki*?

He opened his eyes to find Frigga’s face hovering above his, and something on his forehead and he jerked his head aside to get away, before he identified it as her hand. His head spiked with pain at the motion, and a sound came out of his mouth before he could bite it back.

“*You’re safe, little one,*” Frigga soothed. “*It was a dream.*” He shut his eyes trying to relax, but his whole body was rigid and his mouth was dry with the aftertaste of terror.

“Can you tell me about it?” she asked.

He could still remember, but when he opened his mouth, the details evaporated. The rest seemed inconsequential. All he could find to tell her was a halting, “I – it was dark. There was… something… there. It hurt me. The creature that hurt me?” he guessed. “Is that who--?”

“There are separate events, sweetheart. The creature that hurt you recently -” she touched his arm, “was not known to us before, but is not a mystery now. But before that,” she pressed her lips together, searching for the way to explain, “you were missing. No one could find you, not your father, not me, not Heimdall. But Eir discovered during that time, someone or something hurt you then as well.”

“You don’t know?” he hated the way his voice rose up at the end, tremulous as a child’s.
"No, we don’t where you were. And I fear that is what you dream of. So we hope you can remember and tell us. But—" her hand returned to smooth his hair, “-- I would rather you remember nothing than have these nightmares break your rest."

He thought of what she’d said and the ill-formed terrors in his sleep, and swallowed. “How was I missing?" he asked. “What happened?"

She pressed her lips together, regretting telling him as much as she had. “It’s a long story, that I don’t wish to tell you now, but … you fell from the Bifrost into the void. We feared you were dead.”

A flash of his nightmare – the nothing – struck, stealing his breath, and making him feel cold. “That’s my dream,” he whispered, forcing out the words. “There’s only darkness. And shadow and then pain…."

“Oh, darling,” her face twisted in sorrow and she leaned down to kiss his brow. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry.”

“No, I – I want to know,” he told her. “Maybe it will help.”

He didn’t really believe it would. Knowing what the nothingness was, didn’t ease the terrifying hold the reminder had on his body and mind. But better to know, than know there was a secret.

He wanted to press for how he’d fallen – it wasn’t something that could happen accidentally – but decided he was too weary to push when he probably didn’t want the answer anyway. Both she and Thor feared giving him the truth, which meant it was terrible. He could wait.

“Could you read something?” he asked. “Something light? I could use something else to focus on.”

She seemed grateful for the chance to do something useful for him, and that let her smile more naturally and pluck a book off the table. “I have your favorite Kree poetry collection.”

He let himself sink into the rhythm of the words and the delicate construction, casting off the shadows of his nightmares. They were all familiar poems to him, but in Frigga’s voice seemed to be renewed.

He closed his eyes to better visualize the poems, but opened them again when she hesitated as something drew her attention. Footsteps intruded, and Odin’s voice greeted them both, “Good afternoon.”

Odin moved close enough that Loki didn't have to turn his head. That sharp blue eye examined Loki and Odin nodded approval. “You do look improved, as Thor claimed. Very good. I would do that, Frigga, if I may. Something calming after today’s court assembly would be welcome.”

She handed him the book and vacated the chair promptly. “Of course.” She kissed Loki’s brow again. “I will see to your dinner while he reads to you, and return in a little while.”

Odin read one poem to him before closing the book “I had an idea for something you might do while still abed. Thor mentioned you were growing restless and bored, and I think poetry will not engage your inquisitive mind for long. There is a treaty negotiation with Alfheim on which I would like your thoughts.”

He said it so casually, but Loki tensed warily. This felt strange and unusual. Of course, having Odin read to him also felt unusual, but to want his thoughts on something important was … unprecedented, so far as Loki could remember. “You want… my opinion… on a treaty with
Alfheim?” he repeated slowly, in case he had misunderstood.

“You have a clear mind for legal matters,” Odin said. “And I have been deficient in taking advantage of it. But – that said--” he added, “nor do I wish you to have any undue stress about this or damage your recovery. So it is not a,” he hesitated, searching the right word, “trial. Or audition. It is simply something for you to occupy your mind for a time. If you wish it?”

Loki did not, for one second, believe it wasn’t some kind of trial. Odin never did anything at a whim. But Loki was also already desperate for something to do. If Odin really wanted his thoughts on this treaty, Loki would give him some. He held out his good hand. “I do. And I thank you for the distraction.”

Odin chuckled. “I am unprepared. But I will have a copy made for you.”

“Oh.” Disappointed, Loki let his hand fall back to the bed.

Odin regarded him and then said, “If you are so eager, would you care to hear of today’s audience? If I am to have your advice in one area, I should hear it in others.”

I should’ve gotten myself killed centuries ago, Loki thought with some sour humor. But he certainly wasn’t going to object if Odin was willing to talk to him as if Loki actually had something worth hearing. His heart felt buoyant and warm in the glow of Odin talking to him about rule and royal justice. Odin wanted his opinion. His, not Thor's.

If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up.

tbc...
In the audience hall, Thor looked at Mjolnir, tempted to tug at the handle, but he knew it wouldn’t come to him yet and it would only be humiliating to fail in front of people he should impress. So he stood to the king’s side, put his hands behind his back and pretended he didn’t see the hammer at all.

Volstagg, Sif, Hogun, and Fandral stood before the throne, as Odin explained their quest to search out knowledge of the most recent owner of the Mind Stone.

“But be cautious,” Odin warned. “To ask too many questions is to reveal our interest, and Asgard’s interest in the Infinity Stones is going to cause other parties to be interested as well. The Stones have been out of circulation for many years, and we may not be the only one searching for their rumors.”

Sif nodded sharply. “Yes, my king. To where will be sent?”

“You will first go to Xandar as my emissaries. Speak to their leader, Nova Prime. They are mortal but strong allies of Asgard and may know of this shadowed threat who uses the Chitauri as his footsoldiers.”

“Thor will join us?” Fandral asked and grinned at Thor.

“Nay, friends,” Thor shook his head. “Not yet.”

“You have my confidence, Lords and Lady Sif,” Odin declared and there was little to say against that.

In the hall outside, nonetheless, his friends objected. “Without you, or without Loki, we make poor emissaries,” Fandral said.

“And poor negotiators,” Volstagg added. “Give me a battle, even one so small as what we fought on Midgard and I know what to do, but this – this is no fit task for a warrior.”

Thor could scarce believe the words he was speaking, but he knew they were true, “We cannot always fight, Volstagg. And we cannot fight an enemy we do not know.”

Sif made a wry smile. “Strange to realize Loki would be best at this.”

Thor agreed. “He would indeed.” Loki would relish a quest like this, since it required talking, information, secrets, power, history-- all things he enjoyed most. Thor sighed. “But the Silvertongue lies abed, harmed and threatened by this unknown foe. I would travel with you, but
without Mjolnir and while he is in such low spirits, I would do you little good. Go forth, my friends. Seek out who found the Mind Stone and rumors of a powerful enemy."

“And then we will bring him to battle,” Volstagg declared.

“Of course we shall!” Thor laughed and slapped his shoulder. “Go prepare, I will see you off at the Bifrost.”

After his friends were safely away, Thor lingered in the Bifrost.

“My prince?” Heimdall prompted, when Thor stared at the great sword, thinking.

“You saw nothing of the Mind Stone before? Whose hand held it or the scepter before Loki?” Thor asked. “Or where he went after he fell?”

Heimdall shook his head, golden eyes somber. “None of that. He passed from my sight, and I believed out of the bounds of life altogether, as I reported to the king. Nor have I looked for the Infinity Stones in very many years so I did not see when the Mind Stone was placed in a new carrier, and after that I had no knowledge of what it was until you arrived with it.”

“And the others?”

Heimdall turned away, gazing out unfathomable distances. “The Soul Stone remains where it has lain undisturbed, protected by its own power. The aether – Reality – is where your father put it. Space, you know. The Time Stone is protected by the sorcerers of Midgard. And Power, I do not know.”

Thor frowned. “Another of the Stones is on Midgard? How strange that three of them should have been there at one time, and no one knew.”

Heimdall flicked golden eyes at him. “I would not be certain of that. The one who sent your brother knew what he held. But to release one to acquire another is a gamble not all beings would choose,” Heimdall pointed out.

“Unless there was some confidence in getting it back,” Thor said, thinking of what his mother had said about torture and how Loki’s words on Midgard had seemed to be another’s. Someone had tried to ensure their prize would be returned. “Our foe will not be pleased to have lost both.”

Heimdall turned his gaze back to look upon the cosmos. “So I keep watch.”

Thor bid farewell and returned to the palace, thinking morosely that their enemy could hide himself from Heimdall’s gaze, so keeping watch seemed somewhat futile in this case.

Frigga smiled to see Loki sitting up. He also had a book projection in front of him, and was reading something. It was difficult to read from the back of the projection, but then her smile widened, realizing it was the treaty. Odin really had given it to him to look at.

But her pleasure dimmed as Loki’s gaze wandered over the letters, before he frowned and shut his eyes tightly as if trying to clear his vision or he was in pain.

“Good afternoon,” she greeted him, trying not to be too sunny when he was in distress. “What’s wrong, sweetling?”

His eyes popped open. “Nothing.” Realizing that wasn’t too likely believable, when she’d caught
Settling herself on the chair next to him, she decided to take that seriously, even though it was obviously a half-truth. “Then you should rest.”

“I rest too much,” he muttered.

“I don’t think that’s true. You should rest whenever you need to, to keep healing.”

“It’s so slow.”

She smoothed his forearm down to the back of his hand. “But you are getting better, Loki. Your injuries were so severe they overwhelmed your body’s healing ability, turned it nearer to mortal.”

He made a face. “Mortals are like this all the time? How do they bear it?”

She bit back a chuckle. “I think it is not all the time. Nor would they heal as quickly as you are, even if you complain of its slowness. But the point is, you need patience.”

He snorted. “Not a quality I possess.”

“Now that’s not true at all,” she objected. “You possess great quantities when it’s something you want.” He looked disgruntled, but didn’t argue the point, since she was right. His patience was measured entirely by how much he desired the result – figuring out a spell, he had endless patience; standing in court for a reason he cared nothing about, he’d have an illusion standing in his place in two breaths. Or he would manufacture some disruption for his own entertainment.

“You want to be well, and you are healing,” she reassured him, fingers light on his hand. “Is the reading material too boring?” she teased, nodding toward the glowing page of the treaty draft.

He looked away, throat working. “I can’t read it,” he murmured.

Her brows drew together in alarm, though she kept her voice steady. “What do you mean? Your vision or the letters --”

He cut her off. “No. Not that. I can see them, I know what all the words mean, I --” Pausing, anxiety burning furrows in his brow and corners of his eyes, he tried to find the words to explain, while she waited in her own anxious stillness. “I read some, I know the words, but I can’t put them together into meaning. I keep reading the same words, over and over, and they flutter away. I can’t concentrate. But I need to understand it, I promised Father I would, but my head aches, and--”

His breaths quickened and she used her free hand to banish the treaty. “Loki, no, hush, little one. It’s alright.”

He shook his head a little, brows knitting and eyes wet, “No, it’s not, I said I would do it. He’ll never ask again, he’ll never think I’m fit, if I can’t do it now--”

“Hush, that’s not true.” It broke her heart to see his distress over believing he’d failed Odin. She wasn’t sure if he simply had no strength to try to hide it, or he was truly changing and opening up, but at least it gave her the chance to comfort him. She caressed his cheek with the back of her fingers. “Loki, your father knows how ill you are. He doesn’t want you to make yourself worse over a stupid treaty whose only purpose is to reaffirm what he told them a century ago. Do what you can. You impressed him yesterday with your discussion on court, so don’t fear he doesn’t know. He does.” She kept smoothing him, until he calmed and nodded in acceptance. “Good. Now, let’s talk about the treaty. You remember the visit, don’t you? I know you eavesdropped on the
meetings at least twice.”

“I listened everyday,” he admitted.

“Clever child,” she said, impressed. “I will ask you how you did it, later. But you see? You know what this is about. So let’s look at the treaty together. Would it help if I read it to you?”

His eyes flickered as if he was unwilling to say yes but then answered grudgingly, “Maybe? If you want to?”

“Of course I do.” She settled in and opened the file again, scanning the first few paragraphs. “If it helps you feel better, this is dense and dull. I’ll read a little at a time and we can discuss it. Perhaps that will help us both stay awake.” She cleared her throat and began the recitation of titles: “Odin, Son of Bor, King of Asgard, Protector of the Nine Realms, All-Father--”

“They won’t like that,” Loki interrupted. “‘Protector’. They don’t call him that, or wish for Asgard’s protection.”

She smiled and made a notation in the margin.

He stayed awake and made useful comments through the first page, where she drew a halt. “We’ll stop here, sweetling. You look pale and I have had quite enough of this stuffy business for one day.” She banished the annotated treaty copy again with a decisive flick of her fingers, catching him trying to suppress a yawn.

“Not another nap,” he grumbled, but offered no other objection as she lowered the bed.

“You need your rest. I heard Eir plans to lighten the restraining field tomorrow. It should help you be more comfortable”

He tried to look pleased at the news, but couldn’t muster much enthusiasm. “Good. I suppose.”

“It is good, because it means another step of healing,” she told him. “Now close your eyes.” But as she shifted to move, his good hand tightened to keep her there.

“Would you – “ he started but the rest got caught in his throat, and he turned his head away, swallowing hard. “Nevermind.”

But it was obvious what he’d wanted to ask. “Of course I can stay,” she murmured and took his hand. “Rest, now, Loki. You did well today.”

As soon as he dozed off to peaceful sleep, she disengaged her hand and went to the outer room, going to Eir.

“You heard what he said about reading?” she asked, and Eir nodded. “He loves reading, Eir. If this persists...” she bit her lip, unable to imagine what Loki’s reaction would be, except it would not be happy.

“I think he should try a simpler material,” Eir said, voice a little dry. “He is perpetually exhausted by injuries and his restless sleep. He was ambitious to select something so challenging to start.”

Frigga glanced at the monitor to see the restlessness had already started. His good hand was twitching, and his eyes darted beneath his lids in dreams.

“Should you put him deeper?” Frigga asked. “Perhaps solid rest will help his concentration as
well.”

“I intended to do so, yes.” Eir went into his room and touched the panels. Frigga smiled, relieved, when the tension in his face smoothed out and his hand relaxed.

He was getting better, she reminded herself. The surface injuries were mostly gone, the bones were knitting, his head gave him less problem, and he was drinking a little now-- all was proceeding toward improvement. She, like her son, had to cultivate patience. These little hiccups were to be expected and managed, and they would get through them, too.

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tbc...
Rising to the surface

The void had weight, had form, like tentacles of night holding him down. He struggled against them, but they were too strong. Even knowing he was dreaming, he couldn’t wake.

Maybe he wasn’t dreaming. Maybe everything else was the dream. He was trapped in this nothingness, and he would never escape. It would never end, only an eternity of darkness.

Abruptly everything around him blazed with golden light and yanked him from the nothing. He opened his eyes, panting for breath, and found Odin’s face right above him. His hand, dry and warm, withdrew from Loki’s forehead. His blue eye looked into Loki’s with some sympathy. “It was a dream,” he reassured Loki.

“I couldn’t wake up, I thought--” he swallowed back the fear trying to strangle him.

“When you seemed distressed in your sleep, I thought to pull you out. Better now?”

Catching his breath now, Loki paused to figure out if he was actually better. “Yes, I am. Thank you.”

Odin pulled Gungnir closer to him so he could lean on it, standing at Loki’s bedside. “I saw the void. Is that all you dreamt?”

Loki remembered a flicker of other darkness, and someone… something … looming above him, but then it was gone. “All I remember.”

“Do you remember what sent you into the void in the first place?” Odin asked.

Loki glanced away, gnawing on his inner lip. “I know it was something bad,” he murmured. “The way everyone wants to hide it from me, it was something I did. Wasn’t it?”

“No,” Odin denied then amended, “Well, you fell from the Bifrost, that was terrible. Other terrible things happened, that is also so. But the greatest mistake was mine, Loki.” Loki’s gaze snapped back to him, astonished by this acknowledgment. Odin noted the amazement and snorted. “Am I so bad about admitting my mistakes?”

“Must be the head trauma, but I don’t recall it happening before,” Loki retorted, then flinched, regretting that he’d said it. Odin was here, talking to him, had pulled him from the nightmare, and Loki was attacking him. It would serve him right if Odin walked out and never came back.

But Odin didn’t seem angry, only amused. “At least you didn’t name me an old hound, as your mother would. But, all that is aside the point: we will tell you what you are missing,” he promised. “There is knowledge you need. But not until you are stronger.” He looked around, moment before the outer door opened and Eir entered, followed by Frigga and Thor. “And here is Eir to tell us how far along that path you are.”

Eir bowed her head. “All-Father. My prince.” She straightened and addressed Loki. “Your healing has proceeded swiftly, accelerated as much as I dared without weakening you. The internal soft tissue and organ damage were first to recover, and thankfully you are now out of danger for any sudden collapse.”

Loki picked at the blanket, thinking that no one had told him he had been in that danger before. He
thought he should be annoyed by that ignorance, but he was also grateful he hadn’t been anxious about it.

“And his head, Eir?” Odin requested softly. “His memories have not returned.”

“The damage is perhaps eighty percent healed, according to the scans,” she reported. “That last percentage may include the recovery of these past years, or it may not. I cannot say, All-Father. It is possible.”

“But it’s there,” Frigga objected. “We know that, from his dreams.”

“Fragments, perhaps,” she suggested. “Or,” she hesitated and glanced between Frigga and Loki, “images impressed upon him. By those who hurt him when he was missing.”

Loki’s stomach roiled in disgust at the implication. Someone could have been interfering in his memories. His nightmares were because they had touched his mind.

Why would someone want to imprint those fears and that pain so deeply it survived skull damage and brain trauma?

Discipline, the answer came to him, as if a far voice whispered in his ear. Control.

He lurched sideways and Frigga was just fast enough to grab the bowl off the cart nearby for him to retch into it. “Loki!”

His body was shuddering and felt cold, aching pain shooting through him at the odd position, but he hunched over the bowl and coughed as his stomach tried to empty itself of nothing.

“Loki, what’s wrong?” Thor demanded anxiously, hovering on Frigga’s other side.

“I-- I’m okay,” he said, but his voice was faint and he had to wipe his mouth with the cloth Eir found for him. He couldn’t look up, feeling all their eyes on him. He was supposed to be getting stronger, why did he still feel so broken?


“He recalled something,” Odin said, when Loki didn’t answer.

“No, nothing. I’m fine,” he said. “Go on, Eir.”

She hesitated, but continued anyway, “The bones are healing as well, and think it’s time to lighten the restraining fields on them, except your knees and lower left leg. But your pelvis, arm and ribs look improved enough to try a lighter support. If you wish.”

He nodded, knowing he should try, at least. Nothing was fully healed – he could feel that much in how much he still hurt everywhere – but he would like to sleep in his own bed at least, and that required being well enough to leave the Healer Hall and its equipment.

Eir moved forward, a control pad in one hand, and she positioned Loki’s arm so it was already supported by the bed. And with a touch, released the field.

The air on his skin felt odd, and his fingers didn’t respond when he tried to move them at first, but then it was as if something clicked together, and he could make a fist with that hand. The pull of tendons at his elbow made him clench his jaw, and lifting his arm and hand was worse, but at least he could move them again.
He became aware of his parents and Thor also watching, and for a moment he thought of vultures, gathering around to pick at a carcass, little beady eyes *staring*. “Could you stop?” he demanded.

Frigga frowned, curiously, “Stop what, Loki?”

"Watching me like I'm a court jester here for your amusement."

He saw Thor stir to object but Frigga intervened before he opened his mouth. "Of course you're not that, but we can leave you with Eir. We don't mean to hover."

He knew they were only concerned but he was still relieved when they left. He glanced at Eir's face, expecting disapproval, but she nodded her understanding. Indicating his elbow, she asked, "How does this movement feel?"

She had him move almost everything with careful deliberation. The pain was oddly welcome since it was from moving and he knew it was less sharp than before. After all the tests, she held a cup for him. "Pain draught, if you can keep it down, it would be better for you."

He drank it slowly and it dulled the renewed throbbing to something more tolerable. "Well done," she said. "I shall tell your family that you are mending well. I will allow you to move back to your chambers with the caveat that this area is still of concern." She held a hand above his knees. "I will need to keep a close eye on its healing, and you must not put your body weight on your knees. So no attempts to stand or walk, just yet."

He grimaced, but the prohibition wasn't a surprise since he could sense the damage there. "You think I will walk at all? Truly?" he asked, voice soft. "I can feel the weakness in there, of all the shards waiting to fall apart again."

She nodded, her expression softening. "It may be difficult and painful at first, but I see no reason why you shouldn't be able to, once they knit together properly. But it needs a few more days at least."

He wanted to go back to his chambers, but ... a few more days. That was a small price to pay, for not having to make someone else care for him and invade his room. Nor did he want to be carried through the halls like a helpless invalid. No, he would walk to his own rooms, or he would not go.

"I'd rather stay here," he said. Her eyebrows shot up with surprise, having expected him to want to flee the infirmary as soon as he could. "I'm used to the staff, and my room can be dangerous for people not me." He tried a mischievous grin, and she shook her head.

"For now," she agreed. "If a more serious patient arrives, I will need to displace you."

"I like not being the more serious patient." It wasn't even a jest, he meant it. He had been dying and she'd pulled him back. And despite his earlier despair, he was glad of it now. "Eir, I--" his voice stopped, refusing to speak his gratitude for what she'd done, but he forced it out anyway, "I didn't say so before, but... thank you."

Thankfully she didn't ask him to elaborate. "It is my honor, my prince. Do not waste all my effort."

Of course, he had no intention of doing that. He wasn't Thor, heedless of his own care.

After Eir had reported Loki's condition and Thor had gone back to Loki's side to keep him company, Frigga had followed Odin back to his sitting room in their private quarters. He'd puttered about before going to the balcony, his mind clearly on something else.
She brought him a cup of mead and joined him. "Odin?" she prompted when he said nothing. She only had to look at his face and know what he had not discussed while Thor was with them. "What did you see in his mind?"

"Nothing I saw, but there was... a voice," he answered slowly. "I could not clearly hear the words, but the tone was... religious. Zealous."

"His captor's voice?" she asked, setting her cup down on the balcony rail when her fingers trembled. "I think so. And, Frigga, it was familiar."

"You heard it before? When?" Her mind tumbled through the possibilities, but who could it be? Some enemy with a distinctive religious cadence? She couldn't think of one, but she was not Odin's age, nor had she watched as many outer Realms people as he had.

He shook his head once. "I know not. I need to hear it again."

"Then you should ask Loki to see into--"

"You saw how he reacted," he interrupted. "It is there, close to the surface. To prod at it now..." he trailed off, uncertain. "I should, for the good of the Realms. We must know our enemy. But to tear the curtain in his mind seems fraught with risk that I cannot measure."

Risks of sudden shock, of memories he was not yet ready to face, of anguish and fear all piling on him at once... yes, Odin was wiser this time. She laid her hand over his and squeezed, when he glanced at her. "It is the right choice to wait, husband."

"Is it?" he asked, a little bleakly. "If this enemy attacks--"

"Then we will defend against it. But when you keep both the tesseract and the Mind Stone, no one will challenge you."

Her attempted reassurance did not strike at the heart of his worry. His eye sought the horizon. "And when I am gone?"

"You know what you must do," she said, though her heart ached at the reminder of the inevitable. "It is our sons who must defend the Realms. Both of them need to learn their full strength and to know what weapons are theirs to wield. And that can only come from the truth."

He turned his head to face her and his fingers gripped hers. His expression was somber and concerned. "All of it?"

She lifted her chin and nodded. "I should have told him when we both sat with you. Since that day, since I lost him," her voice faded, recalling the terrible regretful grief that had engulfed her and not eased until she'd been able to reach him before the invasion of Midgard. She had to clear her throat to find her voice. "I have thought how the truth might have changed all that followed. I thought I would have time to explain...." But she'd had no time at all, as everything had collapsed within a day. She'd been too concerned about Odin, and not concerned enough about Loki. She had to look down at her hands, shame and regret bitter in her heart. "I didn't understand the depth of the blow it was to him. How it struck across what was already cracked and shattered him. I will not make the same mistake again. He must know all of the truth, and if he knows, then Thor should, too. It's time they stop paying for our comfort."

He nodded slowly and gave a sigh. "In this I will let you guide, as my decisions regarding all of my
children have proved dire. I hope I have time to amend them all."

"You will." She rested her free hand atop his chest, smiling at him with affection. "You have a
great heart, when you keep it open. Not all is scheming and darkness; there is love and light in the
universe as well."

He laid his hand over hers, pressing hers against his armor. "As you prove daily. Thank you for
reminding this old warrior that he can be more, Frigga. Always you have been there to light the
path, and I know how deeply lost I would be without you."

"You never will be," she reassured him, and added with pointed emphasis, "Unless you are cruel to
the children again."

He lifted a hand to ward off her ire. "I swear." But then he found a bit of a wry smile. "I have found
myself quite enjoying my discussions with Loki. If I could do it again...."

She softened at that. "If we both could do it all again, we would do better, husband. But since we
can't, all we can do is better in the present."

United, she felt sure that they would.

________________________________________________________________________

tbc...
Rejoice

Two days after Eir's evaluation and pronounced Loki on the mend, Thor went into the infirmary armed with little cakes from the kitchen. His mother had passed word that Loki had slept poorly again and needed some cheering up.

Thor expected to find Loki dozing or picking at his food or watching some recording-- what he did not expect was to find Loki perched on the edge of his bed.

His bare feet were on the floor, the rest of him bare except for the smallclothes around his hips. Upright, he looked all bones and no flesh, and it was alarming that he was still so thin. Worse, Thor could still see the glow around both of Loki's legs at the knee, keeping them straight. Possibly the extra support was helpful, but Thor knew it meant he had no approval to do this.

Loki was leaning all his weight against the bed, one hand clutching the edge, the other uselessly gripping the sheet. He looked sweaty and pinched, and his body was canted to the side as if he wasn't capable of straightening. He looked about five seconds from falling.

"WHAT IN ALL THE HELLS ARE YOU DOING?" Thor bellowed. Loki flinched, and for a terrifying moment, Thor thought he might collapse. He threw the plate with the cakes to the table and strode forward to seize Loki around the waist. "Get back in bed, you fool."

"I can't move," Loki confessed, breathlessly. "Or I'll fall on the floor."

He was shaking against Thor's arm, and so Thor shifted his grip to one arm around his back and the other scooping beneath his thighs. "I have you, brother."

"Thor!" Loki yelped as Thor picked him up bodily and laid him back in bed.

"There." Thor let him go and stepped back to admire his handiwork. "Now, what possessed you to try that with no one here? What if you'd fallen? You could have hurt yourself, rebroken your bones, hit your head--"

Loki waved a hand, trying to wave away his impetuous action. "All right, all right, I said it was a mistake!"

He hadn't actually said that so Thor just folded his arms and glared. He had no intention of letting Loki treat this foolishness lightly, when he could have been re-injured badly.

Loki heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes. "Nothing happened."

"Because I entered in time to catch you. No other reason. Certainly not because you attempted to stand without Eir's blessing. Alone."

Finally Loki cast his eyes down and curled a surly lip that he was being harangued but couldn't argue, because he knew he had been caught doing something recklessly stupid. "I thought I was strong enough. It's only standing, how hard can it be? But... it was," he finished, blowing out a disgruntled breath. "It hurt, and I was unsteady and dizzy."

Thor softened his tone. "You look as if you still hurt." The pallor and stress lines around his eyes were particularly concerning.

"No, it's fine," Loki protested and pulled his hand away from rubbing his leg as if he'd suddenly
caught fire. Smiling, Thor poured out a small cup of the pain draught, and helped him drink when his hand trembled.

He relaxed against the pillow with a deeper breath. "Thank you," he murmured, eyes flicking to find Thor.

Thor dragged the chair closer with his foot. "Loki, what were you thinking?" he asked, trying to ask as a true question not an accusation, once he'd sat down. "You knew it was dangerous."

Loki glanced away, head turning from Thor, as he searched for an explanation. "I thought I could. That's all."

"And you wanted to attempt it in private in case you failed?" Thor asked, lifting his brows. Loki's cheeks turned pink, and he muttered something which might have been 'maybe.'

Thor wanted to sigh, but didn't, because it was the same pride he'd have in the same situation. "You need not prove anything--" he started.

Loki's head shot up and he hissed, "Of course I do, don't be stupid. You think I can just lie in this bed, helpless and useless the rest of my days?"

Thor stared, aghast. "Loki, of course not. No one thinks you will. You improve every day."

"Do I?" he returned, but it was a tired voice, as his temper dissolved as quickly as it had come. "It doesn't feel that way. Everything hurts all the time...I still can't read anything more complicated than a baby book," he added in disgust. "What if I never can? What if it's gone?"

"I've managed," Thor said, with a bit of a shrug.

"I have to read slowly. Sometimes the runes go backward, so I have to concentrate. You know this, certainly you mocked me for my slowness often enough."

That seemed to stir something in Loki, as if this were new to him. He gave Thor a look, frowning at him. "Truly? I always thought you were doing it to annoy me."

"No, of course not, why would I do that?" Thor returned, completely confused. "I wanted to be clever like you, not slow. Why do you think I always wanted you to tell me things? When you say things aloud, I get it right away."

Loki leaned back against his pillow, plucking at his sheet, and had a thoughtful look on his face. "I never knew that," he murmured. "Or if I did, I never thought about what it meant. I shouldn't have mocked you. Or made you feel stupid."

Thor's chest felt tight and he had to wrap a hand over Loki's. "I never meant for you to feel less either, Loki. I'm sorry."

Loki's eyes met his and he didn't say anything for a moment, letting them both relax. Then a glimmer of a smile appeared on his lips. "You still have a stupid helmet."

"Says the person with the most ridiculous helmet in Nine Realms," Thor tossed back, grinning. He could see the possible retorts forming, but before Loki could speak them, Frigga sailed into the room in a flutter of colored silk. "There you both are! Oh, look at you, sitting so peacefully. Let me
rejoice in the contentment I see--"

She stopped abruptly, as Thor saw it, too. Loki's eyes went blank, and he went abruptly still.

"Rejoice," he repeated, voice toneless. He didn't move, even to breathe, sitting rigid as ice.

Thor frowned, worried. "Loki--" But Frigga held up her hand to silence him and she frowned at Loki.

"Rejoice," Loki repeated. His voice was so flat and lifeless it sent a chill down Thor's back. "For you are free. Free of want. Free of suffering."

It wasn't quite the same but it reminded Thor of those recordings he'd seen on the SHIELD flying carrier. "That sounds like what you said on Midgard?"

"Midgard?" Loki repeated, blinking, as if he were waking up. A confused frown drew his brows together, and he pressed a hand against his chest, his breathing in desperate gulps.

Frigga sat beside him on the bed. "That's not important right now, darling. What happened? What did you see?" She smoothed back his short hair. "Who said those words you were repeating just now?"

"I don't -- I don't know." His hands were shaking, even his lower lip was trembling until he bit it. "I can't breathe," he whispered.

Frigga pulled him against her body, cradling his head against her shoulder. "You're safe, little one," she whispered. "You're home and nobody can hurt you here."

"What's wrong with me?" His voice was ragged, rising up from where his face was buried in her hair.

"Nothing," she soothed. "Nothing's wrong with you. You're reacting to memories you can't access yet."

He lifted his head, and Thor's hand reached out in a reflective urge to help him from the imploring look on his face. "You can. You can help me remember it. Please," he added and though Thor would've said there was no way Frigga could resist that, she shook her head.

Her fingers were light on his cheek. "I could, perhaps, but I don't think I should, Loki. To have all the memories crash upon you at once-- I don't think anyone could handle that."

"It's better than this!" he protested, voice rising to a broken shout, but his eyes were wet.

Frigga kept her calm. "If pieces upset you so much, the full memories will be no better. Knowledge is not always better than ignorance, my son. Let your mind reveal it to you slowly."

Miserably, he shook his head against her shoulder, burying his face again. Frigga lifted her eyes to Thor and flicked two fingers at him.

He got the message, climbing to his feet. He wanted to say something to Loki, but whatever he considered sounded stupid, so it was better just to go and let her tend him.

Creeping out as softly as he could, he closed the door behind him and bit his lip in worry.

To hear those words come out, clearly without Loki's conscious will, had been unnerving. Wrong. They needed to help him, but Thor had no idea how. Nor did he like how close Loki seemed to be
remembering everything; Loki was already feeling too uncertain in himself and his ability, to handle the truth of his adoption well, and yet if he remembered on his own, it would be worse.

He wanted to talk to his friends, but they weren't back yet. Who then?

It came to him what the obvious answer was: he should talk to the king.

tbc...
It turned out not quite so easy to talk to the king, and Thor was able to get him alone only seconds before Frigga hurried into the room.

“Eir is with him, but I will return to him shortly. There is ill news, did Thor tell you?” she asked.

“Thor has told me nothing yet,” Odin answered. “I presume you mean Loki?”

“He shared another memory of his missing time,” she started and Thor didn’t think that was a good description at all.

“He blankly repeated someone else’s words, Father. As if bespelled. It was eerie, but also sounded similar to what he was saying on Midgard.”

Odin exchanged a look with Frigga and she nodded, adding, “As you noticed before, it seemed religious in tone.” She cast an illusion copy of Loki, the words repeating again, and just as chilling the second time.

Odin’s frown deepened and he cast his gaze away, before shaking his head once. “There are too many I recall who use similar phrases. Yet it tickles my memory of something not so very long ago. Heimdall!” he called, “Attend. Frigga, repeat it.”

The illusion played again, and Odin’s eye went distant, listening to a response Thor could not hear.

Odin grunted in annoyance. “He remembers it, too. I will search the Chronicle, now that I have confirmation it was recent.”

There was a log kept in Asgard of events outside of it which were noted by her observers, whether those who visited other Realms or through arts such as Heimdall or the king’s. Thor had looked at it a few times, but it was only a summary, and he wasn’t sure what information his father would find in it.

“How can you not recall it?” Thor asked. He would have expected Odin to remember everything, and yet here, he didn’t remember something from less than a century ago.

Thor winced at the implied criticism and would have retracted it, but his father only shook his head once. His voice was weary as he answered, “There are so many, Thor. Mortals fling themselves upon a pyre for little cause, and all there is out there is death.” He waved his fingers outward, toward the stars, and Thor had to nod his understanding.

Odin went on, squaring his shoulders again, “But I will look. Perhaps something may spark.”

“That would be good to know,” Frigga said, “but not the reason for my visit. Loki is quite troubled by this recollection, and I fear these memories are returning swiftly. I think we need to tell him the truth of his blood soon.”

“That was what I was going to suggest,” Thor added, and grimaced. “I don’t want to since I know it will hurt him, but if he remembers on his own, it will be worse.”

“Yes,” Odin agreed heavily, but when Frigga turned, as if to rush right back to Loki’s bedside and tell him that minute, he held up a hand. “Let me look at the Chronicle, and see if Heimdall and I can recall what teases our memory. I would rather be armed with that knowledge before risking
She glanced at the door and bit her lip, before acceding with a nod. He moved to the side table, set Gungnir against the wall, and activated the Archive. As it formed in the air, he stroked his beard, scanning the entries

“Thor, I’ll stay to help your father, and if you would go keep Loki company when Eir is finished; I think we should not leave him alone right now.”

Thor agreed, but lingered, hoping his father would see the entry that would remind him of what he had heard. But Frigga flicked her fingers to coax him to go, so he went.

Frigga waited, watching Odin flip through the Chronicle – entry after entry of reports of various happenings that someone in Asgard had seen and noted of interest. It was indexed to longer reports and information on worlds and persons, most of them mortal and most long dead.

She wondered if he was recalling Kree; there were elements of their society that were both militaristic and zealous. The Kree were powerful enough to hold a weakened Loki captive and hurt him, though they were usually not fool enough to want to challenge Asgard nor did they bother with sorcerers or other means to hide themselves.

_They are mortal, they change_, she reminded herself. Kree were long-lived for mortals, but still, it was an error to assume they remained static. Perhaps one had found a technique to hide his movements while acquiring the Infinity Stones.

A soft breath drew her attention back to Odin, in time to see him slump against the table, one hand bracing himself upright.

“Odin?” she hurried to him. “Are you well?”

He turned his head toward her, his expression troubled, and then he looked back at the Archive display. His free hand expanded one corner of it into a bigger image.

She saw a green-skinned race and the notation: Zehoberei.

“It was this I remember,” he answered, his voice a little hoarse.

Leaning against his shoulder to read it, she asked, “This world?”

He didn’t take his gaze from the report in front of them. “Twenty years ago, an invader came. I remember Heimdall telling me to look, because an old enemy had returned. So I watched…” His eye closed in pain. “As before, he came to the world as a locust does, divided the population, and his soldiers murdered half. Not for conquest, not for gain, simply for… death. And all the while his herald intoned the most horrifying things about how it was a _joyful_ event. They were being freed from their suffering.”

The echo of Loki’s words made her shudder, and she seized his hand in hers, as a horrible deep forboding took over her body. She had heard this story before. He took strength from the grip and continued, “I started to rouse the Einharjar to battle, but before the day was over, the attack had ended and his fleet had vanished, as it always had before.” He inhaled a deep breath. “Thanos the Mad Titan, Frigga. That is who seeks to unite the Infinity Stones and spread his madness across the universe.”

She whispered, “That is who held our son.”
“Yes,” he agreed, “I think so. I still wish confirmation, but it fits too well.”

“Thanos.” She knew the name, too. Thanos was a warlord of Titan, altered into immortality and a near-Asgardian power, who was the last survivor of his world and reappeared periodically to bring to other worlds what had befallen his. He took beings from those worlds into his service, made them powerful tools of death, increasing his army each time he struck. Was it possible that Thanos had built his power enough to challenge Asgard?

“What will we do?” she asked.

“Destroy him,” Odin answered with the wrath of the warrior king in his voice and his blazing eye. This time she was not at all averse to seeing him return. “I have let him prey upon the universe for too long already. I will find his hidden fortress and his army and turn them to ash, and plunge Gungnir into his heart.”

“And then remove his head and burn it,” she advised, with her own vicious chill. “But not alone, you and the boys must work together. Not in reckless haste.”

He smoothed her hair down her back, soothing himself with the touch from righteous fury to something more calm, but equally determined. “No, no reckless haste. But there will be a reckoning, this I swear. For turning Loki into his hound, I will end him.”

“And if you do not, I will,” she declared, the memory passing through her mind of his shattered body and how close she had come to losing her son, again. His more recent fearful recall and despair that were scarcely easier to remember.

It was with their hearts perfectly in sync once more, that they turned as one to look at the image in the record, a recording made of a different culling two centuries ago, of a distant but still clearly large armored figure surrounded by his Outrider constructs, and two robed acolytes.

Odin looked at it and added, “He moved too soon and grabbed too much. He attracted my attention, and now he will learn his mistake, attacking my son and a world under my protection.”

“Yes, we will avenge him,” she agreed. Then she extended a hand and dismissed the Archive. “But not now. Now we must be soft, not hard, and tell Loki the truth of his blood. That is what matters today. To reassure him that he is ours, and he is no monster. He is no changeling child, no weapon, no reluctant gift, but a son.” She looked into his face. “Can you say that to him without hesitation or evasion? Because he will sense it if you do.”

He returned her look squarely, and said, “He is my son, Frigga. As much as he is yours.”

She smiled and put her hand in his. “Then we should go tell him so.”

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Thor was glad to arrive before Eir had left. She had removed the binding from Loki’s legs and was helping him bend his knees, working through the stiffness and weakness of being immobilized.

Loki turned his head, and to Thor’s relief, he looked recovered from before. His eyes were still reddish from crying, but Thor made no mention of it, smiling as he returned to the bedside.

“Back so soon?” Loki asked. “Am I that thrilling?”

“Thought you might want company.”

Loki’s lips twisted sourly but he didn’t object, returning his attention to Eir as she coaxed him into doing two more bends. “There, my prince. I will leave the restraining field off for now if you wish to sit up more comfortably, but it should go back on later.”

Loki agreed and Eir took her leave, as Loki pushed himself upright. In the silence after she’d gone, Loki finally broke it with an uncomfortable shrug. “So. Mother sent you, in case I go mad again.”

“No, just to sit with you. You’re not mad.” Loki scoffed, and Thor insisted, “No. Repeating something you were forced to say, isn’t madness.” He considered and then admitted, “You should know-- We don’t know who took you captive yet or really how, but we discovered the artifact you were carrying when I found you, was the Mind Gem.”

“The Infinity Stone?” Loki demanded. “I was carrying the Mind Stone? How did I find that?” But then the rest of the implications sunk in and his rather incredulous humor drifted away and he frowned. “Is that why I forgot?”

“I think that was the crack in your head, but there seems to have been some… tampering before that,” Thor answered, trying to be honest but careful also.

Loki’s hand rested on his stomach as if he wanted to be sick, and pressed his lips together, until the impulse passed and he let out a laugh. “Someone in my head. And you’re being very careful not to tell me what I was doing with the Mind Stone.”

“Whatever it was, doesn’t matter. It wasn’t you,” Thor answered staunchly.

Loki shot him a look. “Great. Now I get to imagine what I did. No wonder my dreams are terrible.”

“Loki, I know this is difficult--”

Loki’s glare turned vicious. “Stop condescending to me. I am not a child, and you are not Mother.”

“No, he’s not,” Frigga’s voice cut in suddenly, neither of them having heard her enter. “Thor, pull the other chair close. I will sit on the bed.”

Thor turned to find Odin entering as well, and he knew from the resolute expressions that they were going to tell Loki. “I – should I be here?” he asked, hesitating.

“Yes, son,” Odin answered and let out a breath as he sat down. “What we are about to say, you have not heard either.”

Surprised, Thor exchanged a glance with Loki and then hurried to bring the chair close by his father as Frigga settled herself at the end of the bed.
“I – don’t understand,” Loki said, looking from Odin to Frigga. “Something we don’t know? About what happened last year?”

“No,” Frigga answered. “What happened before you were born. Or, no, it has some bearing on last year, since your finding out a piece of it was what caused – everything that followed,” she started and then had to look away. “We had hoped – foolishly – none of this would ever come to light. For you, for ourselves. But secrets never keep forever, and we should have known better than to hide the truth from you. So we intend to rectify that mistake now.”

Thor frowned. Before Loki was born? Was there something about Thor himself that was also kept secret? His chest tightened in anxiety as Odin took up the tale.

The king’s voice was well-suited for stories, and he began as a soft rumble.

“You were told that the Winter War began when Jotunheim attacked Midgard and Asgard stirred to defend it. But it truly began when one of our own, a lady named Amora, a sorceress of great power and even greater ambition, found her way to Jotunheim and allied with Laufey. She would help him defeat Asgard, and together they would rule the Nine Realms. You see, she had learned that my father, Bor, was the son of a Frost Giant.”

“What?” Thor blurted, looking up, startled. His grandfather had been half Frost Giant? That meant Thor had Frost Giant blood, too. He looked to Loki, eager to share the idea that they shared blood after all – and why hadn’t his parents mentioned this before? – but Loki wasn’t looking back at him. He was frowning a little, his lips flat.

Odin nodded. “This was… so long ago, but yes, it was an early attempt – when the Realms were closer – to bring peace between them. I never knew my father’s mother, but I do know it was possible because the royal line of Jotunheim can change their size to become more akin to Aesir if they wish. They normally do not, but it made acceptance by our people easier. But, it was a truth Bor ended up hiding, because the combination of blood yielded a far greater power than the sum of the two individually. The Odinforce was created in that union, and that was what Amora wished most of all: a child to challenge me – and you--” he added, glancing at Thor, in case Thor didn’t grasp that. “And rule through her child.”

But Thor was already far ahead of him because he knew where this story was going to end. Amora had got her way, he thought-- Loki was not Jotunn blood alone, but the blood of this Aesir sorceress. That was why they had tried to keep it a secret, not for Jotunn blood alone, but the blood of a traitor.

But then why had Odin brought the child to Asgard to raise as his own? At first it made no sense, but his heart sank with the obvious truth that it was because of Loki’s power. Odin could never risk a child with Bor’s potential raised by someone else, away from his watchful eye. So Odin had raised him, kept a close eye on him-- even disparaged his sorcerer’s skills as much as he could, so Loki could never become strong enough to challenge him.

Thor’s hands clenched to tight fists, anger burning in his chest. He was about to blurt out the harsh accusation when Frigga touched his hand. Her eyes warned him to stay calm and to wait. The story was not yet finished. His anger simmered back down and he glanced aside to see how Loki was taking it.

Loki was listening curiously, but with no flicker of realizing this was about him, not yet. Thor bit his lip and hoped the revelation came gently to him. Perhaps being only half Frost Giant would be less painful to him.
Thor shifted in his chair, resigned to waiting for the tale to come to the end he expected.

“So Laufey started the war. I had no notion Amora was involved until much later,” Odin admitted, looking off into distant memory with a rueful twist of his lips. “Asgard opposed of course, seeking to stop the Jotnar conquest of Midgard. Amora had found and gave Laufey the Space Stone to seal their agreement. With that power, he could attack on multiple fronts, including here while the bulk of the Einharjar was occupied on Midgard. So I had you and your mother take refuge in the mountain sanctuary with the rest of the children. I believed them safe there. Once shut, no force could open the doors from without.”

He hesitated and Loki added softly, “But someone opened the door from within.”

Odin glanced at him and nodded. “Indeed. Amora had her servants and her thralls even then, to do her bidding. A traitor opened the door and Amora herself transported a party of Jotnar warriors to invade. There were few warriors in the refuge and few weapons-- Your mother gave you to Heimdall to keep safe,” he said to Thor, “and she--”

“-- stayed to protect those who could not fight,” she interjected smoothly. “They would all have been slaughtered if I had not.”

“You heart was nearly your death that day,” Odin retorted, the ghost of an ancient argument echoing in his words. “It was foolish!”

“It was necessary,” she returned, but more calmly. She faced her sons. “I surrendered to them, if they would spare the others. Amora arrived, and she was furious we weren’t dead, you had escaped, and the Jotnar refused to kill me once they’d accepted my surrender. We were all taken to Jotunheim.”

Thor gaped at that news. He’d never heard such a thing, and exchanged a horrified look with Loki.

“Laufey returned,” she said, and her eyes dropped to her lap, where her fingers rubbed together in her only concession to anxiety. “And once he saw it was me, he wanted nothing to do with Amora, as my ancestry and my power is greater than hers.”

“Mother, no,” Loki whispered.

She didn’t seem to hear, swallowing hard and her voice barely emerging from her throat. “He threatened to kill all of our prisoners, unless I submitted to him. So I did.”

Thor could only look at her, stricken by what she was saying. Laufey? Had done that? “You let him live, Father?” The demand flew out, unchecked. “Why?”

But Loki whispered the answer, “Because of me.” Thor turned toward him, confused, but Loki was only looking at Frigga. “That’s what you couldn’t tell me, isn’t it? That Laufey … that he … assaulted you, and he’s my-- my true father,” he finished, voice shaking and skin white as bone.

“Yes,” Frigga confirmed, soft as a breath. “I was a prisoner all through the war, until you were born, so early, so tiny.” Her lips made a tremulous smile. “I thought-- I had thought I wouldn’t be able to bear to look at Laufey’s child, after what he’d done, but then I saw you. The birthing nurse, my companion through all this, took pity on me and let me hold you. And I loved you, Loki.” Her hand gripped his. “Always, my son. Which is why it was so devastating when Laufey took you away. He was going to raise you himself, as his heir, the future king of Jotunheim and future challenger to rule the Nine Realms.”

“But I took the tesseract from him,” Odin said, “and without that, his force weakened. Asgard
pushed the Jotnar back to Jotunheim and they were defeated. I retrieved your mother and brought her home. She told me of her child, so I went back to Jotunheim to fetch you, Loki. And I intended then, to kill Laufey.”

“I told him he could not,” Frigga said.

“But why?” Thor demanded in confusion. “Why wouldn’t you wish him dead?”

She lifted her head, squaring her shoulders with all the resolution and strength of a queen of Asgard. “Because he was defeated. Because your father took the Casket and his heir and left him nothing. If he was killed, a new king would arise. But if he lived, he would always know that Asgard held his future in our hands. And we raised him as our own.” Her hand covered Loki’s, but he pulled it free to hold both hands in his lap.

He was still pale and stunned, and stared down at his palms as if searching for a hint of blue skin beneath. “So… I’m a Frost Giant bastard.”

Frigga and Thor both flinched at the flat statement, and Thor grimaced, recognizing that he was correct.

But Odin said, “No. You have Frost Giant blood, that is so. But you are my son, Loki. I claimed you on the day I placed you back in your mother’s arms.”

Loki lifted blazing eyes, and hissed, “Lies. I see your true intent. You wanted to control the power. That’s why you brought this bastard child into your house. You were afraid of me.”

Odin’s lips parted in objection, but then closed again as he reconsidered his words. “At first, yes,” he admitted. “I could not let Laufey keep you, not just because your mother wished you back, but because I knew he would raise you against me.”

Loki slumped against his pillows, the fight and anger gone from him on hearing he was right. “And,” Odin continued heavily, fingers tight on the arm of his chair since he did not have Gungnir to hold, “I realize now I was not the father to you I should have been, Loki. I meant to be-- I believed I was treating you fairly, but I kept a distance between us. Your past, your blood was not your doing, and yet I treated you as if it was. I have been trying, since you returned to us, to make up for my mistake. You are my son, Loki. You always have been, and you always will be.”

Loki couldn’t look at him, lip quivering and his brows knitting in anguish that he wanted to believe. He’d heard Odin’s explanation and declaration, and his acknowledgement that he’d not treated Loki fully as a son of his own blood, and to Thor it looked as if Loki didn’t know what to do with the confession.

After giving Loki a chance to speak, Odin drew in a deep breath. “So that you do not mistake my words,” he said, “and you understand that I speak from the heart and from truth, I give this to you as a gesture of my trust and faith in you.” He put his hands together and then drew them apart, a glowing box forming between his hands, pulled from another dimension.

The Casket of the Ancient Winters appeared, a maelstrom caught inside the translucent decorative sides. Odin took it by the handles and set it carefully on the small table beside Loki’s bed. Frigga blinked, shocked by the gift.

“Its power is yours to command,” Odin said. “It belongs to you now.”

Loki’s eyes seemed fixed on the swirling power, reflecting its glow. His nearer hand lifted slowly
toward the Casket, and Thor reflexively tensed. Loki was upset and unwell, and he could activate its power before any of them in the room could stop him.

But his hand didn't touch it. “What do I do now?” he whispered. His hand dropped back into his lap, and he turned his gaze back to Frigga. “Who am I?” His voice cracked, the pain in it making Thor hurt, too.

She cupped his cheek. “You are our son, Loki, and we your parents. That has not changed. We love you.”

“And my brother,” Thor added staunchly. “Forever.”

Blinking furiously to try to keep the tears from falling, as his chest heaved for unsteady breaths, Loki sat frozen and helpless beneath the onslaught of emotion, until Frigga gathered him into her embrace. He shook in her arms, his face hidden in her shoulder.

“I’m here, my son,” she murmured. “We’re all here for you.”

Odin leaned close enough to rest a gentle hand on the back of Loki’s head, smoothing his short hair. Thor, feeling awkward but not wanting to be left out, laid his hand on Loki’s back so he would know Thor was there, too.

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Loki’s mind whirled, lost in the storm of emotions and thoughts of history he’d never knew. Odin, his father, not his father-- Laufey, King of Jotunheim. Laufey who’d raped his mother during the war. Which made Loki half-Frost Giant.


No wonder Odin had always acted as though Loki were something distasteful.

He might be trying to make amends now, but all those years, Loki hadn’t been imagining that his father valued him less. And because he had, everyone else had, too. “Loki the lesser” they’d whispered, and they hadn’t even been wrong.

“Loki, it’s all right,” Frigga murmured into his hair. “You are my son, our son, there’s nothing to fear.”

He was making some strange sound in his throat, he realized, and he cut it off, trying to calm down. Air seemed to wrap around his chest, his bones ached, and panic made a sudden darting leap to escape. A lurching breath caught it, and he forced himself to inhale.


Following her instructions and concentrating on his breaths, his emotions settled, until he was feeling distinctly humiliated by the awareness this was the second time in as many hours he’d clutched at Frigga’s gown like a baby.

Pulling back, he had to use a corner of the bed sheet to wipe his face, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes. “Why?” he demanded suddenly and lifted his face to Frigga’s. “Why tell me now? You said nothing my whole life and you tell me this now?” His voice cracked on the last word, and his eyes burned again. Impatiently he tried to blink them clear.

“Because the memories aren’t that far from the surface,” Frigga explained, wiping a stray tear track with her thumb from the side of his jaw. “And we feared you might remember only a piece.” She drew a breath and nodded to herself. After searching his eyes. “Last year, that was what happened. You found out about your Jotunn blood when one of them touched you. But your father fell into the Odinsleep, and I was too distracted to help you as I should have, and you… fell off the Bifrost. And into the hands of this enemy who took advantage of your confusion and pain.”

Loki blinked as that stirred something within, a flash of memory rising to the surface of a deep voice asking him, “Are you strong enough to join my children?”

But he was distracted by Thor’s voice, rough with emotion, “You said – both of you-- When you told me what had happened, you said Loki was Laufey’s son. Nothing else. You knew I thought that meant he was fully Jotunn, the same he believed himself. You let me think we weren’t brothers by blood at all!”

Loki felt sick. He and Thor had both thought he was fully a Frost Giant? And what, shapeshifted into this form? Was that even possible?

“Thor,” Odin started, but Frigga didn’t let him get far.
“No, he’s right,” Frigga said. “I thought it would be easier.”

“Easier?” It was torn from his throat, incredulous. “How would it possibly be easier to believe I’m all monster? Hard enough to know I’m half, but to be a Frost Giant completely? To believe I’m nothing but a false skin, while inside I’m what everyone hates?”

“Loki, no,” Frigga tried to put her hand on his arm and he yanked free.

“Yes. That’s exactly it, I know it.” He could feel the remnants of that loathing still curdling inside him, a desire to claw his flesh off his bones untempered by the revelation that it wasn’t true. And when it had been true, untempered by anything?

His head lifted, awareness hitting like lightning. “I didn’t just fall off the Bifrost, did I? I threw myself off. That’s why you both feel so guilty about it and why you decided to tell the truth this time.”

The silence that fell and the stricken look on Thor’s face told him he was right. Defeated, exhausted, he leaned back. “So tell me, which am I supposed to believe? The story you couldn’t admit for a thousand years that you stole a Jotnar infant and raised him in ignorance, or the softer tale of a mother’s love and her half-blood bastard?”

“Loki, it’s true,” Frigga murmured, reaching a hand toward him that didn’t quite make it before falling to the bed when he glared at it, tired of being comforted. She drew breath and admitted, “I didn’t want to tell the truth of what had happened, I didn’t want to think of it at all. We had convinced ourselves that you would never learn any of this – that the secrets would keep forever. Then it did not, but I was too slow to tell you everything when it mattered. I was wrong, Loki. I made you pay a terrible price for my comfort, and I didn’t want to make that mistake again, now that you’ve miraculously returned to us.”

He heard that and he wanted to believe it. He wanted to believe that she was telling the truth now, and he wanted to believe he was only half Frost Giant, But could he believe it, when they’d lied for so long and the worse truth seemed more likely?

Looking her in the eye, he asked, “Am I truly your son? By blood?”

“You are, Loki. I swear, on my life, on the Eternal Flame of Asgard, it’s true.”

“And I swear,” Odin added, “that you are my son by heart. I have oft treated you unfairly, but I will do better. If you give this old man another chance.”

Faced with those two oaths, Loki knew he had to choose whether to continue to doubt them and himself, or accept what they were promising. His gaze flicked to the Casket sitting so quietly on the table, thrumming with power. Surely Odin would never give such an artifact to someone who was entirely Jotunn, even if he’d been raised a cuckoo in the nest, believing himself Aesir?

“What does Laufey know of all this?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Frigga answered promptly. “To our knowledge he never put you and his child together. Of course there was little communications between us, but through proxies, we heard that he believed Odin had killed the child I’d borne. It was,” she hesitated, looking regretful, “one reason he continued to hate Asgard and Odin in particular. And, last year, he invaded the palace and struck at your father in the Odinsleep. I hope this isn’t difficult to hear, but you… killed him, Loki. Knowing he was your birth father, you killed him with Gungnir.”

Loki frowned, trying to parse what he felt about that. It seemed mostly an empty revelation-- he
didn’t remember ever seeing Laufey, he had no feeling toward him as blood, and he refused to be sorry he killed the monster who attacked his mother, even if that attack begat him in the first place. “Then I avenged you. That is not difficult at all.”

She smiled her gratitude at him and patted his arm. Thor spoke up, his voice having that odd thoughtfulness to it again, “Does this mean Loki is the heir of Jotunheim?”

“He could be,” Odin answered. “Jotnar do not care about marriage, only royal bloodline.” He turned his head back toward Loki. “However kingship goes to the one who can take power and has the support of enough clan elders to keep it. To take the Realm, you would have to defeat Helblindi, a cousin who was acclaimed not long ago.”

Loki thought about what they were suggesting and barked a laugh. “I’m not going to be king of Jotunheim. I have never been there and I know nothing about it.” He noticed Thor stir at that, and wondered if there was something else missing. Had he and Thor visited there, and Loki had forgotten?

But Odin’s next words distracted him from asking about it. “Still,” Odin added, thoughtful, “the one who brings the Casket home to them and is able to restore their Realm to its former glory would have more support than you imagine.”

Loki shot him a look, sensing some ancient plans starting to come to fruition in his ‘suggestion’. To close that down, he said, “But I am not a giant. And I think in their society, battle prowess matters a great deal, as it does here.”

Odin lifted a hand in a pacifying gesture. “It was only an idea. I have long held a hope that somehow you would be able to bring peace between the two Realms, but achieving that was never a clear path.” He slapped his knees and rose to his feet. “Think on it. You must get well before anything else, regardless, and to that end, you should rest.”

“Would you like us to stay?” Frigga asked. “I’ll stay if you wish. But it’s true you look exhausted, dearest.”

“I would like Thor to stay, if he would,” Loki requested, and had to look away when Frigga’s lips twisted in disappointment she made into an accepting smile.

But Thor was pleased. “Of course, brother.”

Both Odin and Frigga hovered at his bedside, making small movements as if they intended to touch him, before they withdrew with soft urges to sleep well, and they would speak more later.

“You… seem remarkably calm about this,” Loki observed after a moment of silence.

“Should I be raging?” Thor asked, lifting his brows at him and a smile tugging at his lips.

Loki picked at the blanket. “I don’t know… I guess, yes. They lied to you, too.”

That chased Thor’s amusement away. “I want to understand,” he said slowly. “They wished to protect Mother, and I cannot disagree with that. But to deny her blood tie to you, even by implication, seems wrong to me.”

Hearing his own feelings reflected back to him somehow made the pain sharper. It felt like rejection, that she had thought it somehow better if he were a monster than part monster and part
hers. He didn’t want to think of it that way, but the idea felt true.

Thor must’ve seen something in his face that made him add in a rush, “But I don’t think they meant to do that, only to keep me from being curious about the truth. You were dead and past harm, we thought.”

“Wrongly.”

“Yes, thankfully we were wrong about that.” Thor squeezed his arm. “But nothing has changed, Loki.”

Loki gave him a tired, impatient look. He hadn’t asked Thor to stay if all he intended to say were empty words. “Of course it has.”

Thor nodded, accepting that, and corrected, “All right. But not everything. I am still your brother--”

“Half-brother.”

“Brother,” Thor insisted, overriding Loki’s attempted correction. “And they are still your parents, just as we have been for a thousand years. That has not changed. You have not changed, only what you know is changed.”

Loki thought that sounded nice, but he didn’t believe it. Everything felt different. He was different – he was half-Frost Giant. His true father was Laufey. He’d been raised in ignorance of that, and plainly they’d never have told him at all except fate had forced their hand.

Raising a hand, he examined it.

“It’s still the same,” Thor said, more softly.

“It explains a few things, like why hot springs make me feel ill.” And why his father had cared so little for him, of course. That was the important one. But- Odin had recognized his fault and had promised to make amends, hadn’t he? And he had given Loki the Casket of the Ancient Winters in token of that, so Loki should accept it as honest.

He glanced at the Casket, and narrowed his eyes, wondering if he was imagining that its glow seemed a little brighter when Loki’s attention was on it. Breathing with slow deliberation, he extended seidr toward the seed of power writhing inside.

The glow brightened.

“Thor, would you bring it to me? I need to – try something,” he requested, not taking his eyes from it.

Thor blinked and shrugged, rising with alacrity to seize the handles and pick it up. The Casket didn’t react to his touch at all, as he moved it closer, setting it on the bed at Loki’s side.

“What are you going to do?” Thor asked.

Loki shook his head a little, unsure. After Thor pulled his hands away and sat again in his chair, Loki held out a hand cautiously and set it flat against the side.

Was it warm or cold? He couldn’t tell, but he could feel its power, rising and flowing into his hand, eagerly. As soon as it had a taste, it poured into him, irresistible, filling him with a power that felt familiar somehow. Had he touched the Casket before? Yes, he knew he had, he didn’t remember it,
but he knew he had felt this before.

Something happened as the power filled him. Not ice or cold as he would’ve thought, but warmth suffusing him from within and flowing across his skin.

Changing him.

It was changing him.

Terror seized him and he tried to pull away, but it was too late. He couldn’t stop it, heat washing over him and leaving a chill in its wake.

“Loki!” he heard Thor call out but he seemed far away.

Everything was different. The air felt different on his skin, and when he opened his eyes, even the light and colors seemed oddly shifted.

And his skin… his hand… it was blue.

Horrified, he yanked it back from the Casket, but his skin remained blue. Frost Giant blue. With visible marks and ridges on the back, and his nails had turned black.

Thor gasped.

His heart was pounding in his chest and he couldn’t catch his breath. What if he was stuck like this forever? Had Odin known this would happen? The Casket had made him into a monster. One of them. He wanted to be sick.

He raised his eyes, reluctant to see Thor’s reaction and yet unable to resist.

Thor was staring at him, slack-jawed. There was no disgust on his face, only shock. “Loki…” he managed after a moment, voice strangled in his throat.

“So, now we know it’s true,” Loki said, trying for light-hearted but it came out too flat.


“None of those,” Thor cut in and blinked away his shock to meet Loki’s eyes. “You. That’s all. Not that different.”

That threw Loki into a rage. “Not that different?” He flung out a hand, meaning to call a dagger, but ice formed instead, a sharp clear blade headed directly at Thor’s neck. “NO!” Seidr caught it, panicked, and the blade disintegrated to powder as it touched Thor’s skin.

Leaning back again, Loki shut his eyes, wishing for one desperate moment this entire day would be a bad dream. “Sorry. I didn’t mean--”

“I know,” Thor said, his voice warm with sympathy that just made Loki feel worse. He didn’t deserve it, not one bit. He’d turned into a creature and the very first thing he’d done was nearly kill his brother.

“It’s all right, Loki. Take it easy,” Thor said and with careful deliberation, as if he was proving a point, he wrapped a hand around Loki’s wrist. Loki tried to jerk away, afraid that he’d be hurt. Everyone knew Frost Giant touch would freeze the skin of any Aesir.
But Thor tightened his grip and nothing happened. “You are powerful, brother,’ he reminded Loki. “In every skin. You control it.”

Looking at Thor’s hand, so pale, against the odd blue flesh, his touch warm and familiar, let Loki’s heart slow. Thor didn’t let go either, waiting until Loki had absorbed the truth deep within that Thor didn’t hate him. Didn’t find this change of form repulsive.

“It’s really not,” Thor murmured, and Loki looked up, surprised that Thor appeared to be reading his thoughts.


“You wanted them all dead,” Loki murmured. “I remember.”

Thor flinched. “No, I wanted battle,” he said. “Who I fought was irrelevant, really. The stories are just stories.”

“Laufey was a monster. That makes me a monster.”

“He did something monstrous,” Thor corrected. “To Mother. That made him wrong, and I’m glad you killed him. But that doesn’t make him a monster, and it certainly doesn’t carry to you.”

His every path through this labyrinth of self-doubt finding only his brother’s quiet faith in him, Loki ran out of things to say. He stared at his blue-skinned hands, before muttering, “Has it really only been ten years? I feel you’ve aged a century. Maybe more.”

That made Thor grin. “I’m wise. You’re calling me wise.”

“What? No, I’m not.” But he knew he was, really, and heaved a sigh. “I just – this is all so much.” He looked down at where Thor was still holding his arm, something roiling in his stomach at the sight. That skin, couldn’t be his. He didn’t want it. He needed to make it go back.

And it did. The will to change it back seemed to be all he needed, suddenly – the blue seemed to fade away as the change swept over him, buzzing through his flesh and then gone.

Startled, he looked up and Thor grinned at him. “There, you see!”

“Good. Now we need never see it again, now that I know it can happen.”

Thor frowned at him. “Never? Truly?”

“Yes, never,” Loki confirmed with a nod. “Why would anyone want to see it?”

Thor seemed equally confused. “Why would I not? I don’t mind it, Loki, and of course it might be confusing to people who don’t know, I understand that, but if it is part of you, it seems a better idea to grow accustomed.”

“I don’t want to grow accustomed!”

Thor lifted both hands, urging peace. “Then as you wish, Loki. I merely meant to say--” he chewed on a lip to find better words, “you are my brother, no matter what. I was not always what I should have been, I know that now, but I’m here now, and I won’t let you fall into this anguish again.”

“Again?”
“You tried to end yourself,” Thor reminded him, his voice thick with grief and guilt, his head drooping in misery. “You were hanging over the nothing, I held on one end of Gungnir, and you had the other. I was about to pull you up, back to the bridge. You … looked at me, and you let go. You fell.”

Loki shivered at the story. It was strange hearing that he’d done something so dramatic that he didn’t remember at all. He could imagine the self-loathing though, so the feeling still lingered, but worse was the feeling of shame that he’d forced Thor to watch. “I-- I’m sorry,” he said, feeling small.

The blue eyes snapped up to meet Loki’s. “No, no need to be sorry. Just… don’t forget we love you. I know this day must be awful, and you still so hurt, but we’re with you.”

He squeezed Loki’s hand, looking earnest and sincere. It did make Loki feel a bit more centered, as if he could get through this. He didn’t have to hurl himself off the Bifrost and an endless fall through the void.

He glanced at the Casket of the Ancient Winters, still sitting quiescent in his lap.

What could he do with that artifact of power? How powerful was his mixed-blood? How much had Odin and Frigga been holding him back all this time out of fear?

Perhaps it was time he learned.

________________________________________________________________________

tbc...
yo, sorry this is short, but I’ve got Big Bang due in > a week and even though I’ve not really worked on it, I feel too guilty working on other things, so I haven’t quite finished up the part after this yet.

But in totally unrelated news “The Ice Demon and the Red Skull” launches soon!

Thor finished the children’s tale that Loki had requested from the books by his bed, but was not surprised to find Loki had nodded off at some point. He was still unwell, and after so much emotional upheaval this day, no wonder he was exhausted. Closing the book and setting it back on the table as silently as he could, Thor crept from the room.

He found Frigga in her chambers, on the balcony enjoying the golden sunlight while her needlework sat abandoned in her lap. She looked up and smiled as he came to kiss her cheek. “Join me? Tea?”

“Something stronger?” he countered, and she waved a hand for him to help himself to the drink table.

He brought back the ale and slumped into the chair with a sigh.

“How does he fare?” she asked.

“He sleeps. He… touched the Casket,” he answered turning the cup in his hands idly.

“I felt a rush of power pass through the palace,” she noted. “But I noticed no change in the temperature, so what did he do with it?”

“Nothing,” Thor gave a shrug, but knew that wasn’t the real answer. “He… transformed. Into a Jotunn appearance. More of one,” he corrected, “Not the same as I’ve seen, but the skin, the eyes…. It had taken every spark of willpower not to flinch when Loki had raised those scarlet eyes to meet his. The skin change hadn’t bothered him, but the different eyes had hit him with the strangeness. Yet he’d known any reaction would fuel Loki’s hatred of his blood, so he couldn’t offer anything other than his honest surprise and acceptance.

“And? What did you think?” she asked.

“That it’s wrong that he believes it makes him some sort of monster.”

Her lips pressed together in rueful acknowledgment. “Yes, this has been… difficult. But I think the news hit with less force this time. Or at least it seemed so, to me. Did it to you?”

Thor raised his eyebrows incredulous at her question. “He tried to kill himself, Mother. Anything would be better than that.”

She flinched and set the needlework aside with a restless motion, to pluck a grape. “You blame me.”
He swallowed, unwilling to say it, but the words burst out anyway, remembering that image of Loki – a face of sudden peace of decision made. Thor had known his intent just before he’d done it, time enough to feel the horror and too little to do anything about it, before he’d let go above the endless void. “You lied to us both,” Thor said. “By omission, yes, and I know you found it difficult to tell the story, but none of this would have happened had you – and Father – had sat us down and told us the truth.” He slammed his cup down, making the ale slosh over the side and the table shuddered.

“Yes,” she agreed after a moment of shocked stillness, her voice soft. “I know. And yet,” she hesitated and glanced at the main doors as if to check they were still shut, “I am not certain it would have changed as much as you believe. Not until all of us understood… what we almost lost.”

That struck Thor into silence, as he mulled it over. Odin had only very recently been shamed into behaving as Loki’s father – would he have been as generous without Loki’s near death? Would Thor himself had been a better brother without his banishment and Loki’s plunge off the Bifrost to put it in his face how desperate and unhappy Loki had been?

“That was why I didn’t want to tell him,” she added. “He already believed himself set apart, but to confirm that? With Jotunn blood and no blood of Odin’s? I feared—” She rolled the grape in her fingers, the action similar to what Loki did with his fingers when anxious. “I feared many things. And Odin feared him. Or at least feared what he might become.”

“Because of his Frost Giant blood?” Thor asked, not entirely surprised that Odin would believe that, since he had never tried to teach his sons otherwise about the Frost Giants.

But Frigga shook her head. “No, because of his potential. Because of his resemblance to those who had come before.” She laughed once sharply. “Oh, he claims otherwise, but I know. They share no blood, but she cast a long shadow.”

“Amora? The sorceress?” Thor hazarded, since she was the only one Thor could imagine making his mother so bitter.

Frigga started, her look at him sharp as if realizing who she was speaking to, and then forced a smile. “A tale for another time, darling.” She rose to her feet, smoothing her skirts. “I fear Loki may have another dark nightmare in the wake of today’s revelation, so I will go sit with him. But get yourself some sun and fresh air, Thor, you look almost as pale as he is.”

She cupped his cheek gently and took her leave.

Thor frowned after her, wondering who she was talking about. He had never heard of this Amora before today, and now it seemed there was another sorceress he knew nothing about?

He could almost hear Loki’s voice, that cold contemptuous purr of his on Midgard, in his ear, “You know what this means, Thor. There’s another secret they’re hiding from us.”

He wanted to reject that idea, but after the discovery that his parents had held back Loki’s true ancestry for so long, it seemed nothing was impossible.

Nearly overturning the table in his rush to get away from his own thoughts, he hurried out of the private chambers to find a distraction.

tbc. ..
hey folks! Happy new year and it's back! between (Ice Demon Red Skull starting to post and then the tragic loss of this part and some more of this middle bit in a computer screw up, it's been a while, I know.

Hopefully you're all still reading and enjoy this update, more to come

(and just as a timeline reminder, this story is set directly after Avengers (Assemble) - GotG has not happened yet.)

Loki awoke slowly, awareness trickling back from the darkness. He opened his eyes to see Frigga smiling at him. There was something tentative about her smile that took him a moment to remember why.

She was his mother, but she had lied about his father and his ancestry for all his life. He wasn’t sure what he thought about that yet. Was he angry? Certainly. She’d kept the truth from him, and he had deserved to know. But seeing her there, he couldn’t help but remember her affection as well. Not just recently but stretching back in his earliest memories of sitting on her lap as she rocked him back to sleep from a nightmare.

“Loki?” she asked, smile faltering at his expression.

“I--” he started and couldn’t put words to it. He was angry. She’d lied to him. But at the same time, he didn’t want to be angry at her. She was still his mother, and now he knew she truly was his mother, and that eased some terrible fear that had lurked inside him his whole life, too.

“I’d heard the rumors, you know,” he said abruptly. “That there was a secret isn’t a surprise. I always heard I don’t look like either of you.”

She grimaced in regret. “I know, but I never thought it was believable. This is me,” she touched his nose, and then his forehead, “This is my father. Now this,” she brushed his cheek, “is most definitely Laufey, though.”

“And the black hair?” he said, meaning it as a statement, but it curled up on a question, because Frost Giants didn’t have hair at all. But that was the main thing that people had teased him about, with his golden-haired mother and brother.

To his surprise, she smiled, a brief flicker of surprise. “What? They questioned your hair?” She gave a laugh. "Did those fools believe Odin was born with white hair?" At his puzzled look, she reached across and smoothed the top of his head. “He had black hair as a youth.” He blinked, surprised by that. He’d never seen any image of Odin as a young man, he realized. Was that not strange?

Yet it was oddly good to know. Even though he wasn’t Odin’s blood, it still seemed that perhaps he could be, with this new information. “I would have appreciated knowing that earlier,” he said. He meant it as dry humor, but Frigga winced and pulled back her hand.
“I thought you knew. I never heard that question or I would’ve told you. Not that—” her voice faltered, “it wouldn’t have still been a lie, I suppose. But if you’d known, at least you could’ve felt better. More secure.”

Seeing her look down and twist her hands together, made his heart twinge in regret. He hadn’t wanted to hurt her, and yet there was still that vicious cold voice within that said she deserved it. She’d let him suffer all those years, uncertain of himself and his place. He’d known in his heart there was something wrong – different – about him, but she had lied to him that it was just people being unfair about his magic, or his bookishness, or that he was too skinny.

Feelings too muddled to settle on one, he decided to find out the answer to his question instead. “But why did I not know that?” When she looked down again, he hastened, “No, I meant not in blame, I mean – why have I seen no images of him as a youth? I know it was long ago as even we mark time, but still – I have never seen an image of his coronation. And you cannot tell me it is modesty,” he added in jest, as there were modern statuary and other images of Odin all over Asgard.

Frigga didn’t smile and her gaze seemed fixed on her hands. “To explain all is … forbidden. But you should know that not everything your father did in the past was… laudable. There was much of which he is now ashamed, and so he tries to pretend it never happened.”

That gave him enough to guess. “You mean the conquests.”

Her head lifted sharply, eyes fixed on him as if digging into his mind to read what secrets he knew or what lost tome he’d found. When she realized her reaction had given her away, she asked, “What do you know of that?”

Very carefully, he answered, “I know the stories do not mesh between when Bor conquered the Nine, what the other Realms say, and when Bor died.” He had been certain the history he and Thor had been taught was not complete, but only now did he put it together that Odin had hidden it deliberately, mostly by pushing the events back in time to his father, not himself.

“Clever,” she said with an approving smile that fell away as she gave a soft sigh. “I am trying to persuade Odin that you and Thor both need to know the full history, and he has said he will tell you, but we thought the more personal history was more pressing.”

“It’s certainly more than enough to take in,” he agreed with some wry humor and a glance at the Casket sitting on the bedside table.

“I – I am sorry, sweetling,” she murmured. “I never meant for any of this to hurt you.”

“I know.” He opened his mouth to say he forgave her, but the words wouldn’t come out. Not yet. “We’ll be all right, Mother,” he promised instead. “But I need time.”

Her eyes brightened with hope. “Anything you need, Loki. I swear.”

He found her hand and curled his fingers around hers. She gripped back, smiling with relief.

Thor intended to visit Loki but one of the Einharjar informed him he was summoned to the receiving hall, so he turned on his heel and went the opposite direction outside the family quarters.

In the receiving hall, he found his father already enthroned, and he beckoned Thor to join him on the dais. “Our warriors have returned,” he informed Thor.
"Sooner than I expected. I hope this means they bring good news." Thor turned to face the gathering, folding his arms as he waited for the brief time before the main doors were held open and his friends were announced.

Odin ordered the room emptied for their report, so they were alone as they approached the throne. All four looked unharmed, which was a relief, though Thor hadn't really expected any danger on Xandar.

They all bowed to the king, fists at their hearts, and waited until Odin greeted them to straighten. "You are welcome home, Warriors of Asgard. How fared your quest."

Fandral and Sif exchanged a glance that they hadn't decided who would speak before Fandral started. "My king, we went to Xandar as you bid. It took a little effort and a small dispute to prove our claim to be of Asgard." Volstagg snorted, and Thor grinned, knowing that meant there had been a fight with Xandar Security.

"It all was smoothed over," Sif added hastily. "And we eventually had audience with Nova prime."

Fandral continued, "When she heard what we wanted, she brought us into her council of advisors. They told us they have been engaged in war with the Kree Empire, though were in the midst of negotiating a peace."

Thor shifted, wondering what any of this had to do with Infinity Stones or the one who had hurt Loki. Odin showed no impatience, listening, and when Fandral paused, glancing at Thor, Odin prompted, "Continue. Nova Empire finding peace with the Kree is, itself, good news."

"Yes, All-Father," Fandral agreed. "However, it seems there are large factions within the Kree who do not wish peace and reject the treaty. One in particular was of note, which was why they told us all this."

Sif took a step forward, gaze flicking to Thor, and took up the tale. "Their intelligence reported that one warlord named Ronan, a particularly zealous follower of their ancient ways, has refused the treaty. He took up the old title of Accuser, and is said to be searching for the Orb of Power in order to crush the Nova Empire completely."

"A zealot, you say?" Odin asked, free hand on his beard. "The Orb of Power would be the Power Gem, that much is obvious."

He sounded doubtful to Thor, but it sounded a good fit. A military commander, seeking conquest and the stones to help him. And the Kree were technologically advanced, and could likely hold Loki captive, as weakened by the void as he had been. "So this Ronan is our foe?" Thor asked, but was dismayed when his friends looked to each other.

"That ally, Fandral?" Odin prompted. "Did they have a name?"

"Not precisely. But they did have a connection. They emphasized that it was no more than rumor, but there had been activity in the shadowed areas beyond their territory, and it was known Ronan
was associating with an assassin who was also the only known survivor of her people, exterminated during the Culling of Zahoberi by," he cleared his throat, "Thanos the Mad Titan."

Odin leaned back, letting out a breath, but showed no surprise.

But Thor was not so skilled and scoffed in disbelief. "Thanos! That is a name out of a story!"

"Stories do, often, have some truth, Thor," Odin said.

Thor shook his head. "But Thanos? Immortal pursuer of Lady Death? Last survivor of his kind, who murders worlds to lay the bodies at her feet?"

"If only that were true," Odin said with a strange sadness, but then he stood, gripping Gungnir tightly. "Thanos the Mad Titan has killed entire populations of beings, swarming like a locust and departing again. He and his followers, his acolytes of death and destruction, never stay with their victims long enough to be caught, never coming too close to Asgard's interests to gain my undivided attention. Until now."

"You think it's him?" Thor asked, not quite able to keep the edge of doubt out of his voice. It still seemed more like a tale out of one of Loki's old storybooks, than something real. At least the Kree warlord wasn't a story that was as old as Thor.

"I know it is," Odin answered with a decisive nod. "This was confirmation."

The others who had been listening to this, exchanged a look among themselves and Sif offered, with a grimace of apology, "We could not find out more about him, my king. Nothing of his current whereabouts, if anyone knew."

"There are other ways," Odin said.

"And then we bring him to battle, All-Father?" Volstagg asked. "My axe hungers for a good fight."

Odin's lips flattened in some grim amusement. "We will need all the axes when war comes, Volstagg. But not yet. He will not strike at Asgard while we have the tesseract, and I cannot attack him until I know more. But keep your blades sharp, warriors. The call will come. You may leave us."

The four bowed and left at the dismissal, leaving Thor and Odin alone in the large room.

"How did you already know?" Thor asked.

"Your brother's words. I recalled hearing similar language in the acolytes of Thanos before," Odin answered, gaze distant with thought. "But Thanos in alliance with the Kree is more dangerous than I expected. He truly is moving to gain all the stones. But why now? He already possessed the one in the scepter."

"Perhaps that was why," Thor suggested. "He gained that one and thought of finding the others. But then, what would he do with them?"

"It matters little," Odin said. "Thanos as he is, is danger enough. With an Infinity Stone he would gain power enough to challenge us. With all of them, he might conquer or destroy the universe. We must destroy him while he is weak."

Thor wanted to believe that but when his gaze dropped to Mjolnir, still in the middle of the floor, shaming him with his inability to wield her. How could he fight Thanos, when he was without his
weapon?

Odin turned his head to look straight at Thor, who felt caught in the single eye. Exposed. "And
you, my son, must shed your own weakness. Your power lies within you, not in this tool." He
tapped Mjolnir with the end of Gungnir making a resonant clink. "Come, let us see how Loki
fares."

He headed for the doors but Thor was slow to follow, wondering what his father meant. Did he not
need Mjolnir after all?
To rise, to walk

When Eir entered and asked if Loki wanted to stand and walk. Frigga held her breath, wondering if he would have her leave again. She would, of course, but she hoped without Odin or Thor in the room, he would let her stay.

It felt strange and wrong to feel so uncertain of Loki's feelings toward her. She had always lavished attention on him, as if she could make up for Odin's growing coolness, and always held the security of his love. And now? They were still mother and son, but distance had crept in where before there had been none.

But at least he was here, he knew the truth now, and he was recovering. Trust could be mended, closeness regained. As he'd said, he needed time, and likely so did she to re-orient herself to this family, which had been reborn after tragedy.

Loki didn't look at her, though, as he nodded to Eir. "I want to try, at least."

Eir caught the same doubt that Frigga did in his voice, and the Healer frowned. "Do you sense something that suggests you may not?"

He reached down and rubbed the side of his left knee. "I know the weakness lingers."

"Strength will only return with use," Eir pointed out. "We will begin slowly, my prince. If you feel too much pain, we will stop at once."

He sat up and moved to the edge of the bed, dangling bare feet. Once the restraining fields had been removed, he'd been able to wear some soft sleeping clothes, but Frigga still bit her lip to see how the trews and tunic hung on his body. With his hair so short and the loose clothes, he reminded her sharply of the boy he had been.

Eir stood before him and held out both hands. Loki gripped her forearms as she gripped his, and she nodded. "Now stand."

Frigga caught her breath, as Eir supported him to his feet. She was small, compared to him, but strong, holding him as he swayed. His grip tightened as he stared unblinking into her upturned face.

"All right?" she asked.

He nodded faintly, jaw clenched, and Eir moved backward two small paces. He followed her, first his right foot and then his left. His left knee nearly buckled and he tipped to the side, but Eir held his arms, letting him catch himself.

Head down, he sucked air through his teeth, in obvious pain. Frigga had to bite her lip to keep from telling him he should get back in bed.

"Is it too much?" Eir asked softly.

"No, no, I'm all right," he said. "I can do more." He straightened, shutting his eyes when he was upright, as it seemed more dizziness struck.

Eir moved two more steps and he followed, a little more slowly than before. But this time, he stayed up.
"You can let go," Loki requested. But it took him a moment to release her, even after she'd let go of him.

The instant he lost contact, he staggered, arms flailing frantically, and his body listed to the left.

"Loki!" Frigga cried and darted forward, knowing she would be too late to catch him.

He would have fallen, if not for Eir's darting forward and grabbing his torso. "I have you."

He grabbed her shoulders, holding tightly and breathing hard. After he'd calmed, still clutching her though, Eir asked, "What happened?"

Not meeting her eyes, he explained haltingly, "So dizzy... not, not dizzy, not exactly, I felt like I was falling. I could feel my feet on the floor, but I felt I was falling."

Eir frowned, but didn't comment on that at first. "Let's get you back to the bed."

"No, I want to try again."

Frigga wanted to object. He was pale from effort and pain, but he was determined. Staying very close this time, so he could look right at Eir, she stood still beneath his grip on her shoulders. He took a moment, taking deep calming breaths, and Frigga felt him touch seidr. Then he lifted his hands.

But without that point of contact helping him to ground himself, his body jerked and he had to clasp Eir's shoulders again, nearly missing one even though she hadn't moved at all.

Frigga pressed her lips together and blinked back some threatening wetness.

She had hoped there would be no lingering problem, but it seemed that hope was not to be.

Pushing down the dismay, she strode forward to wrap a hand around Loki's waist. "Arm across my shoulders, let's try side-by-side. Back to the bed."

He leaned on her, shuffling his feet, and when she got him back in bed, he accepted the pain draught without protest, draining the whole cup.

"What's wrong with me?" he asked, as Eir gathered near with her scanner. She looked at the result with no surprise.

"It appears, my prince, that the skull fracture has affected your sense of balance or orientation."

"Will it heal?" Frigga asked.

Eir's glance said quite plainly it would not. "It has healed, All-Mother. What remains is scar tissue of a sort, a routing around the damage which is now permanent."

There was silence in the room for a moment as Loki and Frigga both digested this news.

"So I will never walk?" Loki asked, voice small.

"You did walk, my prince," she reminded him. "And you will continue to walk but you will need assistance. At first a person, to hold you steady as you hold them, but as you become more skilled--a walking stick, perhaps. We will see what works for you."

Frigga looked at Loki, heart aching at this news. He was slumped against the bed, staring at his hands lying limp atop the coverlet. "Sweetheart," she said, and caressed his hair.
He jerked his head from her touch and turned away. "Thank you both," he said with stiff formality. "I'd like to sleep now."

"Loki--" she started.

"I'm tired." He turned to face the other way and pulled the coverlet over his shoulders.

Frigga and Eir's gaze met, and they both silently agreed to do as he asked, even though it was plain his tiredness was a ploy to be left alone.

Frigga kissed his cheek and smoothed back his hair. "You'll get through this too, my darling. We're here for you."

He said nothing, and his eyes were closed, but body was filled with a tension that crackled in the room. Frigga turned down the lights and looked back at the doorway, reluctant to leave him to deal with this on his own.

He stayed silent, not calling her to return. "I'll be right outside if you need anything, Loki. Rest well," she said, a little helpless, knowing he wasn't going to rest at all.

In the outer room, with the door safely closed, she faced Eir and demanded, "'Permanent'? Was that a wise thing to tell him?"

Eir did not flinch. "It is the truth. It is healed. Whatever is wrong in his brain, it is beyond myself and his own body to heal."

"That doesn't mean never--" Frigga replied heatedly, but Eir smoothly cut her off.

"It is not my place to promise a miracle which may never come, All-Mother. You may tell him so; but I must tell him what I know is true: his sense of balance and orientation is damaged. It will not heal further on its own, so he must learn to live with what is."

"But--" Frigga started, but had to turn away, because she knew Eir was right. If it was truly permanent, then he should know that. But today, on top of everything else, it seemed a cruelty, not a kindness. "He has already suffered so much," she whispered. "I thought he would heal completely. It seemed so... promising."

"You must take solace that he returned at all, my queen." Which was solace of course, if not what she wanted to hear. Eir added, seeing her queen was not much consoled, "The mind-- his mind in particular -- is strong. He may find a way to overcome this."

Eir bowed her head and departed, but Frigga paid little attention.

She glanced at the monitor where he was pretending to sleep. Both hands were bunched to tight fists and his jaw was clenched.

Aware he was being watched or at least aware of the possibility, he freed one hand and pointed his palm upward. The images of his room all flashed, and blanked.

She ached to go to him, but not yet. He wanted no company for now, so she would leave him be. Instead, she must tell Odin and Thor the news that Loki's brain had suffered irreparable injury after all, and he would never again walk unaided.

Oh my son, I wish none of this had happened. You deserved so much more than this.
tbc...
In the hallway, she found Thor and Odin both heading her way, toward Loki, and held up a hand to halt them.

"Nay, do not visit," she cautioned. "He does not wish company."

Thor frowned. "But I thought he would be walking? Did something happen? Is he all right?"

Odin's eye saw a little more deeply. "We should retire to our chambers and you can tell us what happened."

Frigga entered the sitting room circled the table and the side area, desiring neither food nor drink, and too restless to sit.

Odin entered, and after watching her briefly, said, "I intended to request your presence at the feast to welcome the warriors back from Xandar this evening, but I see ill news on your face."

She nodded and pulled apart her hands. "I will make an appearance," she conceded, knowing she had been absent from view tending Loki. "We need no rumors springing up like weeds."

His lips pressed together in rueful acknowledgment. "There are enough about Loki already. He will need to be seen as well."

She shook her head once, but didn't want to explain yet why Loki would not be willing to appear in public any time soon.

Thankfully not insisting on the story, Odin poured wine from the decanter on the side table. He set the glasses on the main table and reached for her hands. She didn't realize she was rubbing her fingers together, until he pulled her hands apart to hold in his own. She glanced down, biting her lip in rueful amusement to be caught.

"Loki learned this habit from you," Odin murmured. "Speak your fears aloud, Frigga."

"Yes, please, Mother, what happened?" Thor entreated from the other side. "Was he unable to walk?"

She inhaled a deep breath and pulled her hands free from Odin's grip, to turn and face them both. "He did walk. It appeared to cause him pain, which would have been distressing enough, but... there was more. He could not find his balance unless he held on to Eir, as he walked. Eir said it was a damage in his brain - that it had healed, but not perfectly, so that it was," she had to stop to keep her voice strong, finishing, "permanent. That Loki would not be able to walk, unaided."

"Ever?" Thor demanded. "But that's-- that is impossible. This is Asgard--"
She put a quelling hand on his arm. "I know. That is what I said. Eir did not dismiss the idea that some rare method may be found to heal him, but for now, he-- and we -- must deal with what is."

Odin turned away, free hand rising to stroke his beard in contemplation. But he seemed less shocked by the news than Thor, who had still not accepted what Frigga was telling him.

"Then we will go to the places where they have advanced healing techniques, beyond Asgard," Thor declared. "Bring them all here, until it succeeds."

"I am not saying we should not try," Frigga said, "because of course we will, but Eir used the word 'miracle' and I do not think she did so without reason, Thor. And she warned of giving him false hope that this .... affliction may be easily cured, when in truth, it may not be cured at all."

"I refuse to believe that," Thor insisted, twisting away from her, and he folded his arms with a familiar stubbornness. "Everything can be cured. We have two Infinity Stones in the Treasury, and we are Asgard! Nothing should be beyond our knowledge and power."

"And it will not be," Odin reassured him. "But your mother is correct that this may require time and knowledge we do not have yet. Patience."

Thor snorted his opinion of that, making Odin smile in his beard. "Yes, one of those qualities you and your brother possess in small quantities. But we have no choice in the matter."

"For now, Loki needs our support. He was upset to find this damage, and with everything else already such a trial...." she trailed off, sorrowed by how much he'd faced only to find out that even his body was betraying him.

"I will go to him, then," Thor offered.

"He wanted to rest, so if he sleeps, do not bother him," she warned.

Nodding, Thor took his leave.

After the door shut behind them, Odin murmured, "Ill news. But walking is better than not walking at all, I think. I had feared as much when I saw the damage to his legs."

"Better, perhaps, and we shall help him see it so, but if he cannot walk unaided, he cannot fight. And I know he has already realized that."

He turned to look at her, eyebrows up. "What need does he have to fight? That was never his strength."

She leveled a stare at him. "You, who not long ago appeared to have the idea that Loki could rule Jotunheim, now claim fighting unimportant?"

"Not unimportant, but for him it is the least of his skills. He still has his sorcery, his knowledge, his mind - these are not small advantages. But of course, you're right, he should avenge himself on Thanos, and he will need to be fully healed for that. Eir said that she could not heal him?"

"She said she knew of nothing that would heal him," Frigga corrected. She was not quite mollified by his dismissal of Loki's fighting prowess. Centuries of Asgardian lauding of such skills and resultant mocking of Loki's, though he was hardly unskilled, had made that a point of pain and resentment to him, which would now be worsened.

He glanced away, brow creased, and she watched, wondering what he was thinking.
"My lord?" she prompted when he said nothing. "Have you a thought on something which may heal him? The Odinforce?"

"Certainly Eir would have considered that," he said, "but I will see what I might be able to do." He faced her. "Thor is right in his optimism. Do not despair for Loki, or let him despair. We will find a way."

She tried to let his certainty fill her, so she could believe it, too.
Encouragement

Thor found his footsteps slowing on the way to the infirmary. He wanted to see Loki, to find out for himself that this dire news was true. Because it couldn't be, could it? It was alarmist, surely. Loki was getting better. A little dizziness or light-headedness had to be something easily cured, not a pronouncement of doom.

The monitors were off, curiously, in the observation room next door, so Thor had to open the door to peek inside. The room was dim, lit only by the yellow strip by the floor, and the lump on the bed appeared to be facing away.

"Loki?" Thor whispered. "Are you awake?" Usually Loki would wake up if his door opened; he was very difficult to sneak up on, as a rule.

There was no response. Thor couldn't tell if Loki was actually asleep, but in case he was, Thor withdrew and eased the door shut again.

He went to the feast hall, to celebrate his friends' return from Xandar. At his mother's questioning glance, he had to shake his head that he hadn't talked to Loki. She was not surprised, pressing her lips in brief disappointment, before gesturing him to entertain himself with his friends.

He tried-- he was pleased they were back, of course, but the carousing and the laughter seemed distant. He tried to smile along, not dampen their enthusiasm, but when he looked to the high table, the smile fell away. Loki's chair had been removed when he fell off the Bifrost and it had not returned. It might remain gone, if Loki could not or would not return to the hall, even though he was still alive.

"Thor?" Fandral drew his attention, merriness banked for more somber concern. "You seem out of sorts. I thought Loki was improving?"

"He is," Thor replied. He wondered what to say. It was not his place to tell what he'd heard, and even if he could, Loki would hate the advertisement of his weakness. "It's just... slow. He grows frustrated."

"Knowing him, he grows bored, too," Sif offered from the other side. "Perhaps he would like other company?" she asked more hesitantly. "I could visit him?"

Thor caught himself from snorting at that. Loki would rather be dismembered than have Sif see him unable to walk, but he made a smile at her in thanks. "I will ask him. Once he is amenable to visitors at all."

"Give him our best wishes," Fandral requested, "for a speedy recovery and back to making us all laugh, soon."

Thor murmured agreement, and then changed the subject to their trip to Xandar. At least he might get a good story to relate to Loki out of this.

In the morning, he headed back to the infirmary, expecting the lights on and Loki awake. Instead, it was still dark. There was a tray with breakfast, untouched by the bed, and by the dim light as he entered, he could see Loki was on his back, eyes closed. But Eir had told him moments ago that Loki was awake, but in a down mood.

"Good morning," Thor greeted him, cheerfully. Loki's lips twitched. "I know you are awake." He
waved the lights on.

Not opening his eyes, Loki said, sounding irritable, "Well, I am now. Just let me sleep."

"You didn't eat breakfast," Thor said, nodding toward the meal.

"Not hungry."

"Are you going to sit up and eat something?" Thor rephrased, not surprised to get an abrupt 'no' for an answer. "Will you sit up? To talk?"

"I don't want to talk."

"Please?"

"Fine." Loki sighed and angled the head of the bed up.

Taking that victory, Thor pressed, holding out the breakfast pastry on its plate. Glancing at it, Loki's lip curled and he shook his head. "Loki, you need to eat--"

"I need you to go away and leave me alone," Loki interrupted. "I'm tired, Thor. Leave me be."

Thor moved closer to the bed, to look into Loki's face. He did look tired, bruised under the eyes as if he hadn't slept at all or well. And why would he, finding out such a thing?

"How are you feeling about all this?" Thor asked, softening his voice to try to get Loki to share. Combativeness would close him up even more tightly.

Loki shrugged a bit, casting his gaze past Thor. "Fine."

"Because if you weren't fine, I think that would be understandable," Thor said, tugging the chair closer with his foot so he could sit down as close as he could. "I wouldn't be fine. Mother told me what you learned yesterday."

"Of course she did."

"Do you want to get up and try again?" Thor offered. "Maybe it will get better?"

Loki shook his head once. "It won't."

Thor didn't like to hear that. It sounded like giving up, and he wasn't going to let Loki do that. "You can't know that. None of us will stop just because Eir doesn't know how to cure you. The universe is vast, with technology and magic and healing that could help you. We just need to find it."

Loki took some time to answer, gaze fixed on the far wall, while one hand fidgeted with the blanket. "Yes, of course."

But the words were spoken without any enthusiasm, and Thor knew he didn't mean it. "You don't believe me."

"I believe you," Loki said.

The lack of argument was more upsetting than a fight would've been. "Then you don't believe this affliction will be cured." Loki shrugged. Thor wondered how to get through to him. "You think Eir is omniscient, and she has all the answers."
"No, I just don't see the point of--" he hesitated, not wanting to finish, so Thor did it first.

"Hope. You see no point in hope."

Loki's lips parted in the beginnings of a denial, but his face twisted and he demanded with a sudden rage, "Why should I?" Thor was glad to see the temper, even if he didn't like what Loki was saying. "What is there to hope for? I know the instant I'm 'well enough', you'll all go back to how things were, barely acknowledging I exist. So take your pity and your hope and get out." He grabbed the breakfast dish and hurled it into the wall.

Thor didn't have to dodge so he knew it wasn't meant to hit him. After the pieces fell to the floor, Loki stared at his hands, chest heaving for breath. His voice was calmer and a bit shattered as he said, "Just-- just stop pretending."

"Is that what you really think of us?" Thor asked in the silence. "That our caring isn't true? How can we -- how can I prove otherwise?" He leaned forward, spreading his hands. "What can I do, Loki, to show you these fears are but phantoms?"

"Nothing," Loki muttered. He pulled up his knees, looking small and young with his short hair and thin arms hugging himself defensively.

"There must be something."

He kept his gaze down, unable to meet Thor's eyes. "There isn't. Because I know it's stupid. I know you believe it. I just .... I can't. I mean, why should you? The golden prince, true Odinson, the one everyone loves -- and this." He barked a bitter laugh, waving a hand vaguely down his body. "The half-Frost Giant bastard cripple. It would be funny if it weren't so pathetic."

Thor stared in dismay, unsure what words might shift such feeling. "Loki, no. That's not so."

"And they call me a liar," Loki scoffed, but his voice caught in his throat, breaking at the last, and he forced another chuckle trying to cover it.

"No, it's not," Thor insisted. He leaned closer and reached for Loki's shoulder, cupping the nape of his neck to bring their heads together. His voice was ragged, as he implored, "This is so hard for you, I understand that, but please do not say such things about yourself. You are so much more than that."

"Am I?" Loki whispered, bleak with doubt. His hands gripped Thor's shoulders, intending to push him away, but he only held on.

"You are." Thor thought of the other fear he'd let fall and promised, "Everything will not go back as it was. We have all learned better, Loki, and we will do better still, I swear it." He didn't let go, trying as best he knew how to show Loki he meant it.

"Brothers forever," he whispered. "Half-Frost Giant bastard cripple or not, I don't care; you are my brother, always. Hold tight to that."

Loki heaved a sobbing breath, and his fingers clutched tight as claws into Thor's flesh, but Thor kept still until Loki drew himself away, breaths coming more easily. He turned his head and wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"Well, at least I wasn't making Mother's gown soggy this time," he said, with rather painful attempt at making light of his turmoil. He wouldn't look at Thor either and had gone back to the defensive posture.
Thor seated himself back in the chair. "It's a difficult time, Loki. We all understand that. I just wish you would give yourself the same understanding. It is no bad thing to need time to heal."

Loki was silent for a moment, considering, then quirked a smile. "You will tire of talking me back to sense."

Thor shook his head. "You would do the same for me." He thought of Loki trying to get him to leave Jotunheim before it all went to pieces and added, "And have. Even if I was sometimes foolish and failed to listen."

Loki's face held some surprise that Thor was admitting it, though he jested, "Sometimes?"

"Ha, very funny." Thor rolled his eyes. "Now, how about you stand and show me what actually is happening?"

"Thor... no. Can we not?"

"I will not let you fall," Thor promised and held out both hands. "We cannot form a plan to make you better until we understand what you can and cannot do." He said it plainly, not trying to hide from the truth. As Frigga had said, they all had to learn to manage the present, even if they kept hope for the future.

Groaning with annoyance, Loki nonetheless dragged his feet over the edge of the bed. Thor noted that he kept one hand on the bed as he straightened. "You feel it even sitting?" he asked.

Loki glanced at his hand that had given him away, and grimaced. "Less so, obviously. I thought before it was only weakness from lying abed."

Thor nodded and let Loki clasp his forearms, before gripping back. "Ready?"

Loki squared his shoulders, expression tightening with determination. "I am. Don't laugh."

"I would never," Thor promised.

"Wait until you see it," Loki muttered, but it proved not a warning Thor needed.

There was nothing funny about it, though at first Loki wouldn't look at him, as if he feared Thor really would laugh. If Thor had seen some clown pretending to stumble about as if he couldn't tell what was up or down, he might have laughed, but the real thing before him was heart-breaking, not amusing.

The first time Loki walked, holding on to Thor with both hands, Thor exclaimed, "Very good!"

Loki's eyes flicked up to meet his, icy, as he warned, "If you condescend to me again, I will gut you."

Thor bit his lip, contrite. "Sorry. I only meant to be encouraging."

"You weren't."

After that Thor kept his tone more matter-of-fact, even if he still had to bite his tongue to keep from phrasing things as if his brother was a toddler learning to throw a ball.

It proved to be the most difficult morning Thor could remember, helping Loki as he fought the dizziness that assailed him every time he felt unanchored on his own two feet. Watching Loki keep trying to walk-- holding on to Thor's shoulder, a table, a decorative pike that Thor seized from the
outside hall - while in obvious pain too, made him feel his own helplessness. Would he be half as stubborn? Would he keep forcing himself to try new techniques as much as Loki was?

Thor tried to get him to stop when his legs collapsed beneath him and only Thor's diving catch kept him from crashing to the floor, but Loki refused, wanting to try one more time holding only the pike in both hands. Thor couldn't deny him the chance, while he was willing, and hovered close enough to hold him when he wavered.

But when Eir entered and called a halt, citing Loki's tremors from exhaustion, even Loki didn't resist returning to bed.

"Rest," she handed him the pain draught and turned to Thor. "And you, my prince, must remember how to refuse foolishness."

"It isn't foolish to find my limits," Loki retorted. "I need to know."

"But not all at once. Rest," she repeated and with a decisive gesture, lowered the lights and glowered at Thor.

He touched Loki's arm. "I want you to know, how impressive you were today."

Loki frowned and scoffed, "Stumbling and grabbing you by throat?"

Thor chuckled. "That was an accident." He paused, "I think." Loki smirked, but Thor was not to be distracted from what he wanted to say.

"No, you were impressive facing this challenge straight-on with such courage. You will conquer this, Loki. Before, I was hopeful but not certain, but after today? I have no doubts."

His eyes widened and his throat worked, but nothing came out. The speechlessness made Thor grin. "Have a good rest."

He slipped out of the room, to find Frigga in the observation area. She smiled at him and gave an approving nod, but didn't speak until the door shut.

"How much did you watch?" Thor asked.

"All of it. I didn't want to interrupt. You were exactly what he needed, my son. I'm so proud of you. Both of you," she glanced at the monitor where Eir's assistant was coaxing Loki to eat something. "You did well."

Thor shook his head. "It was so hard, Mother," he confessed. "He was so brave, and he sees none of it."

"We will keep at him until he does." She smoothed his cheek and down his beard. "You have grown into such a fine man, Thor, and a good brother."

He kissed her cheek in thanks. "I had an idea for something to help him walk on his own." She lifted her brows curiously when he didn't elaborate. He shook his head. "Not yet. Let me see if I can get the crafters to make it first."

"All right. Be mysterious then," she teased. "I need to speak to Loki before he sleeps."

He headed out of the palace, toward the smiths and artisans, smiling with anticipation at what he was going to have made for Loki.
Every time he let Thor wheedle him into standing, Loki knew it would be useless in the end. A few days proved him just as incapable of standing without holding onto anything as the first time. It was inescapable, that he simply couldn't tell where 'upright' was, and he felt as if he was falling, even when he knew he wasn't. He could even see himself in the mirror display that he was planted on both feet, and that didn't matter either; losing his balance was a constant unless he had both hands holding onto something to give his damaged brain more references.

Worse, and something he wasn't sharing was the knot of fear in his chest each time that feeling struck him. Falling. It didn't seem to help to know the floor wasn't that far away; his subconscious still recalled pain from falling, and the fear filled the back of his throat, sour and sharp.

But facing that fear and the humiliation of the shuffling walk he seemed to have no choice but use was draining every time. Thor's kindness and patience was welcome but also made Loki want to hit him in the face, knowing he was only being like this because Loki was helpless.

Back in his bed, he wondered -- what did it matter? Half-Frost Giant bastard princes didn't matter, and never had. Being damaged like this only made him extra irrelevant.

Which made it that much more painful every time Odin came to visit.

Just go. I know, and you know, you're humoring me. You and Mother and Thor are all afraid I'll try to kill myself again if you don't make an effort, but you don't see that the effort itself is obvious to me.

But every time he opened his mouth to tell Odin to go away, he couldn't say it, because each time Odin settled himself on the visiting chair, it reminded him of when Odin had read him that children's story when Loki had been in too much pain to sleep.

Odin looked at him, brows up. "How are you feeling, son?"

Loki shrugged. "Same."

"Then, perhaps," he glanced around the infirmary, "it is time to remove you to your own chambers? I would've thought you would have demanded it days ago?"

I have no way to get there without being seen, was the truth. Right now no one really knew what was wrong with him, but once it was seen, once it was public, there was no going back.

Instead he answered, "I would like to sleep in my own bed, but since I still need attendants, it seems simpler here."

"Well, this room is gloomy. Let us get you fresh air, at least, and we can speak on the balcony."

A shiver of fear went through him. "That's... a long way," he objected.

"The other side of the room opposite was the one I meant. Is that too far for you?"

A sharp laugh escaped him. "I don't know. I have yet to leave this room."

A bright eye found his. "Then it seems time, does it not? You are not a prisoner, Loki, and I would not have you feel like one."
Wasn't he? A prisoner of the truth that both his body and mind had failed him, and a prisoner of the knowledge that his life had been a lie?

Odin stood up. "Come. I will help you. The aged and the infirm shall walk together."

Leaning Gungnir against the bed, he held out both hands. Feeling suddenly very small again, Loki gripped his wrists, and when Odin's fingers tightened on his forearms with reassuring firmness, he stood up.

The room tilted, his stomach lurched sickeningly in reaction, and he had to hold still until both feelings eased. The worst part about this problem was that he couldn't stop it or pretend it wasn't happening.

"I have you," Odin reassured him.

Loki shut his eyes, a warmth spreading in his chest at hearing that, but pained, too because he shouldn't need Odin or anyone to keep from falling on his face. He chuckled once bitterly. "I wish you didn't have to."

"I wish I still had two eyes, but not all battle wounds heal, my son."

Loki's eyes flicked up to the golden eye-patch. He was so accustomed to it, he rarely thought of what it meant -- that Odin had only one eye -- or that, weirdly, he'd lost it in battle with Loki's own people.

He dampened his lips. "Was it Laufey?"

Odin's eyebrows shot upward, and then lowered into a frown. "Laufey? Oh, who took the eye? No." His lips made a sort of wry smile. "It was a guard for you, actually. I thought he was dead but he had one more fight in him." His single eye read Loki's face and corrected the unspoken thought, "I never blamed you for the loss, no. Here, you hold Gungnir, and we will walk side-by-side."

Loki's hand took Odin's shoulder, while the other wrapped Gungnir's haft. The weapon felt alive to his grip. He'd always been afraid to touch the weapon of the king, as if it would burn him to ash for the presumption, but the power hummed through his veins and seemed to welcome him.

Odin's arm reached around his back, so they stood close, and Loki was struck by the awareness that he couldn't remember the last time he had been so close. Childhood, certainly, when Odin had been more free with his attention to his young sons.

He was also taller than his father, and beneath the bulky clothes, Odin felt more fragile than he had expected. He was not the stern, solid warrior Loki held in his mind, but an old man, perhaps not as well as he pretended to be.

Loki shot him a glance, and tried to offer Gungnir back. "Is this ... do you need this?"

"No, you hold it. We will support each other."

It was easier said than done, but Loki walked through the observation area, across the hall, and to the next room with the open wall with a view toward the mountains. He thought Odin might try to hurry him along as his pace was slow and halting, but he told Loki of the court doings that day, seeming in no hurry.

His knees felt like the bones were grinding together. Every step stabbed him up the leg and he had to clench his jaw to keep quiet. They didn't reach the balcony when Odin stopped, and said over
his shoulder, "You. Bring the chair here."

Aeldrith, one of Eir's assistants, who had followed them across, jumped to obey, dragging the armchair behind Loki. He sat down and had to press his head against the back of the chair, sucking air through his teeth at the throbbing pain.

A dry wrinkled hand touched his forehead and a cooling wave washed through him, easing the discomfort.

His eyes opened to see Odin looking down at him in concern. "It was too far."

"I'm all right," Loki protested. "It will pass."

Odin did not seem much consoled, gripping Gungnir tightly. "I dislike how this persists. We will find another method of returning you to the infirmary."

Loki felt like he ought to protest that, but since he would rather not walk back he held his tongue. "Anyway, what did you want to talk about? Your conquest of the Nine Realms?"

Odin froze when lowering himself to his own chair, then shot a look at Loki. "Well played," he admitted. "But no. Not today." He grimaced. "Though it is somewhat relevant. Today I dispatched the Einharjar and the Warriors Three to end an attack by brigands on a town on Vanaheim."

Loki kept his face still, but Odin's keen eye caught some subtle shift. "You disapprove? Why?"

"I don't disapprove, that is not my place."

Odin tilted his head. "You have an opinion. I would hear it."

Chest tightening, Loki paused to gather his thoughts. This was a test; Odin was probing for his thinking on outworld affairs, after his comments on the Alfheim treaty had made it no doubt clear that Loki's opinions were not twin's with Odin's.

But on the other hand, what could Odin do to him for disagreement? Stop visiting? So he countered, "Does Vanaheim need our assistance? Hogun proves they have fierce warriors of their own. Let the Vanir leadership tend it."

Odin's fingers tapped Gungnir's haft, not surprised nor angered by the opposition. "They are outworlders. Does that change your opinion?"

Frowning, Loki looked out to the mountains. "Not local brigands?" But that was not the point, was it? "How is that possible? How did they find Vanaheim at all?"

Odin nodded approval that Loki had found the issue. Vanaheim, like all the Nine Realms except Midgard, was uncharted and unchartable by outsiders, because it was not a natural creation and existed outside the hyperspace lanes. Which was not to say there were no connections between the Realms - Dark Energy and other sorcery could cross the abyss, and a few knew of natural bridges between that were known as the branches of Yggdrasil, but the Realms were difficult to find from outside.

"That is why they will be brought here for interrogation." Odin tapped his fingers, gaze distant. "We face a powerful enemy. The one who held you prisoner knows us. And this group of scum feels like a game piece moving into place, but for what purpose?"

"To test our capacity to defend outer Realms?" Loki guessed.
"Perhaps," Odin said with a flick of his eye at Loki.

With that, Loki knew that whatever he couldn't remember had something to do with his suggestion. Asgard's capacity to defend other Realms. Thor had let slip that Loki had been on Midgard. Had Loki been there to test Asgard's defensive capability on behalf of this mystery leader? Had he attacked and killed them? How many? All of them? Is that what everyone was hiding from him?

He didn't want to know this and hurried to think of another explanation.

"Or perhaps they sought to test Vanheim's defenses, as well? This could be a forward scouting group to set up a base there?" Loki suggested. "If they know where Vanheim is, it is not difficult to find the rest of the Realms through Yggdrasil if they have even one seidr-user among them."

Gaze now more openly considering, Odin slowly nodded, brushing his beard. "Well-thought," he agreed. "We will look for such indicators when the group is brought here. Heimdall keeps watch for other parties which may seek attack either here or another Realm, while our elite forces are engaged on Vanheim. There is another--" he started but stopped at the sound of Thor's step in the hall and then his voice.

"There you are!"

Thor bounded into Loki's sight, and his grin was bright. "It is good to see you away from that dreary room, brother!" he greeted, and lightly knocked on Loki's head with his free hand. "Still hollow."

Loki groaned and rolled his eyes. "Are you sure you want to claim him?" he asked Odin. "Maybe we got switched around."

"I have wondered," Odin added dryly.

Thor pretended to be affronted, and brought the long black box he was carrying up to his chest. "Maybe I won't give you this, then."

"What is it?"

"A gift."

"For me?" Loki asked, frowning. He'd asked for nothing, and while almost anything would fit inside that box, it seemed too large for the gifts Thor used to give him. The box was about a sword-length but thick. A musical instrument?

"Yes, of course for you. Open it." He set the box on Loki's lap and then stayed near, watching with a grin of anticipation.

While he didn't think Thor would play a prank on him with Odin sitting right there, Loki still undid the two clasps and lifted the lid with caution.

The glint of gold caught his eye first, and he thought he was looking at a pair of swords.

But instead of blades there were two black sticks as long as swords, with golden tips and a golden curved handle at the top. They were both nestled in green velvet, similar in shade to the trim on his formal armor.

He plucked one from its cushioned hollow. It had some weight to it, more than he expected. It must be dense metal, not wood, and lacquered black.
He glanced up, trying to smile at Thor, though he had no idea what the sticks were for. "Uh, thank you? They're ... very nice."

Thor rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh. Then he grabbed both sticks from Loki in both hands, held them by the handles, and put the other ends on the floor in demonstration. "Walking canes!" he announced with a flourish. "And- watch -" he held up one, across Loki and did something, unsheathing a narrow blade from the tip. "With knives. I know you like knives. And the handles are fashioned after your helmet." He held up both close together, so it was obvious the curve of the handles reflected the horns of his helmet.

Then he stood there, looking at Loki with a wide-eyed look of hopeful anticipation, as if Loki was supposed to applaud.

But he couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. An inexplicable fury rose up in his chest, paralyzing him - he wanted to take both those sticks, break them over Thor's head, and hurl them out the window.

Every fiber of his being rejected them. He rejected the permanency of them. He rejected that he needed them. He rejected that his brother was hopeful and happy about giving them to him.

In a sudden convulsive movement, he shoved the box off his lap to crash on the floor. "Get out. I don't want to see you, I don't want to see those things, I don't want your gifts, I don't --" His voice cracked and got stuck in his throat, so he had to look away, chest heaving while he tried to get control of himself.

"Loki," Odin started, his voice a familiar disapproving tone. "Your brother--"

"Father," Thor interrupted, "I understand. I am not offended."

That was worse. "You should be," Loki muttered. "Be offended. Don't sit there and take it."

"When you are better, I won't," Thor promised with a bit too much cheer. Then his voice softened, and when Loki darted a glance at him, he saw Thor looking back with nothing but concern. "Would you like to try them?"

He held out the canes again, offering them as if Loki hadn't flown into an irrational temper.

Loki swallowed and nodded. Wordlessly, he accepted the canes, and wrapped his hands around the handles. Thor nudged the case out of the way with his foot and stood in front of Loki. "I will not let you fall," he promised, when Loki hesitated.

He placed the canes carefully and lifted himself upright. The dizziness hit, the feeling of falling, but his hands were steady on the canes and after a moment, he was able to look up.

"All right, son?" Odin asked from his left.

Thor was grinning as he seized Loki's upper arms. "I knew it would work."

Loki let his head fall onto Thor's shoulder and whispered, "Thank you."
On this occasion of Chapter 30 (CHAPTER 30, holy mackerel!!), I want to thank all of you for reading! There have been so many delightful comments and more kudos than I would've ever dreamed on this story when it began. I'm so glad you're all on this road with me as we take our final turn and head into the homestretch.

-Lizardbeth (lizardbeths at tumblr)

Thor stayed close to Loki, as he practiced his canes.

Thor had already earned two snappish orders to 'stop hovering!' which made Thor take a step back, but he always had to recover that step when Loki kept trying to lift the canes up to walk and losing his balance. Thor held his shoulders until he steadied again.

"One at a time," Thor suggested, not for the first time.

"I know that," Loki snarled at him and jerked himself free. "I have to do it on my own."

"You could slide them along the floor so you don't lose contact?" Thor asked.

"That is what I'm doing!" Loki protested, and Thor had to bite his lip on the retort that he wasn't.

When Loki's knuckles started to whiten with frustration on the handles, Thor knew he was about five seconds from hurling them at the wall.

Wrapping one hand over Loki's, Thor waited until he had Loki's attention. "You need a break."

Loki's eyes narrowed at him in a familiar glare. "No, I need you to stop telling me what to do."

Now that was unfair. "I am trying to help!"

"Do it somewhere else!" Loki shot back.

There was no arguing with that petulant childishness, and Thor was not going to try. "Fine. But I am not leaving until you are safe in your bed. So turn around and walk back to it." Thor folded his arms and was unmoved by Loki's surly glower.

"Fine."

Thor's annoyance evaporated, as Loki painstakingly pivoted like an old Midgardian clock. Thor kept quiet, not wanting to break his concentration of each small adjustment. Although he was ready to dart to the rescue, Loki didn't need any steadying.

Thor snorted. "You do better when you're mad at me. I should stop being nice."

"You only say that because I can't use the blades yet."
"You will, Loki." He said it with confidence, but watching Loki -- now actually pushing the tip along the floor a little ways rather than trying to lift it -- inch across the floor, made him less sure. But since Loki had said 'yet' Thor was going to encourage that hopefulness. "If only out of pure goat-headedness," he added.

"People who wear dumb helmets shouldn't have an opinion on other people's--" Loki started, but cut himself off, his head snapping to leftward and his hand lifted off his cane in a spell-casting gesture.

The cane clanged to the floor. His body tilted and he staggered, before Thor caught him. "Easy. I have you."

"Did you feel that?" Loki asked urgently, gripping Thor's tunic. "What was that?"

Thor set Loki on his feet. "I felt nothing. What did you sense?"

"Nothing?" Loki repeated incredulously, scoffed, "How is it you are their trueborn son and you felt nothing?"

"I don't have your powers or skills," Thor protested.

He meant the words to be admiring, but somehow they infuriated Loki instead. He growled in irritation and his fist thumped Thor's chest. "You have power. Right. Here. You are the heir to the Odinforce, you have the same potential, maybe more! You should have been with me learning seidr from Mother, but they indulged your stupid fighting, and now you have the magical sensitivity of a rock."

Slack-jawed, Thor blinked at him. "You-you mean that?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "Well, I might have mis-spoken about the rock when your frog imitation is so good."

Thor ignored that jest, sticking to what Loki had said. "I have never heard you even suggest that I could do what you can."

Loki heaved a sigh. "Of course you can. That was always obvious. Norns, Thor, do you think I didn't always know my little tricks will never add up to what you can do without even trying? You can fly." Thor was going to say that was Mjolnir, but Loki said sharply, "No. Mjolnir is only a tool. Why do you think I guarded what I could do so jealously? What else did I have? But now, all I see is you frittering away your power, and it's such a waste." He turned his head, shoulders slumping. "One of us should be at full strength, at least."

Thor turned all that over in his mind, wondering how he should answer. "I have paid little attention to such things and perhaps I should. Father made much the same point to me. But at the same time, Loki," his free hand cradled the back of Loki's head, careful of the newly healed injury, "I suspect, now that we know the truth about your heritage that you don't know the boundaries of your own powers either." He leaned in closer to murmur, "You were right. His fear caged you, but now you know you are more."

"Or less," Loki muttered, but at least he seemed to be considering Thor's words.


Loki was silent, then quirked a smile. "Well, walking would be a good start."
"To the chair?" Thor asked, and Loki nodded. Now that Loki was more mobile, Frigga had brought in a cushioned chair with footstool for him. Thor didn't like it, because he wanted Loki back in his own room, but Loki still resisted moving, and the chair was a compromise to get him out of bed.

Not able to figure out how to pick up the cane without Loki falling, Thor helped him to the chair, then went back for it.

"Would you get Mother?" Loki asked.

Thor whipped around. Loki did look a bit pinched at the corners of his eyes, a familiar signal of pain. "I will fetch Eir; she is closer. I let you stand for too long, and now--"

"Thor," Loki cut in. "I need to ask her about what I sensed." A troubled frown creased his brow and his gaze went distant briefly, looking into places Thor couldn't see. "It was strange," he murmured. "Powerful, but ... like nothing I have felt before."

"Oh, very well, then. You promise not to stand without someone with you?" he demanded, suspicious this was a means to get him out of the room for Loki to try to walk alone.

But that seemed not his aim, as he shook his head once. "I am settled here."

Thor noted Loki's tight grip on the chair arms and sent Eir to him anyway as he went to find Frigga.

At Thor's word, Frigga went back to Loki's room. He would not tolerate an audience when he was trying to use his canes, and so she made herself scarce when Thor was helping him, glad to let them find their bonds again. She smiled at the feel of power coming from inside. Apparently Loki had decided to investigate on his own, and was not waiting for her. Which was typical of him, not wanting to wait for answers, but instead figure it out himself.

But her smile fell completely off her face as she entered Loki's room. Her feet stopped as she could only stare.

Seated in the chair with his feet up as if at his ease, he had one hand on the Casket and the other lifted over his head, calling so much seidr that scarlet threads of it swirled around him. Her heart caught in her chest, knowing how easily that much power might damage everything around him, including himself.

His gaze looked within it, too deeply at first to notice her presence, until she cautiously tapped his magic with her own, bracing for a backlash if the casting fell apart. But he sent it all back to the Casket for absorption, and she could breathe again.

"Good afternoon," he greeted her, taking his hand from the Casket and smiling at her as if she'd walked in on something pedestrian like combing his hair.

"What were you doing?" She pulled the visitor's chair closer to him, and tucked her hands together so she wouldn't be tempted to reach between them and throttle him for frightening her.

"I wanted to see if I could use the Casket as a power source for more than weather function since Father gave it to me, so I thought I'd try it."

"What was so urgent to risk yourself with such power? You knew I was coming."

"There was no risk," Loki replied with cool aplomb, as if he had carefully measured it, instead of
being simply ignorant of the danger and reckless with his safety.

She slapped her knees, startling them both with the sudden sound. "Of course there was risk! You cannot blithely play with power that could strip you to the bone in an instant!"

There was something icy in his eyes when he looked at her and his body tensed. "Did I seem as if I were playing?"

She hesitated, knowing she was on delicate ground now. "No, you seemed in control, Loki. But that much power is dangerous. Just -- please be careful, my son. My heart can only take so much of you endangering yourself."

He relaxed. "There was no danger. Truly, the Casket responds to me as if I have always held it. But it was no help in discerning what is happening. Did you feel it? There was a sudden pulse through Yggdrasil, but I could find no source... I thought it might be the start of an attack."

"No, no, Loki," she covered his hand with hers and squeezed. "It was nothing alarming. I had not considered that you don't recall your own research, or I would have reminded you. The Convergence is beginning."

She so rarely saw him stunned, she had to smile as he sat speechless, silently mouthing 'the Convergence' before he shook himself and cast into seidr again to see for himself. His eyes lit with wonder and he murmured, "It's beautiful."

The brightest smile she had seen since his return transformed his face into something joyful. "I was right. Not only is it real, it was coming soon." He leaned toward her, hands outstretched as if to catch all his enthusiasm. "Do you know how long it's supposed to last? Because the stories said years, but that never made sense to me. There would be more interchanging of peoples between the Realms if that were so, but obviously there is scarcely any." He heard his words and snorted with actual wry humor, "Except for me."

She smiled at him fondly, pleased he had finally found something to engage his interests. "You have all the time you need to investigate it, dearest."
Thor hurried out to the Observatory, pushing his way through the gathered Einharjar.

Heimdall noted his entrance and nodded, before activating the Bifrost.

"My friends!" Thor greeted jovially, as soon as they appeared. They had been sent with some other fighters to quell marauder activity on Vanaheim, and though he had wanted to go with them, he had stayed on Asgard. Without Mjolnir he wasn't sure he would be of much help there, and Loki had that look in his eyes as he told Thor he should go that said the opposite of his words.

A quick count showed Volstagg, Fandral and Sif. Fandral was leaning heavily on Sif, an arm bound up with hasty bits of his cloak. "Fandral?"

Fandral's injury had not sunk his spirits. "The foe was mighty-- and mighty big, I should add-- but it is a little thing."

"He should see the healers," Sif disagreed. "That creature nearly cut his arm off."

"The prisoners follow," Volstagg interrupted with a worried glance at Heimdall. "We should not tarry, lest they get restless."

"Yes, of course," Thor ushered them out of the way so Heimdall could bring the rest through. "Fandral, with me. Volstagg, Sif, if you would both assist in seeing to the prisoners disposition in the dungeon. The king will then want your report."

They agreed, and Thor took Fandral's good arm across his shoulders. When Fandral sucked in a breath of pain, Thor cast around for distraction as they headed for the transport.

"So, our friend Hogun, did he choose to visit his family?" Thor asked, but didn't finish when Fandral twisted his head around to look at Thor.

He said, "I suppose the king did not mention to you, but Hogun was ordered to remain behind to assist with having the local trouble-makers handled there."

"He did?" Thor asked, incredulous. That was not a policy Odin would usually endorse, preferring to keep judgments to himself. But after a moment, Thor knew where it came from. "Ah, yes. Father has been talking with Loki, who has been rather forceful in his argument that Vanaheim should tend more of its own affairs." Thor shrugged the opposite shoulder than the one supporting Fandral.

Fandral hummed in thought, before saying, "At least he is well enough to counsel the All-Father. From your few words it seemed he was barely speaking."

Thor had to nod at that and offered with a brief laugh, "He has quite the sharp tongue still."

Fandral's eyes flicked to the side, to look at Thor, but he looked away again and asked, "Is it his memory loss that keeps him at the Healers? Or is there more you have not said?"

Thor swallowed hard, uncomfortable by the questions. "More. And I would tell you, but I think he would not like me to say yet." It was Loki's reluctance to leave the Healers' that told him Loki did not want anyone told. He's already let slip to Thor, when pressed, that he didn't want to walk to his quarters because he was afraid of being seen-- he hadn't put it that way, but it was obvious, given
what he'd said about feeling so useless.

"Perhaps I'll see him at the Healers'!" Fandral exclaimed.

Thor just smiled awkwardly. "Perhaps."

It was not a surprise when they reached the hall within the Healer's quarters and Thor saw the door to the observation room outside Loki's chamber was firmly shut. Apparently he or Eir had warning of visitors on the way. Of course with Loki investigating the Convergence, it was possible he'd watched the entire battle on Vanaheim, Thor was no longer sure what Loki was able to do.

Fandral was fixed up quickly, regaling both Thor and Eir with his exploits in the battle. Thor had to laugh at the 'giant' - larger than a Frost Giant? Absurd.

Eir gave him a sling and a stern command to do nothing to strain the healing wound until morning, almost smiling when he said grandly, "A man who knows what he's doing does not need both arms."

"I am sure, you scamp. Now be off with you."

They both bowed to her and took their leave. Back in the hall, Thor could just hear his mother's voice drifting through the open door of the solar, and beside him, Fandral perked up, "Oh, the All-Mother's here, shall we say hello?" He was darting to the doorway before Thor could stop him.

Frigga was there, with Loki, of course. She stood close to him, and glanced aside to see who was there, her face falling in dismay that someone besides Thor stood there.

Loki was balanced on his canes, wearing the soft tunic and breeches he wore during the day, and barefoot, with his hair still damp and wavy from a recent wash. He glanced a little more slowly and his hands tightened on the handles, and Thor knew the only reason he wasn't gesturing the door to slam shut was because he couldn't lift his hand.

Fandral stared, eyes flicking from Loki's face, to the canes, and then back up, throat bobbing once with a hard swallow, before he essayed a grin. "I'm glad to see you looking so well. Both of you." He gave a short bow. "My prince. All-Mother."

Loki said nothing, standing tensely, before forcing himself to smile a greeting. "Fandral. You appear injured?"

"'tis a scratch. I assure you the huge creature which attacked me looks far worse."

"I don't doubt it."

When a silence fell and it seemed Fandral was trying to formulate a question about what was wrong with Loki, Frigga interjected smoothly, "It is good to see you safely home, Fandral. I bid you farewell until the feast tonight."

He got the message and swept her a bow. "My queen."

"Thor, if you would remain," Frigga requested.

Thor let Fandral go off, and shut the door behind him when he came further in the room. "I am sorry," he said to Loki. "I thought you were in your chamber or I'd not have brought him down this hall."
Eyes on the floor, Loki hesitated, before giving a tight shrug, careful not to lift the canes. "I suppose everyone had to learn eventually."

"Fandral will not--"

"Of course he will," Loki cut in, wearily. "He'll tell Sif and Volstagg, and Volstagg will tell ten people 'in confidence', and it'll be across Asgard by sunset."

Thor grimaced, because he was probably right. "Should I go swear him to secrecy?" He stepped to the door. At least he could slow the spread of the rumor--

"No," Loki said. "There's no point. Let them know."

Frigga began, gently, "Darling, all that Fandral knows is--"

"That I am standing up with two canes, because I obviously cannot support myself. That is quite enough, I think. I imagine I will go from 'Silvertongue' to 'Cripple Prince' in a week." The tone was light, as if he were jesting, but he was also quite serious.

"I will not allow it," Thor declared staunchly.

"How will you stop them?" Loki returned. "Forbid the name spoken aloud and they will whisper it instead. No," he turned his gaze back toward the wide open doors that led to the balcony and the sky and mountains beyond, "like my blood, it is a truth I cannot deny."

"Until we find a means to make you well," Frigga offered. "These are early days yet, my son."

"Until then," he added, but Thor pressed his lips together. Loki was humoring her still, but without conviction of his own.

He allowed no one to intervene to challenge his assumption or comfort him. "Would you move the chair closer, Thor?" Loki asked. "I would sit here. The Convergence of Midgard and Alfheim occurs shortly and I want to watch."

Thor jumped to move the chair to Loki, who sank down with a sigh, pulling his hands from the wrist straps they'd added and hooking the horns on the arm of the chair. Frigga pushed the ottoman into position with her foot. "Do you need the draught?"

Glancing up he found a smile to flash at her. "Not when I have stellar phenomena to watch. Here, you can both watch with me."

He held up both hands and with a small but precise gesture, called a power that Thor could feel like a breeze just beneath his skin, and a nearly imperceptible black line formed in the air before him. The line, like a drip of ink, widened, until it was obvious that it wasn't merely black, it was the absence of light that widened. Stretched apart, the starless void did not offer air or heat or anything else, only infinite depth that seemed to pull at the watchers.

Looking at Loki, his gaze so distant as he looked into the magic, Thor saw what could be: Loki, shut away in one of the towers, isolating himself from all company so they would not see his weakness, while he lived within his magic like a spider in a web, seeing everything, but apart from all of it. Inwardly, Thor shook his head; he would not let Loki retreat like that. Loki needed to remain a part of the Nine Realms, not hiding himself away.

Thor darted a glance at Frigga to see if she saw the same, but her concentration was on the spell itself. She watched, lips parted and eyes bright with pride. "Steady," she urged softly, though Thor
saw no reason for the caution. "Focus on the point they meet."

Deep within the nothingness, something formed -- a swirl of color that grew closer and larger, resolving into a flicker, images flipping past as if a person stood in the middle of them and spun like a top, too quickly to catch any of the sights. But then it slowed and Thor could start to catch them-- a tree, several alfar, snowy rocks, a glass building on Midgard-- hundreds of images as if the magical convergence was capturing every corner of both Realms.

Until abruptly he saw one he recognized.

"Jane!" he blurted. "That was Jane. Go back! Can you go back?" he demanded urgently. "Loki! Make the images go back!"

Still holding up one hand, while the entire display went dark, Loki craned his neck to look up at Thor. "Jane? What is a 'Jane'?"

Thor shut his mouth realizing that of course Loki didn't remember anything about Jane. He cast around helplessly, looking to Frigga to help.


"A scientist. An astrophysicist," he repeated, remembering Darcy's painstaking effort to teach him the word. "You'd like her, I think. She is eager of such studies, too," he waved his hand at the visible image.

"And you met her on Midgard?" Loki asked, tone dubious. "Was I with you?"

"No. You did not meet her." Thor thought it best not to admit Loki had probably seen her at some point when he had been attacking Thor with the Destroyer. He was still quite certain Loki had observed the battle from afar through his arts.

"Then how can I focus on her?" Loki asked, quite reasonably. "I would do so, so you might see your ... friend," his voice rose on a question, unsure of the relationship, "but if I do not remember her, or ever knew her, then I am unsure--"

Frigga stepped forward, sketching into the air as well until a transparent image of Jane stood before them. "I saw her," she explained when Thor was incredulous. "I wanted to know your company on Midgard."

Loki frowned, his look appraising. "She seems small," he murmured.

Thor laughed. "She is tiny, but quite clever. She was studying the Bifrost from Midgard, and seemed ready to recreate a mortal version of it."

"Really?" Loki seemed impressed, and Thor smiled. He would learn their value before he met one, and that alone would help preclude events repeating even if he remembered the past.

Loki turned his eyes back to his spellcraft, centering himself with several deep breaths, before raising both hands again and pulling forth the image of Jane.

Thor leaned closer, trying to see. She was walking, somewhere, amid grey buildings. It was hard to see but he thought Darcy Lewis was near her. He watched, smiling, as she poked about, glad to see her looking content and that bright light in her eyes of curiosity.

She vanished.
"Where-- what happened?" he asked Loki, but Loki seemed no less confused, frowning intently.

"The was there, and then--"

"The Convergence," Frigga said. "There was a merge. A small one, but it opened to another place."

"To Alfheim?" Loki asked, frown deepening as he stared into the renewed flicker. "I don't see her there either."

Thor's hands tightened to fists. "Where is she?"


"A what? I have never heard of such a thing. Can you find her?"

"Not without knowing her, Thor. I am sorry. But Heimdall's eyes may be more suited to it," he suggested.

Of course, Golden Eyes would be able to see her. Thor was glad Loki was there to think about this, while Thor's chest and mind seemed stuffed with anxiety. Jane was in danger, and she was clever, but fragile. The Realms beyond Midgard would be perilous. "I will find her. And ensure her safety."

"Be careful, my son," Frigga urged him. He kissed her cheek, tapped Loki on the shoulder, and hurried out to find Jane Foster.
Thor didn't want to let go of Jane when they'd arrived back on Asgard -- she was so lithe and warm, and fit perfectly against him -- but he had to loosen his grip to look at her face to see her reaction.

She exclaimed, still clutching him, "We have to do that again!" He couldn't help an answering grin at her wide-eyed excitement. Jane Foster had no fear in her, only a heart for adventure.

Her smile faltered as she caught sight of something beyond Thor, and greeted uncertainly, "Hi."

Heimdall's golden eyes settled on them both and his deep voice greeted, "Welcome to Asgard."

Jane's fingers clutched a little tighter but after a moment, her smile returned. She let go of Thor to turn and face Heimdall. One hand pushed her hair behind her ear. "So this is the Bifrost?"

Her eyes traveled all around the Observatory interior, lighting on the control console with the hilt of Heimdall's sword still in it.

"What's the power source?" she asked, and when Thor chuckled, she turned, "What? I want to know."

"I know, and we can return here. But first I want you to see the city."

"But-- just a minute--"

He ushered Jane toward the entrance, where Thor turned to look over his shoulder to see an actual curve on Heimdall's lips of amusement at her pelting of questions.

"Oh," she breathed and her footsteps faltered at the sight of Asgard across the bridge. The golden towers gleamed in the sun, only a few clouds hung above the mountains behind, while the gardens and buildings occupied the shore in a profusion of stone and green and falling water.

"It's beautiful, Thor."

He nodded in agreement and gestured her to the skiff waiting.

She gasped when it rose into the air and nearly fell out bending over the edge to try to get a look at the engines. "Jane!" He hauled her back with a grip on her jacket. "Please."

She was only momentarily repentant, creeping back to the side, but this time, it was to the aft to see the water plunging over the edge of the world.

A frown knitted her brow. "Is that a giant waterfall?"

"Yes," he answered. "To my knowledge the water falls off into the void."
"Then where does new water come from? Wait, the void? Are you telling me Asgard isn't round? But there's a sun," she glanced at it, squinting. "Main sequence yellow star, like Earth's as far as I can tell without a spectrometer. But your planet--"

"Realm," he corrected helpfully.

"Your Realm isn't spherical. It has atmosphere and gravity, but if it's not a sphere-- my God, it's flat, no one will ever believe this-- there's not much mass so why is there gravity? It must be artificially generated, somehow, as is the atmosphere. And I guess the water, since it's dumping millions of gallons over the edge. Unless it's pulled in at the bottom.... Have you ever seen the underside?" she interrupted herself to ask him. "A closed system would make more sense."

He laughed and held up his hands to ward off her questions. "You are worse than Loki, and never did I imagine his curiosity would be matched."

The mention of Loki made her go still and her enthusiasm dimmed. She bit her lip before offering, "SHIELD told me what happened in New York. I'm -- I'm sorry."

For a moment he had no idea what she was talking about or what she was sorry for, then realized: SHIELD had been told Loki was dead.

"He lived," he told her. "The Hulk damaged him severely, and it seemed he would die for some days after I brought him home. But he is strong, and pulled through. You may see him in the Infirmary."

"Oh."

He attempted to reassure her. "He means no harm to anyone, Jane. Not you, not Midgard."

"But New York-- the attack. SHIELD told me that was him."

"It was," Thor admitted. "But not him, in a sense." His gaze drifted outward, remembering. "When I returned here, after regaining my power, we fought, and I didn't understand why. And he fell from the Bifrost bridge. No," he corrected himself, not willing to let that euphemism stand, "he let himself fall, intending death." She made a soft sound of sympathy, glancing at the water and the void beyond the edge. He continued, more softly, "Only recently we found out another power scooped him from the nothing, tortured him, gave him a weapon that poisoned his mind, and then sent him to Midgard to recover the tesseract."

"Wow. That sounds... awful," she murmured.

"It has been difficult," he agreed.

She glanced at him. "I meant-- nevermind. So, where are we going?"

"First, to the Infirmary. Eir will know what has happened to you."

Eir did not know what happened to Jane, as it turned out. Thor stood aside, watching, as Jane stretched out in the Soul Forge and Eir looked at the virtual representation of her body.

Aeldrith stood beside Thor, watching the readouts, and Thor asked her, "This is not of Earth. What is it?"

"We do not know," came the soft answer. "But she will not survive the amount of energy surging
Aeldrith walked away leaving Thor bereft. Gutted. "Not survive"? This illness could kill her?

Of course she was mortal, and logic told him that mortals died early, but it seemed unfathomable that Jane should die of whatever this was. Asgard could cure it.

But a quiet voice reminded him that Asgard couldn't cure Loki; perhaps there was no cure for Jane either. He shook his head to dislodge that doubt. One way or another, Jane would be cured.

Odin's voice snapped through the room, "Why did you bring the mortal here?"

"She's ill. We can help her."

"Her own people can help her," Odin said. "She does not belong here."

Loki’s voice was soft, but Thor and Odin both whirled to face him. "I think she may. That energy is... powerful." He was leaning on his canes, partially bracing himself in the doorway. He had changed into black trousers and green tabard over a long-sleeved black tunic with gold around the collar. Maybe it was being in clothes that weren't akin to sleepclothes, but he seemed better, too - his face looked less gaunt with better color.

Thor glanced behind him and saw no one. "Tell me you didn't just walk all the way from your room unattended."

Loki ignored the demand. "I felt the energy as soon as she arrived," Loki said. Jane had sat up and they were looking at each other curiously. "Do you not feel it, Father?"

"Father?" She repeated and blinked away her stare at him. "You're Loki. I recognize you from the photo in the briefing. That means you are--" Her face turned toward Odin and she swallowed hard.

He looked on her. "Odin All-father, King of Asgard, Protector of the Nine Realms," he answered, rather neutrally to Thor's ears, when he normally announced it with severity.

"Uh, Right." She sat up. "I'm Jane--"

"Jane Foster," he interrupted. "I know who you are." He glowered at her. "Her world has their own healers. She can return to them. Guard, remove her to Midgard," he commanded.

Which was when Thor noticed the two Einharjar trailing Odin inside the room. They moved toward Jane. "No, don't--"

But he was too late. As before, the energy snapped forth from Jane, throwing Thor back. A clatter made him turn in alarm to find Loki fallen on the floor in an awkward heap. "Loki!" Thor sprang to his side, beating the healers. "Are you alright? Don't touch her!" he ordered the Einharjar who had gathered themselves as if to try again.

Loki pushed Thor's hands off, as he sat up, not meeting anyone's eyes. "I'm fine."

He didn't look especially fine-- Thor suspected he'd used glamour before because his face was ashen-pale again, and his lips were pressed together as if he was holding back being sick. He made no move to try to stand, either.

"The infection is defending her," Eir observed in astonishment.

"No," Loki corrected, "it's defending itself."
Odin drew nearer to her, single eye looking intently. "What did you sense, Loki?"

"Something... familiar?" he answered. "But I don't know why."

Odin held out his free hand above Jane's arm, and a reddish glow formed beneath her skin, swirling like a restless sea inside her flesh. "Ah."

"Father?" Thor prompted, when Odin said nothing. "What is it?"

Odin seemed thoughtful, considering whether to tell them what he knew or not.

Loki looked at him, and it was if no one else was in the room. "Father, we need to know."

Loki knew what the infection, the power, within Jane was, Thor realized. And that was not what he wanted to learn. There was something more.

Odin's single eye met Loki's across the floor, and after a moment, he nodded slowly. "Yes. It's time."
When Odin decided to bring them to the solar and dispatched one of the guard to fetch Frigga there, the question was how to get Loki there. Before, they'd had two people carry the chair with him in it, but there was no chair here.

So when Thor held out his hands to pull Loki to his feet, he didn't stop when Loki was standing with his canes but wrapped both arms around Loki's waist and picked him up.

Loki yelped in outrage. "THOR! What are you doing? Put me down."

"You walked from your room," Thor answered. "Do not tell me you are not in pain, because I know it's a lie. This is easier."

Loki banged the canes against Thor as best he could in the awkward position smashed against Thor's armor. "PUT. ME DOWN. Father!" he sent the appeal over Thor's shoulder.

Odin was no help, watching with a hint of amusement. Jane was frowning, so Thor explained, "Hulk shattered his legs. He is only recently able to walk at all."

"Thor!"

She nodded understanding, big eyes soft with sympathy.

"I am here, you big oaf," Loki huffed. "Stop speaking about me like an inconvenient sack of flour!"

"You would be more convenient if you were a sack of flour. Stop that!" Thor ordered, tightening his grip as Loki tried to trip him by weaving a cane tip between Thor's ankles.

"I will stab you," Loki threatened.

"You will not," Odin commanded, and then gestured with his free hand. "This way, Jane Foster. We will await my sons in the solar."

"Why must you be so embarrassing?" Loki hissed, but stopped struggling as soon as she and Odin were gone.

"Why do you care so much about what a mortal you only just met thinks of you?"

"I don't! I don't wish to be carried at all. Why is that hard to understand?"

"I do understand," Thor acknowledged. "And I hope soon it will not be necessary. Until then, relax and enjoy the ride, little brother."

Loki groaned and was probably rolling his eyes, but he stopped fighting the inevitable and let his
head fall to Thor's shoulder. Thor carried him to the solar and deposited him in his armchair.

"All right?" Odin asked.

"Fine," Loki replied as the healer's staff gathered other chairs into a semicircle facing the balcony.

"Who don't you use a smaller version of the flying boat that brought us from the Bifrost?" Jane asked. "Or just a wheelchair?"

"It's not necessary," Loki answered stiffly. "Thor was just being annoying."

Thor made a face at him for the lie, but the door opened, keeping him from objecting aloud. Frigga slipped inside and Thor made the introductions.

Frigga smiled warmly and reached for Jane's hands, when Jane looked confused on what she should do. "My dear, welcome to Asgard. I thank you for all your care for Thor when he was with you."

"I ran over him with the car," she confessed. Loki snickered.

Frigga's smile widened. "No harm done. Now please, sit."

When they'd all taken a chair, Odin plucked a book from the palace records and flicked a page to open between them of an illustrated version of what Thor recognized as the war for Svartalfheim. That meant... he glanced at Jane... the aether. That was a Dark Elf weapon of immense power and somehow she'd acquired it? By accident?

"There are relics that predate the universe itself," Odin began.

"Before the Big Bang?" Jane asked. Four people turned to look at her. She sat back in her chair, opening her mouth and then reconsidering, biting her lip. "Um. That's when we start the universe."

"It's a story," Loki said. "The dawn of Asgard, when you mortals were scurrying about in the mud." Her face held outrage at the insult, but he was paying her no attention, watching the movements of the illustrations. "A story whose historical accuracy is.... somewhat questionable, is it not?" He addressed Odin, lifting his brows.

Thor felt the sudden tension and exchanged a worried glance with Frigga, but she didn't intercede, waiting.

"What do you know?" Odin challenged him.

Loki spread his hands. "Nothing everyone doesn't know. 'Born of eternal night, the Dark Elves come to steal your light'," he quoted.

"You told us those stories as children," Thor said to Frigga who nodded.

"But I've been to Svartalfheim," Loki said. "They're not coming to steal our light, because they're all dead."

A heavy silence fell in the wake of his words, until Odin stood, thumping Gungnir on the floor. "They went to war against us," he said. "Malekith took an ancient weapon, one of the six Infinity Stones, to turn it against us. Because the aether's natural form is amorphous, he used it in host bodies," he waved Gungnir in Jane's direction, "to turn his own people into weapons. My father, King Bor -- "
"Was it?" Loki interrupted, voice cold, as his hands gripped the cane handles white-knuckled. "Was it really? Because I know it wasn't Bor who conquered Alfheim -- in their own records, he was already dead. So tell us, was it Bor, or was it you who exterminated the Svartalfar?"

Odin reared back, clutching Gungnir close. "You dare--"

"I dare! Yes, I dare! You lied to me for a thousand years, what else have you been lying about?" Loki shouted, hurling one of his canes to the floor, where it spun and slammed into the side table. He didn't rise from his chair, but his fury was so towering that no one could move. "Tell us what happened! The truth, not the lies strewn all over Asgard."

Odin stalked closer to him, glowering down at him. "You have pressed this since you woke, since you returned from your disgraceful failed attempt to conquer Midgard--"

"ODIN!" Frigga exclaimed. "Enough."

"Father--" Thor started, stricken by Loki's face suddenly pale at the revelation at what he'd done.

"No, I will have this out, when he seeks to condemn what he so recently attempted to do himself," Odin snarled.

"Thor said he was tortured, that New York wasn't his fault," Jane said. Her voice was hesitant, but Thor was still impressed she spoke at all. Odin rounded on her, and she pressed back, terrified.


But he didn't need to as the aether within Jane snapped forth, sending Odin staggering back, barely catching himself. Jane turned limp in her chair.

Standing, Frigga positioned herself between Odin and the others. Her voice was calm. "Thor, carry her back to Eir. They can watch her until we're finished here."

Thor rose, but hesitated, looking over at Loki to make sure it was all right to leave him there. Loki seemed frozen, anger cut from beneath him, so he stared at Odin.

"Thor, go," Frigga encouraged. So Thor scooped up Jane's tiny body into his arms and hurried out.

Frigga shut the outer door when Thor had gone.

"That was unkind," she said to Odin's back. "You apologize to your son this instant."

"I'm not his son, am I?" Loki found his voice again, bitter and angry. "Or maybe I am if conquest and death are what you're so desperate to hide from me. But it failed you said. The problem wasn't conquering them or ruling them, was it, only failing and humiliating you."

"Loki, stop," Frigga urged him. "We didn't tell you what you had done under the influence of another, because it makes no difference now. Odin, using his memory loss as a weapon was wrong and you know it." Odin ignored her, and she turned to the one who needed her consolation. She pushed Loki's feet to the side to sit on the footstool, laying a hand on his leg. "My son, you think you know the answer already to what you push so hard to get, but you don't. Sometimes things are hidden because they're shameful and the pain of the truth is difficult to bear. That is why I didn't tell you the truth about your origins, but it is not the only difficult truth in this family."
He swallowed hard and murmured, without looking at her, "So many secrets. So many lies. And for what? To pretend Asgard is perfect, that the other Realms are grateful for Asgard's benevolence, when the truth is the opposite?" He lifted his chin and met her eyes. "How are we supposed to learn from your mistakes, when you pretend you never made any?"

Odin turned around and Gungnir thumped on the tile loudly in the silence. "Of all the mistakes I have made, my regrets are those I made with my children." He stopped, clutching Gungnir while his shoulders slumped tiredly. "Especially you. Not because you are not my blood, but because you display my faults. Your very existence is proof I could not keep my wife safe, and my fear of what might be would have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, if not for wiser heads than my own."

"That's not my fault," Loki protested thickly, a sheen to his eyes. "No, it was not. It was never fair to you. Responding to your accusation with one of my own was also unfair," he admitted. "I do not believe conquest was your aim; it seems you were sent to acquire the tesseract and, in that, you succeeded."

Loki pressed his eyes with the heels of his hands, avoiding looking at anyone as a silence fell. He seemed easier when he lowered his hands and said, "But I did attack them."

She didn't want to confirm it, but knew she had to, at this point. "Yes. You led an army of Chitauri against the Midgardian city New York. The one who hurt you so badly was one of their defenders."

Loki's eyes stayed fixed to his hands, fidgeting with each other and the handle of the cane lying in his lap. "I don't remember any of this. At least the void and after, there are shadows, nightmares, something lingers. But all of this, there's nothing."

"You likely never will," she said, laying her hand atop his to still the restless movements and offer some support. "Eir said the trauma prevented any memories from forming. But that's all right; none of it--"

He pulled away from her. "If it wasn't my doing, you would have told me before."

She shook her head. "To torment you, when you are already in such pain? No darling, I would not. Another day when you are stronger, then we would have--"

He lifted his pale eyes to hers, shining wetly. "Except those days never come, do they? The right days to tell secrets?"

"They must," Thor's voice made her start. She hadn't noticed his return, but he came to stand behind Loki's chair, setting both hands on his brother's shoulders. His declaration warmed her heart, and Loki seemed to relax, in the shelter of his brother's support.

Thor's blue eyes met hers and then went to Odin. His voice was calm, and she heard the echoes of the king he could become. "You owe us the truth. Mother shared her dark secret, now it is your turn."

Odin sighed. "Yes. I suppose it is. Long since, I should have told you. Sit, I will try again. More calmly, I hope." He seated himself, laying Gungnir aside.

Thor did not sit, remaining in place at Loki's back.

Odin hesitated, then asked her, "Where do I begin to tell a story I have never told before?"
"You told me," she reminded him.

"You knew most already," he reminded her, then inhaled a deep breath. "I suppose the best way is
the simplest. Frigga is not my first wife, and you, Thor, are not my firstborn."

"What?" Thor stammered in disbelief, but Loki seemed much less shocked to Frigga's eyes. He was
briefly surprised, but he nodded as if everything slotted together now.

"My daughter, Hela. Bor still lived then, and he doted upon his only grandchild, near as much as I
did, especially when her mother passed unexpectedly. The Nine Realms were fractious and warlike
-- the Svartalfar held the aether, the Jotnar held the Casket, other Realms had their artifacts and
powers-- it was a greater fight. And I, and Bor, and Hela, all gloried in it. But soon Bor began to
question, why more conquest? Why destruction? I did not listen," he admitted, "I was his general
and Hela my captain, and together we were.. unstoppable."

He inhaled a deep breath. "To this day, I do not know if she did something to him, but not long
after he declared an intent to pull back, Bor fell ill. It was during this time - his reign but he was not
there, despite the tales - that Hela and I defeated the Svartalfar. She demanded their deaths, and I
gave them to her." His head hung down, ashamed. "They are all dead. As you said, exterminated."

A weighty silence fell. Thor was shaking his head a little in denial, and Frigga tried to smile
consolingly at him.

"And then?" Loki asked. "What happened to her?"

"Bor died, I became king. And for a little while, it was all as it had been before - she was my
sword-hand as I finished the conquest of Jotunheim. But I had lost my taste for it. I met..." he
glanced at Frigga, "a young beautiful sorceress, wise beyond her years, and found," his lips twisted
in a rueful smile, "she wanted nothing to do with me while I was at war. In the end, I decided that
Nine Realms was enough. I did not want to rule the universe; I wanted to return home to Asgard
and live in peace.

"But Hela... she refused peace. Goddess of Death, she claimed, and so death she would have at any
cost. On Jotunheim she killed Laufey's brother, slaughtered him like a sheep, though I commanded
a peace. We argued and fought, but it was not until she attempted your mother's life that I knew I
had no choice but to stop her. She is ... imprisoned on Helheim, bound by spell she cannot break
while I live."

"She's still alive?" Thor asked. His blue eyes held confusion and betrayal; whatever he had
expected the truth to be, it wasn't this. "My... sister is still alive?"

"She tests the spell," Odin confirmed. "She escaped once, long ago, and murdered the Valkyrie
who were sent to stop her. If she escapes again, she will seek the throne and your lives: You, Thor,
as a rival, and you--"

Loki answered softly, "As a bastard, pretender to her blood."

"And the blood of what she called the lesser creatures," Odin added heavily. "It was a different,
harsher time, and she was a product of it, but she was always thus. Once when she was but a child,
I gave her a wolf pup, hoping to spur some softening and care in her heart. She used her power to
grow it into a war beast that killed hundreds at her command."

"But why don't we know?" Loki asked in confusion. "If Mother was alive, many must remember.
How can it be so hidden? Even I could find only small things dropped into cracks. We know the
story of Hela, Goddess of Death's triumph over the Valkyrie as a tale from the dawn of Asgard, when it could not have been so long. Why are there no memories of her? Or you? How did you... erase ... it all?"

His voice trailed off, as a sudden understanding washed across his face, and Odin nodded once to confirm.

"So you see," he murmured. "That is what the aether can do. It is the Reality Stone. I used it to hide her from memory and history, and then hid the stone where I thought no one would ever find it."

"And then Jane stumbled on it by accident," Thor mused.

"The Norns have a bitter sense of humor," Odin said with a snort.

"The Stones are so ancient and powerful, they are alive in some way," Frigga murmured. "Perhaps they grew tired of being ignored."

"We know one, at least, seeks them for his own evil purpose," Odin shook his head. "They will need to be separated and hidden again."

"And Jane?" Thor asked. "How do we get it out of her?"

Frigga met Odin's gaze, and they both knew the sad truth.

"I do not know," Odin answered.

"What? How is that possible?" Thor demanded. "We have the two other Stones--"

Odin cut in, "They do not play well together, Thor. Only in very specific circumstance can they work upon another. You saw what the mere approach of power did. A full attack against it would cause a reaction that might obliterate most of Asgard, and would certainly kill your mortal girl."

"We have a little time to study it, Thor," Frigga reassured him. "We'll find a way."

"We need to," Thor said. "This is not her doing, and she should not have to suffer for our world intruding upon hers."

"Go see to her. Show her our Realm." Frigga suggested. "Reassure her we will do our best to help."

Thor knocked lightly on Loki's head to get him to look up. "Are you all right?"

"Go. I'm fine." Loki pushed his hand off. Thor hesitated then tousled Loki's hair with a smirk as Loki complained, before he strode out.

"Are you?" Frigga asked softly.

The flick of his eyes at Odin gave the answer he was not really. She wanted to sigh-- one stupid thing said in anger had damaged Odin's attempt at rebuilding. Why was her husband so wise about so much, and yet so unrelentingly foolish in this area?

"One thing I don't understand--" Loki started and huffed a laugh, "well, one of many-- the aether will react if attacked, yes, but what if not as an attack? You handled it before, so I do not see why you cannot pull it from her?"

"It is not so simple. The Aether has a host now, which it did not before. It will be reluctant to leave, seeking a wielder, but the mortal cannot. The only one I ever saw remove it from a host was
Malekith himself." Odin glanced at the door to check that Thor was gone, and answered, "Though, it may be possible-- I could--"

"It is not," Frigga cut that one off. "It would take immense power to overcome it, and such effort would kill you."

"I am not so fragile--" Odin protested, but fell silent when she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Not fragile," she allowed, after a moment, willing to give him that, but they both knew his strength was not what it had once been. "The risk is unacceptable. If you fell, and Hela freed herself? At least the boys know now, but what could they do? They are not ready to face her."

Odin glanced at her, but did not argue against the obvious. Even if Thor could lift Mjolnir again, that was not enough to face Hela in battle, and Loki could not even stand. She would slaughter them both without compunction. They would need both their own weapons with more power and skill and to work together.

Loki snorted. "I'm not ready to face anyone."

She patted his leg. "You will be, sweetling. Do not lose hope. We will find a way to heal you, and to save the mortal's life."

She hoped to save Jane, since the mortal seemed delightful and had helped Thor, and Thor seemed attached, but would there be time before the aether took its price?
Thor waited outside the chamber given to Jane, as she changed clothes. If they were to wander about Asgard, he had thought she would appreciate clothing less likely to draw attention. He'd also changed and pulled on a cloak to make some effort at walking privately.

The door opened, and Jane appeared. Thor smiled to see her in a golden dress and blue mantle about her shoulders, as the open balcony and breeze might be cool for a mortal's delicate skin.

Before he had a chance to speak, she grimaced and tucked her shoulders in discomfort. "I feel like I'm going to prom," she said, hitching the mantle around her. "I'm not used to dresses."

"Well, it looks lovely."

She darted a shy smile at him. "Thanks. So, where are we going?"

"Mother suggested I show you the city."

"I'd like that."

They wandered outside, Thor watching her as she gazed around in awe and delight, darting from place to place as things caught her eye. But soon she settled more at his side until at a small courtyard where they were momentarily alone, she started, "With your family, that was... awkward."

"Loki is upset about his injury," Thor started to explain.

"No, I get that. It was the rest. He was angry that your father had lied to him about something, for a thousand years? Was that exaggerating?"

"Only a little. All our lives," Thor added, mood darkening at the reminder. It wasn't just Loki's past Odin had lied about, but his own. Thor's half-sister, who sounded like quite a monster, had been lied about so thoroughly there was hardly any trace left. Odin's anger about Thor's lie about Vanaheim seemed even more hypocritical now that Thor knew what Odin had kept from everyone. "They say it was for our protection, but it seems it was mostly for their own."
Jane pushed back her sleeve and held her hand in the falling water of the fountain, drawing it back hurriedly. "Wow, cold." Wiping her hand on her mantle, she said, "I think every child eventually has to be disillusioned with their parents," she mused. "As children we have a childish image of who they are, but as we grow up, we realize they're just people, too. With all the flaws that people have."

"I doubt yours stood by while an entire race was obliterated," Thor murmured, afraid of being overheard, but still annoyed that he knew none of this. Angry that it had taken Loki pushing for the truth so viciously for Thor to know there was something hidden there.

"Well, no," Jane agreed, rueful smile twisting her lips. "Nothing that dramatic." But the smile faded and she turned to face Thor, lifting her chin and squaring her shoulders to be brave. "So, this thing, the aether, how do we get it out of me?"

"No one knows," he answered honestly, but when her face fell, he added quickly, "Yet. They will find a way."

"Why is it so difficult?" she asked. "I realize it's rare--"

"Not rare," he corrected. "Unique. There are only six Infinity Gems, and they are different. Father says they cannot be used on each other, but... I don't know. He is not always right. Loki is clever, and he's handled them before. Perhaps he will be able to use them to pull the aether from you."

"I'd like that, of course," she said, "but I don't want him to risk himself for me."

"Others would not be so kind," Thor said. "After what he did to your world."

Jane gave a little shrug. "Maybe. And besides, am I wrong, or does he not remember New York?"

Thor shook his head. "He remembers nothing of the last ten years. The Hulk fractured his skull, and that is what causes his difficulty in walking and his memory loss."

"Ten years? Oh my God!" she exclaimed, eyes wide and distressed. "I can't even imagine."

"It is only a fraction of time for us," he reminded her, though her horror reminded him of how difficult it would be if it were him. To have a blankness between that trip to Vanaheim and waking up in the Infirmary would be strange and unsettling.

"I guess. And maybe, after what you told me, it might be better that he can't remember what else happened." She pulled her mantle more tightly around her shoulders and for a moment watched the water. "Aliens. Cosmic powers," she murmured, "it was all much more exciting when I didn't know how dangerous and horrifying it would be."

"All of it?" he asked.

She started and turned toward him with a sudden smile. "Definitely not all of it." Ducking her head, she freed a hand to toy with her hair, in a shy gesture he would have thought calculated from anyone else, but with her was genuinely flustered.

He smiled back "Shall we continue?"

They ambled through the city, and he introduced her to their ways. She was delighted by the children's ball, and after she'd tossed it back, she turned to him with a satisfied gleam in her eyes. "See, I knew there was some kind of gravity control in this place. Do you have one of those I can take apart? I'd really be interested to see the insides."
He laughed. He really should have guessed the part of Asgard she would like the best. "I think I can find you one in the old nursery, if you like?"

Her eyes were bright, and her lips turned upward with a bit of mischief. "Your old nursery? Really? Now this I need to see."

Wondering if he'd just made a terrible mistake, he brought her back inside the palace and they headed for the family wing. He wondered what was in the old nursery, since he hadn't been in there in a hundred years at least, and everything important had been put into storage once he and Loki had moved to their own suites in the north wing.

Crossing the main corridor, they were met by Frigga. "Thor! Jane! How was your walk?"

"It's so beautiful here," Jane said. "Everything. It's a little overwhelming."

Frigga smiled sympathetically and set her hand on Jane's shoulder, but before she could speak, Thor realized she was not where he'd left her.

His brows knitted. "You didn't leave Loki alone with Father, did you?"

"It is not so bad as that," she chided gently. "But no, I did not. The All-Father was called away, and I had Loki return to his room to have a nap. He was exhausted by walking so far and then ... everything else."

That 'everything else' being the revelation that Thor had a half-sister, so effectively hidden from all history that even Loki with his nose in every book had found little trace. "He's not the only one," Thor muttered.

"Thor..."

He held up a hand. "Not here, in front of Jane. I think she's seen enough of our family problems."

Jane looked from him to Frigga, chewing her lower lip in discomfort. Frigga saw, and tried another smile. "Of course. After you left, we discussed options for removing the Aether from Jane. Unfortunately we found no obvious solution, because of the power required to overcome the Aether's inclination to remain in a host, but we have not exhausted our options, either."

"I already told Thor, I don't want anyone risking their lives for me," Jane declared.

Frigga patted her shoulder. "That is very brave of you, Jane. I see why the Aether chose you."

Jane turned wide eyes on her. "It chose me?"

Frigga chuckled. "Well, I don't know that it had many from which to select, but no question, it is ensconced in you, now, and must be pulled or coaxed out of its cozy house."

Jane wrinkled her nose and added drily, "The Aether is like Darcy trying to get up for class? I'm doomed."

Thor who knew she was jesting, laughed, and then laughed some more when Frigga looked shocked by his amusement.

But the mirth was cut off by a loud horn of alarm. He tensed, listening as it sounded again, echoing down the hall.

"The prisoners," Frigga said, and her hand tightened on Jane's shoulder.
"Someone escaped," Thor guessed.

"Go," Frigga commanded. "I will watch over Jane."

His eyes met Jane's, for a moment conflicted when he wanted to care for her himself, but he nodded sharply and turned to run for the stairs. Hopefully this was not as serious as the horns suggested, and peace could be restored shortly.
Ragdoll Dance Party Celebration at my Tumblr! Thank you for 2000 kudos, guys, it’s amazing!

I’m open to headcanon/fic reqs, Questions? Things you’re curious about? (anything but the end, lol, I thought I’d have more time, and I can always do another one when we’re done)

Go here if you wanna play: Celebration post

Frigga watched Thor go, wanting him to call Mjolnir. You can wield her, son, you simply need faith.

But he would have to use whatever weapons came to hand, and perhaps that way learn that he was more than his hammer.

She turned away to find Jane watching her. "Come. If there is an uprising in the dungeon, we should be out of the way."

"The dungeon?" Jane repeated in rather skeptical disbelief. "An actual dungeon?"

Frigga gathered the word had altered in meaning on Midgard, and explained as they walked, "There is a prison area beneath the palace where prisoners are brought for their sentencing before the king. Only a few remain there. Right now there are some outland brigands housed there." she frowned. "Someone must have been careless, as the cells are normally quite secure."

A troop of Einharjar rushed past, barely saluting her as they went, and her frown deepened. That was more than was required for a single escapee.

Worse, as she and Jane rounded one of the main pillars of the Great Hall, she saw Odin himself, in full armor, surrounded by another squadron of Einharjar. He saw her as well, and angled to meet her in a hurry.

"Send a squadron to the weapons vault and defend it at all costs, and seal the dungeon! Go!" he ordered the Einharjar, and some trotted off to do his bidding, while most remained with him. "Frigga!" he greeted her. At her expression, he added, "It is a skirmish, nothing more."

She deliberately glanced at another squadron who had entered, captained by Sif. There were far too many soldiers gathering for a single escaped prisoner. "A skirmish," she repeated flatly. "I see. I shall take take Jane to the infirmary, and seal us in."

He nodded. "Good. I will come for you when it's safe."

Which meant it was not safe now. "You take care," she ordered him.

He smiled. "Despite all I have survived, my queen still worries for me."
"It is because I have worried for you that you have survived," she replied tartly.

He chuckled once and grabbed for her hand to kiss it hurriedly before striding off.

Frigga plucked one of the Einharjar's short swords from his belt, and after a second of staring at her in consternation, he bowed his head and hurried after his compatriots. Then, holding it comfortably in one hand, Frigga turned to Jane. "Do as I say with no questions," she instructed.

Jane nodded, looking properly concerned about the danger. "Yes, ma'am."

Together they hurried to the main infirmary entrance where six Einharjar were already waiting. "No one comes in," she ordered them, and they saluted as she and Jane passed within.

"Stand back," she told Jane, who retreated up the hall and Frigga turned to set the ward that would strengthen the lock on the pair of doors and give her warning if it was broken.

Eir met her in the middle of the hall. "All-Mother?"

"Some, perhaps all, of the prisoners have escaped from the dungeon. While the king and guard gather them up and return them to prison, I sealed the doors."

Eir frowned. "But if there are injured?"

"You may tend them in the east wing, but Loki and Jane must be kept safe."

Eir nodded sharply and hurried back the way she'd come. She would gather her assistants and then Frigga would ward the east access as well.

But first, she passed through the observation room, with Jane at her heels, and opened the door to Loki's room. He was sitting up in bed, with the lights on. "Mother? What is it?" He noticed Jane then and stiffened like a fearful rabbit, before he tugged awkwardly on his sleep shirt. "Jane Foster."

She lowered her eyes and muttered, "Sorry, didn't mean to intrude."

"The prisoners have escaped," Frigga told him. "I sealed the door, so we'll just wait here until your father takes care of it."

He looked toward the door before letting out a breath. "I should--"

"Wait," she cut in. "Dearest, I know you want to fight, but not yet."

"A bit difficult when I can't stand up," he said, tone dry but with the underlying pain. She leaned down to kiss his head.

"Change and sit in your chair," she said. "You'll feel less helpless if you're not in bed." She stayed nearby, just in case, as he carefully levered himself up to his feet.

"Should I go?" Jane asked hesitantly. "If you're going to change, I should definitely go out--"

With a deft twist of seidr, a green light rippled up his body, replacing the loose sleepwear with the clothes he'd worn earlier. To Frigga's amusement, he'd added a touch of illusion to smooth out his unruly hair.

Jane's mouth dropped open as she stared. "What-- is it real? How does that work?" Her awe changed to curiosity in an instant and she approached him. "I remember that happened to Thor
when he got his powers back, he got his armor, so I thought it was something to do with that, but -- you just-- " She reached out to touch his sleeve. "It is real."

He looked down at her, expression bemused. "Yes. It is real."

She looked up at him. "But how?"

"I see now what Thor meant about your inquisitiveness," he murmured. "Let me sit and we can discuss it."

"Oh, sure, right." She backed off to give him room to use the canes and cross to his chair. Frigga darted next door to bring in another chair.

"That seems painful," Jane said to him with sympathy as he inched across the floor, with no way to hide his awkward shuffle, though Frigga was sure he would have liked to. "Have you tried water therapy? Earth has some great medical techniques. I guess because we're so fragile, relatively, we have to figure out all these different ways to help people recover."

"Given what I've heard, I doubt Earth has any interest in helping me," he returned, "if I killed thousands, millions, of your kind." He turned his head to pin her with a flat stare, that dared her to return his hostility in kind. Though Frigga held her breath, she was surprised when Jane shook her head.

"It wasn't so many. There was a lot of damage, those big flying whale-things did the most, and the press feared thousands were dead, but it turned out later that anyone hit by the alien guns woke up. They were just stunned. The only deaths were, I guess, collateral damage in the buildings. A hundred or two. Which is too many, obviously, but you know, for an alien invasion, you could have done a lot worse."

"So... few?" Frigga was astonished. "Why -- why would the Chitauri have stunned mortals?"

Loki snorted as he lowered himself to his chair. "Don't ask me, I have no idea."

But Frigga wondered. Thanos had no regard for life-- his predations through the centuries made that clear enough. But Thanos had not been on Midgard, Loki had. Had it been Loki's choice, or had it been Thanos' to betray him? Had Loki been left in New York as its conqueror, how long would he have lasted once the mortals realized the aliens were not lethal?

No, not the mortals. They were irrelevant. How long would Loki have lasted on Midgard, once Odin had discovered his guards were toothless? Asgard would have taken him, even if Loki had won New York.

Thanos had planned it so the two Stones would be in Asgard. That was the only explanation. And now they had the aether, too.

She looked at Jane and felt cold.

Oh, my dear girl, that you have tangled yourself into this story is a tragedy.

A loud horn of alarm blasting through made her start. Loki sat straighter, listening. "That was the city alarm," Loki said. "The prisoners have escaped the palace."

"Or something else is happening." She opened the security status display with a sharp gesture, unfolding it in mid-air for both her and Loki to see.
"What is that?" Jane asked, devouring the sight at it with curious eyes. "Hologram?"

"We are under attack is what it is." His eyes met Frigga's then flicked away. "Do you think it's... him? Coming for the stones?"

Thanos? she looked at the image that the system was trying to identify. It should match with Thanos' known craft in the chronicle, but it was finding no match. Faster than thought, the archive searched through, and then flashed the answer.

Svartalfar.

"Dark Elves!" Loki blurted. "How can that be?"

"Stasis," she realized. "They bided their time for the return of the Convergence. And the Aether. " She looked at Jane. "You are in more danger than we thought."

The ground shook once, as if hit by something, and then much harder and she heard creaking of the ancient stones all around. As one, she and Loki held up a hand, seidr spun, to reinforce the ceiling if it threatened to collapse. But after a moment, the shuddering stopped, and settled. They waited in tense silence but it appeared to be finished.

"Jane Foster, I would not leave you unarmed," Loki told her and held out a cane. "Twist he top, like so, and -" the blade sprang out of the tip, "use it on any who would threaten you."

"But you should--"

"I'm not rising from this chair," he answered. "I would only be in the way. Take it."

She nodded and crossed to him to take hold of the cane at the middle. It immediately crashed to the ground the second Loki released it to her. "Good lord, what is it made of? It weighs a ton. I can't carry it."

He grimaced with the failure of his plan and cast his eyes to the side to ponder an option. "Dagger? This is the smallest I have to call." One of his slim throwing knives appeared in his palm and he offered it to Jane.

She was a little startled, but apparently more used to magic now because she hesitated only an instant before she seized the hilt. She tested its weight, while Loki kept his hand out to catch it, but she raised it easily. It looked like a short sword in her small hand, and Frigga almost smiled to see it.

"And of course, you can use the Aether," he reminded her. "If you are truly in peril, it will defend itself."

He was speaking as if he knew something was coming, and it made Frigga uneasy. "I need to go check the wards. You two stay here."

"Not going anywhere," Loki called after her, in dry jest, but Frigga didn't smile, too caught in her anxiety..

The eastern doors were secure, but in the western hall, she could hear the distant sounds of fighting when she was in the hall, coming from the solar and its open balcony. Worse, as she approached the doors, she heard swords clashing on the other side, and once something hit the door.

She swung the sword into ready position and waited, but the doors held even as something
slammed into them again hard enough to make them rattle. She retreated slowly backward, keeping her eyes on the doors. The Einharjar had the fight in hand, the doors would hold--

Something else hit the doors, making them thrum and vibrate against their frame, and then ... as if darkness itself ate them away, the central point of the doors melted away.

Unfamiliar aliens, white haired and armored in black wearing masks, pushed open the doors. The Einharjar defenders were on the floor.

Another came through, armored but unmasked - he seemed almost Aesir except for the long white hair and alfar ears. His eyes met hers from down the hall, and she could sense his hate from here. He was coming for revenge.

*Oh Odin, what have you done?*

For the Dark Elves to push so hard to get in, meant they knew the royal family was here, or they could sense the Aether -- either way, she needed time.

She cast a double of herself going into the solar, another fleeing down the hall away, and ran into the observation room, gesturing all the doors closed behind.

Heart pounding, she locked the door knowing it would stop him only moments if he had another of those darkness weapons. Loki and Jane were visible on the monitors and she destroyed all of the screens in a flash of power, unwilling to give her enemy a view of their placement inside, and then hurried into Loki's room, locking that door behind her as well.

"Dark Elves. They're coming," she announced.

"Get behind me, Jane," Loki advised her. Holding her dagger in her fist, Jane moved behind his chair.

Her body rippled with green light and vanished. "What- what just happened?" her disembodied voice asked in confusion.

"Don't touch anything or you'll be visible again."

Though she wished he'd turn himself invisible, too, Frigga nodded in approval, and turned to face the door. Odin and Thor would come; she needed to give them time.

A crash outside announced that the outer door had been breached, and she heard a call in an unknown language. The All-speak spell took a moment to work, as the elves called to each other, searching for her.

"There is another door, my lord."

"What we seek lies within. Open it."

The door boomed as something fired into it, and a second shot obliterated it.

The soldiers looked within. "Here!"

They held weapons on her, but she just waited. They were nothing, only the leader mattered. And indeed, he sent his troops away as he sauntered in, confident he had her trapped. His eyes flicked between her - armed, armored, dangerous - and Loki, sitting down in a chair in an obvious medical facility, sickly looking with his pallor and short hair, and his hands folded on the single cane across
"Who are you?" she demanded, to draw his attention back to her.

"I am Malekith" he answered, and she wasn't all that surprised. "And I will take back what is mine."

He headed straight for Loki, believing he had it, until she attacked, swinging her sword to take off his head. He evaded smoothly, and drew his own blade.

He was agile and strong, but her skill was the greater - perhaps he had been in stasis too long -- and she maneuvered to her right, to get Malekith in position. The instant he was close enough, Loki struck, whipping his cane out and activating the blade.

But Malekith's armor took the blow, the blade sliding along his flank instead of penetrating. Luckily, that moment of distraction was all she needed: she bound his sword with her own and sent his flying into the wall out of his hand.

"Mother!" Loki cried in alarm.

She abandoned Malekith and whirled aside, just in time to deflect another blade with her own.

Lifting her eyes, she saw... not a Dark Elf. A creature. Big, with natural armored flesh, horns, and when he struck again, his strength was immense, bringing his heavy weapon against her much smaller one so the shock ran up her arms. She looked into his eyes and they were... the same. He was a Dark Elf, but altered.

She knew the old stories, of the weapon that Malekith had made of the Aether, to transform his people into near demons. It was a transformation that would kill the victim in the end, but until then, the Kursed was a formidable foe.

Worse, Malekith was picking up his own sword, she saw, and she had to give ground to Loki's left to keep both of the enemy in view. He had somehow let the cane fall to the floor, so he was unarmed. She could not fight both and keep Loki safe.

Odin, where are you?

Malekith saw she was overmatched as well. "Give me what he possesses, and I will let you live, witch."

Loki answered for her. "You want what I possess? Do you?" His hands made a twisting gesture and the Casket of Ancient Winters appeared on his lap.

Malekith's eyes widened, recognizing it, and he took a step back, his sword held up defensively.

But it was too late-- the power of ten thousand Jotunheim winters swirled inside the casket and Loki launched it at the attackers.

Spears of ice, thick as her wrist, impaled them both, striking the walls behind them. Malekith's hands reached for the spear, dropping his sword, and his face held a terrible shock. He staggered and keeled over, the ice shattering all over the floor.

Relieved, Frigga let out a breath and turned to Loki. He was... blue. She hadn't seen his Jotunn form in so long she'd forgotten, and for a moment, she saw Laufey's skin, Laufey's cheekbones, and Laufey's scarlet eyes. It was unsettling, but she blinked, and he was her son, winter-blue skin and
red eyes included.

"You didn't mention your plan--" she started, but his eyes flicked behind her and his mouth dropped open in horror. The Casket stirred again, readying it to strike again.

She turned, to see the Kursed had not fallen. Despite the ice through his chest, he was still on his feet, still armed, and his sword was coming straight at her.

"MOTHER!" she heard a yell.

The room lit up with a blinding light, but she could see the shadow of the Kursed within it and the glowing shape of Thor behind him. The room smelled of ozone and shook with a boom of thunder.

A mere hand-span from her skin, the creature's weapon fell from nerveless fingers, and she had to step aside as his body collapsed, dead before he hit the ground.
After that last Big Chapter, it's getting taken down a notch as we delve into the aftermath.

(and I should note that - I know - Endgame made removing the Aether actually WAY easier than this, but let's pretend it's actually still difficult, k? sigh. canon *kicks pebble*)

Frigga blinked away the spots from her vision, as Thor's arms went around her tightly. "Are you alright? Did he harm you?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm fine, Thor." She pulled back to look him in the face and realized she hadn't noticed Mjolnir. Looking around she didn't see the hammer. "Mjolnir?"

He shook his head. "I didn't call for her, I just saw you and I had to stop him. I'm not sure how...." He looked around, noticing the ice and the other body. "What happened?"

She patted his cheek. "I always knew you could do it, Thor. The power is in you, not the hammer." That reminded her of her other son, who'd also wielded his heritage. Loki was still holding tight to the Casket with both hands, and when he realized she was looking at him, the blue vanished and his face returned to its usual appearance. He lowered his eyes and swallowed hard, sitting tensely, as if he feared her disdain.

She rushed the two steps to stand before him, clasping his face between her hands. "My son. No," she urged him, shaking her head, "never. Never be worried that I will reject you for your blood. Or your skin, whatever color it may be. You saved us, my darling." She pulled his head to her chest and kissed the top of his head. "You see, you have power, even in this chair. You need not fear the future."

A hasty thumping and a blast from Gungnir outside, were only a few seconds' warning before Odin burst in. "Frigg--" he started and cut himself off, seeing the bodies on the floor, ice shards all over, and Frigga still clasping Loki to her. "Is he hurt?"

She smoothed Loki's hair one last time before she withdrew. "Nay, my lord, we are all well."

"Well." He put the butt of Gungnir to the floor and said a bit dryly, "I see I was not needed, after all. But where is Jane Foster and the Aether?"

"Oh! Here!" Jane's voice said behind Loki's chair. She touched his shoulder to break the illusion, so she re-appeared, still clutching Loki's dagger in her other fist. "Oh, right. That was - that was--" She inhaled a ragged breath. "I thought I was gonna die," she confessed. "I thought we were all gonna die. But we're-- you," she looked at where her hand was still on Loki's shoulder, "you stabbed them. With ice. And you used a sword, and you shot him with lightning?"

"And I made you invisible," Loki reminded her with a self-satisfied smirk and little sympathy for Jane's understandable confusion. He plucked the dagger from her hand. "You're welcome."
"Loki!" Thor exclaimed but then ignored him to seize Jane’s shoulders and give her a close look. "You are all right?"

"I'm fine, I just need... a minute. Maybe two?"

"Thor, take her to the solar for some air. The attack has been defeated but I will need you shortly for clean-up."

"Yes, Father." Thor escorted Jane out, leaving Frigga, Loki, and Odin with two dead Dark Elves at their feet.

Odin looked down at the smaller, un-Kursed one. "Malekith," he said, and shook his head once. "No one saw him die, but it still seems... difficult to believe anyone survived. But now I know he pulled his command ship out before we arrived, abandoning his people."

"Withdrawing to fight another day," Loki murmured. With a twist of his hands, he put the Casket away, between dimensions again. He was far better armed than he looked. "I would have done the same."

"But their vengeance failed. The Aether is..." Odin hesitated and glanced at Malekith's body again and released a soft sigh, "... still trapped within the mortal."

Loki raised a hand to rub his eyes. "I shouldn't have killed him, should I? He's the only one who knew how to remove the Aether from her."

"He would have killed us both," Frigga reassured him. "You had no choice. We will find another way."

"I have an idea," Odin said, and brushed his beard, looking rueful. "You will not like it, so let me think of another before I broach it. I must go, but I will send staff to remove the bodies."

He turned and went. Frigga met Loki's eyes.

"What does he mean?" he asked, puzzled. "To use the tesseract after all? Or perhaps I could use the Casket?"

"No," she declared firmly. "Absolutely not. If that's his idea, not only do I not like it, I will oppose it."

"I could do it." There was a note of defensiveness in his voice, as if he thought she was insulting him.

She sat on the footstool to be more eye-level with him. "The Aether is one of the Infinity Gems. And while you are strong and the Casket has power to draw on, it's not enough. The effort would kill you. It might kill your father, too, and I will not concede that risk is worth it, not when his death would unleash much worse."

He thought of that, a pout on his lips, and flicked his eyes at Malekith. "He wasn't that powerful."

"He was the Dark Elf king. He handled the Aether for thousands of years, so of course he had affinity for it. An affinity you do not have, which you cannot overcome without a great deal more power."

"But if I use the tesseract?"
She frowned, cocking her head to regard him. "Can you tell me why you are so determined? Jane is no one to you."

He shrugged, but wouldn't meet her eyes. "Thor likes her. She seems ... clever. Her death would be a waste."

All three were true, and also irrelevant. "And?"

He rubbed at his knee. "And. If only a tiny bit can do that - " he jerked his head toward the Kursed, "and can erase my sort-of-sister from history, it can heal me." He lifted his head again to meet her eyes. "I'm willing to take the risk."

Her heart clutched in her chest that he would do this reckless thing and she shook her head in denial. "No. I am not. Loki, we have not even begun to look for ways to help you. This... this desperation is dangerous and unnecessary. You will be better, but not by risking your life to try this."

He did not seem very persuaded by her plea, face settling into stubborn lines she knew well. He was no blood of Odin, yet sometimes she wondered at the Norns playing some cosmic jest at her expense, just from how alike they were.

If she could not have agreement, perhaps she could bargain for patience. "At least wait to hear your father's idea. Perhaps it's not terrible."

He snorted. "You know you're going to hate it, if he's already warning you."

That made her chuckle and shake her head at him. "Like father, like son."

The sound of footsteps intruded, and she turned to see staff there ready to move the bodies. They saluted both Frigga and prince, but she didn't miss the curious glance at Loki's walking canes.

Nor did Loki. After they dragged the Kursed out of the room through the puddles of melted ice, Loki sighed. "I can't sleep here. I need to return to my rooms, I think. It's time."

The truth was known and would spread, so there was no point in hiding any longer, was what he meant. It saddened her to see the resignation in his face, but he was right: it was time.

"You killed Malekith of the Svartalfar from your chair, and saved my life. We will tell the story so they know you are no helpless invalid, but a sorcerer of power. But yes, you should go back to your own rooms." She folded her hand around his to squeeze it in support. "We'll find a way to get you there." And she teased, smiling, "Without having Thor carry you."

tbc...
There were dead Dark Elves and fallen Einharjar in the hall, and Thor grimaced, wishing they'd been moved before Jane had to see them. He'd killed two of the Dark Elves himself with his bare hands, fury and terror filling him that he would be too late.

He'd been in the dungeons when the attack had come, and at first had thought it was more marauders. Not until he'd interrogated a wounded elf, had he even known what was happening. But that hate-filled whisper, "Malekith comes to avenge us. Take all Odin loves and make him watch it all burn."

Thor had known where Malekith would go. He would find Frigga and Loki, and kill them both. So he had run, his fear growing with every fallen Einharjar that Malekith would reach them first.

Which he had. Seeing the Kursed one threatening his mother had snapped something inside, all his fear transmuting to fire in his veins. He hadn't known what he was doing, or how he was doing it, all he'd known was that he had to do something.

The power had exploded out of him, lightning called not with Mjolnir from the sky, but pulled from within. His skin still tingled with the remnants, while inside he was simply relieved that it was over. His mother, Loki, and Jane were all safe, and Loki had shown he was no helpless invalid after all, taking up his other legacy of ice.

Jane went out to the balcony of the solar. "Oh, no," she whispered. Thor joined her and for the first time saw the broad swathe of damage to the city. There was smoke rising in the southern quarter, and fallen towers. In the water, Malekith's command ship still loomed, ringed by Asgard's defense fighters, outside the restored shield.

"That's a Dark Elf spaceship?" Jane asked. "Are they still in there?"

Thor shook his head. "I don't know if we've boarded yet to know who remains. I would think few or they would have fled already."

"So strange," she murmured. "Here I am on another world, looking at a real alien spaceship, and all I can think of is how sad it is. They waited a thousand years and threw their lives away on revenge. Why would anyone do that? Go somewhere else, build a new life-- It's just such a waste. I mean look at that ship-" she freed a hand from her mantle and pointed at it. "It's amazing. It looks like it could go anywhere. And they came here to die."

Thor watched the ship for a time. "He had nothing else, I suppose. The rest of his people were gone. Revenge was all he had."

"Because of Asgard."

He instinctively wanted to argue to defend Asgard, and his father, but the words wouldn't come out. They weren't true, and he knew it. "Yes. Because of Asgard. Because my father and a sister I knew nothing about slaughtered them."

Jane turned to look at him. But instead of asking the obvious question, she shook her head once. "You have a lot to deal with suddenly, don't you?"

"I thought I would be helping you, bringing you here, but so far, I have only revealed terrible family secrets and endangered you further."
She put her hand on his forearm. "Thor, it's not your fault, and your mother and brother would never have let anything happen to me."

"But you were frightened."

"Of course I was, but I'm fine." She saw mulish resistance and offered, "Get this Aether out of me and we'll call it even, okay?"

He knew she was jesting, but he had to take it seriously. "I would, if I could."

"I know. I wasn't really thinking it was going to be you personally," she added, smiling, but he still felt the sting. In this, he was weak. He could not help her. Even with the lightning he'd been able to bring forth, he had no skills or power to help Jane.

A sharp call from the door roused him from his thoughts. "Thor!" He turned to see Odin. "You have duties."

"I have to go," he told Jane. Bravely she nodded her understanding, and sent him on his way.

He hurried to join Odin in the hall, as they headed for the doors melted away by the Dark Elves.

None of the sights were new until they arrived at the Throne Hall, which Thor had not needed to pass through in his rush to the infirmary.

His footsteps came to a halt, on seeing the destruction. Columns and statues had fallen, part of the ceiling had collapsed, there was rubble and bodies - both Aesir and Alfar - on the floor, and the throne itself was splintered and half-missing. Worse of all was the enemy ship taking up the far end of the hall, like a giant toad of darkness swallowing all the light.

"This is worse than I thought," he murmured

"We were lucky," Odin said, and Thor turned to him in shock. "Lucky" was not the word that came first to mind. But Odin didn't retract. "We nearly lost your mother, and your brother, and the Aether. We were lucky," he repeated.

"The skill of our warriors--" Thor started to protest.

"They were unprepared. Weak," Odin snarled. "We have grown complacent in our peace."

Thor shivered at the anger in his voice, a reminder of the warlord Odin of old, but he was unsure what to say. There were too many Aesir dead; perhaps Asgard and its king had grown complacent and soft.

Odin thumped Gungnir against the floor. "This is unacceptable."

"You could not have expected Dark Elves, Father," Thor tried to reassure him.

But Odin's single eye glowered at him. "Of course I could. And certainly I expected trouble at the Convergence, but I did not prepare. The shield was not raised, the air defenses too weak."

Thor opened his mouth but Odin was in no mood to hear it. "Had this been Thanos, we might all be dead. No," he said, turning to survey the damage, with a deep inhalation of breath. "This is my doing. What more did I not see?" he added softly, more of himself, than of Thor. "I saw nothing of Loki, I know that now. I did not see you, only what I wished to see, a reflection of myself. And I saw our power, resting on old glories and stories I told myself. All that while I thought I saw..."
everything, and I saw nothing."

"Father?" Thor asked, puzzled by this soft-voiced despair. "It is not so bad? Did we not have the victory?"

But Odin ignored him to walk slowly toward the ship, gathering up warriors and advisors who came to report and hear commands, while Thor trailed behind him.

The room had been cleaned up but Loki was still sitting in the same chair, while Frigga had to leave to be seen in the aftermath. There were too many dead and preparations to make, and Loki knew he had no part in that right now. So he stayed out of the way and opened a poetry book. He'd found poetry the easiest thing for him to read, since phrases tended to be short and needed thought anyway.

A tentative knock on the door frame made him look up and he saw Jane Foster. She tugged her mantle more tightly around her shoulders as if she were cold. "Thor had to go help your dad, so I was wondering if you could use some company?"

He shut off the book display and gestured to the empty chair. "If you like. I believe you expressed an interest in learning about conjuring?" He held out a palm and called his dagger to it.

She watched, curious. "How? Thor said magic and science are the same, and of course we all know the 'sufficiently advanced technology looks like magic' quote, but .... How?" she faltered back to the basic question, looking at him like a child wanting to know everything.

And Loki, who was not at all used to anyone looking to learn anything from him, enjoyed her eagerness. "I would say he is not wrong, but that is too simple an answer. There is knowledge of the universe and its workings beyond what you Midgardians know, and it would look like 'magic' to you." He considered her identification of the Soul Forge and amended, "Not all of it, not to you, and you could learn the rest. So, that, I would call 'science'. But this?" He lifted the knife up. "This is magic. Magic is a talent one must have."

Then he huffed a laugh. "And I do not speak of the charlatans on your world who claim to practice magic. There are a few who use the true magic, but most use simple tricks of sleight-of-hand." He waved his hands together, switching the knife between them, so the knife would seem to disappear before he showed it to her, and she realized she'd been distracted.

She smiled, delighted, and then her brow lowered into a frown. "Wait, there's 'true magic' on Earth? Really?"

"Mortal sorcerers practice a technical form. Like so." He called one of the spells, a ring of fire forming between them, set with the glyphs. "It is very ancient and originated elsewhere, but each spell of these can be memorized. The system is convenient for short-lived mortals who do not have the longevity to learn to call power without the crutch of pre-set spells. This one, for example, will make small objects animate." He turned the circle to activate it and pushed it at the corner table, careful to direct it away from Jane lest the Aether take offense.

She gasped as the table shook itself and lifted each leg with delicate grace. "That's..." she couldn't take her eyes off the table, as he gestured to have it walk in a little circle, "...
amazing..."

Her eyes were wide and she was smiling hugely in delight and awe, as if she was seeing something that had changed her conception of the whole universe. Perhaps she had. She had believed the universe had no magic in it, and now he was showing her it did. He settled back in his chair, feeling a warmth in his chest that finally someone was appreciating what he could do. And true, she was an easily impressed mortal, so perhaps he shouldn't be that pleased by it, but it was better than the shrugging indifference or disdain of most Asgardians.

It only took her a moment to start thinking about what she was seeing. "The spell creates joints where there weren't any before," she observed, "so it's both transformation and movement. Will it do that forever? Or are you its power source?"

He nodded, impressed. "Yes, ultimately I am the source. Though the spell has a limiter already in it, so it continues only so long as I wish."

She pursed her lips. "The spell is like a computer program, it sounds like, but utilizing-- what, the source code of the universe?"

He shrugged. "Basically. Yes."

"The ability to use it is genetic, though. Not everyone can do it. So is that why you can ...change your skin color? I didn't get a good look - but I heard what your mother said. Is it just sorcerers or....?"

He stilled, and though he tried to keep his face blank, she saw something and rushed ahead, "Oh God, I said something I wasn't supposed to, didn't I? I'm sorry. I should've known better than to talk about things I don't understand, I'm terrible about personal stuff. That's why I stick to science, mostly. I'll just shut up now." She drew a finger across her lips, closing them.

There was something in her apology that he didn't like. As if she was afraid of him, and he didn't want that.

"It's ... not easy to talk about," he admitted. "I only learned of it recently. But it's not sorcerers, it's ... me. I'm only half-Asgardian. My," he hesitated, not sure of what to call Laufey, "blood father was not Aesir. Not Odin. He was," everything tensed up inside him, trying to stop the words from coming out, and it took some effort to push out the truth, "a Frost Giant." Yet, once he'd said it aloud, the anxiety settled, especially when Jane exhibited only curiosity. She didn't know what the Frost Giants were, so the truth didn't matter to her. He pulled the Casket out again and rested a hand on it, "This is an artifact from their Realm."

"Oh," she murmured and didn't know what else to say, not that he could blame her for that. He didn't know if she even understood what he was saying. He could see the various questions pass through her face, and once she started, "Then how-- It's none of my business. Nevermind."

He cleared his throat. "To tie this to what we were speaking of, I was created in an effort to cross the blood of the two Realms with greater power potential than each alone."

She nodded. "Hybrid vigor."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Cross-breeding two relatively homogeneous genetic strains increases their genetic diversity, right? Weeds out harmful recessives."
He sat back, wondering if he should be offended that she was likening him to a plant. The offspring of Aesir and Jotnar was a peculiar type of cosmic cabbage?

She went on, giving a shrug, "Although if you're actually different species, I don't know how it worked in the first place. But here you are, so it obviously does. So you can't be that far apart genetically."

He very nearly snapped something about how Frost Giants were beasts and she wouldn't say something so incredibly ignorant and stupid, if she knew the truth about them. But he restrained his surge of temper and warned, voice tense, "Do not speak of this to anyone. The truth remains hidden here on Asgard for a reason."

She looked at him, and then a furrow knit her brows and it seemed she finally put some pieces together as her lips drew together in a shocked 'o'. "I... oh my god. Yes, of course, I won't tell anyone. This all seems very complicated and hard, and I'm sorry my presence is making things worse for you and your family."

He had to nod agreement with 'complicated and hard'. So many lies, so many truths now revealed. The urgency of the attack had displaced his anger and confusion, but now what was he to do? What was he supposed to do with the knowledge that he had grown up with one image of his family and the truth was something else entirely?

But all that was aside the point. "It's not your fault," he told her. "I apologize for our family drama spilling onto you."

Perhaps seeking distraction from a discussion that became too personal, she changed the subject. "Before the attack, Thor was going to get me one of those floaty balls to dismantle. I don't suppose you have one stashed away," she waved her hands in charming imitation of his conjuring, "that you could show me?"

"A hoverball? No, I haven't had one of those for years." When her face fell in disappointment, he smiled. "But I can get one. There are a few advantages to being a prince of the Realm, you know."

"Oh. Of course," she agreed with an arch look and smile.

It was simple enough to request a hoverball, a table, and tools for Jane to take the hoverball apart. The staff looked a little askance, but Loki had asked for far more esoteric things in the past, so they didn't mind. Eir seemed less enthusiastic, but when he proposed putting it in the solar, she agreed with a sigh and then helped him across to the other room.

The chair was welcome and he found Jane already busy taking the hoverball apart.

"This is so great," she said, not looking away from her toy. "Is it magical?"

"No, it is not," he confirmed.

"So then, how does it work? Is it a form of anti-gravity? I know Stark has those repulsors, but those are just very powerful thrusters... I think. He never published how they work, so maybe it's the same principle..." Her voice trailed off, as she worked on a particularly stubborn fastener. He was about to offer to pry it off for her with his greater strength, but with a rather terrifying growl and bared teeth, she strained at it until the panel flew off.

Innards now exposed to her delighted eyes, she started to put a probe into it but stopped and turned to him. "Is it gonna explode?"
"Only a little," he jested dryly, but when she took him seriously, he shook his head. "No, you can poke at it as much as you like. We wouldn't let the children play with them if they were explosive."

"Given you're all superhumanly durable that isn't filling me with a ton of confidence," she muttered.

"I would be standing beside you, not sitting here, if that were true," he pointed out. "Superhumanly durable is not the same as impossible to harm."

Probe raised in her hand forgotten, she frowned at him. "But then there would be more ways to help the injured, like a wheelchair," she pointed out. "Those don't even exist, so logically Asgardians don't get hurt."

"We get hurt. We just heal better."

She pointed the probe at him. "Ah, see! So you are superhumanly durable. So what happens if someone gets his leg torn off by a, what did Thor call them, bilgesnakes?"

"Bilgesnipe," Loki corrected. "And if someone's leg was lost to a bilgesnipe that person deserved it." She folded her arms and glowered at him that it wasn't funny, even though he thought it worth a laugh. He rolled his eyes at her lack of humor and answered, "If someone were so careless as lose a leg to a chicken, we have artificial means to replace the limb."

She hummed in thought, and found a counter-example. "But the king has an eyepatch."

"I was told he kept it to remind himself of the price he paid for wisdom, though...." he reconsidered that story. Knowing the truth now about himself and Frost Giants, he wondered if Odin had kept the patch to remind himself to always be wary of the Frost Giant bastard in his house. That was likely too bitter, but that didn't make it untrue. "Perhaps it was more a war trophy. In any case, he choose not to have it replaced. But there has not, to my knowledge, ever been an Aesir with my particular problem, since it is not of the limb," he patted his knee, "but rather with this." He tapped the side of his head, glad Thor wasn't around to make some jest about Loki's brain always being a particular problem.

She made a face. "So no wheelchairs in however many thousands of years? That's... ridiculous, honestly. Can't you get one from Earth? Or-" she turned her eyes to the probe in her hand, to his legs, and then the glowing center of the hoverball. "Can we get twelve of these and lift up a chair? So you can hover wherever you want?"

"I don't think--" he started, about to dismiss the idea as unworkable and too much trouble.

But Jane was warming to her idea and was not about to be dismissed. "Tony Stark can fly with four repulsors," she held out both palms to him in a peculiar gesture. He presumed she was talking about some Midgardian, probably someone he ought to remember. "Your little flying boats have control mechanisms. I can make you a flying chair. But I need help."

"Jane, that is kind, but unnecessary--"

"No." And now she looked quite fierce for such a small person. "You saved my life. You gave me a knife to defend myself and nobody's ever thought I could defend myself before. Let me help you."

"I--" he wanted to protest again, but the words died on his tongue. What was the point? He didn't want a moving chair; he didn't want to surrender to that inevitability, but his other options were being carried, which was humiliating, or walking, and merely crossing the hall still felt like his
bones were grinding together. If Jane wanted to try to give him a means for greater autonomy, why was he trying to stop her? "Very well. If it means so much to you."

"Good. I need someone who understands the controls on those flying boats."

"I can help," he offered.

"No. You'll just want to use magic, and the whole point of this is to do it with science."

He lifted both hands in surrender and called for someone to come in to fetch the requested help for Jane.

A little while later, a tech was escorted into the room. He looked a bit wide-eyed to be inside the palace and saluted Loki awkwardly with his equipment case clutched to his chest.

Loki waved him toward Jane's work table. "Assist her with her project."

The technician was first confused about what she wanted to do, but eventually it seemed the idea seized him, too, and shortly their low voices in conversation and the soft hum of the equipment stopped being interesting to Loki. Closing his eyes, intending only to rest a moment, he didn't realize he fell asleep until a sudden slapping sound startled him awake.

"I've got it!" Jane exclaimed and turned toward him in excitement. "Loki, I-- oh, sorry."

He waved a hand, embarrassed he'd nodded off. "You have a chair that works?" he asked. They had something, he could see that. They'd taken one of the basic straight chairs and modified it, attaching a thick base, full of equipment. The technician was affixing a metallic cartridge to the arm of the chair, presumably the control system.

It was actually happening. And he realized he was eager for it to work. Not only could he use it to get to his own room, but he wouldn't need anyone to watch over him when he was trying to walk. Not that he was going to take it to the great hall to be stared at there, of course, but at least in the family wing, he could move around on his own.

She answered, "Well, no, not yet, but we're close. But I figured out what the ball is doing. It's not reacting against gravity. I was right; Asgard has some kind of artificial gravity field, and I'd love to look at whatever is generating it, but anyway, what the ball is doing is emitting a field that neutralizes the artificial gravity field in Asgard."

"And so?" he asked.

"It floats because there is very little natural gravity to attract it, and small manipulations of the field are enough to move it. Oh, also, your chair and these hoverballs won't work on Earth, because our gravity is a function of planetary mass, not artificially generated."

"I'll be sure not to go there, then. I'm sure everyone will be happier about it."

"Not me," she objected, sounding hurt that he would say that. "You have to come visit. Or I'll come here."

She wanted him to visit? That seemed ridiculous, and that was before considering he'd attacked Midgard and he could only walk with canes, though that was bad enough.

But then she choked out a little laugh. "Oh right, the Aether. I may not get to go back to Earth. I forgot in all the sciencing."
"You will, Jane. I promise you will survive this," he said, and he meant it. He'd wanted to help her before, mostly for his own healing, but now - even if it didn't work out for him, he still wanted to free her from it.

She turned thoughtful brown eyes on him. "I believe you."

"Come here." He beckoned her closer and held out a hand, palm up. "Put your hand there. I want to try. Perhaps it is not so difficult as they claim."

"Are you sure?" she asked, but despite her uncertainty, she laid her small hand across his.

"It'll be fine," he promised and, very cautiously, brushed her skin with the tiniest skein of seidr to see what would happen.

Her arm turned red, as if her blood started glowing, and he could feel the power stir like a hungry dragon rising up to attack. He disengaged in a hurry, dropping his hand. Leaning back, he blew out a breath. "Well. Damn."

She snorted a laugh. "That about sums it up."

It was all true. Power would meet power in hostile attack, unless he was already known to it, as Malekith had been, or his power was great enough to smother its reaction. The tesseract would be enough, but if the stones fought each other, that would do more harm that good.

What was Odin's idea? He didn't care much for mortals, so perhaps his idea was simply to let her die, and he knew no one else would agree with him.

Or... What did Odin carry? Gungnir. Was that it? If he was too weak to wield it himself to do this, he could let Loki use it. It would be dangerous, and Frigga would not agree to it, but was Gungnir powerful enough? Perhaps if it accessed the potential in Loki’s bloodline, it would be.

Loki was going to ask him if that was his plan, next time Odin came to visit.

"Just so you know, when I get it out of you -- and I will -- I intend to use it to heal myself, so all your hard work will probably be used only a short time." He gestured to the chair under construction and the technician pretending he had been working on it all along and not watching.

But she smiled, a softness in her eyes, and she said, "And if you can't, then you'll need it. So I need to finish it, don't I?"

"I suppose that's true."

She folded her arms and looked resolute, but there was a smile hovering on her lips as she declared, "Then I'm gonna science the shit out of this chair."

He didn't understand why she was snickering to herself as she went back to her project, but he was smiling anyway.
The losses to Asgard were worse than anything she had seen since becoming queen. To see so many of their own fallen, here, in the heart of the Realm, was heartbreaking.

As she went from fallen warrior to fallen warrior, her aides followed her to keep records. She could identify many for their long service within the palace, but some she had to ask the guards or others to identify the fallen. Then, record made, she had the bodies removed to lie in honor in the plaza. She also had the Dark Elves removed - guards sharply warned to handle them respectfully as well - to a side hall while the king decided what to do with them.

That duty completed, she went to attend to those who mourned their personal losses. She made sure, where she could, to mention that Loki had killed the Dark Elf leader, Malekith, even while still injured himself. She didn't mention Thor, and when he joined her to offer his condolences as well, she didn't change the story. It was clear enough by his armor that he had fought, too, but it was time to let Loki's name stand alone for a heroic deed.

Thor followed her lead without objection. Later once the group of mourners had dispersed to their own families, she waited with Thor to see if any last citizens would come forward. He had done well- offering his condolences with an awkward sincerity, but seemed to offer solace. She was pleased to see Thor behaving with such solemn maturity, putting aside his youthful brashness at this somber occasion.

Finally they were alone, as the night slipped across the courtyard, chased belatedly by the soft glow of path lights and the glimmer of the palace towers.

Pitching her voice softly, she asked, "Did you mind that I did not mention your triumph over the Kursed?"

He looked as if he minded for a moment, but reconsidered and gave a shrug. "I saw the spear of ice Loki put through him. He was already dead. I only made sure he didn't hurt you as he fell."

"It was not so 'only' to me." She kissed his cheek and patted his shoulder, before she let out a soft sigh. "Your brother needs all the encouragement he can get right now, or I fear he will do something reckless."

"Loki?" Thor said with theatrical shock. "Reckless? Surely not."

"You have little room to mock, my son," she reminded him, but smiled, before all too quickly the amusement faded. "He seeks the aether to heal himself, and will not wait for better options."

"But if he has a way--"

"He does not," she snapped, out of patience with her whole family's foolishness. "You still do not understand how powerful it is. It is an Infinity Stone, not a trinket, and I will not allow Loki or your father to risk themselves, toying with it." She was shaking, rage coursing through her body like a fire.

Thor's shock pulled her back to herself, and she inhaled a deeper breath, seeking her calm. "We will find another way. We must."

His eyes fell on her, looking more deeply than she would have expected. "Loki will be alright, Mother. We will keep him from anything too foolish, but think how far he has come already."
She thought of Loki's broken form on the gurney when he had first arrived home. If Malekith and the Kursed had come only a few days earlier, before he had been as recovered, he and she would probably both be dead. "I know." She gave a wan smile. "I keep thinking of what might-have happened instead. Kursed would not have stopped with me."

"I was there, and Father was not far behind me. We would not have let it come to that." Thor told her staunchly.

Someday he would learn that saying did not make something so, but today, she let it go. It had been a trying day for them all, and it was time to seek her own solace with the rest of her family.

"Let us go find what trouble your brother and Jane Foster have got up to in our absence," she jested lightly, and took Thor's arm for the walk home.

They found, not trouble, but a miracle. There was a chair, wobbling in the air a few handspans above a table, while Jane had her body contorted into an odd position to look beneath it, with her hand beneath the chair. "Almost. Almost got it," she was muttering.

Jane had built a floating chair for Loki. Inside the room far enough to glimpse his face, he was watching Jane and the technician with avid interest, both hands gripping the handles of his canes as if he were barely holding himself back from going up to them. He glanced at her and Thor, noting their interest. "Ah, you are just in time! See what Jane and Marten have made! It is a wonder."

"With hoverballs," Thor said, his tone bemused, as if he should've known that was what she would use. Frigga was impressed, because she doubted anyone had considered using the toys for anything practical.

Jane swung her head around to look at him, grinning. "This uses twelve of their central cores."

"Lady Jane, your hand--" the technician warned.

She pulled it free when the chair power seemed to dim and the chair started sinking. "Got it. I'm not a lady, Marten."

Marten eyed Loki warily, as if he'd already heard a correction on being respectful, and said nothing.

But Jane did not notice, straightening and rolling her head on her neck, making an alarming sound. "Okay, let's bring it down to the floor and fire it up. I think it's ready now."

Everyone was anxious as the power went out, the platform underneath the chair now resting on the table's surface. Jane moved forward as if she was going to help Marten lift it, but Thor shouldered her aside. "I have it, Jane."

Jane pushed the control on one arm rest and immediately there was a soft hum and the chair rose up a handspan. She sat in it herself, smiling when it didn't sink nearer to the ground, and then got out to use the controls from beside it, to test its movements. It went forward and back, side to side, with a gliding smoothness, and then she guided it closer to Loki. "I think we fixed it. All right, give it a go."

He stood up with care, Frigga moving reflexively nearer to steady him as he grew a little careless in his eagerness to get to the chair. Then putting both canes across his lap, he reached for the controls.
"It's not going to go fast or high," Jane started apologetically, then let out a startled laugh as the chair abruptly rose above them.

"High enough," he called down to them. "I think the ceiling needs to be repainted. Up close it looks quite shabby."

Frigga shook her head, smiling. "Thank you, Jane," she told her. "This is a marvelous gift."

She shrugged. "It was fun. And I'm glad to help."

Loki dropped down again, keeping the chair high enough to be at her eye-level. "Ah yes, this is better. This is excellent. My thanks seem paltry," he held out a hand toward Jane. "Would you like a ride on your contraption, Jane? You should experience what you have made."

"Um."

"I would like to know the chair's capacity," Loki wheedled, and of course Jane wanted to know that, too, so Frigga took the canes while Jane perched on his lap. "Relax," he told her.

"This seems unsafe," Thor complained.

"Nonsense. I will keep her safe," Loki retorted, and the chair rose up again and made a slow circle near the ceiling, before coming down again.

"Not a bit of strain, I am impressed," he announced, reflexively offering his hand to help her climb off in her gown.

"That was--" Her voice stopped an instant before her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed.

Loki was just in time to grab her, nudging the chair forward enough that he could catch her under the arms, nearly falling himself if not for both Thor and Frigga darting close.

"The Aether," he said, passing her to Thor to carry.

"You had her working too hard," Thor accused.

Loki recoiled in his chair, hands gripping the arms, and his eyes narrowed. "I had her do nothing! She chose to work on this because what else was she to do, while you were gallivanting about, ignoring her!"

"I had duties!"

"Boys." Both of them looked down or away, suitably abashed. Frigga nodded to Jane, lying unconscious in Thor's arms. "Take her to Eir to be checked."

"Yes, Mother." Thor left.

Frigga warmly thanked Marten and excused him. He picked up his personal things and left with a bow, leaving her looking at her younger son, as she handed him the canes back.

"What?" he demanded with a rather sullen turn of lip. "If you want me to apologize to him, I won't."

"That was not what I intended to say. Are you ready to return to your chambers, now that you have this device to help you?"
The tension went out of him and he nodded. "I've been ready all day."

"Then, let us go, my son."

It felt odd and yet good to walk down the hall with Loki at her side again, though she was walking and he was floating in his humming chair. But since it had been not so long she feared he would never leave the infirmary, this was a great step forward.

_Thank you, Norns and Those Above Them, for giving me back my son_, she prayed silently. _I promise I will keep him safe._
Loki entered through the main door to his chambers, noticing with some relief that the chair cleared the door frame without needing the other door opened as well. A little ways inside, as Frigga closed the door behind them, he stopped to look.

The lights slowly increased in brightness automatically, illuminating his sitting room and the archways beyond to his bedchamber, bathing room, and dressing room. Straight ahead was the balcony and its view of the sea. There was his usual furniture-- the full shelves occupying two walls, his work desk, and one long sofa. His favorite reading chair was back, returned from the infirmary.

It was all long-familiar. And yet...

"Loki?" Frigga questioned softly, noticing he hadn't moved. "Is everything all right?"

"It's different," he said.

"Is it?" she turned to look for herself, frowning. "Do you remember the furniture being placed differently? I had not thought much shifted, but with your memory loss..."

He shook his head. "No, it isn't that. I recognize it, but ... it doesn't feel like me."

"Ah." Her hand rested on his shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. "I think it is not the room which has changed, my darling."

"How can I be changed? I'm the same as I was ten years ago."

Her fingers smoothed his hair, where it had been cut off so short on the side, fingers delicate near his wound. "No, sweetling, you are not. You may not remember those years consciously, but you lived them. And everything since you came back from Midgard has changed you even more." She lifted his chin to look into his face. "This is not a bad thing. It is nothing to regret. Tragedy and trial change us all, and you especially need to grow settled into your skin again and to learn who you are now, after this waterfall of revelations."

"Deluge," he muttered.

"Indeed," she agreed with sympathy. "How could you feel the same about yourself after learning all that? I know it was too much to learn all at once, and I should never have let it come to that. That was my doing, and I am so, so sorry, Loki. It was for the best of intentions, though I know that is little consolation. But above all, remember you are my son and I have loved you since the moment a little wriggling pale blue baby was put into my arms and you blinked reddish eyes at me." He tensed at the reminder, but her soft ministrations of her fingertips along his hairline eased that away. "So while you have not known, remember that I always have. To me, you are only and forever Loki, my child, whatever outer appearance you have."

He leaned his head into her hand, as a crack deep within healed. He already knew the answer when he asked, "So if I wanted to stay Jotunn...?"

"I would do what I should have done from the start," she admitted with a sigh. "Supported you. Defended you. Told the truth."
He found himself shaking his head. "No. I think ...." It was hard to admit, but he could look back on his childhood and he knew. "You were right. You couldn't have protected me from the contempt toward a half-breed bastard. They weren't ready to accept such a thing." He shook his head. "They still aren't." Most of Asgard barely tolerated the lie of who he was; the truth would have been worse.

Frigga heard the unsaid and bent down to kiss his forehead. "Now that your father has learned from his fears, that will change, Loki."

He pushed the control so the chair moved forward, out from under her touch, suddenly impatient with all the encouraging words. "In this chair? I find that unlikely. Asgard has little use for those who are not perfect warriors. Let's not pretend otherwise."

"You are a warrior," she insisted.

"I am not!" he rejected that label viciously. "Don't ever say that to me. I want no part of that stupidity."

"Loki--"

He slammed his hands on the arms of the chair. "No, just stop! Thor is the warrior, that's who he is. It is not me. It never was, and it certainly isn't now."

She hesitated, and then said, "I only meant--"

"I know," he interrupted, and sighed, letting go of his burst of temper and was just weary. "I know you meant to be encouraging and remind me that I can fight even from this," he waved his fingers to indicate the chair, "but you underestimate how tired I am of hearing about Thor the Great Warrior and how I should aspire to be more like him. How he is what all Asgard wants and needs and loves. And I am everything else." His lips quirked in a sour smile. "And now even more so."

He thought that might chase her out the door, but of course it didn't. Instead she pulled his desk chair and turned it to face him before sitting down. "What Asgard wants and needs are... not the same thing," she said. "Thor is easy to love."

"And I'm not."

She lifted a hand to stop him. "Not what I'm saying. The people see what they think is the best form of themselves, and he's happy to give that to them. They want an outgoing prince, who is exciting and enthusiastic. But what they need, is someone who can rule, and rule is not entertainment. It is statecraft; it is defense and making choices. Above all, it is work. Thor has been little interested in the work of rule. Until lately I would have said he had no interest at all."

"Because Father let him," Loki pointed out.

She opened her mouth to object but her lips twisted in rueful admission that he was correct. "Yes. And that is something of which the people are generally not aware. They see the entertainment and they like it, but they do not see the lack of preparation. But I have always hoped that you would be there, at Thor's side, to advise him."

"You were both born to be kings," Loki quoted, unable to shield the bitterness. "He knew it was a lie when he said it."

She shook her head. "It was never a lie. Loki, do you not see it, yet? You were born, you were... created," she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, trying to find the right word, "to be a king. And not
just any king, a king with the same potential powers as Bor and Odin himself. That Odin grew concerned about the truth, does not make it a lie. You were born to be a king." She found a small wry smile for him. "Had you been of larger stature, you probably would be king of Jotunheim right now, battling us for the return of the Casket. But instead I got two sons, and Laufey got none." She reached across and patted his knee. "You have power and abilities to protect this Realm. All the Realms. Surely that is an aim worthy of you, even if you are not king of Asgard?"

He nodded, knowing it was, but unhappiness tugged at him. It was not that he even wanted to be king, it was the mere fact that it now stood so far out of his reach that rankled. He would have to settle for whatever Thor would allow him, with no real ability to go elsewhere.

But no, he would heal himself. He could not -- would not -- stay trapped in his rooms, or trapped in Asgard. In the future, if Thor refused to listen, Loki could go elsewhere. Jane had already invited him to Midgard, and there were other Realms.

Perhaps Jotunheim would be more accommodating to a sorcerer bastard of their old king, bearing the Casket of the Ancient Winters, as Odin had suggested.

He still had choices, and once he persuaded his parents to let him use the tesseract to pull the Aether from Jane Foster, he would have more.

Thor told himself he was visiting Loki's quarters after the somber feast because he had missed Loki's presence at his side. Odin had mentioned him in the memorial feast, lauding him killing Malekith from his sickbed, but without him there it had felt hollow. He wanted to tell Loki of how the gathered warriors had pounded the tables and shouted for him, but the closer he got to the doors, the more he knew that was only a part of it.

He'd visited Jane in the infirmary, in the bed Loki had so recently vacated, and she was still unconscious. Eir had pawned him off that Jane needed rest, but that left Thor with no answers. He remembered how delighted she had looked on Loki's lap, zooming up to the ceiling, and the reminder that she'd looked the same on their walk in Asgard helped little.

Loki had certainly rushed to her aid quick enough, managing to catch her, in his chair.

Tense with something he didn't want to name, he knocked once on the door and tried to go in. He expected a ward or lock or something to keep everyone out, but instead the door swung open.

Thor entered Loki’s room and a gasp slipped out, as all thoughts of Jane evaporated.

Loki was sprawled on the floor next to his chair, pushing himself up with his hands and stretching to reach one of the cane handles. “Loki!”

“Stay back!” Loki commanded and lifted a hand to ward Thor away. “I’m fine.” He didn’t look at Thor, and his jaw was clenched.

“You don’t look fine?” Thor ventured. “Can I help you up?”


Thor bit his lip to keep from challenging that declaration, even though it was so obviously untrue. Loki was white-faced with pain, one hand on the floor attempting to push himself back to his feet, the other clutching the handle of one of the canes, the other beyond beyond his reach.

“Did you re-injure your leg?” Thor asked in concern.
“I’m fine. Go away.”

Thor didn’t stir. “Loki--”

The hand against the floor abruptly flung outward. “GET OUT!” he shouted, and called daggers, launching them at Thor.

No, not quite at Thor. He didn’t have to move as three daggers smacked into the wall a span to the left, one after the other, and clanged to the floor.

Thor folded his arms. “Three. Impressive. You have your power back. But if those were meant to hit me, your accuracy needs work.”

“Shut up,” Loki muttered, chest heaving and his hair hanging in his face. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you, you moron. Just leave me alone.”

“That, I will not do,” Thor said and strode forward, clasping Loki under the arms.

“Thor, leave me --”

Thor lifted him up, ignoring both the complaint and the ineffectual beating of fists on Thor’s armor. Loki could do much worse if he really wanted to, so Thor set him back in the chair.

Blazing eyes looked back. "I didn't want your help."

"I know. But you have it anyway." Thor folded his arms and looked back, unwilling to give on this point. He would help.

Loki grimaced and looked away. "I have to learn how to get up. Myself. I won't always have you or someone else around to do it for me."

"Perhaps you should."

Loki’s face snapped back to his. "No! I have had quite enough of people hovering, giving me no privacy, no peace."

Thor held out his hands. "Fine, Loki. I think none of us want to hover, only help while you need us."

"I don't!"

Which was easy to say when he hadn't been the one who saw him looking like a floundering fish, but Thor wasn't going to argue about it anymore when the truth was so obvious. "If you say so."

Loki’s sour look said his sarcasm did not go unnoticed. "I do. Just let me do it my own way. What did you come in for anyway?"

Thor let him get away with the change of subject and shrugged. "I wanted to see you back in your own rooms again. It has been... awhile.” He looked around, thinking the last time he’d been in here with Loki had been a fortnight before the aborted coronation. Thor had poured out his doubts, and he’d thought Loki had encouraged him, but thinking back he realized Loki had said very little and his face had been too still.

Had he, at that moment, decided to go to Jotunheim and started his plan? Or had that started earlier when Odin had announced it? Thor couldn’t ask, since Loki didn't recall, but now he wondered.
"How does it feel to be back?" Thor asked.

Loki shrugged. "Better than the infirmary."

That reminded him of who was in the infirmary now, but every imagined way of opening that conversation, sounded too petty, so he couldn't say anything.

A silence fell, until Loki groaned. "What? You have something you want to say, so say it."

Thor swallowed. "Jane. What are your-- You looked very familiar with her."

Loki stared. "Are you jealous? You are." He tipped his head back and laughed. It was not an especially amused sound. "Your mortal girl is kind to me for an afternoon and you think I'm going to steal her from you? Are you deluded? Look at us, you moron --" He gestured between the two of them, "Yes, I'm so sure the girl will choose the cripple who can't walk over the warrior prince. But fine, I will keep away if you are so insecure."

that hit hard. "No!" Thor protested. "You can be friends--"

"Thank you for your permission," Loki interrupted.

"Loki! That's not--"

"I will pull the Aether from her and then I need never see her again," Loki informed him coolly. "If you are fool enough to involve yourself with a mortal, that is not my problem."

That reaction left Thor somewhat incredulous. "You seemed to get along very well..." he started, tentatively.

"Of course. She was doing something to help me, and so I will return the favor by saving her life. That's all there is, Thor. You need not be concerned."

Thor should have been relieved by that, but strangely he was not. It was disquieting instead; he didn't want Loki to cut himself off from her. That wasn't right, and he didn't want to make Loki think that was what he wanted. Or that Thor had any right to want it. "If you really feel nothing for her, fine, but I wouldn't want you to deny yourself a friend because I was acting like an idiot," he said, trying a smile to coax him into better humor.

Loki shrugged. "It doesn't matter." Thor would have objected because it did matter, but Loki smirked and teased, "When are you not acting like an idiot?"

Thor mock-threatened him with a fist, before ruffling his hair. "Never."

Loki made a face and jerked his head away. "Stop it."

But Thor palmed his head and angled it to meet his eyes. "I was jealous because I know she sees you for more than the 'cripple who can't walk'. So you need not fear that, all right? Even if the Aether does not heal you, you are more than that, and those who love you, we know."

For a moment, Loki stared back, as if he couldn't comprehend the words Thor was saying. Then he swallowed hard, blinked, and ducked away. "Must you be so embarrassing?" he muttered.

But Thor smiled, knowing Loki got the message.
Out of Time

Finally all his visitors were gone and Loki had his own quarters to himself. He looked at the sunken bathing pool and decided he could manage, if he were careful.

It was not bad, to slip down to the floor and undress there, then lower himself into the tub. Though tempted to linger, he wanted to be clean first, so he used the sponge for his body and his hands for his hair. It was disturbing how short it was. Hopefully that meant it was short enough to not dry into curls, but short hair made him look like a child.

It felt like an age since he’d been clean, and as he sank beneath the tepid water to rinse off, he had to smile wryly at the thought that at least now he understood why he didn't care for hot baths.

The scent of his mother's garden, rising from the soap, filled his nose, and the tension melted away. Resting his head on the rim, he closed his eyes, letting himself drift.

The water was in constant motion when the bath was in use. There was a current flowing against his skin, drawing off the dirty and replacing it with clean. He closed his eyes and imagined that it was pulling away the bad, the foul, the wrong from who and what he was.

Frost Giant blood pulled out and sent down the drain. Attacking Midgard and who knew what other deeds. Half-remembered nightmares. Wrongness in his brain and that unhealing damage in his knees. He wanted all of it taken by the current and gone.

But wanting was not the same as reality, not until he had a Reality Stone in hand, at least, so that would have to wait.

Climbing out was as slow and careful as getting in, and when he realized he had no towels near to hand, he spellcast instead, pushing the water off him. Conjuring sleepwear made a sharp pain knife behind his eyes, warning that he was over-extending. He hadn't thought using the Casket had used a lot of his reserves, but apparently the sum of the day was enough.

Grateful no one was in the room to watch, he crawled into the chair, instead of trying to use the canes to rise. Someone would be along in the morning to fetch them off the floor, and that was soon enough.

Transferring to the bed without them was more a matter of flinging himself across the gap and hoping for the best, but it worked well enough.

Resting atop the covers he looked up at the ceiling, which was a magical night sky that he'd always found soothing. But now it seemed too dark, and even when he wasn't looking at it, he had the impression someone or something was staring back. He tried to tell himself not to be stupid, the ceiling was something he knew quite well, but it didn't work.

Trying stubbornly to conquer this unease by staring at it failed, too. He felt as if he was floating upward toward it, or falling, and his fingers gripped the coverlet to remind himself he hadn't truly gone anywhere.

Focusing, he freed one hand and gestured at the display, to turn it off. The actual ceiling of pale blue with gold cornices appeared, instantly soothing. His heart slowed again, and he took deeper breaths.

Tomorrow, he would request Odin visit and discuss his plan to pull the Aether. Because Loki had
his own idea for how to do it, and he was getting more eager to try it, whatever Frigga might caution.

In the morning, Frigga told the staff to wait in the hall while she entered Loki's suite. As expected because the door opened, he was awake but she did not expect to find him already dressed and in the floating chair.

Smiling, she came to kiss his head. "Good morning! How did you sleep?"

"All right," he answered with a shrug, then added more honestly, "It took me a little while to get used to how empty my rooms are." He cast a look around and up at the high ceiling, grimacing. She supposed after the close confines of the infirmary, his suite probably did feel cavernous.

"I brought staff with breakfast if you're up to it?"

He hesitated, wanting to decline and avoid being seen, but assented with a smile, "Sure. Why not?"

She had them set up on the balcony, and they were about to leave when the youngest girl suddenly turned back, saluted with her fist to her heart, and said in a shaking voice, "I'm glad to see you're better, my lord." Ducking her head, she hurried out, before he could find his voice.

He shut his mouth, and lifted his brows at her. "Did you tell her to say something?"

"No! Certainly not," she protested in affront. He peered at her suspiciously, though she had nothing to confess. Nor would she have done it since anyone told to do it would have lacked sincerity regardless. "That was heartfelt, darling." She patted his hand. "You are missed. I hope you emerge into the wider world again and allow court to see you soon."

He pulled away and shook his head. "This will not be permanent, and I will not have them remember me like this."

Dismayed she set her tea cup down again. "Loki, you cannot hide in your rooms until that far off day that we find some power strong enough to heal you."

"It will not be long," he answered with infuriating calm. "The Aether is down the hall. The only question is whether Jane Foster survives the process of removing it."

"No, that is not the only question-- your own survival is at stake, too. There is no need to be filled with reckless haste, darling. A little patience and we will find a better way."

She meant the promise, but the Norns decided to make her wrong as a message arrived that Eir requested their presence in the infirmary.

Eir was waiting in the observation room with Odin. Frigga was surprised to see him, as he had been at court earlier, but perhaps Eir's news was more urgent than she had expected. Thor was inside the room, hovering over Jane, who appeared to be still asleep.

"All-mother, my prince," Eir greeted with a nod. "I have ill-news. The mortal awoke this morning, but I had to put her back unconscious. The Aether has begun to attack her tissues."

"How long does she have?" Loki asked.

"A day. Two, perhaps."

Frigga gasped, hearing her dismay echoed by Loki. "So soon? But Eir, is there nothing you can do
"to give us more time?" She needed more time to find another solution.

Eir shook her head. "Overnight her body has weakened, as what native strength she possesses has been overwhelmed. Worse," she cast a pitying lance toward the monitor, "I have not informed Prince Thor, but the end will be slow and... terrible. You will not wish him to watch."

As the Aether ripped Jane Foster apart, was what she was not saying, Frigga realized. She looked to the monitor, and thought of the innocent child there, suffering for no reason but ill-fortune.

"And containment?" Odin asked, drawing her attention back.

Eir nodded. "Yes, I expect the Aether to begin to break free by the end of the day. She will need to be contained before that happens."

Worse and worse. The Aether would start to pull itself out of her, until the vessel for it cracked and utterly shattered. Jane might prefer the Aether to be taken from her early, even if it killed her, to spare her the end, if there was no other way to save her.

Thor let go of Jane's hand and came through the door. When it shut behind him, he looked at Eir and demanded, "You have to save her."

"My prince, it is as I said, I have no knowledge that can save her," Eir explained patiently. "There is no equipment, nothing I possess in the infirmary, that will pull the Aether from her, until she is dead and it frees itself from her body completely."

"There must be something!" Thor exclaimed, fists clenched at his sides as if he would fight the Aether himself. To Frigga's alarm she saw a bit of power crackling along his skin. "Father! You and Loki, you must be able to help her!"

Odin noticed as well and commanded, "We will discuss it in the solar, away from her." He looked to Eir. "If you need containment sooner, notify me at once."

"Yes, All-Father."

Thor stormed out of the observation room, with Odin close behind. But Loki stayed back to cast a final look at Jane, and Frigga knew he was going to volunteer to attempt to save her.

She had run out of time to find another way, and her only real hope at this point was Odin forbidding Loki from the attempt for whatever his own foolish plan might be.

In the solar, the door shut and warded against outsider intrusion, Thor had gone all the way to the balcony where he stood, looking out, with his posture stiff and his arms folded. Odin had one hand gripping Gungnir, and when his gaze met hers, he gave a small rueful smile of resignation. Frigga took the chair next to where Loki had maneuvered himself and waited.

Odin was the first to break the silence. "Our choices are now distilled," he declared. "We do nothing and Jane Foster will die. She is mortal, her life is short regardless of what we do. Perhaps it is her time."

"No!" Thor whirled back around, taking two urgent steps inside. "She is here, in Asgard. With all our powers, you cannot tell me we have no other choice!"

"We do," Loki added. He turned his head to look at Odin and said quietly, "Give me the tesseract. With Gungnir, that should be enough--"
"No," Frigga declared sharply. "I will not allow it."

"And I will not allow her to die when I have the power to save her," Loki shot back, lifting his chin and his eyes gleaming with intent. "Father, that was your plan, was it not? If I pull the tesseract's power through Gungnir, it will re-channel the dark energy, which should neutralize whatever repels the two powers from each other."

Odin considered, brows lowered. "That was not my idea, no. It is a clever theory, however. It may work."

"And it may not. It a only a theory, which is also unacceptably dangerous," Frigga cut in. "Tell me you have a less insane idea."

Odin didn't answer directly, brushing his beard with his eye on Loki. "You do not recall at the moment, but you asked me not so long ago, what my plan for you was. At the time, I had no good answer because I believed my original plan was lost."

Loki frowned. "Your original plan? I assume it was for me to rule Jotunheim."

"Briefly," Odin agreed. "When you first came home, I thought that would be the path. But when we chose not to tell you of that heritage, it became impossible. How would you know of it? So I turned to another thought. Who could I have take over the maintenance of the gate that keeps Hela in her prison? You had the potential, and as your mother taught you magic, it seemed that it could be your role to take the spell from me."

Frigga frowned at him. He had never mentioned that idea to her and it seemed improbable he had kept that plan, as he had forbidden higher magics from Loki with time.

He caught her look, and amended, "But that did not last either, because I let my fears grow as you grew, that you seemed too like her. But regardless, the idea depended on one simple idea. To hold the spell in my place you would need to unlock the potential of your mixed blood. And the method Bor used to do that, was to embrace the Eternal Flame."

Dead silence fell.

Frigga couldn't find any words at first. The Eternal Flame of Asgard? That was Odin's idea? To have her son touch Asgard's source, its essence, the central power of the entire Realm?

"What?" Thor blurted. He merely looked confused.

Loki, though.... Her very clever son was actually considering this insanity. The look on his face was speculative and curious, head tilted and gaze distant as he ran through what he knew.

"With your potential opened, you would have..." Odin cast around for the correct word, "your own version of the Odinforce. Then with Gungnir alone as focus, I think you would be able to pull the Aether safely."

Frigga listened and could not believe he was saying any of this. "This is your idea?" Frigga demanded. Unable to remain seated, she stood up and circled her chair before turning to confront Odin. "To hold the Eternal Flame? The source of Asgard's power? It could scour him to the bone in an instant."

"He would only need to touch it--"

Oh he should know better than to try to placate her with that. "He is not fully Aesir!"
Odin looked at her, too calmly, and answered, "Neither was Bor."

She grimaced and made a frustrated growling in her throat. "It is reckless. Unnecessary. Foolish."

"I would not suggest it if I thought he would be harmed, Frigga," Odin added. "The opposite is more likely -- that he will be able to use the Eternal Flame to heal himself."

She grew still and shut her eyes, knowing she had just lost. Odin had dangled irresistible bait in front of Loki, and he would do it.

Loki’s chair hummed and his hand touched hers, pulling her fingers to his face. She let him hold her hand against his cheek, trying to let it comfort her fear. "Mother. I know you want to protect me," he murmured. "My injury, recovery, all of this, has been difficult for you to watch and you don't want me hurt again. But if this can heal me and let me help Jane, then... I need to do it."

She swallowed. "You do not know. Many have sought the power of the Eternal Flame. Few have survived its touch. And if you do, there is still a price."

"What kind of price?" Thor asked.

"All power has a price," Loki answered. "I know that already. I will pay it."

"Hear what it is first. If you take the Eternal Flame within, it will bond you to Asgard," she explained. "The more of it you take, the more your fate and this Realm will be tied together. Once done, it cannot be undone."

She watched as he considered that; at least he was taking it seriously, and not dismissing her concern.

"Do you truly wish to bind yourself to a place where you have been so unhappy?" she murmured. "We are trying to do better, Loki, but to do this and grow to resent us all, would be unbearable. For you and us."

"You make it sound as if it is impossible to leave," Odin corrected. "It is not. It is not an imprisonment, but simply an awareness of Asgard and her people."

Loki gnawed on his lip and said, with a wry twist of his lips, "Using the tesseract seems less permanent."

"Unless it kills you," Thor said.

"Well, yes, that would be permanent," Loki agreed with a smirk.

"You could do neither," Frigga suggested without much hope. "Jane said she did not want anyone to risk his life for hers."

"So we let her die?" Thor demanded. But then his blue eyes fell on Loki, and his anguish was like a fire, knowing that his demand had a price. He slumped and looked at his hands. "This is all my fault. Jane is at risk because --"

"Because she was curious. It had nothing to do with you, my son," Frigga interjected.

"But I can't do anything to help any of it!"

She smoothed his hair. "A hammer is a useful tool, but it will not solve every problem. No one can fix everything, not the king, not the king's son, either."
"Yes, leave something for the rest of us to do," Loki drawled, pulling their attention back to him. "But I would like to speak to Father, alone. Please."

Puzzled by the request and suspicious that he didn't want her to hear what he wanted to say to Odin, she frowned.

He saw her doubt and explained, having to clear his throat, "I have a rather personal question. That I would rather you two not hear."

Her eyebrows shot up wondering what he could possibly ask that he would think so embarrassing. Something about his Jotunn heritage? About the Eternal Flame? About Odin's own powers? But it was not for her to speculate, was it? He was entitled to his privacy.

"No, you cannot use the Eternal Flame to make yourself more attractive," Thor told him, teasing.

Loki heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes at his brother, as she bent to kiss his head. "All right. Thor and I will leave you to it, but I want you both to be kind to each other," she instructed severely. "No arguing while we're gone."

"Yes, Mother. I promise."

At the door she hesitated, caught by the intuition that Loki sending her away was never a good thing. But she would check on Jane, and let him talk to his father without her interference.

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The door closed behind his mother and Thor, leaving him with Odin.

The king looked at him expectantly. "You have a question?" he prompted when Loki said nothing.

Loki held up a finger for him to stop the course of that thought. He had no question-- that had been the easiest way to get the other two to leave. "Let's see where she goes."

One bright eye peered deeply. "Ah. You want to do it now."

Put that way made Loki's insides tighten up. No, he didn't want to do it now. He didn't want to do it at all. Except he also wanted to do it desperately. He forced a careless shrug. "It seems to me if I'm going to risk my life for this, it ought to result in something lasting."

"The Eternal Flame, then."

He lifted his brows. "Did you think I would refuse the power? But are you sure you want to give it to me?" he asked. Of course it was too late, once Loki knew it was an option. He would never have thought about the Eternal Flame as anything he could or would want to touch, but knowing, there was little Odin could do to prevent him now. "Do you really want to give me power equal to yours?" He asked the question deliberately. Once it was done, it could not be undone, his mother had said. That meant Odin couldn't undo it either.

To his credit, Odin did not flinch and merely nodded. "I have considered this for days," Odin admitted, hand tightening on Gungnir. "Even before the Aether arrived, I thought of it. I do not dismiss the danger to you, though Frigga will believe I do. I considered that you are not as strong as I hope, and will let the power control you into villainy as it did Hela. But the truth is, I no longer have the strength to protect you or Asgard from our enemies, so I must give you the means to protect yourself."

"Oh." Loki sat back. That had not been what he'd expected to hear. Nor did he like it. It confirmed his instinct that the only reason he was hearing all this truth now had little to do with his injury, and more to do with Odin's awareness that he was dying.

"Not tomorrow," Odin added, with a wry twist to his lips, reading Loki's expression. "But soon. I have grown concerned that neither you nor Thor would be ready."

Loki bit his lip to keep from pointing out that it was Odin's own fault for not preparing them earlier. He had hid the truth almost until it was too late, and now he was going to let Loki do something that Loki doubted he would have considered ten years ago, whatever he was claiming now, simply because he was running out of time.

Odin didn't see, looking away with lowered brows. "Hela alone is enemy enough. If she could be turned against Thanos, that would be the best outcome, but I worry they might find common cause if she is freed before he comes for the Stones."

Loki grimaced. Common cause in destroying Asgard and in killing Loki in particular. "I'll just have to stop them then," he said with deliberate lightness, as if it would be easy.

But Odin was not amused, returning his look somberly. "I hope you do, Loki. You and Thor together must defend the Nine Realms from these enemies."
Stricken from his levity, Loki stared in astonishment. Had Odin ever expressed such an uncompromising belief that Loki could do something so important? That he could do something as Thor's equal?

Because he would be Thor's equal in power, after this, wouldn't he? Loki had been focusing on the Odinforce, and not Thor's strength, but if Loki had his own Odinforce, his power would be at least the same as Thor's, and it would be all his own.

Odin was not finished. "Thanos wishes to cull the universe, and Hela would be glad to rule the ashes he leaves behind. Do not let them, my son."

Loki had to swallow and blink back a sudden wet heat in his eyes to find his voice. "I won't, Father. I swear."

Odin regarded him for a long moment, perhaps parsing his intent as best he could. There was a flicker of doubt, that Loki meant it or could do it, but he pushed it away and straightened. "Then let us do it, before your mother discovers our intention." He glanced over his shoulder toward the door, gaze distant. "She and Thor remain with the mortal and Eir."

Loki directed his chair to the door. "Then we should go."

He felt a little guilty and quite young as he hurried past the closed door to the observation room, as if he were in the midst of stealing cookies from the kitchen. Having Odin pace him was odd, though, when it ought to be Thor.

He expected her to catch them before they reached the damaged doors at the end, but whether it was luck or something Odin had done, she stayed out of sight.

Should he stop? Tell her? It felt wrong to go behind her back, when he knew her fears were out of love.

But on the other hand, he knew she'd try to stop him. And if she started to cry, he probably wouldn't withstand it. But then Jane would die, and he owed her better than that.

Odin noted his hesitation and turned back. "Are you reconsidering?"

"No," Loki answered, voice firm. "But I would rather not pass through the long hall." It was possible to get to the Treasury the other way, though he was not certain if the chair would work on the narrow back stairs.

Odin hummed in thought before looking at Loki. "Face them down, son. I will be at your side."

"But they'll remember me like this." He held up the two canes in one hand while the other was on the control box for the chair.

Odin nodded, acknowledging that was true, but not that it was a bad thing. "Yes. And then they will see you rise from it," Odin said. "It must be seen to be believed, Loki."

Loki, who knew how court behaved toward him when Odin wasn't around, had to admit that was true. Right now, the stories probably sounded like lies his mother had put out to make him sound brave and useful; if he showed up without any injury at all, they would wonder what the 'truth' was, and that was rarely to Loki's benefit.

Odin coaxed him to go forward. "Come, if you wish to do this, we must go quickly." He gathered up Einharjar as they approached the grand staircase and Loki felt vaguely ill that he would have to
go all the way down, in full view of everyone. But the chair handled the shallow steps well.

But shortly the sight of the hall made him gape in shock. No one had told him the damage was so extensive. Nor mentioned there was still a Dark Elf craft at the far end.

"What-- What is that still doing there?" he asked.

Odin explained, "There is a discussion whether to remove it in pieces--"

Loki was aghast. "You want to cut it apart? No, no, that's Dark Elf technology. We should keep it and study it." He wanted to look at it, and Jane would love it, he knew that much already.

The king turned his head toward Loki, a twitch of amusement at his lips, more felt than seen. "A mothership still sits outside. There is plenty to explore."

"Oh." Loki looked down, embarrassed to have been so eager for something so trivial. One would think he would have learned to keep his mouth shut about such things in front of Odin by now.

Odin added, "I said there was a discussion, because I wish it to be flown out intact if possible. There are other enemies on our horizon, and I would not waste this gift. I look forward to hearing what you learn from it."

Loki's head snapped up again. The king's eye looked on him with warmth as he declared, more loudly, "As slayer of Malekith, Loki, I give to you all Svartalfar ships and technology as your war prize. Do with them as you wish."

He pointed with Gungnir toward the ship, and Loki followed the motion to look at the ship - now his ship - and then realized that those near him had turned toward him to salute, fist to heart, and the Einharjar clattered to sharp attention as he passed by.

For him? There was a strange heat in his chest, constricting his breath, and he had to blink and look away.

That let Sif approach unnoticed until she was in front of them. "All-Father."

"Lady Sif," Odin greeted.

Sif's smile seemed genuine but a little wary as she said to Loki, "My prince, it is good to see out of the infirmary. You look..." she hesitated, "better? Than I was told, at least."

"I am feeling better, thank you."

Odin said, "Lady Sif, if you wish to visit Jane Foster, I believe she would like company. Thor and the queen will be pleased to show you to her."

"Oh yes, All-Father. I would." She saluted and took her leave.

Loki glanced at Odin as they resumed their walk, heading for the wide side doors that would lead toward the main lift to bring them beneath the palace.

Odin caught his eye. "You see the purpose?" he asked.

He nodded. "You sent Sif to delay them."

"We will see if it worked."
At the lift, he dismissed the accompanying guards, so they were alone as the door whispered shut. The descent was barely noticeable usually, but Loki's anxiety tightened everything in his body. Almost time.

Frigga left Jane, awake and resting against the bed with Thor staying with her for company. Across the hall, she found the solar empty. Frowning, because she didn't think Loki and Odin would've left without telling her, she asked the system where they were.

Main long hall was the answer, and she had to nod, impressed that Odin had persuaded Loki out into public view somehow. She would have to ask later what his answer had been.

But that was well, and she could join them. At the broken infirmary doors, she encountered Sif.

"All-Mother, good afternoon The king said you might escort me to Jane Foster?" Sif asked. "If you think it a good time to visit?"

Frigga did, of course - the poor girl needed all the distraction from her understandable fears that Asgard could provide -- and led Sif back to Jane's room, where Jane and Thor were both pleased to see her.

Frigga withdrew to the hall again, and decided she would meet up with Loki and Odin, after all, and found they were no longer headed to court, as she had thought. Instead they were beneath. Not to the dungeon sub-level, but the western cellar.

The Treasury.

"That wily goat-headed bilgesnipe spawn!" she shouted in an absolute fury at both husband and son.

"Mother?" Thor shoved back his chair, concern darkening his eyes.

"Stay put," she ordered. "I have no time for more foolishness from my family!"

Her feet beat a fast rhythm on the back stairs as she nearly flew down, her gown fluttering around her. Down around the spiral, down around the spiral, again and again, until she flung open the door into the corridor and ran.

The doors to the Treasury were shut. The guards stood with pikes crossed before it.

"Open it," she commanded.

The lieutenant in command swallowed but did not blink as he answered, "The king has forbidden entry to everyone, my queen. Including you. Specifically."

Of course me, 'specifically', she thought with a sour humor. I am specifically the one he wants to keep out before my son burns alive in the Eternal Flame. But in this, I do not answer to anyone but myself.

"I am sorry," she told the guards, raised both hands, and cast her spell to sweep them out of the way.

But she was too late.

It was just the two of them in the Treasury. Odin carried Gungnir, while Loki held his canes.
Odin’s other hand curled under Loki’s elbow to keep him steady as he found getting out of the chair more difficult than he expected, having stiffened up. His knees complained about straightening, and he nearly fell on the last step, if Odin’s upright bulk had not been there to brace him.

“I have you,” he murmured. “There is no hurry, Loki.”

“I’m all right,” Loki reassured him. “But I do look forward to being healed.”

They both watched the curl of the Eternal Flame in its cauldron. There was no heat to it, only light, but beyond that, when Loki peeked within, the shining glow of seidr was nearly blinding, overwhelming the blue glow of the tesseract on the pedestal at the opposite end. That pedestal had once held the Casket of the Ancient Winters, and the reminder of his Jotunn blood made him uneasy again.

Loki licked his lips. “Father?” he asked, hating the way his voice suddenly quivered as if he were still a boy.

Odin looked over, eyebrows up curiously. “Loki?”

“Are you sure it won’t-- reject me?” he asked. “For the wrong blood? I’m only-- only half Aesir.” Damn it, why was his voice shaking? He wasn’t afraid, he wasn’t.

Odin closed his free hand around Loki’s shoulder. “Remember, there is Jotnar blood in me, too. That is, after all, where Amora got the idea; she wanted to create her own Bor.”

Which Loki knew, but it didn't help much, now that he was actually looking at the Eternal Flame. “Mother said this was dangerous.”

“It is,” Odin acknowledged. “Not because of your blood, but because of the power. You can sense it and you know it is no toy. But--” his grip tightened, “you have the potential, Loki. You always have. Even when I unwisely feared it, I knew it lay within you. And the Eternal Flame will bring it forth.”

Loki swallowed hard. “And heal me. I don’t have a lot of choice, then, do I?”

Odin did him the favor of not claiming that he could refuse to do it. He *could*, and they both knew it, but they both knew he wouldn’t. Once the chance to heal had been offered, Loki had known he would do it, no matter the risk.

“So, either I come out of this healed and powerful, or I get burned to ash. How dramatic.”

Odin’s lips twitched, but he reassured him more seriously, “I think the first, or I would not have offered, Loki. And I will be here to help.”

Loki wasn’t sure what Odin could actually *do*, if the Eternal Flame decided to take offense at Loki’s attempt to touch it, but he did feel slightly better hearing the promise.

Dampening his lips, he drew in a breath to try to settle his nerves. “Nothing for it, but do it then.”

He took another step, knees still aching sharply, and thought he might do something worse than this to rid himself of that pain. With one hand he grasped the Flame’s stand, and let the canes fall to the floor.

Clearing his mind, he looked into the fire, widening his sight to the power before him. It was
fierce, a roiling wave in a tempest, and this was but a fraction of the power it was drawing from the heart of Asgard itself.

*Can I do this?* He wondered suddenly. Sure he was strong, immortal, but could he take that within? To make himself a part of Asgard, and Asgard a part of him for always? Until the destruction of the Nine Realms and the end of the world?

But hadn’t he done it with the Casket of the Ancient Winters already? He’d taken that within, and it had felt... easy. Shouldn’t this be the same? He was the son of both Realms, not Jotunheim alone.

*I am Aesir. I am a prince of Asgard,* he told himself. The king stood behind him, watching with faith that Loki could do this.

His hand trembled only a little as he reached out for the fire.

For a moment, nothing happened. The seidr of the fire touched his hand almost with curiosity, as if tasting him. The flames twined around his hand and they tugged at his power.

He stiffened, almost pulling away. But instead, he released his shields and defenses, to let it in.

The Eternal Flame engulfed him, a tidal wave within, and he would’ve screamed but he had no control over his body. It didn’t exist, consumed by the fire.

Until the fire found a seed at the very core of him that would not be consumed. Harder than diamond, colder than ice, it held solid, and though the flames encircled it, it was not destroyed. Instead, it grew, embracing the power the Eternal Flame offered.

The powers grew together, merging, warp and weft of the tapestry of his innermost being and melding into something stronger than the two apart. And still it poured into him. His bones were burning, and he flung his power wide in hope of easing the strain.

He heard the sound of drums – no, hearts – he was hearing every beating heart of Asgard. He could reach out and touch the lifeforce of each person.

*More.*

Each animal from the smallest mouse to the dragon that lived on the highest peak, forgotten in its long slumber.

*More.*

Beyond Asgard, he could feel Jotunheim. He saw the ruins, the defeated people... He could see it all, time itself another thread that he could read backwards. He could see the ruins he’d left behind. That Odin had left. That Hela had left. That Bor had left. Thousands of years of ruins and destruction, and for what? A people once proud and fierce, now dispirited, their leader slain by the hand of his own son. Because of lies. No, worse, for nothing at all.

But with this power, he could make some of it right. He reached out, thinking he could restore it. He could fix his failure. He could raise a new city in Utgard.

With this power, he could raise the dead.

“LOKI!”
The blaze of light pulled him back to himself. He had been stretched too thin, a fragile bubble about to disintegrate, unconstrained. He was taking too much, and it would destroy him if he didn’t control it.

He was aware of his body again, not sure if it had always been there or he was shaping it anew. But there was still so much within him, so much his skin burst with it.

He turned and saw Odin there, Gungnir streaming with its own silvery brightness and Odin’s face pale with the effort.

Loki saw his strand in time: backward, Odin collapsing on the steps of this very hall, and forward, collapsing with the strain of calling Loki back from overextending himself. He would die, if Loki didn’t help him.

He gathered the power together, fenced it, tamed it, until it simmered beneath his skin.

“No, Father. Not today.” He pressed his hand to Odin’s forehead, sharing his strength and healing. He healed them both.

The Flame rushed through his body again, damage repaired, restored.

And in his mind, what had been locked away suddenly returned. Ten years of memories flooded him all at once, but only one mattered, smashing into his awareness.

... falling... falling ... anguish and pain and loss and confusion...

... claws catching him, tearing apart his body, tearing apart his mind...

... ”Your domain will be a universe free of suffering, free from want. But first you learn to serve.”

... that voice again and again, through the fire, through the blades and the needles...

.. the bright glow of the Mind Stone in his eyes...

He gasped, air leaving his lungs in a rush, but he saw nothing but memories of pain.

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tbc...
From the Ashes

Frigga raced through the doors, and her feet stopped, rooted to the floor, at the sight below.

Loki stood next to the cauldron, one hand gripping the edge, and the other extended. The Flame had wrapped his hand, but then he opened himself to the power.

Blinding light washed through the chamber, but she refused to look away.

*No, stop, my son, that's enough...*

The Flame was all around him now, his body like a shadow, but within an even brighter light shining forth like a star. But he didn’t stop, drawing more, deeper inside. It was going to be too much. How could he endure it?

Fire engulfed where he'd stood, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to hold in her scream. He was still there, within the fire, she could feel it, he wasn't gone, he was still--

Then he was not.

A wave of power rushed outward, passing through her, across Asgard, thrumming along Yggdrasil, taking Loki with it.

“Loki! No!” she shouted but she could do nothing to bring him back.

Odin acted, seeing the same, and brought Gungnir and the fullest of his power to stand as a beacon when Loki was lost in the currents.

Loki pulled himself back, the glow shrinking down back into a person-shaped fire, and then fading to reveal Loki with glowing emerald eyes looking on his father. He shaped the power between his hands, walked the two paces closer, pressed his fingers to Odin’s forehead, and both shuddered as the emerald wave passed through them.

Something went wrong. Loki let out a thin scream, staggering back, before falling to his knees. The brilliance winked out and he was left there, head hanging, and hands over his face, while his body was shaking with violent sobs.

She ran down the stairs and threw herself beside him. “Loki?” She wrapped both arms around his body. He was too warm from the seidr still raging under his skin, but she paid no attention as he clutched at his hair and shook. “Loki, sweetie, little one-- I’m here.”

At first he could do nothing but tremble and gasp for breath, while her gown grew damp. She held him tightly, making soothing noises, but looked up at Odin who hovered uselessly. She narrowed her eyes at him, still angry with him for doing this with no regard for the consequences.

Loki calmed enough to try speaking, “I remember,” Loki struggled to say, through desperate breaths, “I remember all of it.”

She grimaced, hoping 'all' wasn't really true. “I’m here,” she murmured, resting her cheek on his hair. “Everything’s going to be all right now.”

"No." He shook his head against her, denying it. “No. I remember him. Everything.”

She smoothed his hair and shoulders one-handed, while she held him tight with the other.
“He hurt – me – hurt me -- he was in my head--” His voice broke and he clutched at her gown, trembling uncontrollably.

“It’s all right, sweetling,” she soothed. “You’re safe here.”

“No!” He raised his head so abruptly he almost slammed his skull into her nose. “No, we’re not safe.” He shook his head frantically, his cheeks still wet and eyes wide with panic. “He’ll come here, he’ll take the Stones, he’ll kill, everyone will die...."

She shook her head once and brushed the tear track away with her thumb. “We’re safe,” she repeated. “He will not attack Asgard. Not when we hold three of the Stones, and not when we have you.” He shook his head again, but she stopped him, framing his face in both hands.

“Yes, you,” she confirmed. “Calm yourself, Loki. Center. Breathe.” He did so with her help, his breaths slowing to match hers. "There. Good. Now feel the Eternal Flame now resides within you,” she added. He stirred at that, as if he had forgotten, and his gaze darted up at the cauldron. It was empty.

He had taken it all. Her spirit quailed, dismay and doubt clamoring inside, but she ruthlessly pushed it away. It was done, now it must be managed.

After a moment, it occurred to her she was looking at this with fear, but that was the wrong way to see what he’d done. My son did this. Mine. No one else in the history of Asgard has done this. Not even Bor himself could. But my son did. Now both my sons will shine, strong and brilliant.

Her arms tightened around him and she kissed his head. “I am so proud of you, Loki.”

He sniffed and asked in a watery voice, “Because I was a fool who did foolish things?”

Ah, he remembered that, too. “No, I’m proud of you because you did foolish things, but you have learned from them.” She smoothed back his hair from his face and tilted his chin so he would look at her. “You have known weakness, and you have known what it is to be overcome. And now you are wiser and stronger than you were before, and you will be a powerful guardian for Asgard. You will protect the Nine Realms from the evils like Thanos that seek its destruction.”

He sniffled again and wiped his face with the heels of his hands, before straightening. He looked more settled, and she was glad to see it.

The doors opened and boots on the tile announced who it was long before she heard Thor’s urgent voice, “Loki! I felt that, the power – is everything all right?”

“Everything is well, Thor, calm yourself,” Odin called up to him and gestured him to join them.

Thor clattered down the steps. “Loki, are you-- how do you feel?” he asked, frowning in worry to see Loki’s distressed face and both him and Frigga on the floor.

Loki inhaled a steadying breath and answered, "Better." Thor nodded, looking pleased, and held out a hand to help Loki up. Loki reflexively started to extend his own hand, as he looked up. Some odd expression passed over his face, and he jerked his hand back from touching Thor's. "Why?" Loki demanded.

Thor frowned and his gaze swung to Frigga in confusion before returning to Loki. "Why what?"

Loki’s hands tightened to fists and his voice cracked as he asked, "Why are you being like this. To me?"
"I don't understand, Loki," Thor said with slow care.

"Why don't you hate me? I tried to kill you, twice, but you saved my life! WHY?"

"Oh," Thor said, realizing as Frigga did that, of course, Loki remembered that, too. He knelt in front of Loki who was looking down, thin shoulders shaking. Frigga didn't interfere, knowing they had to work this out on their own.

"Because you are my brother. And you were not in your right mind when you did those things, anyway."

"I knew what I was doing," Loki muttered.

Thor was going to contradict that, but she shook her head once, quickly. It was not time to pick at that. Thor bit his lip and tried, "You were angry because I'd been such a poor brother. I was arrogant and controlling, and sometimes I treated you badly."

"That's not the same!" Loki threw out a hand, and a bolt of force launched from it - apparently without his intent given his white-faced shock - as it slammed into the pedestal that held the Gauntlet. It fell off with a clang to the floor.

"It is the same," Thor said into the silence. "Do you remember what I told you on Vanaheim?" he asked, and Loki froze. So Thor answered for him. "I told you, that if you revealed my lie, I would tell everyone that you were a coward. I threatened you, Loki. And worse, I didn't even realize that I'd wronged you. That was not the first cruelty I didn't notice, but they were wounds all the same. I see that now and I am so sorry, brother. Please, forgive me and let us start again."

He held out his hand again, blue eyes earnest.

Loki kept his face averted. "But I was so much worse," he whispered. "I... couldn't... I couldn't stop. There was nothing to hold onto, and--"

Unable to bear the hollow confession, Thor surged forward to pull him into a tight embrace. "Because I broke your trust. You thought you were alone, but never, Loki, I swear. Now you know all the truth, and so do I, and we can move on, together." He pressed his head against Loki's and murmured, "My brother, always."

He glanced at her over Loki's shoulder, and she smiled with an approving nod. He truly had matured since his exile, and it was good to see.

Loki shook his head against Thor's shoulder. "I don't -- I don't deserve that."

Thor pulled back a little ways, holding Loki's shoulders, and glowered into his face. "Yes, you do. Of course you do." He shook his head in desperate denial. "You have endured so much, Loki. You deserve that and more." He leaned in and kissed Loki's brow. "Can you not forgive yourself?" he implored. "Please. Let the Eternal Flame burn it all, and Loki and Thor can be born anew."

Loki murmured, "Is it that easy?"

"Nothing about this is easy," Thor answered with a choked-up laugh. "But we can do it. I forgive you," he declared simply. "Will you forgive me?"

"Of course," Loki muttered. "Of course I do."

"Good." Thor's smile was brilliant, as his hand slid up to cup the back of Loki's neck to bring their
heads together, but he pulled back to frown in worry. "Your skin feels too hot. Are you feverish? Are you sure you are all right?"

"It's the Eternal Flame," Frigga explained. "He will learn to control it better with time."

Loki inhaled a deeper breath and shut his eyes, to re-center himself and pull the Flame tighter in control. "I have it. I suppose it's time to get off the floor."

Thor rose and first helped Frigga, before extending a hand for Loki and pulled him to his feet. Thor kept hold of him at first, uncertain he could stand without help. "I have to try, Thor."

Thor let him go, and Loki stood, while Thor hovered nearby. For a moment he was absolutely still, then shifted his weight from foot to foot with careful deliberation, testing. His smile was brilliant. "I am better than I've been in … some time, I think."

"The dizziness is gone?" Frigga asked, and he nodded.

"Yes, and no more headache. No more pain in my legs," he confirmed also. "I had forgotten what it felt like."

Thor seized his shoulders. "Then it was a success!"

"Oh, far more than that, Thor," Odin murmured, joining them with steps that seemed stronger than Frigga had seen in decades. "Not only did he open the well of power within him, he has now melded with the Eternal Flame."

Thor regarded Loki for a long moment, looked at the empty cauldron, then frowned. "What does that mean?" he asked. "I know that is what you wanted to heal yourself, but-- are you truly alright?"

"I am, Thor. I promise," he reassured Thor. His gaze went distant and his head cantied to one side, and she could distantly sense him reaching into seidr. His hands started to glow with gold and emerald fire. "For what it means -- I cannot say, not yet. There is much greater power available to me." He held up his hands to stare into the twin flames, frowning in mild curiosity, before he clenched both hands into fists and the flames vanished. His gaze slipped aside, and he murmured, "I can sense everyone. Asgard. I think if I listened, I could hear each person. Is this what it is to be Heimdall? How strange...."

Frigga exchanged a glance with Thor, both feeling a bit alarmed by Loki's distraction, as if he might slip away somehow. "Loki?" she asked.

Blinking, he seemed to recall himself. "Asgard." He disengaged from Thor and walked to an empty niche behind the cauldron. He held out his hands before him and gestured, bringing the Casket of the Ancient Winters back between them and setting it in the niche.

"You don't wish it with you?" Thor asked.

"I have no need of its power now," Loki answered, with a dismissal that shocked Frigga. But not as much as his casual promise that followed, "I will bring it to Jotunheim and restore the Realm. But not today. Today I should free Jane of the Aether."

He went past and Frigga realized he meant to do it now. "Loki? Are you sure? So soon? I think you should get more accustomed to the power."

Glancing at her, his eyes held a glowing spark in them that made her very uneasy. "I can do it," he
stated flatly. "There is no need to waste time. Thor? Are you coming?"

There was a glow around him as he started up the steps as Thor hurried to join him, then had to lunge to catch Loki around the waist as he suddenly pitched backward.

"LOKI!" she exclaimed, thankful that Thor was close enough to catch him.

"I have you," Thor promised.

Frigga rushed to join them. "What happened?"

"I thought you were healed?" Thor asked, right on top of her question, bodily carrying Loki back down to the level floor.

"I thought I was," Loki answered, looking pale. Both hands were still gripping Thor's forearm, which was around his middle. "I don't know what happened. I was walking up the steps and was just suddenly dizzy. But I felt the damage heal. I know I was fine." He looked at her, frightened, his eyes now pleading for her to explain.

But it was Odin who had an answer. "You lost awareness of your body, Loki. It is tempting to suffuse yourself with the seidr now at your command, but this--" he tapped Loki's shoulder, "is the house for it. You must not allow the power to consume you. This was a warning."

"I didn't know I was doing it," Loki murmured. "How do I stop it?"

"Until you learn more control, perhaps something to ground yourself?" Odin thumped Gungnir on the floor for emphasis.

Frigga scooped one of Loki's canes from the ground. "Try this again."

He looked at it but made no move to take it. "I'm healed."

"Are you?" she countered gently. "Perhaps a weakness remains. Try it."

His lips twisted but he grabbed the offered cane by the handle, and Thor eased his grip and asked, "All right?"

Loki stood on his own, without the cane touching the floor. "I'm fine," he said. "See?"

But she could see how tightly he was holding the seidr of the Flame, wrapping it around himself like a shroud. "Keep it with you," she advised. "Just in case."

"All right," he conceded. "Shall we try again?" he asked Thor, who nodded and gestured Loki to precede him up the stairs in case Loki fell again.

Which he didn't, but she suspected it was because he thumped the cane lightly every other step and was concentrating more on not letting the power slip free. Then they were out of sight and she whispered, "What have we done to him?"

Odin answered, "He is overwhelmed, now, but he will learn in time."

He should not have reminded her of his part in all this. She turned to confront him. He took a step back, recoiling from the anger now unleashed from her.

"You deceived me because you knew this would happen."
He shook his head once. "I knew he would heal with the Eternal Flame. I did not expect him to heal me."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Do not play word games with me, my lord. You know what I mean." Her hand pointed at the Eternal Flame cauldron. "He could have been completely obliterated by its power. He very nearly was."

"Not that nearly," he corrected. "But I did believe he would take more than a taste, yes. The power is in his blood, Frigga; he could never deny its call. Just as Amora foresaw, ancient blood forged in the Eternal Flame made the Borforce, and so it forged again, in Loki."

"But such a risk?" she asked, voice sliding to plaintiveness and tears pricked her eyes unexpectedly. "For what? For power?"

He turned his head to look at the tesseract glowing with that sapphire light in the far niche. "He will confront Thanos again. I would rather he take his revenge with power, than face him, broken and weak as he was before."

She caught her breath, and had to nod agreement, because of course she wanted that, too. Better to face Thanos with the power to defend himself, than in fear, but that moment she had seen him engulfed in the Flame and the terror struck that Loki would perish in it and she had done nothing to stop it, still coiled around her heart.

Odin's hand closed on her shoulder and she looked up. "I thought-" her voice cracked, "I thought I'd lost him again."

Odin tugged her nearer, to the shelter of his arm. "He is well. And now he will be well for a long time to come."

It was calming and after a moment she could lift her head and look at the now empty cauldron. That spark was now housed elsewhere. It was said the Eternal Flame would survive so long as Asgard did, but what did that mean for Loki? He held the power, but she worried they did not yet understand the consequences. This was not the same as the Odinforce.

"And Hela?" she murmured. "Will you still give him the spell to hold?"

"Eventually. He ensured I need not do it soon, but if he wants it, I will transfer it." His mouth lifted in a bit of a wry smile, though full of regret. "He is too curious to keep her imprisoned. He will free her someday. But at least now he and Thor will have the power to stop her. If they must," he added, with a surprising change of attitude. She lifted her brows at him in curious prompting, and he added, "Perhaps they will not have to. I believe her hate and fury have consumed her, but perhaps our children will have the words to reach her, when I could not."

Knowing the history, Frigga was rather doubtful of that herself, but he was right to hope.

She inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We do not want him removing the Aether without us, I think. We should go." He offered her his arm and she hesitated. "I am still angry with you for trying to do this without my knowledge."

"I know." He said it with simple acknowledgment, not trying to argue her out of her anger or defensiveness.

"But I also know it was Loki's doing. If not this, he would have done something else reckless, perhaps without either of us to help him. As he is probably doing right now. So I have to let it go."

She slipped her hand through his. "Shall we?"
He lifted that hand up to kiss her fingers, in all the apology she was probably going to get for something he thought had been the right thing to do.

Together they left the Treasury to find what their sons were going to do about the Aether trapped in their guest.

tbc...
The Reality Stone

As they walked down familiar corridors, Thor couldn't help glancing at Loki, and smiling. Loki was walking beside him; Loki was well. He had remembered, he had forgiven... And Thor felt lighter himself, as if a long-held weight had finally lifted off.

Loki finally confronted him, impatiently. "What?"


Loki rolled his eyes. "I've been here."

"Not all of you. Now all of you is back." Thor thought of the Eternal Flame and added, jesting, "And a little extra."

Scoffing, Loki kept walking, but not before Thor saw the smile turning his lips.

Loki kept the cane on the opposite side from where Thor was, and while he did not seem to need it to walk, he tapped the floor every other step, which relieved Thor that Loki was being careful. Thor stayed near, just in case.

In the infirmary, they went in to find Jane sitting up in the bed. Thankfully she looked no worse from when Thor had seen her last, and her smile of greeting was bright. "Thor! Loki! Oh my God, you're walking! What did you do?"

"I took in Asgard's power source," Loki answered, rather casually. "And now I can remove the Aether from you."

She blinked. "You... took in ...Asgard's power source," she repeated and looked to Thor. "What does that mean? It sounds very dangerous."

Loki shrugged. "Not as much as it sounds."

Thor, remembering how Frigga had sworn and rushed from the room as if her skirts were on fire, snorted. Loki shot a glare at him.

"I am well, Jane. I told you I would not need your clever contraption for long. But that is unimportant," he waved a hand, pushing the whole issue aside. "I have the strength to remove the Aether now, I believe. So you should lie back and let me take a look."

She hesitated and worried at her lower lip with her teeth before asking, "Is it going to hurt?"

"Looking? No. Removing it? Well, I will do my best to make it as painless as possible," he promised, "but--"

Her small hand touched Loki's arm, halting the reluctant admission that it was probably going to hurt. "It's going to hurt more if you do nothing, right?"

He held her eyes and admitted the truth that no one else had yet told her. "Yes. If I do nothing, it will be a terrible way to die."

She nodded, not surprised. "Then do it. Whatever you can." Her hand tightened when he started to pull away. "Loki? If it doesn't work, then I don't want you to blame yourself. I'm the one who stuck
my hand into the wasp's nest, not you."

"That is generous," he started but she didn't let him finish.

"I mean it. None of this is your fault. You're doing what you can and I appreciate it. No matter what happens."

Thor smiled at her; she was so kind to him, and brave.

Loki gave a sort of half-smile, not quite sure what to do with her absolution, and cleared his throat. "Well, I should get on with it, I suppose." He glanced back at Thor. "You might want to step back. If this goes badly, I will try to shield her, but I doubt I can shield you as well."

"Don't try," Thor suggested. "I can handle it." He didn't like the moment of doubt that crossed Loki's face, but Loki just nodded and returned his attention to Jane. Thor moved back a few steps and to the left so he could watch from the side as Jane lay back on the bed.

The door slid open again and Frigga and Odin entered, distracting Loki again. "I -- Do I need an audience?" he asked, sounding a bit nettled.

"I will not let you do this alone," Frigga replied. "If you need help, we're here."

His jaw clenched as if he wanted to argue and send her away, but gave in to the inevitable. "Fine. Don't interfere," that was sent toward Odin and Gungnir and he turned back without waiting for a response. Taking a deep breath, he tried to make a smile at Jane. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be. What do I do?"

"Hold out your hand," he requested and she held it out to him. He clasped it loosely in both of his, and the reaction was immediate: the scarlet glow infused her skin, as if her blood was a fire. The hairs on his skin stood up, as a wave of something washed through the chamber.

"Ah, no, I think not this time,' Loki murmured and a matching pale golden fire surrounded him.

Thor stared. He'd been told about the Eternal Flame, but to see it, rising from Loki, was something else. He could feel it, his Asgardian heart recognized that power.

But he didn't recognize Loki. Loki was illusions and daggers and tricks.... not this.

The power rose, Thor's uneasiness growing with it. Lightning skittered at his fingertips, roused by what loomed in the air, unseen.

Frigga's hand gripped his arm and he glanced at her, she smiled in understanding but also trying to quell his anxiety. He tried to relax as he turned back to watch-- Frigga did not let go of him.

"Come,' Loki murmured. "You know you can't stay in this form. You have to come out."

Was he talking to the Aether?

jane must've had similar thoughts because she let out a nervous giggle, clapping her free hand over her mouth. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

Loki ignored her, concentrating. "Let go of this form. Let it go, it's not for you. I won't let you take her."

The reddish gleam grew brighter and more scarlet, and Jane began to float above the surface of the
bed. She didn't seem to notice, her brown eyes fixed on his.

"Careful, Loki," Frigga warned softly.

"I need you to give it to me, Jane," Loki said.

"How? I don't know how?" she asked, sounding panicked.

His thumb slid across the back of her hand, trying to soothe her. It was the most gentle thing Thor had seen him do in years, and quite the contrast to his snarling threats against her on the Bifrost and Midgard, trying to provoke Thor.

Loki murmured, "Jane, listen to my voice. Close your eyes. Breathe. Imagine yourself handing it to me, that's all you have to do."

She closed her eyes and tried-- Thor could see it in the way her expression tightened, and she imagined with everything she had.

"Hold it in your hand and pass it to me," Loki urged.

It was hard to see at first, so slow and vague, but then Thor was sure: the red fire in her veins was dulling, coalescing, gathering in her arm and in the hand that Loki held.

"She's doing it!" Thor exclaimed, proud and amazed.

But his voice was too loud, and Jane's eyes opened and she looked right at him.

Or someone did. Someone or some thing with glowing scarlet eyes looked at Thor, and it was not Jane. Her body levitated higher and more upright, Loki still clinging to her hand, but now he looked more like a supplicant to a glowing goddess hovering in midair.

Reflexively Thor took a step toward the Aether-Creature that had taken over Jane, and the glow intensified.

"Thor!" Frigga warned, as the Aether snapped forth in a ruby wave of power. Thor reflexively tried to dive between it and his mother, while she held out a hand to ward the power away.

"Jane!" Loki exclaimed. "You need to control it!"

Blazing eyes turned to look down at him and she yanked her hand from his grip so violently he was hurled back, prone on the floor.

_Oh, this is very bad._

He wasn't the only one to think as Odin stepped forward. "Jane Foster!" he called, power curling around Gungnir in threat.

The Aether gleamed and surged again. And suddenly - the infirmary was gone. The palace was gone. Odin and Frigga were gone.

Thor stood in a tumbled ruin, blasted stone and fallen columns all around, Loki sprawled between them, while darkness without stars arched overhead. Jane still floated, her gown flowing around her bare feet, and her eyes glowing with feral red light.

Without conscious thought, only the awareness that they were in terrible danger, Thor held out his hand and called for Mjolnir.
Please, please, please, he begged Whoever would listen, and let her come to him. Was this reality? An illusion? Was there a difference? Either way he needed Mjolnir.

The feel of her haft snapping into place in his palm, finally, was like coming home. Now, he had the power.

Jane's lips turned up in a disdainful smirk, as if his power meant nothing to her. Was he a threat? Likely no, but he could certainly distract her long enough for Loki to do something.

"Let go of it, Jane!" Thor called. "The Aether is killing you! Please, let go of it!"

He stepped closer, Mjolnir swinging, and very carefully did not look toward Loki on the ground. This was an old tactic of theirs, and one they needed no words to begin. As long as Loki was conscious, he would know to take advantage of the opponent's distraction that Thor was trying to provide.

"You," she snarled.

Jane did not listen, gesturing with her hand. Their surroundings shifted again, became a desert of sand and a narrow dusty road with broken buildings to either side. It was the village of Puente Antiguo again. It looked... and smelled ... real.

And something else appeared, something which should not exist anymore.

Thor took a step back, looking up, as a massive figure formed. Metallic, gleaming, shaped like a man: The Destroyer.

"You brought this to my world!" Jane shouted. "This killing machine!"

The head of it swiveled to stare down at Thor, and the visor began to open, revealing the fire within. Grimly, Thor readied himself to fight. This time, he had powers and he would not be taken so easily.

"No, Jane," Loki said and climbed to his feet. Thor wanted to shout at him to get down, this was not the plan. "I did. Not Thor."

Fiery eyes glared at him. "You killed people. You are a monster."

He flinched but stood tall and fearless. "Bring Asgard back, and you can do what you want to me," Loki offered. "If vengeance is your aim, I won't resist." He spread his palms in a pacifying gesture, and Thor shook his head frantically.

"No, NO, you will not do this! Jane, stop! This isn't you!"

She ignored him, and an instant later the Destroyer and the town were gone, and they were back in Asgard, but on the Bifrost bridge, with Jane floating above it, with the city behind her.

"Thank you," Loki told her, sounding sincere, and then he smiled. "Welcome to Asgard."

A golden halo surrounded Jane's floating form, and Loki thrust out both hands toward her. The Eternal Flame sang, its power pure and brilliant in Thor's veins, while the Aether screamed and thrashed within the sphere of Loki's power.

He staggered, trying to hold her, and clenched his jaw. Thor rushed to his side to hold up Mjolnir, and Loki's left hand seized Thor's around the handle, adding their energies to the battle.
"Give it to me, Jane, please," Loki said through his teeth."I don't want to hurt you."

The scarlet glow began to dim, shrinking away from her skin, down her arm, and when she opened her eyes again, they were her own again, but her face was drawn in agony. "Take it, take it, hurry," she whispered and held out her hand.

Loki extended his free hand toward her, palm up, and she set her hand into his. Scarlet and gold burst wildly from their joined hands, sending them both reeling. Her eyes rolled back and she plummeted to the ground.

Thor caught her around the shoulders, keeping her head from hitting the Bifrost bridge as he skidded on his knees beneath her.

Another heavy thump showed Loki had fallen to one knee, and his face looked ashen, as he swayed.

Another presence intruded and Heimdall moved into view, golden eyes looking from Thor to Loki. "Well done."

"Containment. I can't hold it for much longer," Loki requested, voice ragged. Thor saw his hand resting on his kene, and in his palm sat a ruby-like stone, encased in a greenish-gold aura.

Heimdall raced into the Observatory and returned with a device usually used to keep visitors' artifacts and charmed weapons secure when they came to Asgard. Thor hoped it was strong enough to contain the Aether, but likely Odin and Frigga were on the way, so it wouldn't have to hold for long.

Loki dropped the stone in the crystal box and Heimdall slammed the lid closed. Loki gave a vague smile at him. "Not bad for a monster, hm?"

He barely finished the question before slumping to the ground, boneless with exhaustion. Thor couldn't check on him with Jane equally insensate across his lap. But Heimdall turned his far-seeing golden eyes on Loki and said, "He sleeps."

Thor let out a sigh of relief. "It was close, I think. She was angry at us. At me." He didn't understand completely; he was willing to accept the blame for having drawn the attack on her in the first place, but she had never seemed to behave as if she was angry at him, at all.

"Perhaps the Aether drew it forth," Heimdall suggested.

"I hope so." He looked down at Jane's face, peaceful now. "At least the Aether is gone from her, and she can recover."

He looked up at Heimdall, not realizing until after he asked the question that he must sound quite young, asking for reassurance, "Are we safe?"

Heimdall, as always, was honest. "With three Infinity Gems in Asgard? No, my prince, we are not. But for now? Safe enough."

Thor nodded his thanks and pulled Jane nearer to him, more comfortably, and decided not to move until help came.

tbc...
Healing

Frigga peeked in on Loki first. He was still in the same position she'd left him in, when they'd brought him to his bed from the Bifrost bridge. He didn't stir when she approached his bedside, and his breathing remained slow but steady.

Thor had told her what happened with Jane, and she smoothed Loki's hair off his high brow. It was only exhaustion and he would recover soon, but seeing him so motionless reminded her too sharply of his time in the infirmary.

But he'd fought the Aether and won, and she hoped Thanos had been watching to see his former victim was no longer weak and helpless. "Rest, little love. You bought us time, and you deserve some peace for awhile." She kissed his brow and left the room, warding the door against anyone but his family from entering and disturbing him.

Going up to the infirmary, she expected to find Jane Foster much the same, but instead discovered the mortal wide-awake and dressed, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Good morning, my dear. What a delight to see you awake," Frigga greeted cheerfully. "I expected to find you still resting."

Jane smiled back at her. "I feel fine. Eir has been prodding at me all morning, but the Aether is gone and I'm back to normal."

"Well, that is ... excellent news," Frigga said, pleased but confused. "But are you not still fatigued by the experience?"

Jane spread her hands in a shrug. "No? I feel better than I have since I got that Aether in me, and fully rested. I promise, if I feel the least bit tired or weak I'll come back here," she said to Eir.

Frigga looked to Eir, who looked as puzzled as Frigga felt, but she clearly had no reason to keep Jane in the infirmary as she said, "You are free to leave as you wish."

"Great," Jane said and popped off the bed to her feet. "Is Thor around? Or," she hesitated before adding, "Loki? I should talk to them."

"Thor is in the training field and Loki is still asleep. As I thought you would be," Frigga said, looking to Eir for an explanation.

"From what she has shared about the experience," Eir said, "it seems Loki made an effort to heal her as the Aether was pulled free."

Jane nodded enthusiastic agreement as Eir moved away, her job done. "I didn't know what it was - it was all really confusing, honestly - but there was some kind of-- of warmth that rushed in to fill where the Aether had been. Like, it hurt and was cold and empty, and then it wasn't. It's ... hard to explain," she finished and shrugged, looking disappointed that she didn't think she'd given it the right words.

Frigga nodded slowly. "I think you explained fine, dear. But yes, that does sound rather like the Eternal Flame. It was good of him to help you." She suspected he'd thought she might still die from what the Aether had done, taking over her fragile body in that way.

Jane's lips twisted. "Especially after I-"
When she cut herself off, Frigga prompted, "After?"

"I said something... or the Aether did. To both of them. I didn't mean it, but... it wasn't nice," she admitted, looking down.

"Well, I'm sure they've heard worse, but you should probably tell them this. Come," Frigga beckoned. "I can take you to Thor, at least, while Loki recovers."

Jane walked with her, quiet and curious as they walk from the infirmary. "Can I ask you a question?" Jane started hesitantly and at Frigga's assent, she continued, "During the... when the Aether took over, there was time when this place," she waved a hand, brushing the polished stone of the wall, "was gone. We were back in New Mexico. Or did I bring it here? Or was it illusion?"

Startled by the question, Frigga lost a step and had to frown, wondering how to answer. "I... don't know," she admitted. "I know in our lore, the Aether is known as the Reality Gem. And it has immense power to alter what is seen. Unfortunately I did not see what happened - to my awareness you were in the infirmary and then you were gone, and I could sense the Aether and Eternal Flame on the Bifrost Bridge."

She didn't add that she knew there was time in the middle she could not recall, and it made her very uneasy. She considered talking about it with Loki, but having only just got his memories back of a far longer gap, she wasn't sure what his reaction might be.

But that didn't change the fact that Loki had been there, and she had not, so she added, "Perhaps Loki could tell you. He would know better than I do."

It wasn't a bitter thing to admit. She had acceded to Odin's demand and held Loki back, but now he was free to become who he was always meant to be. And she would no longer fear it.

"I'll ask him later," Jane said, but in a tone that wasn't sure she would or not. Frigga didn't argue, and they left the family wing to arrive at the steps that led down to the Great Hall. The Dark Elf ship was still there, and Jane gasped to see it. "Oh! I didn't know there was a smaller one, too!"

Frigga chuckled, smile irrepressible at the young mortal's enthusiasm. "The king has given it -- and the larger one outside -- to Loki as his warprize for ending Malekith. I believe they are attempting to figure out how to fly it out, since Loki wants it in one piece."

She was pretty sure Jane heard maybe two words, her eyes just glued to the ship. "Can I look at it closer?" Jane asked, still not looking away.

"As close as you like."

Jane was halfway down the stairs before Frigga could move, and she had to smile.

Jane spied a familiar face, of one of the techs standing beneath the forward nose and looking up. "Marten!"

"Lady Jane!"

Jane rushed up to him. "What are you looking at? What kind of propulsion system does it have? Can I see it?" The questions burst out of her in a rush, and thirty seconds later they were knee-deep in technical discussions about the ship.

Frigga watched for a little while, amused. Apparently her son's main competition was going to be alien technology. But Jane was happy and safe, and Frigga would leave her to it.
Loki was barely stirring toward awareness and already knew everything ached. He did not want to wake up and discover how bad it was, but his body persisted anyway, so he opened his eyes.

And shut them again, as the light from the window stabbed him right in the brain. "Shut it," he groaned piteously, knowing someone was in the room with him but closing his eyes against seeing who it was.

Relief in the dimness allowed him to open his eyes and see that he’d sent Odin to darken the window covering. He might have been embarrassed by that, but every cell of his body ached and he had no strength to spare as long as someone was dimming the room.

Odin came up to his bedside and for a moment looked down, regarding Loki. "How do you feel?"

His voice creaking like an ancient barge, he answered, "Like dragon vomit?"

Odin's lips twitched like he thought Loki was jesting. But it was true - being swallowed and then spat back out by a dragon would probably feel all burnt and limp.

"You should not have tried to contain the damage so tightly," Odin advised. "The power had nowhere else to course but through you. Next time, push it through to Asgard."

"I thought the Bridge might collapse," Loki admitted, and barked a rough laugh. "Been there, done that, as the mortals say."

Odin nodded understanding. "Well, it turned out for the best. The Aether is contained, and Jane Foster and you will both recover swiftly." He eyed Loki. "There is something... odd about the mortal now."

Loki felt a twisting of guilt. He knows. "Uh, really? Is she all right?"

Bushy brows lowered at him. "Loki. What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Loki protested reflexively, but then admitted under Odin's stern glower. "I only.... As I was taking it from her hand, it occurred to me that the Aether -- I was going to use it to heal me, after all, so why not... use it... to help her?"

Odin shut his good eye, already suspecting what Loki had done. "What did you do?" Odin repeated.

"You took Thor's powers away from him, remember? I remember. So I gave her some."

"You gave her powers?" Odin asked, but did not sound surprised, only weary.

Loki lifted his chin and admitted, flat out, "I did." Loki didn't want to have this argument lying down, so he pushed himself up to sit against the headboard of his bed, gritting his teeth against the ache in all his muscles at the movement.

Odin pulled the reading chair with his foot and sat in it with a heavy sigh. "Which powers?"

"I don't know," he hedged. "It was all at once. Strength, I think, because I remembered she could not even lift my cane. Healing, because she said humans are quite fragile and slow to heal. And... I think that's all."
It wasn't precisely a lie. He wasn't sure what else he'd done. It had all been so quick.

"Loki," Odin started, "there is a reason we do not go about altering mortals. The mortals do it to themselves, constantly, seeking more and more power, and it always goes poorly. Always. They are not equipped to deal with it. The Kree have done this for centuries, leading to ever-more deadly war. Thanos himself is a product of such things and it drove him mad with power."

"Jane is a good person!" Loki protested.

"And a mortal," Odin emphasized. "A mortal you have now made more akin to the green monster that nearly killed you, than the girl she was yesterday."

Green monster? Loki thought and frowned. He remembered talking about the Hulk with Barton and his other thralls on Midgard. He remembered the plan on the Helicarrier had involved the Hulk. But he still could not recall the Hulk's attack on him. He remembered fighting Thor, and Stark, but nothing past catching Barton's arrow only fragments of waking up in Asgard. Eir had been right, it seemed, even after the Eternal Flame, the rest was gone.

Odin noticed his distraction and let out a sigh. "I suppose it is done now. But Loki, you must be more wise about such decisions."

Loki didn't like thinking he'd done something foolish. "But she said -- I was trying to prove that I wasn't what she said of me."

"I understand you meant no harm, but you altered her life without her wish," Odin told him. "We have too much power to do such things. It is a violation, regardless of your intent."

Loki dropped his gaze to his hands, as his chest ached as if he'd swallowed a coal. He'd tried to do something right, and he was still wrong.

"You are still so very young," Odin murmured, and Loki's gaze flicked up to him, to see Odin's bright blue eye on him, soft with a newfound sympathy. "And as your mother reminds me, frequently, one is never too old to learn. You will learn, Loki. But you have greater power now, and the consequences will be far greater as well. You must consider your actions carefully."

"I will, Father," Loki promised.

"Good. I will send to the kitchens so you might put some flesh back on you. You are still all bone." Odin stood up, with much more ease than he had in the recent past, but turned back before walking away. "Lest I bring only criticism, your actions on the whole were well-done, Loki. You used both power and cleverness to contain the danger. I would like your thoughts later on what to do with the Stones."

Loki had many ideas about that. There had been very little to do but think of this dilemma while trapped in the infirmary. "Yes, of course. Although..." Loki held out a hand before him, remembering the pins driven through it and Ebony Maw's voice in his ear. "I'd really like to use them first."

Odin's expression grew more somber and a flash of the same rage that Loki felt appeared in his eye. His free hand gripped Loki's shoulder. "Indeed. We will discuss our plans. With your mother and with Thor, this time."

He grimaced at the reminder. "Is she very angry about that, still?"

"A bit of gentle apology would not go amiss," Odin advised. "Rest now. Know that we are all very
proud today."

Loki ducked his head, not sure what to say, as a lump formed in his throat and his eyes burned. His father left, and Loki leaned back against the pillows.

His body might still ache, but that crack in his spirit that had formed a long time ago -- the one that had shattered with the revelation of his Jotunn blood and then been torn apart by Thanos and his Black Order -- that crack was healing.
Loki wandered toward the Great Hall, feeling remarkably refreshed after another nap, and it didn't bother him to keep the cane in his left hand as he walked. He was careful on the steps, using the handrail as well, and feeling daring jumped the final step to the floor, just to see if her could. He couldn't help a smile, as the surge of satisfaction at the simple success made him feel like a child again, though it occurred belatedly he should have checked if anyone was watching first. Only one servant appeared to be paying attention, and she smiled back, pleased or amused, and bobbed a little curtsy when she saw his notice.

The Svartalfar ship -- his ship -- was still there, swarmed by workers, so he walked nearer to find what they were doing. The ship was humming with power, he noticed, and the boarding ramp was down so he walked up inside, looking around curiously.

"Oh! My prince!" one of the technicians greeted, and the three people sitting around the console in front stopped working and started to get up.

"No, no, please don't stop on my account." They all went back to whatever they'd been doing, and he was regretting his choice of words because he wanted someone to tell him about the ship, when a familiar voice greeted him.

"Loki! You're up!" Jane exclaimed, and he turned to see her getting to her feet from where she'd been inside the side wall. "This ship is amazing!" she told him, her eyes bright. "Marten and I've been tracing the power supply. Did you know it seems to work on entirely different principles as Asgard's?" She didn't stop to hear an answer, continued to explain what she'd found.

He listened with only partial attention, thinking that, whatever Odin might think, it couldn't be wrong to help her, and ensure she would stay like this for much longer.

She blinked and the explanation stopped. "Is everything all right?" she asked and her enthusiasm dimmed like a star being eclipsed. "I'm sorry, I was blabbering. I wanted to talk to you, actually." She looked around. "In private, if possible."

"Certainly." He led the way back out to the side of the hall, beyond the columns to the outer promenade in the sunlight. "Sounds serious?" he asked, half-joking, but inwardly he braced himself. She must know what he'd done.

She looked out toward the Bifrost Bridge and touched her lips with her tongue. "I wanted to apologize."
He stared at her, completely taken by surprise. "You? For what?"

"I said - the Aether said - I didn't mean it. I don't think you're a monster," she turned to him, earnest brown eyes searching his.

"Oh, that." It still stung, if he was honest with himself, but he had to shrug. "You weren't wrong."

"Yes, I was!" she insisted. "You're not a monster. I was just... " she turned her head, frowning, trying to find the words to explain. "I guess I didn't realize how angry I was about Puente Antiguo until the Aether dragged it out of me. All my work, my .. dreams... it all fell apart when Thor landed in front of my car. I mean, sure it proved me right, but then made it impossible to do anything with that knowledge, SHIELD stole my work, then that creature-robot-thing attacked and I got hustled off to the Arctic because they were afraid you'd hurt me I guess...."

He seized her hand to tug her back to face him. "I would not have hurt you, Jane," he promised. "Even at my most ... mad, angry at Thor, I taunted Thor about you, but I did not seek you out."

"Oh, good to know. I mean, I certainly don't think you will now, anyway, so that's all that matters, but I'm glad you weren't like that then either."

In truth, he knew he had been. If she had been within easy each, who knew what he might have done? He'd been eager to hurt Thor, and he still didn't know how much of that was his own and how much had been thrust on him by the scepter.

But in trying not to hurt her, he'd done something else. He knew he had to tell her, but for a moment could only look at her, helpless to know how to start that didn't sound pathetic. I wanted your good opinion to me so I did this thing I should not have...

Yes, that sounded brilliant. Where was that supposed 'silvertongue' when he needed it most?

A frown grew on her face as she looked up at him. "It's really okay," she said finally. "I'm not mad about Puente Antiguo anymore. I'm more mad at SHIELD, I think."

He shook his head, and waved a hand at the Dark Elf ship. "They didn't take all your work, surely? You have that now and Asgard. Things you surely find more interesting than whatever you were doing on Midgard?"

"But that's yours," she said.

"I would be delighted if you spend as much time as you like learning about it," he offered, and grinned. "If you promise to tell me of your discoveries."

"Of course!" Her look grew sly. "I can show you what we've got so far?"

She knew how tempting that offer was, the minx, but he took a hold on his curiosity and reminded himself why he had wanted to speak to her in the first place. "In a moment."

Her curiosity turned to concern when he didn't speak right away. "What is it?"

"Apparently I have to tell you something, which you have not discovered yet," he started, hedging the truth awkwardly. This would be so much easier if she already knew and was confronting him.

How does one confess to making such life-altering decisions? At least when I changed Sif's hair, she knew right away.
Then he knew; he would show her. "Hold out your hand for a moment, I want to give you something." With a perplexed look, she put out her hand palm up.

"You're not giving the Aether back, I hope?" she joked with a nervous laugh.

"No, not that." He swung his cane in a twirl that landed it right across her palm.

She jumped and grabbed it reflexively, blurring, "You know it's too heavy--" But then he wasn't holding it anymore, and she was. She stared at it, raised it up and down experimentally, and then looked him in the face. "What? Is this a different-- Are you pranking me?"

"You're stronger," he gave her the truth flatly. "At the end, with the Aether, I was concerned it might still damage you. I wanted to make sure you recovered. So I gave you extra strength and healing. I didn't mean -- well, that's a lie, I did mean for it to happen, but it happened so quickly, I didn't exactly consider all the consequences."

"Consequences?" she repeated, and lowered the cane to rest the tip on the floor. Her small body tensed like a deer at the scent of a wolf. "Like what?"

"You will stay stronger and will heal yourself from most injuries and illness," he paused to make sure Odin was not listening and added, "That will give you a longer lifespan."

Her brows shot up and her lips parted, before she shut her mouth with a decisive snap and asked, "How much longer?"

"I have no idea how long you would live normally, so perhaps... double?" he hazarded. "It depends how much the healing slows your aging."

She nodded slowly, brown eyes thoughtful. "You gave me super strength, super healing, and doubled my lifespan," she repeated in a strange tone as if she thought he was making a jest at her expense, but then looked at the cane she was lifting easily. "You made me like Captain America, without the serum."

He considered what he knew about Rogers and gave a shrug. "I suppose. Though hopefully you will choose less ridiculous attire."

That earned him a snort, but the amusement passed as she lowered her gaze to think. "Can you undo it?"

He was disappointed that she would ask. He'd thought she would be more eager to explore the possibilities. But perhaps Odin had been right, and the mortals couldn't handle it. He grimaced a half-smile. "Perhaps. I can try. Though I have to warn you that quite often what is done cannot be undone where powers are concerned."

"That's all right. I just wanted to know my options." After a moment of silent consideration as she looked at the alien ship, she faced him again. "I'm not sure I want you to," she admitted.

He felt a stirring of hope. "No?"

A definite smile was playing at her mouth and making her eyes shine. "Seems like a waste, doesn't it?"

"It does," he agreed, a little hesitant to play along, Odin's words still on his mind that he had done something wrong to her.
"I mean, humans dream of this chance. To be stronger and more dangerous." She playfully tried to poke him with the cane and he reflexively turned to let it pass to the side, aware there was a blade in there even if she was not.

"Can you teach me?" she asked. "How to fight?"

He regarded her, surprised. "Me?"

"You seem like a good teacher, and you can handle weapons. I mean, I'm not gonna carry some big hammer," she rolled her eyes, "but I can see myself with daggers. And I'd like to learn how to defend myself better."

He was struck by the incongruity for a moment, that anyone would ask him for weapons' instruction. But then he shook his head to deny her request, realizing too late that he shouldn't have, as a sudden dizziness struck, the world not settling after the quick movement of his head.

"Oh no!" Jane darted forward to grab his shoulders as he staggered a step and headed for the ground. "Got you."

And she did, her new strength holding him upright until he was able to straighten and take the cane she handed to him. Her brown eyes settled on him in distress. "I thought you were healed."

"I am. As much as possible, I suppose. The Eternal Flame healed the damage, but it seems a bit... imperfectly." He kept the bitterness out of his voice. Everything he'd risked to heal himself, and it hadn't worked, not completely. Odin had been wrong; it wasn't just his inexperience handling the Eternal Flame, the flaw in his brain was still there. He hoped he'd be able to fix it as he grew to know the power in his veins better, but he feared it was permanent. Perhaps the Norns were still punishing his attempted suicide.

Not that Jane wanted to hear all that, so instead he said simply, "Which is why I'm not going to teach you - I'll help as I can, of course, but I think my mother would be better. I learned from her, so you'll be in good hands."

"Oh, wow. That would be amazing to learn from her. She fought so well during the attack. But, I'm sorry that you aren't completely better." Her hand touched his arm in sympathy.

It was probably no less than he deserved, in truth, but he made himself smile at her. "I believe you were going to tell me about the ship?"

For a moment, she looked resistant to his deflection, but decided to let him. "All right."

As expected, once she started, her need to share her discoveries, and it wasn't too long before they were both wedged inside a wall mid-ship, while she showed him a conduit. It was glowing a strange deep violet, and nothing like Asgardian ships at all. "Marten and I, and the others, we can't figure out what this does? Obviously it's powered, but I traced it and it goes in a circle from the bridge to propulsion to weapons, but there's no generator that anyone can find. It doesn't make any sense, so then I thought - maybe it's magic?" She turned her head to look at him hopefully.

"See, already you know more than any other Midgardian," he teased gently, and held out his hand, calling seidr to look beyond sight.

First he saw Jane - beautiful in all dimensions, gleaming with a new power, and for a moment, his heart ached at the thought that she was not for him. *Let me give you all this, Jane, all this wonder, forever...*
No. He couldn't.

*Remember what you promised Thor,* he reminded himself sharply. But now that he'd given longevity to her it seemed a dark fate he'd made for himself.

*Enough. She's being kind, and I'm reacting like a desperate fool. She has no interest in you that way, and never will. Pull it together.*

He pulled his gaze from her to look at the open panel and the mystery conduit. It pulsed scarlet in seidr, and all thoughts of trivialities vanished as he recognized it. "It's the Aether," he murmured. "Or rather, the power they pulled from it long ago. It's powering the ship. There's a crystal somewhere that's holding the reservoir."

"Oh. The Aether huh," she reached out but didn't quite touch the reddish glowing wall. "I thought it looked like blood."

"In a way, I suppose it is, and the crystal is its heart."

She patted the wall and then suddenly laughed. He frowned at her confused, and she explained, still laughing, "It's *crystal powered.* No one will ever believe me!"

He had no idea why that was funny -- Hadn't Fury been making weapons out of the tesseract? It couldn't be that strange a concept even on primitive Midgard -- but he smiled, amused by her amusement, and was just glad to see that she seemed happy.

...
High above and down below

Thor went to the training field to spar with anyone who was there, feeling restless. Finally, after three dull training bouts with Einharjar, Volstagg showed up and he accepted Thor's invitation to spar with quarterstaffs. Odin had pointed out Thor's deficiency with long weapons, and Thor thought he should train more with it, even if he had Mjolnir back now.

Volstagg as always fought like a bull, using his bulk and muscle to overpower his foe, especially when their staves bound together. Thor found himself fighting more with Loki's style of agility and quickness, darting in to attack and then back out again, to draw Volstagg into lumbering pursuit. It winded him and he grew careless, letting Thor get a good hit on his shoulder and then an awkward grip that spun the staff right out of Volstagg's hands and sent Volstagg on his backside.

"Yield!" Volstagg said quickly, and laughed. "You are too quick for this old man, lad."

Thor held out a hand to yank him to his feet. "Well fought. For an old man."

"You've given me a powerful thirst. Come, let us drink," Volstagg said and Thor threw the practice staff in the bucket as they left.

At the long tables by the river, beyond the training yard, they took the corner away from others and not until the girl set down the tankards, did they talk about anything but the match.

Volstagg wiped the foam from his beard, having gulped at least half, and set down the tankard with a thump. "So. How does Loki fare? Fandral said he was on his feet, but with walking sticks?"

"He improves," Thor said, not sure what else to say. Nothing about the Aether was known to anyone beyond the family and Heimdall and Thor was not sure if Volstagg knew about the Eternal Flame at all. "He now needs but one stick, and we have hope that will improve as well."

"Good, good," Volstagg nodded. "Though I do have to ask," he leaned forward and lowered his voice, "Just between us, you can say, it was you who killed the Dark Elf King, was it not?"

There had been a time, Thor realized, when he would have answered with enough insinuation to make others believe that, in fact, it had been his deed. The memory made him feel sick and ashamed now. No wonder Loki had been angry at him. Bad enough Thor had plenty of his own deeds, but then he'd stolen some of Loki's as well. Not from malice, but for glory, justifying it that he'd done something to help, and Loki wouldn't mind sharing the credit.

"No, it was not," Thor said flatly. "He killed Malekith with a spear of ice as thick as your arm from his chair. And he killed Malekith's servant, the Kursed monster, when both attacked him and Mother, believing foolishly they were helpless. I did not arrive until both were already dead."

"Oh." Volstagg leaned back, blinking at his mug, as if the universe had slid a bit sideways from what he had thought. "From his chair, you said."

"With sorcery," Thor said. Watching Volstagg, he remembered what Loki had said about Volstagg telling everyone, and had an idea. It felt very much like a Loki thing to do as he leaned forward and added in a quieter voice, "I don't think I realized until that moment how powerful he truly is. He was sitting down, hardly able to stand, and he killed that Dark Elf king and his monster warrior. He saved Jane and Mother."
He wanted to say something about how Loki had saved them all from the Aether, but thought that might be too much, so he added more simply, "And probably all of Asgard if Malekith had taken the power infesting Jane." He shook his head ruefully and drained his cup before slamming it back down. "I don't know, old friend, something has awakened inside him, as if slipping so near death broke loose what once was caged."

Volstagg nodded, very slowly, but his eyes gave him away as impressed. "Well, we always knew he was something different, didn't we?"

'Different', Thor thought of the story his parents had told, about what had happened to Frigga and Laufey being Loki's blood father, which was oddly less different than the story he'd heard first about Loki being pure Jotunn shapeshifted to Aesir. "Different, but a warrior nonetheless," Thor said and pushed himself to his feet. "I should go visit and see how he fares today. You are welcome to come with me and visit as well?"

Volstagg grimaced. "Fandral said he was... reluctant to have visitors."

'True, he has been touchy while healing, but he was walking yesterday, so I think he would be more welcoming today."

Volstagg stood to join him. "Then I should greet the hero of the Battle against the Dark Elves!" he declared loudly, and Thor slapped his shoulder, approving.

Thor expected to find Loki in his room or perhaps with their mother, but instead saw him immediately in the Great Hall. Holding one of his canes, he stood beneath the aft end of the Dark Elf ship, looking up at the underside. He called something up into the ship and then, before Thor's eyes, the engines at the back sent out a blast of flame.

The fire engulfed Loki utterly.

"LOKI!" Thor yelled, panic clutching at his heart and he ran toward the fire. If he could just get there, pull Loki out, faster...

The flames parted, as if they were but noxious smoke, and Loki lowered his free hand from waving it aside. "I see the problem!" he called, as the engines shut off.

"Loki," Thor couldn't quite halt his forward rush gracefully, stumbling the last steps. "Are you--unharmed?"

Loki sneezed, apologizing, as he wrinkled his nose. "I'm fine. No need to be alarmed."

Thor stared at him. "You were on fire."

Loki rolled his eyes. "I hold the Eternal Flame, Thor. There is very little that can harm me now. And especially not fire." His gaze slipped past Thor, and he drew himself straighter, as Volstagg approached.

"Loki! That was remarkable," Volstagg said. "You look very well. Indeed, nearly all recovered," he nodded down to the cane. "Only a bit longer and you'll free of that, eh?"

Loki did not respond to Volstagg's cheer, his expression staying fixed. "Perhaps."

"When you are recovered, perhaps we could spend some time on the training field?" Volstagg invited. "Thor just now--"
Loki interrupted. "Pardon me, but I was in the middle of something important." He turned and stalked away, heading up the ramp into the ship.

Shocked by this rudeness, Thor excused himself from Volstagg and hurried after. "Loki!" His brother waited within, lifting a brow curiously. "What was that?" Thor demanded in a harsh whisper, aware of other ears nearby. "Why were you so rude to our friend?"

"Our friend?" Loki repeated. "No, your friend."

"What? Hundred of years we all went adventuring together--"

Loki stepped close, sudden sparks of fury in his eyes. "Hundreds of years were enough for him and the others to think I murdered Father," he hissed. Thor jerked back, recalling what they'd let spill of events while he'd been on Midgard the first time. Loki saw the reaction and smiled thinly. "Yes, I remember that, too. They are not my friends. They never were my friends, only yours, and I am tired of pretending to be friends with people who loathe me."

"That is not true!" Thor protested, and Loki gave him a baleful look.

"No? Do you want to see, Thor? Do you want to know the truth?" he demanded and his hand shot out to Thor's forehead.

For a moment he felt nothing, only the press of Loki's cold fingers on his skin, and then abruptly he was elsewhere: a spinning deluge of memories, of slights and jests, year after year after year; culminating in a conversation they'd thought was unheard, not realizing that Gungnir let the king eavesdrop when he wished and Loki had wished to know exactly what the warriors intended to do. Thor gasped and staggered back, hands up as if to push the memories away.

Loki's pale eyes were distant, paying Thor no attention. "They betrayed me," he said. "That I could forgive, since, after all, Hogun was correct, even if he leapt to that conclusion with far too much ease. But what I can not withstand-- they could not tolerate me for a day. Not one day without your presence. That was when I knew beyond all doubt they were no friends of mine and never would be."

His voice was calm, but bitter - a tone of resignation. But then he lifted his face to have his gaze meet Thor's and there was power there, which Thor expected to see, and determination, which he did not, and Loki said, "I will not live in your shadow, Thor. That path is darkness and misery and I will not walk it again."

Thor wanted to tell him he understood, that it was all right, but Loki twisted the air around his body, there was a breeze, and Loki was gone.

Thor let out a long breath, unsure what he should feel about it all.

After a moment, a noise to the left drew his attention and he looked over to see Jane trying to slip out of the bulkhead panel. She gave him an awkward smile of the caught, and a bit too bright, "Hi."

But she grew somber right away and asked, "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "You heard?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to but you were right there..."

"It's fine, Jane. You couldn't help it." Loki had to have known she was there, so he hadn't said anything he didn't want her to know. He swallowed. "I just -- I thought I knew what was
happening, and I didn't know anything."

Her eyes were soft. "Sif, the others, what did they do? He said they betrayed him."

He thought back to what Loki had shared. "He showed me," he put a hand to his head, "He was right. I thought they were his friends, too, but to him... they tolerated him, for me. And when I wasn't there, they came to find me." At the moment Loki had discovered the horrific secret -- one of the secrets -- of his blood, they'd also believed him a traitor and a murderer and they'd gone to find Thor. No wonder he'd sent the Destroyer. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and heaved a breath. "I don't know if he'll ever forgive them."

She cocked her head a bit, and in that moment reminded him of how she'd looked with the Aether possessing her. She was small, but formidable. "Should he?" she asked. He didn't think he flinched, but she saw some reaction and hurried to add, "I mean, they were friendly to me, so I don't share that feeling, but if they thought that badly of him after so long, well, that's a bit more than, I don't know, a misunderstanding."

He let out a sigh and nodded agreement. "I know. I just want them to be friends again, because they used to be. It wasn't all a lie. And I don't know how to fix it."

"Well, he probably needs some time," she advised. "He's still recovering. We all are, I guess."

She looked hesitant, making him ask worriedly, "Are you well?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Better than fine, really," she added with a bright laugh, that faded, "I already spoke to Loki but I should tell you too, I'm so sorry I said those awful things." He frowned in confusion, and she explained, "During the Aether. I made it sound like I blamed you, but I didn't. Not really. I was just... angry, and it came out like that."

"Oh. I thought it was fair," he admitted. He'd been more occupied with trying to keep her attention than listening to her words, and he'd known the possession was affecting her. "I did fall unasked into your life. I put you in danger that you did not deserve. You have nothing to apologize for.

Certainly not to him, since she'd been more harsh with Loki, but she'd already spoken to him she said so that was dealt with.

"Well, all right, if you're sure." She smiled at him, a bit tentatively, and he wished he could erase all of this to go back to just the two of them in the desert before all this had happened.

"I am." He cast around for something to ask about. "I saw you got the engines working. Right into Loki's face. I was... concerned." That was a wild understatement--his heart still felt tight from his fear and he wanted to go find Loki and shake him.

"It was a bit scary the first time we ran the test," she agreed, but with far less concern. "I thought for sure it was too strong, but he said he needed to watch from the inside and he could shield himself, and I said you'll get fried to a crisp, and he said he wouldn't, and we had a little fight, because I thought he was being reckless and dumb, but I guess he was right. He knew he could handle it," she related breathlessly. "All that power from a crystal the size of my fist. Do you want to see?"

"The crystal?" he asked, unsure if that was what she was asking.

"Uh, yeah. It trapped some of the Aether in it, Loki said. I'm still trying to figure out how, but without taking it from the housing, because he said we don't know how to put it back. So shouldn't try yet, not until we get the ship out of the palace at least, because I'm sure your father's already
mad this is taking so long."

The thought of Odin being mad at Jane for this - when it was absolutely not her fault - made him straighten. "Did he say something to you?"

She held out her hand in a pacifying gesture. "No, no, I haven't seen him, but still, who wants an enemy ship stuck in their hall? I wouldn't. So that's why we were testing the engines, to prep for flying it out. And then we found a problem, but I think he said he knew what it was. So hopefully tomorrow maybe we'll be able to fix it."

He relaxed again, glad Odin wasn't being difficult about this. He'd agreed to Loki's idea to fly the ship out, so it wouldn't be very fair for him to get angry about it, especially not after only two days. "Ah, good. Are you going to fly it?"

"Me?" She laughed and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I could never."

"I doubt that," he said. She glances up sharply, as if surprised by his words. "I think you could."

"All right, not 'never'. That's a long time, and I'm sure I could learn to fly it by then," she allowed after a moment, and laughed again to herself. "I'll have the time, after all."

He frowned, caught by her words. They hit a place in him he'd been trying not to think about at all, that even though the Aether was gone and she was on the mend, she was still mortal. And mortals were... mortal. Jane was mortal. That was inevitable. "What? What do you mean?"

"Oh, you haven't heard?" she asked and bit her lip. "I hope it's not supposed to be a secret then, but, um, when Loki pulled out the Aether he... helped me. Made some alterations physically, so I'll live longer. Like Captain America."

Thor stared at her, looking for any difference, but seeing nothing. "And you're ... all right with this?" he asked carefully. She didn't sound upset by it and had seemed amused by it before, but he didn't want to be happy about it if she wasn't.

"Of course! I think it's everyone's dream to be able to live longer. To see more, do more, not suffer old age too soon," she said, then shrugged. "I'm sure there'll be drawbacks to it. But for now, it seems pretty exciting."

Looking into her bright eager eyes, Thor knew: *He did this for me, so I wouldn't lose her so quickly.* He seized both her hands and brought them up to his lips. "I'm glad."

She blushed and looked away, pulling her hands loose as if he'd made her uncomfortable. He let her go and said, trying to lighten the atmosphere, "You will definitely have time to learn how to fly this ship, and any ship, then."

"Right. Though honestly the power source interests me more. Loki's the one who wants to fly it."

Thor's first thought was that Loki knew little about flying either, despite all his centuries, and had certainly never flown a Dark Elf ship, but on the other hand, Loki really wanted to fly. "He's always tried so hard to find a way to fly with magic," he said. Because of Mjolnir, he knew-- flying with Mjolnir had been one of the things that had cut a chasm between them and Loki's resentment of that had led him down some dark and strange magical paths. But now... He frowned with the sudden thought. "I wonder if the Eternal Flame will allow him to fly now. I hope so. He'll like that."

He smiled, imagining Loki floating in the air, able to fly at Thor's side for the first time.
"Flying with the Eternal Flame. That's just ridiculous," Jane shook her head, but her expression was amused. "People should not be able to fly under their own power, ignoring gravity and lift and all the other science of flight. It's annoying."

He knew she was teasing, so he grinned and offered, "Would you like to fly with me? I can show you what it's like." He held out his hand. "I promise no floating chair, no alien spacecraft, no mechanical suit, can compare."

He wondered if he'd been tricked into the offer, when her hand grabbed his without hesitation. "Yes. I would. Thanks."

Only a minute later, she was shrieking into his ear, but obviously with excitement as they were pulled by Mjolnir off the balcony. He held her slim form around the waist and her surprisingly strong arms wrapped around him, while his other hand held Mjolnir.

Everything was perfect as they soared high above Asgard.

They hovered there, letting her look. Her eyes were wide but delighted to see it beneath them; she was not afraid at all.

"Oh Thor, it's so beautiful," she whispered. "This is amazing."

As was she.

Frigga entered her garden, curious and concerned. She'd felt Loki cross the ward -- something she had laid long ago when she realized he went there when troubled -- but she had thought he was occupied in the hall with the ship.

She found him surrounded by flowers whose stalks definitely had not come up to his waist yesterday. She lifted her brows, impressed, as he held out a hand, the other on his cane. His jaw was tight with concentration as two stalks visibly sprouted another hand higher. The touch of seidr was light, but the power behind it... He was learning control, and learning it quickly.

Still, she kept her voice light. "What did the violets do to you, my son?"

He tossed a glance at her, half-smiling. "They complained of being too short to see the light."

She moved nearer. "And?"

"And? Nothing. I wanted to try it." He let his hand fall and for a moment, avoided looking at her.

"And?" she repeated more softly. "Did something happen with Jane?"

He flinched almost guiltily, but then shook his head. "No. Volstagg came to talk to me." His knuckles went white on the curved handle. "As if nothing had happened. As if I didn't remember, and he could pretend to be my friend. And Thor encouraged it, just as blind as always. It reminded me of..." he swallowed and looked away, free hand gathering into a fist and pressing his thigh.

"Of?" she prompted gently.

"Of why I let go," he whispered. For a moment he looked bereft, pale eyes haunted.

"Sweetheart," she murmured and would have tried to embrace him, except his anger sparked and he flung out both hands, the cane falling to the ground.
"What is the point?" he demanded furiously. Threads of power came off his hands, skeins of emerald and gold that whipped out, slicing the stalks of the flowers he had grown. "To have power but be alone? To be healed but not completely? To be free, but still remember!"

He crumpled to his knees, hands digging in the ground then clutching his head. The broken stems and flowers turned instantly limp and brown, and a wave flowed out from him - not frost as she thought at first, only death. The flowers died, then the grass pathway, spreading outward.

"Loki!" she called sharply, holding her own power if he failed to stop it. Her citrus trees bordering the path lost their blossoms, white petals falling like snow, then the leaves turned brown and fell off, leaving skeletal branches.

At first he didn't hear, trapped in whatever dark memory held him, until she called again, "Loki!" He looked up, noticed the spreading death, and with a shuddering breath, he gathered the power back.

Eyes wide with horror, he stared at what his power had caused. It was rather stunning to see the profusion of color remaining by the eastern entrance but this half was nothing but bare sticks and dry leaves on the ground. "Is this what I do?" he whispered, pale and shocked.

She knelt before him and grabbed his cold hands in hers. "No harm done, sweetling."

"No?" He barked a strangled laugh. "I killed half your garden."

"You can help me grow it back. They're just plants." She chafed his hands between hers to warm them and then just held them. He didn't pull away, letting his hands stay within hers, and dropped his head, shoulders sagging in defeat. "I'm more concerned with you. You lost control. Because of ... memory?" she asked.

"No," he started in a reflexive denial but his voice trailed off, and when he spoke again it was in softer admission, "You were right. I was better off not remembering." His fingers trembled so she tightened her grip.

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"You can get through this," she reassured him. "You're not alone. You have your family to help you. It's only been a little while, Loki. All of that fell on you in an instant, it will take time."

He swallowed. "We don't have time. Not enough. He said - he promised -" His voice died away, but she waited, knowing sometimes he would speak if she left the silence open long enough. His throat worked and his lips parted but nothing came out. She leaned closer to rest her head against his.

"Thanos is powerful," she murmured. "But so are we. You are no longer the battered shell he could force to his own design. He hurt you, and you're afraid," his head came up as if he wanted to deny it, but she shushed him. "Of course you are. There is no shame in admitting fear, little one. Courage is what we do in the face of our fear, and I know you have plenty of courage."

He shook his head in denial. "I couldn't stop him, I couldn't stop any of them," he whispered in confession, tensing as if he feared her response. "I couldn't--" His voice broke and she let go of his hands to wrap her arms around him.

"Oh my precious boy." She kissed the side of his head. "You had to survive. In dark places victories are small, but they are victories. You won, and you're here now, back with people who love you."

She smoothed the back of his head, caressing lightly with one hand even as he muttered, "I'm so
tired of being weak."

"Hush. You're not. A weak person would not be here now. You survived what would have destroyed lesser beings."

"I shouldn't need--"

She cut that off. "Shouldn't need comfort? Shouldn't need your mother? Nonsense. I'm here, and I will give you whatever you need. Because you're my son, and I love you, and none of that comes with caveats or conditions."

He sniffed, but she could sense a little thread of sudden contentment as he said, "You are my mother."

Her brows drew together, not understanding why he said it with such a tone of wonder. "Yes? Of course...." Oh. Oh no, he had believed in that time of suffering that he was fully Frost Giant. She wondered what Thanos had tortured him with, taking that half-truth and twisting it. Had he tried to convince Loki that he was no son of hers at all, not by blood, and not by heart either?

She blinked back tears and repeated, with emphasis as if she could counter such lies in the past and fix her own terrible mistake, "You are my son." Her arms tightened on him. "Always."

They sat together amid the dead remains of temper and anguish, until the shadows lengthened and he'd found his peace again.
Caught in a snare

As soon as he felt less like something a cat left on the floor, Loki straightened and inhaled a steadying breath. He'd already apologized, at least five times tearfully, for destroying the garden and for going to the Eternal Flame in secret and for everything else, so he didn't do it again. But his chest tightened with remorse anyway, as he saw the expanse of dead plants. He'd destroyed something his mother had worked so hard to create and tended with her own hands.

Exhaustion tugged at him, deeper than merely physical tiredness. He didn't want to rise yet, but knew he should.

Frigga watched him, expression still concerned, but then she tried a little smile. "I had thought to try to coax you to the feast tonight, but I think that would be best another day."

He grimaced. "Not today, no." Preferably not ever, but he didn't think he was going to get his way on that. Not after having been 'dead' for more than a year. And since he'd already been seen in the Great Hall with the ship, it was not as if he could pretend he didn't want to be seen in public at all.

But all he wanted to do right now was go back to his chambers, throw himself onto the bed, and sleep until morning. If the dreams would let him.

"You do need to eat something," she reminded him. "So perhaps you and I, Thor, and Jane Foster, too, if she would prefer a smaller dinner arrangement in the family dining room. Odin must preside, but he might join us later."

Although he thought longingly of his bed, he was hungry, so he nodded. Then let out a sigh. "I should go find Jane. I rather abruptly left our experimenting with the ship."

Frigga's smile widened. "I think she was occupied. I saw Thor take her flying above." She flicked her gaze up at the sky.

Of course he did, Loki held back the words from speaking them aloud, knowing how bitter they would sound. "That's good then," he said instead, and busied himself with stretching for the cane, which had fallen out of easy reach. He climbed to his feet with care, worried the dizziness would come back. He held out his free hand to his mother, though she needed help less than he did and then he stood there, unable to get himself to move. Her smile widened with affection and she patted his cheek.

"Go rest, sweetie. I will fetch you for dinner."

He left the garden, glad to stop looking at the destruction he'd caused, and headed back to his chambers. He paid no attention walking there, could not remember seeing anything on the way, until he was on his bed staring up at the ceiling.

Rest did not come.

Every time he closed his eyes, that hideous face loomed over him and the deep voice commanded, "Break him."

Corvus had pinned him to the stone through his abdomen, while the big one had taken each limb and snapped it. He couldn't scream because the Other was in his head, while Ebony Maw's voice slithered into each crack the pain caused.
"He shall be your father, he shall guide you and make you strong..."

He seized his pillow and hurled it off the bed as hard as he could. Then he sat up and put his head in his hands, tugging at his hair. He tried to breathe and focus on other things. All he'd done this afternoon was be upset about remembering this, and if he could just put it away... He needed to stop thinking about it, stop the phantom ache in his legs, stop having to push the memory back in the dark...

"Your salvation shall be in obedience..."

Angry and upset, he heaved himself out of bed, knowing he'd get no rest. Sitting around wasn't helping; crying all over his mother wasn't helping-- so what would help? Doing something about it.

It wasn't hard to get back into the Treasury. Odin had strengthened the guard and reinforced the shield, but neither were more than a moment's inconvenience to Loki.

He descended the stairs with care to look at the Infinity Stones: the tesseract on its pedestal, brilliant and shining blue; the Aether like scarlet smoke in its containment device; and the Mind Gem trapped within its poisoned shell behind the ward. Loki flinched at the sight of the scepter, repelled by the reflexive desire to take hold of it. That desire was not his own, but implanted there to ensure a conduit between his mind and Thanos' henchman.

He returned to the tesseract. The power from all three on his senses was immense, nearly blinding if he opened himself to it, but the Space Gem inside was the most brilliant. With that stone he could go straight to Thanos.

And with the Infinity Gauntlet in the far niche, he could wield all three.

Kill Thanos. End this now. Have his revenge. Be able to sleep again.

"Wisdom is thinking through the consequences of one's actions," Odin's voice said suddenly behind him. Loki started, having not noticed him enter at all, too enraptured by the stone.

"I am thinking," Loki answered, without looking away from the glow of the stone. "I'm thinking I take that, go straight to Thanos and cut off his head before he can stop me. I can do it."

Odin moved up beside him and when Loki glanced at him, saw he was looking at the cube, too.

Odin didn't argue directly; instead, he asked, "And his minions?"

Loki flinched, memories of blades and pain flashing through him, before he set his jaw and answered, "Them, too. There are three Gems."

"And only one way to wield them together," Odin answered.

Loki turned around slowly, to face the gauntlet on its pedestal. "Is that not its purpose?"

"It's fake."

"Well, I know the gems are fake, obviously, but if I replace them with the real ones--"

"You will die," Odin interrupted, and Loki faced him, incensed by the lack of faith. After all this, for Odin to still doubt him?

"I have power--"
Odin cut him off. "It is not a real gauntlet, only a gold copy. Bor destroyed the real one a long time ago. This one is a snare. If anyone attempts to wear it and put a real Stone in it, they will die."

Loki's lips parted in surprise and he looked between the golden gauntlet on its stand and Odin. "I'm glad I waited then," he said dryly, but couldn't keep his humor, thinking all of the ways that secret could have turned out poorly. Setting a snare for the unwary was clever, but letting his sons be caught by it--

He swallowed, realizing the truth. The snare had been for him, that was why he didn't know. It was only now that Odin had some faith and understanding in Loki, that he had been told.

Odin saw his recognition and added, "The snare was for anyone who hungered for conquest and power. Not you specifically, Loki."

"But you didn't warn me. What if Hela had escaped? I knew the Gauntlet was here, I could have tried to use it to fight her."

Odin's hand tightened on Gungnir and he flinched, looking away. "I... did not consider that probable. The Stones did not reappear until recently."

Loki knew what Odin was trying to imply, but he shook his head in furious denial. "I knew the tesseract was on Midgard. I've known that for at least five hundred years. I could have taken it whenever I wanted. You knew that. Which was why you put a trap here, for me." Betrayal and fury bubbled up inside him, wondering why he had ever believed that any of this reconciliation was anything but false.

Odin's head came up to face him again and he insisted, "No, it was not for you, Loki; it was here before you were born. It stayed for what you might have become, yes, but you did not. And now, I believe, never will."

That rocked Loki back a step in shock. "Truly?"

"You understand what it is to suffer, my son, would you ever wish another to suffer as you did?" Odin asked, voice softening. Loki recalled the memories that had driven him here in the first place, and had to shake his head.

He held out a hand toward the tesseract, but did not touch it. "I want to take the Stones and kill him," he confessed. "I want to rip his hidden base apart and all his ships and his servants. I -- I think about it, and then I remember--" His voice caught, and he had to change what he was going to say, admitting, "I wish I never got those memories back." Letting his hand fall back down, he inhaled a deep breath that still shook when he let it out, as he finally put words to the fear deep inside. "I will never be safe until he's dead. He promised... he promised worse if I betrayed him."

His hands trembled on the cane and he had to grip it more tightly to make them stop, and inside, he felt sick. Because he believed it. If Thanos found him again, there would be no end to the agonies Thanos would inflict to punish him. His lips trembled too and his eyes pricked with tears, as he admitted the terror that lurked inside.

Odin's free hand set on top of Loki's hand on the cane, and his grip was warm and comforting. "We will kill him," Odin promised. "But not you alone. And not with the Gauntlet. That would require Eitri on Nidavellir to forge another and--" He stopped speaking, and his eye met Loki's gaze. They both had the same thought: if Eitri was the only one who could forge another in the cosmos, then it was likely Thanos knew that, too.

"We have to warn him," Loki said. "I can go."
"No. First, we must scout," Odin cautioned. "It may already be too late. We have not heard an alert from Nidavellir, but ... we might not if an attack was strong enough. And if Thanos has not moved on the Gauntlet yet, he will not soon, with no stones to put in it. Also, he may believe this one is Bor's," he nodded toward the false gauntlet, "and come for it, not bothering Nidavellir at all."

Loki snorted. "You think we'll get that lucky?"

"I think that would be very poor luck, so ... probably," Odin returned dryly, and Loki had to acknowledge he had a point. "I will speak to Heimdall. And you, I think, need to remove that ship from the Great Hall. You were planning that soon, were you not?"

"Tomorrow," Loki admitted, but he didn't want to deal with that right now. He itched to move, and go to Nidavellir, to warn Eitri that an attack might come.

"Take care of that then, and I will tend to Nidavellir," Odin said. "But now, we should ready to attend the feast."

"Mother said I... could abstain," Loki had to swallow back his sudden burst of anxiety that Odin was going to require his attendance. One blue eye fell on him.

"Because of the cane?"

He considered that, and decided he didn't care. Maybe he would later, but right now, it didn't matter. People had seen it already and there was no hiding it. "No. I'm just... tired."

"Very well. But, don't wait too long. Take your due, Loki."

Loki still doubted there was any, but evading it forever was not his intent. "It would be better after I take the ship out of the hall. Mother promised a smaller dinner tonight."

Odin still looked as if he wanted to protest Loki's absence from the feast hall, but let it go with a sigh. "Find some rest tonight, son. You look nearly as wan as your days in the infirmary."

"Best not go to the feast hall then, right?" he retorted with a smirk. Odin's expression was a familiar forbearing look up at the ceiling that eased Loki's heart.

They walked together back to the family rooms, and although Loki was uncomfortably aware that it meant Odin was concerned about him, Odin's presence that seemed to shine too brightly beside him for shadows of memory to intrude.

Odin distracted him with questions about the ship, and at the dining room, Frigga had already arrived.

He said nothing about Loki's fear in the treasury, and she said nothing to him about his weeping in the garden, but when their eyes met, it was as if all that was communicated anyway. Loki felt the moment Odin transferred him to her care, as if he was back to infancy. Part of him wanted to complain about it, but did he really want to storm out and stare at the ceiling of his own room again?

Odin took his leave after promising to return to the family dinner when he could.

Frigga came forward, hands outstretched and brow furrowed in worry. "You did not rest?"

He glanced at the door to make sure it was closed and they were alone, and then shook his head.
"Oh, sweetling." She held his hands and tugged him toward the table. "Sit down and I will fetch a drink while we wait for the others."

His chair, dark wood carved at the top of the back with his sigil of the twin horns, was padded enough to be comfortable and he hooked the cane over one chair arm.

When Frigga brought something in a small glass, clear and cold, he thought for a moment it was water before the scent reached his nose. His eyebrows shot up in shock that his own mother was handing him this, and she smiled at him, "You can switch to wine while dining, but for now, I recommend something stronger to settle yourself."

Niflheim Ice was neither ice nor made of water, but it went down easily and Loki was feeling more in the mood for company by the time Thor and Jane arrived.

tbc..
The Gauntlet

Chapter Notes

well.... hello there! I hope you are still reading this!

It's been awhile and I am sorry about that. It was a not-fun winter and I lost some of the story mojo, but lockdown and NaNo seems to have kickstarted me back into it, so I'm not done yet.

Enjoy and I promise, more soon. :D

The door opened for Jane and Thor to enter, and Frigga moved toward them to greet them, happy for their arrival to stir Loki from his dark thoughts.

Jane's eyes widened taking in the room. "This is the family dining room?" she asked Thor. "It's so..." she waved a hand, "... nice. Beautiful," she corrected herself anxiously. "I feel under-dressed."

"You are dressed just fine. This is not a formal occasion or place." She glanced around and had to smile in rueful recognition that it was not very informal in appearance. "I concede the furniture is rather ornate."

The table itself was a heavy oval piece of ancient ironwood, its surface as glossy as glass. Because of Jane there were two extra chairs placed beside the boys', the king's massive chair at the end, Frigga's own more delicate chair at the other, and there was still room at the table.

Loki had stood to greet them, and Frigga saw Thor's eyes flicker at the sight of his face, noting the pallor and distressed lines engraved that had not faded. But he did not address it, striding forward, "Jane has told me what you did for her. What a splendid gift!"

Loki's eyes darted toward Jane and his lips made an attempt at a smile. "I could scarcely allow my resident partner in alien ship mechanics to perish, could I?" He beckoned her nearer. "Please, join us."

Jane hesitated as if she wanted to say something to him, but she just smiled as she found her seat. "This new strength is very helpful for wrenching the bulkheads off. So thank you for that."

Loki's smile flickered more honestly as he saw Jane in the heavy wooden chair that was far too big for her. She probably could not have moved it before her strength boost, and Frigga saw her toes were barely touching the ground. If Jane were to stay longer, she would need a better chair.

"Speaking of, I think we should be ready to fly it out tomorrow," Loki said, leaning back in his chair and idly turning his small glass in his fingers.

"But the flight stabilizers," Jane objected. "We haven't fixed them yet."

"I saw the problem. I can fix them tonight."
Frigga straightened, intending to object to this plan -- he needed rest, not to be tinkering with the
ship. But Jane was first. "I'll help you."

"It should be a simple matter--" he flicked his fingers, but she was having none of it.

"Then it'll go even quicker with two, won't it?"

"I wouldn't want to pull you away from whatever else you want to do," he said, and showed rather
impressive restraint not looking at Thor.

Jane had no idea what he was talking about, staring at him with her brows knit in confusion. "But I
want to work on the ship. Why wouldn't I? Are you mad at me that I overheard? I didn't mean to--"

It was his turn to look confused. "Of course not. It didn't matter. But you need not spend the
evening on the ship; there is little left to do. It was always capable of flight."

That was news to Thor, who looked from one to the other. "It was? Why did you not fly it out
yesterday then?"

"Because now we understand it, and will be able to fly it more securely. Plus," he smirked, "now I
know how the big one works, too."

"Speak for yourself," Jane retorted. "I still don't know how it works. No," she corrected herself, "I
know how, I just don't understand why it works. Magic makes no sense," she said, sounding
aggrieved, but obviously teasing Loki as well, whose smirk widened at her.

"Of course it does. Seidr is the unifying basis of the universe, the threads that hold it all together."

She added dryly, "You mean the Force."

"You know of this concept then?" Loki asked eagerly. "Why did you not say so?"

She didn't answer immediately and then shook her head once, muttering, "I forget sometimes. It
was a joke."

"No, no, it is not a joke," Loki insisted and held out a hand, palm up, conjuring an emerald fire.
Jane leaned closer, intrigued.

Thor watched with casual ignorance -- with neither Jane's curiosity because he had seen Loki do it
before, but also without Frigga's understanding that his technique had become instantaneous with
his will. He no longer needed to make the effort to cast; it simply came as he wished, powered by
the Eternal Flame.

"You cannot see it, but this fire is truly... a knot," he explained. "There are threads that bind
everything - and I do mean everything - together. They are infinitely thin, woven together into the
Tapestry of Creation. Perhaps separate universes use something else. I would like to visit to find
out--"

"No," Thor interjected. "That seems risky. What if you could not return?"

Loki closed his hand and rolled his eyes at Thor, sneering, "How touching."

"Loki," was all Frigga had to say in gentle admonishment to get him to look down and grimace an
apology across the table.

"Anyway," Loki continued, "we shall move the ship tomorrow, after I fix the stabilizers tonight.
And you are welcome of course, if you wish," he said to Jane who smiled at him with a short nod.

"Speaking of magic," Thor said, "Jane and I were talking of flight earlier. And it occurred to me, can you use the Eternal Flame to fly now? Yourself?"

Loki thumped back in his chair, blinking. Frigga was no less surprised-- she had become accustomed to the knowledge that only Thor could with Mjolnir, but there was no reason to think it was impossible for Loki now. The Eternal Flame was what powered Thor and Mjolnir, through the mediation of the Odinforce. It should be possible.

"You had not considered it?" Thor asked, tone incredulous. "Really?"

"I had other things on my mind," Loki muttered, and Frigga wished she could reach his hand to console him, knowing what he'd been thinking about. He inhaled a deep breath and gave a shake of his head. "It should be possible," he said. "But then I've never understood why I couldn't before, either. So I suppose we can find out later."

Thor frowned. "You sound not eager?"

"I would like to, of course," he said, but left it hanging.

"But?" Frigga prompted.

He took a moment to find the words, and when he did, his tone was so dryly amused it might have peeled the hide from a manticore. "Flying with a damaged orientation sensor in my brain does not suggest success."

"Oh, sweetheart," Frigga murmured.

"It's fine," he insisted. "I haven't flown before. It is nothing I'm missing."

Frigga could tell from Jane's expression that even she knew that wasn't true. Loki had missed flight since the day Thor had learned to do it with Mjolnir. But perhaps it was something that his injury had taken away from him, despite the Eternal Flame's power and healing.

"You should try," Thor said, surprising her. "I'll help. We need not attempt it in view of anyone else. There is much vacant desert around the area I first met Jane on Midgard. Or that grassland on Vanaheim? You remember that? It stretched for days and we never saw a single person."

Loki's lips lifted in a wry look. "That seems a lot of trouble. I'm not so fragile we must go to another Realm. But that's for later." He waves the topic aside. "We have more important concerns."

"We do?" Thor asked. "Like what?"

"Thanos," Loki answered, and the name fell like a stone in the room and lay there untouched for a moment.

Until Jane licked her lips and asked hesitantly, "What is that?"

"Who," Loki corrected.

"Thanos the Eternal," Frigga added, when it seemed Loki wasn't going to finish. "The warlord who sent Loki to Midgard."

"Our enemy," Thor said, fingers tightening on his cup and threatening to shatter it. Jane nodded her understanding.
"He will come for the Stones." Loki kept his voice level and his expression unmoved, but his hands betrayed his anxiety, coming together in his lap. "But when we hold three, and he has none, that would be a fool's errand. So what else would he do?"

"Find the others?" Jane suggested. "Thor said there were six. That means there are three more."

"I spoke to Heimdall. He said he did not know the location of the Power Stone, but the other two remained secure," Thor offered. "So that has not happened."

"Not yet," Loki added darkly. "I know he was searching for them. And if he thought one was close, it might explain why he risked the loss of one with me."

"Then we take the fight to him while we have the advantage," Thor said. "We have three, he has none. We go crush him."

"We would need to use them individually, as the Gauntlet downstairs is false."

Frigga's eyes flicked to his, shocked by that news, but then she nodded, with resigned understanding. Odin had kept many secrets of power, and the Gauntlet being fake was probably the least of them.

But could anyone use the Stones individually? She knew Loki wanted to use them all himself, but without a real Gauntlet that seemed unlikely, even with the Eternal Flame. She tapped her fingers on the table. "The Mind Gem will need new housing. The corruption in the scepter is too strong to be useful. But even after that is done? We would need three people who could use them then."

There were not many. "Me, you, and your father?"

"What?" Thor exclaimed. "Without me? No!"

"You are not mage-trained, Thor. And you are the heir, where else would you be to keep Asgard safe if the king was away?" she asked him, and he shook his head in furious denial.

"No, I will not sit safe here, while all of you risk your lives."

Loki raised his brows at Frigga. "Much to my surprise, I have to agree with Thor. Father holds Gungnir and the spell against Hela, he must stay in Asgard as our rearguard. Nor is it true that Thor can not wield a stone." At the sudden surprise from both mother and brother, he smiled a little. "Embed one into Mjolnir. It was made in Nidavellir, and with a Stone in it, would be nigh-unstoppable, I think."

Frigga didn't like it - not at all. She was resigned to Loki attacking Thanos-- above all, he had claim to vengeance and she would not deny it, but both her sons? The idea made her heart quail, knowing the risk. But she couldn't deny Loki's idea had merit.

Thor sat back in his chair and regarded Loki in silence. "Really?" he asked eventually. "You think so?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "Did you not hear me say it? Of course I do. The question would be which one. It seems logical to have it be the Mind Stone since we must strip it from the scepter anyway, but..." he grimaced and seemed to be searching for the right words to explain, ending with, "You have no training in its arts. I suppose utilizing its raw power would be enough."

Frigga hid a smile at that. 'No training in its arts' was the most diplomatic way of insulting his brother she had ever heard him say. Thor glanced at him, narrow-eyed and suspicious, but couldn't argue about it.
But Frigga knew that was not the best use of their skills. "That is the easier path, yes, but I think
does not account for strengths. The Space Gem should be embedded in Mjolnir -- you understand
movement and space, with enough experience with the Bifrost to direct it beyond simple power.
The Mind Gem to me, and the Aether to you, Loki." It could be the other way around between the
two of them, but she thought he would be uncomfortable with the Mind Gem and he could make
good use of the Aether, having touched it already.

"Father will never agree to the three of us leaving him here," Thor pointed out.

Frigga grimaced, because of course he was correct. Odin would never agree to this plan. But then
who? If Odin himself went, Thor would have to stay. Loki needed to go. Frigga was one of the few
trained sorceresses left in Asgard, so who else was there?

Jane, who had been listening, licked her lips and offered, "I could take the Aether back." When she
was the focus of three pairs of Asgardian eyes, she lifted her chin and explained, "I'm stronger
now, and I used it already. I know how it works."

"Absolutely not!" Thor exclaimed. "It is too dangerous and it is not your fight."

"'Not my fight?'" Jane repeated, incredulous. "Of course it's my fight. Thanos is the one who
attacked Earth. He'll attack it again, you said so yourself. We need to take him out and I'm willing
to take a risk to do that."

"You are a scientist, not a warrior," Thor pointed out, and Frigga inwardly winced, knowing that
was the wrong tactic.

"So teach me to fight. I already asked Loki."

Thor rounded on his brother. "You agreed to this reckless plan?"

Loki leaned away. "Not this plan. She wanted to learn how to defend herself. Of course I agreed to
that. I said you could teach her best," he added in Frigga's direction, then his eyes flicked to Jane,
expression growing more somber. "You do not fully understand the danger, I think. None of you
do. What he is, his power." He swallowed hard, and a silence fell as they waited. Thor calmed
down, and Frigga patted Loki's near hand in encouragement.

"When you're ready."

He inhaled and straightened his spine as if to cast the anxiety away. "He is stronger than us,
physically. I know of nothing tough enough to pierce his flesh deep enough to kill him. Perhaps the
blades his Order carries, but I would not depend on that. His Black Order - those he calls...
children," his voice choked in his throat and his gaze flicked to blankness of memory before he
shook himself back. "They are powerful warriors, too. All sworn in his service, and all altered to
make them stronger than whatever species they started as, taken from his cullings."

Jane asked hesitantly, "Tony Stark threw a nuclear bomb at them, through the portal in New York.
That had to hurt them, right?"

Loki frowned. "The Chitauri perhaps. But the fleet was not gathered at Thanos' sanctuary, that
much I know. It probably makes little difference. He has more footsoldiers, all of them expendable
to him."

Thor nodded slowly. "That is why you want to use the Stones."

"Yes. We will lose a war."
Thor bristled with defensive pride, but did not answer before Odin's voice cut in from the entrance, "I fear you are right."

"Father?" Thor asked, and they all started to rise for the king, who gestured them to stay seated as he joined them at the table.

"We -- I -- " Odin corrected himself mercilessly, "have grown complacent. Our warriors are strong, but they are few. A targeted attack seems more likely to succeed. But only if we know where to strike. Do you?" he asked Loki directly.

"I can find him," Loki declared.

Odin's brows knitted. "That was not the question. You do not know where he is."

"With the tesseract in hand--"

"-- You will end directly into his trap," Odin interrupted. "He knows we have the tesseract. He will not be unprepared."

Loki subsided, lip curled in a pout that said he wasn't done with plan, even if Odin was right about its risks.

"But not the Aether," Jane offered, surprising them. "Right? He can't know about that. So...." She trailed off into uncertainty.

"I would not assume that, but continue," Odin gestured with his free hand, and Frigga was rather proud of him for not dismissing her idea unheard.

"Can't we just use it to change reality so he's not in it anymore?" she asked. "Or put him into a different reality? Or however it works, but it seems like that's the best option."

"Much of what the Reality Stone does is more akin to illusion," Odin began, his voice meditative as he smoothed his beard with one hand. But Frigga knew that face, and knew he was planning something. "A matter of perception, not the actual state of things. I did not, for instance, remove Hela from reality, I shifted the perception of those who remembered her. The Mind Stone can do similar. To do more than a localized shift of matter would require the Gauntlet and the other stones."

Disappointed, Jane leaned back, "So it won't work?"

"Oh, no, Jane Forster, it will work."

Loki shook his head in confusion. "But the Gauntlet isn't real. Unless you spoke to Eitri and he made another?"

"He is well, and I sent a message for him to be wary," Odin answered, "but no, he made no other, and I did not wish him to, for fear it would be taken. I told him of our dilemma. And he had a suggestion."

The king let the silence linger, until Frigga was going to smack him for the dramatics.

Thor was the first to give in, "Father?"

Odin's clear blue eye traveled to each member of his family. "We use the Aether to change that fake Gauntlet into a real one."
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Frigga could only stare, mind turning the possibilities. Could it work? It must be possible or Eitri would not suggest it, and yet, how had she missed something so obvious? When she looked at Loki, she saw that he too was stunned and thoughtful.

Jane nodded her head. "A small localized reality change, from one where it was false to one where it works. Who will do it?" Loki glanced at her, about to offer, no doubt, but she didn't stop. "Me. I can."

Thor shook his head. "That still seems too risky; Jane, you nearly died before."

"I'm stronger now, and I know what it feels like," she protested. "I can do it."

Thor looked to Odin. "Father, tell her that is not possible."

Odin regarded Jane thoughtfully and his words were not what Thor wanted to hear. "I had hoped you could, but you are certain?"

"Well, as certain as all this gets," she said with a little laugh. "I believe I can control it now, rather than it controlling me."

Thor still didn't want to hear it. "No, no, we cannot put all of this on Jane. She is mortal, this is unfair."

Jane's lips flattened and her eyes narrowed, "Unless you don't think I can do it," Jane challenged.

"I -- " Thor started, but he couldn't quite say he thought she could. "I think you might be underestimating the difficulty. You didn't see yourself when the aether was controlling you. You were not Jane, and in your mortal form--"

"But I'm not so mortal now, am I?" she retorted and plucked Loki's cane off the arm of his chair to hold up like a scepter. "Look. I can do it." The blade suddenly extended from the end, making her rear back in surprise but luckily it didn't strike anyone. She snorted a laugh. "And I can do that, too."

Frigga smiled at her jest. "We do not doubt your sincerity, my dear. Or your willingness to help. But this is a very important question."

"She should try," Loki suggested, his tone not allowing for much disagreement as he stared in challenge at Thor. "You would deny her a place in the battle. You would not do that to Sif, so do not seek to push Jane from hers."
"I can do it," Jane repeated, more quietly, and her hands fiddled with the cane before she twisted it just right to put the blade back.

Thor nodded a reluctant acquiescence. "Fine. And then what? If this works?"

"Then," Loki answered with a light but vicious tone, "dear brother, I put all three stones in the new-and-improved Gauntlet and I go kill Thanos, all his Children, and send Sanctuary into a flaming abyss where it belongs. Then, after that, perhaps I shall have some breakfast."

Frigga admired his intensity, but a shiver slipped down her spine in warning. Nothing was ever so easy. "Not alone. And not when Thanos may not be defenseless or unprepared. We must know more."

"Yes," Loki agreed grudgingly. "Locate and observe him first. That seems wise."

"And perhaps some training would not go amiss," Frigga suggested, her eyes settling on Jane. "I would not throw you into this without some preparation, dear. Thor is correct that it is dangerous, but you have already shown much promise with the Aether. Remember, I told you it chose you, and that, I think, was not a mistake." She nodded to herself. "Perhaps you were meant to find it, in this time of need."

Jane shifted in her seat, uncomfortable with the idea, and handed the cane back to Loki to give herself time to think. "Do you think so? Really? I'm not anybody important. A random mortal out of billions on Earth, and, what, trillions in the galaxy?"

"A mortal the Norns decreed would stand at the foot of the Bifrost at the exact moment Thor was sent through it," she reminded Jane gently. "Randomly chosen or not, you were chosen, Jane Foster, and your choices since have only confirmed to me that it was not random at all."

Gallantly, Thor offered, "You truly belong with us on Asgard."

Loki choked on his drink, laughing and waving his hand in an inability to speak at first, then sputtering out, "Who the hells are you and what did you do with Thor? Mother, could you please ensure that's not Fandral under some shapeshift curse?"

Frigga had to laugh at that, and both Odin and Jane smiled, even if Thor didn't appreciate it quite so much.

"I just meant..."

"It was nice," Jane reassured him. "A bit... much, but nice."

Odin had enough of the playing and thumped his chair. "Tomorrow, you and Loki will fly the ship out of the Great Hall. You will begin your training with my wife, and the rest of us will prepare for war."

As intended, that made them all somber again, as their thoughts all turned toward the battle ahead.

Frigga's thoughts went mostly to Loki, who had every intent of taking his revenge on Thanos, but she was uncertain he should. And yet, who else had better claim or ability? Yet on the third hand, what if she lost him in this attempt, or he failed? What if Thanos' hold on him remained, and that shadow forced on him would not lift and bring him only defeat and capture again?

That was why he could not go alone, she decided. Someone must go to remind Loki of himself and his family and Asgard, even if the treachery of Thanos was stronger than they hoped.
And could she lose both of her sons? She knew she couldn't bear it, but what else could she choose? If they failed, at least she would not live long in a universe without them. There would be no escaping Thanos and his madness, not if he took all the Infinity Stones.

But still better to arrange that she would not lose either. She was not the first mother to send her sons to war; best to make sure she was not the last, either.

Loki wandered the halls of the palace, restless that night. He cast a thin glamour so he might go unnoticed; he was seen but not recognized. It was an easier spell than full invisibility for nearly the same effect.

All seemed prepared and planned, as best they could for now. Tomorrow he would start casting for Thanos, to locate Sanctuary. Heimdall too had turned his eyes outward into the cracks where a hidden base might lurk, but only Loki had been there, so he would have the best chance to find it.

His hand gripped the cane too tightly. What if he turned his eyes upon Sanctuary, and someone on Sanctuary looked back? Was he prepared?

That voice in his mind, he remembered it again, the pull of his consciousness at the will of another, "he will make you long for something as sweet as pain."

But that had been through the scepter, and now he knew that had also been the Mind Stone, so it should not be so easy for the Other to take hold of him again.

Which of course was why he was roaming the halls instead of sleeping, because he was not anxious about that. Not at all.

The scoffing noise he made startled one of the young women cleaning the floor at the other side of the corridor, and he loosened the glamour that had become near invisibility with his disturbance. She smiled at him politely, relieved someone was there, even if the spell told her she didn't really know him. But he belonged, so she went back to her work.

He walked on. Instead of imagining or fearing his failure, he decided to imagine success instead: the imagined use of the Gauntlet, all that power at his command and wielding it against the Titan. Tearing him apart and then crushing his fake floating hell in space. Sending his evil minions into singularities to be torn apart forever. Making it all not exist anymore.

It was satisfying. The more detail he imagined, the more he enjoyed it, until there was a bit of a smile on his face and his pace picked up until, quite without intent, he found himself in the Great Hall.

The throne and columns had been repaired, though they both needed final touches. The main damage that remained was the ship itself and the hole through which he would fly it out. There was no one around it, so he thought he might as well go take care of the flux in the stabilizer system himself. Dinner and planning had run late and he'd suggested they start fresh in the morning. It had been a lie, since he'd known he had no intention of sleeping, but Jane had accepted. When she'd excused herself, Thor had scurried after, and since Loki hadn't seen either since, he figured they were still together somewhere.

That thought gave him a twinge of pain, but he knew he had to ignore it. It was pathetic, really, and he should stop it. Just because she had shown him some kindness was no reason to pant after her like a grateful hound. She'd made her choice and Loki would have to live with it, as he'd lived with everything else Thor had won without trying.
As he'd said himself, he had more important things to think about. Like the ship.

Strange, it had seemed so important during the attack but now was little more than an afterthought in a much bigger plan.

But ... should it be? He frowned and ran a hand along the hull. The ship was ancient and of a technology based on the Aether, which had not been in the universe since the last Convergence. Thanos could not have seen it before.

And there was a much larger one parked in the bay near the Observatory.

"Oh yes, my darling," he murmured, brushing his free hand along the hull as he walked up the ramp. "I think this would work splendidly."

He half-expected Jane to be with the ship, though he sensed no one present, but she was not. He set to work, glad to have something to occupy his thoughts, since it required his concentration to use seidr and route the ship's power conduit properly to the aft stabilizer.

A soft step was just enough warning he didn't startle too badly at the chiding voice, "I knew it."

He turned his head and looked up to see Jane, her arms folded, as she glowered at him.

"You're supposed to be asleep," he said.

She was not put on the defensive by his weak attack. "So are you. You said you we should both get rest before morning."

He shrugged. "It's true. We should."

"But you never had any intention of doing it."

"Well, no," he admitted. "Not tonight at least. Having one's memories back is not very conducive to sleeping I've found."

Her expression softened despite his light tone, and she laid her mantle over the opened panel to hang it up. "Then I'll keep you company. I'm not that tired."

It occurred to him that he might not have been the only one pretending to greater tiredness than he'd felt. He lifted his brows at her. "The discussion was that boring?"

She grimaced and gave a little shrug. "I don't see much point in random speculation about things we don't know. We'll never know until we start experimenting. And I understand that's dangerous, the Stones aren't like high school chemistry, but half-remembered stories from three thousand years ago aren't filling me with a lot of confidence that any of you know what you're doing, honestly."

He absorbed that as she stood tense that he'd take offense, but she relaxed when he nodded. "Fair point. I suppose we don't, not until we start. But that's tomorrow after we remove this ship from the Great Hall."

She knelt down beside him. "What are you doing? Can I help?"

He showed her and together, it was a fairly easy fix, just as he'd thought it would be. After that, they ran two test cycles, and with that success, they stood in the command area of the ship and exchanged a glance.
Her lips turned up. "We could take it out right now?"

The screen was lit, showing the near-empty hall just outside the hull, and with some regret, he shook his head. "We could. But... would you think poorly of me if I admit to wanting an audience?"

"What if we screw it up?" she countered.

It was on his tongue to say that no one would be surprised by that, but all he said was, "We won't. I have flown small craft before. This is not so different."

"All right. Then I guess we're ready. Let's get some rest and tomorrow, we'll show them what we can do. And that means you rest, too. You guys must have melatonin or something like it to help you sleep?"

"Drinking?" he offered, and she smacked him in the arm.

"No! Something healthy. Like tea or something." She looked away, biting her lip. "Sorry. I'm making light of it, and I shouldn't. You went through something horrible and here I am telling you to make tea. Like that's gonna make it all better." She rolled her eyes at herself, scoffing.

He opened his mouth but at first nothing would come out. She must mean it, but it was catching him unprepared to hear it put so baldly. "Jane, I appreciate your concern, truly I do, but it's not necessary."

She looked doubtful but didn't press him again. "All right. But at least we should both get some rest before morning."

He escorted her back to her suite, leaving her at her door with a polite good night, and returned more slowly to his own room. He knew she was right-- he should try at least to rest, but his insides tightened up the closer he got and his steps dragged.

He turned the last corner and found Frigga waiting for him. "Mother? Is all well?"

She smiled warmly at him. "I thought to see if you wished company during your rest."

He set the point of the cane down and bit his lip. "I'm not five years old. I don't need you to keep the bad dreams away." His voice gave the lie to that, sullen as any child's and just as obviously a lie.

Stepping forward, she smoothed his hair. "Just for tonight, then? You look so tired, little one. I can read you some poetry until you fall asleep."

Pride didn't want to accept her offer, but the longer he stood in the hall, the more the exhaustion seemed to fall on him. He turned away to open his chamber door and was embarrassed when his voice cracked, "All right then."

She took his free hand and brought him inside. He pulled off his boots as she poked around in his work area for something to read before giving up and pulling from the archives as she sat down next to the bed.

He looked up at the fake sky ceiling and wondered if it too was going to turn into feeling watched.

"Close your eyes," she urged softly. "You're stronger every day, but you still need to recover."
He couldn't look at her as he confessed in a voice that would barely escape his throat, "I don't know if I can face him."

She caressed his hair back from his brow. "You won't face him alone, sweetling. You are much changed from what you were then, with greater strength. You will be his undoing."

He liked the sound of that, even if he wasn't sure it was true.

Her hand slipped down his face, coaxing him to close his eyes. "Hush now. I'm going to read to you and you can rest."

When she started to read, he had to smile, recognizing it as his book of tales, and the smile stayed on his lips until the tension loosened from his body. And whether it was Frigga's voice or presence, or his own exhaustion, sleep gathered him in gently and he remembered nothing of his dreams the next morning.

Frigga closed the small paper book softly, though she thought Loki was quite sound asleep finally.

He'd had so little time to learn about himself, about his new powers, or about his memories. It was a wonder he could sleep at all, except he was exhausted, physically and emotionally.

His hair was still so short he should look young, but his face was too thin for that, aging him instead. She started to reach out to smooth it, where the bit above his ear was trying to curl, but pulled back her hand. If she woke him, he might not sleep again, and she knew the gesture was more for herself than for him.

Finally he knew the truth. It was a relief to her, she wished she could go back in time to her younger self and shake her-- "Just tell them, you fool!"

A sense of another presence was warning and she turned to see Odin lingering in the archway from Loki's sitting room. He looked at Loki and raised his brows in question. She put a finger to her lips and rose to go to him, closing the door behind them out in the hall.

"He's asleep finally. His fear shrouds him," she murmured as they walked back to their apartments. "I fear he'll do something risky against the Mad Titan."

"No doubt," Odin agreed. "I did catch him in the Treasury contemplating the Gauntlet."

She glanced aside. "The false Gauntlet. Not even I knew of that."

"I did not think of it at all until recently," he admitted. "I suppose, knowing it was not real, I put it out of my strategies. It was only ever meant for one like Thanos. But if Loki can wield it as true, with three stones..." he nodded to himself. "I believe he is able. Whether he should or not, that is a question."

She opened the door to her sitting room and closed it behind them after a nod to the guards. "Because?" she prompted. "Because of his penchant for risk?"

"Because of his penchant for thinking his life is worth less," he corrected. His eye raised to hers, and she was astounded to see the regret in his face. "So much power, so much skill - Frigga, he very nearly rewrote the entire Ljosalfar treaty from his bed - and yet he will throw himself away on vengeance."

"He knows he is loved, now," she reassured him. "But yes, it is a dark tangle we have made.'
"I made," he corrected. "You always held out for him, as your son."

She wanted to agree, but knew the truth. "Not as well as I should have, either," she admitted, going to her vanity and sitting on the small bench before the mirror. Lifting her eyes to her own reflection, she knew what she would see if she looked deeply enough. "I did not see the truth straining to escape, or hear the whispers about his parentage. Did you know he did not know you were once dark-haired, so his own hair made him doubt his place? He spoke not a word to me."

She reached up to her own to begin pulling out the pins that kept it up.

Odin’s hands grasped hers and gently pushed them away. "May I?"

She nodded and set her hands in her lap, as he began taking down her hair and freeing it from its plait. "We see now, Frigga," he consoled. "And as you said yourself, we started to heal those cracks before he remembered where they lay. He seems ... stronger, now. More confident in himself and us. And ending Thanos will relieve much of the fear that preys on him."

She had to agree with that, because he was right, and yet... "We must make certain that he does not end himself with Thanos. That is, I think, my concern. After that, there will be time enough."

He took her brush from the vanity and began drawing it through her hair. She smiled at her reflection and then lifting her eyes to smile at him. "You have not tended my hair in ... a long time," she had to finish, uncertain when it had been. The boys had taken it from him when they had been small, learning to brush and braid her hair, but when they’d grown too old for such things, Odin had rarely had time or inclination to return to his habits of their courtship.

"Too long," he agreed. "Though these old hands would have shaken too much until Loki healed me." It had been many years, but he still remembered how to put her hair in the loose braid for sleep and tie it off. "There," he said with satisfaction.

She turned on the bench to face him. "Do you have my ring?"

He stilled and answered, "Of course."

He held out his hand and uncurled his fingers to display her ring there. "You were right to give it back to me," he said, his eye flicking down to look at it in his palm. "My heart was cold and closed, and my choice then... unforgivable."

"No," she murmured, her hand coming to rest atop him. "Not unforgivable. And I will take it back, because I see the man I wed once more."

His hand closed around the ring keeping her from taking it, and her gaze met his in confusion that he would hold it away. "The warrior king must return," he warned her. "We are at war, Frigga."

She curled her fingers around his fist. "It was never the warrior I feared. It was the killer who forgot which battles have purpose and which are mere slaughter. But, I admit, I will not mind if you slaughter Thanos where he stands, should the opportunity arise."

"One of us will," he promised. His hand loosened, to grip hers and very gently slide her ring back where it belonged. Then he lifted that hand to kiss it. "You keep my heart with you, my queen."

She smoothed his beard with that hand and her smile was the soft one that was just for him. "Always, my husband."
Thank you everybody for your wonderful comments and kudos! As the story [enters the homestretch/rounds to home/insert sports cliche of your choice], I'm very grateful to everyone reading!

There should be no more long interruptions. All the rest is now drafted, and it's just editing from here to the end.

Thor was up early, eager to start, and finding no one else up and about yet, went to the training yard to beat up on some Einharjar before Sif and Fandral joined him.

"Friends! Good, it's time to train hard."

"Oh?" Fandral asked, swinging the practice sword in arcs to test his previous injury and the balance. "Are we going after that bastard soon?"

Thor nodded. "Soon. And the order will come down today for increased Einharjar training, too," He gestured to the lower yard. "Father has been unimpressed lately, and if our foe comes here, we will be hard-pressed. Those Chitauri were not warriors, but their numbers are such it will matter little."

Fandral pulled a second practice sword from the stand. "Then let us practice with more weapons, because if it must be slaughter better to go through it swiftly."

Sif did the same, raising her brows as Thor did as well. "Not Mjolnir?"

"I must learn to do without," he explained simply. No one had told him so, but he assumed it was possible Thanos could take Mjolnir from him. He would still have to fight, and Odin had demonstrated not long ago that his skills without depending on the hammer were rusty. "Have at it. Melee."

They fought against each other, all against all, and Thor was enjoying himself until Fandral got a lucky move in, twisting one of the blades out of Thor's hand. Thor tried to retreat, now less able to protect one side against Sif, too, but Fandral was relentless with both blades a whirlwind, ignoring Sif to finish his weakened pray off.

Sif hung back despite Thor's protests, and when Thor finally yielded against the wall of the practice field, her two blades were at Fandral's neck from the rear. "Careless, old friend. Never turn your back on an opponent."

Fandral shrugged and twirled his blades, stepping away. "But a fair lady is never an opponent." He bowed to her, and she held up a blade in threat before they all laughed.

"Well fought," Thor said. "Now we must get to the Great Hall. I am told Loki and Jane intend to move the ship soon."
"Glad to hear he is better," Fandral said.

"Are you going to help them?" Sif asked, and Thor frowned at her.

"Why would I need to do that? I know nothing of this ship."

"You've flown before, at least," Sif suggested, looking as confused as Thor, but for opposite reasons. As if it had never occurred to her that Thor would not be a part of it.

"No. They did the work to make it fly and Father gave it to Loki to do with as he will as his war prize. I am going to watch."

"It could get rid of some of the uglier columns?" Fandral jested.

Thor chuckled with Sif, but the humor slipped away as they started down the long corridor past the Einharjar quarters and armory toward the main palace. Had Fandral made the same jest he would have if Thor had flown it out, or because it was Loki? He wasn't sure and so he held his tongue, but it made him uncomfortable to wonder.

In the Great Hall, the ship still squatted like a massive toad in the middle, as they gathered at the king's gesture near his repaired throne.

"Excellent timing, my lords," he greeted them as they saluted. "I hear Loki and Jane Foster are on their way."

A crowd gathered, at first slowly at the edges, and then more of the court, guards, and staff until there were several hundred in a loose semicircle around the ship.

Loki and Jane arrived then with Frigga beside them. Loki looked well, Thor thought, as he surveyed the gathering with bright eyes and a smirk hovering at his lips. Jane looked a bit wide-eyed at the crowd and the king waiting for them. Loki offered Jane his free arm with a deliberate gesture and twirled his cane once, before Frigga murmured something to him and parted to head for the throne to watch.

Their pace was not hurried, allowing everyone to see them in her bronze gown that looked so nice on her, and Loki's usual gold-trimmed leathers with his longer court cape. Without stopping they walked straight up the ramp and into the ship, and a few seconds later, the ramp slurped closed.

The tension in the hall increased, and the king murmured to Thor, "Have the guard push the people back from the sides. That looks too near, to me."

Thor nodded and stepped aside to the captain to relay the order, as the ship began to hum. The sound built and deepened, the vibration increasing, until the engines ignited with a scarlet glow and a thrumming sound that shook the whole palace.

Without fanfare or wobble, the ship lifted several meters, enough for Thor to look straight at the nose where he thought the cockpit was, and the ship began to glide backwards toward the massive hole it had made coming in.

The rubble of course had been cleared and the fallen columns not restored on that route, so it remained clear to leave. Halfway down the wingtip brushed another column, and he tensed at the horrendous screech, but it passed and the column still stood with only an ugly gash. And then all was clear and the ship darted for the air with an abrupt acceleration that made half the crowd gasp and then cheer as the ship flew straight out and up into the sky.
Thor joined them, applauding, glad it was successful.

Fandral applauded also, then leaned toward Thor, "Where's he going to land it?"

It occurred to Thor he had no idea where Loki and Jane were going with the Dark Elf ship.

Odin pointed Gungnir at the far end of the hall. "Restoration of that end may now commence."

And with that, the morning's entertainment was over, but Thor was too curious to wait until they returned. He slipped away to the balcony and called Mjolnir.

Loki stood behind the main control console and observed his domain, such as it was with a sense of pride. The viewscreen was lit, showing him a view of outside and all the people gathered to watch the ship take off. He glanced at Jane. "Are we ready?"

In a funny accent, she declared, "Aye, captain, engineering stands ready." He frowned at her and she sighed, and said in her normal voice, "I'm ready."

He made a note to ask later what that had been about and touched the engine start.

By the time the ship nearly decapitated Bor, he was enjoying himself immensely, and when he pulled the throttle to send them zooming away, he had to laugh with sheer enthusiasm.

"Now this is living!"

The ship flipped easily, without disorientation or problem, though Jane had to clutch her side console with both hands. He sent them swooping near the mother ship, when something thudded hard against the ship's hull, wobbling them.

"What was that?" Jane asked. "A bird?"

"A rather irritating passenger, I suspect. Hold on," Loki narrowed his eyes and then, smirking, sent the ship into a barrel roll to fling his irritating passenger off. Between his own senses and the ship's tracking system, he saw their passenger heading toward them.

The ship dove abruptly toward the water, skimming its surface for a bit, before climbing again, trying to lose his persistent shadow. He circled up and through the city instead, trying to lure Thor into carelessly hitting something. But unfortunately he proved he knew the city better, cutting them off and landing on the nose of the ship, grinning.

Then, very clearly, he mouthed, "I win."

Loki's hand strayed toward the weapons array - not to actually use them, but he'd enjoy activating them so Thor would know he actually hadn't won.

But Jane punched the ramp release instead, so Loki rolled his eyes and let him aboard.

Thor clumped forward, Mjolnir swinging, "You set a good chase, Loki. This ship's more maneuverable than I thought." He clapped Loki's shoulder. "You see why you should learn to fly yourself? You could have made that turn around the guard tower."

Loki still didn't want to think about flying himself. To have something he'd wanted so desperately dangled in front of him which he was unsure would actually work was courting even heavier disappointment than not trying. He made a show of fiddling with the controls to avoid Thor's eyes.

"This will have to do for now. Where else shall we go?"
"Can we see under Asgard?" Jane requested, eyes alight while she grinned.

"She is obsessed," Thor warned playfully. "I had to pull her back in the boat when she nearly fell, wanting to see."

"I did not! Nearly fall, anyway. Please, can we go look?"

"Of course. If you'd like." They swooped down over the edge of Asgard, down and down, and he tried not to remember the long fall into that same nothing, holding on a little too tightly to the controls.

"Wow," she breathed coming to stand next to him as they all looked at the sight. The ocean fell over the edge, collecting at a point beneath, from which it was drawn up again with no obvious mechanism. "That's... amazing. So it is a closed system. Sort of at least. Is it... magic?" she asked.

"I never thought about it, really," he confessed, and set the ship to hover so they could watch the wonder. He narrowed his eyes and sought seidr, to read the patterns there and see what they said. "The stories say it was created, for Asgard, as all the Nine were created and set on Yggdrasil. But not by whom. Ancient beings, no doubt. But now I look at this and I think... whoever it was, they used the Infinity Gauntlet. A trace remains in the Eternal Flame so I can sense them all." He teased them out, thread by thread, until six brilliant colors gleamed in his open palm. The orange was pulsing with his heartbeat. His eyebrows shot up. "Interesting. I would not have expected Soul to be the strongest. Perhaps it's the primary component of the Eternal Flame."

"You said the will was what provided direction to your command in magic, so perhaps Soul and will are... interchangeable. Different words for the same thing. If Mind is the intellect and memory then the Soul and will would be... I don't know, the ineffable?" she mused. Then she gave a little laugh. "Oh, listen to me, what do I know? I only found out souls are real yesterday."

He considered that before clearing his throat, letting the six faux-stones disperse. "Jane? I will take your thoughts seriously, I promise. I like to hear your ideas. Please do not feel as if you are... unwelcome to share them. I did not intend to scorn your curiosity."

Confused, she turned to him. "What? No, you didn't." Her lips pursed and she nodded understanding of why he'd said that. "Oh, I just... I know I amuse you, and Thor, and everyone here with my ignorant, wacky Earther ideas."

"No, that's not so," Thor protested.

Loki was a little more honest, allowing with a smile, "Maybe you amuse a little. But that doesn't mean we don't take you seriously. You made me a floating chair out of a bunch of toys, so of course I take you seriously. I certainly appreciate your desire for knowledge. It's not a very common feature on Asgard." When Thor reacted as if Loki had slapped him, he added with a sigh, "That wasn't a slight against you personally. You know it's true. The entire Realm cares very little about acquiring knowledge, because most of Asgard believes they have nothing left to learn. As Father said, we are complacent, and not merely in our defensive capability."

"Immortality has some drawbacks, hm?" Jane teased. "So now where? Hyperdrive test?"

He shook his head. "The big ship, of course. I want to see the interior. Do you?"

Her eyes widened with excitement. "Oh yes."

Loki arched a brow at Thor. "Brother?"
Thor could always be depended on to adventure, so he said, "Of course." Then added with some disappointment, "Father said it was empty, though."

"We'll have to be very cautious of traps. Malekith hated us - perhaps he left us a surprise." Loki took the small craft to the looming mothership, getting a good view of it up close, before sending the command to dock. There was a tense moment as nothing happened, and he worried the mothership was shutdown, damaged, or there was a system or undetected alfar aboard still who knew their fighter had been compromised.

But wide doors opened and he exchanged a look with Jane, before pushing them forward. Some sort of automated system took the controls from him, and he let it happen, clenching his jaw.

"Stay close. If they've set self-destruct, we may have very little time to get out," he warned as they were drawn alongside to fit the smaller craft up against the neck of the large ship. Thor and Jane's shared look of concern was entertaining, and he was tempted to needle their lack of foresight a bit more. But unfortunately the warning was true, so he should keep his wits about him.

As they docked, it was hard to see with the brightness of the outside streaming in to illuminate only a narrow section, but it seemed a bit dark and cramped, which he supposed made sense with a people obsessed with 'bringing back the darkness' to the universe. They bumped something and the ship powered itself down without instruction.

Grimacing, he hoped this wasn't a bad idea. "Let's look around."

Jane opened the ramp, and Thor was the first down, Mjolnir in hand. Loki followed him down, casting a witchlight and sending it above them to see better.

"It looks like we're in the belly of a whale," Jane commented in a quiet voice. "Like it's all alive."

And it did, it felt very close and dark and weirdly organic, except for the absence of any people. The scarlet power glowed softly, mostly inert, through the supports and conduits, seeming to beckon them forward.

"Definitely Aether powered, like the little one," Loki murmured, holding a hand above one of the conduits. There appeared to be no rapid build-up, so it was probably not increasing into a self-destruct.

"Do we trust the lift?" Thor asked. "I think I found one."

"It's a tall ship," Jane said, tilting back her head to catch a look at the high ceiling and no doubt thinking of how much ship was above them. "I say we try it."

They went inside and found no obvious controls. Then Thor nudged something in the wall and a display control activated, much like on the smaller ship, and Loki dialed to what seemed the highest level. The lift was smooth so the acceleration was barely noticeable up the 'stem' of the ship and the doors slid apart.

It was brighter thanks to the large windows opposite, and he didn't need the witchlight anymore. Most of the body of the ship was hollow, arranged in semicircular tiers around the power core. Each tier held multiple copies of a device that was a bit larger than person-sized yet obviously for a person to stand inside, and Jane stood outside of one for a bit frowning. "What is it? Control stations? Some kind of interconnected computing if they're plugged in?"

Loki activated one of the panels to see what it would say and frowned as the All-speak spell shifted to reveal the meanings. "It says stasis pods. I presume this is where they slept, waiting the
"They're all empty," Thor said, his voice echoing until he quieted it. "This doesn't hold that many."

"Maybe there are more on other levels, still in stasis?" Jane asked.

Loki didn't think so - it seemed more likely Malekith had thrown all the people he had at the possibility of revenge and to grab to the Aether, but he shrugged. "We can look."

"No traps for us," Thor said, moving closer to the burning reddish fire of the central power core that made the ship seem to have a massive glowing eye from the front. "He was so sure he would win."

"He almost did," Loki reminded him. Without the Casket there, he doubted he would have survived and certainly Frigga would have been killed first, trying to protect him, and after that, Malekith would've had Jane and the Aether, and with that, the victory.

"But you were there, so it was not so close," Thor said and his hand closed warmly on Loki's neck briefly.

Jane was circling the power source. "Definitely Aether based, too. Is there a crystal in the middle, or is this free-floating? It looks less focused. So there's probably a focus mechanism somewhere...."

She trailed off, climbing down a set of curved stairs, intending to look beneath the power core, no doubt.

Loki had wanted to activate the control stations but sharing a glance with Thor, they both turned as one to go after Jane. The ship wasn't entirely safe, even if she'd forgotten, and it was safer to be together.

But as they explored the lower area of the central core of the ship, they encountered nothing dangerous or even that surprising after working on the smaller version. The ship was old, but it seemed untouched by its long slumber, and no Dark Elves interrupted their exploration.

"Could we take it to Earth?" Jane asked, pausing by the massive front windows and the view of the city beyond.

"We could take the Bifrost," Thor said. "It is much quicker."

She rolled her eyes. "I know. But what I meant was, Is this ship interstellar capable? Does it have some sort of hyperdrive, or did it have to use the Convergence to get here?"

"I see no reason why it should not have a hyperdrive. Malekith must have hidden it away from Svartalfheim at such a distance to not risk discovery while they waited. And hyperdrives and jump technology are rather common," Loki answered.

She opened her mouth then reconsidered. "Okay, later you need to explain to me how it's possible but not this second." She explained, with a laugh, "I was just imagining this ship appearing on Earth. Those flying whale things were bad enough, but an actual alien space ship would blow people's minds."

"Flying whale things?" He had no idea what she was talking about at first, and frowned before the image of something undulating outside Sanctuary came to mind. "The Leviathans? Did they come through?" He felt uneasy with the realization he was missing another piece of New York.
Something very large at that.

She wrinkled her nose and nodded. "Stark exploded one. Big biohazard mess. Last I heard, the city and SHIELD were still cleaning them up."

Thor grimaced. "Banner and I brought down another. They were disgusting. And not easy to kill."

"I only saw them from afar. That I recall, anyway." He shook his head to try to push off the anxiety. There was no getting those memories back, and it was too late to be concerned about them. "I have no objection to taking the ship to Midgard later, assuming it survives the attack on Sanctuary."

Thor raised his brows. "We're taking it to Sanctuary? When was this added to the plan?"

Loki bridled a bit at his tone. "Last night. When I realized he can't be familiar with a power core based on the Aether."

"Does this ship have attack weapons?" Thor asked, more reasonably.

Loki had to admit, "I don't know. I would expect so. But we'll only know on the control deck." He pointed upward.

They climbed back up the small stairs, past all the empty stasis chambers, to the forward control deck. Confidently Jane stepped into the well and swiped one hand, activating the displays. "I recognize power, the flight system-" she gestured, bringing another display into view, "ah, this must be the hyperdrive, and this..." she squinted as if that would help her decipher the symbols, "no idea."

Loki crowded closer. "Navigation, looks like. Hyperlight sensors to check for hazards. Remember, the Realms are outside the jump system so anyone coming here must navigate manually. And here I see--" he swiped another display to prominence and shot a gloating look at Thor, "the weapons array. So Malekith had some even if he barely used them. Shall I blow the bridge to the Observatory?"

Thor folded his arms looking very disapproving and not at all amused by Loki's attempt at a jest. "Again?"

"I seem to remember Mjolnir having something to do with it," Loki shot back.

But before Thor could retort, Jane straightened sharply and turned to face them, with her body curiously rigid. Her eyes were yellow.

"Heimdall?" Thor asked cautiously, hand tight on Mjolnir, in case he got a different answer.

"I have urgent news," Jane's mouth moved and it was her voice, but Heimdall's accent came out. "I can see the enemy fleet. It moves toward Asgard."

He's coming, he's coming, and we're not ready. I'm not ready, was all Loki's mind could provide in the shocked moment after Heimdall delivered the news. He felt cold and empty, and his mind refused to think of anything else.

Thor's hand on his shoulder was warm and grounding, and it was Thor who asked the most obvious question. "When?"

"Too soon. A day, perhaps. One very large ship."
He's bringing the planet-killer. How does he know where Asgard is? How can he be coming here? Why would he face our Infinity Stones? Why does he not fear us?

Too many questions, and the answers would probably come too late, but he needed to figure it out. He needed to breathe.

"You told Father?" Thor asked.

Heimdall-in-Jane nodded. "I have. I will raise the shield, but you must move that ship within its bounds first. Hurry, Odinsons."

Jane blinked and the gold was gone from her eyes. She shook her head once, and twitched her shoulders. "Okay, that was weird. I didn't know he can do that." She turned to Loki. "What do we do?"

That made him pull himself together, and all his half-formed plans fell apart and reformed into something dangerous, but ... possible.

"You must get the Aether. And--" They were short on time, so he reached out and laid a hand on her forehead to show her, mind to mind in a swift torrent. It was not only his own ideas, he noticed, as the two combined. "Do you understand?" he asked as he pulled his hand back.

Her expression was somber as she looked up at him and she nodded once. "I understand."

"Understand what? What are you doing?" Thor demanded.

"There's no time. You have to fly her back with Mjolnir, right now."

"I'm not leaving you here!" Thor protested, the grip on Loki's shoulder tightening into a painful claw.

"You must. I have to move the ship. You heard him. And you have to take Jane to the Aether." He saw Thor look like he was going to balk and cut it off. "No! She's our secret weapon, Thor. You have to protect her. Go!"

"Protect yourself," Thor ordered him and let go, jaw clenched around whatever else he wanted to say to Loki. "Come, Jane, we must find a hatch."

With an anxious look over her shoulder at Loki, Jane hurried after Thor into the lift.

That left Loki alone, and for a moment he was very aware of exactly how alone he was. And Thanos was on the way.

His insides churned and his breathing hitched, as the thought drilled down into his core, leaving only fear in its wake.

No, stop. Focus. Move the ship so Heimdall can raise the shield. You don't know how much time you have, so do it now or he will raise it with you outside.

But despite his attempt at concentration, he found himself staring outside the Dark Elf ship, searching for the sight of Thanos' warship.

Thanos was coming. All their plans were too late.
Evacuation

Thor and Jane landed on the balcony outside the Great Hall, which was the closest outside access to the Treasury beneath. Unlike before when she'd enjoyed flying with Mjolnir, the urgency of the threat had made her expression somber, and he wished they could go back and fly again some more for fun.

She pulled away from him, looking determined. "Where do we go?"

"This way. What did he tell you?" Thor asked. But he didn't get an answer, because they emerged from the columns to the main nave of the hall, and saw a scurry of activity.

Odin and Frigga were both there, Odin in full armor, as he gave instructions to Tyr for the defenses. Odin caught sight of Thor and Jane, beckoning them closer. Tyr hurried away with a distracted nod toward Thor.

"You heard." Odin said, and it was only a little bit a question but Thor nodded.

"I'm going to take the Aether at Loki's suggestion," she said, her chin raised with a bit of proud defiance.

"Our secret weapon, he said, even if I'm unsure of his plan," Thor added with a little annoyance that Loki shut him out.

"Yes. I see," Odin agreed.

"We need to evacuate the non-combatants," Frigga cut in. "To the caverns as before."

His blue eye went distant in thought or memory, before snapping back to Frigga. "No, not the mountains. They must go to Midgard. It's not safe here."

"Midgard?" Thor repeated, incredulous.

"He will bombard the Realm, that is what he does to soften the target to submission," Odin said heavily. "Our shield will hold for some time, but not forever. And if he has a way to penetrate it, our people will be lost. Gather them up," he instructed Frigga.

"But we cannot use the Bifrost if the shield is up," she reminded him.

But he already had the answer. "The tesseract will."

"What about building a portal like the one in New York?" Jane asked. "I know how. Loki showed me."

Odin regarded her in some surprise, before he nodded. "Perhaps. We may not have time. Take the Aether now, Jane Foster. Hold it safe. Thor stay with her, for now. I will need you when the attack begins."

He strode off, Gungnir in hand, and Thor was about to escort Jane when his mother caught his arm. "Where is Loki?"

"Moving the Dark Elf ship inside the shield."

She pursed her lips in concern before visibly shaking it off. "I must make the announcement to
evacuate." She rested her hand on Thor's cheek. "Keep safe, my son."

"You, too," he wished her and as he watched her walk away, he wondered if he would see her again.

"Thor, we have to go," Jane prompted, stirring him out of his dark thoughts.

At the Treasury, the guards stepped aside without argument and Thor opened the main doors. He and Jane entered, and the doors shut behind them with a solid deep boom.

"Oh, wow," Jane murmured. She hurried down the steps to the main floor, gazing curiously at the tesseract on its pedestal first. "So that's it, huh? It's so small. So powerful."

Rather like you, he caught himself from saying, but was amused by the comparison.

She resolutely put her back to it. "But we're not here for that. The Aether is..." she turned in place slowly, looking, but more feeling where it was so she was already starting to walk toward it before she said, "there."

The containment vessel was on its own stand past the niche holding the stand and containment field holding the scepter, and the Aether lit up the corner nearest the Destroyer's old lair with a ruby glow. Thor's fingers itched for the scepter, but he ignored it to follow Jane to the corner.

As soon as the two of them stood in front of the container in which the reddish smoke was swirling, Thor's uneasiness got the best of him and he asked, "Jane? Are you sure you want to do this?"

She didn't take her eyes away from it. "There's no one else who can do it."

"I've known Loki long enough to realize that was not a yes."

She hesitated and then said, "Yes, I want to do it. Because I can. Because there's no one else. Because some people believe I can." That was clearly a warning that she was tired of his caution, reading it as a lack of support.

He flinched and grimaced. "I believe you can. I'm just... worried."

She looked at him and smiled unexpectedly. "Look, if some old Dark Elf king could handle this stuff, so can a physicist nerd from Illinois. I've got this."

He had to smile back and gesture for her to go ahead. His hand tightened the grip of Mjolnir as she inhaled a deep breath and removed the lid of the containment vessel.

"Hi," she whispered, as the first scarlet tendrils crept out like something alive. Thor felt so tense he was vibrating, as the tendrils curled around her outstretched fingers.

But instead of leaping to the attack as he expected, the reddish smoke twined around her arm.

"It's okay," she murmured, though if that was to Thor or the Aether, he couldn't tell. Then it sank beneath her skin and vanished.

Her body went rigid, as the scarlet stream continued to flow, and her head tipped back, both hands extended toward the vessel as it emptied and disappeared within her.

Thor waited, fiercely tempted to shout her name or pull her back, but he did neither, knowing he might make it worse. He realized he was calling his own power unconsciously and, remembering how the Aether had reacted last time, he made a conscious choice to put it aside and try to relax.
Jane could do this.

And if she could not, with Thanos coming, it might not be a terrible thing anyway.

Her head rotated back forward as her hands dropped to her sides. It still took a frozen moment of stillness before she turned to face him. Her eyes were scarlet, but her brow was knotted and her lips parted. "This is a bit odd," she confessed in her own voice. "I thought I'd have to fight it, but I don't. It seems to like me."

She held out her hands, and scarlet smoke swirled above her palms and her head canted to the side to watch it. "It does feel more... comfortable. Maybe by making me stronger, Loki made me a better vessel. More compatible or something."

"As long as it doesn't harm you."

Her gaze went off to the side in concentration, and came back to his, "I think it will eventually. It can't help it. This body's still flesh and blood and this is too much. But for now? It's fine. We only need it for a little while, right?" she asked, wry twist to her lips and she shrugged. "To kick Thanos' ass."

He reflexively smiled back but then cautioned, "Don't take him lightly."

Her smile vanished, as the Aether pulled back inside except for her eyes. "I don't. I saw Loki's memories, you know. He tried to keep them from me, but I saw enough." Her jaw tightened and she looked toward the Gauntlet. "I never thought I was the kind of person who could say this and mean it, but Thanos needs to die."

He looked at her, realizing that, though she might be small and slight and use her mind more than a weapon, but, like Loki, she was no less a warrior.

"He does," he agreed. To himself he added that he was going to do it first. Loki had cause, and Thor was the first to admit that especially after seeing the look on Jane's face speaking of his memories of Thanos, but he also feared Loki was willing to pay any price to get his revenge, and Thor had already feared his death twice. Not again.

But first he had to know the plan. "So the Gauntlet is next?"

Her smile became secretive and a little feral. "Scepter first. Gotta take it out of that crystal housing. Then the Gauntlet. He wanted me to hold back the tesseract for now."

He was a little alarmed by the bright red glow of her eyes as she rattled all that off. "I thought the Stones don't play well with each other?"

She laughed, and it wasn't quite Jane. "No, they don't. But that's all right. Well enough for this." Her head snapped up, looking toward the ceiling. "I hear something. No, I feel it. I feel things shifting, Thor. I feel power." Her eyes turned brown as they met Thor's. "He's coming."

Thor wasn't sure what to do then; stay with Jane, or go help the defense of the city. It seemed whichever he chose would be wrong.

But Jane took the decision from his hands. "You can't help me here. I know what to do and I can do it. You need to go upstairs and give us time."

"I don't want to leave you here alone."
"Defenseless?" she asked and held out her hand. A long dagger appeared in it and she smiled. "Not anymore."

He had no choice but accept that she wasn't helpless; with the Aether inside her, she was probably one of the most powerful people in Asgard. He nodded. He wanted to kiss her farewell, but her expression forbid the attempt. "Be careful, Jane."

"You, too."

He ran up the steps, sealed the doors again, warned the guards the attack might be imminent, and ran for the lift to the Great Hall.

On the Dark Elf ship, Loki stood in the central command well, surrounded by the active displays as the ship came to life.

"I like this ship," he said aloud. There was no one else to hear. Just Heimdall, maybe Odin half-listening as they waited for Thanos to come, but otherwise he could chat to himself. It made him less nervous, since at least he felt like he was doing something. "Pity I'm going to destroy it. But what else can I do?"

The engines started smoothly and the scarlet glow washed across everything in a bright flare before settling again. "I'm sorry, Malekith, that Asgard was so terrible. You deserved better, honestly, even if you were trying to destroy everything before you died. And at least you won't have died for nothing, if I can use your ship to save another Realm from extinction."

With a soft hum, the ship began creeping slowly toward the shore. He only needed a little ways to bring it inside the shield, so as it moved he opened the panel to start figuring out how to make the ship attack without a pilot. It had to have some kind of AI - all interstellar travel-worthy ships had to have some sort of automatic systems - but he clearly wasn't looking in the right way since he wasn't finding it.

"I know it's here, Malekith. You didn't have so many people that your ships would do everything by hand, though I appreciate you didn't shoot at me. So maybe you don't. That would be highly disappointing. What a useless waste this has been if I can't find a way to automate the weapons."

The display blinked and shifted, turning into an interface for the weapons systems, and he chortled. "Ah, of course. Automate the weapons and propulsion." The control display shifted again for the interface to do both.

Then he noticed where the ship was. "Heimdall, I'm clear."

He felt the touch on his mind from the Watcher and his attention briefly focus, "So I see. Shield ready."

It was a fantastic sight, as Heimdall activated the Realm's defensive shield. A giant clamshell of light snapped shut over the city and its environs, protecting it.

Loki put a hand to his chest at a strange tugging sensation, and bit his lip in chagrin as the truth became obvious -- the Eternal Flame was powering the shield. Not all of it, but at least some of it was drawing from him.

*Mother did warn me of consequences I didn't understand,* he thought with some dry humor. *Here we are. Not that I needed added incentive to save the Realm, but now I definitely need to save the Realm. And myself.*
Thor took the lift to the top of the tower to see what was happening.

No, no, not so soon, he begged the Norns but the Norns were bastards who didn't listen, because there, high above the shimmering city shield, was a ship casting a shadow over the entire city.

That was a big ship, and made it clear in a way that Thor hadn't really understood before that the force sent at New York had not been the full range of Thanos' offense. He had more power than that, and now it was all directed at Asgard.

I'm sorry, Loki, he thought toward his brother, probably still in the Svartalfar ship. I did not, until this moment, understand what you faced.

Mjolnir in hand, he went flying to the great hall to see if he could find Odin. The king was in the midst of giving orders to his commanders but when he saw Thor, he beckoned him closer. "Jane Foster?"

"In the Treasury," he reported. "Loki is still in the ship. Mother?"

"Preparing our people for evacuation through the tesseract, but I think it is too late for that. Asgard lives or perishes by what happens here." One of the ravens came to his arm and then as quickly winged away, given its mission. "She will take them to the mountains."

He did not think Frigga would go into safety to hide when her husband and children were at risk. She would fight. "Is that even far enough?" Thor asked. "That ship is vast."

"If he takes the Gauntlet and the Stones, it won't matter, Thor," Odin reminded him. "There is nowhere they will be safe."

Thor's hand tightened on Mjolnir. "What do we do? Jane said Loki gave her a plan before he sent us away, but I don't know what it is."

"We fight, Thor. That is what we do." He eyed the large ship above. "He is slow. I expected more attack to test our defenses. Ah look- " he gestured with Gungnir at the small needle-like ship fleeing the Svartalfar ship for the city. "Loki."

Thor was relieved to see it. Leaving Loki trapped on the Dark Elf ship alone had been difficult to bear. For a moment, the ship came hurtling close to the palace, as if he intended to crash it back into the hall, before veering off and twirling up out of sight.

Odin chuckled softly. "Both of you, such spirit." His free hand gripped Thor's shoulder. "Such good men you've become." Touched, Thor could only look at him, and the blue eye settled on him. "On a day like today when all might end, Thor, it behooves a father to say what he should."

A horrifying light washed over the outside, and Thor flicked his gaze upward again to see a flame stream from the enemy ship and engulf the shield, lighting it up in a dome of violet fire.

"No," Odin whispered.

"Father?"
"He has the Power Stone, Thor," Odin whispered. "That's how he found us. The shield will fall, perhaps in minutes. The time for talk is past." He whirled away from the sight and shouted for his advisors, cape billowing. "Come, Thor. It is time to fight."

The ship dropped like a stone onto the balcony, and Loki clenched his jaw at the impact. He was on the ramp when the power seized inside his chest and the outside light flared violet-white. He stumbled, nearly falling, as Asgard fought to keep the shield intact against the strength of the attack.

Blindly he reached for support from the edge of the ship and cast his eyes upward. The Power Stone. This was worse than he had expected, though at least it explained why Thanos would dare. Let him land with it, touch the ground, and he could burn all the life from Asgard. It was a potent threat, even against the other Stones.

The shield wouldn't hold for long, not under that strain, and it was going to take everything from him before the battle had even started, if he didn't find a way to block it.

But first, he needed to warn them.

He closed his eyes, calmed his racing heart enough to touch the Eternal Flame and sought all the people of Asgard. He could identify his family, but there were so many others, and he could touch them all. It was a feeling he wished he could enjoy, rather than fill him with dread that they were in danger.

"This is Loki speaking to you."

He felt confusion and ruthlessly suppressed it, so they would listen.

"Everyone but warriors must evacuate the city, but you must go below it. Do not evacuate over land. Go into the basements and the deeper undercroft of Asgard, as deep as you can into the caverns. There are many passages, and many interconnect. Shut them behind you. Go beneath and hurry. We will defend you."

He left them with a snap, ignored his family's queries, and focused on Jane. "He has the Power Stone. I'm coming down, do not finish the plan. I have another one."

She seemed a little amused that he'd changed the plan already, but acknowledged easily enough, which he envied as the shield was hit again and he was left breathless.

Casting his eyes upward, he prayed, Hold together. Just a little longer.

When he had gathered himself together he hurried to the Treasury, barely noticing the guards in his haste. Within he jumped from the top of the steps all the way to the bottom, scarcely noticing when he caught himself with the Eternal Flame from falling.

She had already taken the Mind Stone out of the scepter which was now a crumpled ruin on the ground that made him smirk to see. The tesseract was still there, untouched, because he had been going to take it to open the portal.

"So?" she asked. "Why underground?"

"If the Power Stone is used on the surface, he can eliminate the life from it. I'm hoping underground will offer protection. The people can't escape now. It's too late. The shield won't hold for long and he'll be here soon." His eyes met hers, now glowing scarlet with the Aether. He had
the odd thought that he could make his eyes match by shifting to his Frost Giant skin. For the first time the thought didn't make him want to be sick. "There's no time for the plan I gave you."

"Good, it was boring. Is this a Trickster God plan?" she asked. And that wasn't quite Jane, he thought, but that was all right; he needed the Aether right now.

"It isn't boring," he allowed and hovered a finger at her forehead. It wasn't safe to say such plans aloud.

After he shared it, she nodded. "Let's do it."

He took what he needed, and on the outside he sealed the doors and commanded the guards, "Let no one else in. Not for any reason."

"Yes, my lord." They saluted and gathered in formation in front of the doors.

As he and Jane hurried away, she murmured, "Will that be enough?"

"It will barely slow them down. Your eyes," he reminded her, and her eye color flipped back to brown. "Good."

The bombardment hit again, but with the Casket of the Ancient Winters now in his dimensional pocket, he had blocked the power drain. It meant the shield would break sooner, but he needed the Eternal Flame himself.

As they rose up in the lift, he cast the invisibility spell on her. A green-gold flame rippled over her body, hiding her from view as they emerged onto the high balcony of the eastern tower to have a view of the enemy ship and the shield.

Anxiety made a sick churning soup in his gut, as he looked at the city. He knew what was going to happen down there. There were too many still on the surface. He wasn't sure if underground would help against the Power Stone, since it was old lore that said specifically the stone worked only on the 'surface', but if the people could evade Thanos' footsoldiers long enough... perhaps they had a chance. It was a terrible gamble, but he saw no better way.

He inhaled a deep breath to settle himself. All that mattered now was winning. The battle had begun.
eh, lockdown and writing frelling battle scenes is just ... ugh, y'all. Sorry this took so long. The end's actually written, at least, it's just the bit in the outline that said "Thanos shows up and things turn to crap" is taking longer than I wanted it to.

I wanna thank the Jotunheim Writing Cabin for encouraging something that happens in this chapter, this is all your fault. :D

Thor wanted to ask Loki why their people should evacuate underground, but there was no opportunity before the odd touch in his head was gone.

Hurrying in Odin's wake, he felt a bit lost. When had it happened that Loki knew what to do? He must know some lore that Thor did not, but since Odin barely had hesitated before giving a confirming nod to the captain he must know it as well. Or perhaps Loki had given him more explanation than Thor had received.

The shield was hit again, and reflexively Thor looked up. It held still, but after the glare faded, he could see another ship beyond the shield, a smaller one. "Troop transport?" he asked, when Odin's eye followed his gaze.

"Likely. He appears not to be taking us seriously." He snorted. "Apparently Loki's disdain of Asgard during his captivity has bought us an advantage. We must not squander it."

"How about if I keep them from landing at all?" He glanced up at that transport ship and spun Mjolnir. Once the shield was down, Asgard wasn't the only place that was going to be vulnerable to attack.

"Do what you can," Odin encouraged him. "The fewer we fight below the better."

There was another tremendous barrage sent at the shield, and this time Thor saw it waver. It held but the purple fire seemed stronger, and he knew it would be soon. He launched upward, swinging Mjolnir to hover, and the next attack he was ready for the inevitable collapse.

As the shield melted away, he was already rising toward that alien ship, Mjolnir pointed straight at it before it had started to move. First lightning, he sent it at the ship, enveloping it in his own fiery blast, and then he went for the engines. Engines had to be less armored and tended to be more delicately engineered to work. They tried to fend him off with some sort of blast from the ventral gun port, but he caught it on Mjolnir and sent it into their engines instead.

As they began the descent, his anger grew. No, these invaders would not be allowed to land. No, they would not be allowed to attack Asgard. He would stop them.

He could feel the storm grow in his veins, across his skin, and build in Mjolnir, and when it was an inferno that needed outlet, he flew, Mjolnir extended, into the engine core.

Heat and light surrounded him and for a moment he was concerned he might have miscalculated,
then it all exploded, hurling him from the ship. He whirled, at first too dizzy to recover, but saw the towers of Asgard spinning beneath him and was able to right himself, shaking his head to clear it.

Pieces were still falling, and he smiled with grim satisfaction that he'd taken out the landing craft. His gaze lifted toward the giant ship, wondering if Thanos could see his challenge. *Yes, come forth, you vermin, fight me, and we'll see who is the stronger.*

Then he saw them. At first five, then ten, and ten more -- transport ships descending from the mothership. The smile slipped from his face. He couldn't get them all.

But he was not alone in the battle either. Asgard's defenses began to fire back, and the great Dark Elf ship hurled a stream of ruby flame at the mothership, obliterating anything in its path. But the mothership seemed little touched by the attack, and its own return blow with violet flame ripped half the top of the Dark Elf ship off its port side.

The battle was joined. And there was nothing left to do but fight.

Thor dove at the nearest transport ship, determined to take out all he could, while knowing nothing was going to stop them all.

*Whatever you have planned, brother, do it soon.*

"*I sent you a present at the eastern gate,*" Loki had whispered in her mind before disengaging. Frigga, shook her head and frowned curiously, wondering what he was talking about. There was no time for anything frivolous, and she doubted he would do that, but then the people near her were looking for direction, and she immediately started urging them to do what he suggested and get underground.

With an escort of six Einharjar and Sif, Frigga made her way east, encouraging the warriors to gather at Odin's direction while the rest needed to seek safety.

It was still a confused mess that she feared very much would turn tragic, and she very nearly abandoned her hurry to the east to see to the crowd. But she knew Loki wouldn't send her there for no purpose.

"My queen?" Sif asked, when it became clear Frigga was headed toward the closed gate.

"Loki becomes ever more like his father, sending cryptic messages for--" Frigga answered, interrupting herself to shout at parents with a small child huddling in the doorway. "Clear the street! Go underground." The family jumped and went inside.

More Einharjar were waiting at the gate when they arrived, talking to each other urgently.

"Open the gate," she commanded. One of the guards trotted to her.

"All-Mother, there is an..." he hesitated, unsure, "an attack?"

"By the enemy?"

"No, my queen. By..." he didn't want to say it, but had to push it out, "the animals?"

Another warrior added, a younger one with more excitement, "There are bears and--"

She didn't need to hear any more and let out a disbelieving laugh. "Loki! Only he would remember
that story. Open the gate. Those are warriors for Asgard."

They looked all around in astonishment, before doing what they were told.

"A bear, my queen?" Sif asked, her hand tight on her glaive.

Frigga shook her head in amazement. "He remembered a story from when he was little, when I told him I rode to his rescue on a bear."

"A bear?" Sif's eyebrows shot up and she said with great caution, "I.... do not recall that story, All-Mother."

"Because I made it up when he was ill. But he will make them real, it seems. Let us see what my son has called from the forest and the mountains to come to our aid, Sif." She raised her voice. "Open the gates."

The great doors swung open from the middle, toward the outside, and Frigga heard Sif gasp at her side.

There was, indeed, a bear. Not an ordinary bear, this one was massive, higher at the shoulder than a horse, with claws on each giant paw as long as her hand. Black as night, but shading to grey at the muzzle and the chest, the bear had the most alert brown eyes Frigga had ever seen on a living creature.

Behind the bear there were three more bears, though not quite as large and a more ordinary deep brown. There were also two mountain lions. A giant white stag with magnificent antlers. A pack of wolves.

But the front bear was the largest of them all and she lowered her head to Frigga.

"Oh no, my friend, you do not bow to me," Frigga murmured and approached, hands outstretched in peace. She ignored the hissed warning from the guards and Sif pacing her, tightly holding her glaive.

The bear's fur was so plush she thought her hand might get lost as she touched the sow's neck.

Above them with a sudden crash of amethyst light the shield collapsed and she looked up to see Thor battle the first ship even as others began the descent.

"Here they come. Sif, mount up. We've got to back." She jumped, glad for her divided skirts as she swung a leg over the bear's shoulder.

"Mount what?" Sif called.

"Pick one, and let's go." Frigga plucked a spear from the upraised hand of the Einharjar and with a pressure of her knees directed her new mount to go through the gates. The other animals followed, Sif mounting awkwardly on the stag, which stood patiently still for her as if it was ridden all the time.

"Close the gates!" she ordered the warriors at the wall.

Trusting the bear to find her own path, Frigga watched the sky, noting when smaller enemies broke free from the transports and began the attack. They looked like Chitauri on some kind of sled. The defenses were handling them for the most part, even as buildings began to take damage.
She directed her mount to the nearest landing site, and soon found her battle. All she had to do at first was merely hold on, as claws and teeth did their damage, but fended off attacks from the sky.

On the back of a giant bear, she was invincible. At least for a little while.

"A war bear?" Loki asked the air beside him drily.

"Your idea, not mine," Jane's voice retorted. "But I think she looks awesome."

"She does." Loki had to agree. Even from here, even in these circumstances, it made him smile to see his mother riding a giant bear. He just wished she weren't riding it to war.

He inhaled, gnawed on his lip, and watched the enemy land despite his people's resistance with the weapons, the Dark Elf ship, and a bunch of very large animals.

But he had played this scenario before in New York. Chitauri and Outriders disgorged and attacked, and their guns lit fires and buildings fell. It all happened quickly with only sporadic, mostly ineffectual resistance. He knew what Thanos wanted to see, so he let the weapons burn in his pocket and did nothing.

But when his presence in the tower drew attention he knew he needed to abandon it. "You know what to do?" he asked.

"The magic responds to my will, I remember." Scarlet glowed beneath her fingers, barely perceptible as she cast its influence over the city. "Go. I'm fine."

"Keep yourself safe," he urged. "Above all. You can't let yourself be taken, Jane."

"You, too, Loki. Remember that."

He glanced up at the Sanctuary II. *Come on, make your move. I know what you want to do, so do it.*

A Chitauri flying too close to the tower made a good exit point. Loki hurled himself off the balustrade onto the flying sled, threw the Chitauri to the street below one-handed, and decided he'd get in some fighting before he had to play the next part.

He was able to take out five from behind before they were onto him, swarming in the air like a pack of determined mosquitos. He dove free, avoiding the blaster fire, and smashed through someone's balcony and rolled through their dining room.

One Chitauri followed him, jumping off its sled, to get two daggers in its throat and it fell like a stone. Loki returned to the balcony to see if the sled was salvageable, and paused at the sight of dead Asgardians in the street below.

A family. A child.

Guilt was a suffocating wave, that made him close his eyes and bite his lip. *This is all my fault. If I hadn't thought I was so clever with the Frost Giants and been such a fool to launch myself off the Bifrost, the tesseract and scepter would never have come here. Thanos would never have attacked. I have to stop it, I can stop him, I can take the fight to him...*

He fingered the Casket, barely tucked away, and clenched his jaw. *Wait,* he reminded himself, *draw him in and snap the trap shut behind him. There were always going to be casualties.*
He extended the Eternal Flame toward the fallen, in some worthless attempt at an apology, and then frowned. There was nothing there. The Eternal Flame did not recognize them, and not because they were dead. Because they were not real.

His head lifted to look in the direction of the central tower and shook his head in relief and some amazement. Too good, Jane. I fell into my own trap. But does it matter? I know some will be real, and I need to accept that and not linger in it. Not now.

But I don't have to let him have all his own way. I can still fight with my own weapons. I'm not powerless.

The next Chitauri sled to fly past took a spear of ice through the torso.

The pair of four-armed Outriders crawling up the side of the building looking for victims burned in emerald flame.

And still the enemy came.

Thor hovered above, taking out what he could in flight, but as the ships started to disgorge enemies he took the battle down to them.

He took out a whole craft full by watching it land and then slamming himself and Mjolnir straight into the ground in the middle of them. The resulting shockwave was appropriately violent, killing the entire first rank nearby and stunning those behind it.

It had the unfortunate side effect of smashing the facade of the nearest building as well and destroying all their windows. A balcony fell off, crushing another Chitauri beneath it.

It was satisfying to lay into those trying to battle him. Their weapons stung, when he let them hit him, but mostly they got in each other's way, trying to swarm him, and he slammed them out of the way.

He heard a familiar roar on the other side of the fight and smiled to himself.

He hurled some more enemies that way, and eventually the crowd thinned enough to see Volstagg and his battle axe as a red tornado, unstoppable and laughing.

"Thor!" Volstagg called, catching sight of him. "You promised enemies, and you delivered!"

"I'd rather fight them somewhere else!" Thor shouted back and worked his way closer so they could fight back to back. "Where's Fandral?"

"With the All-Father last--" He broke off as a Chitauri on a flying sled fired at them. Thor threw Mjolnir, knocking it off the sled, and in the gap where he was weaponless, knocked heads.

"Thor!" Volstagg's call in alarm drew Thor's attention, and he glanced over his shoulder.

There were new enemies entering the small square. Four arms, elongated heads with no eyes, they seemed to sniff the air to find prey.

Thor called Mjolnir back to his hand and didn't wait for them to attack. He didn't know what those things were, but not carrying weapons meant they were the weapons.

He held Mjolnir over his head to draw the lightning and then redirected it straight at the creatures. They screamed and fell, twitching.
Five seconds later, they all got back on their feet as if nothing had happened.

"Damn," Thor muttered.

Volstagg slapped his shoulder. "You need an axe."

"I don't have an axe!"

Volstagg spun his and taunted, "Looks like you'll have to be clean up then." He gave his war cry and clashed with the creatures, Thor at his side.
Loki tucked himself out of sight beside a window of an abandoned house, and closed his eyes, trying to get a sense of the battle.

They were definitely getting boxed in, with enemies landing in the perimeter. That was expected, since that had been the strategy in New York too, but also told him Thanos suspected the Stones were in the palace. He could feel no Chitauri inside the palace itself, not yet, despite it being fairly open to flying craft. Unfortunately he couldn't feel the Outriders at all, because either they were naturally resistant to such touches or they were simply not alive enough, but unless they were setting an ambush from the rear, there was no need. The defenders would all get backed against the palace walls, with nowhere to go except underground where some Asgardians were hiding.

Outside he could hear screaming and smell the smoke caused by the Chitauri weapons firing at the buildings.

Peeking up at the sky, he saw another transport descending. And better, he felt an echo along his skin of power approaching.

The Power Stone was on that ship. That meant Thanos.

A frisson of fear slid down his spine, but he pushed it away. No time for that right now. He had to put on the second act of his trap, so Thanos would be drawn the right way.

He touched the Eternal Flame long enough to warn his parents, Thor, and Jane without distracting them too much. He's here.

Then he jumped to the ground and began running for the palace, knowing he had to get there first. As he ran, he formed a spear of ice, not as hard as Asgardian steel, but it gleamed in the sunlight and was good enough to knock Chitauri out of the way. There were two Outriders ahead of him, holding Asgardians prisoner, and he was on them before they knew he was there. He speared one through the back and tugged frantically to pull the spear out as the second turned. He let go and dodged, forming another and realizing he was being stupid. He had infinite spears, why was he collecting them?

The civilians were quick to press against the wall out of the way, as he let the Outrider grab his spear occupying its hands and formed another to take it through the throat. "Get inside and bar the door!" he ordered the wide-eyed pair who were staring at him as if they'd never seen him before.

He checked his hand, wondering if he'd changed skin accidentally, but found it normal. "GO!"

"Yes, my prince." The woman nodded and pulled her husband inside the building. Too late he noticed the roof had collapsed, but perhaps that would discourage attackers. He had to keep going.

A Chitauri on a sled fired at him and he threw up a hand to deflect the blast, not sure he could until after he'd done it.

Thunder crashed from something Thor was doing and he heard an answering roar of an angry bear to the east and he laughed, feeling giddy. You want to fight us, Thanos? Ten thousand years of pure power embedded into the foundations of Asgard? You are a fool.

In the plaza, he launched a stream of ice at the descending craft, knowing it wasn't enough to
actually stop the ship. It was for Thanos' benefit--Loki was throwing down a challenge and he doubted Thanos could resist.

He made sure his green cape billowed dramatically as he hurried up the few steps to the main doors.

They swung open at his approach and he turned at the top to cast a wall of ice before him as the ship landed with a thrumming noise. Its weapons fired but the Casket was strong enough to reform the wall against the blast, and then he shut the doors.

On this level the hall was a nave of grand statues supporting the Throne Hall above them. There were a handful of Einharjar in the hall and he gathered them to him.

"They'll come to get in the Treasury," he told them. "We have to stop them."

He cast another ice wall to hide the door and tucked himself around a window support, shielding himself with a light glamour so he could watch.

Thanos' minions began to swarm the plaza before the palace gates, and Loki was profoundly glad he'd already gotten through because there were now Chitauri and Outriders acting as security. Some had prisoners in tow which Loki grimaced to see. Not everyone had gotten to safety, despite his warning, or perhaps some hiding places had been found. There were some Einharjar among the prisoners, too, which made him frown. Why wouldn't Thanos order them slain? If not now, then later no doubt.

The plaza made secure around the perimeter to Thanos' satisfaction, the ship landed in a plume of vapor and creak of old metal. Loki toyed with the Casket inside the dimensional pocket, thinking of what he could do as the main ramp lowered.

More troops, not surprisingly. Then, the Children started. First Cull Obsidian, as the strongest and least vulnerable to ranged attack. He was Thanos' version of the Hulk, a mindless brute that was all-but indestructible.

Corvus and Proxima followed, paired as usual, with their blades at the ready. Then Ebony Maw - all spindly length of him coming down the ramp. Loki's lip curled with hatred. Maw he wanted dead. Now. Soon. Chief architect of Loki's pain, it was mostly his voice that Loki wanted to silence forever.

Curiously Gamora wasn't with them. Loki remembered her, though she'd been gone most of the time on other assignments than breaking the Frost Giant 'guest'.

But Maw? Loki wanted to kill him slowly, but he knew he couldn't. He'd get one chance, probably, and he'd have to take it. The others were brute force fighters, but Maw's telekinetic powers made him the fastest and most dangerous. He needed to be eliminated but he needed to wait until Maw's attention was fixed on something else.

"REJOICE!" Maw announced loudly. Loki's heart seized in his chest at the sound of that voice.

"For your salvation is at hand! You have been blessed with the great coming of Thanos the Eternal. Your suffering is at an end."

There was sounds of a fight growing nearer on the eastern courtyard, but instead of becoming alarmed, Maw smiled. "Let them through! All are welcome to experience Thanos the Eternal's
beneficence and mercy. His understanding surpasses all. Surrender to him, and your people will be blessed."

Loki heard a bear, and knew who was near. He clenched his jaw.

*No, you will not take her. You will not touch any of mine, you foul creature.*

It was just a thought - a moment to gather the Eternal Flame and touch Asgard - for the emerald fire to explode out of the ground and wrap Maw in its tendrils.

He screamed, in a bone-chilling shriek, while his powers exploded from him in desperation, tearing the stones from the plaza and hurling them in every direction. Loki, far enough away to be untouched, smiled in grim satisfaction as he tightened the Flame around Maw, even as he tried one last time to get free in a whirling tornado of stone and dirt and weapons exploding out from him. There were shrieks of terror, but Loki paid them no attention.

*No, you will not escape,* Loki promised with gritted teeth and all his will to hold on. *You die here. For what you did to me, you die. Right now.*

*Loki!* an alarmed voice broke into his concentration. The Eternal Flame abruptly extinguished itself, Maw collapsed to the stones in a broken heap. He blinked, trying to orient himself, while sagging against the wall.

He was almost too slow, barely catching a glimpse and ducking. Proxima's dagger sailed through the window, a hair's-breadth from where he'd just been standing.

Pushing away the weakness, he straightened and cast a double to look for him. Thanos had not made an appearance, but the Children were all glaring at him.

Loki gave them an insolent wave then dismissed the illusion so it would disappear. He thought about setting a few more just for fun, but he didn't want to distract them from the target too much.

"After him!" Proxima shouted, presumably to Cull Obsidian since he heard the heavy steps of the behemoth.

Now that he had their attention, he just had to survive it long enough.

The bear helped make short work of the enemy, but only those that were right in front of her and she was so big the narrow streets of the upper city turned into a cage. They were taking fire, and only the shield she'd snagged from another Einharjar protected as much as she could reach from above. But the Chitauri had learned to stay high and fire, while the more flexible monstrosities tore at the animals from below with their excess limbs and claws.

Frigga decided it was time to let the bear fight on her own terms instead, and leaped off. "Go, my friend. Find a more genial field to fight in." The bear let out a tremendous roar and headed down a wider cross-street, giant paws striking enemies that tried to harry her, while Frigga faced the palace. That was where she was needed.

Sif jumped off her stag, too, to take to the ground, glaive extended to defend her queen. Only four other Einharjar were left to join them.

The Eternal Flame struck in a wave of power and she heard a scream, and as one she and Sif turned to share a look and start running to the plaza.
They fought their way into the gathered enemies, protecting the ship. Just as one more Chitauri fell to her blade, she looked up and saw another figure walking slowly down the ramp of his small vessel.

He was immense, armored, and carried a long-handled war hammer. Worse, she saw - felt - a small violet stone embedded in the head of the hammer as he rested it against his shoulder and surveyed the field.

She swallowed hard. Thanos. He could be no other, carrying the Power Stone.

The Chitauri and the Outriders froze to watch him. The armed couple halfway to the palace steps watched him, reverently, waiting.

"Oh my child," the deep voice murmured, looking upon the body on the ground. "What has the boy done?" He lifted his head and looked straight at her. "Come forth, Queen of Asgard," he commanded.

He knew who she was. Foreboding touched her, knowing she was about to be a pawn between him and her son. Please do nothing foolish, she hoped silently, addressing that to both her sons and Odin.

She returned Thanos' stare with one of her own and walked a few paces closer, ignoring Sif's hiss of dismay. "Thanos, I presume."

His big head nodded once. "You have property that belongs to me."

"I have nothing that belongs to you."

"You have my Infinity Gems and Loki. I want them both."

"None of those belong to you, and you cannot have them."

He brought the hammer down from his shoulder, holding it out. "You know what this is. You know what will happen if I put it on the ground."

She smiled just a little, not impressed with his threat. "No, I don't. And if I don't, you certainly do not."

His mouth tightened in an unconscious expression of annoyance at her challenging him. "Give me what I seek, and I will spare your people."

"As you have spared so many already?" She gestured toward the bodies on the plaza, and the fallen buildings. "We know who you are, Thanos the Butcher. We know you spare none."

For a moment, Thanos did nothing, only stared at her, but in the end, he could not resist her challenge. "Gather them up!" Thanos ordered loudly. "All of them. Every Asgardian you can find. Do not harm them, but drag them here, and we will see how long this queen can withstand her people's deaths before she gives me what I want!"

The Outriders surged around her, and though she and Sif both fought, they were shortly outnumbered and disarmed. Chitauri forced Sif to kneel, while Frigga was left unmolested, while the people were gathered together.

There were ... so many. More of the enemy and more Asgardians than she had thought. With a
shock she recognized the family she'd sent inside. Why hadn't they gone inside as she'd said?

But what else could she do? Thanos could not possess the Stones, and she had to hope Loki and Jane were busy making a Gauntlet for them to defeat Thanos utterly. She needed to give them time.

The tall, blue-skinned female with the halberd paced close. "Give him what he wants. Your people will die, either way, but if he has what he wants, he will take only half."

Frigga ignored that. "What did you do to Loki? So I know what to avenge."

"Nothing he did not deserve. And less than he will get for his betrayal and murder of Ebony Maw." She stepped aside to sneer down at Sif, who glowered back.

"Fight me, creature," Sif challenged. "Not helpless prisoners."

The weapon whipped around, and Frigga gasped, as it sought Sif's neck. But Sif did not flinch, and the blade stopped at her skin, drawing a thin line of blood. "At least you aren't a coward. Maybe he'll spare you and make you one of his Children."

Sif was about to lunge for the weapon, Frigga knew, and cast lightly to hold back her hand, until Thanos' helper walked away. "Not yet," Frigga murmured.

Sif's jaw tightened but she nodded a short jerky acceptance.

There was a plan, and as they both were in the middle of it, there was nothing to do but wait for it to play out.

The main door was slammed, rattled, and when it was slammed again, it crashed to the floor with a resounding boom.

Loki stood in the middle of the hall, Einharjar at his back, and lifted his chin, determined not to flinch as Cull Obsidian stomped in, Corvus just behind him. Both of them? Really, you shouldn't have, Thanos.

He settled in, calling his power to his hands, ready to fight them both.

The air lit up with a blaze of light and crash of thunder, as lightning slammed into Cull from behind. Loki couldn't help a smile as Thor fell to the stone just behind them.

"Where have you been?" Loki shouted to him.

"Busy!" Thor shouted back and laid into Cull again, making the behemoth shudder and turn to face him with a roar.

"Then you will both die!" Corvus snarled and rushed forward, glaive extended.

Loki held out a hand and with hopefully adequate casual attitude, grew his ice spear just in time to meet it, haft to haft.

Corvus was fast and his blade sliced through the ice if Loki didn't keep his concentration, but Loki wasn't fighting alone either, as the Einharjar joined the fight. Corvus could've killed each of them separately with ease, but against six he had to give ground back toward Cull. Loki pressed his advantage before disengaging and sending a fleet of doubles to confuse him. "Back!" he ordered the guards and they all ran for the door to the steps. "Guard the Treasury!" he shouted at them and then stood aside, invisibly.
Thor sounded as if he was having too much fun fighting Cull, and Corvus hesitated whether to help his brother or be lured into unfamiliar corridors.

A phantom Loki poked his head out and then slammed the door, while the real Loki stayed very still and tucked his magic around him as tightly as he could. *Go, come on, go after them.*

Corvus looked around, carefully, large ears also scanning for any sound that would reveal the trap. But with Thor and Cull's fight of thunder crashing and stone breaking he would never be able to hear Loki's heart beating.

Corvus hit the door with his blade, slicing through the hinges with ease, and jerked the door open. There was, of course, nothing there, but Loki held back a snicker as Corvus tiptoed inside.

When Corvus was gone down the stairs, Loki released the glamour and formed another ice spear, creeping toward Cull and Thor's fight, which had collapsed half of that facade and moved outside.

Waiting an opportune moment, he saw his chance and charged the spear with the Eternal Flame and shoved it into Cull Obsidian's back as hard as he could.

*I remember you. I remember how you held my leg and snapped it like a tree branch. I remember how you laughed with joy at the sound.*

The sound Cull made was not human at all, a monster's roar of pain, as he turned, blindly flailing with this giant fists. Thor smashed him in the face with Mjolnir and then again in an uppercut to lay out Cull Obsidian on the landing, as the ice spear shattered.

Loki summoned another and slammed it into his neck, nearly decapitating him. The groan he made was less bestial, and cut off with a last breath.

Then he lifted his head and looked at Thanos, making sure his voice carried, "That's two. Leave, or I kill them all."

Glancing at the body at the Odinsons' feet, Thanos had no visible reaction, and then forced a sort of smile. "Oh pet, I will enjoy your screams." He pointed his warhammer at Loki and launched a blast from the violet stone straight at Loki.

Loki was going to duck, but Thor was there, bracing himself as he caught it with Mjolnir. "Go," he urged Loki. "Finish the one with the glaive."

Thor had both hands on Mjolnir's handle to keep her steady against the power, and Loki didn't want to leave him, but when Thanos tried to change targets, he knew he had to get out of sight or the whole palace might be made rubble.

Frigga clutched her hands together, watching Thor fight the behemoth while Loki fought inside. She wasn't sure which was worse -- watching one, or being unable to see the other -- or then it was worse, as Loki emerged to join the battle.

It ended quickly, and she had to smirk at Loki's bold challenge to Thanos, though her anxiety returned as Thor caught the blast meant for Loki on Mjolnir. He urged Loki away to finish the one with the glaive, and Loki was out of her sight again.

Thor's jaw clenched holding the immensity of the Power Stone, but it was too much in the end, hurling him backward into the wall of the weapons practice hall, which turned to rubble all around him. She held back a frantic call of his name when he didn't rise right away.
But Thanos was not the only one with power, as a familiar blast with Gungnir slammed Thanos stumbling back. She turned to watch Odin, Fandral and Volstagg with him, fight their way into the plaza.

She had once scorned the warrior king as too heartless and violent, but she was glad to see him once more, war helm and armor flashing golden, while the spear of the king was leveled steadily at Thanos.

"Surrender or die," Odin warned. "I will not offer again."

Unconcerned, Thanos faced him, knowing with the Power Stone in hand he still held a potent threat. He smiled a little. "To think the rest of the universe fears you," he taunted. "You have grown old and weak, while the rest of us have grown strong." He held up his battle hammer. "Give me Loki and the Stones, and I spare the rest."

"Spare them of their lives, you mean," Odin said. "You are nothing but a killer."

"I am," Thanos replied easily, striding forward two paces, the glow of the Power Stone violet against his armor. "Populations grow too large, consume, and must be culled. That is the way of things." He tilted his head. "It is your own tale, I believe? Ragnarok? The old ways must burn once in a while."

"You and your ways are old," Odin retorted. "I once thought as you did. That war and slaughter were the way of things. But it is not so. Death is just one piece of a cycle of life." He turned his head to look upward, and his free hand curled around air, gathering a spell, and he threw it at the balcony of the Great Hall.

Only then did Frigga realize Loki stood there, though Odin had unerringly found Loki's hidden perch, and thrown a spell at him. Loki caught it, against him, clearly confused, but as the spell sunk inside him, his head jerked up with alarm writ large in his eyes.

She knew it then, what that ancient and tangled ball of seidr had been: the seal on Hela's prison. Odin had sent it to him to hold.

And that meant...

Dread like a stone in her chest, Frigga opened her mouth to shout a protest, as Odin attacked.

"Father, no!" Loki's frantic yell echoed off the flagstones but Odin paid no heed.

His form and speed with Gungnir were that of a much younger man, a glimpse of the warrior king he had been. But it was not going to be enough, Frigga knew that from the start, when the female warrior threw her blade at Thanos to use.

Gungnir sent Thanos careening back but he still blocked it, as Odin moved for his head.

"You still don't understand," Thanos said, across the blades. "I cannot be defeated."

Thanos used his hammer to block Gungnir and spun the spear in his other hand. In a motion Frigga couldn't even track, he got inside Odin's defenses. The blade thrust through Odin's armor as if it wasn't there and into his body.

"NO!" Frigga screamed and she threw power at Thanos, who didn't flinch.

Odin remained speared on the blade, the point emerging high in his back through his cape. His
arms fell limp, Gungnir falling to the paving stones without resistance.

Frigga's eyes tracked its fall, hearing the clang as if from miles away in a distant echo. *Odin, no...* Beside her, Sif whispered something.

"Your king is dead!" Thanos called. "Will you surrender? I will spare half. If you fight, you all die."

Frigga stepped forward, snarling in her fury. "We will never surrender."

Thanos was neither disappointed nor surprised. "So be it. Capture Loki and hold these here," he commanded his troops. "I want Loki to watch me kill them all. I'll get the Stones myself." He lowered the spear and pulled it out, letting Odin fall, crumpled to the ground, as Frigga gasped in horror.

"NO!" Loki shouted.

Looking contemptuous, Thanos lifted the hammer and blasted with the Power Gem. Frigga watched, hand over her mouth. But so strong was Loki's rage, he only needed to lift his hand and the energy was deflected right back into Thanos, sending him crashing through the landing strut of his ship and flung hard against the ramp.

Loki jumped from the balcony. It was a fall he could survive, regardless, but he used his power to slow himself, so he more floated to the ground. Landing with his knees bent and one hand on the ground to disperse the force, he rose back up. "My father will be avenged, Thanos. Get up."

Frigga watched proud of his courage, but fearful of what else could happen. Glancing worriedly toward the hall entrance to check on Thor, she found instead something far, far worse:

Thanos' minion emerged onto the top of the steps. He was covered in the blood of a slaughter and in his free hand, held aloft his trophy of a golden Gauntlet, blue and yellow stones embedded in it, the other depressions empty. At least the aether was still safe somewhere, but it would matter little once Thanos had three of the Stones.

"No," Sif whispered, echoing Frigga's own despair.

"My lord, I have it!" the minion pronounced.

Loki whirled and fired off a blur of daggers. He seemed to be trying to sever the hand that was holding the Gauntlet before he put it on or gave it to Thanos. But the alien was too quick, using his glaive to defend himself, so Loki started to run toward him to battle him directly.

Thanos, however, was up again and blasted the Power Gem at the pavement at Loki's feet. It was impossible for him to deflect so the explosion threw him back across the plaza, leaving him sprawled and stunned at the feet of some Outriders, while a Chitauri leveled a weapon at his head.

"Are you finished?" Thanos asked mockingly of all the Asgardians, holding the head of his axe low to the ground. "How many do you wish to lose? Your king is dead, your princes defeated, your Realm burning ... how many more do you wish to die?" He didn't wait for an answer, seeing the defeat on their faces. "Bring it to me, Corvus," Thanos commanded. "Let me see my prize."

Like a well-trained hound, Corvus trotted straight toward him, ignoring Loki who was stirring and slowly sitting up. The woman warrior retrieved her spear and went to flank Thanos.

Frigga noticed Odin's hand twitch. Whatever Thanos said, Odin was still alive. She couldn't see his
face, but his head tilted to look toward Loki.

Oh, no, my love, hold on, she urged him silently, wishing she could send him strength.

Corvus held the Infinity Gauntlet reverently, while Thanos examined it, a smile growing on his lips that made the dismay in Frigga's heart that much heavier. They had managed to build a real one, but failed to keep it safe.

Thanos looked straight at Loki. "At last, my property returns to me."

He slid his free hand into the Gauntlet, as Corvus bowed and stepped aside to flank him. Grinning hugely, Thanos removed the Power Stone from his weapon and smacked it into place. Thanos held up his Gauntlet-clad hand in triumph, making a fist.

All the Gems flared to life, shining like stars on the back of his hand.

"Asgard," Thanos announced, "it is time. Half will live, half will die. Perfectly balanced. As it should be."

There was nothing sane in his eyes as he gave the order, and Frigga knew they were seconds from their final fight for their lives and the preservation of Asgard itself.

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to be continued!
Loki watched, not having to fake his tension. His stomach curdled with fear that he'd done this all wrong. He would fail and everyone would die.

He prayed, not sure who he was praying to, but to anyone who might be listening: Please, please, let all this be worth it. Please let this not be a mistake.

"Perfectly balanced," Thanos said. "As it should be."

He held up the Infinity Gauntlet, certain in his evil plan, and Loki's eyes fixed on it in desperation. Don't tell me I did this for nothing...

The glow from the blue and yellow stones flickered. Thanos' brow furrowed and he looked at his hand. "What is this?" he demanded. "What is happening?"

With that, Loki knew he'd won. Relief was a cool balm through his veins, restoring his energy with gleeful satisfaction. Checkmate. You lose. Who did you think was going to win a battle of wits between the Mad Titan or the God of Mischief? Even the Midgardians would know who to pick to win that bet.

It was with no small amount of smug pride, Loki stood up, heedless of the Chitauri behind him, and made sure his voice rang out across the plaza with heavy scorn. "Oh, did you think I would give you the real one?"

He snapped his fingers - more for the drama than for any real need - and the entire Gauntlet rippled, before it turned dull gold and the fake Gems turned dark. Only the Power Stone still glowed, and as Odin had warned- the fake Gauntlet was a trap.

"No!" Thanos hollered and tried to pull off the Gauntlet with his other hand, but it wouldn't budge.

Loki smirked. "Oh, you are a fool. I warned you. But you didn't listen. Jane?" he called in invitation, and all around the ruined buildings rippled and turned solid and many of the "corpses" vanished. There was still damage and there were still bodies, but it was not nearly as terrible as it had looked before.

Unfortunately one body was exactly the same when he looked at Odin. His father was still living, but the pool of blood was real. His eye met Loki's as his hand curled slowly around the haft of Gungnir. And he nodded, very faintly in approval, and Loki knew what to do.
Jane floated slowly down from her tower out of the illusion that had hidden her, and Thanos gasped to see her scarlet eyes. "NO!"

Thanos thrust out his hand to use the Power Stone against her, but the power rebounded instantly on him, ensnaring him in violet lightning and he howled, trying to tear the gauntlet off. Corvus tried to help him, but the Stone's power burst through him, too.

"Corvus!" Proxima lunged toward him, as if to help, but it was too late. He staggered and fell, convulsing as the purple lightning continued to run through him.

Gathering seidr through the Eternal Flame, Loki leaped up, propelled high in the air, while at the same moment, Odin hurled Gungnir with all the power he had left straight to Loki’s waiting hand. His hand snapped around the haft and it felt like an old friend, humming with the Eternal Flame.

Landing before Thanos, Loki leveled Gungnir at him and called out, "You have been judged, Thanos of Titan. And you are found guilty. I will have vengeance for all you did to me and mine, you monster," he added more quietly and fire burst out of the spear, engulfing Thanos. Tendrils of flame surrounded him in a cage of seidr and then flared with the heat of a star. Thanos let out one last scream, and the Eternal Flame burned him to the bone.

All that remained when the fire faded was charred armor, bones, and a half-melted false Infinity Gauntlet bearing one real purple Stone. All around them, the Chitauri and Outriders collapsed to the ground, their puppet strings cut.

It was over.

A cheer went up - ragged but heartfelt - from the Asgardians, and many threw their arms around whoever was beside them while others retrieved weapons and hacked and stabbed the fallen enemy to be sure they were dead.

Frigga and Sif ran to the king. Thor was standing on the steps, his hair still streaked with dirt from the rubble. Loki had to smile, seeing him there, and he shook his head. Late to the party again. Jane beckoned, and Thor joined her to hurry across the plaza together.

A flash of light in the sky drew his horrified attention toward the ship, and he gathered his power to hurl it into a shield.

But the Sanctuary wasn't firing at them. With another flash and a deep rumble following distantly behind, it was gone. He wondered idly who remained in command, now that the Order was dead. Whoever it was had decided the wiser move was leaving, and Loki was just as glad about that.

Closing his eyes, Loki sought the Eternal Flame that bound him to all the people of Asgard still safe in hiding "Thanos is dead, the enemy are defeated. It is safe to return above."

The jubilation he could feel at that news was restorative, and he was smiling as he opened his eyes.

Only one enemy remained and she had just been abandoned by whatever crew had been alive on that ship. Loki grounded Gungnir, trying not to show how much he needed it to stand, and regarded Proxima Midnight coldly. "Surrender, or die."

She sneered. "I will never--" A blade appeared, sticking out of her chest, and she choked on her words. Heimdall stepped from behind her and pulled out his sword so she fell to the ground, dead. Heimdall bowed his head. "As you commanded, my lord."

Loki opened his mouth, and then shut it again, not sure what he wanted to say. It wasn't as if he had
a problem with it, since he'd have done it himself. So he tipped his head in thanks at the Watcher, and turned to look his parents, and the little knot of people around them.

He already knew Odin was dead. He'd felt it happen as Odin had thrown him Gungnir; his spirit had gone, leaving his body a shell.

Moving with slow caution, he put a comforting hand on Frigga's shoulder as she bent in grief. She twisted to look up at him, grabbing his hand with hers, and she shook her head, brow knotting to try to keep the tears at bay.

There was a frozen moment of stillness while everyone tried to figure out what to do next. The crowd was growing slowly, as those in hiding emerged into the sunlight.

Loki eyed Thor, wondering if he was going to take over, or Frigga. But they both seemed unwilling to speak. Someone should order the bodies picked up, at least.

He was about to order it himself, when Thor stirred. He looked from Odin to Thanos' corpse and to Loki before standing to address the people gathered there. "Odin All-Father is gone to Valhalla, with all the heroes of old," his voice rang out, shaking only a little, and he lowered himself to one knee. "Loki shall be king of Asgard. Long live the king!"

Loki stared at him, utterly befuddled. He turned to look behind himself as if there might be another "Loki" standing there. His fingers twitched on Gungnir, perhaps he could drop it and escape...

He wasn't the only one to think Thor had mis-spoken or they had heard wrongly, and there was a wave of whispers and confused silence.

Thor repeated it loudly, "Loki, the avenger of Odin All-Father, and Slayer of Thanos, shall be king of Asgard. Long live the king!"

The strangeness of everything worsened when others took it up, "Long live the king!" and kneeling and stomping and applauding.

Under the cover of all the noise he bent down closer to Thor to demand in a harsh whisper, "What in the hells are you doing?"

Clear blue eyes met his unflinching. "It should be you."

"What are you talking about? This is impossible. It should be you!" His voice rose, quelling the crowd back to silence to listen. "You're the heir, not me. Get up."

Thor did stand then, but he shook his head. "Father gave you Gungnir. The crown passes to you."

"Because I was there!" Loki protested. "He gave it to me as a weapon, not the throne. Just stop it. Stop mocking me. It can't happen."

"Of course it can, and it should," Thor said, reasonably.

"No, it can't! Don't be an idiot. You know why." Infuriated at Thor's stupidity and intransigence, he hissed, "I am not his son."

"You are."

He banged Gungnir on the paving stones. "Stop! No rule can last with that sort of secret hanging over it. It's impossible. I won't do it. It's a weakness the Realm cannot afford, even if I wanted it."
Frigga interrupted, putting a quelling hand on both of them. "The way to break the power of a secret is to reveal it, my son." And she turned to face the crowd.

"Mother, no, you don't have to do this...."

"You have suffered for my secret quite enough, Loki." She lifted her chin and her voice carried, strong and true, as she told the story. "During the Winter War, when I was abducted, King Laufey of Jotunheim begat a son on me. That child was born on Jotunheim and taken." Loki felt ill feeling the stares, as people figured out what she was saying. Thor put a hand on his shoulder in comforting solidarity. Frigga continued, laying it out in the open. "But when Odin found out that my child had been stolen from me, he returned to Jotunheim to take him back. He wrapped that baby in magic unbreakable for a thousand years and took that baby as his own son. We kept this secret because we never wanted Loki to feel he was not our son. Loki Odinson has the blood of another in his veins, but he is Odin's son of his heart. And Odin All-Father did bestow Gungnir, the King's spear, upon him when he knew his death drew close."

"Mother, no," Loki whispered. "What are you doing?"

She didn't stop. "Loki wields Gungnir and the Eternal Flame of Asgard. He is the Slayer of Thanos the Eternal. Avenger of Odin Borsson."

And Thor, that idiot, he completed it, bellowing, "Loki, son of Odin, King of Asgard!"

He thrust Mjolnir into the sky, and Loki was shocked to see Heimdall follow, hoisting his sword in the air.

Buoyed by the shouts of the crowd and the thunder of weapons, Loki couldn't speak to stop them. Finally the din tapered off, and he held up a hand to call for silence. He boosted his voice by spell so all could hear. "I ... I am struck by your faith in me, by your willingness to accept this. It is not something I sought, returning from Midgard broken and dying; I thought simply walking again was the most I could hope for. This," he shot a glower at Thor, "was not a situation I expected in the slightest, and certainly not after I discovered the secret of my blood just days ago. When I took the Eternal Flame into myself to heal my injuries, I vowed to protect this Realm and its people to the limit of my power and ability. I meant that, and I will continue to do that. But everyone here is in shock, and not thinking clearly. For now, let us clean the field, and mourn our dead, and then... later, I will accept the choice of the people whether it be me, or Thor or, who knows, perhaps neither, as your king."

There was some murmuring at that, and he hid a smile before issuing orders, "Lord Tyr, if you would see to the collection of the enemy. The enemy dead may be taken to the headland stone where they will be burned another day. My lord Heimdall, with the queen's advice, see to the disposition of Odin All-Father and the remainder of our honored dead. Everyone else, tonight we celebrate our victory over evil and prepare for tomorrow's grand feast."

There was more cheering after that and his smile became more open, pleased by the reaction and even more so as the crowd started to disperse.

He waited there, with Thor at his side, keeping his silence and holding Gungnir to keep himself from slumping tiredly.

Jane came over to them. The Aether still glowed in her eyes, but Loki had become a bit more accustomed to the look and since she seemed to be herself, he wasn't concerned. "I like it," she announced. "Better than being king of New York, right?"
"I suppose if you put it that way...." He glanced at Thor. "Even if it makes no sense."

Thor folded his arms stubbornly. "It makes perfect sense. You saved Asgard."

Jane looked toward Thanos' corpse and shook her head, smiling ruefully. "I can't believe he fell for it. What a moron." Her blunt assessment made Loki snort a laugh and she looked very proud of herself.

"Hey, I fell for it," Thor objected, but with mock offense.

"He had to think he won," Loki explained. He thought of the guards at the Treasury, sacrificed as part of his ruse, and his humor fled for a darker remorse.

Heimdall and others knelt beside Odin's body.

"I'm sorry that wasn't part of the illusion," Jane murmured, touching Thor's arm. "We didn't expect him to try to take out Thanos himself."

Another sacrifice to his 'plan', though unintentional. If Odin had only waited a little longer... "I should've saved him," Loki said, numbly. "After all that, he ... was gone."

Thor said, "He knew what he was doing. And he knew what he was choosing, throwing you Gungnir."

Loki shook his head. "No. You're just trying to shove it at me, because you want to go to Midgard."

"I do," Thor admitted. "But I also think it's what Father wanted, and it's the best choice. I'm not a king."

"You could be. They love you more than they'll ever love me." Loki gestured outward to the slowly emptying courtyard as the people went to check their homes and clean-up began.

"Maybe, but that doesn't make me a king. I wasn't suited for it before we went to Jotunheim. I thought I was, because I didn't know any better. But you knew."

Loki's gaze lifted toward the Observatory and the still-smoking wreckage of his war prize, remembering the rest of the fallout from that disastrous trip to Jotunheim. Very softly he murmured, "I've done terrible things. Not all of Midgard was against my will, and treating with Laufey, trying to kill them all - that was me."

"And Father personally butchered how many in the Realms before we were born? I killed twelve bar toughs on Vanaheim for nothing but sport and made you lie about it," Thor said. "I learned better. And so did you."

Loki glowered at him, mouth moving but unable to find words at first, until he blurted, "You can't do this."

Thor smirked the most insufferably smug grin Loki had ever seen on his face. "Watch me." He swung Mjolnir to rest on his shoulder and walked away with Jane tagging along behind him and making apologetic faces over her shoulder.

Tyr came up. He did not hesitate in his address at all, though he was older than Loki and he could not have known the truth about Loki's ancestry. "My lord, what shall we do with the ship?"

Loki grimaced at Thanos' shuttlecraft, now listing to one side on the paving stones with one of its
landing gear damaged. He sensed no one alive on it. "I do keep collecting them, don't I? This one I want rid of, though. But there's no one on it, so we can deal with it later." Tyr went off and after a moment, Loki became aware of Frigga's faint smile in his direction. "What?"

"I hear the king of Asgard," she said with a rather knowing look.

Incensed, he turned to face her. "I can't believe you're supporting this. It won't work. They'll all calm down and realize how inherently unsuited I am for this. Thor's the heir, not me, and this is all just absurd."

Frigga smiled in affectionate amusement. "Do you not remember? Odin himself said it, and you repeated it to me yourself not long ago -- you and Thor were both meant to be kings."

"Of Jotunheim! That was his plan. You cannot tell me he meant for his own son to be disinherited by Laufey's get."

Her hand was gentle on his cheek. "You are and always have been Odin's son, my darling. Do not let these later revelations break you from that truth. He had faith in you."

His eyes sought where Heimdall was carefully moving Odin's body to a long cloth to be carried away and his eyes pricked with tears that he had to swallow back.

"I will go care for your father now. You will do well, Loki." She kissed his cheek and glided away, following after the honor guard with the king, leaving him there.

Mechanically he answered the questions put to him until he saw Tyr start to move Thanos' remains and recalled he needed the Stone first. "Tyr, hold!" He hurried across the cobblestones and curled enough of the Eternal Flame around his hand to hold the naked Power Stone safely. "All right, thank you."

The Stone pulsed with violet light, blinding when he looked at it with seidr. Thanos had retrieved this one first, and used it to guide himself to the others. But now Loki had four, he knew where the Time Stone was, and he could find the last.

What then? Have Eitri make a new Gauntlet? Fix the universe, as Thanos had intended? Go back in time, save Odin? Go back farther to undo his mistake on Jotunheim? Save his mother from Laufey to create a paradox? All the way back to save the Svartalfar?

The heavy sigh escaped him and he curled his fingers around the Stone, knowing he would do none of it. It was a fool's quest. There was no certainty of creating a better outcome, and since the Stones seemed to only cause misery and destruction, it seemed possible it would end in worse.

Perhaps the answer was to end the Stones instead. Could he use three to destroy one, so the six could never be gathered again? Or would that cause some kind of terrible destruction not worth the price either?

"My king."

He looked up to see Fandral there, as Fandral gave a sweeping bow that wasn't nearly as mocking as Fandral could perform it.

"Not king," Loki objected.

"Details," Fandral waved a hand dismissively and Loki frowned at him.
"I would have thought you would support Thor's claim."

"Thor's claim is to give it to you," Fandral said with a grand shrug, but then must've seen by Loki's face that wasn't a good enough answer and he added more seriously, "You defended Asgard in the last few days. You have the All-Father's power. And, well, not counting some lapses of judgment here and there over the years, you've always been the voice of caution to Thor's recklessness." At Loki's start of surprise, Fandral offered a rueful smile. "We did notice, even if it looked like we didn't. And--" Fandral was completely incapable of being serious for any longer, and added in jest, "And you're holding an Infinity Gem so who's going to say otherwise?"

He didn't smile and kept his gaze on Fandral. "And if I do something you don't like two years hence, will you go running to Thor to bring him back?" he asked. "Because I'm not interested in doing this if I'm just keeping the seat warm while he plays on Midgard."

"Fair concern." Fandral nodded. "That would be wrong. And I can tell you I won't, but of course why should you believe it? But let me ask you a question in return: Do you think Thor would do it?"

"If I screwed up, he would."

"But would he steal it from you? He wouldn't. And, say he did, do you think if he's been absent the whole time and you've done a good job, that you wouldn't have any supporters?"

"Because civil war sounds so excellent," Loki sniped, irritated. "I'd give it to him before I let that happen."

Fandral's smile was pleased as he revealed how deftly he'd trapped Loki. "And that is how I know you will be a good king." He bowed again, fist to heart, and for the first time, Loki let himself believe this was actually happening.

Chapter End Notes

To be concluded next week!
And the Dawn

Chapter Notes

Two and a half years ago I posted the first chapter of this story to AO3 (though the bones of the beginning are older than that), and now here it is, finally, the ending.

Thank you to all my readers on this, it's been amazing to see the enthusiasm. It's by far my most popular fic ever. <3

Keep in touch at Tumblr or in my other stories here at AO3. My summer project is to finish both "Ice Demon and Red Skull", and "To Walk the Path of Hope", which have been lingering in WIP status here at AO3 so I could finish Ragdoll.

One last chapter, let's go. Comments/kudos always treasured!

In the Treasury to put the Power Stone in some temporary containment and protection, he looked at the pedestal where their trap had been laid and had to smile grimly. After killing his way inside, Corvus would've seen the "Gauntlet" in its weak force field on the pedestal, the broken scepter, and the shattered cube on the floor. He had certainly not looked behind the seemingly broken gate and into the niche that had once held the Destroyer.
The blue shards on the floor vanished, and Loki turned to greet Jane as she picked her way down the steps.

With a nod toward the metal orb that now held the Power Stone, she asked, "You're going to put it with the others?"

"For now. Certainly not for long." He observed the niche and said, "The Destroyer used to guard this place. Do you suppose SHIELD would give it back if Thor asked nicely?"

Equally dryly, she answered, "Probably not." The glow in her eyes intensified and the gate reformed, new and strong, but without a Destroyer within. The doors swung open to reveal a shallow niche with a shelf that held one intact tesseract, a yellow gem in another containment orb, and the lantern-looking containment device for the aether.

"How will you secure them?" she asked.

"For now, bind the gate with the Casket of the Ancient Winters. Only I can use it."

"I should give mine back, then."

"Are you sure? You've taken to it very impressively."

She smiled and ducked her head. "Thanks. But," she grew more serious, looking up at him again, "I don't feel like myself with it. I think... keeping it, I might become something I don't want to be."

"You are wiser than I," Loki answered. He inhaled and let it out slowly. "To be offered what I have always wanted and never believed would be mine..." He thought of the handful of days he'd held the throne before, and its dismal ending, and wondered if he was being foolish to consider this at all.

"You don't want it anymore?"

"On the contrary. I have ideas. But I sent those Einharjar for Corvus to slay, knowing they would die," he gestured at the Treasury doors at the top of the steps. "What kind of king is that."

"One desperate to save his people?" she ventured. "Maybe it's just the Aether saying this, but we had to make it real. He had to buy what we were selling. I understood your logic, and it still makes sense. Maybe if we'd had more time, there could have been another way, but... I don't know. I don't think it helps to dwell on it."

"Saying 'we' makes me feel better, though it was not your responsibility."

"It was," she disagreed, "I had the power. But that's why I don't want to keep it." She offered her hand and he took the containment vessel and held it for her. It was a simple thing now for her to send it from her, and he had to smile a bit remembering the desperation they'd felt to help her rid herself of it.

"Are you sure you won't keep it?" he asked, only partly jesting.

She shook her head. "No. Though if you keep it nearby I might want to ... play with it, now and then."

He laughed. "Only you would use one of the foundation stones of the universe as your toy." He shut the containment device again where the red smoke reformed and swirled within. Setting the vessel in the niche, he closed the vault doors with a solid thump, satisfied very little would be able
"What will you do with them?" she asked more seriously. "Keep them here?"

"No, against enough power that will not hold. I intend to put yours back where you found it. The tesseract will allow me to access it without the Convergence, and that will not happen for another thousand years. The rest will need to be scattered."

"Throw the Mind Gem in a neutron star," she advised. "That one's too creepy. No one should have it."

He nodded and then fell silent. "You're leaving then? You don't have to."

She cast her eyes down, chewing on her lip. "I should though. If I stay--" she trailed off before admitting very quietly, "it'll hurt Thor. You two will live much longer than I will, even with your gift, and it's not right for me to cause trouble."

He shook his head. "No, there'll be no -- I would never--"

"I would interfere," she interrupted. "Me. You and I have shared more in two days than I ever will with Thor. I know that. Do you understand what I'm saying?" she implored, looking up. He was stunned silent by what she was implying. His hand lifted, but she shook her head and moved back a step. His hand fell back down. "I'm sorry, but I'm not the kind of person who would do that. I'll tell you what I'm going to tell him -- I love Asgard, I love the science and the magic of it all. It's fascinating. But I can explore that in the future. I have time, now, thanks to you. But right now it's time to go home and live my own life for awhile."

He turned it all over in his mind and decided if she was being this mature about it, he could do no less. He'd known all along nothing could or should happen. Still he had to make one last play and point out one immutable truth: "This is your life now, Jane. You will find your old one confining."

"Maybe, but I need to find that out for myself."

He nodded a reluctant acceptance. "All right. You are always welcome in Asgard. And if you need help -- call my name or Heimdall's and we can bring you here."

"Thank you." She grabbed his hand to pull him down to kiss his cheek, whispering, "Thank you for showing me magic."

Then she pulled away, her fingers trailing his with a last brush of her warmth, and he watched her walk up the steps and leave.

It was late and the Great Hall was deserted. Loki made his way to the bier where Odin lay in state, held beneath preservation spells so he looked merely sleeping.

Tomorrow the family would preside over the funeral, but tonight, he was alone to say his own personal farewell.

*Why did you do this?* He asked silently. Frigga and Thor had both seen and understood the message, when Odin had transferred the spell to hold Hela and given Gungnir to Loki.

*Why me? To make amends for the past, or because you truly thought it was a good idea? What if I make terrible mistakes?*
To prove to me that I am your son, and you had no other way left to you?

Because you knew Thor didn't want it anyway?

Why did you do this, to mire me in uncertainty of your intent and my own ability? I have learned better, yes, but so much better to make me worthy to be your successor?

Perhaps the people will choose otherwise and this is all just a night chat with a ghost that will amount to nothing.

He lifted his head to see the throne. They would not hold the coronation here, but in the Hall of Ascension which would hold most of Asgard within beneath its grand throne dais.

This one was smaller, more practical if one could say such a thing about a throne at all, and meant for the king's usual business. Most of that business would bore him to tears, but he knew was important to the people who brought it to the king and therefore would be treated with the seriousness it deserved.

He realized what he was thinking and bit his lip, shaking his head at himself.

A soft step and a familiar touch on his senses was just enough so he wasn't startled by the voice. "You can sit in it. It's yours."

He glanced to see Frigga on the other side of Odin's bier. "Not yet. I meant what I said. And if they choose Thor, then I'll withdraw."

"They won't."

"How can you be so sure? It wasn't that long ago you told me that the people had no true appreciation for the work, only the entertainment of it, which Thor provides."

"That was before we were attacked by two hostile forces and everyone saw what I always have, and your father saw for himself." She tenderly smoothed back Odin's hair from his face. Her wedding band on her finger glinted in the light. "Thor would be a king much like his father. But that is not what Asgard and the Realms need."

He frowned. "But--"

She reached across to touch his hand. "Change is not something to fear. Keeping everything in amber for a thousand years was no true answer. Midgard develops by leaps and bounds; we cannot hold them back from the outside universe."

"We shouldn't."

She inclined her head. "No. And in fairness, Thor would not seek to prevent that either, but he will not seek to develop Asgard. As I know you will. Because you, my darling, have always seen its faults and its shadows, where Thor only ever saw light."

He moved away from the bier and she followed so they could both stand before the throne. "Our people don't like change."

"True. But Asgard nearly fell today, Loki. It must change or it will die. I think many of our people know this in their hearts that change is upon us. And you will do it thoughtfully, seeing beyond the obvious to the unseen. You understand that to make no choice is still a choice, and it is never without consequences."
For an instant he was seized by the desire to level Gungnir at the throne and blow it to bits. Now that would be change, not the careful measured changes which he would have to begin with. If he could do that much. If they would let him.

"Some will say the bloodline matters. That I am not of the line of Bor. And the son of our former enemy, no less."

"Some may," she acknowledged. "Though none can question that Odin claimed you as his own. And your power should make that less important. But I had to reveal the truth. I had feared doing so for so long, and yet the actual doing of it, I knew it was right and I feared nothing. I should have told you long ago."

He didn't want to cast blame anymore, and shook his head. "I forgive you." Her relief and delight struck him in the heart, worsened by her doubt that he didn't mean it. "I wish I'd known, yes, but I understand why you didn't. I know what it is to fear the worst."

Her eyes settled on him a long moment. "Thanos?"

He had to swallow and couldn't meet her eyes. "I was planning to make sure he killed me," he admitted softly. "I think that's why Father attacked when he did, because he suspected I was going to do it as part of the plan. And now?" he gestured toward the throne and gave a little laugh. "This is rather the opposite of how I expected to end the day."

She hooked her hand around his arm and pulled him close, framing his face between her hands to look into his eyes. "Not again, Loki. Not ever again will you hold your own life as something to be given away so freely, promise me."

He didn't want to promise, trying to look away, but she wouldn't allow it. "Promise me," she insisted. "Sometimes sacrifice must be given, I acknowledge and honor that, but if it is not necessary - if it is for fear alone - you must find another way. Swear it."

"Thanos is dead. I have no other fears worth the effort."

Her eyes narrowed. "That is not a promise."

The words wouldn't come at first; the clear memory returning of hanging off the Bifrost in the nothing and knowing there was nothing left for him. But he had been wrong, hadn't he? He had taken the very worst to heart, but his family was here. His mother, now he knew she really was his mother, loved him, Thor loved him, and Odin had too, leaving him the greatest testament of his faith he could.

Only then he could swallow down the memory and nod. "I swear."

She nodded approval and kissed his cheek. "Good."

Overcome, he gathered her into his arms. "I'm so sorry, Mother, so sorry," he whispered into her shoulder "I should've saved him."

Her hand smoothed his hair. "Hush. We will celebrate his bravery and sing of his battle, as it should be, Loki. And we will remember and mourn with love, not with regret."

They stood in the comforting embrace until a familiar presence and heavier step interrupted. Loki stepped back as Thor entered. "Ah, I'm not the only one who thought to make private farewells before tomorrow."
"I had my turn, if you'd rather be alone," Loki offered.

"No. It seems right it's all of us." Thor kissed Odin's brow and stood there for a moment in silence, his hands folded before him.

Loki tried to give him his peace but couldn't help breaking the silence. "Are you sure about this? I know I said once that I envied this, but... I don't."

"I would rather be a warrior for Asgard, than the ruler of it," Thor answered after some moments of thought. "And perhaps it's selfish of me to decline the duty of it," he added with a quick look at Frigga but she had no shaming words for him. "But I believe you would be better at it. You have grown so much, Loki. Perhaps you don't feel so, but I see it. Mother sees it." She nodded definite agreement. "Father saw it, too. Gungnir suits you, brother. And it would suit me ill."

"Well, we can't all be worthy enough to carry Mjolnir, can we?" Loki retorted with reflexive bitterness, before catching himself and wishing he'd kept his mouth shut.

But instead of arguing, Thor held out his hand, called Mjolnir to him, and thumped her on the ground. "Do it."

Loki eyed the hammer, then Thor. "Not in the mood for your mockery, right now. Yes, I could probably break Father's spell on it, but that means nothing."

"The spell never meant anything," Thor returned sharply. "It was only a trick to make me grow up. You already know. So pick it up."

Loki turned away, curling a lip and squaring his shoulders. "I don't need a hammer to tell me my worthiness."

"No? I think you do. I think you'll persist in believing you're unworthy of the throne if you can't do it," Thor challenged. He came in close and put Mjolnir right at Loki's feet.

Loki had to look down at it, ashamed of the sudden fear that seized him. What if he couldn't? Why was he allowing a stupid bespelled hammer to do this to him? He knew who he was; he already knew what he'd done. He knew he wasn't worthy. Perhaps he was serviceable. Perhaps he was even a king. But as the red-headed spider had said, he had blood in his ledger, and so much more than she had.

He could use the Eternal Flame to break the charm and lift it, but that was cheating.

He had to look away and shook his head. "I know it won't. I know what I did, I know what I am. I--"

"He didn't see Thor move or hold out his hand to call Mjolnir into it, not until the hammer was already being shoved at his chest. "What are you--."

Thor let go. Reflexively, because he didn't let things fall to the floor, Loki grabbed it with his free hand.

And... he was holding Mjolnir. Thor stepped back, both hands upraised as if to demonstrate there was no trickery involved, and Loki could only dart his eyes between Thor and the hammer that was sitting upright in his hand without effort.

Thor's smirk was unbearable. "Told you so."

"But -- I -- how?" he asked in bewilderment.
Thor plucked it back from his unresisting grip and twirled it as if Loki touching it might have altered the balance. "Because even Mjolnir knows when you're being ridiculous." That didn't seem like a good answer, but Loki couldn't pursue the question, when Thor's free hand grabbed Loki's shoulder, turned him, and shoved him toward the throne. "Now go sit in your chair. I want to see what it looks like before everyone else."

Affronted by this manhandling and unwilling to do it, he turned and leveled Gungnir at Thor playfully, and Thor lifted Mjolnir and pointed it at the throne. "Go."

"Somehow I don't think you're serious, if you're bossing me around," Loki grumped at him.

"I will always be your big brother," Thor retorted. "Just as you would stay my annoying little brother if it was me. But it's not."

Loki sought Frigga to see if she would intercede in this, but she was amused and gestured him to keep going.

Halfway there, he turned back to ask Thor, "You're going to stay, won't you? For a little while at least? After?" He didn't clarify 'after' what, but Thor didn't seem to need it.

He heard the plea though Loki tried to bury it, and he answered as any big brother would, "As long as you need me."

Loki gave him a nod of thanks, and turned back to look up at his father's throne.

A fortnight later, Loki paced carefully up to the grand throne Hlidskjalf in the Hall of Ascension, before all of the people of Asgard. Gungnir lay across the arms of the throne, while his helm waited in Thor's hands. Thor and Frigga framed the throne, reminding Loki of that fateful day of the aborted coronation for Thor. But if they were reminded of it, too, they showed nothing but eager pride on their faces.

Loki wore formal gold armor and the emerald cape. There had been two days of discussion about the cape -- Frigga had wanted red, Thor had wanted white to match the white under-lining of Loki's armor, and Loki had wanted to keep something green. Loki had won but conceded to status by having it lengthened to sweep the floor and hemmed in gold.

He walked up two steps. He was supposed to climb to the top and turn to receive Gungnir from Frigga, but suddenly that felt wrong. Instead, he lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head before the throne.

He closed his eyes. Father, give me your strength and your wisdom. Your guidance. Please, I don't know if I can do this.

The familiar voice sounded as if it came from someone standing right above him. "Would I have passed it to you, if I didn't think you could, my son?"

He didn't dare look and see no one was there. Just the sound of his voice was sending the tears overflowing Loki's eyes.

A hand laid lightly on the top of his head, thin with age, but still strong as the fingers smoothed his hair. "You will do well," Odin said in benediction. "Now rise and take your place."

He wiped his eyes and looked up.
From the side, Thor moved to take advantage of Loki already kneeling to crown Loki with the golden helm of high horns. "Still dumb looking," he whispered under his breath, but his hands were gentle pulling it into place.

"Feathers," Loki hissed back but he struggled to keep the smile from his face as he stood.

Turning, Loki faced Frigga who removed Gungnir from the throne across both hands and offered it to Loki.

He grasped it in one hand and faced the hall.

Odin was not there, and in Thor and Frigga's faces he saw nothing but pride and approval. Jane had come, standing in the front row as a representative of Midgard. She was smiling, hands clasped together against her chest as if to keep herself from applauding. Next to her stood Heimdall, Sif, and the Warriors Three. Hogun - who had missed all the excitement on Vanaheim - nodded to Loki in polite acknowledgment. When Fandral saw that Loki's eyes were on him, he cheekily grinned while putting his fist to his heart in salute.

The vast crowd watched him in silence and expectation.

Odin's reign had ended with the funeral and celebration of life feast; today the reign of another would begin, a change not seen in Asgard for more than a thousand years.

Me. And I won't even be able to complain if Thor ruins the coronation right now. His amusement was short-lived, dissolving for the somber ceremony and even more somber responsibility that would come if he sat down.

"Is it going to bite?" Thor murmured.

Frigga flicked her eyes upward. "Boys."

Thor grinned, unrepentant, as his eyes met Loki's. They'd be alright.

That gave Loki the strength to sit down in the throne. It felt too large for him, and he wondered if he'd ever fill it as Odin had with the sheer power of his presence.

He felt the phantom touch on his shoulder and his mother and brother stood there ready to help. He wasn't alone. The helpless, broken thing his brother had carried home not so long ago had healed, and though he might always carry those scars, he had learned from them.

There was much to do still. Soon he needed to decide the fate of the Infinity Stones. Tend to Hela. Send Thor to Midgard to help them transition to their membership of the wider universe. Try to make some kind of amends.

He also wanted to figure out how to balance the defense of Asgard with an encouragement of non-warrior pursuits so no child would ever feel as scorned as he had. Part of that goal included the reform of his father's legacy of conquest, bring the other Realms out of shadow, and renew Jotunheim.

The people had heard his ideas, and now, as they shouted their support, he would have the chance to implement them.

For Asgard and for Loki himself, a new day had come.
the end.
Announcing an updated chapter!

Fake chapter!

To let previous readers know -- if you finished this before August 1, there is now a 'missing scene' added into Chapter 49 in which Frigga gets her ring back.

It was requested at my Tumblr, and I thought it belonged within the fic itself, so I put it where it goes at the end of the chapter.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!