Rulers Make Bad Lovers

by fairychangeling

Summary

Only one of Odin's sons can be King of Asgard.

Loki's favorite has always been Thor.

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An Arthurian inspired tale.

Notes

I was inspired to write this story because I was thinking about Excalibur and Mjolnir and how only one person, the worthy person, can hold them. And I wanted to make Loki a Merlin type figure in Thor's life - strange, a little scary, with a lot of untapped power. This story then grew a life of its own.

I'm following the Norse Myths in regards to Thor's family life so while Odin is his father, his mother is Jord and Loki is not related to any of them.
Loki is older than Thor and this first chapter deals with Thor growing up. All future chapters have adult Thor. Nothing sexual happens between Loki and Thor while Thor is underage, but Thor does have an epic crush on Loki.

In regards to the Loki/Others tag - Loki is a flirt and there is a completely one-sided attraction from Odin that Loki wants no part in. Nothing romantic happens with Loki and anyone but Thor.

Finally, the story name is taken from Gold Dust Woman by Fleetwood Mac which is one of my go-to Loki songs. Chapter titles are also from the same song.
“Useless,” Odin spat.

Loki did not look up from where he sat cross-legged on the floor. He was used to the King’s tirades. The man wanted always more and Loki had already given him everything he could. Odin was king over Asgard and its Empire. He had wanted to conquer lands and people. Loki had assured that he did.

"What concerns you now, my king?” he asked.

"My heirs,” came the reply.

"Oh, those,” Loki said quietly. "You know I will not give you those."

"Then tell me who has the powers you do, boy. Tell me who will give me strong sons."

Loki glanced up. He did not hide his disgust, lips twisting at the thought of anyone lying beneath the bulk of the old man. Odin had been handsome once, but he was scarred and turning grey now. He had devoted himself too long to warfare, but now as he aged his thoughts turned to his line of succession.

Loki took his rune stones from the pouch at his belt and cast them on the floor before him, waiting for them to come to rest before he looked at them.

"Lady Frigga will give you sons. Marry her," he said.

Odin snorted.

"She is a healer. What power can that give me?"

Loki looked back at the stones.

"If you wish only for strength, lay with the giantess Grid. Her sons will be strong."

Odin was quiet for a long moment before he shook his head.

"Brute strength alone is not all I require."

"Lay with Jord then,"” Loki snapped, growing irritable now. “She is mistress of the earth. The children born of her will have power such as you crave."
Odin reached out suddenly, snatching hold of Loki’s hair and dragging his head back, forcing Loki to look up at him.

"What of you, little witch? A child of yours would be the most powerful," he said, and his one good eye gleamed with lust as he looked along the length of Loki’s body.

"A child of mine would be a monster," Loki hissed, his nails biting into the skin of Odin’s hand as he struggled against the man, forcing himself free. He fled to the other side of the room, glaring angrily at Odin. “If you want a child of mine then cut out your heart and I will eat it. I will not be amenable to any other way.”

Odin glared back at him, but Loki stood firm. For a long moment neither of them moved.

Loki hated Odin, hated him deep in his heart, but he knew he could not hurt the man. The binding had seen to that. They were together until Odin died and that day could not come soon enough for Loki’s liking.

He would never given Odin what the man desired most, not if he had a choice in the matter, but he feared that Odin would take that choice from him. If he ordered Loki then Loki could not refuse.

“Very well,” Odin said finally, turning his gaze away from Loki and Loki felt relief flood through him. “I shall take Frigga as my queen and lay with Jord and Gird. Whichever of my sons is worthy of Asgard, I will crown King.”

“Of course,” Loki said.

He should have guessed that Odin would not settle for only one of the choices presented to him. He had always been greedy.

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Queen Frigga bore three sons - Balder, Hod, and Hermod.

Loki held each of the children and saw nothing exceptional in any of them, although he did not say so. Odin was pleased with them and his Queen. Loki was certain they would have been happy enough together, but Odin had not been content to let his line rest with just Frigga.
True to his word he has sought out both the giantess and the mistress of the earth and begot both with child.

Gird birthed one child - another boy - Vidar.

Loki visited the child and his mother. He held the boy who was as heavy as a grindstone already and saw that he would grow to be a giant. He foresaw nothing of the child’s character, the sort of man he would grow to be, but it was too soon for such things to be known.

Lastly Loki went to Jord. She too had given birth to a boy, this one named Thor.

She let Loki in to her home under duress and watched him with wary eyes as he picked Thor up from his cot.

“He is my son, witch. He is Thor Jordson. Odin will not have him.”

“I do not want to take him from you, Jord,” Loki said. “You are his mother. I want only to look at him, to judge if he will one day be our King.”

The boy was pink cheeked and golden curled, with chubby legs and arms and bright blue eyes. There was not a sign of Odin in him and Loki thought him all the better for it.

Loki held the child in his arms, studying him intently, but he could see only the flickers of what Thor might become. There was power in the little body, something beyond the control of mortal men, but Loki could not tell yet what form that power would take.

Unexpectedly, the baby smiled at him.

None of Odin’s other sons had ever smiled at Loki. They had cried and screamed when he held them, well aware that he was not human, or else they had lain quiet in his arms, staring at him with fear as he examined them.

Thor reached out a pudgy hand. He grabbed a handful of Loki’s long dark hair and tugged, gurgling happily as he did.
“I cannot tell you if he will be the future king,” Loki said, looking at Jord witheringly. “But I can tell you that he is a simpleton. He does not even have the sense to fear me.”

Jord laughed.

“What are you to fear? You would not harm him. He can tell that,” she said.

Loki smiled. He did not believe her, but it would be nice to think that Thor of all Odin’s children sensed already the bond they would share. Thor was only half-mortal. Perhaps he did have a knowledge none of the others possessed.

“You will be my favourite then,” he said to Thor, delighting in how the baby’s smile grew wide.

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From then on Loki split his time between the three families and his duties to his King. He made certain that he visited each year with Vidar and Thor, and that he saw Frigga’s three sons when he was at court.

Thor was still Loki’s favourite of all the children. He alone had no clue as to his royal blood.

Jord was under no illusions when she fell pregnant with him. She knew that one day Odin would call upon Thor, that one day Thor would be measured against all of his brothers to find the most worthy of the crown, but until that time came he was a simple boy, living a simple life on his mother’s farm.

She kept him from the backstabbing and warmongering of his father’s court.

Only Loki was ever allowed to visit and Loki knew when to hold his tongue.

For Thor it was always summertime. The flowers always bloomed, the birds always sang. There were always sweet apples and pears growing in the fruit trees, always milk from the goats and wheat in their fields. His mother was the earth and she gave her riches back to him.
“Do you know my father?” Thor asked.

He was seven years old.

Thor and Loki lay in the long grass on the hill behind Jord’s farmstead. Loki had arrived that afternoon on his yearly pilgrimage to the farm. There had been a great meal in his honor, a deer had been caught and roasted on a spit. Loki had brought fine things - wine, cured and potted fish and strange seeds for Jord to plant in her garden. He had told Thor of his adventures until Thor had wanted adventures of his own and then Loki had followed him into the long grass, had chased him until they collapsed exhausted.

The sun had finally set, but it was still pleasantly warm. The stars in the night sky dimmed, dulled by the haze of summer as all things were.

Loki felt contented. He could not think of a great many places he would like to be more than Jord’s farmstead in high summer with Thor at his side.

“Yes,” he said. “I know your father.”

Thor paused for a long moment before he voiced his next question.

“Yes,” he asked, his voice quieter now.

Loki laughed. “No.”

He could see why Thor might think such a thing. Loki came each year to visit and his visits were always spent with Thor. It was natural that the child would wonder why Loki had such an interest in him. Jord did not want Thor to know that he was Odin’s son. She wanted him to grow up, untainted by the man and his court. Loki respected her wishes for the moment. There was no great rush to tell Thor of his true parentage. That was a bridge that could be crossed in time.
Thor nodded, satisfied. “I didn’t think you were. You didn’t seem the sort.”

Oh, Loki thought, I must be very obvious if even a child can tell.

He said nothing in response to Thor. Instead, he looked up at the dimly lit stars.

“What are you to me?” Thor asked, interrupting the silence again.

“Nothing,” Loki answered carelessly.

For the moment he was nothing to Thor. If Thor became the King, if he was Odin’s heir, then Loki would be any and all things Thor wished for, but that was not now.

Thor thumped the ground beside him with a clenched fist.

“That isn’t true! I know it isn’t true. You aren’t nothing. You are special to me, Loki. I know it!”

Loki turned over onto his side so he could look at Thor. The boy’s face was red, his lower lip stuck out and trembling. His whole body radiated tension, clenched in on itself. Loki had never thought Thor would take his words so deeply to heart. Overhead a flash of lightning split the sky. Loki had seen no clouds. It had been completely clear above them, yet he heard the thunder and saw the lightning.

This then was Thor’s power. It was the power Loki had sensed in him when Thor was only a few weeks old.

How strange that Thor, son of the earth, should have power over the skies.

“You will know what I am to you when you are older,” Loki said quietly, reaching out one hand to stroke through Thor’s curls.

That touch and Loki’s soft words seemed to be enough for Thor.
He unclenched his fists and relaxed, his body no longer a tightly wound coil of energy. The sky cleared, leaving only the stars behind.

“And I will know who my father is then?”

Loki nodded. “When it is time, yes.”

Thor mulled this answer over before flopping down into the grass next to Loki. He said nothing else, just lay there beside him and gazed up at the stars.

Loki found the sound of his breathing intensely comforting. He closed his eyes, peaceful under the stars and slept with Thor at his side.

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Thor was twelve and had just had a growth spurt. His chubby legs had lengthened, his shoulders had widened and he had lost his baby fat. He was wiry and long-limbed, filled with the nervous energy of youth.

When Loki visited, Thor found to his pride that he now stood head-height to Loki’s shoulder. Another growth spurt or two and he would be the taller of them.

He trailed after Loki, abandoning his chores to spend hours by the fireside hearing of Loki’s adventures - his stories of Asgard, his fights with great giants and mortal men, the magic he had worked since their last meeting. He showed Thor simple tricks, made flowers appear from thin air and produced coins from behind Thor’s ear. Those coins vanished when Thor tried to touch them, but the flowers stayed. They bloomed for the length of Loki’s visit.

There was no one else on the farm who took such an interest in Thor. The labourers indulged him as the son of their mistress, played with him when they had free time and saved him the choicest apples and pears from the orchard, but they did not come to the farm simply to see him as Loki did. They did not spend hours exploring the woods around the farm, talking of everything and nothing. They did not play pranks and steal food from the larder and hide in the hayloft when Jord discovered their mischief. They did not laugh so musically at the chaos caused.
There was no one else in Thor’s whole world who was as dear to him as Loki was. Loki was his true friend, his co-conspirator. Thor looked forward to his visits and he dreaded the day when Loki would leave again.

Thor found himself jealous of anyone who would try to gain Loki’s attention for themselves. He knew that Loki was beautiful. Loki was beautiful in the way a thunderstorm was beautiful, naturally and terrifyingly. Loki’s beauty didn’t mean anything to Thor, not compared to Loki’s other gifts, but it meant something to other people.

Thor first noticed it with one of the milk maids. She brought her chair up to the fire to sit with them on an evening after supper. No-one else had ever done that. She moved her chair closer to Loki’s as he told his stories, her eyes fixed on him. Loki was aware, amused even by the attention. Thor saw his eyes flicker to the maid more than once, saw the smile on his face grow wider.

Thor hated it.

When Jord came to usher Thor to bed as the night grew long, Loki stood too.

“Will you not stay and tell more stories? You tell the most wonderful stories.” the maid asked. She put out a hand, reaching to touch Loki’s wrist, to hold him in place but he pulled away from her.

“I am glad my stories amused you, but I tell them for Thor,” he said.

The maid blushed, her gaze falling to the floor and Thor felt something shameful blooming in his chest. He was joyous, delighted that Loki had rebuffed the request. It was a horrible thing to feel and yet Thor couldn’t stop himself.

He and Loki went up the stairs to bed together, parting at Thor’s door, and Thor slept soundly that night, reassured that Loki’s attention was all his own.

From that night on though he was more aware of the effect Loki had on others. The glances he attracted, the opportunities others found to touch him - a hand on his shoulder or his arm, a brush against him that could be dismissed if questioned. Loki seemed happy enough with all of it so Thor tried not to hate it.

Some were not so subtle.
Thor had been play hide and seek with Loki. It was supposed to be Loki’s turn to seek, but any number of minutes had passed and Loki had not found him. Thor sighed. It would not be the first time that Loki had misunderstood the rules of the game. Thor almost hated hunting for him. Loki turned himself into frogs and rocks and birds to hide, which Thor had informed him often was cheating. It did not surprise him that Loki had forgotten to look for him.

Perhaps Thor was getting too old for these games.

He moved from his hiding place and set out for the barn where he had last been with Loki. He stuck his hands in his pockets, considering the other games they might play.

Thor rounded the corner and stopped. For a moment, he forgot to breath.

Loki was there where Thor had left him, leaning up against the side of the barn, but he was no longer alone. One of the farmhands was with him,

The man had one hand pressed to the wood right by Loki’s head and he was leaning into him, far more imposing than Loki who looked very small indeed to Thor in that moment.

Loki wasn’t frightened though. He was smiling, his head tipped back slightly and Thor felt an icy chill run through him as he realised this man was the reason Loki hadn’t come to look for him.

Loki was not interested in fair maids, but in the burley men who toiled in the fields.

It didn’t shock Thor. He did not care if men loved men, or women loved women. It was natural and Thor thought no less of Loki for his preference. He only cared that Loki had abandoned him for this flirtation.

Even as Thor watched, the farmhand reached out his free hand to stroke over Loki’s cheek. His hands were rough from work and Thor gritted his teeth, thinking of how soft Loki’s skin was and how the touch must hurt him.

“You are so beautiful. I want to have you right here,” the man rumbled, his voice low but Thor still heard him. He was listening.
Loki laughed melodious and silken. He pressed a hand to the man’s chest, his fingers stroking softly.

Thor hated this. He hated to see someone else pawing at Loki, hated to see Loki enjoying it, but most of all he hated how he could not look away. He wanted to see everything. He wanted to imagine he was the one touching Loki, that Loki looked so invitingly at him. It was confusing and terrifying.

Loki was his friend and yet Thor wanted him.

He had never wanted anyone else before. He had rolled his eyes at the romantic parts of Loki’s stories, rushed him onto the battles. He had traded kisses with the daughter of one of the milkmaids, and while he had enjoyed it, he’d felt nothing like the yearning he felt now.

Thor had not realised until this moment that his growing awareness of other people’s interest in Loki had been down to his growing awareness of Loki. Thor was on the cusp, moving between child and adult. He was growing out of childish games and pursuits. He was growing up and the love he felt for Loki was changing, maturing.

He wanted to steal kisses from Loki as they laughed together, wanted to hold hands with him in front of the fire. He wanted things from Loki that he didn’t fully understand yet, but he wanted them all the same.

Loki would never be interested in a gangly youth like Thor though. Loki was something ethereal, a creature of shadows and magic. He could have anyone he set his mind on and they would want him too. It was in his nature to be desired.

The farmhand moved his head to press a kiss to Loki’s pretty mouth and at the last moment Loki turned away, his musical laughter filling the air.

“Minx,” the man said. “You’ve spent too much time with that boy. You’ve forgotten what to do with a man.”

Loki shook in the man’s arms, his laughter quieter now and Thor felt as if he had been stabbed in the heart.
“Don’t you get bored, running around after that brat?” the man asked.

Thor bit his lip, forcing himself to stay silent. He needed to know what Loki would say. He needed to know if Loki would toss his head and smile and laugh as he’d done before. He needed to know if Loki believed he was a brat, if Loki was bored of him. From the corner of his eye Thor saw dark clouds starting to form on the horizon.

Loki narrowed his eyes. He shoved the man away with such force that he sent him sprawling onto the ground. Loki no longer looked delicate. He looked dangerous.

“I get bored of foolish men who want to bed me,” he said. He smoothed his hands over his front, brushing away the man’s touches as if they were nothing more than dirt. “I have allowed myself to be waylaid for too long, Thor is hiding and I am supposed to be seeking.”

The dark foreboding clouds that had begun to form on the horizon parted, letting the sunlight through.

“Witch,” the man spat.

Loki laughed again.

In the blink of an eye he vanished.

Thor did not stay. He knew Loki would have changed into some other form and would be searching for him now. He didn’t want Loki to know he had been spying. He was certain Loki wouldn’t have wanted this moment to be overheard.

Thor ran and ran until his legs were sore and he was forced to stop. His heart ached with joy.

Loki cared for him more than any other. Thor knew that now.

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“Loki is here!”

Thor’s delighted whoop alerted Jord to the witch’s’ arrival. She had known it would be soon. Even in the eternal summertime of her home, she knew when the months passed. She felt it.

“Good,” she called back to her son. “Throw rocks at him until he goes away.”

“Ma!”

She laughed at Thor’s shock. He was thirteen now. He was no longer a child, but growing into a man. He helped with the harvest, he went out on the hunt. He was old enough to know that his mother and Loki were not friends. They shared one thing in common and that was Thor.

Jord resented each visit from Loki. Every time he came, it was a reminder of Thor’s destiny. With each year that passed she knew she was another year closer to losing Thor.

Once he found out he was a Prince, once he learned to control his powers, why would he ever want to stay?

She left Thor to greet their guest and instead poured them cups of the blackberry wine. Loki would be thirsty after the long ride.

He had given her the seeds for the blackberry bush. It was fitting that he taste the produce of that gift.

Jord took one of the cups and stepped out into the courtyard, looking around for Thor and Loki.

They were standing by the stable and Jord was grateful that her footsteps had been soft. They had not heard her, completely engrossed in their own conversation.

Jord knew her son well. She had seen his excitement at Loki’s arrival turn from something innocent to something heated. He had developed an attachment to Loki that was no longer platonic.

It was easy to see why he would feel such an infatuation. Loki was very lovely to look at with his
pale skin and raven’s black hair, his rosebud mouth and emerald green eyes. Jord did not think he was a great beauty, but he was haunting. Once seen, it was difficult to forget him. He was always impeccably turned out, dressed in black and never with a scuff on his boots or a tear in his clothes. He held himself as if he was a King, not a slave.

Loki’s loveliness hid a cruel heart. Loki was a force of nature, ageless and inhuman, bound to a warrior-king to do his bidding. Jord did not think he knew how to love and she doubted he was inclined to learn.

Jord stood in the courtyard, listening to them, watching them, wondering if Loki was even aware of the effect he had on her son.

"I picked these for you," Thor said, thrusting his hand forward.

Inside his clasped fingers was a bunch of wildflowers. They were beautiful things; blue, violet and white in color. He must have found them growing in the hedgerow when he was in the fields for the wheat harvest.

"Thank you," Loki said quietly.

He took them from the youth and held them close to his chest.

A pleasant silence bloomed between them, each smiling at the other, and it was more than Jord could stand.

Bad enough that one day Odin would steal her boy from her. She did not need him taken away by the witch.

"Loki does not need your clumsy attempts at wooing, Thor Jordson!" she called, startling them apart.

Thor jumped as if he’d be scolded. He turned and ran, heading for the wheat fields and Jord knew they would not see him again until the evening. He would work with the men to bring in the harvest, his face bright red and then he would slink in the house for supper.

Loki watched him go, his amusement clear on his face.

“Must you treat him so, Jord?” he asked. “There is no harm in it.”
She cast a curious eye over Loki, but she saw no blush in his cheeks. He was still smiling, his eyes alight, but there was no heat there. He enjoyed being admired and that was all.

It soothed her. Nothing would happen if Loki did not will it and he was content to accept Thor’s gifts and his calf-love. He did not want more.

“What for you,” she said, offering the cup to him.

“What and flowers? I am being spoiled,” Loki said, grinning.

He took the cup from her and sipped. She watched him still, now waiting for some sign that he enjoyed it, but Loki showed nothing. He drained the cup dry and still she did not know if he had liked it or if he drank because he was thirsty and that was all she had offered.

“Come inside,” she said.

They walked in silence.

Inside the house she offered him a chair by the fireside, his usual seat. He sat and she moved to sit opposite him.

For a very long time neither of them said a word.

“Odin is devising a trial for his sons, a test to prove their worth,” Loki said finally.

Jord felt her heart flutter.

“A test?” she asked. She tried to keep the hope from her voice, but she could not hide it from Loki.

He shook his head.
“Thor is a fool, but this test is a test of bravery, valour and strength. Thor has all such qualities. There is no reason he would fail in this.”

Jord knew she should be offended on Thor’s behalf, but she had held no illusions regarding her son’s talents. He would never be a great scholar or strategist, nor did she want him to be. She loved him for what he was, a happy, kind-hearted boy who saw goodness wherever he went.

They would eat his honest, good heart whole in the King’s court.

Loki looked at her shrewdly. “You think as I do then. You think Thor is the one who will be worthy.”

Jord sat up straight, her back ridgid, hands clasped to her knees.

“No,” she lied. “He is reckless, foolish. He is too emotional. His heart rules his head.”

“Oh yes, he is all those things,” Loki agreed. “And a terrible liar, just as you are.”

Jord swallowed.

She had felt it long before now. She had known, had heard the earth sing for Thor as she dug her garden. The land called for Thor to be King of it. The land wanted him as ruler.

The prospect had become inevitable to her.

“I must go away for a long time. I do not know exactly how long. Odin has things he needs for his trial and I am the only one who can arrange them,” Loki said, looking away from her, staring instead at the fire.

“You are his vassal,” she said.
“You think me weak for being bound,” he said, eyes flickering back to her. “Well I think you weak for bearing him a child. I would not let him touch me, not even with my bonds. You have no such claim on you and yet you allowed it.”

Jord sighed. Her choice was not an easy one to understand.

She had no love for Odin. His soldiers marched over the land, burnt and salted the earth were they could not take it by force, ensuring it would never flower for another if they could not control it. She hated him for that, but she was old and her memory was long. He was mortal and he would die, the land would recover. What she had taken from him was far greater. She had made Thor with the seed Odin had given her and he would do incredible things.

“I gained Thor,” she said. “You are alone, Loki. You have nothing and no-one of your own. You serve a bloodline and you are useful but you are not loved. I am loved.”

Loki snarled and threw his cup at her. She caught it gracefully.

“You are leaving?” she prompted, as if his outburst had never happened.

“I may be gone years,” Loki said, sinking back into the chair.

He looked tired suddenly, his face lined and much older. It was the strain, she thought, of the work he undertook for Odin.

No wonder Loki wanted Thor to be King. He would never have to lift a finger then. Thor would never dream of asking his beloved Loki to fly to the ends of the earth on impossible quests. Loki would have a comfortable life if Thor was crowned and Thor might have a life as long as theirs. He might live forever and keep Loki always in that comfort he so desired.

“You worry about how Thor will take your absence?” Jord guessed.

Loki nodded.

Jord did not know why he would not just admit the thing, but he was a strange creature.
“I will tell Thor you are adventuring. He will understand. He wants so much to go on your adventures.”

The fire crackled and leapt.

Since Thor could talk he had talked of Loki, of the things Loki had told him; the places he had been and the people he had known. Thor had desired to be at Loki’s side on his quests.

Jord knew that each time Thor went out to hunt, he went with plans of strengthening his skills as a tracker, sneaking through the wood without making a sound. When he held his scythe to cut down the stalks of wheat he imagined cutting down his enemies. He trained for adventures he would never have.

“Do you tell him I work for the King?” Loki asked.

“Never,” she said.

They sat in silence together, Jord holding the cup and Loki the bunch of wild flowers, until the sun began to set and the hall grew cold. Jord rekindled the fire and arranged for dinner. Thor appeared, as sullen as she had known he would be, but Loki remained at the fireside. He ate hardly anything and his eyes lingered on Thor.

He left in the middle of the night and Jord found herself consoling Thor through his first heartbreak.

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“When do you think he will return?” Thor asked.

He had climbed one of the orchard trees and was eating the fruit, his hands and mouth sticky with juice.

Jord stood below the tree, basket on her hip, waiting for Thor to shake the tree and loose the pears.
She frowned at Thor’s question. She did not need him to tell her it was Loki he spoke of. Jord knew well enough who had her son’s heart.

“I cannot say, Thor,” she said, reaching out to touch the tree trunk. “It could be years. He didn’t know.”

Overhead, clouds began to form. Jord looked up at them uneasily.

They needed the rain. It brought new life and rejuvenated the land. They could not survive on sunlight alone. The earth craved water, but these clouds now were not of her doing. She had not let the rain in.

“How could he leave and not say anything?”

The first rain drop landed on Jord’s forehead.

“He didn’t know how to tell you,” she said, her fingers trembling.

She felt the raw power in the air. It would be impossible not to feel it and it all came from Thor. His emotions were getting the better of him. He was still so young, so unaware of what he could do. Did he even know that this rain was his doing?

“Thor,” she said, reaching her hand out to him, but he wasn’t looking at her. His eyes were fixed on the horizon. He threw his pear with such force that it sailed across the length of the orchard.

The clouds burst overhead, the rain falling heavy and undaunted.

It continued that way for three nights and three days until the ground was sodden and Thor’s tears had run dry.

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Loki did not return for seven years.
Thor fell in love again, tumbling with pretty girls and pretty boys. He fell out of love just as quickly, his attachments always passing fancies and yet none seemed to begrudge him for his fickle nature. He was magnetic, making friends with all he met. He was still kind, his heart honest. Jord never worried, for she knew he son would not keep secrets from her.

Thor grew tall and broad, his hair lengthened and he grew a beard, his skin was kissed by the sun and for all he grew, there was still a gentleness in him. He was the first to offer sympathy or to console a crying child, the first to offer help to their workers and neighbours. Thor embraced his life on the farm, his childhood fantasies of adventures forgotten. He worked hard in the fields and the orchards, heared the goats and turned his hand to any and all tasks asked of him. He was a fine man, coming on his twentieth year.

He no longer expected the sound of horses hooves to herald Loki’s arrival. He had stopped looking for the witch sometime after his fifteenth year.

Jord could not imagine what had kept Loki from their homestead for seven years, but she knew he would have returned if he could. She knew he had taken Thor’s flowers with him when he left. She had not found them in his empty room the morning after.

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Loki came at sunset on an otherwise peaceful day.

He rode into the courtyard of the farm on the back of a great black horse. He was thinner than he had been, paler too if such things were possible.

Jord came running from the farmhouse.

“Loki?”

“It is time,” he said. “You must tell Thor. Odin is ill. He will not last the winter.”

Jord felt a shiver run through her. There was no winter in her corner of the earth, but outside the seasons remained.
“It is too soon,” she said.

“You have had twenty years with him, Jord. Let him be a man now. Let him meet his destiny.”

Jord’s footsteps felt heavy as she went to fetch Thor. She did not want to make this trip. It was what she had dreaded since Thor had been born. From the first time she had held him in her arms, she had known she would lose him. Loki was right, twenty years was more time than she might have had, but Jord never wanted the eternal summer to end.

She found Thor in the goat pen. He was feeding the littlest goat, letting it eat from his hand. She watched him for a heartbeats length, trying to save this image of him in her mind.

“Thor,” Jord said, her throat growing tight. She didn’t have the words so she motioned for him and he followed her obediently, stepping out of the pen.

She took him back to the courtyard.

Loki had dismounted his horse and was waiting for them.

His eyes widened as they swept over Thor, taking in the changes that had occurred since they last saw each other. Loki had left a boy behind and come back to find a man.

Thor had become handsome in their time apart.

“Loki!” Thor cried.

He ran past his mother to catch Loki in his arms, lifting him up as if he weighed nothing. Thor spun him in his arms, laughing joyously, and all Loki could do was hold on to him.

“You have been gone so long. I thought I would never see you again,” Thor said, setting Loki back down on his feet finally.
“I did not plan to be away for so long,” Loki said, his cheeks pink. “You have grown.”

“I missed you,” Thor said, as if that were not plain to everyone.

“I missed you too,” Loki said quietly. He reached out his hand, stroking over Thor’s cheek, feeling the roughness of his beard. “You didn’t have this when I last saw you.”

“You’ve not changed,” said Thor. His eyes were soft as he gazed at Loki.

Watching them, Jord realised why she had loved the last seven year of her son's life so much. There had been no Loki. He had not been there to steal Thor’s attention. With Loki in his life, Jord felt she faded into the background. She would always be Thor’s mother, always be precious to him, but she would not be the centre of his world as Loki was.

She thought of Thor’s other loves, his rolls in the hay and his summer flings. His infatuations did not last.

She would tell Loki of Thor’s lovers when she was alone with him. Loki would not want to be one of a string of conquests. He was too proud and she would play on that pride, would remind him that Thor was half-mortal with all the failings of a mortal man.

“Thor, there is so much I have to tell you, that your mother has to tell you. It is time. Your father...” Loki began, but Thor held up a hand, quieting him.

“I do not care who he is. I have all I need. I have my mother and I have you, returned safe to me, and I have the land. This is all I want, Loki.”

Loki cast a desperate glance in Jord’s direction.

She sighed. This could not be a story that Loki told alone.

“Thor, this cannot be a secret any longer”, she said.
“Why not?” Thor asked. “I have lived all my life without a father. Why do I need one now?”

“Thor, it is important. The fate of our Kingdom and its Empire are involved,” Loki said.

Thor laughed. It was a great, booming laugh that shook the shutters on the windows. It was not unlike the rumble of thunder.

“You make it sound as if my father is the King!”

Silence settled over the courtyard. Thor looked quickly between Loki and Jord, looking for some other explanation, but both their faces betrayed the truth of his words.

“My father is the King?” Thor asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” Loki said, answering for Jord who found she could not speak. “You are Thor Odinson. You are the son of the King.”

“No,” Thor shook his head. “No, I am Thor Jordson. That is all I have ever needed to be and all I will ever need to be.”

“Please, Thor,” Loki caught hold of Thor’s hand, holding it tightly. “Your father is dying. There is a test, a test of worth for his sons. The one who prevails will be crowned King when Odin dies. You must go.”

Thor pulled his hand free from Loki’s grasp. His eyes were wild, full of fear.

“I do not want to be King,” he said.

Jord licked her lips. She found her voice. It was soft, hardly more than a whisper, but she caught Thor’s attention.

“You must go, Thor. On this one thing, Loki and I both agree. You must go.”
He would go. Jord knew that already. She would work on him. Loki would persuade with his flattery and sweet words. Thor would sense the adventure offered to him, the only real adventure he would ever have. He would leave the eternal summer and see new things, meet new people.

He would best Odin’s trial and be crowned King.

It was his destiny and she could not prevent it any longer.
Follow those who pale in your shadow

Thor had never left his mother’s farmstead. He had never had a reason to. The land provided him all they needed. He had ample food, thick woods with good hunting. People came and went as they pleased so there were always new face, new people to join their supper table.

The only thing he had ever considered leaving for had been Loki.

Now he was riding out with Loki, heading to an uncertain future.

Thor knew he did not want to be a King. He knew nothing of politics and warfare. He had no skills in those areas. He was not a wise man. He had no idea how to deal with the day to day running of a Kingdom. He could never make the difficult choices a King was required to make. If someone needed his help, then he would send it. He could not turn anyone away. He would burn through the Kingdom’s fortunes trying to save everyone.

He stared at Loki’s back as they rode, hoping that Loki would understand.

Loki rode in front, leading the way. Thor came next, then his mother Jord. They had no one else with them. They did not have any attendants and they had not thought to bring any of the workers from the farm. Those workers were needed there.

Thor was not a leader. He was happy where he was. He enjoyed being part of the farm, of something bigger than himself. Kings did not have freedom, they did not wake at dawn to milk goats and then spend happy hours wandering the length of their estate, checking the fences for breaks before returning to feast on breakfast.

Kings had advisors, meetings. They made decisions far bigger than if they would hunt for deer or rabbits that day.

Thor stared hard at Loki.

Loki believed Thor would be the King. His mother believed it too.
Thor doubted it.

The two people he loved best in the world believed that he could be King, but they did not say if they believed he would be a good king. They did not say if he would rule well. It did not seem to matter to them. The only thing that seemed to matter was that Thor triumphed.

They had been riding for the best part of a week. It had been exciting, but Thor’s interest was tempered by the knowledge of what lay ahead. He had seen the seasons change, leaves on trees turning from lush green to russet and gold. He had felt the bite of cold wind for the first time. He had slept under the stars, wrapped in a blanket and listening to the soft noises Loki made in his sleep.

All those things Thor would treasure forever, but he could not stop the dread that built in his heart as they neared the capital.

Loki looked back at him over his shoulder, smiling.

“We’ll be there soon,” he said. “We should find an inn tonight. We can wash, make ourselves presentable, then we can ride into the city tomorrow.”

Thor nodded.

Loki had no idea what he was thinking and Thor was gladdened by it. He felt he would be betraying Loki if Loki knew that he did not want this future. It was so clearly something Loki wanted.

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The inn was small, but cosy. They were only two rooms free, but Thor did not mind sharing.

“I will sleep with Loki. We have slept together before,” he said, throwing one arm around Loki’s shoulder.

His mother’s cool, knowing look caused his cheeks to heat.
“Aye, but you were a child then. Now you are a man. Loki will not have any room in the bed if he shares with you.”

“Then I will sleep on the floor,” Thor protested.

Loki said nothing. Thor knew enough of Loki’s habits to know he would have protested if he did not want to stay with Thor.

Loki was like the howling wind they had sheltered from. He came and went as he needed. He could not be changed or forced. If Loki did not want a thing, then he would never allow it.

Jord pursed her mouth as if she tasted something bitter.

“Fine,” she said.

Loki had a full coin purse and he paid for their beds, a shared meal and their baths. A great wooden tub was brought up to their room and set in front of the fire. Thor allowed Loki the first bath. He himself did not care that he was pungent with the scent of sweat from their rides and the nights spent out in the open air, but he knew that Loki cared.

Loki was fastidious.

Thor had realised very early into his friendship with Loki that Loki was not as other men were. He was beautiful in a way that never changed, never waned. He did not age. He was not mortal, but something else. Thor knew his own mother was the same, the earth herself, but he did not know what Loki was.

He had studied Loki, learning a great many things about him during their short visits together. Loki liked to be clean, he liked to be well-dressed and he liked to be the centre of attention. He liked long stories about intrigue and stolen passion and grew bored of describing battles. He laughed at everything and nothing. He enjoyed praise and flattery, but Thor had never seen him pursue such things beyond that. He was his own.

Loki’s time spent away from them had not dimmed Thor’s memories.
When he had seen Loki in the courtyard of their farm, his heart had remembered everything.

Thor ate his supper - a warming stew of mutton with slightly stale bread served along side for dipping - and drank his ale, imagining Loki upstairs above him soaping his milk pale skin.

He wanted to go upstairs. He wanted to open the door and find Loki there still wet and naked. He wanted to trace the droplets of water on Loki’s skin, wanted to hold him and show Loki just how much he had missed him.

Loki had left when he was a fumbling, clumsy boy. Thor was a man now. He knew how to please his lovers and he would please Loki. He would make Loki moan for him, would make him tremble under his tongue. He would give Loki so much pleasure that Loki would open his legs for him hungrily, would reach for Thor and invite him inside.

He would...

“Thor,”

Loki’s voice startled him and Thor turned round to look at him, his face bright red.

Loki’s hair was damp still, his cheeks tinged a lovely pink from the heat of the bathwater. His smile as he gazed at Thor was warm. He was wrapped in a thick black robe and his feet were bare. It was a strangely vulnerable look on Loki who had always been so poised, so incontrol of how he was seen. Thor felt his heart skip.

Loki was letting him see him like this. He was allowing Thor this moment of openness.

“The water is still warm,” Loki said, seating himself across from Thor. “You should hurry or else you’ll have a cold bath.”

Thor nodded. He did not trust his tongue to speak.

He took the stairs two at a time, barrelling through the door to their room. He sat on the narrow bed and unlaced his boots.
It was too small a bed for him and Loki to share. Thor alone would find the bed too small.

He stripped out of his tunic and leggings, standing naked in the centre of the room. He had worked himself to hardness with his thoughts of Loki earlier. Now he gazed at the bed, imagining how Loki would have to lie astride him if they did share it and his cock gave a twitch.

Thor would have to see to himself before Loki came up to sleep. He could hardly greet Loki with his cock throbbing between his legs.

He climbed into the bathtub and sat down, the water rising around him and sloshing over the edge of the tub. The water was warm enough. Thor ducked his head and wetted his hair, working his fingers through the tangles. There was a bar of soap on the floor at the side of the tub and Thor reached for it. He worked up a lather in his hands and scrubbed the suds deep into his blonde locks. Then he washed his hair clean and started on his body.

He soaped over his arms and chest, aware as he did that the ache between his legs was growing more demanding with each passing moment but he delayed in touching himself.

Thor finished his washing, leaving his cock for last. He worked up the lather in his hands again and then grasped his cock in one hand. He stroked his hand up and down the length of it roughly. He doubted he had the time to draw it out. Indeed, ever squeak on the stairs had him convinced that Loki would be upon him at any moment.

Thoughts of Loki entering the room, seeing Thor touching himself was all Thor required to push him over the edge. He came with a muffled groan, dirtying the water with his spend.

Thor slumped back against the side of the tub. The water had grown cold as he washed and he needed to get out of the dirty grey it had turned and dry himself.

With an effort he raised himself and stepped out of the water. He dried himself on a cloth left at the end of the bed and opened his travelling pack to draw out a new change of clothes.

He dressed quickly.
Once dressed, Thor strode to the window and opened it. He then picked up the wooden tub, carrying it across to the window with ease. He poured the dirty water out onto the ground below.

He left the window open to air the room a little and placed the wooden tub in the corner of the room to be collected by the innkeeper later. He mopped the floor with the cloth he had used to dry himself, then left it to drip dry in front of the fire.

He did not think Loki would know what he had done, not when Thor had taken such care to clean up after himself.

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Loki swirled his spoon around in his stew, sighing.

He could not expect the sort of rich food he enjoyed in the palace in a little inn, nor could he expect the food to be as fresh as that served on Jord’s farm, but his stomach still protested at the thought of eating mutton and stale bread.

He drank the wine, which was sour to taste, and sighed again.

He spied Jord coming down the inn’s stairs from the corner of his eye. He had known she would come to find him. They had not had a chance to speak alone since they started out on this voyage and Loki knew she would have words for him. Seven years worth of them.

Jord settled herself in the seat that Thor had vacated. Loki continued to play with his meal. He raised the spoon to his lips and sipped a little of the broth. Jord had her own plate brought to her and a cup of the same wine Loki was drinking.

“This is very nice,” she said.

Loki snorted. “The food is passable, but the wine is undrinkable.”

“You’ve drunk yours,” Jord pointed out.
Loki frowned. He knew that Jord had not come to exchange pleasantries with him.

“Your son has grown,” he said conversationally.

“Vous noticed? Aye, but I know you did. I saw the look in your eyes when you saw him, witch,” she said, reaching for the slice of bread at the side of her plate. She tore it in half and dipped one piece into the stew.

Loki stared at his empty cup. Even as foul as the wine had been, he would have welcomed more of it now. His mouth felt suddenly dry.

Thor had become something wonderful in the years that Loki had been away. He was so big, so strong. When he had lifted Loki into his arms, Loki had felt the broadness of his shoulders and the muscles of his arms. He had thrilled at being held in such a secure grip.

Jord chewed on her piece of bread, swallowing it before she spoke again.

“You’re not the only one who’s noticed. Thor is popular on the farm,” she said.

Loki felt jealousy coil deep and unpleasant in his belly. He raised his spoon to his lips and forced himself to eat a mouthful of the stew to fill his belly with something else.

Thor had mooned over him when he was a boy, but it had only been a childish infatuation. Loki welcomed the knowledge that Thor had not spent seven years pinning for him. Thor was a young man and he should have his affairs.

Loki did not care. He would not care.

“You have misunderstood my interest,” he said evenly. “I believe Thor will be our King. That is all I care about.”

Jord smiled at him. She raised her glass to her lips, took a sip and then pulled a face.
“How did you ever drink this?” she asked.

“I am used to horrible things,” Loki said.

**

By the time Loki knocked gently on the bedroom door, Thor had stoked the fire into a warm, roaring glow and laid out his bedroll on the floor.

“Come in,” he called cheerfully.

The door opened slowly and then Loki slipped inside. He took in the sight of Thor, settled down on the floor and he smiled.

“You can take the bed,” he offered.

Thor shook his head. He knew that Loki was only offering out of a sense of obligation. Loki deserved to have the bed.

“It’s too small for me, I’ll be happy on the floor,” he said.

Loki shut the door behind him, locking it with a soft click. He made no sound as he walked across the floor and the bed barely dipped as he sat down on it. Thor watched him, licking his lips.

“You could be King by the end of tomorrow,” Loki said. “What will people say if they know I let you sleep on the floor?”

“They will say good, Loki can keep him in his place,” Thor said with a laugh.

Loki smiled at him. He reached for the belt of his robe, tugging it free. He let the robe fall from his shoulders, baring his pale milky skin to Thor’s gaze.
Thor stared at him. For a wild moment he thought he was dreaming. This was so much like the things he had fantasised about that he could not tell if it was truth or some illusion.

“You mean to sleep naked?” Thor asked, his voice deceptively calm.

He had been bedding down next to Loki for the best part of a week. Loki had worn his robes at all times. He had shown Thor no hint of skin through their whole trip, but now they were alone he was suddenly bearing himself without a hint of shame.

“Always, when I can” Loki murmured.

He finished undressing himself, sitting before Thor completely nude and without any sign of coyness. Thor could not stop himself from looking. Loki was pale all over, apart from the small patch of dark curls between his legs. He cock was long and lean and just as pale as the rest of him. He was not muscled, but his skin stretched taut over his bones. He seemed fragile now that Thor could trace the bones of his ribs and the hollow of his hips with his eyes.

Thor clenched his fists, digging his nails into the palm of his hand, trying to distract himself from the alluring sight in front of him. He looked down at his hands, at the grain of the wood beneath him. He looked anywhere but at Loki.

He did not think Loki meant this as a seduction. Loki was a creature of his own desires and now he desired to be nude. There was no more to the situation.

Loki crawled into the bed, pulling the simple quilt up to cover his nudity.

He settled on his side, looking down at Thor.

“Good night, Thor,” he said quietly.

“Good night, Loki,” Thor echoed.
He shifted, unclenching his fists and struggling with his bed roll, trying to get comfortable on the floor. He didn’t mean to, but he ended up facing Loki. The firelight was playing over him, casting shadows around his gleaming green eyes. It made him look as if he was wearing a mask.

“What are you, Loki?” Thor asked.

He knew Loki was not human. He had always known that. Now he ached to know everything about Loki, about his secrets and the reasons why he came and left as he did. How had Loki come to serve the King? Why did Loki favour Thor above the King’s other sons? Why had he been away for seven long years and sent no word?

He needed the answer to these questions and many more.

Loki blinked sleepily at him. He stretched out like a languid cat.

“I am a witch,” he said.

“You are more than that,” Thor said.

Loki nodded. “Oh, I am. I am like your mother. I am older than time. I have always existed in some way or another. I am magic and superstition, the primal and the profane.”

Thor shivered.

Even with the warmth of the fire, he suddenly felt cold. Loki’s words seemed to suck the heat from the air. Whatever Loki was, and he did not think Loki would give him an answer, not yet, it was something dangerous. More so than just being a witch. Loki was magic himself.

Thor should have been afraid of Loki, but he found himself drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

“What is my father like?” Thor asked. He had not thought of the King until now and it seemed strange to imagine their King as his father.
Thor and his mother had never spoken of his father. He hadn’t mattered. Thor had been happy with what he had. He knew his mother disagreed with the King, disliked his armies and his wars. It seemed impossible that Thor could really be the child of a man his mother had dismissed as a warmonger.

“Do you want me to tell you the truth or lie?” Loki looked at him with amusement, waiting for the answer.

“The truth,” Thor said.

He was not a child who needed to be assured that his father was a good man. He could withstand whatever the truth of the matter was. He would not view it as a reflection on himself. He was more than the two people who had made him.

Loki wetted his lips, pausing before he spoke, seemingly aware with every second he allowed to pass that he made Thor nervous.

“He is a selfish man who dreams always of conquest and what he power he can obtain. He determined to be stronger than his own father and he is that, but he has also become so much worse than his father ever was. He sees only his own vision and thinks nothing of those who are hurt by his whims. His word is law and he does not forgive. There is no mercy in his heart.”

Thor shivered. For the second time, Loki’s words had stolen all the warmth in the room.

Loki reached out his hand, brushing his fingers lightly through Thor’s hair.

“You are quite the best thing he has ever done. You are nothing like him,” he said gently.

Thor leaned towards Loki, eager for more of his touch, but Loki had already withdrawn his hand and slipped it back beneath the quilt covers.

“How came you to serve him?” Thor asked.

He could not imagine Loki would have done it freely, not when he so clearly hated the King. It was
in every word he said, in the way his eyes flashed and his mouth curled. Loki despised him and Thor could not understand the bond they had.

Loki yawned. He stretched, the quilt slipping down around his hips as he moved. Thor’s eyes followed the movement and he licked his lips unconsciously.

“I served his father. He inherited me.”

It was not the answer Thor wanted. He wanted to know the full truth of the story, wanted to hear every detail of how Loki - wild, strange, contrary Loki - had come to find himself in the service of anyone. It must be a story worth telling, and well worth the hearing, but Loki did not seem interested in sharing. He seemed to want only to sleep.

Thor would let him sleep soon, once he got the answer to a final question.

“If I become King, will you serve me?” Thor asked quietly.

Loki closed his eyes. A smile graced his lips.

“Oh yes, I will serve you.”

**

Thor rose early the next morning and found Loki already awake and standing at the open window. He was dressed, ready for the day’s travel and seemingly replenished from his nights sleep. Thor came to stand behind him.

He placed a hand on Loki’s shoulder and Loki turned his head to look back at him, smiling fondly.

This was a different kind of intimacy to the night before, one born of long friendship and Thor was glad he and Loki could fall back into it so easily. Loki did not begrudge his touches, his familiarity. In fact, he placed his hand atop of Thor’s.
“I can almost see the palace from here,” Loki said. “I cannot wait for you to see it too. I’ll show you everything. I know every hidden staircase and passage way, all the secret spots. You’ll be able to spy on your court and know everything they say behind your back.”

Thor smiled. He could grow to love the palace if Loki loved it.

He could grow to love the idea of being King if he would have Loki beside him when he was.

“What if I don’t want to spy on them? What if I don’t want to know what they say?”

“Then I’ll spy and report back to you,” Loki said with a toss of his head, his eyes sparkling and full of mischief.

“Oh, that is what you propose to be? My royal spy?” Thor asked, laughing.

“I propose to be whatever you want me to be,” Loki said, his voice suddenly serious and Thor found himself at a loss for words.

He stared at Loki, aware that he could kiss him now. All he would need to do was lean forward and he could kiss Loki. He half-imagined that Loki would kiss him back.

Did Loki mean it truly when he said he would be whatever Thor wanted? Did he know the desires that lived in Thor’s heart?

It was too much of a risk, and one that Thor was not yet prepared to take. Not when Loki had only just returned to him.

Thor stepped back.

“I should dress,” he said.

Loki’s eyes lingered on him for a moment and then he turned away, gazing out of the window, his eyes fixed on the horizon and the almost seen palace.
Thor thought he heard him sigh.
Heartless challenge

They rode the rest of the way to the palace in silence.

Jord had already been up and at breakfast when Thor and Loki had come down. They had eaten a quick meal of stale bread and hard cheese, washed down with fresh milk lightly seasoned and sweetened with honey. Thor noted Loki only drank the milk, that he did not eat the food set in front of him.

Their horses were rested from the nights stop and they made good time. By the time the sun was high in the sky, they had reached the capital of Asgard and the palace. The palace was an imposing building. It was gleaming and golden, with towers and spiers that stretched up into the heavens. Thor could only imagine the labour it would have taken to build such a thing.

Loki seemed to know his thoughts for he said “The last King, Borr, enslaved the giants and had them build this palace for him.”

“And he stole the gold from the earth,” Jord said, her eyes flickering from side to side as they rode through the palace gates.

Loki laughed. “The dwarfs would say it was their gold. They did say it was their gold. They protested quite loudly at its theft.”

“They steal too,” Jord muttered.

Their little group was greeted by a stablehand who bowed low upon recognising Loki. The boy took their horses and shortly a soldier in full regalia appeared to escort them inside.

Thor found himself falling back, two steps behind his mother and Loki. They both seemed much more at home here than he was. It was obvious in the way they carried themselves. Loki loved this place. His footsteps were light, as if he walked with a spring in his step. He did not feel dread at what was coming, as Thor did. He was happy to be here.

Jord was composed and elegant, her travelling clothes shimmering and changing as she walked, becoming a long and beautiful gown of copper color. Thor could not remember the last time he had been consciously aware of his mother’s magic. Everything on their farm was controlled by it, but he
had been born into that world. It had seemed as natural to him as breathing. What she did now was different.

She wanted to make a good impression. Thor hadn’t thought she’d care. She had no love for his father.

The soldier led them to a grand hall and had them wait outside the doors.

Thor shifted uncomfortably. He had worn his best clothes, but he had been riding and compared to his mother and to Loki, who seemed unfazed by their trip, he was consciously aware of his appearance and how it had degraded from the morning.

Loki noticed his nervousness. He reached out his hand and caught hold of Thor’s own.

“Do not fret. You look handsome,” he said and squeezed lightly.

The doors to the Hall opened and Loki let go, leaving Thor aching for the pleasant warmth of Loki’s hand in his and the steadiness he had felt when Loki touched him. In that brush of palm against palm Thor had found relief. He had found the strength and the assurance he needed.

“Your Majesties,” a herald inside the Hall announced. “Presenting Mistress Jord and Prince Thor.”

“Am I not to get an announcement?” Loki muttered, but he strode forward all the same.

“And I am here!” he said, announcing himself and bowing low to the King and Queen. “I have returned.”

Thor looked at the King.

From the way Loki had described him the night before, Thor was surprised by what he saw.

Odin was an old man, his hair and beard having grown grey. His right eye was covered by a patch, but it did not completely hide the scar that ran down that side of his face. His skin was sagged and wrinkled with time. He was wrapped in warm furs although it was not cold in the hall and indeed
there was a roaring fire lit in the grand fireplace. His crown seemed too big for him and the hand which held his scepter was thin and spindly, the fingers clenched painfully.

Thor had been expecting to see a monster, but to see only a frail, elderly man made him wonder how much of Loki’s account he could trust.

Loki had always been good with stories.

Odin banged his scepter on the floor, startling Loki out of his bow.

“My herolds do not need to tell me of your return, as they do not tell me when the dogs return from hunt,” Odin said, frowning at Loki. “You have brought my son then, the one you favour?”

Loki recovered himself quickly.

“Yes, this is Thor,” he said, gesturing for Thor to join him at his side.

Thor stepped forward. He was aware of Odin’s one good eye looking over him and he felt as if the man was trying to see into his soul. If Odin’s body had wizened and shrunk around him, his mind had stayed sharp. There was no cloudiness in the bright eye that looked Thor over.

“This farm boy is the one you think will be worthy?” Odin asked incredulously. “Look at him. He is an oaf. He’d be better put to ploughing a field than ruling a kingdom.”

Thor felt his cheeks heat and he looked down at the floor. This was hardly a warm homecoming. His father did not seem to care at all for Thor, nor did he seem to want him there.

Jord muttered something that Thor did not catch.

“You told me Jord’s boy would be powerful. All I see is a workhorse, fit for labour and nothing more.”

“Thor is worth twenty of you,” Loki replied coolly. “He has more worth in one finger than you do in
your whole body.”

“Must you fight?” came the soft, calming voice of the Queen.

She stood from her throne and came to stand before them. She was a tall woman, her brown hair beginning to grey. She had wrinkles around her eyes and they creased when she smiled. She was younger than her husband by a good many years and she was beautiful in a way Thor had never seen in anyone. His mother did not age. Loki did not age. The Queen wore the passing of time openly and it was lovely on her. Thor liked her immediately.

“I am pleased to welcome you, Thor,” she said, clasping his hands in her own warmly as she greeted him. “You must call me Frigga. I have longed to meet you, but we have respected your mother’s wishes and stayed away. I am so glad to meet you now. Please know that you will always be welcome here, whatever the outcome of this trial.”

Behind her Odin snorted, but the Queen ignored him. She dropped Thor’s hands and turned from him to his mother.

“Mistress Jord,” she said, acknowledging the other politely; curtseying to Jord who curtseyed back.

“Should I curtsey too?” Loki asked as the Queen’s attention turned to him.

She laughed.

“Oh, you have been gone from us too long, Loki! I have missed you,” she said.

“And I you,” Loki said.

Frigga held out her arms to him and Loki came to her. They embraced as old friends.

“How do you fare?” Frigga asked, reaching her hand up to touch Loki’s mouth. “Are you healed?”

Thor stared. He had not know Loki had been ill. Loki had never mentioned anything of the sort.
“Yes, I am quite repaired. Your healing touch has done its work,” Loki said. He pressed a kiss to Frigga’s fingertips and she laughed again.

Thor wondered if he was going mad or if Loki was really flirting with the Queen before her husband. He risked a glance in the direction of Odin and found him glaring at both of them.

“We are embarrassing Thor,” Loki said.

Thor hadn’t even realised that Loki had been watching him.

“He should know you well enough by now to know you are incorrigible,” Frigga said. “And I know you well enough to know you are harmless.”

“Only sometimes,” Loki said, his mouth stretching in a sly smile.

Odin banged his scepter on the floor again. Thor felt he would soon begin to hate that sound.

“Come back to your throne, wife, and do not indulge that witch. He has had too much of your good care of late.”

“He has needed it of late,” Frigga said, but she released Loki from her embrace and made her way back to sit beside her husband.

Thor wondered again of what she spoke. Why had Loki needed to be healed? Loki had said nothing of his own health when he came to the farm. He had seemed in good spirits throughout their journey. Thor did not believe that Loki could fall ill the way a mortal man could. He did not believe Loki would have needed the healing of Queen Frigga if what had afflicted him had been anything simple. Loki would have cured it himself if he could have.

Thor wanted to be away from the King’s gaze, wanted to ask Loki what had happened, but he didn’t know how to end the audience. He had no understanding of the politics of court, although he felt Loki knew them very well and broke with convention for the pleasure of it.
“How fair the trails?” Loki asked, drawing Thor’s attention back to the reason for their arrival.

“Vidar will arrive in a day or so’s time, he and his mother are travelling a greater distance,” Odin said. “Hod and Hermod have both failed in their trials.”

Thor saw the Queen wince at her husband’s words.

“Not unexpected,” Loki said. “I could have told you neither had the qualities you asked for.” He looked at Frigga and his countenance softened slightly. “Although both are fine boys.”

Frigga smiled at his words.

Thor found himself pleased that Loki seemed to have at least one friend outside of himself. He had often wondered where Loki went when he was not at the farm. It was good to know there had been someone caring for him during that time.

“Finer than this churl you see fit to heap praise upon,” Odin sneered.

“I would choose words carefully,” Jord said, her voice rising up, imperious. “You might have Loki bound to you, but I am not and you insult my son. Do you want your crops to fail?”

Odin gazed at her. He seemed not to have noticed her before.

“You have changed,” he said. “You used to be beautiful.”

Jord’s shoulders shook as she fought to suppressed her laughter. “I still am.”

Thor nodded. His mother was beautiful. She was the earth and scorched, marked and furrowed where it was and all the more beautiful for it. He would not have anything said against her.

He stepped forward slightly, ready to make that clear if the old man continued.
“Jord,” Queen Frigga interrupted. “I have not had the pleasure of your company before. Let us talk and leave the men to discuss the trials. You must tell me of your journey here and your home.”

She rose and motioned for Jord to join her. Thor wondered if his mother would allow herself to be removed, but Jord cast one pitying glance towards Odin before she followed the Queen.

Loki stared after them as if he too wished to be leaving.

Thor found himself approving of the Queen’s diplomacy. Twice now she had interrupted her husband during his insults, defusing the situations he created with admirable tact.

The more time Thor spent in the King’s presence, the less he found himself doubting Loki’s word on the man and his temper.

“Thor’s trial shall be tomorrow,” Odin said once the door of the hall had closed behind the Queen and Jord. “Balder will take his trial this afternoon.”

“You still favour Balder?” Loki asked. “I have told you that is a mistake.”

“We will see after his trial,” Odin said, his brow creasing as his frown grew more pronounced.

“Yes, we shall see,” Loki agreed. “Will you allow me to show Thor the trial ring? The others have seen it, I do not ask for anything more than you gave them.”

Odin studied him. Thor thought for certain that the King was about to refuse Loki’s request but instead he waved his hand, dismissing them.


“And I grew tired of yours a long time ago,” Loki said.
Loki had not lied when he said he knew every secret passage within the palace. He led Thor through a door hidden behind a tapestry and down a spiral staircase, through another door that appeared to be a solid wall until Loki pushed at it, and out into the sunlight.

They walked together, so close that every so often Loki’s shoulder would bump against Thor’s or Thor would find his hand brushing against Loki’s hip.

Thor could see where they were headed. There was a great glittering tent erected on the rolling green lawn of the palace. The fabric of the tent looked as if it had been cut from the night sky. Thor could only guess at what would be inside it.

“Who is Balder?” he asked as they walked.

“Your half-brother and your father’s favourite. He has his talents, and a good deal of his mother’s good graces and looks, but I have always found him lacking.” Loki said, curling his lip in disgust. “Your father believes he will be the next King and he has done everything in his power to prepare him. Balder speaks the language of the giants and the dwarfs. He is a skilled swordsman and diplomat. He rides, he composes music. The people love him and I grow sick even speaking of him.”

Thor laughed. “You sound envious.”

“I can do everything he can and much better besides” Loki said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“But you are not loved by everyone,” Thor said. “I think you are an acquired taste.”

Loki looked at him from the corner of his eye.

“How dull it would be to be loved and adored by everyone. I much prefer a select few,” he said.

“Like the Queen?” Thor asked, his mind replaying the scene in the grand Hall and how Loki had allowed himself to be embraced with such tenderness.

Loki laughed.
“Oh Thor, now you sound envious!”

“You are familiar with her,” Thor said obstinately.

“She is familiar with me,” Loki protested. “Should I not have friends? That is all we are to each other.”

“Sometimes I thought I was your only friend,” Thor said.

Loki looked at him quietly for a heartbeat or two.

“Sometimes you were,” he said.

They walked in silence for sometime.

“Your father arranged a marriage for Balder to Lady Nanna,” Loki said when the silence seemed too consuming to continue. “They seem quite smitten with each other. He’ll have to arrange another marriage when you are crowned instead of Balder.”

Thor nearly stumbled. Loki’s words took him completely by surprise. He had thought of many aspects of becoming King but marriage had not been one of them.

“A marriage?” he asked, bewildered.

“Yes, to continue the family line,” Loki said lightly, as if he was not aware of Thor’s hesitation. “I have already considered the best matches for you. The Lady Amora is a witch, but I see nothing wrong with witches, or Lady Sif is a most skilled warrior. She could lead an army for you. There are others, but I think those two most promising.”

Thor shook his head. He could not believe that Loki had not only thought about his marriage prospects but had already begun to select Thor’s future bride.
Did Thor mean nothing to him? Had Thor imagined every touch, every glance that Loki gave him? Or had he simply been a love-sick fool who had read too much into innocent, friendly moments?

“Am I not to have any say in it then?” Thor asked angrily.

“You think I’d choose badly for you?” Loki looked shocked. “I advised your father when he sought to have heirs and I believe my choices were very fine then.”

Thor bit down on the inside of his mouth, tasting blood as he did.

Loki was the reason for his conception. Loki had advised the King, had advised him to lay with Jord. Loki had planned everything and he was still planning now, was weaving the future he wanted with Thor as nothing more than another thread in his tapestry.

Did he not understand how much Thor wanted him? Thor would never be happy married to another. Loki was cruel to plan such a thing, to ignore Thor’s heart and his love.

“I do not want to marry,” he said firmly.

“You are young, there is time,” Loki said, dismissing Thor’s words as if they were unimportant.

Thor grabbed hold of Loki’s shoulder, forcing him to stop in his tracks. He dragged Loki to face him. Loki didn’t seem startled. He looked up at Thor questioningly and Thor wondered why he had to care for this capricious creature.

“Why did you require the Queen’s healing? What was wrong with you?” he asked.

Loki broke from his hold and ran.

Thor took off after him. He caught him around the middle and toppled them into the grass. There was a brief struggle before Loki submitted beneath him.

Panting, Thor stared down at Loki, willing him to say something.
“Look, we are here,” Loki said.

Thor looked up. They were indeed before the entrance to the tent.

There were no guards, no servants and that startled Thor. Whatever was held within the tent was surely powerful, and yet there was no one guarding it.

He got to his feet and offered Loki his hand, pulling him up. Thor still wanted to know what had happened to Loki. He still wanted to know why he had required healing, but he could wait for the answer. For the moment he was concerned with the trial he would face within the tent.

“Come,” Loki said, tugging his hand and Thor was surprised to realise their fingers were still interlaced.

He followed Loki into the tent, his breathing heavy. He could hear his own heartbeat, the blood pounding in his ears. Thor felt a crackle in the air that reminded him of lightning. Whatever he was about to see, it called to him. Thor could hear it, humming softly. There was magic and it spoke to Thor.

Inside the tent was bright and airy, not foreboding as Thor felt it ought to be. A wooden ring had been built for spectators and there was a royal box with raised seats for the King and Queen to watch from. It was jolly, like some sort of tournament rather than a contest to crown a future King.

At the centre of the ring, in a hollow of earth, lay a large silver hammer.

It was the most beautiful weapon Thor had ever seen, for it was a weapon. He could see dried blood on the intricate metal work, the runes and carvings that had been molded into the hammer’s surface. This hammer would never be used to build a house, it would never be an object of construction. It was a weapon of war and Thor could hear it singing.

“That is Mjolnir. Only the one who is worthy can lift it. This is what took me away from you for seven years. This is what you will claim,” Loki said, his voice triumphant.

Thor stepped forward into the ring. He unlinked his hand from Loki’s and reached to touch the cold metal of Mjolnir. It was a beautiful thing and Thor knew he would lift it. He knew he would be worthy.
He brushed his fingers against the spots of blood on the hammers surface, an uneasy feeling rising in him as he looked back to Loki; Loki who had disappeared for seven years, Loki who had needed healing.

“Loki, you could not have been gone all that time simply to retrieve this,” he said.

“There were...complications,” Loki said. “The dwarfs have long memories. They are still angry with Borr for stealing their gold. Odin heard the dwarfs had made a wonderful weapon, something so powerful only one who was truly worthy would be able to lift it. He sent me to find it. I attempted to negotiate a price for Mjolnir, but the dwarfs were not happy.”

“What did they do?” Thor asked, dread coiling in the pit of his stomach.

Loki pursed his lips together and then mimed the motion of a needle and thread. Thor felt sick.

It was Loki’s blood on the hammer.

“Once they had done that,” Loki said, “They locked me away in the darkness underground. For the first time I missed the sun,” He laughed, shaking his head. “I thought of you often down there, as the years passed, but I could not leave until I had the hammer. I had my orders.”

“It took a long time, but I was persistent. I chipped through the rock and stone of my cell and made myself a tunnel to their treasury. It was were I found Mjolnir.”

Loki’s fingers flexed, the memory of holding the hammer, of feeling it’s power etched on his face as he told his story.

“I returned to the palace with Mjolnir and then I collapsed. I had been without food and water for all that time, trapped underground in the cold, unforgiving earth with no warmth, no heat to sustain me. My mouth was still sewn shut. The Queen nursed me, she unpicked the stitches and healed my wounds, gave me sustenance,” he smiled. “Odin had this ring built around where I dropped Mjolnir. None of his men could move it. None of them were strong enough.”

Thor felt anger rising in him like a wave, threatening to drown everything else.
He would take Mjolnir and he would track down the dwarfs who had hurt Loki. He would kill them, would cleave their heads in two, would make them regret the moment they touched Loki, and then he would come back and finish off the King for sending Loki on such a mission in the first place.

Mjolnir hummed louder, feeding on Thor’s thoughts, and electricity sparked in Thor’s fingertips, running through the metal of the hammar.

“Thor,” Loki whispered.

Thor looked down at his hand, horrified by the thoughts in his head. He was contemplating murder. He was no better than the stories he had heard about his father and grandfather. He would have easily slaughtered the dwarfs. He would have killed an old man.

He drew his hand away from Mjolnir, trembling.

“Loki, I don’t want this,” he said. “I can’t…”

“You can,” Loki insisted. “I did this for you, Thor, so you could be the King and I could serve you.”

Thor shook his head.

He couldn’t be the King. He had seen what kind of King he would be. The song of Mjolnir was the song of blood. If Thor lifted the hammer it would be for battle. He would not find peace while he held it. He would hear its whisperings for revenge and he would listen. He would destroy, and he would do it for Loki.

Thor had never wanted such a monstrous thing.

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Loki did not know what had made Thor so uneasy. He had thought the visit to Mjolnir would
strengthen Thor’s resolve. He knew that Thor had felt the hammer calling to him. It was magical, it
knew what it wanted and who should hold it. When Loki had found it in the dwarfish treasury it had
sung sweetly to him, had sung Thor’s name over and over again. Or perhaps that had been Loki’s
heart singing. He had been half-mad by then, delirious and in desperate need of healing. Still, Loki
had known when he grasped Mjolnir that it would belong to Thor.

Only Thor could ever be worthy enough to control such a power.

Odin, the old fool, refused to listen to Loki though. He took Loki’s advice when it pleased him to do
so, such as when it allowed him to bed three attractive women, but he spurned it just as often.

Loki did not feel any shame for relishing in the knowledge that both the King and his most loved son
would be publically humiliated.

It was not Balder’s fault that Loki despised him. He was a good man. He might have made a good
King, but he was his father’s favourite and so Loki despised him on principal. He would not serve
Balder. He would not follow any path Odin set out for him. He would ensure that Thor was crowned
King, that the future Loki wanted was the one which materialised.

If Odin had not been so blinded by his own self-belief, he would have seen the signs that had been
all around them. Loki had read them. Jord had read them. Any witch or ancient being worth their
magic had read them and known.

Loki and Thor had stayed in the tent. They’d drifted to the edge of the wooden ring and soon they
were joined by more people; people from the palace and the surrounding communities who’d come
to see if Balder would be their future King. The King and Queen arrived to fanfair, taking their seats
in the royal box.

Finally, Prince Balder entered the ring. He was tall, with a strong jaw and warm hazel eyes. Balder
was blandly handsome. There was nothing in his face that stood out, nothing that gave him character
but there was nothing objectionable either. He was a strapping man, but nowhere near as muscular
and large as Thor. He had not worked on a farm all his life. He was not a child of the earth. He was
mortal and pitifully so.

The people cheered for him. Lady Nanna clasped her hands, a soft sigh escaping her when her
betrothed appeared. Loki pulled a face.
He could not understand all this fuss over someone so ordinary.

Balder did not play to the crowd. He did not make any cocky displays. He strode to Mjolnir purposefully.

A hushed silence fell over the crowd. Only Loki was bored. He drummed his fingers on the wood of the ring, willing time to pass faster.

Balder wrapped his strong fingers around the hammer’s grip.

He tugged.

Nothing happened. Mjolnir did not move.

Balder tried again, his brow creasing as he tugged, but the hammer still did not move.

The entire ring was silent, all eyes on the young prince and his failure. Odin’s face was ashy.

Then Loki laughed, a great crowing sound that filled the space.

“I told you, your highness. I told you!”

“You will shut your mouth or I will have it shut for you,” Odin roared.

The threat was not one to take idly. Indeed, Queen Frigga shuddered at his side, but Loki continued to laugh. He threw his head back, defiant in his laughter, and danced a little jig.

Balder had failed at the task. Balder’s full brothers had already proved themselves unworthy. Vidar was nothing more than walking rock. There was only one amongst them who could possibly pass this test.
Thor would grasp Mjolnir. Thor would lift it. He would hold it high, he would be crowned King and Loki would be at his side. This was what Loki had wanted, what he had planned for. It was what had kept him going in the long years without warmth, hidden in the dwarfish prison underground.

He would serve Thor.

Loki looked around expectantly, his laughter falling silent as he realised Thor was no longer there at his side.

Thor was nowhere to be seen.

He had gone.
Loki had searched the whole palace for Thor. He had torn through every room. He had turned himself into a magpie and searched from the air. He had found no trace of Thor and that terrified him.

Odin did not take defeat lightly. Loki did not put it past him to strike out at Thor in his frustration. He was too old to do it himself, but he would send loyal guards in his place. Thor was young and strong, but he had never faced trained soldiers.

To strike at Thor would be as bad as any blow that could be landed on Loki.

Odin would kill two birds with one stone if he did that.

Loki had rooms of his own within the palace. He had been gifted them during the days of Borr, when his relationship with the King had not been as fraught as the one he had now. They were in the topmost tower and Loki flew there when his search proved futile. He transformed back into a man and desperately gathered the implements he would need for a tracking spell.

It had never been enough for Loki to just be one of the Old Ones. It had been enough for Jord. She had been happy to rely on her powers, but Loki had always wanted more. He had consumed knowledge, always hungry. He had become a witch. He had learned to transform his body, to twist his bones into the shape of animals and birds. He had learned to read the future through runes. He had learned blood magic and he had learned the simpler spells that did not require such a price to be paid.

He gathered candles, a knife and his chalk.

He cleared a space on the floor and drew a circle in the chalk. Then he marked out the runes and Thor’s name in the ancient tongue. He placed his candles, four in total, at the edges of his circle. He lit them with a wave of his hand, flames jumping to life.

Finally, he disrobed and stepped, naked, into the circle. The magic would be stronger if there was no barrier between him and it. Loki had learned that during his years of practice. He took the knife and cut his hand, letting his blood drip down onto the carefully chalked name on the floor.
He would bleed himself dry to find Thor if he had to.

The runes shone with light. It engulfed him, creeping up the length of his body until Loki was blinded by it.

Then, in the blinding light, he saw a vision of Thor.

He was at a table in an inn. Loki knew it, it was within the palace walls. It was were the soldiers drank. Thor had a tankard in his hand and he was drinking as if he was trying to drown himself. When he finished that drink, he called for another.

The vision faded and Loki found himself furious.

He had bled for Thor. He had been frantic, terrified that something had happened to Thor and all that time Thor had simply been drinking himself into a stupor.

Thor would regret it. Loki would see to that.

He healed the cut in his palm and cleared away the candles, snuffing out their flames one after another. He swept up the chalk circle and the runes. He dressed himself again.

By the time he had finished clearing his room, his anger was cool.

He no longer felt the desire to pick up Mjolnir and hurl the great thing at Thor, but he would still make Thor pay penitence for the blood he had forced Loki to spill.

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Thor finished his fourth cup of ale and motioned to the barkeep to bring him another.

The man came to Thor’s table, but he did not bring another tankard. He was a stout man, with a full head of red hair and a bushy beard of the same colour. His eyes were kindly, even as he stood with his arms folded firmly.
“You’ve had four already and I’ve not seen a coin from you yet. How are you planning to pay?” he asked. He was trying to sound stern, but the way he looked Thor over, the concern in his eyes betrayed that he was worried about Thor.

Thor supposed he had given the man reason to worry. He had been panting when he arrived in the inn, having run as if wolves were at his heels when he saw the outcome of Balder’s trial. He had thrown himself down at a table, calling with a trembling voice for ale and there he had stayed, drinking down cup after cup to quell the nerves that had overtaken him.

Thor wondered if he could tell the man he would pay him tomorrow.

After all, tomorrow he would be King. He would have access to the coins in the kingdom’s treasury. For the moment though, he had no money. He had never needed money and it had not crossed his mind when he’d entered the inn and ordered his first tankard of ale that he would need to find some way to pay.

“I will pay for his drink and a bed here for him to sleep it off in.”

Thor looked up to see Loki stalking towards him.

Loki looked like an ominous dark cloud. His green eyes were slits, his mouth thinned and tight. Thor had known Loki could be terrifying when he was angry, but he had never seen that anger directed towards himself before.

He should have known Loki would be angry, that Loki would look for him. Loki had his plan and Thor was supposed to follow it.

The innkeeper drew back diffidently.

“I had no idea this man was with you, Master Loki,” he said, his eyes darting nervously to Thor and then back to Loki.

“Loki, I am not drunk,” Thor protested. “I have only had four drinks.”
“He will still require the room,” Loki said.

He produced a gold coin and handed it to the innkeeper.

“There is a free room on the first right,” the innkeeper said.

“Thank you, Volstagg. You will wish your wife and children well from me?” Loki said, his eyes never leaving Thor, pinning him in place.

“I will,” the man answered before hurrying off back being his bar.

“Come,” Loki said.

Thor knew better than to resist. He stood up and followed Loki up the stairs, through the first door on the right and into a clean, well-proportioned room. There was a large bed, neatly made, and a nightstand dotted with ampullas of some kind, and a washstand with a jug and fresh towelling cloths. It was a good deal nicer than the small room they had shared on their last night of travel.

“I am not drunk,” Thor protested again once they were inside and Loki had shut the door behind them.

“No, nor did I think you would be, not on mortal ale,” Loki said. “But I do not want you at the palace now. Stay here, sleep it off.”

He turned away from Thor angrily, hands clenched at his sides.

Thor took a tentative step towards him.

“Loki, have I upset you?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “You left and I didn’t know where you were. I didn’t know if he had done
“He?” Thor drew his brows together, puzzled. “Do you mean Odin?”

Loki nodded. His whole body was tensed.

“Balder is unworthy. You will be worthy. I would not put it past Odin to hurt you, imprison you, anything to save his wounded pride.”

“You were worried for me,” Thor said, the words hushed and full of awe.

It made his heart feel light to know that Loki’s anger had come from a place of love. Thor would endure his scolding if it meant knowing the truth of Loki’s heart.

“I have invested a lot in you,” Loki said dismissively.

Thor grabbed hold of him, forcing Loki round so he could look him in the eye.

“You care for me. Admit it!”

Loki stared at him, his eyes wide and his chest heaving as he breathed rapidly.

Thor could see the truth in Loki’s eyes. He knew that he was not alone in the way he felt, but he also knew that Loki was prideful. He would not make the first move so Thor had to make it for the both of them.

“Loki, I do not want a marriage arranged for me,” he said. “If I am to be King, I do not want anyone but you at my side.”

“I will always be with you, I will always serve you,” Loki said softly.
“I do not want you to serve me!” Thor exclaimed, wondering how much more clearly he could state his feelings. “I want you to be my lover! I want to marry you if you will have me.”

“Stupid boy,” Loki muttered before he surged forward in Thor’s arms, his mouth meeting Thor’s in a hungry kiss.

Thor pulled him closer still, his hands working to divest Loki of his long black cloak. It fell to the floor without any delay, but Loki growled when Thor broke their kiss to drag Loki’s tunic up over his head. Thor pulled his own off as well and threw it on the floor, returning to Loki’s arms to capture his mouth in another forceful kiss.

He hooked his fingers into Loki’s leggings and pushed them down, grabbing a handful of Loki’s bare ass, his fingers brushing between the cleft.

Loki broke the kiss this time, panting. “Yes,” he whined. “Yes.”

He kicked off his leggings the rest of the way, along with his boots, and Thor released him for a moment to struggle with his own leggings and boots, succeeding in stripping himself. He stood ready for Loki’s inspection, his cock already half-hard.

Loki’s gaze fell on his naked body, taking all of him in. Loki licked his lips.

Thor didn’t know if he reached for Loki or if Loki reached for him but then they were in each other’s arms again, kisses laced with teeth, rocking against each other. The feeling of Loki against him, naked and unashamed, was everything Thor had ever wanted.

He never wanted anyone else to have Loki like this. He never wanted Loki to lay with anyone but him again. Loki had promised that he would serve Thor and this was how Thor wanted him to serve. He wanted Loki in his bed, he wanted Loki underneath him. He wanted to hear every gasp and groan that issued from Loki’s kiss reddened mouth. He wanted everything from him.

He could hardly have been the first one to want that. Loki was beautiful. Loki had always been beautiful and Thor’s jealousy was unbound.

“Did the other Kings….did you serve them this way?” he asked, panting for breath.
Loki laughed.

“Such jealousy, Thor. You accuse me of consorting with the Queen and now you accuse me of being the whore of the Kings. Do you think so little of me?”

His words were light, mocking, but Thor saw the fear in Loki’s eyes. He thought Thor would reject him if he had been with another.

Thor would have been a hypocrite to do such a thing. He had lain with men and women both. He had enjoyed every pleasure of the flesh offered to him. He had studied how to make love with more attention than he had shown any other subject. One day he had hoped to show Loki his knowledge, but he had done it all in pursuit of his own pleasure.

If Loki had lain with every King the land had ever had, Thor did not care as long as he was the last one.

“Loki, I think the world of you,” he said.

Loki’s smile softened.

“No,” he said. “No, they have never had me. This is for you, only for you.”

Thor pulled him towards the bed. Loki went easily, falling onto the soft mattress atop of Thor. He laughed prettily and Thor was reminded of how much he loved Loki’s laugh when it was like this. When Loki was happy, when he was loved, his laughter was the most beautiful music to Thor’s ear.

“I have loved you for so long, Loki,” he said, stroking his hands up and down over Loki’s arms, wanting to touch him as much as he could now he was allowed.

“I would have gone completely mad in my captivity if I had not had the hope that I would return to you,” Loki said, stroking his fingers across Thor’s face.
He looked at Thor with such devotion that it almost stole the breath from Thor’s lungs.

“Let me have you,” Thor whispered. “Let me make you feel loved.”

“Yes,” Loki said eagerly, nodding his head in agreement.

Thor rolled them over so he was atop of Loki. He hovered above him, looking down at him, keeping his full weight off Loki, frightened of hurting him. He had no idea how weak Loki was, of how recently he’d managed his escape. Loki hadn’t provided a anything so concrete as a timeline when he told Thor of where he’d been.

“Do not treat me as if I am made of glass,” Loki snapped, noticing his hesitation. “I have said you may have me, so have me.”

He arched his hips up.

“You said you would let me love you,” Thor countered, pressing his own hips down against Loki’s, groaning as their cocks brushed together, revelling in the feeling.

“Fuck me. Love me. Isn’t it the same thing?” Loki asked, panting.

Thor shook his head. “No, and I will prove it to you.”

He pressed a kiss to Loki’s jaw, then trailed kisses down his neck, mouthing at the skin there. He wanted to leave as many marks on Loki as he could. He wanted anyone who looked at Loki to know that he was Thor’s.

Loki gasped beneath him and tipped his head back. Thor bit down, sucking a dark red mark into Loki’s milk pale skin.

He pulled back and admired his handy work. Loki raised trembling fingers and touched the darkening bruise, smiling with pleasure.
“Possessive,” he murmured.

“Yes,” Thor agreed. He had wanted Loki for so long. He had wanted to be the only one that Loki looked at, the only one he desired. He never wanted to share Loki with anyone else.

He trailed his kisses lower, over Loki’s chest. He kissed and licked at one of Loki’s nipples, his thumb stroking across the other one, hardening them under his touch. Loki wiggled under him, his breathing heavy and stilted.

Once Thor had worked his nipples to hardness he continued down, his kisses trailing over Loki’s stomach and down over his hips, then lower still. He pressed a kiss to the head of Loki’s cock, tasting him. Loki’s spend was bitter on his tongue, like something burnt. He tasted like no one else Thor had ever lain with.

Loki rocked his hips up, trying to push further into Thor’s mouth. Thor grabbed hold of his hips, pinning him down to the bed.

Loki whined, tangling his fingers in Thor’s hair, tugging.

Thor ignored him. He parted Loki’s legs, nudging them wide and continued his worship of Loki’s body, kissing the insides of his thighs. Loki was trembling by the time he finished, spend beading at the tip of his cock.

Thor smiled, pushing Loki’s legs up, arranging the man how he wanted him. Loki let him, trusting Thor to give him pleasure. It was everything Thor had hoped for.

He pressed a kiss to Loki’s hole.

Loki gasped.

Thor pressed another kiss, then another while Loki squirmed and pressed his hips forward demandingly, wanting more of Thor’s touch. Thor gave him that, licking over Loki’s puckered hole, working it open slowly with more licks and kisses until Loki was mewling, his fingers wound deep in Thor’s hair, nails scratching at his scalp as Thor fucked him with his tongue.
Loki repeated his name like a chant, rising up at meet the thrusts of Thor’s tongue inside him. It was glorious. Thor loved the taste of him, the smoky, unnatural tang of his body. He could stay between Loki’s thighs forever, giving him his pleasure like this.

Loki’s fingers tightened still more in Thor’s hair and then he was coming, spilling on his stomach. He collapsed back against the pillow, breathless and exhausted.

“So these are the skills you’ve been learning,” he said after he had caught his breath.

“Mmm,” Thor agreed, settling beside Loki.

“I do not think kings are supposed to serve others,” Loki said.

“If you would let me, I would spend a lifetime on my knees serving you,” Thor said, licking his lips.

Loki smiled. He rolled over onto his stomach and pushed his hips up, wiggling himself invitingly at Thor.

“Take your pleasure,” he said.

Thor could not have refused him. He knelt behind Loki, spreading his cheeks and gazing at Loki’s spit-slicked hole. It would not be enough to ease the way, Thor knew that. He looked around the room and his eyes fell in the ampullas of oils on the dressing table. They were left out for soldiers to take care of themselves, to rub on sore muscles after travel or training, but they would do for Thor’s purpose.

He reached for one and opened it, sniffing the oil first to ensure there was nothing like clove that could hurt Loki. Satisfied, he poured a generous amount into his palm and slicked his fingers.

“How long has it been?” he asked, pressing his thumb against Loki’s hole, rubbing it in soft circles, spreading the oil. Loki was already relaxed and Thor found he could breach him easily.

“Since I had sex or since I was penetrated?” Loki replied. “The answer to the first is over seven years and the answer to the second is never.”
“Never?” Thor repeated, not certain he believed Loki, not when he pressed one finger inside Loki down to the knuckle with ease.

“I have never let a man mount me. Or a giant. Or any being.”

Thor slipped a second finger into him and pressed a kiss to Loki’s back.

“You have saved this for me?”

“There has been no one else I have trusted,” Loki said. He glanced over his shoulder at Thor, meeting his eye and Thor knew Loki was telling the truth.

He pressed a third finger inside Loki, marvelling at how Loki arched his back and spread his legs further. Thor could see Loki’s cock, bobbing hard and ready again, between them. Thor spread his fingers, working Loki open on them, stretching him, coaxing him. He wanted to be careful, wanted Loki to enjoy every moment of their love making. He would not hurt Loki, not for anything.

When he withdrew his fingers Loki whimpered. It made Thor’s own cock twitch. He’d never known Loki would make noises like that. Thor was certain he could pleasure Loki and come just from the noises the other man made. It was a heady feeling, knowing he could make Loki sound so wrecked.

He reached for the oil again and slicked his cock, generous again with the quantity.

“Thor,” Loki hissed.

“I’m here, I’m here,” Thor murmured.

He moved behind Loki, guiding the head of his cock to press against Loki’s stretched hole. Thor moved slowly, but he felt how Loki tensed. Thor’s cock was thicker than his fingers.

He gripped Loki’s hips, rubbing little circles into the skin there, trying to soothe Loki. He wanted them to be together like this, wanted to claim every part of Loki, but he wouldn’t if it hurt Loki.
There were so many other things they could do together. He did not need to mount Loki like this, not
today, not ever.

Loki however had other ideas. He shoved his hips back, impaling himself half-full of Thor’s cock, a
curse ringing from his lips as he did.

“Loki…” Thor started, wanting Loki to pause, to give himself time to adjust, but Loki refused. He
kept taking, inch by greedy inch, until Thor was buried deep inside his tight heat. Only then did he
stop, his whole body trembling.

Thor held onto him, fingers dug into Loki’s hips, holding him upright. He shut his eyes and bit his
lip, lost in the feeling of Loki clenching around his cock, so tight and so hot that Thor thought he
might spend just from that. He tried to to think of something else, anything else, but it was
impossible.


Thor did as he was told. He moved slowly, little rocks of his hips and slowly, so slowly, Loki began
to rock with him. Thor wished he could see Loki’s face. He wanted to see everything, but he didn’t
believe Loki would let him. Not yet. It was still too much, too new for Loki. He didn’t enjoy being
vulnerable and revealing himself to Thor in this moment would have been too much. It was enough
that he gave Thor his body. It was enough that that Thor was the only one he’d trusted with this.

Thor reached down between Loki’s legs, taking his cock in hand. He stroked him in time with his
slow thrusts, earning pleased whimpers from Loki as he did, until Lok decided it was too slow for
his tastes and began to buck and squirm, fucking himself back onto Thor’s cock and forward into his
hand. Thor wondered if that would be their future, if Loki would come to him whenever he wanted
Thor, if he would take his pleasure from riding Thor’s cock. He would let Loki have that.

He would let Loki have anything he wanted.

The pace Loki set was brutal. It seemed he couldn’t have Thor deep enough or hard enough to
satisfy him. It bewitched Thor and he found himself following Loki, his thrusts growing in power,
turning ferocious. He let go of Loki’s cock and reached to hold his hips with both hands, gripping
them hard enough to leave bruises as he hammered into him.

The bed creaked below them, moving with Thor’s thrusts. The headboard banged against the wall
and Thor was certain that everyone in the inn must know what was happening. It should have made him ashamed, but Thor felt the opposite. He wanted everyone to know that Loki was his, that they were lovers. He meant it when he told Loki he wanted to marry him. If he become King, if Loki accepted him, then he could have such a thing. He could marry Loki and proclaim their love to the skies above and every living being in the Kingdom.

Thor came with a choked-off gasp of Loki’s name, throwing his head back as he drove deep into him one last time. His orgasm had been building, he had felt the prinkle of it under his skin, like little licks of lightenning along his nerves, but he hadn’t expected it to overtake him so soon. Loki stilled under him and for a moment neither of them moved. The room was unexpectedly quiet after the noise they had made. The only sound now was their harsh breathing as both of them fought to regain themselves.

Thor moved first. He eased them carefully so they lay together on the bed, Loki’s back pressed to his chest as Thor spooned behind him, his softening cock still buried deep inside Loki. He was keenly aware that Loki’s cock was still hard and he wrapped his fingers back around the shaft, stroking him until Loki bit his lip and came with great shakes running through him.

Things could never be the same between them now.

Thor had told Loki everything, he had told him of his heart and all the things he wanted. He would never look at Loki without remembering this. He would want it every day. Now he had had him, Thor knew there could be no one else in his heart or his bed but Loki.

“I meant it,” he said, pressing a kiss to Loki’s shoulder. “I want to marry you.”

Loki laughed, tipping his head back so he could see Thor’s face.

“Become King and I will think about it,” he said.

Thor knew that was as good as a yes.

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Thor had fallen asleep.
It was reassuring to be wrapped in his arms, to feel Thor’s breath against the back of his neck and to hear his snores so Loki allowed himself to remain in the bed with him.

Seven years had given him a long time to plan.

Alone in the dark with only his own thoughts, Loki had sustained himself with his plans and the knowledge that eventually he would escape and return to Thor.

Loki had not been planning to fall into bed with Thor. Certainly he had not planned to do it like this, when passion and fury had reigned high. He hadn’t meant to do it before Thor was crowned.

He had meant to come to Thor when Thor was King. He had meant to offer himself, his gifts, to Thor then.

He hadn’t expected Thor to want to marry him.

It would cause a revolt. People would riot in the streets. They would never accept that their King wanted to marry Loki. He was witch, he was one of the Old Ones and those who knew what he had been, what he was capable of, they would hate it.

Thor would have Mjolnir though. He could put down any uprising with Mjolnir in his hand.

It would make other things easier. The line of succession for one.

Loki hadn’t lied when he told Thor that he was the only man he trusted enough to let mount him. He wouldn’t lay with just anyone when there was always the danger that he could fall pregnant. He had waited for a man who was worthy and that man was Thor.

In the darkness of the room, Loki smiled. He placed one hand against his flat stomach.

He had felt the exact moment he had conceived.
Their child would be powerful and it would be Thor’s heir.

**

Thor arrived at the tent on the morning of his trial to find a hushed crowd.

He saw his mother’s face, pale and fearful, brighten when she caught sight of him and he realised how much his disappearance must have terrified her the day before. He would go to her, he would apologise to her for causing her such needless worry, but first he had to meet his destiny.

Every footstep seemed to take an eternity.

Thor could hear Mjolnir’s song as he stepped towards the weapon. He heard the call for blood and battle. It was not what he wanted. He did not want to be a warrior. He wanted to bring storms, replenish the land and have grand adventures with Loki at his side. That was the future he had dreamed of.

That future couldn’t be, but he could have another one, a different one.

He would accept Kingship if he could have Loki.

Thor reached his hand out, wrapping his fingers around the hammer’s grip.

Then, as if the great thing weighed nothing, he lifted Mjolnir into the air and held it aloft.

Odin’s roar of fury was drowned out by the cheers of the crowd.
Loki had often had private audiences with the King. He was used to being summoned for Odin’s whims. He stood before the fire, enjoying the warmth of it while the King grumbled and muttered, dismissing his attendants who fussed around him.

The room was a small one, an antechamber for the King to meet his courtiers away from prying eyes. Odin had summoned him there in the aftermath of Thor’s success. Loki had been expecting that. He knew that the man would not be able to accept the outcome. He had not heeded Loki’s warnings and now Loki meant to gloat.

There was nothing Odin could do now to prevent Thor’s ascension to the throne.

Odin succeeded in sending the last of his servants away, waiting for the door to shut behind the man before he turned on Loki. He no longer seemed frail. His fury gave him strength and he held himself with his back straight. His one good eye blazed with anger and he strode across the room to stand in front of Loki, glaring at him.

“How did you achieve it? What hex did you use on Mjolnir?”

Loki laughed. He could not help himself. Odin was reduced to accusing him of trickery.

“You know I could not have done anything. I did not make Mjolnir. It is not my magic at work.”

“Then you hexed Balder, witch,” Odin said.

“You cannot believe the truth even when it is clear in front of you. Next you will accuse me of casting a spell on Thor,” Loki said, greatly amused. “You must accept that all I did was bet on the winning man.”

“You are a devious little whore,” Odin hissed.

“I have won,” Loki said, spreading his hands out in front of him serenely. “I have won and soon all of this will be Thor’s. He will have your throne, your land, your crown. He will have me.”
Odin looked at him sharply, assessing him.

“Oh, but I am clumsy,” Loki said, enjoying himself. He brushed his hair back from his neck, keen to show off the marks Thor had left on him. “I misspoke. I meant of course to say that Thor has already had me.”

“Whore,” Odin muttered again, his gaze fixed on Loki’s neck and the love-bites on his pale skin. “Did you give him what you would not give me? Do you carry his child?”

Loki smiled. “Yes.”

He placed his hands on his stomach. He would not show for many moons, but he did not care. He knew what he had taken from Thor, knew what was growing within him now.

He would give Thor an heir. A child of their combined power with the crown of Asgard as it’s birthright.

He would give Thor everything he had never given Odin.

Odin snarled. He grabbed Loki’s wrist and held it tight, squeezing painfully as if he meant to leave his mark on Loki as well.

"Did you eat his heart, witch?" he growled.

"Yes, when it was young and tender. And now he loves me and I love him," Loki said, unable to keep the joy from his voice.

He shook off Odin’s hold on him and strode past the King.

He had been too long away from Thor’s side.
"I am still King. You are still bound to me," Odin called after him.

Loki paused at the door. He turned to look at the King.

Once more Odin appeared small to him; a hunched and huddled figure, time creeping upon him with the inevitability of mortality. He would be met soon by Death herself. She would come, as she did for all mortals. Already Loki could feel the anticipation of her presence.

"Your death is coming," Loki said. He savoured the words. "I can feel it. You might have days to live, perhaps only hours, but your time is ending. I am Thor's now."

He slipped from the room, smiling to himself as he heard the furious bellow that echoed out from the King’s chambers.

Everything Loki had planned, everything he had hoped for, was coming together.

The King would die.

Then Thor would live and a new era would dawn under him, long and glorious, and Loki would be by his side for all of it.

**

Thor’s head was spinning. He had been kissed and congratulated. He had been embraced by his mother and by the Queen, had basked in his mother’s pride and had looked for Loki, but been unable to find him in the great throng of Lords and Ladies who had arrived in the grand hall to meet their future King.

A day ago, Thor had meant nothing to these people. He had been either unknown or known only as Odin’s bastard son. Now they flocked to shake his hand, to bend their knee and swear fealty to him.

It was overwhelming, but Thor found he liked the praise and the attention. He smiled widely, proud with himself.
The one person missing was his father. Thor had not seen him since the King had stormed from the tent, muttering curses as he went, leaving his Queen to once again intercede on his behalf.

It was Frigga who had instructed they return to the grand hall and who had called servants to bring forth ale and mead, she who announced they should celebrate what Thor had done and the King he would be.

Thor had drained a flagon of ale. He was pleasantly warm and that feeling did not dissipate as his half-brother Balder approached him.

“Well met, Prince Thor,” Prince Balder said, taking Thor’s hand tightly in his own. “You have my sworn oath. I will serve you and the Kingdom when the time comes.”

“Well met, brother,” Thor said.

He had been assured already that his half-brothers would not challenge him for the crown. Queen Frigga had told him, her voice a whisper in his ear as she embraced him.

Thor knew they would not. He had Mjolnir. He would destroy anyone who dared to challenge his might.

“Tell me of your plans. Will you make changes?” Balder spoke lightly, but Thor saw the way his eyes strayed, looking for Lady Nanna in the crowd of nobles.

Thor could guess what his brother was thinking. He feared that Thor would break the engagement, that Thor would want the Lady for himself. It was what Odin had arranged, after all, that his son and heir would marry Nanna. Perhaps Balder thought that Thor would want to take everything his brother had had; not just his Kingdom, but his future wife as well.

“Some changes,” Thor murmured. “But nothing of the kind you are worried with.”

“You are most kind, brother,” Balder said.
The door of the grand Hall opened. Both men paused in their conversation, turning to look at the late arrival. There was no introduction from the herald, but the man who entered did not need an introduction. It was Loki and he looked as beautiful as Thor had ever seen him. His smile was triumphant, his eyes glittering as they caught the firelight.

Thor wanted to go to him, to kiss him.

“How did it feel to lift Mjolnir?” Balder asked.

Thor forced himself to look away from Loki and back at his half-brother. He would have time to catch up with Loki later. Loki would come to his bed tonight and then every night after. Thor would have all the kisses he wanted then, but for now he had to play the part of the dutiful heir.

“Powerful,” he confessed. “The hammer itself did not seem to weigh anything, although I know that cannot be true, but the power I felt when I held it was immense.”

Balder nodded thoughtfully.

“Did you hear it singing?” Thor ventured, wondering if Balder had heard the call of the magic within the weapon.

His brother’s confused expression told him that he had not.

“You heard Mjolnir singing?” Balder asked, his pleasant brows drawing together in concern.

“Ah, it is magic,” Thor said, dismissing it. “Perhaps I heard only because I was worthy.”

“No doubt,” Balder agreed.

Thor did not dwell on it. He did not know how to describe the song to Balder, or what the man would make of it to know that Thor had heard it sing of blood and battle.

“When is your wedding day?” he asked Balder. “We shall have a celebration, a feast in honour of it.”
You are still a Prince and our Kingdom should celebrate your union.”

Balder smiled happily. He was in love and Thor found himself cheered to see it. Balder and the Lady Nanna would be happy together, their children born out of their mutual devotion to each other rather than born to further a man’s ego. Their children would not be conceived as Thor had been, as Balder had been, in an attempt to find the most powerful amongst them.

“We had not set a date. We were waiting until the trail had finished,” Balder said, and once again his eyes found Lady Nanna. He smiled at her and she at him. “I will marry her as soon as I can.”

Thor nodded.

His own eyes found Loki, standing off to the side of the Hall. Balder followed his gaze. If he was surprised, it didn’t show in his face.

“So, you have plans for Loki?” he asked. “He has been a thorn in father’s side for sometime now, but if father did not test him so he would not behave as he does.”

Thor frowned. He had seen how Loki behaved in court - his spiteful tongue, his flirting, desiring always to draw attention to himself even if that attention were cruel. Thor would not have that in his court. He would have Loki contented and pleased, seated beside him on a throne of his own.

“Our father has not treated him well. You knew of his captivity?”

Balder bowed his head in acknowledgement.

“Yes, and I saw him after. It was a wicked thing that was done to him,” he said sadly.

“Did a search party go after him? It was seven years. Did the dwarfs make no ransom demand?” Thor asked.

For seven years he had lived with no word of Loki, no idea if he was alive or dead. He had hated Loki at first, had cursed his name. He had been angry at Loki for leaving him, for being too much of a coward to tell him when he left. Then he had begun to miss him, the ache so terrible that no amount
of hunting or flirting could fill it. Finally, he had despaired, thinking he would never see Loki again.

The King had known where Loki had been sent however. The whole palace must have known. Something must have been done to rescue him. They could not have left him to languish in a dwarven cell for seven years without trying to intercede on his behalf.

Balder’s cheeks grew red. He looked down at the floor, away from Thor’s gaze.

“They made a demand, but it was not one the King could meet. Father knew that Loki would find his own way back to us.”

Thor felt white hot anger course through him. He would have called Mjolnir to him, have had the hammer fly into his hand, but he knew that if he did that he would have to use it, he would have to seek blood.

Outside the palace the sky was split by lightning and the clouds opened; heavy, angry rain falling with relentless fury.

Balder looked out of the nearest window, watching in fascination as the rain pounded down from what had been a clear sky the moment before.

“You did that?” he marveled.

Thor ignored the question.

“There will be changes,” he muttered darkly. “We may got to war with the dwarfs.”

Balder gaped at him.

“Because of Loki?”

Thor nodded. He had never desired war before. He had never wanted bloodshed and destruction, but now he could not see another way back. With Mjolnir in hand he would be unbeatable and the
dwarfs would learn they could not hurt what was Thor’s.

“Is that not what a King would do, if his Queen had been held captive and hurt so badly? Is it not what you would do for Lady Nanna?”

Now the surprise showed clearly on Balder’s face. Whatever he had thought before, whatever he had supposed was between Thor and Loki, he had clearly not imagined that they were lovers.

“You mean to make Loki…” he trailed off, unable to bring himself to say the words and shook his head. “No, you cannot.”

“I will be King. I can do as I please and marrying Loki is what pleases me,” Thor said firmly.

Around them heads were turning, people looking at them as they raised their voices. Balder, aware of those listening in, motioned for Thor to follow him away from the other nobles. They moved closer to the window, where the sound of thunder and the pounding rain provided them further cover.

“Does father know?” Balder asked, his voice dropping low so he would not be overheard. “Thor, you must speak with him. He will tell you everything. He will tell you what Loki is and what he’s done. I am sure Loki has told you, but you must hear the truth of it. Father will tell you and then you will see why you cannot do this.”

Thor did not disillusion his brother. He did not let Balder know that Loki had told him nothing of his servitude or his past. He wanted to know everything, but Loki was prideful. He would hear from Odin and then he would be able to get the truth from Loki. Loki would be eager to reveal everything when he was fighting against the King’s version of his story.

“I will take audience with him,” Thor agreed, trying not to appear too ardent in his enthusiasm.

Balder clasped his hand again in gratitude.

“I will make the arrangements and then come to find you,” he said.
He released Thor’s hand and disappeared into the crowd. Thor stood by himself, looking out of the window at the rain. No-one approached him and Thor was glad of that. He did not want to talk of loyalty and oaths, of the kind of King he would be. He wanted to speak to his father, to learn everything about Loki and his strange relationship to the crown.

He wanted his chance as well to barate the man, to ring from him apologies for how he had treated his servant.

He would bring those apologies to Loki like they were jewels.

Balder reappeared at Thor’s side almost as quickly as he had disappeared from it. He touched Thor’s arm gently and inclined his head towards the door.

“Father will see you in his rooms,” he said.

He led Thor from the Hall and down a corridor to a private chamber. It was warm and well-lit, and the King was seated beside the fire. He looked tired, huddled in on himself and Thor found his heart filling with pity for the old man.

He had hoped for a different outcome and Thor understood his disappointment. He was not excited to be King.

Perhaps those apologies Thor wanted would not be so hard to coax.

“Father,” he said.

The man looked up at him, startled.

“Thor, my son, take a seat,” he gestured to a chair across from him and obediently Thor sat.

It was the first time his father had acknowledge him as his son with any warmth in his voice.

Balder lingered in the doorway but Odin dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “Go, Balder, this is
a conversation for the future King. Find your Lady and be merry.”

Balder nodded. He shut the door, leaving Thor alone with his father.

Odin sat back, both hands curling around his scepter. He used the thing as other men might use a walking stick. He used it to balance, to hold himself up straight as he spoke to his son. He was an old man and Thor could not stop himself from feeling some compassion towards him.

He tried to remind himself of how cold the man had been when Thor first arrived, how he had insulted Thor’s mother and how he had hurt Loki, but he could not stop looking at the man’s wrinkled hands.

The life of a King was not an easy one. It had taken everything from the man sat before him. Odin had needed to make hard choices and he must have had regrets. His grip upon power, upon life itself, was slipping. Thor found sympathy in himself for the father he had never known.

“Balder has told me of your plans,” Odin said. “I cannot say I approve of them.”

“Because Loki is male or a witch?“ Thor asked.

There were expectations for a King, Thor understood that. Odin had made his expectations clear in his choice of Balder’s betrothed. Lady Nanna was a beautiful woman, her lineage and reputation beyond reproach, and she would give Balder beautiful children.

Loki’s lineage was lost to time. The reputation he had was ruined beyond repair. Thor had not even thought of children or if Loki could bare them. His magic was strong, but Loki’s pride might not allow it. Thor did not care. He wanted nothing but to be with Loki.

“I object because Loki is bound to the King,” Odin said. “He is a servant and Kings do not marry servants.”

Thor stared at him, stunned into silence by the old man’s words. Of all the things he had thought Odin would say, that was not one of them.
“Bed him if you wish,” Odin said. “I have no objection to that, and Loki would enjoy that, no doubt, but understand that you cannot elevate him to rule beside you.”

Thor flushed red. He could not stop the imagines that flashed into his mind of how Loki had enjoyed being bedded.

“My father bound him, using his own blood in the binding,” Odin continued, his voice measured and calm, as if he was retelling a story. “He bound Loki to serve our bloodline. A King may die, but his blood lives on. Loki served my father, he serves me and he will serve you. When you die, he will serve your son.”

Thor shivered. He did not want to think of that, of Loki living on long after Thor had departed from the mortal realm. He did not want to think of Loki bound in perpetual servitude.

“Loki is powerful. My father bound him to use him as a weapon,” Odin said, looking away from Thor towards the fire. “With Loki’s power, he enslaved the Giants and built this beautiful palace. I used Loki for my own means as well. He has conquered me land, brought me an empire.”

“You left him in the capture of the dwarfs!” Thor said accusingly, finding his voice again.

Odin sighed. It was a horrible sound, filled with bitter regret.

“I knew he would return to us. I did not make that choice lightly, Thor, but for the good of the Kingdom. The dwarfs wanted things I could not give them.”

“You let him suffer,” Thor cried.

“Aye,” Odin agreed, his head bowed in shame. “I did. I have made him suffer. My father made him suffer. He cannot refuse our orders. He could not refuse my order to find Mjolnir, nor could he return without it.”

Odin looked at him sadly.

“You too will make him suffer. He is your servant next.”
“No, I won’t...” Thor started but Odin grabbed hold of his hand. Thor looked at his father, unwilling to hear anymore but the man would not allow that.

“He will never be anything but a servant,” he said, digging his nails into the back of Thor’s hand. “You cannot marry him. He will serve our bloodline. He will return to it when you die, Thor. It is his duty, his future.”

Thor felt ill.

He had been so happy mere moments before, planning on the future he would have. He had Loki and they were in love, just as Thor had always dreamed of. They had shared something beautiful together and Thor had come to peace with his destiny. He had believed he could rule with Loki at his side.

Now he knew that it could not be, not while his family clung onto Loki as an indentured servant, using him for their own ends.

His grandfather had enslaved Loki. His father had continued to misuse and mistreat him. They had been weak, feeble men and weak, feeble Kings, unable to stand on their own without Loki’s power to support them.

Thor would be a better man. He would be a better King. He would make this right.

He would give Loki his freedom. He would break the bounds that had tied Loki to the crown. Loki would be free.

Thor stood up, dislodging his father’s grip on him. He gazed down at him with something close to disgust in his eyes.

“You are wrong. Loki will no more be a servant. I will free him and then I will marry him.”

He strode across the room and threw the door wide.
He would use his father’s blood that flowed in his veins to free Loki. He would use his parentage to
his advantage. All Odin had told him was how to give Loki the most precious of gifts and Thor
would do that. He would defeat anything, no matter how old the magic or how powerful the spell,
for his chance to be with Loki.

If he had looked back he would have seen Odin smiling after him, but he did not look back.

His heart ruled his head, his thoughts were as pure and warm as they rays of the sun, and Thor did
not see the shadows in others. He saw only what he believed to be true.

He believed his father to be a broken, brittle old man and so that was all he saw.

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Thor walked with resolve. He did not run. He did not need to run.

His footsteps echoed as he walked back towards the hall, and Thor felt as if every step was filled
with purpose. When his story was told, and it would be told, then his determination would be etched
into every line. This would be the moment, the storytellers would say, when Thor first acted as King.

They would tell of his conviction. They would tell of his love. It would be an epic story, the sort that
Loki used to tell Thor when he was a child. Then Thor had cared for the battles and the glory, but
now he cared for the softer moments, the love that could convince a man to charge into battle. Thor
was like those heroes of old. He was on a quest to free Loki from his bounds and he would receive
the praise of a hero when he did.

Everyone would know that Thor was a good man, a different man to his father. They would know
he would be a good King.

Thor entered the Hall and at once eyes turned to him. Thor saw Balder step towards him, but he
ignored his brother. He did not want to be delayed now he had a quest. He needed to act now before
his father could try to prevent him from his plan.

He caught sight of Loki. The man was by the fireside. He always gravitated towards the fire in any
room, preferring to be near the warmth than away from it. Thor looked at him, filled with jubilation as
he thought of how happy Loki was going to be. He would kiss the praises from Loki’s lips, would
hold him close and feel the exaltation in Loki’s embrace. Loki would tell their story and he would tell it beautifully, weaving the most wonderful saga with his talented words.

He would be so pleased with Thor, so grateful for what Thor was about to do.

Thor strode through the crowd and caught Loki by the arm, distracting him from his conversation.

“I must speak with you, Loki,” Thor said.

He did not know the noble Loki spoke with, but Loki did not seem terribly upset to be pulled away from him. He did not offer the man any apologies as he followed Thor.

He glanced at Thor questioningly, but did not say anything until they were in the relative private of the corridor. There were guards, but they did not look at the Prince and his attendant. They did not listen. They had their duty.

“What is this?” Loki asked, smiling. He wrapped his arms around Thor’s neck. “You could not wait to have me again?”

Thor smiled. He bent his head to kiss Loki. It was a chaste kiss, just a brush of their lips together, but it was enough to send his heart racing.

“I have wanted to do that all evening,” he said.

“You’ve spoken to your father?” Loki asked.

Thor suspected that he already knew. Loki had told him all about the secret passages, the places within the castle he could spy from. He probably knew what Thor was planning.

“Yes. We talked of you, of my plans to marry you.”

Loki laughed. “Oh, I am certain I know what he said to that. Did you give him a heart attack?”
“No, he lives, but he told me I couldn’t marry you,” Thor said.

“And as stubborn as you are, you are choosing not to listen to him,” Loki said blithely.

“I am choosing to do better than that. I am choosing to defy him and my birthright,” Thor said, grinning.

Loki looked at him carefully, amusement vanished from his face.

“Thor…”

Thor was certain that Loki knew what he was about to do. He knew the gravity of what Thor was planning. Thor could feel the sparks of electricity in the air, the magic in his blood, the magic that bound him and Loki together as Master and servant. He would undo those bonds. He would replace them with something better.

All he needed was a little of his blood.

He kissed Loki again, demanding his mouth this time. He wound his fingers in Loki’s hair, tugging and Loki laughed into the kiss. Thor bit him and Loki bit back, drawing blood as he worried Thor’s lip between his teeth. It stung, but it was enough. It was all Thor needed.

He broke away from Loki, smiling as he saw his own blood stained on Loki’s mouth.

“You are free,” Thor said. “I release you.”

“What?” Loki gasped, the color draining from his face.

“I release you from your bonds. You are no longer the King’s servant. You are free, you are your own.”
Loki grabbed hold of him, his eyes wide with fear.

“No! No! Why are you doing this? Thor!”

Thor stared at him. He would have thought Loki would be happy, but he didn’t sound it. His hands clawed at Thor’s arms, as if he was trying to rip Thor open and mix himself back in to Thor’s blood.

“Because I am not my father,” Thor said, twisting in Loki’s hold to stop him from succeeding. “I am not my grandfather. I am giving you your freedom.”

“You fool!” Loki hissed angrily.

He shrank away from Thor, his whole body trembling. It seemed as if he could not control his form. He grew and shrank before Thor’s eyes, shuddered and flickered, his face for a moment his own but then changing to a fox, a magpie, and finally a snake. It was horrifying to watch and Thor wished he could look away, but he was transfixed to the spot and to Loki.

Then Loki stood in front of him again, panting with exertion. He looked at Thor, his eyes filled with misery. It was the opposite of everything Thor had imagined and it stunned him more than the transformations he had seen Loki undergo mere seconds before.

Loki gave one horrid cry, a howl as if his heart was breaking, and threw himself at the window. He crashed through the glass and was away in a second, transformed into a bird in the middle of his fall.

Thor watched, powerless to stop him.

He stood in the corridor, the silence loud after Loki’s howl. His arms ached from where Loki had clawed at him. His heart ached from how Loki had left. This was nothing like Thor had planned. This was not his first great victory, his first triumph as King. This was a mistake and a terrible one.

“Thor!” his mother’s voice startled him and he whirled round to face her.

Jord stepped carefully over the broken glass, her eyes darting from the broken window to Thor and then back again.
“What did you do?” she asked, her voice ringing with fear.

“I set Loki free,” Thor answered because he had always been honest with his mother.

Jord slapped him.

Thor stumbled back, clutching at his cheek. His jaw ached from the force of her blow.

His mother had never hit him. She had never spanked him, even when he had been at his most disobedient, his most mischievous. She had never raised a hand to him.

Thor blinked back tears of shock.


“We couldn’t be married while Loki served. My father told me,” Thor said, cold fear creeping up his spine as he spoke.

Odin was the King. He could have simply forbidden such a union outright. He could have ordered Loki away. He hadn’t. He hadn’t needed to. He had given Thor just enough information and Thor had done the rest.

“You have been tricked!” Jord said, her eyes darting back to the window. “Oh my stupid boy. My sweet, stupid boy.”

Thor bowed his head. He breathed in heavy, quick breaths, his head beginning to swim.

“I only wanted Loki to be free,” he said. “I did not want him to be a servant all his life.”

“Loki has been a willing instrument and weapon for Odin’s bloodline and he understood why he had to be bound,” Jord said.
“What do you mean?” Thor asked, looking up at his mother.

He did not believe Loki would have been bound willingly. Loki was too proud. He would never have submitted.

“Loki was duplicitous. He was neither friend nor foe. Until Borr bound him, Loki was wild. He was feared throughout the Kingdom. No-one ever knew if he came to bring joy or to bring sorrow,” Jord said. She looked away from Thor, far into the past, remembering.

“Borr sought to use him, to use his powers, but Loki could not be trusted. He destroyed Borr’s army because the wind changed direction and so did his fancy. Borr was furious, but he still craved that power. He used blood magic, sacrificed part of his own blood and bone to bind the spell. I can still remember how Loki howled when the spell took hold. It was pitiful and so was he, but he learned. He came to understand why it had to be done and even to accept it.”

Thor shook his head. He did not believe Loki would ever have accepted his servitude. Loki had always been so much his own that Thor could not comprehend the idea.

“You did not know Loki before, when he was wild,” Jord said, seeing the shake of his head. “When Borr bound him, it brought Loki peace, it brought the Kingdom peace. Loki schemed and planned, he sought to serve you because he knew you would love him, but he did not seek to break his bonds. He knew by now they were for his own good.”

“What is Loki?” Thor asked pleadingly.

He needed to know why it had been essential that Loki be bound.

He needed to know what he had unleashed upon his unsuspecting Kingdom.

Jord nodded her head towards the window. Thor looked out and saw that the skyline was alight with flame. Below them, the countryside was burning.

“Loki is fire and his freedom means death,” Jord said.
“Thor, no!” Balder tried to block his way, but Thor was far stronger. He threw his brother aside and forced the door to his father’s antechamber open.

Odin was sitting where Thor had left him. His smile was wicked, his good eye gleaming with madness.

“Why?” Thor asked.

Balder entered the room behind him, holding his shoulder. Thor should have felt sorry for him, but he had no pity for any of them. The line of Odin was rotten. It was filled with liars and Thor was tired of being lied to, of being used and told he would understand eventually.

All he understood is that he had been left vulnerable and easily manipulated.

“I never favoured you,” Odin said. “You are weak, easily led. You would have married that witch and he would have whispered filth into your ears, would have had you destroy everything I built.”

Thor slammed his hand into the wall, making the room shake.

“What have you built?” he snarled. “The only things you’ve ever made are me, Balder, your other sons and anything good in us has come from our mothers.”

“I built an empire,” Odin shouted. “I expanded far past what my father ever did and I protected what I had. Do you know what the dwarfs demanded in exchange for Loki, when that fool got himself captured? They wanted me to tear down Asgard, to give them back their gold in exchange for that wretch.”

“Gold? You let him suffer for seven years for gold?” Thor said, horrified.

He wanted to tear down the palace with his bare hands. He wanted to melt down every bit of gold, to give all of it to Loki and hope that was enough to buy his forgiveness. He beat his fist against the wall again, hard enough to crack the stone. He would begin now. He would break Asgard down to
its foundations.

“You never said,” Balder said, his voice full of confusion and Thor spared him a glance, his hand paused. “You told me the dwarfs asked for something we couldn’t give them. The gold is only a covering. The palace is stone. We could have given it back!”

Balder was looking at his father as if he did not know the man in front of him. He looked at him as if he was a stranger.

“I did it for Asgard! The golden palace is a beacon to our people. Loki is a servant. He understood. Besides, it did him good to learn humility,” Odin said. There was no contrition in his voice, no regret.

He believed what he had done was justified.

Thor shook his head, unable to believe what he was hearing. Loki had been imprisoned for seven years and the man who could have freed him had done nothing. He hadn’t cared. He might even have known what sort of fate he was sending Loki to and still he sent him.

No wonder outside the palace the world burned.

“You did this from spite? People will die!” Balder cried.

His own horror echoed Thor’s.

“This is more important than the people. This is my legacy,” Odin said.

“You are mad,” Thor said.

“I am the King. Loki betrayed me. He gave you what he would not give me and I have punished him as I see fit.”

Thor stared at his father. His blood ran cold.
“You and Loki…” Thor could not finishing the thought.

“You would never have been born if Loki would have given me what I desired,” Odin spat.

“Jealousy and spite,” Bladar muttered.

Odin pushed himself up from his seat. He took a faltering step towards Thor, then another, propping himself up on his scepter.

“Now you cannot have him either,” he hissed. “He is a monster and all the people will soon know. They will demand his head and you will bring it to them, because you are their King.”

“I will not harm him!” Thor shouted.

Balder flinched, but Odin did not move.

“Even when he destroys? When he kills? He will sweep through the whole world like a plague, consuming all who live there. He devours men as easily as he breathes,” he said.

“No!”

“Mjolnir can slay him. Save your people, prove your worth and become a son I can be proud of.”

“Never,” Thor shook his head firmly.

Whatever Loki was, whatever he had done, Thor loved him. He wouldn’t kill the man he loved. It was a monstrous thought and he hated his father for putting it in his head.

Balder hung his head, unable to look at either of them. Thor wanted to hate him, but Balder was as much a pawn in this plot as Thor had been. Odin had been playing them all off against each other. Balder had simply been a useful piece at the right time. He hadn’t known what would happen. He
hadn’t known the depths his father had sunk to hang on to power or to punish those who rejected him.

“Pathetic” Odin said, turning away from Thor. “At least you will never have Loki, and that child you sired with him will never inherit the throne.”

“Child?” Balder looked up, gazing at his father in shock.

“Loki is with child?” Thor demanded. He could hardly believe the words, but he remembered how Loki had seemed to glow when he entered the Hall. Thor had thought he was pleased that he had been right, that Thor would be King, but now he thought Loki might have been delighted for another reason; a secret reason known only to himself. “You knew and you still let me…”

“Why should you have what I do not?” Odin said calmly.

Thor did not hesitate. He surged forward and grabbed hold of the old man.

He closed his hand tight around Odin’s mouth. He wanted him to stop talking, wanted to force every cruel word back into the man’s mouth and make him choke on them. He held him as Odin struggled, his grip tightening until finally the old man stopped moving, until the scepter he had clutched fell from his limp grimp. Only then did Thor withdraw his hand.

He set Odin’s body back down in his chair and stood quietly in front of it.

“Father,” Balder said softly.

He came to stand at Thor’s side. There were no tears in his eyes.

“He is dead,” Thor said.

He should feel something, some horror at the fact that he had taken a life, but he felt nothing. He was not even frightened of what Balder would do. He was completely numb.
If Balder wanted to take his head and have the crown for himself, Thor did not think he would care.

His father had destroyed the most important thing in Thor’s life. Nothing else mattered.

“Yes,” Balder said, looking at Thor. “And you are King.”

He held out his hand, as he had done when he swore his oath to Thor.

Thor took it.

**

Odin’s funeral and Thor’s coronation were the same day.

Balder lied faultlessly. He told that Odin had had a fit, that had Thor tried to hold him down to keep him from injuring himself, but that they could do nothing for him. He was sorrowful. No one doubted his word.

Thor said nothing. His eyes were red-rimmed, his shoulders heavy and people took his grief at face value. They believed he was mourning for his father.

No one mentioned Loki.

The crown was set upon Thor’s head and he shuddered, unable to bear the weight of it. He was no ruler, no leader to these people, but he was their King all the same.

Bells were rung. They chimed out across a shattered Kingdom. There was no feast, no dancing and no jubilant clothes in bright, happy colours. The nobles at his coronation wore black.

Instead of celebrating, they buried the old King.
Loki’s fire raged uncontrollably outside the Palace. Even when there was nothing left to burn, the flames continued.

Jord winced at every blackened section of earth, every scorch mark left and Thor knew now why his mother and Loki had never been on friendly terms. Their dispute was older than Odin and his meddling. Loki destroyed all that Jord built.

**

The fourth day of the unending fire, Thor called a council.

His mother, Balder and the once Queen Frigga were the ones he called. They were the only ones he knew, the only ones he trusted.

“When will this stop?” he asked, gesturing to the window and the fire that raged outside.

“I’m not sure it can be stopped,” Jord said.

“Is Loki angry with me? Is that why he’s doing this?” Thor questioned her.

He wanted to make some sense of the destruction. He could understand if Loki was doing this to hurt him. As cruel as it would have been, Thor would have understood. To simply cause chaos for the sake of it was something he could not comprehend.

His mother shook her head firmly.

“I don’t believe he’s in control,” she said.

Frigga agreed. “For nearly a hundred years, he has been bound and this power has been subdued. He has focused on other things, other magic. I don’t think he knows what he’s doing now or how to stop it.”

“So the Kingdom will be destroyed because Loki does not know how to control himself?” Balder
He held himself stiffly, his arm in a sling. Thor hadn’t meant to hurt his brother, but when Balder had tried to bar him entry to Odin’s rooms, Thor hadn’t been in his right mind. He feared he might never be in his right mind again.

He had killed his father and he had yet to feel remorse for it.

“Loki can be killed,” Jord said. She spoke without emotion. “He is an Old One, but we can still die. The fire will die with him.”

Frigga’s face grew pale.

“No, there must be another way,” she said.

Jord grimaced. “The land is suffering. Thor’s people are suffering. Please, this needs to be ended.”

“A few days,” Frigga suggested. “Just a few more days. He may come back to himself.”

They both looked to Thor to make the choice; Frigga pleading and Jord with her face set in grim determination.

Thor already knew what his heart had chosen.

“We will wait,” he said. “We will see if Loki can stop himself. If he can’t….”

“But you can kill him?” Balder asked.

If it were anyone else, Thor would have struck them, but he knew his brother was not taunting him. Balder did not ask him to goad him. He asked because he knew Thor was weak.
The crown weighed too heavy on Thor’s head. It was nothing, just more stolen gold. He could break it in two if he wanted, discard the pieces, but that would not destroy the weight of leadership. He should be focused on his people and on the land. He should want to protect them. His mother was suffering and that should be his priority. He should want to protect her.

He shouldn’t want to protect Loki.

“You can get close to him,” Jord said. She cupped Thor’s face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. He hated to see the scars the flames left on her, but he endured it. She was enduring worse. “Thor, you are lightning and thunder. You will be safe. You can defeat him and you will have Mjolnir.”

“Could Mjolnir kill Loki?” Balder asked hesitantly.

Frigga let out a little cry at her son’s words. Thor was glad he could not see her face.

“Mjolnir is magical. It will never fail. If Thor lifts it with the intent to kill, then whoever he strikes will die,” Jord said quietly.

“And that was the worth our father wanted us to have?” Balder’s voice rose in anger.

“Your father claimed an empire, Balder; he wanted a son who would follow in his footsteps,” Frigga said consolingly.

Thor shuddered. The last thing he wanted to believe was that he was like Odin.

He was though. He had killed his own father. He had been planning to wage a war on the dwarfs. He was letting the Loki’s fire rage on because of his own selfishness.

Thor was not a good man. He was not worthy of anything but his father’s legacy of war and blood.

“And the child?” Balder asked. “You could really kill your own child?”
The silence left in the wake of his revelation was overwhelming.

Thor risked a look at his mother to find her face had hardened to stone.

“‘You lay with Loki,’” she said, the words an accusation.

Thor did not deny it.

“‘You lay with him and you got him with child!’ Jord’s voice rose, her anger harsh. ‘You stupid, foolish boy, Thor! How could you? Loki doesn’t know how to love, he is incapable and you created a child with him! He will poison that child, like he poisons everything he touches!’”

She shook with anger. Thor could hardly stand it.

“I have tried to keep you safe from him!” Jord cried and now there were tears in her eyes.

Thor felt his heart shatter. He had betrayed his mother. He had betrayed his Kingdom. In his selfish pursuit of Loki, he had destroyed everything else held dear to him. He did not believe his mother would ever forgive him.

She might though, if he struck Loki down and ended the twisted, wicked thing once and for all. She might, if he buried his feelings for Loki in Loki’s grave.

“I will do what I have to do,” Thor said, pulling from his mother’s hold. “I am the King and that duty must come first.”

The words sounded hollow to his own ears, no matter how much Thor tried to fill them with conviction.

**

Thor tried to call the rain to him.
He had done it before, had made the skies open and the rain fall, but nothing would come. The sky was thick with black soot and smog from the fire that encircled the palace walls, but Thor knew no clouds had gathered behind that darkness.

He had never learned to control his power. There had never seemed to be a need before. The thunder and lightning came and went as his emotions did.

His mother’s words echoed in his mind - “You are lightning and thunder. You will be safe.” but Thor was numb. He could not bring the storm when he felt only emptiness inside of him.

**

Frigga found him on the sixth day, standing on the battlement, staring out at the devastation and the fire that burned on even when there was nothing left to destroy.

“Thor, I know that Jord and Balder have given their council on what you must do, but I come to plead on Loki’s behalf,” she said.

Thor did not look at her. He couldn’t.

The fire showed no sign of abating.

Thor had begun to hate Loki for being the cause of it.

“Loki loves you. I know he loves you,” Frigga said.

Thor laughed bitterly. Loki did not know how to love. That was clear to him now.

His mother had tried to warn him. She had wanted to protect him from this heartbreak, but Thor had been so certain of himself. He had never listened to anyone’s warnings when it came to Loki and now they were all paying the price.
“What do you know of love?” he asked. “You would not have been Queen if not for Loki. He sold you to my father, like some prize mare to be ridden. None of us would be here if not for Loki and his meddling.”

From the corner of his eye, Thor saw Frigga flinch.

His words were cruel, but Thor knew he spoke the truth. The sooner Frigga saw Loki for what he was; a grasping schemer who thought only of his own happiness, the better it would be for all of them.

“I know that Loki loves you,” Frigga repeated, defiant.

Thor shook his head.

If Loki loved him then he would have stopped himself. He would have found a way to prevent all of this. Loki had always been so clever, controlling everything and everyone. Thor had always been too in love with him to see him for what he truly was. He had accepted Loki’s deflection and lies, never wanting to scare Loki away by pressing him too hard about his past and about the magic he contained.

Now Thor hardened his heart to Loki and everything they had ever shared.

It had been six days, the fire still raged, and Thor had sworn to do his duty by his Kingdom.

“He did not want to be my father’s whore. He wanted his life to be easy and he would have used me to gain that.”

Thor had meant nothing to him. He had simply been useful. Loki would have used any of them to gain what he wanted and Thor had been the one foolish enough to fall for his charms.

Thor was not expecting the gentle hand that touched his shoulder.

“Do you really believe that?” Frigga asked quietly.
Thor hesitated, then nodded.

He had to believe it.

“And the child?” Frigga said. “Do you really believe that was simply meddling or trickery?”

Thor didn’t say anything. He couldn’t.

He stared out across the burning land, the ashes of his Kingdom and eventually Frigga left him alone with his pain.

The people flocked to the gates of the golden palace. They had lost everything. Their crops were destroyed, their homes in ruins. The food in the stores ran low and eventually Thor persuaded his mother to return to their home, to the eternal summer, and fetch provisions. He wouldn’t let his people starve.

He looked for all options, spoke to scholars and witches, consulted with the soothsayers and the storytellers, but there was no hope. Loki’s fire was unstoppable. Loki would not be able to quench himself.

The only way to end it was to end Loki.

Every day Thor visited Mjolnir. The song became stronger with each return. The hammer had already tasted Loki’s blood and now it hungered for more.

His father’s words rung in his memory, harmonizing with Mjolnir’s song. The people would demand Loki’s head now they knew what a monster he was.

Thor could be a great King. He could be a glorious king. He could destroy the evil that ravaged his
land. It would be easy with Mjolnir in his hand.

Thor had been King for nine days when he came to his decision.

He saddled his horse and took up Mjolnir.

He rode out into the flames in search of Loki and an end to the destruction.

**

Loki sat beside a clear blue lake. He had made his camp at the water’s edge. It was the only thing that couldn’t burn. The trees around the lake edge were aflame. It wasn’t anything Loki had done intentionally. His fire spread were he did.

It had been so long since he’d been wild like this. He had never known how to control himself and now it was worse. He’d spent too long in the service of mortal men. He’d had the safety of his binding.

It would have all been perfect as Loki planned it. The blood right would have passed to Thor as would the throne and Loki would have been loved. Thor wouldn’t use Loki’s power to hurt. He wouldn’t want to enslave giants or conquer land. He would want to repair the scars his forefathers had left.

Loki would bear him a child and if Thor ever left him, that child would take the blood right.

Now none of that could be.

There was no binding and Loki had caused too much devastation to be forgiven.

He turned his head at the sound of hoofbeats. He already knew it would be Thor.

Thor would be the only one who could withstand his fire. He was made of the storm.
Thor was too noble to let him ravage the land. He had given Loki as long as he could and Loki was grateful to him. He had made peace with his fate and his place in Thor’s story.

Death, Loki’s sister, had found him to tell him of Odin’s passing. She had cried her tears into Loki’s embrace, had promised him a place at her table for him and his son.

Thor rode towards him. Mjolnir dangled from his belt and on his head sat the crown of Asgard. His horse, a skittish thing, pawed at the ground but did not bolt. There was nowhere but the lake to go that was not consumed by fire.

“I knew you would come,” Loki said.

It had been inevitable.

Odin had made Loki the monster Thor had to slay to ensure his Kingship. It was almost poetic.

He waited for Thor to dismount his horse. He didn’t run. There would be nowhere he could go that Thor couldn’t find him.

“So, now you know what I am. You know why your mother fought to keep you from me. You know that I am more than any witch. You know I cannot be trusted. You know everything.”

Loki spread his hands out in front of him, laying bare his secrets. All but one. He would not tell Thor of the child. He would not bring that grief to Thor’s door.

“Loki…” Thor walked towards him hesitantly.

He was waiting for an attack, but Loki no longer had any fight in him.

“I will not fight you, Thor. I know I have done awful things. I know you cannot forgive me.”
Loki stood and turned to face the lake. It was so calm here, even with the fire raging all around them. He pressed his hands to his stomach, closing his eyes and let go of the future he had planned, the dreams he had had. He said goodbye to his child. He said goodbye to Thor.

Then Loki knelt at the water’s edge, his head bowed, awaiting Thor’s blow.

“Come,” he said. “Put out the light.”

He felt the air shiver as Thor hefted Mjolnir. It would be a clean death. One blow.

Loki was proud. He did not cry.

He heard the whistle as Mjolnir spit the air and tensed for the blow he knew was coming.

Instead, the hammer flew passed him. Thor threw it as far as he could, into the depths of the lake. A great splash of water rose up and swallowed Mjolnir. Ripples spread out across the tranquil surface of the lake as the hammer sank.

Then, there was silence.

Thor dropped to his knees. He wrapped his arms around Loki.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“Please!” Loki gasped.

He had been ready. He had prepared himself. He was ready for Death and would embrace her warmly when she came.

He had hoped Thor would show him mercy and kill him there, where there were no witnesses. Loki could not stand the thought of being paraded through the streets, of facing a public execution. He had always known people would celebrate his death, but if Thor took him back to Asgard then he would have to see their faces, he would have to see their lust for his blood to spill.
“I do not care what you are,” Thor said. “I still love you, Loki.”

“I can’t stop, Thor. I can’t,” Loki said.

He trembled in Thor’s arms, waiting for Thor to realise that this could not be undone. Loki was not something controlled. He was chaotic and the fire he had within him was as anarchic as he was.

“I know, I know,” Thor whispered. He pressed kisses into Loki’s hair, his tears mingling with the dark strands.

Loki felt the first drops of rain on his hands, clenched in the dirt. He saw them as they fell on the lake. The scent of the rainstorm was a comfort he had longed for. It was the scent of Thor.

The rain fell steadily. There was no anger in it. There was no lightning, no thunder. Just the steady drumming of rain.

“Look,” Thor said.

He tipped Loki’s head up, made him look passed the lake, to the trees that had been aflame.

The rain was quenching the fire.

“We are two halves, Loki,” Thor said. “My rain, your fire. You destroy and I will soothe. New life will come after us.”

Loki smiled, blinking back tears.

“I always knew you were my favourite,” he said.

Thor laughed softly, but his expression grew serious again.
He placed a hand on Loki’s stomach.

“You would have sacrificed this?” he asked.

Loki swallowed. “You know,” he said flatly.

“My father. He couldn’t resist telling me how I had damned not only you, but our child as well.”

“I wasn’t going to use our child to plead for my life,” Loki said. “You would have had to kill it anyway. It’s part of me, it could be another little flame.”

“You are a proud fool,” Thor said fondly. He pushed back the hair from Loki’s face and kissed him again.

Loki softened at that kiss. He had thought of nothing but Thor during the last nine days. Each time he slept, he awoke with the hope that everything had been a terrible dream and he was still in bed with Thor in Volstagg’s inn. Then he had seen the flames and known that with each house that was destroyed, each family that was left homeless, he was destroying Thor’s love for him.

He hadn’t destroyed it though. Thor was here, kissing him.

He had thrown away Mjolnir.

Loki pushed Thor away from him, breaking their kiss and looked back at the lake, at the place where the hammer had disappeared.

“Seven years I suffered for that thing and you throw it in a lake?”

Thor laughed loudly. It startled his horse who kicked nervously at the ground.

“Mjolnir is blood-thirsty. It sings to me. It told me to cleave your head from your shoulders.”
Loki nodded. That was what he’d been expecting, a swift execution by Thor’s hammer.

Mjolnir was a weapon of war and Odin had wanted a worthy son, one who could wield that power. Loki had found him that son.

Neither Loki nor Odian had not counted on Thor being stronger than Mjolnir.

“What now?” he asked, “I can’t control myself and you can’t let me go free.”

“I don’t plan to let you go,” Thor said, tightening his grip as if to reinforce his words. “I plan to give you a new binding.”

Loki nodded in understanding.

Thor was being merciful, but Loki was still an enemy of the Kingdom. There would still need to be consequences for his actions.

“A prison cell? Sending me back to the dwarfs?”

“I am going to marry you, Loki,” Thor said. “I am going to bind you to me. I will live as long as you will. I will forsake the mortal side of myself and stay with you.”

Loki took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Your crown…” he said.

Thor couldn’t do that and retain his crown. He couldn’t marry the monster that had nearly destroyed Asgard, he couldn’t make that creature his Queen.

“I never wanted to be King,” Thor said. “I only wanted you, Loki. I would have been content to live out my life on the farm, to see you once a year, as long as I got to see you, as long as you returned to
“Always,” Loki said breathlessly. “I always came back to you. I will always come back to you.”

“Good,” Thor said. He reached down to his belt, grabbing his hunting knife.

Loki froze but Thor held up his own hand. He cut deep into his palm and then offered the knife to Loki.

“Blood magic,” he said. “Let this be our wedding vows.”

Loki took the knife. It felt heavy in his grip. He dragged it across his palm, gasping as his blood bubbled up from the cut. He set the knife down in the dirt beside him.

Thor pressed their hands together, their blood mingling.

“Mine,” he murmured. “You are mine, Loki and I am yours.”

“Yours,” Loki echoed, lacing their fingers together. “I am yours and you are mine.”

He felt the sparks of magic jumping between them, their blood intermixing. They were beings of magic. They did not need spells to bind themselves together. They needed only their own words, their strength of their hearts and what came naturally to them.

Thor kissed him to seal the binding. Loki clasped his hand tightly, unwilling to ever let him go again.

“Let me take you home,” Thor said.

Loki knew he would follow Thor anywhere. He would never be parted from him again.
Thor rode back to the palace with Loki in his arms.

He rode through his people, who cheered their King and jeered the man in his embrace. Loki hid his face, unwilling to show them that their words hurt him.

Thor had refused to chain him. Loki trusted Thor. He knew he was not walking in to a trap and he would have accepted shackles and chains if it made his people feel safer, but it was a pointless exercise. Loki’s magic could not be contained by chains and he could melt through them if he wished.

An armed guard met and escorted them to the grand Hall.

Frigga was seated on the throne. In Thor’s absence, with his blessing, she had taken on the royal duties.

Loki expected her to be disgusted with him, to spurn him for the fires he had caused and the damage he had done. Instead, she rose from her throne and came to him. She hugged him.

“How do you fare? How is your child?” she asked.

Loki was not surprised that she knew. Of all people, Frigga would have been the first one he would have told. He would have wanted to assurance that his baby grew strong and healthy before he told Thor. Now that had been taken from him. Both she and Thor had learned of the child’s existence from another.

If Loki had not been so proud, so assured of his victory, that would not have been the case.

“Both of us are well, my Queen,” he answered.

Frigga smiled warmly at him. It was disorientating.

She turned her smile to Thor, nodding in greeting.
“And how are you, Thor?”

“I am abducating,” Thor said.

Frigga raised an eyebrow. It was the only hint she gave that Thor’s announcement came as a shock to her.

“It is my fault that Loki was unbound. I never wanted to be King and my actions prove that I am not worthy to be one, not when faced with the real requirements of ruling,” Thor continued. “I do not think the people will protest.”

“Who will be King?” Frigga asked.

“Balder,” Thor said. “He is a good man, a kind man and he has trained for this. He will make a excellent King.”

Frigga nodded. She allowed her smile to grow even wider and Loki could not fault her for it. Balder was her son. It was natural she had wanted this for him. Without Odin’s poisonous influence, Loki could even admit to himself that Balder might make a good ruler.

“And you, Thor, where will you go now?” Frigga asked.

“I am returning to my mother’s farm,” Thor said.

“Mjolnir?”

“Slumbers at the bottom of a lake. If you or Balder ever have need of me, I will take up Mjolnir for you and defend our lands, but for now, I have put that cursed thing somewhere safe.”

Frigga nodded again. She glanced from Thor, back to Loki.
Loki wished suddenly that he did have chains. Thor and Frigga were the only two people who he had ever regarded as friends. They had allowed him a freedom he shouldn’t have had. He should have been dragged back behind Thor’s horse, not carried in Thor’s arms like a maiden he had rescued.

There needed to be restitution. Loki could not escape without punishment.

“And Loki?” Frigga asked lightly.

“Loki is coming with me,” Thor said.

Frigga studied him hard for a moment. Then she nodded in understanding.

“He will live in exile with you as his guard. I think the people will understand that punishment,” she said.

Thor slipped his hand in to Loki’s and held it tight.

“I can think of no more fitting punishment,” he said. “Than for Loki and I to live in atonement together.”

Loki remembered when he had lain on the hillside by the back of Jord’s farm, dreaming that he could always be there. He had dreamed of a day without a King, a day without the old binding weighing on his shoulders. He had dreamed of staying with Thor in the eternal summer for as long as the world continued to turn.

Now Thor would give him that dream and it was more than Loki had ever deserved.
Six years later:

“Tell me the story about the witch and the prince again,” Vali begged.

Loki sighed. He had been trying to get his son to sleep for the better part of an hour, but Vali was filled with his father’s energy. He did not want to sleep until the sun set, and in the eternal summer of his grandmother’s lands Loki could not say when that would be.

“My sweet one, I tell you that story almost every night. Do you not want to hear another story?” he asked.

Vali shook his head.

“No, that one.”

“I want to hear that story too, Loki. It is my favourite,” Thor said.

Loki turned to look at his husband. Thor belonged in the eternal summer. It suited him far more than the stolen gold of the palace ever had. He grew more handsome with each passing year and Loki loved him more with each season if that were possible.

Thor smiled at Loki, leaning in the doorway, and Loki was tempted to forgive him for the mischief he had no doubt come to cause.

“Papa!” Vali cried happily.

He bounced from his bed and into his father’s arms.
Thor lifted him up, Vali shrieking with joy as he was lifted over Thor’s head and then carried back to his bed.

“Do you know how difficult it is to get your son to sleep!” Loki chastised him, but he tipped his head up to catch Thor’s kiss.

“Tell us your story, Loki, and that will help get this little whirlwind to sleep,” Thor said, cupping Loki’s cheek in one strong hand.

He sat on the bed next to Vali, his attention fixed on Loki.

Loki felt something catch in his throat.

He had misread all his omens, all his signs. He had thought he’d been looking for a King, but that was not why the signs had pointed him towards Thor. They had pointed him there because that was where Loki’s heart lay.

Everything had cried out for Thor because he was the only one who could contain the wildness that Loki had within him. Thor had told him true when he said they were two halves - Loki’s destruction and Thor’s resurrection. Together they were balanced and Loki had never know a calm like it.

Thor was not to be King of anything but Loki’s heart and that suited Thor just fine.

“Story!” Vali said, with all the seriousness his small body could possess.

He had Thor’s eyes - those beautiful, bright blue eyes - and Loki found he could never say no to his son or his husband. It was really rather vexing, the power they had over him. He knew he could never deny either of them.

“Well, this story begins a long time ago,” he said, settling back in his chair. “A cruel, wicked old King was pacing in his rooms. He had called the witch to read his future…”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading! I can't believe it's over, but thank you to everyone who read and supported this story.

I have a couple of little headcanons to add here that didn't fit into the story. I hope you enjoy them!

Balder did make a good king. He was known by his people as Balder the Good and Balder the Pure. Loki called him Balder the Boring as nothing exciting ever happened during his rule.

Jord slammed the door in Thor's face when he returned to the farm with Loki. She reminded him, loudly, that she had meant for him to kill Loki, not marry him. They were only allowed in when Thor softened her by talking of the grandchild Loki was carrying.

Frigga came often to visit Loki and his child.

Vali can create whirlwinds. Jord blames Loki, even though Vali is clearly taking after Thor in this respect.

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