Summary

“The Midgardians believed that a giant dragon lived below Yggdrasil, the tree which encompasses all worlds. Nidhogg, they called him, the Malice Striker. He gnawed on Yggdrasil’s roots, feeding on its life-force. Another wonderful example how humans just catastrophize and butcher the truth at their whim. If they had ever set eyes on a true dragon, held council with them, shared a tiny bit of their wondrous magic, such childish legends would never have come to be. Then again, dragons can be quite petrifying.” – Odin

In his youth, not yet consumed by jealousy and anger against his brother, Loki had a strange meeting with a seemingly reckless woman. Many years later, she returns and is introduced to him as a dragon - one of the ancient guardians of Yggdrasil - with the task of evaluating
his former crimes, and Loki finds himself facing a whole different conflict. Can he overcome the poisonous inner demon that had driven him for so long? Or will he choose to walk in shadow once more, pulling the single light that remains with him into the darkness?

Notes

_Sometimes_

_I feel lost and locked up in the jail cell in my mind_

_And I try to understand the situation_,

 _See eye to eye_

 _But sometimes –_

This is not one of the dark, power-play-heavy stories. I think they are great! It’s just not the kind of fic I write. This is a story of redemption, of seeking meaning in a seemingly shattered life. The story of how a defeated villain becomes a hero, and finds that he, against his reservations, wears that mantle well. Oh, and of course: the romance. Feels and fluff all over the place, mixed with some angst and drama… and some sexy times :>. Because Loki is Loki after all.

I have begun to write this story in 2013, shortly after Thor: The Dark World, and for reasons I don’t quite remember, I never finished it. In the meantime, I wrote original fiction, two extensive Dragon Age stories, and honed my writing skills. So, when I pulled out Lightbringer again after going to see Thor: Ragnarok, I was both shocked at my writing and stunned that I never found the resolve to see this through to the end. In the end, I think it was the harrowing events of Infinity War that made the decision for me. I took up rehaling the whole thing, determined to finish it. It’s proving to be a big undertaking, because damn was my writing… unrefined back then (fukken awful.). I don’t know if it’s so much better now, but I try. English is not my native language, so I apologize for any strange choice of words, grammar, phrases…

Rated E (Explicit) for sexual content (which is not very explicit but walks a fine line) in several chapters and many suggestive things before. Also a few (not too graphic, but still) descriptions of violence. That said…

I recently made some fanart for Lightbringer and think it turned out nicely: _The Raven Prince_ and _Light and Shadow_. You can also find me on _tumblr_. Feel free to visit me on either platform!

Come along and buckle up! Dragons know no speed limits.
I. How to Avoid a Fall

I. Prologue – How to Avoid a Fall

“Really, I have to go! I have no time to listen to your hilariously incredible stories.”, the woman chided, pulling at the waistband forcefully as she got dressed in a great hurry. She tossed her dark red hair over her shoulder and puffed out an impatient breath. The man in her bed folded his hands at his nape. He looked perfectly at ease there, smiling serenely without a care in the world.

“But you love my stories.”, he argued.

“Because you make them so real when you tell them. As if they actually happened. Which is of course impossible. And don’t try you lead me off to some wild goose-chase to the ginger-bread house, Gildran! Peter was right. You are nothing but a big tease.”, she accused him. His smile grew wider, and she cursed at herself inwardly for the rush of giddiness because he was so otherworldly handsome. Especially when he summoned that roguish glint to his mesmerizing eyes.

“It runs in the family. Come on, this story actually happened, I promise.”, he cajoled, pulling her back to the chaotic bed by the wrist. She gave an exasperated sigh. “Have I ever told you the one about the trickster and the dragon princess?”

“Alright that’s it –”, the woman protested, but he thwarted her escape quite easily.

“There once was a man who knew nothing but lies…”, he began, unfazed.

“Like you.”, she griped, only half-serious. To her astonishment, he grinned.

“What? I’m the most earnest soul alive! Now, will you stop squirming?”, he stilled her with a squeeze.

“Fine. One story. And be quick about it, I have to get the laundry later and do some serious studying –“

“Oh, I will be quick about it. You’ll be out of here in no time.” And his voice had such a distinct note of mischief in it, she knew without a doubt that she would not move from this place for the rest of the day.

On Asgard, many, many years before…

Yet another endless celebration in his brother’s honour, for the subjugation of some mighty beast or the besting of a warrior of legend. And as the many that preceded it, Loki pretended to enjoy himself. With all the magic tricks he had learned from his mother, the arcane books he’d studied, he couldn’t cast a spell on himself that made him genuinely happy for Thor. Or grant him the credit he probably deserved.

Long, richly filled tables lined the great hall, bursting with all sorts of delicacies. Guests were seated along them, enjoying themselves, partaking in the abundant festivities. Loki smiled politely at some random governor from the western riverlands, who had done little else all evening than ramble on about politics until the prince feared he would die of boredom.
Usually, he liked long discussions, for his prowess at conversation was one of the traits he held dear about himself. People often praised his eloquence, saying that he might one day talk a tiger out of its stripes. But today, the master of mischief and prince of Asgard wasn’t in the mood to talk. In fact, he wanted to flee the room and lose himself in one of his books. Just to escape this repeated show of his brother’s superiority. Always the same thing. Nothing exciting ever happened.

It was the beseeching look from his mother that made him endure the whole ordeal. Retaining a mildly bored expression, Loki let his gaze wander around the room. It passed over Thor and Sif, probably exchanging joking comments about battle skills. Fandral, of course with two maids sitting to either side, and him flashing his dazzling smile. The Allfather, looking stern but content with the events.

Not far away, at a table usually reserved for special guests, his gaze slid past a pair of eyes watching him curiously. He darted back to them. Yes, she was definitely looking at him. A willowy, elegant young woman in a flowing white dress. Loki didn’t usually look at women too closely, so he claimed no expertise about what men thought to be outstanding. Magic was something he knew very much about, and this one looked as close to magical as a woman could get.

He was momentarily stunned by her fey, vibrant beauty. Long, silvery hair fell around her shoulders in waves. The pale skin of her smooth, oval face and slender hands seemed aglow with the soft orange light from the festival lanterns. Grey eyes surveyed him, strangely ageless compared to her youthful face. She broke the taxing stare to lean over as someone next to her whispered into her ear. Her expression lit up with a smile.

Maybe he should look at women more often. There seemed to be some worthy of his attention… He shook his head slightly as if to dismiss the thought. But for some reason, he found that his eyes wouldn’t obey his command, and so all through the evening, he returned to steal fleeting glances at the silver woman, wondering why she had scrutinized him. If it was purely about appearance, Thor was a much more imposing figure to look at. Even though Loki donned his gold and green ceremonial clothes today, people would usually overlook him when his brother was around.

He turned to her direction again, yet she had disappeared. But he caught a glimpse of billowing ivory cloth slipping behind one of the pillars which marked the way to the great terrace. After a moment of hesitation, he decided that it would certainly do no harm to pursue the most interesting thing that had happened all night. And so he excused himself, following the mysterious guest.

When Loki stepped out onto the ornately fenced terrace with Asgard’s starry sky twinkling above, he froze. The woman was leaning over the balustrade in an impossible angle, swaying slightly as if she’d fall over the edge at any second. Her face alight with joy, curious and marvelling as she watched the people down in the gardens take their strolls between Frigga’s rosebushes.

“That’s dangerous.”, was all Loki could say, and he realized too late his horrible mistake. Startled and shocked, her hand slipped. If the situation hadn’t been so hazardous, he would have laughed at the strange way she fanned out her arms when she turned mid-fall, like a bird flapping its wings. Loki rushed forward and grabbed one flailing limb, his other arm wrapping around her narrow waist before she could plunge from the deadly height to the grounds below.

Touching her sent an electrifying jolt through him, as though he had been hit by Thor’s lightning strike. He became aware of several things at once in this single, brief moment: Some strange kind of magic he had never encountered before. Subtle, nearly unnoticeable, yet Loki could feel it surge inside her, probing the edges of her being, beseeching to be set free.

And then there was the pure softness of her skin. A whole different kind of thrill, but just as
unfamiliar to him. Like brushing one’s fingers across the smoothest fabric ever woven. Warm, brimming with life. Suddenly he realized he was still holding her even though the danger had long passed, but she didn’t look offended at all, rather mystified. Steady her on her feet again, he hastily let go of her. She blinked in surprise.

“Your Highness… Thank you.,” she spoke in a musical voice and curtsied somewhat awkwardly.

“What were you doing, my lady? We’re a hundred feet up. You could have broken your neck.,” he sounded too annoyed for his own taste. The young woman gazed at him with an oblivious expression, as if hearing for the first time that a hundred feet drop could be lethal.

“I was merely admiring the view, my prince.,” she defended herself innocently. Loki noted the sing-song cadence of her voice which created an odd little melody as she spoke. The words came out all stretched and rhythmic.

“It would be wise if you wouldn’t lean over the balustrade so far the next time. Maybe I should instruct you in the proper use of balustrades. If you allow me, of course.,” Loki kept his tone polite. She smiled at this and bowed down graciously. He had the distinct feeling that they had entered a game, a strange kind of dance.

“Please do. After saving my life, it would be most disrespectful of me to deny.” He stepped to the balustrade and put his hands on the cool stone, leaning forward a safe distance. She mimicked his moves, watching him closely with her unusual grey eyes.

“Am I mistaken in assuming this is your first visit to the palace?”, Loki threw her a quick sideways glance. Could there be any other explanation to why she’d be so fascinated by the gardens?

“No, you are correct, my prince.,” she answered. He turned from the spectacular view to face her.

“Would you tell me your name?”, It was a courteous, formal request. After all, Loki considered himself a gentleman, however inapproachable he may have seemed to most people. The silver woman who thought she could fly smiled at him, radiant as the sun. Something both new and yet strangely familiar stirred inside him at the sight. Against his will, his lips quirked to answer her smile.

“My name is Ljosira. It means…”, but he finished the sentence before she did.

“… born of light.”
Chapter Notes

A little note on the side:
Dragons usually refer to all non-dragons as mortals. It's the way they see them. The term 'mortal' is used for the inhabitants of all realms, even the Aesir (although they are practically gods or god-like beings). Dragons justify this by saying that they have been guarding Yggdrasil since the beginning of time and watched many empires rise and fall, realms destroy each other, even gods slay gods, while they stayed a constant. Therefore, the simple rule: All is mortal which is not dragon.

Here are some interesting translations I picked for names. I read up on all of them, there is much discussion about the meaning behind names of the gods in Norse mythology. All names in this story for Original Characters originate from old norse too.

Ljosira – Born of Light (Ljos – burning light, but also fair, bright, clear)
Thor – Thunder, the Thundering
Loki – Tangler (much debated, most likely deriving from tangle, loop, knot)
Sif – Relation, Connection
Odin – Seer, Prophet
Frigga – Beloved, Dear
Elding - Dawn

II. Dragon in Woman’s Clothing

Loki would remember this day, the day he met Ljosira, many years later. He would hold this memory of her close even as his mind slowly deteriorated to madness. Clumsy like a new-born bird, flailing her arms as if she could take flight any moment now. Fleeting, shy, innocent. As quickly as she had come, she’d disappeared after the festival, and he wouldn’t see her again until a time when he had delved so deeply into the obscurity of his own soul that he believed no light would ever reach him.

Sitting alone in his cell – or should it be called his home, for the rest of his life – serving the punishment for his countless crimes, Loki lifted his head when he heard footsteps. Two sets, one thumping and heavy, the other almost feather-light. Thor walked into view in front of the energy field, and there she was beside him, the silver woman. The only indication of his utter surprise was the way he lowered the book in his hand. She looked different than he remembered, a little older and much more serious, without the light-heartedness from when they had first met. But magic still surrounded her in a glowing aura. He had to forcibly tear his gaze away from her.

“Come to gloat, brother?”, Loki asked in a sarcastic tone. “And in front of a lady, I see.” The flash of insult in Ljosira’s eyes didn’t satisfy him as much as he hoped it would. She probably thought he had forgotten her. The pang of regret he felt at the thoughtless words shocked him. Thor ignored the cynical remark, addressing Ljosira.

“The Allfather is convinced he is dangerous and insane, but my mother still believes there is good
in him.” He gave a resigned sigh. “With great respect, I request your sight. What do you see?” Loki’s brow furrowed at the humility and deference in his brother’s voice. Ljosira stepped forward, so close to the energy wall of his cell that he could have reached out and touched her. Grey, old eyes bore into him. Knowledge and wisdom dwelled in them, the spark of truth that could unravel any lie. He held her gaze coldly, unwilling to show any sign of emotion. After a long moment of this stand-off, she relented and rubbed her temple wearily.

“Forgive me, my prince… All the magic in this place clouds my sight.”, she murmured, embarrassed. “I’m… still the youngest. I can see confusion and…” Her voice trailed away. Thor moved to put a hand on her shoulder, but at the last moment, he shied away, a strange trepidation on his face. Her slight form seemed even more fragile with his brute of a brother by her side, Loki mused.

“There is no need to apologize, ancient one. If anyone has to, it is me.”, Thor appeased her. Ancient one? There were countless ways to describe her. But the word ancient would have definitely not been on that list. Something strange was going on here.

“Who is she?”, Loki demanded, his tone harsh and unforgiving. Thor threw him a fierce look.

“You would do better to mind your manners, brother. Especially now that you are in the presence of a dragon.”, he barked.

Loki froze, emerald eyes fixed on Ljosira. A dragon. Of course he had read about the guardians of Yggdrasil, truly immortal creatures. A dragon’s lifespan was like his to a Midgardian mortal – a thousand years were merely the blink of an eye. They were such strongly magical beings that their presence would alter the very fabric of reality, therefore they took on the form of mortals on the rare occasions they chose to communicate with them.

Four dragon clans existed in all. Only the most ancient books in Asgardian libraries held their true names: Lightbringer, Darkflight, Voidwalker and Life-Binder. He had read myths about the Lightbringers and the Darkflight, who made the night turn into day and vice versa, while Voidwalkers and Life-binders maintained the delicate circle between life and death. Myths were myths, not to be taken quite literally. Yet all dragons were sworn to protect Yggdrasil, the tree whose branches sheltered all realms.

If Ljosira really was a dragon, she had to be a Lightbringer – her name meant ‘born of light’ after all. Which explained why Thor had asked her for her sight: Lightbringers were known to see the truth in all things, as their very presence chased shadows away, lifting the veil of darkness.

“You tried to fly.”, Loki said, realizing the reason behind her strange behaviour on that day so many years ago. Why she had seemed so innocent and new, like something that had just hatched. It must have been the first time she had been in her mortal form. Ljosira regarded him with bewilderment.

“You remember.” Her voice carried such an earnest hint of delight, Loki almost cringed.

“You remember.” Her voice carried such an earnest hint of delight, Loki almost cringed.

“Why are you here?”, he inquired, summoning a cold and detached expression to his face. He wouldn’t give her a chance to see behind that carefully maintained façade. She sighed and straightened, her tone suddenly formal.

“My father, known to Asgard as Elding the Dragon King, has taken interest in your latest crimes, Loki Laufeyson. He believes that your meddling and war-stirring in other realms should be judged by the Council of Dragons, although he respects the Allfather greatly. I was sent to evaluate you for trial.”
“If I’m even a thorn in the mighty dragon king’s side, maybe I have truly achieved something.”, Loki sneered, but Ljosira looked neither impressed nor angry about his open insult. She merely shrugged, and even that gesture seemed strangely unreal, as if she had studied its use improperly.

“He might not have considered himself with it at all, but he deemed it a worthy task for my rite of passage.”, Ljosira noted. Loki had almost forgotten Thor, until his brother spoke again, befuddled.

“You mean… like a coming of age?” Ljosira nodded, smiling at him. Loki’s lips pressed into a thin line. A thing he could not name reared its ugly head in him at the sight of her casual familiarity with his brother.

“We prove ourselves worthy by fulfilling a task that requires cunning and insight. Only then are we allowed in the council and can serve as guardians of the world tree.”, she explained. Thor’s brow furrowed.

“At what age does this rite of passage take place?” Ljosira seemed to think for a moment.

“If we count time as your friend from Midgard does, that would be when we turn five-thousand.” This brought a puzzled look to Loki’s impassive face. Five thousand was a long time, even for an Asgardian. For a dragon… just adolescence.

“So you are…”, Thor began, but she nodded, knowing what he would say before he finished his sentence.

“Yes, I am considered young among my brothers and sisters. Although my coming of age, as you call it, is a special occasion.”

“Does it have to do with the Convergence?”, Loki asked, intrigued.

“You know your lore, prince. Royal children are always born during the Convergence. It is the time when magic most profoundly permeates all of the realms. Therefore, we always celebrate our rite of passage on the next one.”

While she explained this, Ljosira watched Loki as one would watch a quaint bird. A creature wildly out of place in its surroundings. He was still magnificent, tall and lean, his raven black hair longer and slightly ruffled. The features of his face sharper than she remembered, though regal nevertheless. Ljosira could see the intelligence in his deep green eyes, mingling with just the smallest trace of his old, jovial mischief.

But his perceptive gaze was overshadowed by a fathomless darkness which gnawed on his soul, feeding him with anger, twisting his noble wisdom into ruthless cunning, his playfulness into insane, malicious intent. As she had told Thor, the magic inside this prison interfered with her ability to see the truth, but she had watched him for long enough to know this quite well.

“Why do you keep staring at me?”, Loki demanded with growing annoyance. He hated it to feel people’s pitying stares, like they knew he was a lost cause. Much worse than facing their scorn. A fallen prince, a monster who killed innocents, just because he craved a throne of his own. It was usually pity, or hate, or accusation. Sometimes disgust.

For an unknowable reason, Ljosira’s regard infuriated him even more. Such honesty in her eyes. Earnest, genuine. He loathed the blatant truth she held up to him like a mirror. To acknowledge it would mean to admit that all efforts to build walls of rejection and lies, to wallow in his own hubris hadn’t been enough to detach himself from everything he had ever held dear.

Then he would have to accept the fact that it had all been his fault, and an immortal being had
pityed him for the wretched creature he’d become, lashing out and mangling the hand which fed
him. And Ljosira did not avert her eyes. She stayed silent, just keeping her steady gaze on him.
Blind rage clouded his mind before he could contain it, and the contents of his room went flying.

“Stop staring at me!”, he yelled, voice distorted by hurt and anger alike. Table, chair, books and
drinking cups crashed against the energy field behind which this infuriating, hauntingly beautiful
woman stood.

Her eyes widened with shock and Loki found this so utterly nonsensical, so paradox, that he broke
into a wild laughter. Forget the fact that she was completely safe behind the barrier. Here be a
dragon. Even if in some strange, twisted situation, he’d held a blade to her throat or struck her with
powerful magic, it wouldn’t scratch her. She’d have snapped his neck before he could blink. The
thought of her being afraid of him – of *him* – it made him guffaw like a maniac.

“Maybe father was right… He has lost his mind.”, Thor uttered faintly. Ljosira shook her head and
sighed.

“No, my prince. He is mocking me.”, she corrected him. Before she turned to follow Thor out of
the dungeon, she surveyed Loki one last time. And the hurt that bloomed in her gentle eyes made
the laughter die in his throat. Then she left without another word. Once again, he was completely
and painfully alone.

Outside, in the fresh night air of the prison landing-site, Thor stopped and gazed down at Ljosira
inquisitively.

“You have met my brother before.”, he said with knitted eyebrows. It was not a question.

“Yes… Many years ago, when my father presented your father with this.”, Ljosira reached out and
placed her index finger on Mjölnir, which firmly hung on his belt. She smiled.

“I have seen it being created. It was beautiful magic, wondrous to behold. A worthy companion for
a king.”, she added with a decisive nod.

“Your words honour me.”, Thor replied, bowing to her. For a moment, her eyes shone with
something close to sadness.

“On that night, your brother did me a kindness. As I said before, it was the first time I had been in
my mortal form. I leaned over the balustrade and slipped. Inexperienced as I was, heights meant
nothing to me – flying is as natural to dragons as breathing is to you. Your brother… Loki, he
catch me before I could fall.”, Ljosira explained, a slight quirk on her lips.

“What happens when your mortal body dies?”, asked Thor curiously.

“Well, it depends on how quickly we can react. If we can shift in time, the worst case is that we
leave a part of ourselves behind with it and our power weakens to some degree. But in any case, we
are forced to manifest in our true from. Apart from the pandemonium it could have caused if a
dragon suddenly came to life right in the middle of your palace garden, my magic could have
created a lot of disturbance. We are forbidden to appear as dragons here. Loki didn’t know it back
then, but he saved Asgard – and me – a lot of trouble.” She wore an apologetic expression, but
Thor saw worry in it too.

“In this process… your brother had to touch me. You may know, for I am certain the Allfather has
told you many stories about dragon mythology, that Loki broke an unwritten rule by doing so, although he doesn’t know it to this day. Young dragons are impressionable. They form life-bonds by touch and share magic between their kin, in such strengthening the links that tie us together. Right now, I feel all my family’s presence back home on Yggdrasil. The bond makes sure we are protected. It happens instinctively, and only when we complete our rite of passage, we learn to control it. But the bonds we make are for life. Of which we have a very, very long one.”, Ljosira lifted her hand while speaking and examined it as though she had never seen it before.

“When your brother touched me to save me from falling, he crossed a forbidden boundary: He formed a life-bond, man to dragon. A little of my magic seeped into him, while a small part of him was woven into the fabric of my being. Since he always had a talent for sorcery, he never noticed the increase of his powers. I, on the other side... became an oddly sentimental dragon, susceptible to things we shouldn’t concern ourselves with too much. A little too mortal.” Thor could see a hint of melancholy on her youthful face.

“I knew it is forbidden to touch a young dragon, but my father never explained to me why. Most Asgardians may be under the impression that the unrestrained magical power would simply... well, explode into one’s face.” This earned him a wide-eyed, shocked look from Ljosira.

“That’s... a dreadful thing to say! We guard magic, we don’t use it to blow mortals up...” Thor couldn’t refrain from laughing wholeheartedly at her aghast expression.

“Now you are mocking me too. I should strike you down where you stand!” Her words were empty of all severity, lips twitching with a barely contained smile as she spread her arms in an overly dramatic gesture. Thor, yelping down another laugh, raised his hands in defence.

“I wouldn’t dare, ancient one.” Carefully avoiding to touch her bare skin, he helped her into the sky-striker, then grabbed the stirring handle casually. A moment later, they flew off towards the palace. Asgard’s gleaming gold towers rushed past, rising high into the clouds like polished swords.

“Is it dangerous for you? The bond with Loki.”, Thor inquired after a time of silence. Ljosira watched radiant gardens and delicate rows of houses on rolling hillsides pass by below.

“Not in a sense you might associate with danger, my prince.”, she answered enigmatically. Thor had the impression she didn’t want to say more, so he decided not to press the issue, instead addressing another one.

“I wish you would stop calling me that.”, he complained.

“Why so? My father instructed me to follow your world’s customs, as a sign of courtesy.”, Ljosira asked with raised eyebrows.

“It strikes me as wrong, being spoken to as though you were beneath me. Please call me Thor.” He looked a little uncomfortable.

“As you wish, Thor.”, she smiled at him. With the warm feeling that she had made a friend in Asgard already, the task of her rite of passage did not seem quite so daunting anymore.
III. The Life-Bond

Chapter Notes

These first few chapters are so... meh... I don't even. I guess to hold a reader, the beginning of a story is very important, but when you write them, it's actually the other way around. You start with an idea and it usually takes a few chapters until you figure out what you even want to do. I eased into the plot and needed some time to get it going... Also this first part of the plot takes place in the timeline between the Avengers and Thor: The Dark World, which was quite fiddly and clunky to align in the first place.

Also this whole beginning may seem quite formal, with all the titles and respectful or careful speech, but it will get more casual with time.

Alright, enough grumbling XD

Translations:
Heimdall - The One Who Illuminates the World
Vegr - Glory, Honour, Journey
Natta - Become Night

III. The Life-Bond

The palace landing-site stood deserted and silent at this time of the evening. Ljosira had arrived long after night-fall, but the swirling, shifting nebulae in Asgard’s sky cast a faint light even when it was darkest. She had loved Asgard ever since she had first looked upon it from Yggdrasil, when she’d been nothing but a freshly hatched dragonet.

She had told Thor that connections between mortals and dragons were forbidden, yet as to every rule, there are sometimes exceptions. With the blessing of the Dragon King, one of her brothers had once forged a life-bond with an Asgardian. In it lay the power of a Lightbringer’s unerring sight. Her oldest brother Vegr’s rite of passage had been to seek a worthy one among the Aesir, honouring them as the realm which maintained peace between the Nine.

As a mere child, Ljosira witnessed how Heimdall came to be the Gatekeeper of the Bifröst. She saw time pass and Thor be born, a beautiful, strong child with golden hair and eyes bluer than the sky. And she watched Loki’s arrival, felt the magical potential in his small form, and the love with which Frigga cared for him. But as they grew, the chasm between them opened wider the more it became clear how different they were.

Two brothers who were not brothers by blood. Thor ventured out into the world, gathered mighty warriors as his friends. Always confident, strong and undeviating about his place on Asgard’s throne. A true crown prince, like a mighty thunderstorm. But too impulsive, too much of a temper.

Loki, on the other side, grew to be a solitary, sinuous man. Devoted to knowledge and magic, but unable to step out of his brother’s over-towering shadow. Bitterness consumed him, one ounce at a time. He put so much effort into keeping people at a distance, just to drown in isolation in return. Doubt crept in, and inferiority began to twist the fraternal love for Thor into hatred, jealousy.
Until those treacherous sentiments finally spawned a demon he couldn’t hope to control. He could have turned back after bringing the Jotun to Asgard during the crowning. By then, their connection had already been created, her gaze never able to trail too far. The awareness of the other was an ever-present constant, a solid thing braided into the soul.

And then came what had to come from Loki’s misguided mind. As Ljosira stepped through the vast palace entrance hall, with the Allfather seated on a throne at the far end, she remembered that day. The day when Thor battered Mjölnir against the Bifröst until it burst apart.

Seated on Yggdrasil’s shimmering, star-banded branch, she watched Asgard with growing worry. A giant pair of wings closed in on her, but she didn’t break her gaze, the pull too strong. The bond trembled with apprehension and the sense of calamity. Loki was in danger. At such times, it became overwhelming – for its prime purpose had always been to protect.

“You were missed at the meeting.”, Elding the Dragon King landed on a branch beside her. Huge and imposing even for a Lightbringer, he seemed to glow with a soothing light, the hue of a rising dawn. Eight horns crowned his great head.

“But it is no secret were to find you when you go missing. You are watching over Asgard again.” It wasn’t a question. “What do you see?” Her father did not truly need an answer, but this was his way of teaching his children to look beyond.

“I see brother turn against brother.”, Ljosira answered sadly. Elding heaved a large sigh. Somewhere on one of the Nine Worlds, the sun’s light flickered and waned for just a moment.

“The bond you have with this mortal… It does you no good, my little one. Still you watch him, firming the connection.”, he said in a weighty voice. Elding knew that none of them could be blamed for the creation of the life-bond.

Neither had Loki known what he’d done by grabbing her hand, nor did Ljosira have a choice if she wanted to spare Asgard a disturbing incident. She’d never told her father, but she doubted that she could have shifted from her mortal form quickly enough. Especially the first time, young dragons had difficulties with the process of shifting, for such magic was powerful and complex. Though Ljosira would never know for sure… it was possible Loki had saved her from more than a trespass on draconic law that day.

“You strengthened his affinity to magic. A pity you didn’t cast out the darkness that lurks in his soul. He is drowning in it.”, her father mused, turning his gaze to the Bifröst. Loki was harnessing its energy to send a destructive beam through Jotunheim, while Thor struggled to talk sense into him without success.

“You don’t want to intervene?”, Ljosira looked at him with worry. Elding’s eyes shifted farther away, deeper into Asgard.

“No. Odin will handle it.”, he then answered evenly, his tone calm. They watched the brothers’ desperate fight, the screams full of hatred they hurled at each other, while both men waged a whole different war within the boundaries of their minds.

Thor was now hammering the Bifröst so viciously, the thunderous blows echoed along Yggdrasil like the shiver of some giant beast. His aura overflowed with misery and sorrow and anger. When Ljosira tried to read Loki, she recoiled from the mess of confusion, self-loathing and blind lust for
Even her Lightbringer’s sight couldn’t disentangle the maze-like chaos of his thoughts. It pained her to see him like this, so utterly lost and hopeless. When Thor’s mutilation of the world-bridge continued until the crystal pathway began to crack and splinter, Ljosira jolted up.

“What is he doing?”, she asked, alarmed. Thor just wouldn’t stop. If this went on –

“If he destroys the Bifröst, Loki can’t go through with his plan to eradicate Jotunheim.”, her father explained.

Not an instant later, Thor succeeded. The rainbow bridge broke into pieces, rained down in countless iridescent shards. Together with Loki, he was flung from the shattered remains. But Elding’s sight proved right, as always: Odin had awoken and come to rescue his sons.

As they dangled from the Allfather’s spear, Ljosira felt a sharp pain tear through her great heart: The devastating realization when Loki understood his failure. He had not gained his father’s approval. Only unending scorn for his folly. Once again, he walked blinded, imprisoned in the delusion of his own making. It clutched his sanity without mercy. Nobody had ever needed truth more desperately than this foolish trickster.

Loki’s hand slipped down the spear. And then… he let go. Plummeted into the darkness. Before she could stop herself, Ljosira let out a roar. Her infuriated dragon cry rang on and on in the void between the worlds. She shot from Yggdrasil’s branch, but her father’s giant, shimmering body blocked her way.

“He brought this upon himself!”, Elding hissed angrily.

“Father… please!”, she pleaded, trying to dart around him, anxious and frightened because she felt her awareness of him slipping away from her, thinning until it was nothing but a gossamer thread. Elding’s expression softened when he saw the sorrow on her draconic features.

“If you save him now, and he turns to evil again, you make this our issue. Then his judgement falls into the hands of the dragon-flights. And you will have to present his case to the council.” With a thorough, piercing look at his daughter, Elding moved to the side. She gave him a hasty, affectionate nuzzle, before she dropped into the deep like a swooping bird.

“Thank you, father.”, Ljosira formed the words in her mind as she rapidly gained on Loki, who was tumbling from the edge of the world. Violent eruptions of magic shook the air, discharging with deafening cracks of thunder. The destruction of the Bifröst had created an imbalance which now tore at the fabric of reality. More than once Ljosira was flung around by outlandish currents threatening to throw her off course.

Only her grim determination to reach Loki kept her going. Thank the heavens he was already unconscious and didn’t witness how she managed to rush past and catch him. By a hair’s breadth, before he hit the nether. A tremendous shiver of relief skittered along her spine. A close call, so horribly close. Her wings flailed against the unhinged arcane storm as she climbed upwards again.

They had travelled much too far, much too quickly. Time and space were unstable between the worlds, especially further away from the steadying energy of Yggdrasil. One could fly into a distortion and emerge at the other end of the universe.

Jagged rocks and strange formations floated around her in dead space, lifeless chunks of a long shattered planet. Ljosira landed on one of them to compose and regain her orientation. She looked
down at Loki, limp in the firm clutch of her front claw, his head lolling. He looked strangely young when rage did not distort his features.

Just as she looked up and glimpsed Yggdrasil in the distance, a rock formation shifted. Ljosira had been too preoccupied, too focused on catching Loki to see. One of the rocks wasn’t a rock at all. But some giant, otherworldly monster which made its home in the deepest shadows. Its skeletal spine wound through the void, abysmal jaws opening with an eternal hunger. Fear swallowed her beneath an unstoppable tidal wave. Partly mortal, partly childish instinct. Together, they drove her to make a mistake she would regret for the remainder of her long, long life. She fled.

Her grip slackened Loki’s body slipped from her hold, hitting the ground with a thud. Too late she saw that she had lost him. The worm-like monster coiled and bolted after her, as though she had ignited a radiant flare in a room full of light-sensitive predators. As fast as her wings would carry her, Ljosira flew on until she almost collided with a great black shape. Onyx claws grabbed and balanced her. The next moment, she found herself looking into the sharp draconic features of Natta, the Darkflight leader.

“How did you come to venture into the Chitauri quarantine?”, Natta inquired harshly, sounding worried.

“I… I lost something. I need to go back!”, Ljosira’s mind was reeling, her wings as frantic as a trapped bird’s. She had left Loki behind in that dreadful place! By all that was holy, how could I have done such a horrible thing to him?! But Natta gripped her between relentless claws.

“I cannot let you do that! It’s too dangerous. I shall escort you back into your father’s realm.”, she stated in a voice that didn’t allow protest. And the princess of dragons had no choice but to obey, although every fibre in her being revolted with denial.

Ljosira came to a halt in front of Odin’s throne, trying hard not to dwell on the events of the past too much. She could not allow her emotions to cloud her judgement now. The confession of this mistake still lay before her – to admit it had been her responsibility that Loki had turned to evil again. It seemed like some kind of twisted joke.

The task Elding had given her to evaluate Loki for trial was both a punishment and a gift in the light of recent developments. Instead of casting the shadows out as she’d been supposed to, she had brought more darkness unto both Loki and Midgard. The human realm had suffered from her error dearly. So many lives lost… But she still had a chance to set it right again.

“Ancient one, Princess of Dragons, now that you have looked upon Loki, can you better judge his crimes?”, Odin inquired, rising to bow his head in her presence. Ljosira took a deep breath.

Head high, chin up, shoulders back. You are a dragon. When you admit fault, you need to keep your pride. Failure and defeat are not necessarily partners in crime. Don’t forget that., her father had said.

True. I have failed, but I have not been defeated yet.

So, she recounted the memory of that day when the Bifröst was destroyed to the Allfather, for her
kind did not lie. He listened patiently. As did Frigga and Thor, both standing still as statues to his right.

“Therefore it is with great sorrow and regret that I apologize for my mistake. My failure has brought so much trouble and weight upon your shoulders, Allfather.”, she concluded, dropping her gaze to the perfectly polished golden floor-tiles. Odin stepped to her, his austere features softened now.

“I do not blame you for what happened.” Ljosira lifted her eyes to meet the Allfather’s single one.

“You do not?”, she asked in surprise.

“You had no obligation to save my son, but you did. Even a dragon could not have predicted the strange, dangerous currents that night. You did not drop Loki in Chitauri space on purpose. And even if all had been your fault – which it was not – Loki had a choice. He chose to side with evil again.”, Odin went on.

“With respect, Allfather… Something about this whole affair doesn’t seem right. I have… an apprehension.”, Ljosira’s ventured, her brows knitting in concern.

“Please speak, ancient one.” It was Frigga who had stepped forward, her motherly features alight with hope.

“My Darkflight brethren banished the Chitauri a long time ago. Their abilities to corrupt and consume mortal’s minds were deemed dangerous, their hunger for destruction something we wished to keep from being unleashed. The staff they gave Loki…”, she paused to raise her hands and conjured a mental image of the weapon. It shimmered blueish-white, the blade-like curve cradling a vortex of whispering energy. The royal family stared at it as one would stare at a poisonous snake.

“… this is a weapon as formidable as they come – the magic inside it feeds from conflict, doubt, from the deepest and most unspeakable desires. One could say it’s alive, has a mind of its own and twists others to do its bidding. The wielder might think he is in control, when the exact opposite is the case. If Loki thought he had mastered the staff, he was gravely mistaken.” The image above her hands dissolved into countless tiny specks of light. She exhaled a soft breath.

“I fear… he was overcome by the weapon’s power. Corrupted by whatever lives inside. And when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you. It’s a Midgardian saying.”

“And a true one at that.”, Odin nodded with grudging approval. Frigga put her hands together, an unveiled plea in her eyes.

“Does this mean he can still be redeemed? Can the darkness be purged?” A mother’s resolute devotion rang in her voice. Ljosira shifted nervously under that pervasive gaze. The stress and her own doubts made her fumble, uncertain.

“I… I cannot compete with my father’s light, or my brothers’ vision. I’m still the youngest… Right now, I can’t tell… The magic in the prison clouds my vision…”, she stuttered. Thor put a large hand on his mother’s shoulder.

“You’re making her nervous, mother. She’s only four-thousand-something old. Don’t pressure her with high hopes.”, the crown prince said gently. Frigga’s expression turned apologetic, but Ljosira’s yearning to reassure her somehow granted a great deal of confidence.

“If… you’d let me talk to him alone… Maybe allow me into the cell? I could see much better if the
barrier wouldn’t interfere, if I could –”, she proposed guardedly.

“No. He could hurt you.”, Thor cut her short at once, but Ljosira shook her head.

“What can he do? He only has lies left. And I can see through those. Hopefully.”, she argued with a good measure of self-irony.

“What about the life-bond? If he tries to exploit it –“, Thor interjected again. He reminded Ljosira so much of her older brothers. Very protective, hating the thought that harm could befall her under his watch.

“Thor, do not let her looks fool you. She is much stronger than you think. Besides, Loki has no knowledge of the bond.”, Odin settled the disagreement firmly.

“I need time. The rite of passage is very important to me – even more so now that it involves this task. I promise to do my best.”, Ljosira managed to infuse her voice with determination, although in truth she felt anything but confident. Frigga and the Allfather exchanged a long, thorough look, before they both nodded.

“Take all the time you need, ancient one. You may visit Loki’s prison freely. But let us first assess the situation a little better, before you enter his cell. Also I must tell you that I won’t allow it to go on if he harms you in any way. The Dragon King would have my head, and he is too old a friend to refuse him a request.”, Odin said, an odd blend of foreboding and amusement on his features.

“My dear wife will show you to your quarters. Please feel free to use them as long as you like.”

Ljosira thanked the Allfather and bowed to him respectfully before following Frigga out of the throne room. The mother who had raised Thor and Loki was a gentle, kind woman, and equally strong and determined. But a deep sadness permeated her aura, so clearly visible as if it had been imprinted onto her very skin.

The two women didn’t speak as they passed through the dozens of winding hallways and corridors, all lined with motionless guards. Ljosira slowed her steps when she was led past a great double-door adorned in emerald green, gold and onyx ornaments. Frigga noticed her hesitation.

“These were Loki’s quarters…”, she said thoughtfully, walking to stand next to Ljosira. “Can you still sense his presence?” The Lightbringer nodded.

“Yes. Most often, it is a subtle thing which rarely raises its voice… rather a reminding whisper.”, her words trailed away, a sense of embarrassment lingering instead. It felt strangely… private to describe this. But Frigga looked intrigued, almost urging her to continue.

“What do you see now?”, she asked quietly. Ljosira eyed the great doors, exhaled, and tried to see beyond, the way her father had taught her.

“He lived here for most of his life. A sanctuary where he doesn’t have to… pretend.” Frigga let out a sigh and inclined her head. The words did not seem to surprise her, rather confirmed an educated guess.

“Would it help… if you could look around?”, the queen proposed.

“It may…”, Ljosira mused uncertainly. But before she had made up her mind, Frigga pushed down the gilded door-handle and they stepped into the darkened quarters.

The night sky glimpsed through the wide balcony which took up most of the room’s opposite side.
Long green curtains hung from the high ceiling, gently billowing in the breeze. Several pillowed armchairs and an elegant settee stood arranged in a perfect half circle around the impressive fireplace. The mantle was hewn from smooth dark marble.

Statues and trinkets rested on raised plinths, a diverse collection of strange artefacts with unknown purpose. Bookshelves towered so high into the room they seemed to disappear into darkness. Ljosira approached some smooth lamps from milky glass. They lit up welcomingly.

Everything had been put into meticulous order. Except Loki’s desk – which was the only thing in the room indicating any chaos, yet at the same time it proved to be the most impressive part of it. Open books, scribbled notes, used quills, keys and other, less obvious objects were scattered across the ebon wood. Each emitted a faint residual magic. The desk itself was a masterwork of carpentry: Inlaid with beautiful carvings, while leaving the workplace plainly empty of decoration, polished to a gleam.

“He loved this desk.”, Ljosira mumbled to herself. “Stories and sorcery. Tales where battles are won by wit and cunning, not brute strength. Riddles to keep him company.” As if breaking from a trance, her eyes flickered to the queen. Frigga smiled.

“You seem to know him just from looking at these things.”, she mused.

“A Lightbringer’s sight is a great gift… and a heavy burden. I might often see things I wish I hadn’t.”, Ljosira said with a hint of sadness in her voice. To demonstrate what she meant, she reached out and pulled one of the books closer – a small tome with heavy, dark runes on its navy cover. Inside, they found a detailed history of the Jotunheim war, flanked by enchanted illustrations.

“This… it feels heavy. Weighted by doubt and anger. He read it, but loathed it at the same time.”, Ljosira told the queen, closing the book again with a sigh. Frigga’s gaze was still trained on it, but she seemed to be in deep thought.

“My son was beyond reason at the end… I couldn’t make him see the truth. He tried so hard not to believe it, until even my words weren’t capable of reaching him.”, the queen said, sadness clear in her voice.

“You should not blame yourself for what he has become. I doubt he wanted to see the truth. Sometimes it is easier to turn away from it and welcome the lie.”, Ljosira said regretfully. When she turned her head, she glimpsed a second door, almost hidden by the gloom. Directly adjacent to Loki’s study, it had to be his bedroom. A strange chill went down her spine.

Against her will, she wondered what his bed looked like. Probably grand and wide, draped with soft sheets woven from highlands thread. And the silver fur of mountain wolves, as it would suit a prince. Had he tossed and turned during restless nights, lain awake after nightmares, prowled the shadows between shards of moonlight? Realizing that she had been staring for an unreasonable amount of time, Ljosira cleared her throat.

“My queen, would you mind escorting me to my chambers? The day has taken its toll…”, she mumbled, battling the blush that crept to her cheeks. If the queen had noticed, she didn’t show, and Ljosira was much too flustered to dwell on it. Frigga led her from Loki’s quarters and into her own, just one door further down the hall.

As a child, she had begged her father to visit Asgard in mortal form. All the beautiful things people could create – delicate stitching on the plush chairs of her room, curtains made from the smoothest silk, a mirror circled by silver and gold flowers, vibrant tapestries depicting scenes from Asgardian
In contrast to Loki’s quarters, hers didn’t have a fireplace, but rather a giant, metal pan in which smokeless embers radiated a pleasant heat. Lightbringers loved heat. Legends told that within each of them burned an incandescent sun. It was, in a way, true. And also the reason why they hated cold and bleak places.

Ljosira marvelled at the loving detail inside the smallest things of her quarters. Even the floor tiles were inlaid with all sorts of colourful mosaics. Her impressive four-poster bed’s drapes were embroidered with such a life-like scenery of birds and flowers, she ran her fingers across the stitching in awe. After bidding the queen good-night, Ljosira changed into a nightgown laid out for her. The Aesir had always been hospitable towards dragons, to the point that they took insult if their special guests tried to do any menial little task on their own.

She pulled back the heavy white furs, the satin sheets, the peculiarly shaped pillows, and slipped beneath the blankets. Sleeping as a mortal was the strangest thing – dreams were vivid and emotional, much blurrier than a dragon’s dreams. She was plunged into a nightmare immediately. Loki stood on a field of rubble and chaos. She saw him grab the life-bond that tied them together with his hands, like a solid, thick rope. Then it morphed into a snake, coiling around his body and strangling him.

Ljosira cried out in horror, rushing to rip the murderous creation off him, to keep it from crushing his spirit. And she could feel his agony, feel him dying, while he cursed her for ever letting something like this happen, right down to his last breath. His words, distorted by hatred and wrath, hurt more than any wound he could inflict – he rejected and despised the very thing that had made her fond of Asgard and the mortals in the first place.
IV. Skirmish

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the kudos! They are always welcome <3
I had not really expected them, because we are just edging our way to the interesting parts. I will upload these first 5-6 chapters quite quickly, so I can get to where the real fun starts!

IV. Skirmish

Ljosira woke with a jolt, the last notes of her terrified yell still on her lips, panting rapidly and drenched in sweat. She curled up and buried her face in her hands, drawing a rattling breath. What was she going to do? If she failed in bringing Loki back… in casting out the darkness – assuming there was any at all, and he was not simply insane – the Council might deny her rite of passage, and even decide to execute him. And what if he really hated her when he found out about the nature of the life-bond? Her reckless rescue mission had caused all of this mess in the first place.

Unable to sleep with these troubling thoughts, the nightmare still chilling her bones, she flung the sheets aside and stood up to pour water from a crystal carafe into a matching glass. She drank absently, peering through the curtains into the starry sky. The dead of the night, when darkness ruled absolute.

What really drove her to do it, she would later not know – if it was the bond, or the nightmare, or simply some part of mortal sentimentality – but she dressed quickly and left her quarters. Nobody bothered her when she hurried through the palace to the landing-site, boarding a sky-striker. She’d always puzzled over how to navigate these fickle vehicles – but a bit of persuasive magic did the trick. The prison was oddly empty of guards, except for two very tired ones who were about to doze off when they saw her approach. They let her pass without a second guess – she had clearance after all.

Ljosira came to halt in front of his cell. Loki seemed to be sleeping on a narrow cot. She stepped closer to the barrier, until she was less than an inch away from it, able to see his face clearly. For a small eternity, she just stood and watched him, thinking about that brief touch they had shared so many years ago. Mortals had unusually sensitive skin – they could feel a thousand facets where a dragon’s scales could not. Dragons experienced touch differently. A near impossible sensation to describe. They touched through minds, thoughts, emotions, on a level beyond the physical.

Yet Ljosira remembered very clearly how his long, slender fingers had closed around hers and he had pulled her against his body. Strong for his stature, muscular but nimble, like a willow tree. What an unfamiliar, new sensation it had been. Stunned and mystified, she’d been unable to move beneath the array of images and emotions the newly woven connection had shown her.

His hands… were a whole other thing. Ljosira had watched them create delicate magic, the hands of a skilled musician playing his favourite instrument. Elegant, cultured… yet with passionate determination. Not knowing where it came from, she wondered what they would feel like on her bare skin. Not to save her from falling, but trying to weave an entirely different spell. A shudder went through her and she felt the tiny, delightful prickles run along her arms, her spine... What was
that? Anticipation, anxiety, both? She had no word to define the sensation that surged through her, for she had never felt it before.

“I doubted you would return after what happened.”, Loki’s voice almost made her flinch. To be a dragon right now!, she lamented. The faces of mortals showed emotion much too easily. His deep green eyes were open, taxing Ljosira suspiciously. His expression seemed calm, but guarded.

“Why?”, she asked. Loki threw her an arrogant smirk and sat up, crossing his arms.

“I was under the impression that I had scared you. Or succeeded in chasing you away.”, he drawled. To his surprise, she matched his disdainful smile with just as much scorn.

“You would like that, would you not? Mighty, terrible Loki, who makes even dragons cower in fear. What a cowardly dragon it must be, to be frightened of me! Something along those lines, is it?” The barely contained sarcasm in her voice made his grin falter.

“Did you come to mock me? I’d just like to know, because mocking never gets old. It seems to be a frequent visitor since I was put here.”, he uttered with a fake sigh. Ljosira had to hand it to him – he was an excellent actor. But she did not intend to be part of his audience, yet he kept holding on stubbornly to his little tricks and lies. It made him a pitiful figure in her eyes.

“Mocking is a mortal invention I have no use for. Must there be a reason to why I am here?” She knew she was straying dangerously close to deception, but father would forgive her for this one – Loki didn’t need to know her reasons while he openly insulted her.

“There is a reason for everything.”, he simply said, and for the first time his voice wasn’t filled with contempt or offense.

“Maybe you have already evaluated me as you were supposed to, and now come to take a last look before you… I don’t know how dragons execute prisoners – bite my head off?” he continued, almost amused.

“You may be misjudging all numbers of things. First of all, aiming to bite off a head is almost impossible – the jaws are too big. Maybe if I were Darkflight… they are smaller. Secondly, I am not the one to carry out your judgement. I am rather a neutral advocate.”, she explained.

“What do I even get an advocate? Lightbringers see truth in all things. Can you not easily see if I am guilty by looking at me? Not that it’s much of a question, anyway…”, Loki mused. Ljosira couldn’t help the twitch of her lips.

“If it isn’t a question, then why do you ask?”, she retorted. At her words, a look of surprise fleeted across his face, followed by something that looked like curiosity. She was bright, this one. Why are you even surprised?, his reason mocked. Torchbearer, living sun, the people called them. It had been a long time since he had talked to anyone remotely interesting. Had the chance to spar with words, engage in a duel of wits. And she would likely be a formidable opponent.

“No reason.”, he lied. This made her chime a laugh. A strange sensation fluttered and swooped in his chest at the sound, as though a little bird zoomed around there without rest. He dismissed it as part of the entertaining banter they were having. But he could not quite ignore the way her face lit up when she smiled, how her hair looked a little ruffled from sleep, how she had failed to put on her robe properly and it had slipped just a bit, revealing a perfect patch of snowy white skin on her shoulder.

“You get an advocate because the circumstances of your case are… unclear.”, she answered
calmly, prowling the length of the barrier.

“There is nothing unclear about it. I joined forces with an army of aliens to rule Midgard as a benevolent god!” he exclaimed, his temper close to the surface as so often these days. Ljosira kept something from him. She eluded, holding a crucial part of information out of his reach. Suddenly the playful air from before vanished and she spun around to glare at him with a ferocity that would have silenced braver men than him.

“Do *not* lie to me, trickster!”, her voice had dropped low. Deep and menacing now, almost a growl. A dragon’s voice. The aura in his cell changed within an instant. Lights started to flicker, the ground rumbled. Unrestrained magic pressed down on his lungs, making it hard to breathe.

“Why did you make the deal with the Chitauri?”, she snarled at him. Loki had taken it a step too far with the dragon’s patience, and he knew. The next thing he’d say could very well be the last words of his life.

“Why do you keep avoiding every question I ask?!”, some foolhardy impulse drove him to counter nevertheless.

Now *I am going to die*, he thought. *Pile of ash scattered to the wind*. Loki saw a flash of unspeakable anger flicker in her eyes, and he recoiled, expecting the death-blow that was sure to come. Only it never did. Instead, her shoulders sagged and her divine fury vanished, replaced by something he couldn’t grasp: It looked like a sad kind of regret.

“Because you are not asking them right.”, Ljosira said quietly. This staggered him. She had just turned away and was about to leave, when Loki’s voice, bereft of its usual velvet arrogance, made her stop.

“Wait.” Not more than a whisper. She paused, but didn’t move otherwise, just kept standing there, looking sternly into the opposite direction. “I am still alive.”, he added, sounding incredulous.

“It would seem so.”, she sighed, a thread of defeat in her voice. Loki leaned against the wall above the barrier, trying hard to puzzle out what she might be thinking. Her demeanour did not lack for emotion, yet he was even further away from understanding her intentions than before.

“Do you wish that I was not?”, he asked in earnest, almost gently. Ljosira lifted her head as if the prison’s ceiling held the answer and gave it a slight shake, before her perceptive grey eyes found his.

“I wish you would stop looking at me like I’m your enemy.” The sincerity ringing in her words left him speechless.

And then she was gone before Loki could gather his wits. In the silence that followed, he sank back onto his cot, dropping his hands to his knees limply. Confusion and reason fought each other on the eternal battlefield of his mind.

What else was he supposed to see in her, other than an enemy? Anything beyond would require some measure of trust, a thing he avoided with great care. Secrets, lies and distance, those he knew well. Distance was good, because it made him unpredictable. Convenient and necessary, when one needed to hide the convoluted maze of one’s soul.

But could he really keep up that act? Part of the problem was of course her being a Lightbringer – which made tricking her a near impossible task. Her kind did not lie. He would really be brought to trial in front of the dragon council. And despite the Midgardian’s beliefs that Aesir were immortal
gods, Loki knew very well that he could die by the hands of a mightier creature just like anybody else. A very likely possibility.

It had not been the wisest course of action to agitate and insult his advocate. She had seen right through him, and still he had attempted to deceive her. Loki had a nagging feeling that was the reason he tried so hard to push her over the edge, because he had already lost the battle of shutting her out even before it had begun. He could not hide from her.

The fact that his efforts were seemingly fruitless only made everything worse. So did the tiny voice in his head speaking with maddening certainty: You can trust her. Where did it come from, that whisper? But as soon as he formed that thought a much more sinister and gleeful voice would pipe up: Yes! Pretend you trust her – with the powers of a dragon, we will be invincible!

Loki buried his head in his hands, a tremble running through him. Was that really him? Would he really have pondered the possibility of such a risky scheme? For some time now, a dreadful apprehension had been growing in his mind. People all around him may have thought him mad, but he’d always been quite confident about his sanity. Only now he wasn’t sure anymore.

Sometimes he would act or think in a way that repulsed him, as though a darker version of him gripped control and wrenched it out of his hands. Until now, he had brushed it off as manifestations of rage. Anger was his most faithful companion.

What if you are wrong?, doubt inquired persistently. What if you really are going mad? The sudden urge to confide in someone, to seek reassurance that he was not insane, caught him unaware.

Ljosira’s face appeared in front of his inner eye, and for an instant all other turmoil went silent. The stillness felt so hauntingly liberating.

I wish you would stop looking at me like I’m your enemy. Where does one pick up when one has never tried to trust? What came so easily to others now seemed a most daunting task to him. Because you are not asking them right. Yes, he could be more polite. Less offensive. Maybe even friendly. It would be a start. Loki stretched out on his bed again, hoping while he fell asleep that he hadn’t chased the dragon princess away for good this time.

After spending the rest of the night tossing and turning in her bed, Ljosira decided to take a quiet stroll through the palace gardens the next morning. Loki would do well to stew in his confinement, at least for a few hours. He deserved punishment for making her so angry, she convinced herself.

No Lightbringer liked being lied to, but most people merely accepted that as an absolute fact without thinking about it. They just never attempted to deceive. Loki, who was too clever for his own good, knew that in reality her anger’s source lay in the insolent belief that she wouldn’t see through his lie. And the other thing… He had actually thought she would kill him.

Ljosira exhaled in an exasperated way as she sat down in a pavilion surrounded by rose-bushes. Ivy leaves climbed along the light, carved wood, shivering from the cool breeze. How can I make him trust me?, she brooded. Instinct assured her that evil and madness had not claimed him yet. There was confusion, anger, hurt… Many sentiments which, if uncontrolled and tangled, could appear as madness.

Lost deep in thought, a sudden rustling sound startled her. Lady Sif and Fandral were striding through the garden, but they didn’t seem to notice Ljosira, protected from their view inside the pavilion. She had always liked Sif – despite never watching her as closely as Loki or Thor, the
mighty shield-maiden of Asgard was not unknown to her. A fierce, brave woman who kept her feelings well restricted. Her aura gave her away though. Ljosira glimpsed jealousy woven into it. A bright orange thread, imprisoned by cool blue self-control. On closer inspection, a dull, dark anger became barely visible beneath it, and something else. Not as easily discernible, hidden under layers of rationalization: Wounded pride.

Pride was complicated – the edges were smooth, braided with other emotions, forming strange connections which required a dragon’s sight to untangle them. Much like pulling things caught in a net out of it. Ljosira had learned a great deal about the perception of pride in auras while she had observed Loki. When bordering on arrogance, it was a sickly yellow-green hue. Without the taint of dishonesty, in its pure form, it sparkled like an emerald forest. And broken pride, the way it had manifested after his defeat on Midgard… it turned muddy, greyish and frayed, a piece of fabric washed too many times.

The same colour she saw beneath the forest-green in Sif now. Ljosira knew why – she had feelings for Thor, who chose to give his love to a Midgardian. A mortal with a very short lifespan, even though she was highly intelligent. I shouldn’t judge, Ljosira thought. I am bonded to a man who conjures war, conflict and mischief wherever he steps…

“Maybe you should suggest doing something together that he likes. That usually does the trick.”, Fandral mused, leaning against a low tree with hanging branches.

“Fandral, it is not that I don’t spend time with him that way. We fight together, we feast together…”, Sif answered impatiently. Her companion sighed as if telling her she should know better.

“My lady, what I mean to say is… Alone, just the two of you. Maybe ride out into the fields and hunt for a whole day.”, he proposed, a clear implication in his tone. They walked on, their steps making crunching noises on the pebble-strewn path.

“He disappears each night. He pretends to enjoy himself but in truth he is a caged animal. Let it go, Fandral.”, was the last thing Ljosira heard Sif say before they were out of earshot.

Thor couldn’t leave Asgard since the Bifröst was still being restored. And he needed to deal with an uprising in Vanaheim soon enough. But he seemed to be growing restless, so much that even his companions had begun to worry.

Ljosira raised her gaze to the sky, feeling a strange kind of foreboding. The veil between the worlds grew thin while they closed in on each other. Shadows lurked in the great void which separated the planes, a deep blackness even a Lighbringer’s sight could not penetrate.

The Convergence was a joyful event for her people – a royal child celebrated their rite of passage and Yggdrasil surged with the energy of the Nine Realms lined up in perfect unison. But for some reason, Ljosira could not muster joy at the outlook.

A cloud shrouded Asgard’s azure-blue sky, taking all colour out of the world for a moment. It left her shivering from the cold chill. She reprimanded herself for such gloomy thoughts. The pressure of Loki’s trial makes you fatalistic. At least the accidental eavesdropping on Sif and Fandral had given her an idea, a first step towards gaining his trust… Gathering her annoyingly numerous skirts, she rose from the bench and took off to the palace.
V. Closed Doors, Open Windows

Chapter Notes

These two are so oblivious... Hrhr  
So, Lightbringers cannot deceive or lie openly. It's not in their nature. But they do  
have a bit of a whimsical streak, which can be annoying when they are sought for  
advice. When the mood strikes them, they sometimes choose to give cryptic rather  
than direct answers to questions.

V. Closed Doors, Open Windows

Loki’s quarters were, of course, deserted. Nobody came here anymore. For Thor it likely meant  
pain and anger, for Frigga sorrow, and as for the Allfather… well, he was hard to read, even  
through dragon eyes.

In the light of day, the study seemed much brighter, with the warm sun flooding his desk and the  
vast bookshelves. Funny little specks of dust danced in the air, around the dozens of artefacts, like  
dots of gold powder. Ljosira enjoyed striding through the room, reading the rune-covered spines of  
countless books. To her surprise, his touch lingered on each of them, which was impressive. There  
had to be thousands of books in here, and he had read every single one, although most of them a  
long time ago.

She filed through the pages of a tome on dragons and found the legends so entertaining that she  
promptly decided to borrow it. This time, Ljosira didn’t have to be embarrassed about examining  
everything closely. Instead, she took her time, exploring every strange and riveting part of the  
room. Her favourite, she decided, was the statue of a bird – a peacock, maybe? – whose brilliant  
plumage shimmered in too many colours to even name.

When her eyes fell on Loki’s bedroom door, she froze. Today, she was completely on her own in  
his chambers. Would it really hurt to take a look? Before she knew it, she had stepped within arm’s  
reach to it, her hand hovering over the door-handle. Surreptitiously, she looked around once,  
making sure nobody witnessed this blatant invasion of privacy – for to be honest, it was exactly  
that. Then Ljosira pressed down the handle and stepped into the adjacent room.

Only half as wide as the study, but not any less impressive. The bed, a four-poster like her own,  
stood against the right wall on a raised dais and outmatched even hers in size. Its green gauze  
curtains depicted a deep, enchanted forest where nymphs bathed in a clear pond, accompanied by a  
peacefully drinking stag. Ljosira walked around it in awe – the other side showed a darker image:  
Great wolf-like beasts stalked a herd of slender-legged deer. The framework was made from the  
same ebon wood as his desk, lacquered and carved with great detail. A long sun shaft fell through  
one half of the room from the balcony, throwing the other half into stark contrast, where heavy  
velvet curtains kept the bed in deep shadow. Somehow this struck her as a very defining allegory  
for Loki’s mind – this gulf between light and darkness.

Ljosira stepped closer and saw the mess of sheets, furs and pillows, tangled as though they had  
been fought with. Even though senses of sound and smell were weaker in this form, she could  
clearly make out his scent. A mixture of fresh parchment, the powder used for some enchantments,
the forest after rain… and something unique she had no name for, nor anything to compare it to.

She found herself inhaling deeply, remembering a faint trace of the same fragrance when she had been pressed against Loki for a brief moment, so many years ago. Such a fleeting thing, yet still it had imprinted itself into her memory. Here, where his presence lingered so heavily, the full force of that sensation was brought home to her. She felt light-headed, strangely intoxicated, and had to shake her head several times until it passed. Dropping her gaze to the nightstand to distract herself, she noticed a tome bound in wine-red leather.

“The Antlers hauling Moon and Sun”, she read absent-mindedly. And in the sub-title, “Fables and Riddles of Old” Traces of his aura hummed in the book and told her that Loki had read it many times before. This was his favourite. She picked it up and placed it atop the dragon myths. Not wanting to leave yet, she outlined the embroidery on the gauze curtains with her fingers. It was soft to the touch. Strange, that she would feel closer to him here than she had during their argument in the prison, where they had been only inches apart.

In this room, Loki couldn’t hide from her. Insult her to keep her out. Maintain distance and deception as he did to everyone else. Ljosira sighed, knowing she couldn’t stay forever. When she turned around, the two books tumbled to the ground with a thud and she let out a tiny cry, stumbling backwards onto the bed. Thor was standing in the doorway, surveying her with a quizzical expression.

“I apologize. The door was open, and I… I had not meant to scare you.”, he instantly amended and bowed down to pick up the books she had dropped.

“Never before has someone sneaked up on me.”, Ljosira managed to say in a feeble voice.

“The humans often point out: There’s a first time for everything.”, the crown prince placated with a smile. He paused when his gaze fell upon the red book.

“I know this book. Mother used to read it to us all the time. Where did you find it?” He sounded astonished.

“On your brother’s nightstand.”, Ljosira answered as Thor handed her the tomes carefully. They were on eye-level because she still sat on Loki’s bed, but Thor lowered his head slightly, looking regretful all of a sudden.

“Seeing this recalls memories of an unburdened time.”, he sighed. An unveiled, shocking weakness bloomed in his eyes. “Why does my brother hate me so much, Ljosira?”

She scanned his aura. Dark chains were slung heavily around his proud spirit, a warrior who did not understand why he had lost a battle even before he had entered the fray. Lost a brother. Ljosira knew she could not be of much help in this matter. Only time and honesty could resolve it, if both sides were willing.

“Because… he is utterly convinced that he can never live up to your image.”, she answered slowly.

“What a ridiculous delusion.”, Thor retorted, his face turning ugly with anger. Ljosira shook her head.

“Is it, though? A delusion, yes. But ridiculous? I would not call it that. Think, for a moment, about all the things that singled you out.”, she pointed a finger at Mjölnir, then up to his brow, where a beautiful crown of golden leaves weaved from her magic, and he could hear the voices of his friends and companions, his father and mother, all cheering and loving.
“Your brother chose to build walls of rejection toward you, because he could not face the conflict between love and jealousy. Each carefree memory you recall from your childhood has a tragic drawback for him. Like two sides of a coin.”, she said bitterly, “Of course, this is just my opinion. I read auras, not minds. It does not justify his actions, but merely explains his motives.” Thor looked at her for a lingering moment, taking in her words.

“I wonder if things will ever return to what they were once.”

“Do not move backwards, Thor. That isn’t like you. It may not be as it once was, but it might become something new. You will always be brothers. That does not change. Why else would you wish to reminisce about unburdened times? You have fought each other, battered, slashed and stabbed. Yet still you hope, do you not?” she explained, smiling. The crown prince returned the gesture and straightened.

“You have a remarkable gift for cryptic advice. But nevertheless… I feel comforted, somehow. Thank you.”

Before they left the room, he threw her the same, strange look which had been on his face when she had spotted him. Something oddly close to bafflement. He didn’t pry for the reason why she had been in Loki’s bedroom, although it must have seemed very weird, now that she thought it through. Actually, even she did not quite understand why she had given in to the impulse…

At the landing site, Thor muttered an apology and left her alone, heading towards the Bifröst. We both make our compulsive visits, Ljosira mused. At least she seemed to be gaining experience in flying the sky-striker. Just a few steps short of Loki’s barrier, she halted abruptly when his angry voice echoed through the corridor. In a knee-jerk reaction, she bolted from sight into a shadowy niche.

“He’s not my father!” Not quite a full yell, as though he battled to contain himself. Then his counterpart spoke. The queen.

“Then am I not your mother?”, she said, making no effort to hide her hurt. There was a moment of deafening silence, before Loki let out a heavy sigh. His next words were remarkably gentle, but firm.

“You are not.”, he said. Something about the emotion in his voice made Ljosira peek around the corner to see his face. He looked regretful and beaten, his emerald eyes trained on his mother’s figure standing inside his cell. She took a step towards him, shaking her head sadly.

“Always so perceptive… about everyone but yourself.” Loki’s expression lost some of its tense edges and he moved closer, reaching for her hand. As he did, the illusion started to dissolve. And Frigga vanished, leaving Loki with deep creases on his smooth brow. Defeated. Ljosira waited for a reasonable amount of time until she stepped forward. At the sight of her, he seemed to compose himself and did not quite succeed. A little softness lingered on his features.

“You keep returning here.”, he noted.

“And you keep sounding surprised.”, she said, tilting her head slightly. A genuine smile spread across his lips, probably the first one she had ever seen that wasn’t mocking or sarcastic in any way. Small, but still. One victory at a time.

“This has not been a particularly cheerful day until now. Apart from the guards… I don’t get much real company.” The way he put emphasis on the word ‘real’ told her volumes. Frigga was not allowed to visit him in any other way than through projections.
Ljosira shuffled on her feet. For some reason, she felt thoroughly embarrassed in his presence. She had practically breached his privacy and gone through his personal belongings. *Maybe guilt?* No, it didn’t feel like guilt. Much more elusive, coming from someplace close to her heart, which had decided to accelerate to a treacherous pace. What was wrong with her?

Loki stepped a little closer when she didn’t answer. A slight pink blush had crept to her pale cheeks and once again, the robes she wore weren’t completely in order. His gaze fell onto the two books clutched in her arms.

“Did you bring those for me?”, he asked, even more surprised. Only his mother had sent him anything at all since he was in prison, and she didn’t bring the items herself. She was forbidden to see him. Aside from her, nobody showed him anything but reproach.

“Oh, right… Right.”, Ljosira blurted as though shaken awake from a dream. “Guards!”, she called, making one of the patrolling men walk over to her. Loki watched as he bowed deeply, looking somewhat tense.

“How may I help you, my lady?” He seemed clearly uncomfortable with her fathomless grey eyes watching him.

“I wish to enter the cell.”, she simply stated. The guard frowned and cleared his throat.

“With all due respect…”, he fumbled for the right title to address her, “…ancient one. It is not safe. The Allfather has ordered further… evaluation of the prisoner for your own safety…”

Loki almost burst out in laughter at the way the guard’s eyes widened when Ljosira straightened to her full height. It looked so completely out of place. She was a tiny slip of a woman. Then again, her appearance served all the more to draw attention away from the powerful entity she harboured inside.

“The Allfather”, she began in a very strict voice, “trusts my judgement. Now would you please have the courtesy to let me in.” The authority in her formal tone made the guard shiver, but he still hesitated.

“Yesterday, he threw all the furniture of his cell at you…”, he tried to reason. Loki huffed in exasperation.

“For Valhalla’s sake, just let her in. I could throw piles of desks and chairs at her, they would bounce off. She’s a dragon, you dolt. Even her mortal form is thrice shielded. I’m talented, but not *that* talented. Besides, do you really think me such a deranged creature?”, he snapped. The guard gave him a look as though he was something disgusting stuck on the sole of a boot.

“Should not have asked.”, Loki said irritably. But was the guard not right? He had thrown things at her. Well, at the barrier, to be correct. He’d wanted to scare her, so she would not stare at him with that agitating compassion. But could he really, truly harm her if they stood face to face? He doubted it. Some indefinable instinct rather pushed him into the opposite direction. Ljosira gave the guard a thorough frown and whispered something to him. The man sighed and moved to the cell door, a rune-clustered shield of energy.

The next Loki knew, Ljosira was standing in his cell, not clouded by the shiny barrier, only a few steps away. Just as lovely as he remembered her, his disobedient heart struggling to maintain a steady rhythm.
VI. Game of Truth

Chapter Notes

Things get a little more... interesting. I like mentally torturing Loki. Do I have a problem? Noooo I don't think so. I'm just getting started!

VI. Game of Truth

“I have almost forgotten how small you are.”, he said, cursing himself for sounding oddly breathless.

“I am bigger in person.”, she retorted humorously, her observant eyes passing over him with care. A flicker of light flashed across her iris. Loki’s aura was still not easy to read. Many conflicting emotions were entwined into countless mottled knots. Among this multifaceted, chaotic rainbow, she could see a dark shadow pulsing, tied down by heavy restriction and self-control right now. There was sadness, surely for his mother. Reproach, probably for his brother and father. And around his heart, a thin, bright thread swirled like a pristine serpent. Was he… happy to see her?

“That, I believe without a second guess.”, Loki mused quietly. He noticed her persistent gaze and seemed to understand its purpose.

“Now that there is no magic to interfere with your sight… What do you see?”, he asked with genuine interest. She would say something like chaos, doubts, an utter mess… What else could she see but that?

“I wish I could show you.” He stared at her in wonder, abandoned by the gift of speech. “Too many things to put into words.”, Ljosira said, her lids fluttering. Of all the things he expected, her answer hadn’t been one of them. She held out the leather-bound tome to him. His eyebrows went up when he took it.

“The Antlers hauling Moon and Sun.”, he mumbled. “This… is my favourite book. I should expect nothing less from your keen eyesight.” This was probably the closest thing to gratitude he could muster. Ljosira blinked again, this time from amazement. Loki’s eyes flickered to hers. Up close, she was able to see the tint of blue braiding through the dark green, like soft moss covering a smooth rock. An inscrutable quirk lingered on his lips.

“I left this in my bedroom… Either my mother gave it to you, or… You have been there yourself.”, he deliberated. Ljosira cleared her throat, fighting against the heat that rose to her face.

“It helps my task to look at personal belongings.” Well, not an outright lie, but it bent the truth rather freely.

“Well, since you don’t mind trespassing on closed doors, you might be reckless enough to keep me company for a while. Would you like to play a game?”, he asked and moved to sit down in one of the chairs in his cell. She inclined her head, which made her look like a curious bird.

“What kind of game?” Loki indicated for her to take a seat across him at the small table.
“Do you enjoy riddles?” Her elegant brows shot upward in surprise.

“I know a few.”, she answered slowly.

“It works like this. I am going to pose you a riddle. If you can solve it, I shall answer a question that you have for me truthfully. Then, we switch roles and you tell me a riddle, and so on. A sparring of wit, if you wish to call it so.”, he explained. She regarded him in silence for a moment.

“You are not trying to pull me into one of your mind-games, are you?”, she pondered, but there was no trace of fear in her voice.

“No.”, Loki emphasised. “Contrary to popular belief, I am not a fool. And… you made your point, yesterday.” Another pause. This one seemed to last longer.

“Your first riddle, then.”, Ljosira bobbed her head in approval, momentarily dazzled by the delighted expression on his features.

“We hurt without moving, we poison without touching, we bear the truth and the lies, we are not judged by our size. What are we?”. Loki proposed. She turned thoughtful for an instant, but answered quickly.

“You’ll have to try harder than that! The answer is: Words.”, when he nodded, she went on to ask her question, “Why did you really join with the Chitauri forces?”

“I thought you might ask. Because I had no other choice. It was either that, or death. And the only reason I still live is that they knew I could open a portal to Midgard through the Tesseract. How was I supposed to go back to Asgard after what happened? Ruling Midgard seemed like a good purpose.”, he spoke pensively, turning the little red book in his long fingers. She sensed that he was telling her the truth. His eyes, full of aptitude, were trained on her face with a serious expression. When she averted her gaze, Loki caught himself studying the slender arc of her neck. Pearly smooth, with a slight ridge which disappeared beneath her collarbone. Errant wisps of silver hair curled along the edge of her robe, where the fabric stood out darkly against her skin.

“Do you truly understand the burden of ruling, Loki?”, she said without looking at him. It was the first time she had addressed him with his name. The singsong cadence made it sound oddly gentle.

“Evidently, I understand the rules of this game. Only one question at the time, dragon. Your turn, now.”, he retorted mischievously, hoping his voice betrayed nothing of the hazardous direction his thoughts headed into.

“Alright then. You struggle to regain me, when I am lost, you struggle to obtain me. I pass no matter your will, but I am your slave to kill. What am I?”, she posed her riddle.

“Ah, a good one! The answer is: Time. Give me a challenge, please.”, Loki solved it without effort. When Ljosira took another peek at his aura, she realized that he was… enjoying himself. It thoroughly flustered her. What a strange turn of events.

“So… why where you really in my bedroom?”, came his question. She craned her neck and huffed.

“I may not be mortal, but that does not mean I am above curiosity.”, she then said with a slight smile.
And from there on, beginning with this first game of truth, Ljosira visited him almost every day. The riddles were a way to ask each other questions at the start. In time, they would forget the rules completely and speak to each other beyond self-inflicted boundaries. Loki learned a great deal about the dragon who had been chosen as his advocate. The youngest of a plentiful royal family, and an only sister among brothers, raised, protected and sheltered. Never truly allowed to be free lest she be exposed to danger. How she loved Asgard and has watched over it with keen eyes, hoping to one day be named Great Protector over this branch of Yggdrasil.

But the imposing subjects were almost less interesting than all the little things he came to know about her. The way she craned her neck sometimes, an utterly draconic gesture mortals did not use. Or how she inclined her head, surveying him as though he was some vexing object designed to puzzle her. Her slender hands as they turned a book’s pages or fiddled with a fold of her robes. How she seemed fascinated by menial things – like the stitching on a tablecloth, but could create such complicated magic, he went green with envy and the wish of mastering it.

And how, sometimes, in rare moments, she eyed him with odd little looks he couldn’t place. Hard to fathom what thoughts dwelled inside a mind like hers. As the days and then weeks went by, they developed their own little games and tricks, filling long hours which seemed to pass much too quickly for his taste. Loki would read a passage from a book, and she would enact a scene with a spell. Nothing like his illusions, not as tangible. Her magic was ethereal, instinctive, no copy of reality but drawn from an entirely different source that knew no restriction except the one of imagination.

That he subconsciously started to look forward to her appearing at the barrier frightened him. He caught himself glancing over to it frequently when she was late. On the days where she didn’t visit him at all – though those were rare – he became moody and felt oddly agitated, pacing the little space until even his guards looked nervous.

One afternoon, Ljosira entered while he was reading intently, and when he looked up, he had to yelp down a laugh. The complicated arrangement of her clothes had been tied into an utter mess. It seemed she had no understanding whatsoever about how to get dressed properly.

“Why are you laughing?”, she demanded, her tone sharp. Loki tried to compose himself, clearing his throat audibly.

“You seem to be oblivious to the way clothes work. Why is it they always look so strange on you?”, he answered, pointing at a hastily tied knot below her shoulder. Her cheeks flushed delightfully red.

“No maid, noblewoman or even the queen would help me to get dressed, as they could accidentally touch me in the process. How am I supposed to know how to arrange these things on my own, when I never wore clothes as a dragon?”, she lamented, frustrated. But Loki just stared at her, shocked. A realization visibly dawned on his face.

“Do not touch a young dragon. That law…”, he stated in a weak voice. “I have broken it.” She went still. Now the damage was done – he would have found out anyway, as he would have remembered the rule sooner or later.

“Yes, you have.”, Ljosira confirmed. Loki’s brow furrowed.

“Why didn’t I die? The unrestrained magic should have burst me to bits…”, but she cut him off
“What is it with you people and all the violence? Does everything have to be destructive with you?” He stood up and prowled the room, befuddled.

“But why is it forbidden if nothing bad happens?”, he asked blankly. And with a great sigh, Ljosira explained. About the creation of life-bonds between dragons, of their reciprocity and protective nature, and how they are not allowed to be forged between mortals and dragons, unless in exceptional cases, as with Heimdall and her brother Vegr. Loki listened with amazement.

“But… I don’t feel anything.”, he said after she had finished.

“You are not a dragon. You perceive the life-bond much more… subtly.”, Ljosira sounded a little insulted and he could not understand the reason. His deep, green eyes lingered on hers.

“And how do you perceive it?”, he asked in a quiet voice. To his surprise, her gaze fled away from his, seeking the distance.

“I wish I could show you.”, she spoke the same words from weeks ago, when she had first seen his aura with her dragon sight.

“Why was I not punished?”, Loki wondered.

“Because for one, you saved me from falling. And secondly, you had no knowledge of my true identity. My father was angry, but he is not unreasonable.”, she explained, shrugging. Loki hung his head, thinking for a long moment. Then he lifted his gaze.

“That means… If I happen to touch you now…”, he began tentatively. Strange, it sounded like a… request?

“It would not make any difference.”, Ljosira responded, frowning. And before she knew what was happening, he had crossed the room and stepped behind her. She opened her mouth to protest when he undid one of the silken bows between her shoulder-blades.

“You cannot tie it like this… But you wouldn’t know… Even you can’t see behind your back.” His voice was soft and quiet as he corrected her awful creation with skilful hands. Standing completely still, afraid that if she moved the strange moment would end, Ljosira was overly aware of his fingers sliding across the folds of silk. She realized that she had held her breath for so long she’d begun to get dizzy. But breathing proved to be hazardous too, since his scent quite effectively drove her to distraction. Loki felt her body shiver when his hand brushed across the bare skin of her back during his efforts.

Even this slightest touch left his fingers tingling as tough he had touched an electric current. Or something on fire. He took a breath to calm the slight tremble, fought the urge to run his whole hand along the inexplicably straight nick that marked her spine, and hoped Ljosira needed direct eye contact to read auras. For his probably brimmed with coarse images he definitely didn’t want her to notice.

Much taller than her, he had no effort to reach the knot over her collarbone from behind her back. Ljosira was sure her heart tossed itself so fiercely against her chest, its frantic thuds would be audible across the whole prison. Even though he barely touched her, she could feel the light pressure of his arms around her shoulders, even the muscles at work as he redid the tie, the solid chest heaving against her back with each breath. His face was bent down next to her head, his deep breaths stroking over her cheek as he concentrated his eyes on what he was doing. She’d never
experienced such a strangely intimate moment. Seeing the way his fingers moved delicately sent small chills down her spine. If this went on for much longer, she would jump out of her skin.

“I hope you are watching… so you won’t have problems in the future…”, Loki’s voice sounded deeper than usual, uneven. She merely nodded, and he wished more than wishing for glorious recognition that he could read one tiny shred of her thoughts right now. Finished with his work, he retreated reluctantly, breaking the magic of the moment. The sense of loss he felt scared the wits out of him.

After this fateful day, the relentless dragon lady would not only visit him by day, but also wedge herself into his thoughts, taking up permanent residence there even during sleep. Not inexperienced, he’d been with quite a few women before. But this was different somehow.

In the past, he had always managed to keep a cold distance to these women and they mostly served for his pleasure. With increasing unease, he realized how that sort of behaviour would be impossible with Ljosira. A part of him actually loathed the very notion of treating her as he had treated the ones before. He was no stranger to physical attraction, only he had a rising trepidation that this was no such blatantly simple thing. This felt more like a small spark born between them, growing slowly and patiently until it would set him on fire.

Such intricate magic dwelled within her, a wondrous thing that seemed to be perceptible on her very skin. Some nights, he woke from dreams of touching her, feeling her against his body, losing himself in the silver ocean of her hair, the overwhelming softness. He wanted to shout out at the frustration that struck him every time he woke. An aching need that knocked the breath from his lungs. He wondered if this was one of the ‘subtle’ ways the life-bond showed.

Loki didn’t know what to think about it, neither did he know how exactly it affected him. Although it was very convenient to rationalize it this way. Some things made more sense, after all. The jolt he had felt on the balcony so many years ago, when he had touched her. The way he was instinctively sure he could trust her, and that he wouldn’t be able to hurt her.

But the wicked images in his sleep went much farther than that, near torturous in their intensity. He would jolt up in his bed, breathless and drenched in sweat, a strong pulling tension in his loins which no amount of pacing or mental temperance could fully disperse. His touch had been lighter than a plume moth’s wings.

And yet she haunted him. The fragrance of her skin alone… honey and marigold, like a sun-kissed summer wine. He remembered the flawless curve of her nape and how he had battled the urge to trace it with his lips, to taste a bit of her vivid essence, draw a sigh of pleasure from her rippling throat. Damn her. He prowled around his cell like a caged animal, torn between cursing at her and picturing her beneath him, bare and glorious and gasping his name.

What the hell was wrong with him? He couldn’t lust after this woman, for a thousand reasons. If there was a rule against mortals even touching them, they would surely eviscerate anyone who… defiled their mortal forms. You are walking a dangerous line, his conscience piped up. He knew. Oh, how he knew, but that did nothing to bridle his way too colourful imagination. Loki struggled to keep whatever he was feeling shut behind closed doors while longing slowly drove him mad inside. If it only had been that easy to purge one’s attraction to a woman from the mind, the world would be considerably poorer on sultry poetry.

He had no inkling that the dragon princess was so flustered after their intense moment, she sat in
front of the mirror for the longest time, tracing the ribbon-like knot he had tied absently. She, too, wondered if her feelings originated from their connection, or if there was much more to it than that – and frightened her, because she sensed it much more distinctly. So many confusing emotions she did not understand. They eluded her like intangible little wisps.

What were they? Why had she not wanted him to stop, but instead to pull her close, embrace her, so badly she thought she might burst with it. Was this the reason why dragons should not be getting too close to mortals? *What is this bittersweet feeling, this mixture of giddy anticipation and frantic yearning?*, she thought to herself. Nobody answered her. That night, Ljosira went to bed with a growing restlessness that tingled through every part of her. She did not get one wink of sleep.
VII. The Dark Days

Chapter Notes

Thank you for kudos!! <3
Back when I wrote this, I was quite hasty to go through the events of Thor: The Dark World, and these chapters (VII, VIII and IX) felt a little rushed to me. I tried to revise them and find a middle-ground, so they would not be too boring but also not too sloppy. Personally, I think I start hitting my stride with chapter X, but these are still important in their own way, for character and relationship development.

Translations:

Myrkr - Growing Darkness

VII. The Dark Days

Ljosira felt overwhelmingly glad when Thor’s victorious return from Vanahem provided a distraction from her conflicting, precarious thoughts about Loki. A celebration would be held in honour of the crown prince’s successful quest. He’d brought order and peace back to the Nine Realms, after Loki had disrupted the balance with his war-stirring.

She had just returned from a reading session with him – and had earned a reproachful, accusing look for leaving him alone to attend a feast. The palace maids had laid out her ceremonial robe, draped onto a stand. She went still, staring at it. It was unlike any dress she had ever seen. The sun-coloured, brocade cloth wore a pattern of lifelike peacocks in flight, their beautiful tail plumage cresting over the topmost layer. Light flickered in a twinkling resonance over the pearls and tiny emeralds embedded into the stitching. The manifold layers melted from warm yellow to pure white at the lowest hem. Ljosira gaped at the wondrous masterwork of tailoring, speechless.

“Do you like it?”, the queen’s voice sounded behind her. Frigga smiled at her from the doorway. Already dressed for the festival, she wore a dove-blue robe which perfectly accentuated her kind features. “I had it made for you, and I have to admit – the royal tailor outdid himself this time. I told him I needed something that would suit a dragon princess.”

“It’s… incredible. I can’t even…”, her words trailed away.

The queen stepped into the room and closed the door, gesturing at Ljosira excitedly. “Go on, try it!”

As she slipped into the dress behind the folding screen, she noticed the countless laces criss-crossing at the back. They seemed to be what held the dress in place. Clever, Ljosira mused with a tiny frown of bafflement. This way, Frigga could fasten the ties without touching her bare skin. The breath caught in her throat when the queen gently pulled her in front of the mirror. She could not quite believe her reflection. It looked as though she had been dressed with the sun. Ljosira blinked several times, tracing the soft fabric of the long sleeves. They almost touched the ground.

Loki, who watched his mother’s perfect, illusionary projection of Ljosira, knew a keen rush of victory. She was stunning. But what made him absolutely certain that he’d done the right thing by
choosing to play a role in this was the everlasting wonder in her eyes about such utterly mortal things. It had nothing to do with vanity, he knew her well enough by now. The attention to detail, the complexity of all loving craftsmanship fascinated her, just as her inherent magic fascinated him.

Loki remembered with some amusement how his mother had eyed him suspiciously when they had talked about having a festival dress made for Ljosira. Her surprise had even grown as he explained that he was not eager for Ljosira to know about his involvement. He would pick the fabrics and Frigga the motifs – and then her illusion would disappear with a thoroughly astonished look on her face.

The feast was a full success. Ljosira walked among the guests, trying to hide the blush on her cheeks as they showered her with compliments. Especially Fandral, one of Thor’s closest friends – and probably the most flirtatious warrior all around Asgard. Yet everyone kept a respectful distance, for most of them knew her identity and did not dare to get too close.

She took her time conversing with Thor, whom she had not seen for a while. He had dressed very modestly for a crown prince and all evening, his mind seemed to be somewhere far away. Although he smiled at jokes, ate from each of the abundant plates the maids brought, accepted toasts and praise, his face retained an absent expression. As though some crucial part was missing, without which he did not feel quite complete.

Strangely enough, Ljosira could sympathize. It saddened her that she had to stroll among the guests alone, with everyone giving her at least a foot length of space. Loki could have walked by her side, she could even have hooked her arm around his as she saw many others do. She quested for him with her dragon sight, but the annoying prison force field distorted it. Even though people celebrated and laughed all around her, Ljosira suddenly felt lonesome, apart from them.

She reached into the bonds to her family, seeking solace inside their reassuring answers. Most of them were in flight among Yggdrasil’s crown or slept on the great tree’s branches, dreaming. For once, their presence did not disperse the isolation in her heart. As if it yearned for an entirely different kind of company. She sighed and forced a smile onto her face, continuing to circle among the guests.

Deep into the night, Thor rose and excused himself. Ljosira decided to follow him, knowing that he went to visit Heimdall. When he was stopped by Sif on the balcony, she slid behind a pillar hastily. They spoke shortly, before Thor excused himself politely. The disappointment on the proud shield-maiden’s face could not be mistaken.

A heavy burden to bear, the love that is unrequited. Not all stories end well. For Sif, it had definitely taken a turn for the worse. Ljosira skidded from her hiding place and hurried to catch up to the prince. He noticed her, instantly slowing his pace to match her smaller steps.

“Would it be insolent if I accompanied you?”, she asked cautiously, glancing one last time at the silhouette of Sif disappearing into the shadows. Thor smiled at her with brotherly care. Not for the first time, Ljosira grieved that the relationship between him and Loki had gone so terribly awry. The crown prince had shown her nothing but kindness and care since she had arrived.

“You look like a goddess of the sun today, little ancient one. Who am I to deny you my company?”, Thor replied graciously. Ljosira surveyed the floor with great interest, embarrassed.
“Don’t call me ancient.,” she murmured, before adding more surely: “You are very kind, but you do know that I can see through a lie, even one of courtesy. I daresay the woman who occupies your mind is not the one dressed with the sun.” They left the castle to take flight in a sky-striker, heading for the observatory.

“Would you scold me too, for fancying a mortal whose life is but the blink of an eye?”, he inquired, sounding weary.

“My father once said to me… That we should never judge love. It is too intricate, not subject to reason. Your heart belongs to you. You should be free to give it to whomever you wish.”, she argued thoughtfully. Thor gave her a grateful sort of look, his tense features softening.

“You are late.,” Heimdall noted when they stepped into his observatory. The golden, clockwork-like dome had a marvellous view. Ljosira could see Yggdrasil’s branches, great bands of twinkling jewels spreading across a black, velvet sky. She took her time to let her gaze wander along each of them. The worlds shifted ever so slightly in anticipation of the Convergence.

“And you brought the dragon princess. It is an honour, my lady.”, Heimdall addressed her respectfully.

“How is my brother’s sight today, good Gatekeeper?”, Ljosira returned with the same consideration.

“Impeccable, but it always is. As the realms align for the Convergence, Yggdrasil paints a constellation to tell the story of your kind heart. The king of dragons awaits his youngest daughter’s rite of passage. And what a marvel it is, seeing the world tree in such bloom.” She flushed pink at his words.

“Thank you…”, was all she managed to reply. While Heimdall and Thor spoke, Ljosira gazed at Yggdrasil again. Somewhere between that docile beauty, a menacing shadow stirred, an unnamed threat which sent shivers down her spine. Just like on her first day, in the gardens. She recoiled in alarm.

“I can’t see her.”, Heimdall suddenly said. Thor instantly looked anxious, while Ljosira felt some body-less energy far away come to life. It was of such magnitude that she swayed, dizzied by the sinister purpose that speared her senses.

“Open the Bifröst. I will take a look. Grant me passage, Heimdall.”, Thor requested without hesitation.

“Thor!”, Ljosira interjected when the dome shifted and the prince stepped to the gate. “Whatever it is, it clouds my sight. You are on your own – please be careful.”

He gave her one tense nod, before disappearing into the shimmering pathway. Ljosira prowled around the observatory while Heimdall stood on the dais in a rigid posture. Neither of them could see Thor. He had disappeared almost as soon as he had entered the Bifröst, a swirling shadow now obscuring him. But he came back mere minutes later, and when he did, he was carrying an oddly-dressed, dark-haired woman whose eyes were wide with shock and fear. Heimdall and Ljosira stared at her.

Midgardian. They had very defined auras, vivid and enriched by emotion. This one was equally frightened and awestruck… and very happy about something. Or someone. But Ljosira recoiled when she saw the liquid darkness undulating inside her, leeching from her life-force. Even just looking at made tiny needles of pain stab her mind.
“Welcome to Asgard.”, Heimdall stated neutrally.

“Jane, this is Heimdall, the Gatekeeper and watchful eye of the Bifrost. You know, the thing you called a snake-hole.”, Thor introduced, an unknown cheer in his voice. The woman named Jane mumbled some intelligible reply.

“Worm-hole, then. Anyway, this…”, Thor went on, indicating Ljosira. “You probably won’t believe this, but meet Ljosira, a guardian of Yggdrasil. A dragon, sent here to evaluate my brother for trial.” Jane swallowed at the sight of the impressive festival dress.

“Your brother… Loki? Wait, did you just say dragon?!?” The meaning of his words seemed to reach her with some delay. She gaped in disbelief. But the next they knew, her legs gave out and her face contorted in an expression of pain. Thor immediately steadied her.

“She needs a healer.”, Ljosira said harshly as they heaved Jane into the sky-striker. Her hand hovered over the human’s motionless body, a shower of small sparks raining from her palm. Thor glanced over to her frequently, his brow creased with worry.

“What do you see?”, he asked, but Ljosira shook her head.

“Massive amounts of energy, greater than even in dragons. Like some form of liquid… It’s painful to look at, as though it twists space…” She omitted to tell him how such a force would slowly disintegrate her mortal body, rip apart the very fabric of her being.

Jane was brought to the healers and thoroughly examined, although they came to no conclusion until Odin showed up, furious at Thor for bringing a mortal to Asgard. Her kind did not belong here, he thundered, then ordered her to be taken away. When the guards moved to touch her, Jane erupted in a blast of dark energy that threw even Ljosira off her feet.

After this, they all knew something was horribly wrong. Ljosira, Jane and Thor followed the Allfather into the palace library. A beautiful, magical model of Yggdrasil floated at the centre of the vast tower, which seemed to be made of nothing but bookshelves. Odin flipped open a book and began to tell the story of the Dark Elves and the Time of Darkness. Ljosira’s heart sank. Her brethren had had a hand in that war, too.

“Their leader, Malekith, made a weapon out of eternal darkness and called it the Aether. Fluid and everchanging, it seeks out host bodies and draws strength from their life-force. Malekith sought to use the Aether’s power, to return the universe to one… of darkness.”, he read out loud, turning the pages. They all bore slowly shifting illustrations adorned with golden rune-script.

“With respect, Allfather. We were never quite certain if Malekith truly created the Aether. Much of that strife-torn history has been lost, even among dragons. But what we do know is that he used one of the most potent catalysts in the known universe to bend the Aether to his will: The blood of a Dragon King.”, Ljosira said darkly. Odin nodded, looking thoughtful.

“Fine knowledge of your lore, Ljosira. Before your father ascended as the Dragon King, he united the clans and fought a bitter war upon Yggdrasil’s crown against the former king, a Darkflight dragon named Myrkr. Myrkr had given his blood to Malekith – and as such gained full control over the Aether. Elding supported my father Bor in these times of bloodshed. After many years of strife, they brought about a peace that would last thousands of years.”, Odin continued the story.

“What happened?”, Jane asked and the Allfather turned his one eye to her.

“He killed them all. When Myrkr was slain by Elding, Malekith knew he was at the edge of defeat.
He ushered in a mass suicide of his own people to bring down Asgard’s army.”

“The Darkflight were only reluctantly accepted back among our clans, and it took even longer until they were restored to the council. They thrive in the shadows. Such is their nature. That is why they guard the darkest parts of space, as they did with the Chitauri quarantine. They are our negatives. Where we bring light, they blanket all in gloom. Only they can cloud our sight.”, Ljosira complemented the explanation. Right then, a sudden head-ache seared through her temple, a sting so sharp it made her teeth clench and blurred her vision.

“Excuse me… the closeness to the Aether…”, but her words trailed away.

“I shall escort you.”, he stated stonily, leading Ljosira out of the room. As they walked through the palace halls, Odin spoke in a toneless voice.

“This is a very dangerous situation for you, Ljosira. I am afraid it is unwise to remain in Asgard as long as we keep the Aether here too. That thing is evil to the core, and as a Lightbringer, you are much more sensitive to dark energy. I cannot abide the thought that you might come to harm on my watch.” But Ljosira jerked her head in denial.

“No, Allfather… Please. I will be fine. I can’t leave when things are in such a precarious state. I just need a little rest.”, she assured him. In front of her chamber doors, Odin stopped and gave her a long, thorough look. His scrutiny reminded her much of her father.

“Very well.”, he finally said, and she had the strange impression that he resigned himself to some great defeat.
Ljosira woke from a nightmare of all-enveloping darkness to the shuffling of hurried feet and the clanking of armour. For a split second, she had no orientation whatsoever. Then she remembered falling asleep after fleeing the Aether’s dark pulse, completely exhausted, drained of all strength. With a deep breath, she gathered herself and then stopped short. Something was wrong. Very wrong. She could not sense Loki. Where the bond should have ended with his familiar presence, now a blurred, impenetrable shadow obscured him from her sight. Ljosira instantaneously panicked. Still in her festival dress, she tore open the door to find guards dashing along the corridors. Two women hurried towards her, one of them armed with a short sword. Jane’s aura brimmed with fear and uncertainty, while Frigga’s features were set with fierce determination.

“Ljosira. There has been a prison break. You need to stay in your quarters.” She only stopped for a moment before she pulled Jane to the direction of her own chambers. Completely ignoring what the queen had said, Ljosira bolted after them, when a sharp pain nearly cleaved her head in twain. She staggered, making Frigga whirl around in alarm.

“The Aether. She can’t bear its closeness.” Neither of them dared to touch the dragon princess. Jane made a small motion as though to steady Ljosira, but Frigga halted her.

“It isn’t your fault, my dear, but you cannot be near her.”, her voice carried the edge of a steel blade. Ljosira rubbed her temple and tried to exile the pain from her mind, but it felt as though relentless claws buried into her brain. Still, she straightened.

“I want to help… I can manage.”, he ground out somehow. Frigga leaned in, her gentle eyes serious and fierce.

“No, Ljosira. This is too dangerous for you. Leave this one to me.”, she said, turning to grasp Jane by the arm. With a thin smile, she added: “Who do you think taught Loki all the tricks?” Then they were gone, almost flying across the polished floor-tiles.

Loki. Torn between following the women and making sure that he was safe, Ljosira felt maddened by the conflict inside her. The blindness drove her crazy. She was used to sensing him at all times, however far away, no argument. Always. Whatever clouded her sight still seethed around the prison, slowly expanding. And that decided it. A life-bond in danger cannot be ignored. With a hasty backflip, she was off to the opposite direction. The sounds of fighting and screams sent a very clear message, therefore she avoided the usual routes to the landing site. During her many meetings with Loki, he had taught her a few of the secret passages in and out of the castle, a clandestine knowledge she was now very grateful for.

She emerged from the lowest level into a city buzzing with frightened people, guards all over the place. When Ljosira lifted her gaze, she saw why. A giant spaceship loomed over Asgard, like a
menacing spear-tip ready to pierce its heart. The Dark Elves had come to take back the Aether.

Signs of destruction littered the streets – scattered debris between the neatly built housings, toppled golden statues, levelled trees, frantic yells. The booming of cannons erupted from everywhere, ringing in her sensitive ears. Auras around her flared with fear and fury. The undiluted emotions were infectious, overpowering reason. All of her thoughts converged on Loki, on how she had to get to him right now. So strong was this instinct that she missed the real danger.

Just as Ljosira flew down the stairs to reach a sky-striker somewhere, anywhere, a shriek of pure agony rent her heart. The world went silent and she thought her legs would give out beneath her. Like blood from an open wound, the terrible knowledge saturated her. Between the other fading auras, the pristine spark of life that was Frigga vanished from her sight. Gone. Where before had been motherly warmth, brave and protective to the end, only cold nothingness remained. The void of death. And at the same time, the veil of darkness evaporated, making her realize that Loki had never been in danger. Once again, she had made a terrible mistake.

*I should have stayed. I should have endured the Aether, even if it weakened me, even if it hurt. I should have...* And now his mother was dead, her spirit soaring towards eternity. The world would become a little less, duller, bereft of colour.

Such wrathful thunder split the sky that the air quivered with electricity. Ljosira saw Mjölnir fly, the avenging hammer tempered in her father’s fire. And yet even that magnificent weapon was helpless to stop the Dark Elf ship from vanishing. A single tear meandered down her cheek and fell, seeping into the earth beneath her feet. A precious sign of mourning, shed unnoticed by the ones who had suffered such a terrible loss today.

The beautiful sunlight dress changed into a dark grey funeral gown, the cheerful festivities were replaced by a traditional funeral ceremony. Asgard bid farewell to their radiant queen as she passed over the mighty waterfalls at the edge of the realm. The boat which carried her body glided into the void. Frigga, symbol of love and kindness, dissolved into countless sparks of light, painting a new, beautiful constellation into the sky. It was stunning, sad magic. Ljosira sensed her father’s hand in it, intertwined with the Allfather’s grief. A part of him had died, never to return.

Life-bonds were not exclusive to dragons. They came in many different shapes, their profound purpose inherent to all living creatures. Protect and cherish that most fragile of things, and at the same time respect its boundless power. The Aesir understood more than most about the magic inside each deep connection made throughout their abundant lives. Odin and Frigga had such a bond, now torn apart forever. Ljosira turned away, unable to bear the look of sorrow on the Allfather’s face, mirrored most strongly in the eyes of his elder son. A great heaviness settled onto her shoulders, a grey tapestry woven from the mournful spirits all around her.

After the ceremony, she headed straight to the prison, avoiding eye-contact to anyone who crossed her path. The state of Loki’s cell made her stop short. It was bedlam. Desk and chairs lay crashed against the force-field, books had been thrown around carelessly, their pages ripped out. Shards and splinters littered the ground everywhere, some spattered with streaks of crimson.

Loki did not even seem to notice her approach, sitting at the edge of his cell with his head leaned against the wall, deaf to the world. His usually well-groomed, raven-black hair fell in tangled strands to his face. Rich, red blood pooled around one of his idle hands. He had cut himself in his tantrum and not even bothered to heal it, although he could have easily done so. But his state of mind was such that he didn’t even care, Ljosira thought bitterly when she viewed his aura. An
unfamiliar guard met her at the entrance to the cell.

“Open the door.”, Ljosira ordered curtly. Her voice could have cut stone.

“My lady, he is beyond reason! A maniac –“, the man began. He shouldn’t have.

“Open the door, NOW!”, the dragon princess yelled with such ferocity, even Loki flinched from his stupor. Lamps lining the walls burst apart, every barrier in close proximity flickered erratically. Unrestrained energy burst from her in frightening waves. The guard backed off, shocked at the menace in her posture. He hurried to let Ljosira enter without another word. She didn’t even spare him a second glance, instead walked to Loki, sinking fluidly to her knees beside him.

Without hesitation, her hand slipped beneath his and she leaned in to examine it. He did not resist, merely glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Paler than usual, the light which always seemed to surround her fainter. Dark shadows had made their home beneath her eyes. A small voice of concern stirred within the numb emptiness of his chest. She looked as though she might simply fade away, vanish… Just like his mother had.

“Fool…”, Ljosira whispered softly. “You should have at least removed the shards.” All mettle had abandoned her voice. She tilted her head a little, a look of concentration on her face as she began to pull the glass splinters from the dozen cuts along his palm and lower arm. Gingerly, with meticulous care. It did not even sting. When she had finished, Ljosira moistened a fold of her mourning gown and dabbed the coated blood from his skin. As she did this, Loki felt the magic seeping into the cuts. A warm, tingling sensation, easing his pain. The shredded skin closed and healed, until it was left smooth, unscathed.

She made a tiny movement as if to pull away, but in that instant his fingers closed around hers with an urgency that stilled her. It felt as though he would never let go again. His touch was soft but cool, bereft of warmth. A long since abandoned hearth on a cold winter’s night. He had lost so much. His freedom, his brother’s affection, his father’s respect. And now… His mother, the one constant in his life. Left alone to tumble around like a stray leaf in the violent currents of an uncertain fate.

His eyes lifted to hers, deep green to bright grey, and he let her see him fully for the first time. Nothing left to hide. Ljosira acted without thinking. Her arms came around his neck, embracing him. She felt the gasp of surprise rise in his chest as she let her head fall against it, followed by a great sigh of relief. His steady heart thudded beneath the spot where she rested her face.

She had thrown her everything into this gesture of tenderness, this simple wish to comfort him. A moment of stunned silence went by, before Loki pulled her into his lap and cradled her in his arms. His hands tangled inside the silver depth of her hair, cheek pressed gently to the top of her head. For a small eternity, he just held her, this tiny flickering light, and let warmth spread through the dread chill which clutched him in its stranglehold.

“I am so sorry. I was too late. I should have…”, she finally spoke, but he interrupted her.

“No.”, Loki said quietly. Just when Ljosira thought he would not go on, he added: “Even someone like me understands what that malicious power would do to a creature like you. Your light would wane and be smothered… No.” She wanted to explain to him more, wanted him to truly understand the reasons, but no words came to her. And maybe they weren’t needed, not yet. He did not blame her. He blamed a great many things, but she was not among them.

“Did she suffer?”, Loki inquired after a while, his gaze fixed on something far away. She shook her head once.
“No… It was quick.”

“It will not be so for them.” His voice was utterly calm, void of emotion. But even without reading his aura, Ljosira sensed the lust for revenge inside him, like the coiling body of a poisonous serpent. She feared that this one, she could not calm or cast out. The hurt ran too deeply, down to the marrow. Loss is not something that should be forcefully driven off. It needs to change in its own time.

From the fires of rage, it shifts towards acceptance, until it would slowly heal. Yet the scar it leaves behind would never fully fade, pulling tight from time to time as a reminder that once, things had been hale and whole. But it will hurt a little less each day. Ljosira had experienced this first-hand, the feeling which accompanies such substantial loss, although Loki did not know that. He had not asked, and she would not dredge up the past by forcing it upon him. She just stayed in his gentle embrace for a little longer, hoping that she made a difference, gave comfort. Because at that moment, he needed it so badly.
Thank you for the kudos <3
Loki does Loki things, and gets himself into some serious trouble...
This is a short chapter that leads up to some important events happening in parallel with Thor's battle against Malekith on Midgard. I think I will upload the next one pretty quickly, because it's one of my favorite ones.

IX. Relapse

“He will betray you.”, Fandral noted grimly.

“He will try.”, Thor corrected him. They were sitting in a dimly lit room, all huddled around a round table: Thor, Volstagg, Fandral and Sif. Heimdall stood leaned against a wall, wearing an expression of serious insult. Ljosira understood him – his sight had never failed him before, not in eons, but the Dark Elves had slipped past him with infuriating ease. The Gatekeeper had inherited her brother’s pride along with his eyes, both of which had suffered a serious blow. The debate between the companions had been going on for hours as they tried to devise a plan for freeing Jane Foster – now imprisoned by Odin. After Frigga’s death at the hands of Malekith, the Allfather’s fury had surfaced with a vengeance, and he would not let the Aether out of his sight. Grief-stricken and unforgiving, he had closed the Bifröst so no one, especially not Thor, would get any ideas of foolish heroics. Which was exactly what the thunder prince had in mind. Lure Malekith away with the Aether and then destroy them both. But only one person could help them find a way to leave Asgard at all. Nobody but Loki had such extensive knowledge about the secret passages between the worlds.

“He will not.”, Ljosira spoke into the heated argument, startling the assembled warriors. She stepped forth from the shadowed niche – suppressing a smirk at the irony of her lurking in the shadows at all. Only Heimdall seemed unfazed. “Or at least I dearly hope he won’t. I cannot accompany you to Svartalfheim. Its darkness is very powerful, alien to my nature. But I will keep watch over you.”, she went on.

So they thought up a meticulous plan of action. Free Loki, kidnap Jane with Sif’s help, then distract the guards while Thor escaped inside the hijacked Dark Elf assault ship. Heimdall would call upon the Allfather at the Bifröst to draw him away from the palace. He didn’t look pleased with the idea at all, but was too irked by recent events to object.

“This all sounds very dangerous, Thor… So many things could go wrong…”, Ljosira worried as she walked by his side through the deserted corridors. Thor glanced at her searchingly.

“I know… Are you worried about me or Loki?”, he asked in a humorous attempt to lift a little of the tension that had taken up permanent residence on her features. She threw him a look of fake accusation.

“Both of you.” Thor came to halt at the end of the walkway. It opened out to a small, unobtrusive terrace. Fandral stood on the deck of a sky-striker hovering in mid-air, its ornamented wings
reflecting the fading daylight. His expression was, as always, calm and debonair. He might have been taking some pretty lady on an evening pleasure flight, rather than embarking on an act of treason.

“This is where we part.”, Thor spoke in a serious tone. Ljosira’s gaze jumped to him.

“But…”, she protested weakly. The prince sighed. A rueful smile came to his defining, noble features.

“I do not want you to get caught up in this mess, Ljosira. If you are seen with a traitor, right before a prison break… Please understand.”, he beseeched her. In truth, she knew he had it right. Her first and foremost concern should be the rite of passage, a task of careful observation, not one of hasty, reckless actions. Meddling in other occurrences or conspiring with Thor against the Allfather could bring punishment down on her, maybe even exile. With a heavy heart, Ljosira bid farewell to Thor, watching him board the sky-striker.

“Be safe.”, she told him earnestly. “Do not let the gloom of the dark world into your heart. It will sink its roots into you, cling like a sickness.” Thor had a strange feeling that those words were meant more for Loki than for him. As he took flight, her form grew smaller, flooded by the sunset like a glowing flame, her eyes painted in liquid gold. The concern in them stayed with him for much, much longer.

*And remember*, she had told him right after the secret meeting. *if you do not return Loki to Asgard before the Convergence, he will be trialled in absence. And even I will not be able to foresee the outcome.*

Loki had not expected his brother, who never visited anyway. So he’d not bothered to cast an illusion around his pitiful self until he noticed the distinctly heavy footsteps, much too thumping to be Ljosira’s. The mess in his room vanished and morphed into the usual impeccable furniture, with him standing at the barrier, nonchalantly elegant and flawlessly dressed as usual. Just a moment before Thor walked into view.

Loki hid his surprise about his brother’s nondescript appearance. A modest cape covered up his boastful armour and he wore a serious expression, a strange weariness in his eyes. This Thor looked very unlike the one he knew. Still, Loki kept his face impassive.

“Thor. After all this time, and now you come to visit me.”, he intoned in a voice heavy with sarcasm, leaning forward until his brow nearly touched the barrier.

“Why?” He surveyed his brother critically, making no effort to curb the contempt. Yet a small whisper of his conscience questioned what he was trying to do here. Ignoring it, Loki spoke the same words he had uttered the last time they had seen each other.

“Have you come to gloat? To mock?” Thor cut the villainy monologue short.

“Loki, enough. No more illusions.” He sounded so calm and serious, lacking the blatant overconfidence which had always been a blow to Loki’s self-esteem. Maybe Ljosira had influenced him more than he knew, for the hint of pleading urgency in Thor’s voice stirred something in him that felt quite close to concern. Loki straightened and closed his eyes. The illusion dissolved, letting Thor see him as he truly was, battered and broken by their mother’s death. After being explained about the plan to help in an escape from Asgard with Jane, he let out a humourless laugh.
“What makes you think you can trust me?”, Loki demanded. Thor pierced him with a thorough stare.

“I don’t. Mother did. Any you know who else?” A flicker of emotion passed across his brother’s emerald eyes. Affection? Loki averted his gaze, but Thor was no fool. He had seen it.

“You know exactly who I mean. If you screw this up, I will personally drag you before the council for betraying the trust of a woman who’s shown you nothing but kindness.”

“Is she coming with us too?”, Loki asked, his brow furrowed.

“I would never put her through the danger of the dark world. Closeness to the Aether causes her physical pain. It is out of the question to bring her.”, Thor’s words carried a warning. To his great surprise, Loki looked… glad.

“Good.”, he said, leaving his brother baffled. “When do we start?”

Ljosira clutched the stirring wheel of the sky-striker, her eyes staring blankly into the distance as she tried hard to see how Thor’s plan worked out and pretty much ignored all of her surroundings. The vehicle protested against the pace she put it through while the solid rainbow bridge rushed past her in a colourful blur.

A deafening crash startled her from the concentrated state. She spun around to the sight of the blade-like assault ship as it shot from the palace like an immense black dagger. It swayed dangerously, reminding her of some drunk bird. Ljosira seriously began to question Thor’s wisdom about this whole idea.

Her sky-striker buckled when she stopped it abruptly. The assault ship staggered its way along Asgard’s sky, casually taking some of the city’s inventory with it. The pilots clearly had no idea what they were doing. Ironic as it was, the thrashing around helped them to dodge the cannon fire that erupted moments later.

“Reckless princes you have, Allfather…”, she murmured to herself. Almost as if she had conjured him, the real Odin appeared in the distance. On his majestic, eight-legged horse Sleipnir, whose hooves thundered over the rainbow bridge as he rode up to her.

“Ljosira! What happened?”, Odin called out. Sleipnir pranced and let out an impatient neigh, offended at being halted so brusquely. She looked up at him, her expression regretful.

“It seems your sons have escaped with the Aether.” She glimpsed the ship as it plunged straight downward and disappeared behind a hill. Her dragon sight told her that both Loki and Thor were safe, travelling on through the hidden pathway. Odin was still scrutinizing her when she faced him again.

“Did you help them?”, he simply asked. Ljosira heard no anger in his voice. He probably knew the answer anyway.

“Even if I wanted to, I am forbidden.”, she replied truthfully, not without a hint of offense. Odin sighed and released her from his thorough gaze.

“I did not mean to offend you.”, he then amended in a strange tone. It was silent for a time, before Odin spoke again. “It seems my sons are forever slipping out of my grasp. I wonder if I am
“Cursed?” Ljosira shook her head and managed a crooked half-smile.

“Maybe you have just taught them too well.” The Allfather merely looked at her for a long moment.

“You are going to the observatory?” His features had softened just the tiniest bit. Sleipnir huffed and shook his long, grey mane.

“Yes. At least from there, I might be able to observe how they are faring… It’s the only thing I am allowed to do.”

From Heimdall’s realm, she followed the brothers’ turbulent escape to Svartalfheim and listened to the first real conversation between them in years. Together, they derived a plan to defeat Malekith. As they put it into action, Ljosira understood why her sight had been clouded on the night the Dark Elves had first attacked.

A Kursed. A monster created by ancient, dark sorcery. They had been used in the conflict between Darkflight and Lightbringers to blind the latter in battle. She composed herself, attuning her vision to the annoying veil of fog, until she could see the happenings very faintly. But there was nothing she could do when the confrontation happened and Thor failed to destroy the Aether. The carefully staged ploy turned into a desperate fight, until –

With horror, Ljosira watched Loki get impaled on the same weapon he had struck into the Kursed’s chest. She felt an irrational, maddening surge of fear. And then… No reaction in the life-bond. He was not in danger. The realization struck her like a battering ram. He intended to fake his own death, the goddamn fool. And what then? Did he think he could play dead to escape judgement by the dragon council?

“Liar!”, the cry of frustration flew from her throat as she watched Thor lay his brother down on Svartalfheim’s ugly, bleak soil. Felt the crushing sadness of the crown prince. She cursed at herself for having told Thor that Loki would not betray him, for even believing that man was capable of change. She had feared this would happen, but had pushed the suspicion aside and chosen to trust him instead. Her anger rang out into the great void like the enraged howl of an implacable beast. A dragon’s roar.
X. No More Tricks

Chapter Notes

I really like this chapter :> I gave it a nice little twist, hehe...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X. No More Tricks

Within the vortex of disappointment and hurt, Ljosira sensed the manifestation of another presence, drawing her attention away from Loki. She spun around to see a perfect, bright sphere coalesce into a cluster of stars. The eyes of Yggdrasil looked at her from its shimmering depths.

“My daughter. Your heart is so very troubled.”, Elding spoke softly. Ljosira could not contain the compulsive, dry sob.

“How can it not be, father? Malekith has the Aether. Thor is devastated by his brother’s supposed death. And Loki repeats the same insane mistakes all over again! I have achieved nothing, nothing! He will never change.”, she cried in despair.

“Now, you allow your emotions to cloud your judgement. I have taught you better. The crown prince is capable of stopping Malekith. You have to trust him to see it through. It may be a close call… The Darkflight are practically giddy with excitement.”, her father commented, seemingly unworried. “As for Loki… Look closer! Into the bond, and beyond. Is it certainty you see? Unshakable purpose? I am not so sure even he knows what he is doing. Never doubt your sight. You are Lightbringer.” Ljosira rubbed her eyes and drew a shuddering breath.

“Is it always this hard?”, she asked in a meek voice. The sphere pulsed with tenderness.

“No. You have chosen an exceptionally fickle mortal for an accidental life-bond. And yet, I have complete faith in you, my youngest.” Before Ljosira could think of a coherent reply, the sphere dissolved, leaving her alone in Heimdall’s observatory.

Tired and defeated, she sank onto the steps in front of the Gatekeeper’s podium and buried her face in her hands. If she could only weep like a mortal. They always seemed so relieved afterwards.

In less than a few hours, she had to present Loki’s case to the council, having absolutely nothing to prove his innocence, now that he had chosen deception and lies once more. Instead of a real chance to redeem himself. The corrupting shadow still haunted his soul, although it had grown smaller and smaller. At least she had thought it had. Why, why did he do this to her, when she had been sure they were succeeding in casting the darkness out? How could she defend him now? And hadn’t he sought comfort in her when his mother had died? Hadn’t he shown his true nature then, a man who stood alone, with all his failed attempts to be appreciated? Had she really deluded herself into thinking she would be enough to silence the jealous, raging creature that thrashed around inside him?

Ljosira pulled her shoulders straight. Her father was right. You are Lightbringer. You part the truth from the lies. With your torch you light the way. If there was any honesty to be found in Loki, she would extract it. And give him a piece of her mind meanwhile. With fierce determination, she rose
from the gilded floor, just when she sensed him cross the border between the worlds. What? He returned? It made no sense.

The impressive palace hallways were deserted, since most of the soldiers had been sent out in search for Thor. The damage wrought by the Dark Elves had not been repaired yet, the swath of destruction all the way to the Allfather’s seat still blatantly visible. Ljosira sought a dark corner between two undamaged columns, thankful for the deep shadows the night provided. She did not have to wait long. Footsteps of armoured boots resonated from the marble tiles, before a guard in full attire walked past her hiding place, the spear in his hand clank-clank-clanking on the stone floor. But such a disguise would never fool her.

“You complete arse!” Ljosira burst from the darkness without preamble. “What monumental, foolhardy arrogance must be going on inside your head!” Her voice shook with uncontained insult. Loki froze immediately, spear still in hand. He turned, shocked by the threat in her posture. Her eyes threw out sparks of vicious anger, making him recoil.

“This is how you return? Another trick, another foolish attempt to take what you think is yours by right? Will you never learn?!” Ljosira advanced on him with lighting speed. The next he knew, her hand soared through the air and slapped him right across the face so fiercely, he staggered. He had never thought such a small person capable of such strength. The sound resonated like the crack of whip in the emptiness around them. She erupted like a force of nature, with an ire that choked the air from his lungs.

“Is this your gratitude for my efforts? Is this how you thank me for keeping you company, for protecting you in front of the Allfather, the council, and the whole goddamn world?!” He couldn’t even blink, so quickly she was upon him. Battering her fists against his chest, taking swipes at his face. A blow to his temple made him lose control over his illusion, shattering it to reveal his true form.

“Ljosira, stop –” But she was beyond reason, lashing out blindly, her stunning face so distorted it was painful to watch. A little desperate now, he dodged and deflected her blows with no idea how to calm her. Magic erupted out of her in violent, gut-punching bursts. How could he even explain? As soon as he had left her proximity, her light, the sinister other side had taken over and filled his head with schemes and ideas. And even though he struggled to suppress it – almost succeeding – he had once again been overwhelmed by his delusions. The plan had been reasonable just a while ago. Why, then, had he returned? He didn’t know. He didn’t quite dare to even think about it. A small, vicious fist swished dangerously close to his jaw.

“I trusted you, lying bastard! I trusted you and you turned to evil again. Now they will find you guilty and kill you! Sever our life-bond, gone forever, and you have no idea how that feels – Let me go!” Loki had gripped both of her wrists to stop the relentless assault on his person. She squirmed to free herself, but what could she do? They were on mortal grounds. Her magic might have been tremendous, the enchantments around her shielding her from harm. But physically, she was just a willowy wisp of a woman.

When Ljosira realized her predicament, she proceeded to stare daggers at him. He knew he deserved her anger, and then some. But as he looked at her, the perfect curve of her chest heaving with rapid breaths, face flushed and her lips so invitingly parted, he was powerless to fight the inevitable. It was an act so irrational, he couldn’t conceive of any reason behind it. Maybe he drew some sick sort of pleasure from life-threatening situations, or maybe it was the giddy exhilaration of having cheated death yet again. Or just her, irresistibile in all she was.
With one well-executed pull, he dislodged her balance. She staggered against his chest and he took shameless advantage of her clumsiness. His arm came around her midriff, lifting her just as he dipped his head and covered her mouth with his. Ljosira was so utterly thunder-struck that she didn’t even protest. She let out a muffled gasp and tensed all over for a split second, before some intangible force inside her gave in and went still.

His lips moved over hers so insistently, the tip of his tongue flicking out in a teasing dance, while one of his hands buried into the silver strands at the back of her head. Gently aligning her to a better angle, he coaxed her to let him taste from her sweetness, pressing her body even closer to his own. Shyly, she allowed it. A strong swooping sensation lifted in her stomach when he delved into the honeyed depth of her mouth. Exploring thoroughly, pursuing that intoxicating essence which reminded him of sun-flooded days. Her hands relaxed and came to rest on his shoulders, bunching into the fabric.

“I know I’m a fool.”, Loki mumbled against her lips. And when he kissed her again, her small, smooth tongue answered him. So careful, artless, and yet some deep-seated instinct seemed to guide her. He had lain awake at night, imagining doing exactly this, feeling her soft breasts pressed to his chest, her body quiver ever so slightly. All those hours spent in helpless longing now came back to strike him in full force. Gods, how he wanted this woman. He was already rock-hard and aching from just kissing her, like some untried young lad.

*Why resist?, his male instincts pleaded. You could just push her up against the column, hike up her skirts, plunge into her silky heat and lose all control. It would be sheer bliss. When did you last allow yourself to let go?*

*No, this is the worst time! What in Valhalla’s sake are you even thinking?* The voice of reason sounded distant, worlds away. Loki groaned like a man fighting a battle he couldn’t win.

Thankfully, Ljosira took the decision out of his hands. It seemed she passed some invisible line between startled compliance and shocked realization. She went rigid in his arms and pushed herself away from him, breaking the kiss. Loki knew a sudden, wrecking tide of frustration. He forcibly reined it in, for Ljosira was staring at him, eyes wide and unbelieving, a deep blush blooming on her face. Her hand went to her lips. It shook slightly.

“Why… Why would you do that?”, she whispered. Loki merely looked at her. The abruptly doused desire made him unnecessarily blunt.

“Because you wouldn’t stop flailing at me and it was the only way to silence you.”, he ground out, turning away from her. He inhaled several deep breaths to calm the inferno that raged through every fibre of his body. It took way too long.

“I – We shouldn’t… We need to… deal with things. The Convergence –”, she stammered distractedly.

“I know.”, Loki sighed. “I’m sorry… for betraying your trust.” He still could not look at her fully, but when he glanced at her from the corner of his eye, he caught a stunned surprise on her features. She had not expected him to apologize.

If he was honest with himself, he hadn’t expected it either, not twice in one day. In a way, he had meant those words both times he had spoken them, to Thor and to Ljosira. As his mind slowly returned from the haze, he wondered if the mortal he had killed on the flying fortress had been right all along. Always doomed to fail. However much he twisted the truth, lying to those closest to him, too stubborn to face reality, he lacked conviction. For if he truly, deeply looked into his heart – the place he feared the most – then what was left for him after all the dies had been cast?
Nothing. Not a single thing.

Living in Thor’s over-towering shadow had diminished him all his life, but was that really worth casting a brother away? Hadn’t Thor been the one who had learned humbleness and the meaning of true honour by giving himself up, when Loki had sent the Destroyer to kill him? Did he not bear the burden of the elder son every day, the overwhelming responsibility over thousands of people? And wasn’t his mother, his not-mother, one who had loved him despite his origin? Unquestioningly, to the very end.

He was so tired, so incredibly tired. Of all the conflict in his mind, the questions that demanded answers, of fighting his doubts and being angry all the time.

Loki gazed at Ljosira, as always luminous with that perpetual flame that burned in her. My light, he named her in his thoughts, not even quite conscious of what he did. The bleakness of the Dark World had robbed him of warmth. She gave it back to him so casually, it made walking a different path seem so simple. For one who had never known anything else, it likely was so.

“You are a lot of work.”, Ljosira said quietly. “And yet, you returned. On some level, you must have known what that would mean. To be facing me, and the council.” Loki gave one heavy nod.

“Is it too late to help Thor against Malekith?” he asked.

“We cannot help him now. All we can do is to trust him to succeed.”, she answered slowly. She seemed to have composed herself after the upsetting experience of their kiss, although a rosy colour still lingered on her cheeks. A flash of silver crossed her eyes. “We have our own conflict to settle. The Convergence is close.”

“Will I go back to the prison?” His voice did not sound quite as strong as he wished it to be.

“I hope that won’t be necessary. But…” She lifted her gaze to him and he had the feeling that she peered into his very soul, unravelling whatever she found there.

“Loki, I will defend you in trial, but the time for mischief is over now. As your advocate, I urge you… If there is anything you want to tell me, you should do it now. You will not be able to lie to the council.”, she emphasized, sounding dead serious now, her mind focused on the ordeal ahead of them. Loki averted his eyes.

“Faking my own death seemed reasonable while I was in Svartalfheim. And now it seems like such an absurd idea. It is like that sometimes. As though another… voice whispers these schemes to me. Is it truly me? It doesn’t sound entirely right. It is me… and not me. Do I even make sense?” He fumbled for words, which usually came so naturally to him. But Loki had never tried to explain the bizarre chasm of his mind to anyone else before. Ljosira didn’t question his sanity.

“Since when?”, she merely inquired.

“Since… always, I reckon.”, he replied, but she shook her head.

“No. It became worse. When?” Loki pondered this for a moment, sifting through memories.

“It was worst when the Chitauri gave me that staff. It was incredibly powerful. I relished in wielding it. But it always felt just a little… wrong. You step into your home, and everything is as you had left it, but you just know that someone else had been there. You can sense it, at the tips of your fingers… Just out of your reach.”, he described with some difficulty. Ljosira watched him closely.
“I understand.”, she said after a moment of silence. Loki raised his eyebrows.

“You do? Even to me, that sounded like utter gibberish. And I’m the one they call mad.”, he mused. A smile ghosted across her lips when Ljosira motioned him to follow her.

“Come. I will explain it on the way.” As they walked down the wide corridor, he noticed that her expression had become very tense, her whole stance rigid. Much rode on how she would perform today, and the pressure of it must have been staggering.

“You know that there are artefacts in our universe with near infinite potential and power. Most of them are also equally dangerous. The weapon, for example. I am not sure if the Chitauri even knew what they had handed you there. I think it infected your mind. Even for me, it is very hard to tell which of your actions had been your own, and which had been whispered to you by the corrupting presence in the staff. I won’t be able to rid you of all guilt. But…”, she paused her explanation and turned to him, her grey eyes imploring. So the staff had been the core of the matter all along. The reason for his madness. Or rather the catalyst. It had amplified every conflict and somehow, unnoticed by him, planted ideas into his mind. His lips pressed to a firm line and he felt a wave of insult that he might have been hoodwinked without even realizing it.

“Listen to me now.”, Ljosira demanded his attention. “When we are in front of the council, you must not try to fool them. No tricks this time, Loki. They will simply see through it. If you attempt to deceive them, they will take it as an act of defiance and I won’t be able to protect you from their wrath. Do you understand?” Loki straightened and let his gaze trail off into the distance. After a moment, he closed his eyes, nodding.

“As you wish.”, he conceded quietly. They moved on, walking in silence for a while. A cornucopia of issues seemed to hang between them, burdening the air. Loki wondered absently what he should be expecting from this trial. Would the council appear in Asgard? Would he be brought to Yggdrasil and face a bunch of giant dragons, staring down at him accusingly? He had no idea. But when Ljosira headed towards Odin’s throne, he began to have an uneasy apprehension.

“Where are we going?”, he asked the dragon princess, whose eyes were fixed stubbornly ahead, a deep frown on her smooth brow.

“To the Allfather. He will attend too.”, she answered curtly.

“Well, this is going to be the worst kind of family meeting.”, Loki remarked with a tortured grimace. Ljosira seemed to agree in silence. The throne-room was still thoroughly ravaged by the attack, although a few pillars had been recreated hastily. Most of them still hung from the ceiling, ending in jagged pieces like odd stalactites.

The throne itself loomed at the top of the stairs, shattered and unreppaired. Odin stood at the lower steps, facing the royal seat. Loki thought his not-father looked shrunken, like a man who had faced too many disappointments. Yet when he turned at their approach, a glint of fury passed through his eyes and his features turned forbidding, chiselled from stone.

“Ljosira. And I see you brought one wayward son of mine home, for all the good it does.”, he inclined his head to her in greeting, before his gaze pierced Loki like a flaming spear. If there was anything but reproach in it, it was buried too deep to be found. “I should throw you right back into prison and your brother too, when he comes back! Maybe that will bring you to your senses or finally make you destroy each other!”

“Allfather… Please, calm yourself. He helped Thor, who is now fighting against Malekith. And he returned to face his trial.”, Ljosira said softly in an attempt to de-escalate the tense situation. Odin
heaved a great sigh.

“You do have a kind heart.” He added no more to the matter, instead both he and Ljosira walked to
the back of the throne. Loki could not fathom why. There was only a solid wall of gold behind it
below the great ornate window.

“We have to go now, Loki.”, Ljosira urged.

“Go where? Into the wall?”, he queried sarcastically. But Odin pressed some unseen mechanism in
the golden marble and it started to retreat like liquid, undulating to form an archway. Behind it lay
a hidden chamber, and while Loki retained a mildly surprised expression, in reality he was
impressed that there still remained a passage in all of Asgard he had not discovered until now. He
followed Ljosira and Odin into a perfectly circular dome, similar to the observatory. Canopied by a
most unusual ceiling, made from four kinds of metal which coalesced at the centre above a
podium. The ornaments cradled a material very alike the Bifröst, and yet different.

Each of the four had their own colour, but within that boundary it shimmered in countless hues.
Green, from dark emerald to light grass. Sun-yellow, patches of white speckling it like little clouds.
Dark violet entwined with rosy pink. And red, from richest crimson to pitch black. While he still
marvelled at the construction, the Allfather handed Ljosira his spear.

Without hesitation, she struck Gungnir into the socket. Beams of light erupted all around and the
dome started spinning rapidly. Ljosira spoke an incantation in an unfamiliar language. Dragon
speech. Loki closed his eyes against the flare as it engulfed everything. He was assaulted by the
uncomfortable sensation that his body stretched from here to infinity, while some incredible force
compressed him mercilessly at the same time. He was graphite being crushed into a diamond.

Maybe Ljosira had never thought about the possibility that he might not survive the journey to the
council, and he would soon just shatter to a million pieces. But nothing so violent happened.
Without warning, the pressure lifted from him and his feet touched… somewhat solid ground.

Loki realized with sudden, overwhelming certainty that his fate would be decided in mere minutes.
He had known that already, but now it had become painfully real, inescapable. Either the council
would pardon him in some way, or he would be eradicated at their hands. Taking a deep, steadying
breath, he opened his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Something that isn't mentioned in the story itself: Odin's spear, Gungnir, as well as
Heimdall's sword Hofund, are weapons made from Uru in the great dwarven forge of
Nidavellir (just like Mjölnir). In Lightbringer, these weapons are also imbued with
dragon fire. Incidentally, all three have been tempered in the fire of Lightbringer
dragons:

Gungnir - empowered by Elding, the dragon king. Can cast beams of energized light
through channeling the Odinforce. Is also the key to opening the passage to Yggdrasil, home of the dragons.
Hofund - empowered by Vegr, firstborn of the dragon king and bond-partner of
Heimdall. Can open and channel the Bifröst.
Mjölnir - empowered by Elding. We all know what it does.
Chapter Notes

Thank you for kudos <3 I'm so happy you like it so far! I'll try to keep up the good work!
I think this is the part of the story where things really start evolving and deepening.
I loved describing Yggdrasil, and I like it even more in the overhauled version. It was fun introducing the home of the dragons and each leader of the flights. My favorite is Aevi!
The council chose to appear in their mortal forms even on Yggdrasil, since the presence of the four leaders in one place would be quite uncomfortable for pretty much anyone, even the Aesir. But we will see them in their true dragon forms, eventually :>

Translations:

Andlát – Death
Aevi – Life, Story of Life

XI. Yggdrasil

When Loki opened his eyes, he was greeted by the strangest view he would ever come to see. Millions of stars-strewn ribbons arched over the vast disk he stood on, all formed into the branches and leaves of a mighty ash tree. Streams of liquid light rippled their way across the plane, wound between pillars of meteorite dust to plunge over the edge into infinite space.

Curtains hung from Yggdrasil’s branches, veils of powdery cosmic energy. This place was so far beyond anything real, it seemed ungraspable, maintained by magic which knew no equal. Even the ground beneath his feet felt as though he might slip right through it. It glowed, translucent like enchanted glass. The scales were immense – not made for mortals, but for creatures much bigger. Loki could only stare, lost for words. When his gaze found Odin’s, the same awe answered him in his father’s eyes, followed by a flicker of amusement.

Ljosira, the dragon princess who marvelled at stitching on clothes and letters in books, seemed absurdly unimpressed. A raised platform floated above the plane some distance away, but Loki could only make out blurry shapes and some sort of plaza surrounded by a semi-circle of twinkling columns. A figure dressed in white and gold approached, walking fluidly along the broad path. Tall and graceful, his pale hair streamed over his shoulders and framed his regal, elven features. The crown on his brow was decorated with eight curved prongs, which were uncannily reminiscent of horns. Before any of them could greet the newcomer, Ljosira broke into a run.

“Father!” , she cried out in joy and flung herself into his arms. He caught her without even swaying.

“Ah, my little one! How wonderful to see you in good spirits again. Much better than your bleak mood before.”, Elding’s voice rang with warmth.
“I hope my youngest has not caused you too much trouble, Allfather.”, he then addressed Odin, bowing his head. The Allfather returned the gesture.

“Not at all, old friend.”

Elding shifted his gaze to Loki, who was rendered utterly motionless, struck by a most curious sensation. He wanted to avert his eyes, but they simply chose not to obey. And so he felt something timeless and unending gaze right through him, turning him inside out. Ljosira had been right to warn him. No tricks would fool this being. He simply exfoliated every layer of deception until Loki thought he lay blank before millennia of knowledge, bare like an exposed nerve.

He could have lived without ever experiencing a Dragon King’s thorough inspection. Especially if he happened to see the part dedicated to his daughter. The outlook of having mortally insulted all of dragonkind made him a little queasy. This situation was already declining too quickly to stem the tide.

But nothing horrible happened. Elding finally released him, his expression as though he had just retrieved some ordinary item without meaning to.

“Hm. Interesting.”, he noted, sounding vaguely curious. Well, such were dragons. And this was their king, after all. He had likely seen every possible thing in the world.

“Follow me. The council is already assembled.”, he bid in a perfectly calm voice. They walked a wide pathway lined with starry willows. Loki found himself looking to his feet frequently, where the massive disks of the Nine Realms were shifting into alignment for the Convergence.

He glimpsed Asgard at the topmost, an ornamented gold plate in all its beauty. Midgard was much farther below – a blur of ocean blue, forest green and steel grey. Still lower yet, Jotunheim’s black ice threw back a dull gleam. Loki had to admit, it was a sight to behold. Absorbed in it, he did not notice they had reached the raised platform. He had been right about the colonnade, but the crystalline twinkle was not what caught his attention.

Elding joined the three figures on the dais, all of them now sitting on throne-like seats. And each of them stared at him. They were a very unusual quartet. Beside Elding lounged a woman of average size and a voluptuous mane, as black as a raven’s wing. She had propped her head into one hand, her dark eyes harbouring a sinister intelligence as they surveyed Loki with open distaste.

On her left sat a woman whose vibrant beauty rivalled Ljosira’s – and yet managed to be of an entirely different sort. Earthen, less fey and more tangible, like a root firmly entrenched into the soil. She wore a dress woven from silky grass. Above her radiant features, a tiara of leaves crowned her auburn hair. Compared to her, the last in line was a near shocking sight.

An ageless man cloaked in violet shadows, his face severe and somehow… blurred, as though viewed through a distorted lens. He seemed absent, his eerie, milky eyes constantly shifting in and out of focus, looking at distant things none but him could see. Was he blind? Elding jolted Loki from his musing when he rose to speak.

“Wellcome to the High Council. It has been some time since we last had mortal visitors. I believe it was five thousand years ago, when my son Vegr gave his sight to Asgard’s gatekeeper.”, he began, his tone neutral. Each leader bowed respectfully to Odin. The lady in green even gave him a warm smile.

“You age with pride, Allfather.”, she spoke in an abundant voice.
“As you know, we are here to oversee the rite of passage for my youngest daughter, Ljosira. She has been tasked to observe and evaluate this mortal, who has conspired with the Chitauri and brought them to Midgard in a crusade of destruction. Natta, if you please.” The woman in black stepped forward.

“The Darkflight have successfully kept the Chitauri in quarantine for centuries. And with good reason. They are masters of deceit and have been known to manipulate all sorts of mortals to do their bidding. But this one let them loose upon the world. And since his past crimes clearly show how unstable he is, I call to cease this farce of a trial and execute him.” Her tone during this casual death-threat made Loki bristle with discomfort. Smooth velvet to shroud a hidden dagger in the night. He’d do well not to underestimate her. Ljosira moved to object, but the vibrant lady spoke before she could.

“Natta. I understand that you are angry about the transgression on your quarantine. But we do not take life before examining the circumstances. I see great magical potential in this one – the power to create.”, she said thoughtfully.

“Up until now, he has only taken lives, Aevi.”, the unnerving fourth spoke then. It sent shivers of unease skittering down Loki’s spine. Voidwalker. The most alien of the leaders, the most inscrutable of the clans. They treaded the edge between life and death constantly, seeing things which might easily undo a mortal mind. The strange dragon’s fathomless gaze avoided either one of theirs.

“Thank you for your opinions, Aevi, Andlát. As you can see, the High Council is divided in this issue. Therefore I call my daughter as a witness.”, Elding went on seamlessly. Loki had the odd feeling of being lifted from his body and perceiving the events from above like a detached observer. It was all too bizarre. Ljosira inhaled deeply and stepped before the council members, who were now watching her with various expressions, ranging from benevolent to accusing. Her rigid spine reminded Loki of a wildly overstretched bow.

“Respected members of the council. Even prior to being sent to Asgard by my father, I have been watching the accused’s actions from Yggdrasil. I arrived to my task with the suspicion that the happenings on Midgard, concerning the Chitauri invasion, had been manipulated. And so has Loki.”, she began, casting him a sideways glance.

“What makes you think so?”, Andlát inquired, now sounding faintly intrigued. Ljosira’s gaze flickered to her father, who gave her the smallest of nods.

“There are several reasons. First of all, the staff. We do not know if the Chitauri have created it themselves, but it is an incredibly powerful weapon, capable of manipulating countless people. Why would they just willingly give him such a thing, make him the leader of their vanguard and offer him dominion of Midgard? A very altruistic act for a race known for its mastery in deception.” Natta grunted gruffly to this.

“Mind-controlling a few Midgardians is something else entirely than twisting an Aesir mind. But he is not even Aesir, is he? He is a Jotun! A liar even before he outgrew the crib!” She couldn’t have insulted him more if she had physically slapped him. Loki felt the sting of her offence go deep – she had hit home, latching on to his greatest insecurity. The fact that he did not fit in, had no place in any world. Always to be suspected of treason and betrayal. Ljosira’s face distorted in anger. She pointed a finger at Natta accusingly.

“I object to such meaningless insult! His origin is not subject of this trial, and you are simply bending the truth because of your wounded pride!” The Darkflight leader’s eyes narrowed to glinting slits as she glared at Ljosira.
“You dare talk to me like that, fledgling?”, her voice had dropped dangerously low.

“Enough! Keep your personal offenses out of this trial, Natta. And you, Ljosira. Watch your words when you address the leader of a flight.”, Elding commanded. Natta snorted derisively, but leaned back into her throne. Loki could see Ljosira clench her jaw, the cords of her neck tauter than a lute’s strings. If looks could kill… On the other hand, he was impressed by her fierce defence. Had the outcome of his trial depended on Natta, he would surely have been eradicated by now.

“Ljosira. We understand your suspicion about the weapon. But we cannot base judgement on that alone. Surely, you have some evidence to support your claim.”, Aevi broke the tense moment calmly in an attempt to aid the young dragon.

“Yes. I have spent considerable amount of time in Loki’s presence and endeavoured to discuss these matters with him honestly. That, in addition to watching his aura with my sight, leads me to believe the Chitauri staff has corrupted his soul.”, Ljosira explained.

“Show us a projection of the aura, please.”, Elding suggested. She went white as a sheet at his words, swallowing hard. Loki thought she looked panicked all of a sudden, like someone who had been assigned a near impossible task on which all else depended. Now that he thought about it, he had seen Ljosira perform all kinds of exceptional magic, but she had never conjured the image of an aura. In fact, when he had asked her many weeks ago, she had said “I wish I could show you”, as though such a thing was beyond her abilities. He knew little about the complexities of aura-projection, but it seemed to be a difficult spell.

Ljosira slowly lifted her hands. Hundreds of strings – ranging from solid ropes to thin, gossamer threads – appeared in the air and began to intertwine into intricate little knot-constructs. She meticulously gave colour to each of them. The enchantment took up all of her concentration. Loki saw it in the way her fingers moved as if directing a sophisticated musical composition. Braiding together the threads, she created a multifaceted kaleidoscope – red bled into black and orange, dull grey coiling around it. Forest green, light yellow, and many more he couldn’t even name. A shadow formed at the centre of her creation, pulsing with jagged spikes. Ljosira paused, looking desperate. She knew what Loki did not: His aura was terribly entangled. It took all of her expertise to project it in a proper way. This was her last test, and why did it have to be something so difficult? Her hands froze in the middle of a movement. Elding watched her closely.

“Go on. You are doing just fine.”, he assured his daughter. She tried, although she feared that she was in over her head. Soon, the finished silhouette floated between Ljosira and the council, made from countless knots, weaves and fibres.

“Marvellous! A beautiful job. Look, there is the shade. What do you think, Elding?”, Aevi said, astounded.

“That is not a natural occurrence. The edges are much too sharp. It keeps trying to escape, grow, devour. As a corrupting presence would.” Loki heard the hint of pride in his voice. Natta looked as though she had bitten into something sour.

“What is that, around the heart? It looks like a…”, Andlát indicated a ribbon of pure white light dancing buoyantly around the figure’s chest. It seemed to trail off into the distance.

“A life-bond. A disgrace to our kind.”, Natta spat out while Elding sighed. It was this point when Ljosira’s concentration broke and the projection dissolved, leaving her exhausted and spent. A slight movement below caught Loki’s attention.

If all the happenings of this day weren’t enough, he looked down to see tendrils of pure darkness
slowly penetrating each of the Nine Realms. They swirled and wound menacingly, cloaking all they touched in shadow. Terror must have somehow shown on his face, for Elding spoke to him in an offhand tone.

“The thunder prince is taking his time to defeat Malekith, it seems.” He said that like talking about the weather. “Well then, Ljosira. You have successfully recreated the aura and shown us that the corruption in this mortal has influenced his actions. But still…”, and during his next words he taxed Loki with his gaze, “… he has proven an affinity to evil. If we are to set him free…”

“I do not propose to set him free. Not yet anyway. I think this matter needs more time. There is still some corruption left. If he would turn to evil again in such a manner that it harms others is a question which needs further evaluation.”, Ljosira began carefully.

“You seem to have a suggestion. What would you have us do?”, Aevi inquired with some interest.

“I would let him out of prison and return him to the palace, but place an enchantment around the area, the quarters for example. A magical barrier. And… I would accompany him back to Asgard, so I can oversee the process. At least for the time being.” The council members exchanged baffled looks with each other.

“This much fuss about a mortal! The life-bond makes your youngest sentimental, Elding.”, Natta uttered scornfully. The evil tendrils were nearing the platform, darkening Yggdrasil’s star-strewn branches. Even the council looked concerned now – all except Natta. She seemed perfectly calm, mocking even. The Dragon King ignored her.

“A tremendous offer you make, Ljosira. And the accused stands silent during all of the trial. Are you sure this is not wasted on him?”, Andlát inquired pensively. Aevi too turned her eyes to Loki.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Loki? Your lifeline has been extended several times now. This may be the last opportunity for you to redeem yourself and choose a path of creation rather than destruction. Will you live up to it?”

Loki felt every pair of eyes, even the Allfather’s single one, watching him. It was a thoroughly uncomfortable sensation. The moment Ljosira had warned him about had come, and he had to pick his words very carefully. The world darkened yet further.

“High Council of Dragons…”, he began. “I have made choices which seemed right to me, but proved disastrous and wrong in the end. Denying that I feel… conflicted most of the time would be a lie. But if there is a possibility to make a right decision, one that doesn’t end with me being cast out or falling from some world’s edge… I shall try.” It was one of the hardest things he had to do in his life, meeting the gaze of each leader. These were some of the most powerful beings in the cosmos. When he arrived at Natta, the Darkflight dragon’s eyes narrowed in clear threat. She did not trust him for a second.

“If you step one toe out of line, mortal…”, she purred. As if the entire suspense had been choreographed, the sinister energy seeping into the realms began to dissolve. It waned and evaporated, leaving behind Yggdrasil’s mighty branches, shimmering in contest with each other. One after the other, the council members nodded, with Elding being the last one.

“Very well, so be it.”, the Dragon King said. Beside Loki, Ljosira had been holding her breath. Now she let it out in a rush and a radiant wonder bloomed on her face, outshining even the spectacular world tree around them. She smiled at him, bright like a swiftly rising dawn. It was dizzying. Thor had won the day, and so had she.
“Do you accept these terms, Allfather?” the Dragon King turned to Odin and Loki’s heart sank. The council might be convinced, but his not-father was an entirely different matter. He might deny just out of spite and disappointment. The two great kings shared a long, lingering look.

“I do.”, Odin said, his voice steady but void of emotion.

“One of your sons just saved us a thousand years of darkness. And the other one seems willing to make amends for his past mistakes. You have taught them well.”, Elding mused. The slightest hint of pride ghosted across Odin’s features.

“Too well.” He glanced at Ljosira, who was still beaming.

“This meeting is hereby concluded.” Elding had not even finished his sentence when Natta whirled and vanished behind the thrones. Loki saw a giant, onyx shadow leap from the edge of the platform.

“She was never fond of me.”, Ljosira noted with a trickle of bitterness. Her father stepped from the dais and lifted a hand to her shoulder.

“You openly defied her in front of the other council members. Do not expect her to love you for it.”, he scolded her, before his face softened. “I am a proud father, more than ever on this day. You performed admirably in the aura task.”

“You could have chosen something simpler.”, she muttered. To Loki’s questioning look, Ljosira averted her eyes. For some unknown reason, she seemed embarrassed. “Recreating an aura is complex magic at the best of times. But my father likes to make challenges even more daunting.” He didn’t comprehend the meaning behind her words, but Elding smiled knowingly. Then the Dragon King turned to Odin.

“I must ask you to take your leave now, regretfully. Only dragons are allowed to attend the rite of passage. It is one of our most sacred ceremonies.”

A mysterious, unreadable expression passed over his elven features as he looked at Loki, who did not like the thought of being parted from Ljosira again, especially after what had happened the last time, very recently. He visibly tensed when Odin grasped his arm to lead him back to the portal. For a fleeting moment, Ljosira’s hand wrapped around his wrist and squeezed it reassuringly. Illuminated by the many lights of Yggdrasil, her grey eyes sought his, an enigmatic smile on her lips.

“It’s alright. I will see you soon.”, she spoke the words into his thoughts. And he had no choice but to obey.
I have a quote I am quite fond of from Mass Effect 3 (Shepard says this to EDI):
"Nobody ever fell in love without being a little bit brave."
Time for some happenings!
I hope you like it <3

XII. Game of Dare

Two days later, stars were still falling relentlessly over Asgard’s sky in an unending meteor shower. A beautiful spectacle, the way they would shoot like streaks of light over the horizon in dozens, illumining the golden towers for a moment. Loki felt restless. Being back in his quarters was a great improvement to the claustrophobic confines of his cell, although even here, magical barriers had been set up to keep him from trespassing. They glowed much fainter than the prison shields, yet he sometimes glimpsed them when he used the right angle. Shimmering at the end of the corridor, outside the terrace, at the edge of his vision.

Loki sighed and stepped away from the stunning view which marked Ljosira’s successful rite of passage. His gaze passed aimlessly over the neat furniture in his study. Empty, somehow, without her company. It irked him, and at the same time he missed her too strongly to care about his own annoyance. Lacking real interest, he flipped through a book on his desk when he heard Odin speak behind him.

“You know… What she did for you, it was not a mere act of kindness.” There was a strange expression in his one eye, but Loki could not decipher it. Neither his words.

“Come. Your brother has returned.”, Odin continued, as though he just remembered what he came here to do. Loki followed the Allfather. As soon as he passed through the barrier, an awkward enchantment wrapped around his wrists. Shackles to keep his magic at bay, so he would not get any ideas. He did not like the confining feeling. The hallways were quiet. Grieving period had ended, but people were still rattled by the attack of the Dark Elves. Only a few lonely guards crossed their way to the throne room.

Where Thor stood at the lowest step to the seat, looking a little battered but otherwise unharmed. Loki hesitated. How was he supposed to explain his death to his brother? He had a distinct feeling that he would not be able to talk himself out of this one. And surely enough, as soon as Thor caught sight of him, his face went blank, before it twisted with an array of emotions, unable to resign itself to a single one.

“Loki… You were dead.”, Thor exclaimed, bewildered. Loki opened his mouth to answer – although he had no idea what would come out – when another voice chimed through the hall. A voice more familiar than he would dare to admit.

“Let us call it a draconic intervention.” Ljosira stepped from behind the throne. Her face still youthful and striking, but the silver hair was now streaked with a few errant white strands, pulled up instead of flowing freely around her shoulders. To everyone’s utter astonishment, she dashed up
to Thor with a dazzling smile and flung herself into his arms. The crown prince caught her in a bear hug, spinning her around while she whooped girlishly.

“So hugs are allowed now!”, he boomed, grinning widely as he set her down again. Loki watched the whole thing with a clenched jaw and an unexplainable rush of jealousy. He wanted to punch Thor right in the face. Or the groin.

“Congratulations, Ljosira! I have no idea how you did it, but it doesn’t even matter now.”, he said and then suddenly pulled Loki into a hug too. The gesture took him so completely by surprise that he didn’t even resist. Ljosira had defused a possibly disastrous situation and spared him Thor’s rage and disappointment. Just like that.

“It’s good to see you, brother.”, Thor said earnestly. He didn’t seem interested how Loki was still alive, just… truly glad about it. Words failed the man known for his wit in conversation.

Ljosira curtsied graciously before Odin, but when she turned to Loki, she suddenly looked awkward, uncertain. He suspected that she remembered what happened the last time one of them had returned after an absence.

“Welcome back, Ljosira.”, the Allfather greeted her. “If you would excuse me, I was just about to have a few private words with my sons.”

“Of course. I’m quite weary, I will retire for now. We can speak tomorrow, surely.”, she agreed at once. With one last glance at Loki, she walked off, robes billowing behind her.

“Father…”, Thor began. “I’m truly sorry that I had to go behind your back. I understand if you are angry with me.” Odin did not answer immediately, instead he walked up the stairs with cumbersome steps and sat down on the throne. He let his gaze shift from Thor to Loki and back again, heaving a great sigh.

“You two are more trouble than handling all the Nine Realms together. One plots open treason, beats up a dozen guards, kidnaps his brother from prison and decapitates three priceless statues with a hijacked enemy vessel on his way out. The other embarks on a childish crusade through Midgard and is brought to trial before the most powerful council known.” He rubbed his forehead as though assaulted by a headache. His sons stood motionless and quiet, enduring the harsh rebuke.

“I have raised myself two fools. I wonder if that makes me a fool, too? Where would you be without each other, hm? Without your ardent supporters, who take your part against better judgement? Defeated, scattered, imprisoned. Or dead. You carve this into your brain, or your hammer, wherever you wish, to keep it memorized: The lone wolf does not survive the winter. But the pack does.” Odin shook his head.

“Loki, you may leave. I want to talk to your brother alone.” Since Thor had returned from banishment, Loki had usually been the one getting punished and lectured for several failed schemes. He was very glad not to be on the receiving end this time. Thor threw him a rueful, ironic smile. Against his will, the corner of Loki’s mouth quirked in return.

Then he gave his father a mocking bow and took his leave. Two guards hurried to accompany him until he stepped through the barrier. They simply stopped and stood there, watching him suspiciously, as though they expected him to pull some wild stunt in order to escape.

“Wait until Ragnarok, if you will.”, Loki commented sarcastically without sparing them a second glance. The object of his interest was within his confines now, not out there. Before a set of
double-doors, he came to a halt. They were decorated with a blue floral pattern, formerly part of his mother’s quarters, but rarely used. He paused, gazing down at the handle. The door was ajar. Without any qualms about trespassing, Loki pushed it open.

The quarters were flooded in twilight, the sharp contours of chairs and dressers softened to sloppy brushstrokes. Embers glowed in the heating pan, radiating a pleasant warmth against the spring evening’s chill.

Ljosira rested on a wide settee. She was asleep, her hand slackened to the ground, still holding a book she had been reading. Loki just looked at her. Undisturbed, in private, for the first time without guards or even her noticing. He watched her eyelids flutter from a dream, her chest rise and fall with each breath, the slight shivers run through her body. She was freezing.

Silently he stepped closer, and before he knew what he was doing his hand lifted, the backs of his fingers brushing her cheek. It was the softest touch, lighter than a feather. Nevertheless, his heart picked up the pace. He had no words to confess his gratitude, for everything she had done. It was not his way, grand declarations of what went on beneath the surface. He’d always had a terrible time with such things, too proud and at the same time too afraid of rejection. Another mental conflict he needed to work on.

As if in answer to his thoughts, Ljosira let out a small sigh and leaned into his touch, ever so slightly. His gaze was drawn to her lips. The lower one a little fuller than the upper, but they made such an enticing couple together. He remembered the fiery kiss, how soft she had been, how wonderful she had tasted. His throat went dry, fingers twitching with the urge to renew that memory, to learn if every part of her – however forbidden – would be just as delectably sweet. Or if she had some deeply-hidden passion he had not encountered until now, a wickedness still waiting to be discovered.

She had opened her hair, the waves of silver and white tangling around her face, stray wisps curling onto her brow. Loki picked up one of them, a streak of moonlight sliding through his fingers as he brushed it aside to join the others. Ljosira shivered again, making him frown. He breathed a sigh and walked to her bed, pulling one of the furs free and covering her in it. Gently, he lifted her idle hand to tuck it beneath the cover, but she stirred despite all his caution. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked at him in a dazed fashion.

“The most tedious thing about a mortal body… The cold.”, she mumbled. Colour rose to her cheeks when she realized how closely he leaned over her. Loki pulled back a little, sitting down on the free sofa next to her.

“I can call for more embers.”, he offered casually, but Ljosira shook her head.

“No, no… The fur is enough. Thank you.”, she cleared her throat and eyed him with an odd little look. “Do you usually enter other people’s chambers without knocking?” She sounded only half-serious.

“You left the door ajar.”, Loki simply answered, a little mischief flashing in his emerald eyes. Ljosira made a noncommittal noise to this. Again, he had the feeling that she fumbled. Awkwardly averting her gaze as though she had something to hide.

“Yes… I was reading, but my eyes are too exhausted from the ritual. Would you mind… reading a passage to me?” She rubbed her lids and handed him the book before wrapping herself up thoroughly up in the fur. Loki opened it to the page where she’d stopped.

“I will. But first you have to indulge my curiosity. Tell me about the ritual.”
And so, they picked up their routine from the weeks before. Reading, discussing and exchanging magic. The freedom and privacy of the palace chambers started to feel like home again. Everything was fine. Only not quite. There were two problems, both equally harrowing.

First of all, with the pressure of the trial behind them, Loki’s mind was once again free and completely unoccupied. Which meant to be painfully and intensely revisited by the kiss he had shared with – or rather forced upon – Ljosira.

And with it came the maddening want, by now so persistent that he caught himself drifting off into ribald fantasies when alone, his hands itching to touch himself and relieve the goddamn tension that stretched him tighter and tighter until he would just snap. But that would have just been a hollow, short-lived comfort. What are you, some rookie lad?, he admonished himself. It didn’t really help. He spent the days in rigorous self-control and the nights in perpetual arousal, knowing that he would soon either climb into her bed and make her his in every way, or just spontaneously combust.

The question was only how she would react to either of those options, especially the first one. Which led him to the second problem… Since she came back from the rite of passage, something was different about Ljosira. Sometimes when he looked at her, her gaze would skitter away from his and turn distant, her mind absent and shuttered. And other times he would find her door locked, as though she did not want him to intrude.

Since he could not fathom another reason for her behaviour, Loki was beginning to have a stinging apprehension. Did she regret coming back? Maybe she had finally started to realize what a burden, a nuisance even, she had chosen by taking his case. What else could it be? She grew tired of him for sure, wishing she could just go home and not be bothered with someone like him any longer.

Or maybe he had succeeded in driving her away with his erratic impulses. First faking his death, then pretty much accosting her in a darkened hallway. But she had let him, even participated…

Loki was brooding over these dark thoughts one night, when he suddenly heard muffled voices. Instantly alert, he listened. They came from behind the opposite wall, Ljosira’s room. He put the book aside and rose from the armchair. Almost all living quarters in the palace had secret doors connecting them to adjacent chambers, yet he had rarely used them before. There were better ways to get around unnoticed. But now, he cautiously ran his hand along the rune-seal to activate the secret door. The contours lit up subtly and Loki pushed it open just enough so he could peer through the narrow chink. Ljosira stood with her back turned to him, speaking to a shifting green sphere of vines and leaves.

“I am afraid I cannot help you.”, a rich female voice. Aevi, leader of the Life-Binders.

“You can’t? Does that mean you don’t know?”, Ljosira asked, sounding quite distressed. The sphere pulsed once.

“That is not what I said. I know, but I cannot help you with it.”, Aevi corrected gently.

“But you… you are Life-Binder. You are much closer to the… physical part of the world. You understand mortal afflictions much better. You even let your daughters visit Midgard in disguise. What is wrong with me?”, Ljosira spoke again, a strange edge in her tone.

“Nothing is wrong with you.”, Aevi soothed her. “The other leaders disagree with me, yet I believe
dragons should experience the… excitement of mortal life.”

“I don’t understand.”, Ljosira uttered, frustrated. It was followed by a long pause.

“You are one half Life-Binder too, Ljosira. If you were my daughter, I would not have kept you so sheltered that you do not understand what is going on. But for now, I will tell you what I tell my daughters when they go to Midgard: Let go of the notion that you are dragon, and nothing else. If you do that, you might experience exactly that which we lack: The passion, the up and down of life, the wild thrill of a dance you never knew. Down here, you are a woman. Realize that, and the solution to your problem will be right in front of you. Or right behind you.”, she ended meaningfully. The sphere pulsed once more and Loki felt the faintest brush of a vibrant presence, tingling with a good-natured sort of censure.

It’s rude to spy, trickster. Then it was gone, skipping away with a merry laughter trailing behind it like a ribbon. Ljosira spun around, her eyes wide when she caught sight of Loki. All colour fled her face, only to return in a heated rush, followed by burning insult.

“You! You… intrusive… bastard! How long have you been standing there?!”, she nearly yelled, her voice shaky. She felt utterly exposed, mortified, so acutely that she thought the ground might open up and swallow her by sheer force of will. Loki did not react to her question. Instead he pushed open the door and slowly walked towards her. The intensity in his eyes made her stomach flutter wildly. Fear? It had to be fear. She stumbled backwards until her spine collided with the bed-post. Only a second later, he had crowded her, so close that his chest almost touched hers. When she looked up, she could see the obsidian ring around the green of his eyes. His gaze had darkened, regarding her with an unconcealed hunger. It was like being turned inside out.

“Long enough to understand a few things.”, he answered her very quietly. His voice had turned to satin, caressing her skin and sending chills down her spine. “What do you think is wrong with you? What do you feel, right now?”

Ljosira couldn’t have answered if she had wanted to – somehow her heart thought it wise to be beating all the way up to her throat, sealing it completely shut. And since she couldn’t bear to hold his gaze, she lowered hers to his smooth chin. The air felt heavy, burdened with a tension that might make her come apart at the seams any second now.

“You can speak no lies. If you choose not to speak at all, I will draw my own conclusions.”, he said. She inhaled one shallow breath.

“Strange… On the first day when you visited me in the prison, you would not avert your eyes from mine, while I yelled and insulted you. Now you won’t look at me.”, he mused thoughtfully, as though talking to himself. This made her eyes flicker to his reluctantly. He was still watching her, seeking some crucial, hidden sign in the features of her beautiful face, and she had the feeling she would be drawn into his gaze, scattered into that enchanted forest of deep green. And she would never find her way out again. Not even if she wanted to.

“You know that each time before I touched you, I have wondered… If I would pay with my life for it.”, he went on softly, lips barely moving. Long fingers settled below her chin and lifted it in a gentle but firm way. Ljosira wanted to object, to tell him that he was wrong, why would he even – But then a sudden, vivid memory of his passionate kiss flashed through her mind, drowning out all else. She knew what would happen before it came to be. And also that she would not stop him.

“But it was worth the risk, every single time.” And then he closed the distance between them, his lips blanketing hers so thoroughly, she felt it right down to the tips of her toes. It was better than even flying.
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the kudos!! I got a lot of them recently <3 I'm happy you like my story so far!

So... this chapter explains itself, also NSFW up to the line-break. I know, right? Finally! Took them long enough, and it's not at all the writer's fault for dragging it out for so long... I am usually quite self-conscious about the intimate scenes I write, so I keep them on the softer, less explicit side, especially the first ones. It still turned out okay, I think.

I like to listen to Deep House while I write (I like the rhythms), and during this one, I listened a lot to Kerala Dust - Maria.

If you wonder where we are in the storyline right now, I'll give a little overview: Lightbringer consists of three Arcs, each of them roughly one third of the story. Ljosira's return from Yggdrasil and Loki's trial concludes the first arc. Although he had a few scenes already, you'll be seeing a lot of Thor in the second arc. And although I don't want to spoiler anything, some other heroes will make an appearance in the third arc :) Hope you stay with me!

XIII. One

Yes!, a voice from somewhere within her cried out. Its jubilant acclaim coursed through her, melting all the tension as his lips moved persistently against her own, warm and soft. It was as though she had been holding her breath since their last encounter of this kind. Now it left her with a deflating sigh that disappeared within the ardent kiss. She sank into the embrace, instinctively tilting her head go give him better access. His free hand caught her nape below the mass of silver hair, while the one at her chin coaxed her lower lip to part from the upper.

As soon as she conceded, Loki made a triumphant sound deep in his throat, his tongue pushing into her mouth. Caressing, carousing, sliding deeper when she answered, not quite knowing what she did. Ljosira could taste him, that inexplicable, heady flavour which had haunted her dreams and now seemed to be everywhere around her. It was exhilarating.

A wild thrill, a dance to a rhythm unknown to her. Somehow he took the fear and uncertainty of it from her with the pressure of his lush mouth, the growing warmth of his body. His head bent a little, lips grazing lightly along her cheek, the line of her jaw, to the perfect rim of her ear. The tip of his tongue flicked over the sensitive shell, making her draw a shuddering breath. One hand settled high on her chest, right where her heart thrummed in a frantic race as though determined to escape its cage and soar towards freedom.

“Will you still not tell me your secret? Why you have been distant and distracted? Or do you need more persuasion?”, his voice sounded like the purr of a cat, its heated rush vibrating through her body.
“I…”, Ljosira said, then stopped. Loki pulled back to seek her gaze and saw the flash of silver as she struggled to read his aura.

“You cheat, dragon.”, he rebuked her gently. Mirth danced in his dark, mesmerizing eyes. She stood still for a long moment, dazed and overwhelmed, a high blush blooming on her porcelain skin.

“Is it fear? You are not afraid of me, are you?” Her head gave a tiny jerk.

“No.”, she whispered.

“Good.”, he asserted, and then kissed her again.

She felt the change in him, in the way he pulled her to his chest. It was an unstoppable flame that made her tingle all over. A thousand tiny wings of anticipation fluttered in her stomach, heat gathered at an intimate place lower in her body, spreading in delightful waves through every part of her. She lifted her hands to touch his face, explore the smooth texture of his skin, the patch below his jaw where it felt bristly and just a little rough.

Loki was overcome by a sensation he knew was not his own. A swooping plunge from a great height, mighty wings outstretched as he soared above the first of all trees, its beauty unfolding before him. A bit of her magic, seeping into him to communicate the closest comparison she had to what she felt right now. She had no true concept of desire, of the burning need to unite with another in the most original joining there is. Such things were mortal. Rampant, burning out of control, consuming. Ljosira knew the dangers of these wiles, but had never experienced them first-hand.

She offered no resistance when his hands picked up their previous journey, roaming freely over every inch of skin he could reach. And how could she resist? After these long weeks of being in each other’s proximity, the tiniest touches that lured her with the promise of more, this felt like giving in to an aching need, a necessity that would not be denied. Straining against him, she searched for his wicked mouth, the silken finesse of his tongue, and he gave it to her at once.

She felt an insistent pressure at her lower stomach as he anchored her with his own body, but had little time to wonder about it. His fingers fumbled with the ties of her dress, drawing an irritated sound from him when he was confounded by the vexing contraption. With a quick wave of his hand, every single lace disentangled at once. There was no hesitation. Loki pushed the loose fabric over the smooth curve of her shoulder, and before she knew it, the whole dress fell in a heap of shimmering folds to her feet.

It left her with nothing but a thin strip of undergarment around her waist. Exposed, painfully… naked, although that should not have been embarrassing. Clothes were a mortal invention. But nobody had ever looked at Ljosira the way Loki did now, with a ravenous hunger that was indeed a little frightening. Ashamed, she tried to cover herself but he caught her hands in his.

“Don’t hide from me. Don’t make me chase you down, elusive thing.”, he breathed, guiding one of her hands to the hard ridge between his thighs without preamble. Shocked by his bluntness, she jolted, but did not pull away. “This is what you do to me. You have worn my restraint so thin it’s threadbare. Never hide from me.”, he emphasized in a dark, velvet tone that allowed no objection.

Thankfully he divested himself of his own clothes, because she still had little notion how to handle the convoluted things, and no mental faculties left to puzzle it out. The instant he was free of the confining fabric, he simply wrapped an arm around her legs and lifted her, pushing aside the gauze curtains of her bed. Soft fur and sleek silk tickled her back as he laid her down on the sheets and paused to take her in. She was moonlight tonight, mercurial and flawless in the cool silver glow.
that streamed in through the balcony.

Finally he could feel her skin to skin, let his lips wander along the hollow of her throat which had been the object of his notice so many times. Ljosira arched beneath him as he quested out to discover all of her, to know all her secrets. His fingers moved over her shoulders, down her arms, skinned up the little ridges of her ribcage to cup her breast. He played with the hardened tip, running his thumb over it in a maddeningly light touch, until she gave an urgent, soft moan.

Where had that come from? What drove her to reach for him and bury her hands into his raven hair, dig her fingers into his muscular shoulder? She had never seen a naked man before, much less felt the weight of one press down on her persistently, as though he would melt into her. Tiny delightful prickles raced over every place he journeyed to, a liquid fire that pooled at the junction of her legs. Which seemed to be the destination he headed to, his touch becoming more inquisitive as it went down the flat of her stomach, slithered beneath the shred of undergarment. She rubbed her legs together in some act of mere instinct and felt his fingertips search through the downy little mound.

“Open for me, my light. Let me touch you there.”, Loki cajoled, almost pleadingly. Ljosira obeyed and he took the advantage at once, delving into that most secret place, parting the folds of heated flesh to find a spot so sensitive and aching, saturated with moisture. He dipped his fingers to the narrow entrance to her body, slipping inside just barely. An uncontained groan rose in his chest, a sound so utterly wicked, primal… it made all her muscles tighten in anticipation of… of what? She didn’t know. But she knew she would fray and scatter if she did not reach it soon.

The clear sign of his arousal brushed over her thigh, heavy and hard, yet so smooth at the same time. She sensed that he hovered at the edge of control, fighting a losing battle. The life-bond brimmed with the desperate, mad need to be inside her, be one, a whole thing. Loki tried to bridle it, but the voice of reason was a feeble whisper compared to what the rest of him clamoured for. When he hooked a finger into the last bit of cloth separating him from her, Ljosira protested thinly.

“Loki… Wait…”, she mumbled into his searching mouth, and at the same time she did nothing to stop him, rather pulled him closer. Fickle woman. Her hand merely swished through the air, bolting the lock on the door. That act made the decision for him.

“No more waiting.”, Loki said unevenly. With a feline grace he moved above her, adjusting his body to hers until she felt the hard, silken tip of his arousal pushing against her centre. It forged its way into her relentlessly, stretching the virginal tightness that had never known such invasion before. Ljosira opened her mouth to object, because surely this couldn’t be right, this wasn’t supposed to hurt? It stung, throbbed and burned, but Loki seemed to notice none of that. His face was tense with concentration, deep creases on his brow as he squeezed his eyes shut at the sheer ambush of sensation. Too good. Too tight, gripping him in her snug, wonderfully wet heat. Unable to contain himself, his hips gave a forceful push and he lodged himself inside her all the way, to the hilt.

Ljosira’s sharp cry of pain brought him back to reality like a hammer-strike. Maiden. Of course she was, you idiot! She had no idea what you would do and you just took her innocence like a brute – Loki opened his eyes, momentarily doused by the shocked expression on her face. She had gone very still, a deep nick between her fine brows, her fingers clenching and unclenching around steeled muscles of his shoulder. His lungs laboured to draw air, mind and body torn between the wish to reassure her and the need for release.

“Forgive me.”, he muttered hoarsely, bending down for an exceedingly tender kiss. The honest care in his apology overwhelmed her. He rarely ever apologized for anything. She shook her head,
throat too tight to speak. He resolved not to move until she gave him some sign, but the way she wiggled beneath him, adjusting to the new sensation, drawing him even deeper – it didn’t help at all. The raw, male instinct to move, to claim her, lose himself in her threatened to overpower him. When she stretched to graze the tense lines on his face with her lips, muttering soft words of encouragement, he found it impossible to stay still. He began to move in slow, shallow thrusts. A careful rhythm like gentle waves hitting a bank of sand.

Ljosira felt the pain fade into the background, overtaken by the ardent flame of pleasure that made her back arch for more, her breaths interrupted by small, impulsive whimpers. He seemed to be everywhere, braided himself into the fabric of her being even more than before, tangled up in it until she knew not which was her and which was him. Fleetingly, she understood that they had been heading towards this all along, it had been inevitable. *Let go of the notion that you are dragon, and nothing else. Down here, you are a woman.* That was what those words meant.

And then there was only the rising tide of his passion that washed over her with every deep, filling thrust, sweeping her away. The fragrance of his skin, the compelling urgency of his tongue, the weight of his body. His caution faltered when she wrapped her legs around his waist. Loki knew he wouldn’t last. She felt too right, as though made for him, the perfect fit. And she was his, finally. The rush of triumph made his movements turn erratic, no longer coordinated but rather pure instinct, falling into a natural rhythm.

Forehead pressed against hers, he mumbled her name between senseless words, frantic gasps. And then, with a forceful push he nudged so deeply inside her as he could, tumbling them both into a blinding nova of rapture. Through this enveloping haze, Ljosira felt his body tense and shudder uncontrollably, heard the loud moan escape his throat as he trembled like a plucked string with the force of his release. She gloried in that inexplicable sensation, tried to draw it out so it would last, yet it was too volatile and wild to be chased down.

As she came back into herself, Loki seemed to relax, the strain leaving his muscles. He blanketed her with his full weight while his breathing returned to a measured pace. Ljosira opened her eyes to find him gazing down on her. How did he manage to look both amused and endearing? Her exhausted heart made a funny little leap.

“This was… different.”, he whispered, planting a lazy kiss into the corner of her mouth. Ljosira frowned at him.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Is it not usually like this?” So worldly innocent, this dragon princess. Loki could not hold back a low laugh at her naivety.

He did not answer right away, instead relieved her of his weight and shifted onto the bed, covering them both with a cool silken sheet. Ljosira turned to face him, her features still immersed in moonlight. His hand settled onto the gentle slope of her waist.

“In all your years, you have never looked in on mortals doing this wicked dance?” His lips quirked with mirth. She looked absolutely scandalized by the notion.

“Of course not! Do you peek through other’s windows when the curtains are drawn? Oh, you probably would, trickster.”, she grumbled to herself.

“You peeked through my window, and I definitely had the curtains drawn.”, Loki reminded her, still smiling. Although his obvious amusement at her expense was quite annoying, Ljosira could
not help but notice how light-hearted he seemed, carefree.

“Yes… Well… You didn’t answer my other question. Is it usually like this?”, she repeated. He turned more serious then, regarding her pensively.

“No. It is not typically this… intense. This was something else.”, he answered, but didn’t elaborate. Instead his eyes travelled over her features as though he could somehow extricate the solution to a great mystery from them. Her lids fluttered with sleepiness, all of her softened by a comfortable exhaustion. On the verge of slumber, fulfilled. She nuzzled into the crook of his arm.

Loki wasn’t used to this kind of affection, this casual closeness. He had never allowed such things to reach him, not even when taking a woman to bed. They were always sent on their way afterwards. And now he felt strangely at peace with Ljosira there, tucked to his shoulder. For the first time in years, there were no schemes forming in his mind, no driving anger in his soul, no whisper pushing him to prove his worth.

The darkness of night is a double-edged blade. It cloaks the world with a veil to hide both fears and secret desires, and yet into its velvet depths, lost souls everywhere whisper their loneliness. Loki had loved the night. And hated it. Now he had this flickering flame to light the path, soothing and soft, slowly burrowing her way into his heart. He knew it was dangerous, made him vulnerable.

And yet, what did he have to lose? His grand plans had failed. It felt like he had been fighting against the misfortune of his slanted life with a vengeance for ages. So tiresome. It drained the soul of all joy. Ljosira stifled a yawn and let out a small sigh. Her stillness was a thing of marvel, like the eye of a storm. Silent, utterly calm. Is this peace?

“You look like you are in deep thought.”, she said, her voice thick with encroaching sleep. She lifted one lazy hand, her fingers feathering across his forehead. “Your brow… it creases that way when your mind is occupied.”

“Reading me like an open book, are you?”, he inquired in a playful sort of way. Ljosira gave him an arch look.

“Hardly. If so, you are the most convoluted book ever written.” He smirked at the odd, mocking compliment.

“Have I ever told you that you are beautiful? Because you are. Now more than ever.”, he said, seemingly out of context. She blinked and then surveyed him through half-lowered lashes.

“That was not a lie.” She sounded thoroughly baffled.

“Always the tone of surprise.”, Loki sighed in fake insult. But she had already drifted off, her breaths deep and even, a shy smile curving her lips. He leaned over her, brushing a kiss to her closed eyelids as he whispered the next words.

“No lies between us, my light. What would be the point?”
So many kudos! *jumps around excitedly*
I just couldn't resist including an awkard bro-talk in this chapter. I had to! :D I love writing Thor-Loki-conversations filled with brotherly jibes and at the same time some awkward feels. I have a few of those throughout the story. :>
So, Asgard's Spring Festival is coming up... Loki will be back in society for the first time since his imprisonment... That's not going to be weird at all, right? XD

XIV. Visits

Bright sunbeams filtered through the curtains of her four-poster bed when Ljosira woke from a strange dream. She had been playing with her eldest brother, the crown prince Vegr, down at the roots of Yggdrasil. A forceful wind had swept her around and she wanted to land and steady herself, but the roots suddenly turned into the barren wasteland of the Chitauri quarantine, Vegr morphed into Natta, whose claws grabbed her, spinning around and around… Ljosira blinked.

The dream fled away from her as quickly as sand scattering to the wind, leaving only a feeling of dizziness and confusion. With a jolt, she realized that Loki was not by her side anymore, the place where he had slept cool and empty. For an instant, she wondered if last night had been a dream too. But the state of her body spoke volumes of the truth. Muscles and joints were stiff and strained, her skin a little raw, lips still swollen from his many kisses. A burn lingered at the place where her thighs met, making her flush scarlet. And then there was the matter of being stark naked. Unseen by anyone, a near silly grin spread across her face.

Ljosira slipped out of the bed and glimpsed the robe she’d been ridded of, draped neatly over the back of a chair. A faint hint of his scent still hung in the air. He had not been gone for long. With the intention of disentangling the mess Loki had made of her hair, she walked to the dresser. Still in a daze, her eyes almost passed over the small black box placed on her vanity. A note written in elegant script had been pinned underneath. She pulled it free.

*I recalled that we had this sitting in our vaults, unworn and going to waste. It reminded me of what you looked like last night. Imagine the guard’s face when I asked him to have it fetched for you. If you wear this tonight at the spring festival, I might be distracted from the accusing stares people have grown so fond of giving me. I shall attend. Under heavy guard, needless to say.*

The note carried no signature, but there was no point in one anyway. Ljosira did not have to use her dragon sight to sense his recent presence on it. She ran her fingers over the lacquered wood, before picking up the box and flipping it open. Her heart skipped a beat.

*A necklace, bedded on black velvet. It was a stunning work of art, made from pure white gold, the dozen fine chains no thicker than a thread. It held a pendant of marvellous flowers, their petals adorned with tiny pearls and moonstones, like drops of dew. They cradled a flawless blue diamond – which fractured the sunlight into a kaleidoscope of colours, dancing over the skin of her palm. Ljosira touched the burnished gem curiously. What precise handiwork must have taken to create it! She smiled, knowing that Loki had made this choice for a reason. Perceptive as usual. Yes, she*
would definitely wear it to the spring festival.

A sudden knock on the door startled her and she hurried to soothe the confused maid. They were not used to doors being locked around her quarters. There had been nothing to hide, not until now… Hopefully they would take her being wrapped into nothing but a sheet as an act of eccentricity.

While the maids brought bathwater and tidied up the place, Ljosira drifted off into deep thought. Her father had recently sent a message, the same way Aevi had spoken to her. He had complained about the increasing secrecy, the distance she kept to her family’s life-bonds. And of course, he had known what she tried to conceal from him. The slowly expanding space in her heart, occupied by a mortal.

*Such things have never brought our people anything but suffering, Ljosira.* She’d sensed his disapproval like an unpleasant sore on tender skin. But how could something that felt so right bring her suffering? Loki had looked so peaceful. Seeing him so unburdened had made her feel… Happy, whole, as though something had fallen into place within her, a thing which had been lacking for a long, long time.

She doubted that her siblings or her father would understand, on the contrary. Aevi had been right. The whole experience, the thousand thrills, the closeness… It belonged to life. There was no deep magic in it, no transmission of thought. It was so much simpler, yet more intricate. And so incredibly good.

“You were not here.” Thor’s voice sounded less accusing than it was amused.

The comment made Loki lift his gaze from the book in his hands. Not that he had been reading it at all, just staring at it blankly while his thoughts were elsewhere. His brother strode into his chambers as though he owned the place, browsing around casually. He wore a humbler version of his usual armour. Loki set down the book.

“Beg your pardon?”, he said, a little irritated by the intrusion. Thor fiddled with the spine of a tome, pretending to be very interested in the title. Then he turned to Loki, an explicitly suspicious expression on his chiselled features.

“And when I returned, I came to visit you.” Thor pointed at him, his blue eyes glinting humorously. “You were not here.” Loki leaned back into his desk-chair, feigning inanity. His fingers traced the dark wood carvings absent-mindedly as he tried to look oblivious. It failed.

“Is there a point to your investigation?”, he kept his voice quite bored.

“Thor…”, Loki warned, annoyed now. “You are jumping to conclusions –“ But his brother made a placating gesture, cutting him short.
“Alright, alright. I understand. Forget I ever said anything.” And yet he went on after a moment: “I mean you can ask me for advice, anytime. I have some experience with women. *Real* women.”

“Is there any other kind?”, Loki wondered, groaning inwardly. This had to be the most awkward conversation of his life.

“I mean to say that if you have problems with a particular lady or just… any part of her – I’m sure I can handle it –“ Seeing his brother’s glare, Thor cleared his throat. “Alright even I admit that came out wrong. I *have* a girlfriend. She seems satisfied.”

“Please just stop talking.”, Loki buried his face in one palm. Had he only stayed with Ljosira this morning – instead of having to endure his brother offer uncomfortable relationship advice. It was thoroughly embarrassing. “Just… no more words. About women. Or parts of them.”

“Fine, fine. Actually, I came here for another reason, but well… I couldn’t help but notice…”, he trailed off distractedly, making Loki wonder if he was thinking about Jane. A moment of silence passed, then Thor pulled out a folded parchment and handed it to his brother, who read it with raised eyebrows. It baffled him that Thor would seek his advice about anything. And at the same time, he felt a strange, pleasant sensation about being valued.

“So, Alfheim reports strange occurrences since the Convergence. Parts of forests dying without visible cause, disturbances in space… Miniature black holes, seriously?”, Loki inquired while scanning the note. Thor shrugged.

“It sounds like something sprung from Stark’s encapsulated mind. I wondered about that too. Would it be possible?” Loki walked to the bookshelf and pulled a small tome titled ‘*Phenomena of Spontaneous Sorcery*’ forth from it.

“Well… You defeated Malekith, but the Aether managed to reach through each of the realms before that.”, Loki began, flipping the pages. “An energy source like that leaves residual magic behind. Any number of strange things. But black holes… I don’t know. Nothing in here about them.”

He closed the book and looked deep in thought, his gaze distant. Where had he read about black holes? There had been something, even recently. It lurked at the edge of his memory, but slipped through his fingers as he tried to grab hold of it. Which irritated him. He could usually recall any knowledge he’d gathered from books flawlessly.

“Alfheim calls us to caution about approaching such disturbances if we find them in Asgard. That means they expect us to stumble upon them too. I wished to consult you about it. I don’t even know if this is something to worry about, but since…” Thor paused and threw him an oddly sympathetic glance. “… since mother, you are the only capable sorcerer around.” The praise caught Loki unaware. He shifted awkwardly on the spot.

“What about Odin? Or Ljosira. You could have asked them.” Why did he always do that? Instead of just taking the compliment, he sought to dismantle it. He jerked his head, annoyed at himself.

“Father wants nothing to do with the Aether. He is increasingly… withdrawn. Shuttered. And I think he still does not take kindly to our little joyride.”, his brother answered, bitterness tinting his words. “And Ljosira just completed her rite of passage. She deserves a little peace. Instead of being handed the next mystery to resolve.” They both fell silent, occupied with their own thoughts. Loki went over the report again.

“It says here these disturbances occur in remote places. If we have them in Asgard, they would not
appear close to the city. The highlands, probably. The mountainside. Those would be my best guesses.

“Should we investigate?”, asked Thor.

“Well, I think it would not hurt. Not a great many people live close to the mountains. They might not come across anything unusual, or overlook it.”, Loki answered pensively.

“Good. I’ll dispatch a small party to investigate.”, Thor decided. When Loki handed him the parchment, he shook his head. “Keep it for now. Maybe you should really ask Ljosira if she knows anything about the magic of black holes.” His brother was already at the door when Loki called after him.

“Why me? You could ask her just as well.” Thor merely turned halfway, smirking in a meaningful way.

“Why indeed?”, he pondered as though talking to himself. “I shall see you at the festival tonight. Wear something nice. Jane is coming too.” And then he was gone, leaving Loki with the report still in his hand, baffled into silence.

The soft knock on the door made Ljosira cease her twisting and turning to check if the maids had fastened her dress properly. Especially today, she didn’t want to look dishevelled. Could that be Loki, come to pay her a visit before the festival? But he usually didn’t bother knocking. Instead, Jane stood in the hallway, nervously shuffling her feet.

“Jane! You are visiting Asgard again? Please come in.”, Ljosira exclaimed, ushering the other woman into her quarters.

“Thor told me you lived here.”, Jane said, her gaze wandering over the exquisite room in amazement. “It’s still a whole lot to take in, all of this.” She indicated the rampant luxury.

“Asgard certainly becomes you.”, the dragon princess complimented. It was true. In her deep burgundy dress, Jane looked as though she belonged here, for sure. The shawl around her shoulders wore a pattern of gold and brown leaves. It suited her natural beauty. Ljosira had chosen something subtle today, for the sake of her necklace – a steel blue robe adorned with a faint motif of ocean waves. They seemed to ripple against slate cliffs, shattering into silver spray at the seam.

“Thank you…”, Jane mumbled, fiddling with the fabric. “How have you been? I’m still so sorry that I hurt you when all that Aether business went down… You were so kind to me and –” Ljosira made a halting gesture.

“It was never your fault.”, she denied firmly, but the other woman didn’t seem reassured. Her expression turned into a pained sort of regret.

“But the queen…” Drawing Jane to sit down with her in front of the heating pan, Ljosira shook her head.

“The queen never faltered. She died defending what she believed in, her heart of hearts. Home, family. We all grieve over her passing. But every selfless act leaves an imprint on the great tree. There is this saying on Yggdrasil: The stars remember. When you are at the festival tonight, look to the sky. You will see the image the Allfather painted there so Frigga’s memory will never fade. She will watch over Asgard and her sons forever.”
Then Ljosira leaned in and added in a conspirative tone: “I’m sure she is frowning on their quarrel. Which is also endless. And juvenile.” That made Jane laugh.

“How can we stop now? It’s too much fun.” Both of them flinched at the sound of Loki’s voice. He seemed to appear out of thin air, in full ceremonial garb, a mocking smile on his lips. Jane instantly looked alarmed.

“What is he doing here?”, she asked, inching farther down the sofa cushions. Delight brightened Ljosira’s expression for an instant, followed by a hint of reproach.

“What he usually enjoys doing – sneaking up on people without announcing himself.”, she scolded. It lacked true severity.

“Shouldn’t he be in prison? Wait – shouldn’t he be *dead*?”, Jane made no effort to make her words sound less upset or insulting.

“Someone here is surely not getting acclaimed for courtesy.” Loki smirked, dripping with sarcasm. He fell silent when Ljosira threw him a cautionary look.

“You are the one who just barged in here, you sanctimonious – “, Jane piped up in a temper.

“I live here. Technically, you are the one doing the barging-in.”, Loki cut her short arrogantly.

“Excuse us?”, he then added with such deceptive innocence, both women stared at him. Jane turned to Ljosira, her doe-brown eyes searching for a sign that her friend needed to be rescued.

“It’s fine. I will find you later at the festival. We should catch up over a glass of wine.”, she assured the other woman, who blinked in surprise.

“Oh… Of course. I should meet with Thor anyway.” A little hastier than necessary, she took her leave. The instant the door fell shut, Ljosira startled when a strong arm wrapped around her waist and Loki pulled her close. A humorous quirk still lingered on his lips as they descended on hers. An unmeasured time passed before they parted again, a little breathless.

“Did you have to be so irascible? You scared her…”, she admonished, her expression somewhere between accusing and amused. Loki traced the neckline of her gown, like a man who could not hurt a fly.

“That was just a little good-natured mischief.”, he replied, a spark dancing in his emerald eyes. Unable to resist the allure, he leaned in and pressed his lips to the soft ridge of her collarbone. He felt the voice vibrate in her chest as she spoke.

“By definition, those two terms contradict each other.”, Ljosira pointed out, although she was getting increasingly distracted. “You aren’t listening, are you?” She took a breath to muster some concentration. Loki lifted his head and regarded her with such a playfully blameless expression, it was maddening how handsome he looked.

“No.”, he admitted in earnest. “That is what you get for me not seeing you all day. When I looked around midday you were already gone, and now I have to make up for lost opportunities…” The way his voice deepened, his warm breath fanned over her cheek, reminded her all too vividly of his heated skin last night, how his body had shuddered above hers… A tremble went through her in response, making his eyes glitter victoriously.

“I like it when you blush. It gives me a sense of achievement.”, he murmured against her temple.

“You are eluding. You were gone in the morning.” Her tone held just the slightest hint of hurt. He
gave a sigh.

“True. I wished to be inconspicuous. I do not like private matters to be dragged out into the open.”

“Hmm.”, Ljosira hummed vaguely. Loki lifted his fingers to the slight recess below her throat.

“You are not wearing it.”, he mused, sounding disappointed. Ljosira extricated herself gently from his arms and walked to her dresser, facing the large mirror trimmed with golden flowers. She beckoned him over.

“I can’t see behind my back, remember? Besides, I couldn’t open the clasp…” His expression relaxed as he joined her, picking up the jewellery to drape it around her slender neck. He handled the contraption so effortlessly. Just like that. Ljosira had given up on it after fumbling with it for half an hour.

“You could have used an enchantment.”, he suggested. Ljosira eyed him in the mirror.

“I prefer this over an enchantment.”

“So do I. This way, I am the first to see the outcome of my choice. It suits you perfectly.”, he said after a moment’s pause, making her cheeks turn pink. The blue diamond seemed to twinkle in agreement.

“So…” Loki turned her around, his eyes serious all of sudden. “Should we see how Asgard takes my return to society?”

Before they left for the festival, they both looked up into the night sky, where the first stars peeked through the fading veil of dusk. A faint, sea green ribbon wound between them, like the cloak of a kind goddess.
Thank you for your kudos!! I'm still getting them, that's so great \o/  
A little speedpaint I made recently of Ljosira:  

So, I really like how Loki's character development turned out when I revised Lightbringer in its entirety. He has his issues and it's sometimes easier for him to fall back into old patterns than see reason for once. He's growing into it, but sloooowly. I think it's a very good thing he has Ljosira at times like that. I enjoyed writing the conversation between them - well, I always do, but this is one of my favourites :D  
Also, I took a moment to remember the awesome Frigga with the short scene at the beginning.  
Hope you like it and stay with me! Have fun :))

XV. Self-Made Chains

Asgard was probably home to more gorgeous places than any other realm, but its palace gardens were an unrivalled beauty. Every Asgardian would have agreed to that. Rows and rows of hedges, carefully trimmed and now bursting into bloom with a hundred shades of green. Between them nestled little dots of bright red, marigold yellow, cornflower blue. Trees ranging from knee-height to gigantic grew in their cleverly chosen places. Frigga had been the mistress of this garden, and legends said that it hosted one exemplar of every plant found on Asgard.

Small hills rose to overlook peaceful little ponds. Everything flourished with vibrant life. From the hedge-mazes to the rose-bushes with their tiny ivy-covered pavilions, to the grand pagodas among the trees. Spring had come. Traditionally, the spring festival was held in the queen’s gardens, inside a dozen open structures canopied by glass domes, their polished wooden floors creaking beneath the comings and goings of people. Guests were already everywhere. Sitting on cushions or benches, eating at low-rise tables which bent beneath the weight of delicacies and wine. A hundred lanterns hung on criss-crossing ropes between the tree-trunks.

Loki walked beside the dragon princess along the pebble-strewn path. Strollers passing by could not seem to refrain from casting suspicious looks at him. Most of them managed a stiff nod to acknowledge his presence while they bestowed a much friendlier bow to his companion. Two elite guards followed behind, as always vigilant lest he got any ideas on foolish tricks. Loki loathed to be escorted this way, as if not everybody knew already about his past misdeeds.

He fussed with the sleeves of his formal attire, wishing he could somehow disperse the confining feeling by doing so. In truth his unease was caused by the magical chains keeping his sorcery dormant, and those could not be loosened by fidgeting. An uncomfortable sensation – too tight, like being imprisoned inside a space much too small for one’s size. He wondered if this was how Ljosira felt all the time, with her dragon soul compressed into her mortal body.

As if in answer to his thoughts, she cast him a searching glance. Loki had grown increasingly silent and restless since they had left the privacy of her quarters. Jaw clenched, his noble face a rigid
mask now. He kept looking right through people, as though they weren’t even worth a glimpse, while his fingers kept moving to his wrists, fiddling, pulling. Little creases of annoyance appeared at the corner of his eyes.

She sympathized, she truly did. Someone’s magical potential was not supposed to be held under lock and key this way. It went against the nature of such things, especially in a person who possessed so much potential. But it had been the only way for some middle-ground to appease both the council and the Allfather. When she could not take the sting of rising frustration anymore, Ljosira stopped short so abruptly, the guards almost ran into her.

“I can sense your unrest, Loki. What’s eating you?”, she asked quietly. Instead of an answer, Loki gave the guards a withering scowl.

“I am going to look at those rose-bushes. Could you watch him from here? There’s really not enough space for all of us…”, Ljosira argued innocently. The two soldiers exchanged an uncertain look and proceeded to watch her in a wary fashion.

“Fine.”, one said. Loki followed her between the neat shrubs with their spiky leaves and thorny branches. They would not be blooming for a while, but little colourful buds had sprouted among them already, hinting that they were getting ready for a grand performance. Ljosira seated herself on a marble bench inside one of the small gazebos. She gazed at him while he surveyed the tiny white flowers that climbed the light wood. It reminded him of a day long gone, a memory buried beneath countless others. And yet it came back to him now in vivid detail.

Frigga strode through the garden, looking around curiously. For an instant, Loki thought she had spotted him as her gaze passed over his hideout, but then she continued down the pebbled path. Her footsteps grew distant and a wide grin spread across his childish features. Victory! He had found the perfect spot – but suddenly the seam of a billowing robe appeared at the pavilion entrance.

“Well, where might he be? Not here, it seems…”, Frigga mused playfully. It seemed she would leave again, making Loki suppress a sigh of relief. Then, out of nowhere, she spun around and crouched, her face coming into view right before him. He struggled to evoke an illusion, but was too startled to muster more than a feeble flicker of his hands. They were complicated spells, and he had just barely begun to learn about sorcery. His mother smiled, full of warmth.

“Found you.”, she teased her son, who wailed with frustration when she pulled him from beneath the bench, lifting him into the air like he didn’t weigh a thing.

“Unfair!”, Loki complained, but she spun him around once, twice, until his hair flew around his juvenile face.

“Mother, stop! You won, you won!”, he pleaded, unable to contain his snickering. Frigga set him
on his feet again and instead sat down on the bench.

“I almost didn’t catch you there. You’re too clever for your own good, little rogue.”, she said softly, ruffling his hair into an even greater mess. He hurried to smooth it, but it defied any kind of order. “We need to go back soon. You have a history lesson today, remember?” A strict undertone had entered her voice. Loki grumbled sullenly.

“I don’t like the scholar. I get one little thing wrong and he flies off the handle. But Thor forgets the dates all the time, and he never gets scolded!” He crossed his arms in a gesture of defiance.

“You and your brother are different, Loki. Different strengths, like the flame and the wind. When the flame burns too bright, it rages out of control. When the wind blows too strong, it devastates all in its path. They need to be balanced, challenged so they can support each other. As the great tree does. She holds the realms on her branches, and the dragons always soar around her, nudging her so she would not tip the scales.”, Frigga explained calmly. The firm expression on her face told her son that she would not budge. Better try begging, that always worked.

“Are there really dragons on Yggdrasil?”, Loki wondered curiously, eyes wide and pleading.

“Loki.”, she warned, of course realizing that he tried to wiggle out of the lesson with a distraction.

“Please, mother. It’s such a beautiful day. Just one story?”, he whined in a heart-breaking tone. “About dragons.”, he then clarified as if it needed to be said. Frigga sighed.

“Alright.”, she conceded, her features alive with the dance between sunlight and shade. “One story.”

Balance. Equilibrium. The eternal push-and-pull within all opposites of the world. His brother’s great flame and his own elusive wind. Day and night, chasing each other across the sky. Was he the one trying to tip the scales? He had always thought of himself rather as the one setting them straight, for they had been out of balance his whole life.

And yet… How had that worked out for him? They called him the tangler, the weaver of knots, branded him with that persona. Loki looked down at Ljosira, who, to him, was an embodiment of one side of the scales. Pure and entire, undamaged by the volatilities of a mortal soul. She did not deviate, agonize which course would be the right one. He knew he could never be like her, neither did she expect him to. He would never be an optimist, a light-hearted fellow who faced his fate with certainty and ease, a hero of noble struggle. But even his brother evolved, carving his own path in the world. And Frigga had believed that they could balance each other…

This day seemed to be filled with reminders of his mother. Loki wished he could feel her presence, know that she watched over him. But whenever he revisited the place within him where she had dwelled, he would only find a vast emptiness, a gaping hole, and be struck by the dreadful truth that he would never see his mother smile at him again. She would have been the one person he’d have confided in about Ljosira.

If he had ever wanted a lie to be true, then it was to believe Frigga had been his true mother. She would have protected him from the accusing looks, the Allfather’s rejection. Especially today, where he had decided to appear in public again, while at the same time he loathed to face what awaited him when he did. With his mother, it would have felt a little more like home, and a little less like...
“Exile.,” he said into the quiet. Ljosira still regarded him steadily, no impatience on her face. Just a little frown furrowing her brow. “Why did I even come here? Such a stupid idea. As if they would ever see me as anything but an outcast.” He pointed at the guards, who were watching him with cautious expressions, the way one watched an unpredictable animal that could attack at any moment.

“Look at them, all nervous and shuffling, as if I would pull a dagger on you if they left me out of their sight. Out of my mind, am I? Deranged!” Agitated, he began prowling around the small space. Ljosira’s eyes followed his pacing, her next words firm.

“You are not deranged. I know that. They have yet to regain some faith in you. It takes time.”

“That’s just it! Who will make them understand? Evidently, they will not believe me. The Allfather? He still despises me, and as long as he does so will all of Asgard! Who in this godforsaken realm is on my side?” He did not yell, but the anger in his voice spoke volumes.

Ljosira reached to calm him, but he flinched away from her. "Tread carefully, her dragon senses warned. Don’t push him. A mix of pain and fury had overtaken his features. She stayed still as Loki seemed to battle some great inner conflict.

“My mother is gone.,” he suddenly said, sounding incredibly… miserable. “Just gone. The only family I have ever known.”

“Your grief bleeds out all around you.,” Ljosira whispered. “You have to let it go or it will drag you down with it. She wouldn’t have wanted you to be consumed by bitterness —”

“What do you even know about grief? You are immortal! What have you ever had to lose? How can you lecture me on grief, have you ever even felt it yourself?!”, he turned on her now. Her face flooded with shock and insult. He hated himself for speaking such venom and yet didn’t know how to stop it. Anger entered her eyes, a strange kind he could not place.

“Don’t do this, Loki. Don’t twist my words to suit your false assumptions about me! You always do that, like there is only one truth and that is always your own. You push people away, colouring their intentions with your own! After everything, still? No. Not with me. Vit ru skyldrae.” Those words, spoken in the ancient language of Asgard, stopped him short quite effectively. We are bound, always. All the replies he had ready abandoned him, be they clever or asinine.

“You are not getting rid of me by falling into your usual pattern. It has not worked when you were in prison and it will not work now.” Ljosira reached for his hands, now idle at his side, and wrapped her fingers around his wrist. He felt the magical fetters loosen a little, not so constricting anymore. The breath he took felt like resurfacing from the bottom of a lake.

“Better?”, she asked quietly. Loki nodded, covering her small hand with his free one.

“I am not trying to… get rid of you. It’s just…”, he trailed away.

“I know. This whole… being out in the open puts pressure on you. And your mother was kind, and understanding. I see her, you know. In you.”, Ljosira said, her voice earnest. Loki regarded her doubtfully.

“It’s true. She left behind so much. Magic, cunning, sometimes a bit of a temper… Your fondness of riddles and books. The way you scrutinize people.” His brow wrinkled, making him look very critical. “Yes, exactly like that!” Loki gave a short, amused sort of huff, but his features were still grave, sullen.
“You are trying to distract me by lightening the mood.”, he observed. “I appreciate the gesture, I truly do.” His long fingers absent-mindedly brushed a loose streak of hair behind her ear. “But maybe I should not be here. Not yet.” Disappointment bloomed on her face at once, taking some of the luminosity from her eyes. It made him regret his words as soon as he had spoken them.

“No, please stay. Honestly, everyone will be mocking my terrible dancing skills anyway. Nobody is going to look at you.”, she pleaded. His expression was that of a man besieged by disagreeing emotions. “It’s not the same without you.”, Ljosira added after a long pause, softly. Loki let out a sigh, knowing that he had been defeated. He couldn’t find it in his heart to deny her.

“As you wish.”, he conceded. The joy that lit up her whole face was just a little dazzling.

As they re-joined the guards on the path to the festival, Loki had resumed a look of mild indifference once more. But inwardly, his mind wondered about what Ljosira had said.

_Vit ru skyldrae._ He realized that she had never, not once, turned her back on him, given him up as a lost cause. Unimpressed by his deceptions, she stood her ground. Did her genuine concern come from the life-bond they shared, its protective nature? Then again, what was that bond really, if not a magical representation of a completely real connection between them? He tried to separate it from emotion, but at the same time he sensed that he’d journeyed well past the point where he would be able to do so. It had become indistinguishable, intertwined so thoroughly with the fabric of something else, something… more.

He shied away from putting a name on it, and yet it frightened him. Loki knew, undeniably, that he had crossed a boundary into uncharted land, especially after last night. The dragons might have reluctantly accepted the happenings before, but now… Now he was sailing very, very close to the wind. Treading on thin ice. In no book ever written did it say what would happen if a dragon and a mortal became lovers. He walked blind now, without guidance or wisdom to help him face the dangers that lay ahead. For surely, this would not be a walk in the park.

_Everywhere I go, chaos follows._, Loki thought bitterly.

*If you step one toe out of line, mortal.*, Natta’s dark, velvet voice curled through his memory.

As Ljosira climbed the steps to the great platform, greeted by cheers and waves, she turned to smile at him. Joyful, light-hearted. And Loki was overcome by a sudden, primal fear. It knew no reason, defied rationalization. What if she got hurt because of him? What if this life-bond to a mortal condemned her to a terrible fate? How could he ever hope to protect her from harm? He did not know a whole lot about affairs of the heart. But he did know that people never feared the loss of things they did not love.
XVI. Matters of Integrity

Chapter Notes

The Spring Festival! Every story needs a bit of revelry before things get serious, so here's some feasting and dancing and later a bit of kinky stuff :> I somehow couldn't resist, it just happened XD (NSFW below the line-break)
As for the very end... Well, it had to happen sooner or later.

XVI. Matters of Integrity

“Ljosira, at last! I was starting to wonder if I should send out a search party.”, Thor laughed and pulled the dragon princess into a warm hug. He had risen from his seat as soon as he’d spotted her. Jane was right beside him, looking a little dazed, as though she couldn’t quite believe the scenery around her.

“I just had to take a look at the rosebushes. They are so beautiful.”, Ljosira answered, greeting all of them.

“Did you know that Thor once demolished half of them?”, Volstagg appeared, a goblet of wine in his hand and a wide grin peeking through his thick beard. Thor gave him a good-natured push of his elbow, but the warrior only huffed and went on.

“Right after he got Mjölnir, he boasted around without shame. ‘Watch the might of thunder!’, he screams, and throws the hammer –” But Fandral interjected then, cutting him short.

“And instead of flying, it crashes…”, his words were accompanied by a high whistling noise that ended in a sad, discordant little note. “Like a dead bird, right into the queen’s beautiful garden. It unearthed three trees and half her roses. She was furious. Might of thunder, indeed.” The other two boomed with laughter, while Thor grunted at the wildly exaggerated tale of his failure.

“Ah… Heavens grant her rest.”, Volstagg said then, taking a sip of his wine. It was this point where everyone seemed to notice Loki, who stood a little apart from Ljosira with his hands folded behind his back. “Having a night out too, Loki? Confinement has made you no less… dubious, I see.”

“Give the man a break, Volstagg. He hasn’t been to a feast in a year – you know that’s a crime on Asgard!”, Fandral joked in his usual airy tone. Nothing could dampen this man’s mood. Thor placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder reassuringly, which startled Loki so much he even forgot to keep his gaze strict.

“Fandral is right. Loki has permission to be here tonight.”, the crown prince emphasized, silencing all possible protest. “Let us get you a drink, brother.” As they walked away, Ljosira turned to a still beaming Jane. They began an animated discussion in which Jane marvelled at her story about the rite of passage. She had described it in great detail to Loki when she had returned, but Jane’s avid curiosity made her relive the events once more.

The dragon clans gathered upon Yggdrasil, circling high over her immense crown. They spread their wings wide and let magic rain from the sky in a million points of light. So much knowledge to
be absorbed, showering upon her scales like thousands of sparks. The spectacle could be seen on each of the Nine Realms. And afterwards, the one who had taken the passage through the rain of stars would be a mature dragon, ready to take their place as guardian of the world tree.

“The meteor shower during the Convergence! That was –“, Jane exclaimed when she realized it.

“Yes, you saw a part of the rite in that.” The other woman shook her head in disbelief.

“Amazing. You think you know the boundaries of the possible, and then a god drops from the sky and dragons dance between the stars.” She turned thoughtful for a moment while Ljosira tried to suppress her amusement. “You know, you weren’t very surprised when Loki showed up so suddenly today. And you don’t feel him. Most people I talk to think he’s dangerous. How do you know him?”

“That is a story that goes back farther than you might think. We may still sit here tomorrow if I told it.”, Ljosira mused, letting her gaze wander over the surroundings.

Long rows of tables spanned the platform, a polished wooden pagoda which was open to all sides. At the far end, some space had been left open for people to dance and converse. Music filled the air. Lyre, flute and drums fell into a cheerful rhythm, making guests sing along with their goblets held high. Farther down the table, Volstagg hummed the tune while Fandral pulled a tall blonde woman to her feet and spun her around.

Thor returned then with a wide grin on his face and Loki on his heels, whose movements seemed a little less wooden and more relaxed now. The brothers had grown closer through the events in the dark world and their mother’s passing, although it still felt like a fragile kind of peace. An odd awkwardness lingered in the way they treated each other, not quite sure how to connect again after their relationship had suffered great blows.

Jane still eyed Loki in a wary manner, the way one eyed a volatile substance that could decide to explode at a moment’s notice. Thor on the other hand was positively radiant, his mood infectious.

“Ljosira! I think it’s high time for a dance. Some reliable sources tell me it is your weakness. I will take my chances.”, he said, grabbing hold of her hand without preamble. She was too startled to even utter a response. Loki stiffened instantly. He knew his brother was simply energetic and generous by nature, but that did not help against the ugly sting of jealousy. It had been much better when people were not allowed to touch her at all – by draconic law. Except for him.

But as he watched how his brother struggled to keep Ljosira’s steps in rhythm, lifting her several times before she could trip, his gloomy mood was overtaken by genuine merriment. Gods, she was a horrible dancer. Her movements had always seemed just the tiniest bit artificial. No matter how much she tried to hide it, this mortal body was not her natural form – which made her quite clumsy, even if Thor did his best to salvage it.

“I am truly sorry.”, Ljosira hissed through gritted teeth after she had trampled the crown prince’s toes for the fifth time. Thor seemed very entertained by her embarrassment.

“I don’t have the faintest idea what you are talking about.”, he replied, lifting her effortlessly so she hovered an inch above the ground. “Somehow I thought a dragon would be heavier.”, he commented, earning a scathing look from her. But he had effectively relieved her of the need to coordinate her steps with his. Ljosira thought ruefully that she might have learned a lot about mortal idiosyncrasies, but the fine motor skills required in a dance went over her head. Give me the open sky and I will show you grace. But on the ground, with these limbs?
“Clearly, you chose the wrong partner.”, she mumbled apologetically. Thor flashed her a grin.

“That may be true. I can feel my brother staring needles at me. It prickles. Maybe I should not occupy you much longer, if I don’t want a dagger in my back.”, he surveyed in a jovial tone. Then – quite abruptly – his voice dropped low and turned serious. “But I needed to get you away from him for a moment.”

When her eyes flickered to his, Ljosira found the same synergy of concern and bafflement she had seen him display several times before. Like someone who watched a very unlikely event unfold before their eyes and didn’t quite know what to make of it.

“Have you told him?”, Thor continued. She did not have to ask what he meant. There was only one secret she still kept from Loki. One thing she had been unable to confess to him, because she feared, more than anything, that it could separate him from her. Ljosira shook her head, her cheerful expression replaced by regret. Thor spun her around slowly, sighing.

“He deserves to know. I doubted that after all, I would say this about my brother. But I believe it is true.”

“What is?”, Loki strode up to them in a deceptively casual stance just as the song came to an end. Thor straightened and released Ljosira.

“That from the two of us, you might just be the better dancer.”, he answered evenly, giving Loki a pat on the back before he made his way back to Jane through the crowd.

“Shall we test that theory?”, Loki queried, yet he did not wait for her answer.

Still a little rattled, Ljosira blinked in surprise when his arm slid around her waist. His free hand caught hers, while the other exerted a subtle pressure at the small of her back, giving her precise direction. The rest of her seemed to follow on its own, not even quite conscious about what she did. But a moment later, her feet stumbled over his. Loki corrected the blunder by steadying her confidently.

“You overthink.”, came his soft whisper as he spun around with her. “The rhythm is up here, not down there.” Easy for him to say, with his innate, nimble grace. He moved like water. Casual and unforced, while she struggled to keep up.

“You didn’t have these problems yesterday…”, Loki murmured, his voice a little darker than before. Smooth like silk. He delighted in the blush that crept to her cheeks.

“T-that was different.”, Ljosira argued, which made him smile in a decidedly wicked manner. The devil.

“Not at all. It is quite the same. Push and pull. Surrender a little, gain a little. Stop thinking about the inconsequential steps.” By some mysterious skill, he steered her across the floor. There was an unerring certainty in his rhythm, an intimate familiarity in his movements.

Ljosira relaxed into his guidance, letting intuition take over instead of stringing together a set of complex little steps. It worked. She was still far from elegance, but it felt more natural now. Spinning and twirling, push and pull as the music rose and fell to form its lively melody. Her self-consciousness melted away into a simple kind of enjoyment, coaxing even the worry about Thor’s advice to fade into the background.

Before long, she was smiling, caught up in the magic of the moment, the sure grasp of his hands, the sheer vibrancy of the song. All of a sudden, Loki released her entirely. Before she could even
react, her feet lost solid ground and she was airborne, spinning above the guests in a wild swoop. She let out a little cry, holding on to the strong hands around her waist. It was exhilarating.

“You look happy.”, Loki noted as he set her down again when the song came to an end, sounding quite pleased for his standards. He was not a cheery person to begin with, but the crinkles of amusement around his eyes spoke volumes. He was enjoying himself.

“I am. Dancing is more like flying than I knew.”

They returned to the tables together, where a dozen youngsters immediately pounced on Ljosira. After bowing to both her and Loki respectfully, they pleaded her to tell the story of how Mjölnir had been forged. She marvelled at their auras, pure as only those of children are, untainted by complicated feelings of pride or retribution. They had not come to understand such feelings yet. Smiling at their enthusiasm, she lifted her hands to conjure the images that would tell the story.

Many years ago, when Thor had been just a little short of adulthood, Elding the Dragon King wished to express his friendship towards Asgard by presenting the crown prince with a gift. Long since, the alliance between the dragons and the Aesir had aided the realm to prosper, as they were closest to Yggdrasil’s crown, drawing strength from her magic in a way no other realm did.

And so Elding, together with Odin, decided on a formidable weapon which would suit a becoming king. Three things, Ljosira explained, were needed to create Mjölnir. Metals taken from each of the Nine Realms amalgamated to form its core, making it equally strong, no matter if on Asgard, Midgard or even Jotunheim. The outer layers were Uru, divine metal only the dwarven master-smiths knew how to work. Then, to imbue it with resilience, it needed to be forged under extreme conditions – immense heat or crushing pressure, as found within the heart of a dying star. And lastly, the fiery breath of a dragon to temper it, enchant it with unique qualitites. Elding added his fire to the great forge of Nidavellir, thus creating Mjölnir.

It would channel lightning, never miss its target, and always return to its master. By then, a considerable number of guests has gathered to listen to Ljosira’s story in awe.

“It took many years to forge Mjölnir. When it was finished, the Dragon King visited Asgard and presented the Allfather with the hammer. Odin was impressed. Yet one thing, it still lacked. No weapon so powerful should ever be wielded without responsibility – and so he enchanted it, so only one worthy and of honour would ever be able to wield the hammer of Thor. The hammer has its own will, now attuned to the crown prince. I wonder if I could lift it… But I shall not try. Some doors are better left unopened.”, Ljosira finished, allowing the images she had invoked to fade away.

The people scattered after applauding her, while the children ran squealing to Thor, who had listened in too. Ljosira couldn’t suppress a smile at the way they begged and pleaded for a demonstration of Mjölnir. Yet when she turned to Loki, he wore an expression somewhere between annoyed and intrigued.

“You certainly know how to put my brother into the spotlight.”, he noted, a bit more harshly than intended. She cocked her head at him in an admonishing fashion, as if he should know better.

“Old habits die hard.”, he murmured in his defence, playing with a strand of her hair distractedly. Then, his mind seemed to take a strange turn. “My father is notably absent. So is Sif.” Ljosira gave a small nod.

“The Allfather’s spirit is burdened these days.”, she said quietly. “As for Sif… You know why she did not show up.”
“I never paid it much attention, to be honest… But now that you mention it… There is a tangled web. I cannot fathom Thor’s choice.”, Loki commented with a trace of arrogance. Ljosira raised her brows at him.

“Choice has little to do with it, trickster.” His arm came around her shoulders and suddenly his lips skimmed over the shell of her ear in a feather-light kiss. She took a sharp breath.

“Little, but not nothing. I do not envy them for their predicament. But I choose to take the worry from your eyes by commanding your attention. I’m not sure how long I am willing to sit here if I could be doing some far more intriguing things instead. Sadly, I cannot leave, since those things need your participation.”, he breathed, sending tiny quivers down her spine.

“You are impossible.” Her was voice not quite even.

“You would know.”, Loki retorted playfully.

Hours of dancing, singing and tasting countless delicacies later, the guests had eased from formalities into more boisterous mood, the laughter and cheer ringing out into the fresh spring air around the gardens.

It was long after midnight when Ljosira returned to the palace with Loki. Even the two guards on duty had loosened up, turning on their heels as soon as they had delivered the ‘prisoner’. The lock had not even fallen into place when Loki pulled her into a searing kiss. There was no hesitation this time, no struggle to maintain control. He held nothing back.

When she answered in kind to his seeking touch, his hunting lips, the clothes seemed to fall all on their own. She let out a startled laugh as he whisked her away to the bed, only the diamond necklace remaining from her evening attire. Its metal felt cool against her heated skin. He climbed above her gracefully, eyes darkened by desire. Their depths glittered with sinful promise. A hand slid decisively beneath her backside, pressing her hips to the hard ridge between his thighs. She gasped at the sensation of this unashamed masculinity, rubbing against the soft, sensitive wetness at her centre. He was impatient today, driven by an uncontained passion, no longer restricted by caution.

Still he teased, going slow, letting her feel his whole length along the heated seam of her most secret place. She reeled from the speed of her body’s reaction. Mere moments had it taken to grow desperate for him, to have her senses overtaken by his intoxicating fragrance. She tangled her hands into his hair, arched her spine to be closer as her lungs struggled to draw air in quick gasps.

“What’s this?” His breath fanned over the skin of her throat, a thrilling blend of hot and cold making her shudder with excitement. “Do you have a wicked side I have yet to see?”

Damn him, he was taunting her. In a streak of mere intuition, she hooked her leg around his and quite effectively unseated him from his position, instead rolling atop of him. He was momentarily rendered speechless by the sight. Pure temptation as she enthroned herself above. Her hair curling all around her pale shoulders, the curves of her breasts, just playfully kissing the dark rosy peaks. His hands settled on her hips at once and he sucked in a sharp breath through clenched teeth.

“You have been teasing me all day. I only have so much patience. Should I return the courtesy?”, Ljosira informed him, gazing down through lowered lashes. She rolled her hips once, torturously slow, leaning forward until her flushed face was only inches from his. Streaks of silver tickled over
his cheek and chest. Her hand reached down, boldly grasping his length to guide it where he wanted to be so badly. She was a fast learner.

“How does that work out for you?”, she whispered, her eyes glinting with mischief. Mischief, from her. He was having the tables turned on him in the most enthralling way possible. Loki could barely hear a word she said through the rush of his pulse.

“It works… just fine –“, he began, but then interrupted himself with a groan when he slipped inside her snug, sweet entrance. His fingers dug into the tender skin of her waist as she lowered herself, taking him inside her tight heat.

“Gods…”, he uttered shakily. She gripped him like a vice. He would be undone before he’d even fully entered her. His obvious excitement emboldened her to push downward with one fluid motion, then she stopped short at the sudden depth of sensation. Stretched taut. Despite her maddening arousal, her body was still painfully new to the act. It strained to make room, while she vibrated with the need for something she still had no true name for. His elegant fingers flexed and loosened, his breath coming in rough rasps.

“You’ll kill me. Move. Please move.”, he ground out, pressing her against him so the tingling little peak right above the place he invaded her sparked delightfully. Waves of pleasure racing along every nerve. His hips bucked impulsively, hands urging her to move, to lift and settle, fall into rhythm with him. And thank the gods, she did.

Carefully at first, so slowly he thought he’d go insane from the torment. That sweet, sweet friction drew a deep growl from his chest. Maybe for the first time in his life, he relinquished all control, and just felt. Revelling in the way she found her courage, her own natural pace, squeezing, pulsing, throbbing around him. He thought it would be less intense the second time, that he would lose interest as he had always before. How wrong he’d been. Her passion unleashed, she burned like fire, devouring all in her wake.

His head fell back onto the pillows, the cords of his neck drawn tight as steel. And then she accelerated, driven by a primal knowledge, her fingers catching his and intertwining. Release rolled over her and her inner muscles clamped down on him so frantically, he could take no more. He uttered her name as both curse and praise, before the wave of ecstasy drowned him. Sight, sound and senses all unravelled for those few fleeting moments of bliss.

As Loki struggled to return to reality, he slowly became aware of her limp body draped over his. Strands of her hair streamed out across his chest, her head resting on his breastbone. Again, that peace… Just like last night. That complete stillness of the mind. Seeking his heart for doubt, he found none. There was only a peculiar sensation of being right, in the right place, at the right time. Belonging, he observed with the bafflement of a person discovering a hidden room in a home they had explored a thousand times over. He lifted his hand, letting the silver slide between his fingers. A river of starlight. He would never tire of looking at it.

“Why is it silver?”, he wondered, more as though talking to himself. Ljosira lifted her head, her hands linking just above his heartbeat. The tenderness in her gaze caught him unaware. For a moment, it felt as though he was suspended at some invisible edge, with no notion what awaited him on the other side. Then she smiled a shy smile, and he knew that anxious feeling had just been an echo of a decision made long ago. The heart knows what the mind wants to deny, to rationalize, to explain with petty little words which cannot truly contain it.

“Who would know?”, Ljosira answered elusively, as he well knew she liked to do when the mood struck her. Loki returned her smile. While he did, his touch ghosted lightly over her left hand as he cast a small illusion. A filigree silver band braided around her fourth finger. He pulled away again,
brushing loose wisps from her face. Ljosira looked at her hand, astonished. Yet in her eyes he saw that she did not know its meaning. The dragon princess had by far not watched Midgard as closely as Asgard. He would get her a real one, but until then… she was free to puzzle over its significance on her own. What would life be without a little enigma to figure out?

“Do I get a present every time we do this wicked dance?”, she queried cheekily, grey eyes flashing.

“I would likely be a poor man very soon.”, Loki answered. “The humans call it making love, among less… civil words.” Her expression turned to one of stunned surprise. Both because he had never spoken the word love before – in any context – and also because now she was intensely curious what ‘less civil’ entailed. Yet before she could form a reply, he went on: “So, why is it silver?”

“Don’t you want some things to be left to the imagination?”, she jested, tracing the band innocently. Loki shifted her gently to the blankets, the lure of sleep bringing a languid sort of softness to his features.

“I am not sure you want that, my light. I have a colourful imagination.” She feigned to be in deep thought for a moment before she answered.

“Our magic shapes our mortal bodies to resemble our true form. Lightbringers are fair and slender, elven. Life-Binders more… earthy, vibrant, as Midgardians often are. The Darkflight… dusky, of course, small stature, with hair like living shadow. Voidwalkers are the most… eerie. Tall and ageless, intangible. Like Andlát.”, she then explained.

“Hmm. I had hoped for a more mysterious source.”, Loki said in fake disappointment. His voice sounded drowsy, a little distant already, reaching for the plane of dreamers.

“But not all things are great mysteries to be solved. Some are simple and easy.”, he heard Ljosira say softly. Within the calm she had created around them, he drifted off to sleep. Ljosira on the other hand was reminded of that fateful day, when she had saved him from falling to nothingness… and left him behind to face the darkness on his own.

His aura was peaceful now, as though he had let go of some ever-flaunting, restless thing inside the depth of his soul. Her heart ached, weighed down by a stinging regret that would never truly leave, and a fear so great it robbed her of breath. If she could only stop time as the Voidwalkers can, ever so rarely, or darken the truth so it would never see the light.

But that is not who you are., her conscience pointed out. Ljosira looked at the filigree ring he had conjured. She knew she needed to tell him the truth, even if it carried the danger of tearing a gulf between them. She loved this man, more than she had thought possible. Her heart overflowed with it. Whatever may come, there could be no lies or deception between them. Never again.

Loki woke to the strange feeling of loss. It was still dark in his bedroom, although the first signs of dawn were approaching. Sighing sleepily, he fumbled around for Ljosira, but his hands only found cold sheets and furs. He gathered his senses and looked around in the grey twilight of his room, catching sight of her as she stood at the edge of the terrace. A silken blanket around her naked shoulders, she gazed out into the sleeping city, her eyes distant.

“Ljosira… Is something wrong?”, Loki asked, clearing his throat of grittiness. A slight shiver went through her. She gave him a small smile, but it seemed rather sad.

“There is no silence like the one before dawn. Everything is muted. Everyone is still dreaming… A great grey blanket upon the world. The little lights of their auras dim as they seek simple things,
memories of the past…”, Ljosira said quietly. The words worried him. He had never heard her speak in such a detached manner. Fading, as if her mind roamed some far away land he could never visit.

“Something is bothering you.” It wasn’t a question. Loki sat up and watched her closely. The gloom blurred her features, but nothing could take the light from her eyes, which she now turned to him. The plea for forgiveness in them was almost frightening.

“I cannot keep secrets from you. Not for the Allfather, or for my duties, or… even if it means facing your anger.”, she began, but her voice trailed away as though she struggled to find the right words, the courage. Loki merely looked at her, confused, waiting.

Ljosira heaved a great sigh and her gaze locked with his, before she confessed the one thing she had been hiding from him since she’d come to Asgard.

“I was the one responsible for you landing in Chitauri space.”
So, the plot thickens... I hope I am still keeping you busy with the story. Creating suspense is hard... I really try hard to write scenes which make you wonder what will happen next and how it will all turn out. I hope at some point, I can manage to create such interwoven stories that make you keep on reading to discover the mystery! I practice and read a lot to become better :) As always, enjoy!

Chapter Notes

So, the plot thickens... I hope I am still keeping you busy with the story. Creating suspense is hard... I really try hard to write scenes which make you wonder what will happen next and how it will all turn out. I hope at some point, I can manage to create such interwoven stories that make you keep on reading to discover the mystery! I practice and read a lot to become better :) As always, enjoy!

XVII. Cloak of Shadows

It took a few moments until the meaning of her words reached him. Loki’s face went blank, his eyes unfocused for a second.

“What?”, he said faintly, but his expression was quickly overtaken by a look of disbelieving anger. “Was this your idea of rightful punishment?” The cutting edge in his voice went through her like barbed wire. She took a step towards him but stopped short when she saw the rejection in his posture.

“I didn’t mean to! It was a horrible mistake. Please, let me explain –“, she beseeched. Loki sat up and waved his hand, covering himself with an illusion. Avoiding her eyes, he stood and paced the room, unable to keep still in his rising agitation.

“By all means, explain!” he hissed out coldly, stinging with cynicism. “Explain what ‘mistake’ led to by greatest nightmare.” His anger was a vicious thing that emerged from him like a venomous snake, striking out at anything it could reach. It seared through the life-bond, tearing at it with feelings of betrayal. Treachery, from the first person he had trusted in so many years. When she didn’t answer immediately, he stalked her with two quick steps. His hands grabbed her shoulders forcefully, shaking her once.

“Speak! You can’t have it both ways, Lightbringer. Pulling me close, telling me we are bound, demanding truth from me and then standing silent when you should return the courtesy!”, his voice felt like a wintry chill.

“You fell from the Bifröst. You fell into the void, and I couldn’t let it happen. Do you know what is down there? Nothing. The border to nothing. The end of existence. I felt our life-bond slip away, I was so terrified – but when I brought you back, one of those horrid beasts attacked me and I –“ His state of mind was too irrational to understand the logic of her words or notice the tremble going through her.

“You should have let me fall instead of leaving me in hell! What was I to you? You had met me once! You played around with my fate, instead of just leaving me be. Why?!”, Loki assaulted her, demanding answers.

“You would have died! I couldn’t let you die. Our bond…”, but he interrupted her again.

“So this is it then. The whole trial, all your efforts, making me trust you – just so you can spare yourself an uncomfortable experience. It’s always the life-bond with you. Do you even care beyond
that?” All his inner demons came alive to cloud his judgement and scream at him what a fool he had been. His hand went to her throat. Although he knew he could likely not hurt her, he was powerless against the onslaught of rage. Ljosira did not resist, her eyes full of hurt and sorrow.

“How can you even ask that? It was the beginning. I care because I watched you, knew you through it. Everything we have is built on that. Your life, tied to mine! To lose it means losing all of you. Let you fall? You have no idea what you are even talking about!”, her voice rose and then cracked like a thin piece of glass.

“Then show me.”, Loki said with utter determination, letting go of her throat. Instead, his palm settled on her forehead and he pushed through the connection between them, into her mind. Callously, with no consideration that this was an immense violation of privacy, like barging into someone’s most private sanctuary without asking permission. His anger made him forget all decency. She did nothing to defend herself, although she would have been capable to do so. She let him in without resistance, and the moment she did, he became her.

The cacophony of sensations nearly struck him unconscious. She was endless. Her consciousness stretched out into all directions, like a band of countless stars, a landscape that disappeared into a dawn-lit horizon. In that touch, Loki understood that she was no more mortal than he was human. And he realized what a tremendous idiot he had been, to even push her this far, to try and fit her into some narrow-minded concept of his.

Her life-bonds were the very core of her. The fiery sun at her heart, the fuel that kept it burning incandescently. Absolute things which connected her to some greater construct, of such scale he could hardly encompass it. She could not be without them. He had once asked her how she perceived the bond to him, and now he looked upon it with her dragon eyes. Her fondness of Asgard, her fascination with mortals, their hopes and dreams and desires, they all had come through him. And those were just the outermost layers.

There was so much more beneath. He saw himself in his own complexity, with his virtues and vices, and how he had added thread upon thread to the connection with every little exchange, strengthening it. Fascinated, he wanted to look further down, unravel all of it, when a strange sensation caught his attention. There, another life-bond. It fluttered like a forlorn flag, ripped off. Now they will find you guilty and kill you! Sever our life-bond, gone forever, and you have no idea how that feels.

Don’t twist my words to suit your false assumptions about me.

To lose it means losing all of you. You have no idea what you are even talking about.

In his arrogance, he had assumed that she had never known loss. So many hints, and he had missed all of them, selfish creature that he was. He reached into the torn bond, when he heard her voice. Don’t. You do not have to share that. But he did it anyway. A memory unfolded before him like a dream. A memory of Mother. Her warmth around us when we first opened our eyes. Her love and joy within this primary bond that precedes all others. A daughter, at last.

So much of your father in you, but your heart is like mine. Ljosira.

We were so loved. Until the day she disappeared… Out of nowhere, Loki felt a bolt of agony so intense, he thought it would cleave him in twain. It was like being rent apart, sundered.

Mother was gone, from one moment to the next. She had flown away from Yggdrasil and never
returned. Her presence vanished, and with it did the life-bond that had tied her to her daughter. *Brutally severed, that part of us lost in the void.*

*We were stunted, crippled. Less than before, and it felt as though we would never be whole again. It hurts still. A phantom pain, where she had once been. The first who had loved us, without reservations, before we even came to be.* The vision broke abruptly as Loki let go of her. Ljosira looked at him, a single tear meandering from the corner of her eyes, down her cheek.

“...”, he said, lost for words. “I’m an utter fool.” His arms wrapped around her, so exceedingly gentle. All fury in him had burned down to ashes. “What happened?” Ljosira let out a deep sigh.

“All places in the universe are dangerous, even for dragons. Rarely, one gets lost... They just... vanish. Gone. My mother was one of those cases. I do miss her sometimes, so keenly.” As she said this, her hands linked around his waist and she buried her face against his chest.

“I am so sorry.”, was all he could say. It felt like a hollow comfort.

“As am I. But it is alright. You understand now, why I could not let you fall? I will always protect you. It is part of me. But I do regret fleeing from the Chitauri monster. I was so terrified... And Natta caught me at the edge of the quarantine... She didn’t let me go back for you. I will regret that childish mistake, and what it wrought, for the rest of my life. I never meant for this to cause such chaos. Will you forgive me?”, Ljosira met his eyes, and there was nothing but honesty in their silver depths.

How could he be angry with her? She had saved his life on that day. Aevi had even told him so: *Your lifeline has been extended several times now.* Ljosira had seen to it that he received a second chance. He should have died the day he fell from the Bifrost, perished as he hit the edge to nothingness. He should have been convicted to die at the trial.

“Don’t apologize. I can’t bear it after the ugly things I just said to you. You took my case to make amends, didn’t you?”, he whispered, pressing his cheek into her silky hair. “You saved my life. Twice. Don’t apologize.”

All the tension went out of her then. She had been carrying this immense weight on her conscience, and how liberating it was to be rid of it. Light as air. A wonderful kind of peace. As Loki bent down for a gentle kiss, Ljosira felt her worries flee away from her, evaporating like wisps of smoke in the wind.

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Elding the Dragon King, on the other hand, had a lot to worry about. His wise dragon sight shifted away from Asgard, to Alfheim. The borders of the Light Elf realm blurred and flickered as though painted with sloppy brushstrokes. Elding sighed, wondering if he was, after all, getting old. Ever since the Convergence, his usually unerring vision had some strange chinks in it, small blind spots in which he failed to focus.

“Father... You look worried.” Vegr, his firstborn son and heir, walked into view beside Elding’s giant body to stand at the edge of the viewing platform. Like all Lightbringers in their mortal form, Vegr’s features were even and fair, his long white hair tied to the back of his head in a simple braid. As crown prince of dragons, a circlet of stars crowned his brow.

“I am.”, Elding answered with a turn of his head, looking down on his son. “Did you notice that
hardly any of the Darkflight attended Ljosira’s rite of passage? Natta called to them not to come.” Vegr frowned.

“They were never overly fond of celebrations. Does that really bother you?”, his son asked.

“Natta slips in and out of my sight more often than she did before. I have a strange feeling that secrets are being kept from me.”, Elding said, sounding offended. Vegr knew his father. He might have been truly worried about the Darkflight, but one would be a fool to think that was even half of it.

“Father, you have that look in your eyes you get when you brood over your children. And only one of them makes you worry so much that the skies around Midgard are clouded for days. You have always been more protective of her than the others.”, Vegr turned his eyes to Asgard, where he could feel Ljosira’s presence, shrouded by a veil of magic, but never fully invisible.

“Your sister is in love with that mortal. I have let things take their course because I couldn’t bear her sadness if the bond was destroyed. Not after what happened to your mother. And it was too late when I realized… Her devotion puts her in danger.”, Elding said, his voice unyielding.

“But you have long since respected the Asgardians as the wisest among the mortals. They are the closest thing to our kind, you once said to me.”, Vegr mused thoughtfully.

“Just because they managed not to destroy one another like other realms, they are still mortals! They cannot control their emotions, they meddle with forces beyond their understanding. And this one, look at him. So many failed attempts at glory until it began to dawn on him where he went wrong, and he’s still confused. Do you know, my son, why we are not supposed to bond with mortals?” The dragon king’s piercing eyes turned to Vegr, and even his eldest son felt a little uneasy under his scrutinizing stare.

“Because our magic is dedicated to Yggdrasil, to balance between all realms. Such power is not to be given into the hands of a mortal. It’s Ljosira who will get hurt in the end…” Elding’s draconic features changed from austerity to fatherly concern as he spoke.

“You let me bond with a mortal.”, Vegr pointed out calmly. He let his awareness fan out towards Heimdall, who stood in his observatory, ever-watchfully guarding the Bifröst. Elding huffed.

“Yes. One carefully chosen, who could handle the responsibility. With Ljosira, it was a stroke of fate! A great whimsy of the cosmos, if you will. It leaves her vulnerable to suffering. And I cannot foresee the outcome.”

Vegr touched the side of his shimmering body, allowing his own feelings to carry over to his father. Ljosira was his beloved sister, the only one he had, the tiny spark that bounced around excitedly to lighten his day when duties weighed too heavily on him. He remembered carrying her around on his neck when she hadn’t learned to fly yet, showing her each realm from high above in Yggdrasil’s crown, down to the roots that reached so far. Of course he did not want her to get hurt. But his father and brothers had sheltered her for so long. Every once in a while, Vegr had glimpsed a hint of sadness in her eyes. A peculiar shame, as though she knew she did not lack for anything, but still yearned for more.

“You raised her to take mother’s place as Great Protector of Asgard. But father… you need to let go of her, at least a little. Let her make her own decisions. Or did you call me here to bring her back?”, Vegr looked up to Elding questioningly. The dragon king shook his great, eight-horned head.
“I will watch over her from here, for now. This summons has a different reason. I need you to investigate something for me. The borders of Alfheim look twisted, blurry… and I am afraid that Malekith’s attack has left behind disturbing magical energy. Travel to Alfheim and purge whatever residual magic you find. And Vegr… be careful. Watch out for anything… unusual.”, he explained. Vegr nodded slowly.

“What do you expect me to find?”, he asked in a serious tone.

“I do not know. And that is why I entrust this task to you only.”, Elding answered, bending his head to be on eye-level with his firstborn, who held his gaze in a determined manner.

“I won’t disappoint you, father.”

Thor sat at the vast round table in his chambers, his head propped into one hand. Bowls of fruit, carafes with water and mead or plates of delicacies usually covered the ash wood surface. But for several weeks now, Odin had been delegating more and more urgent matters to him. Ever since Frigga’s death, the Allfather hadn’t been quite the same. He spent long hours wandering the palace alone, or shut himself inside his quarters.

This led to troubling repercussions for his elder son and heir, who was tasked with managing the realm pretty much on his own. Instead of food and drink, reports and official requests piled on his desk now, more often than not accompanied by sealed letters. If drowning in parchment was what it meant to be king, Thor seriously considered a change of career.

He would have been happy to leave for Midgard together with Jane, instead of having to work through these countless issues his father had unloaded upon him. She had only been gone for a few days, and he already missed her. But aside from his increasingly secluded father, he was the only remaining member of the royal family. He could not just up and leave. Well, there was Loki… Recently, their relationship seemed to have become less tense and more like it had been before the entire chaos started. Not quite mended, but on the right course.

While things between Loki and Odin were still cold, or rather non-existent at best, Thor had a growing urge to ask Loki for counsel about all these tedious matters that frayed his patience. His brother had always been the one for the clever negotiations, with his talent to turn a phrase and his considerable knowledge. Thor frowned at the rune-script on the letter in his hand. A guard’s knock on his open door brought him out of his musings.

“My prince. We still haven’t heard from the investigation party.”, the man said gravely.

“No good. It’s been five days since they arrived. They should have reported long ago.”, Thor stood to circle the room, restless.

“Should we send out another party?”, the guard asked in a tentative tone, to which the crown prince shook his head.

“No.”

“Then… What are your orders, sir?” Thor crossed the distance to the door with broad, resolute steps and walked past the guard.

“I will handle this myself. Keep me informed if there are any new developments.” The man bowed to him, but he was already on his way to Loki’s quarters.
On the eve of the spring festival, Thor had sent a small group of skilled warriors to the highlands. They were supposed to investigate the magical disturbances Alfheim had warned about. He had received a message after their arrival and had expected them to report back to the palace daily from there on. But no word had come since then, and that worried him. Of course, there could be any number of reasons why they had failed to get in touch until now. Violent storms often harrowed the land, hailing from the mountains. Messenger birds could get caught up in the strong currents. Or some other equally unthreatening reason. But five days silence… Too long.

The door to Loki’s quarters was closed. When his brother didn’t answer the first few knocks, Thor shrugged and entered without qualms about breaching privacy. And found himself in an empty study. Interesting. Since Loki could not wander off anywhere without permission from him or the Allfather, Thor had a clear suspicion where he had disappeared to. Still, he strolled to the bedroom door to check, swinging it open boldly.

“Loki, you in he –”, but the words got stuck in his throat.

There was a small shriek, followed by the distinct sound of glass shattering. Thor had one, vivid glimpse of Ljosira before she dived beneath the sheets, plucking them up to cover herself. He bit back a laugh, while Loki let out a string of curses at the shards to his feet. At least his brother was half-clothed, sparing them both an even more embarrassing experience. Thor backed out of the room with some muttered apologies and barely contained amusement. Loki emerged a minute later, fully dressed. His emerald eyes threw out sparks.

“Are you familiar with the concept of knocking?!”, his brother snapped.

“I’m really sorry – to my defence, I knocked three times.”, Thor interrupted himself, letting out a suspiciously false cough. “I shall, eh, apologize to her in person.”, he tried to cut his losses. Loki snorted derisively.

“She might never leave that room again.”, he mused, rubbing his smooth chin.

“Well, that would surely benefit you…”, Thor began, then suddenly seemed unable to contain himself. He shook with laughter, a grin spreading across his face. For a moment, Loki just stared at him in disbelief. And then, as though infected by his brother’s amusement, his lips formed an answering smirk. Despite the awkward situation, it felt good to joke light-heartedly with each other. Loki cleared his throat.

“Why are you here, exactly?”, he inquired, lowering to his favourite armchair.

“You remember the disturbances Alfheim reported? I sent out a group of warriors to investigate as you suggested, and I haven’t heard from them for five days.”, Thor began, serious again.

“Five days… That’s too long.”, Loki mused with knitted brows.

“I hear you. If you have not asked Ljosira about the black holes yet, do so now. This situation has become urgent. If I don’t hear from my warriors by dawn tomorrow, I am going to the highlands myself. And you two will accompany me.”, the crown prince said, his voice ringing with determination.

“Are you serious?” Loki’s expression was dumbstruck. A familiar, adventurous glint danced in his brother’s bright blue eyes. He really meant it. His course was set, and he would follow it through to whatever end.

“When facing unknown, strange magic, who else would be better company than a sorcerer and a
dragon?”, Thor replied in encouragement, before he took his leave.

The echoes of his steps had just died down when Loki returned to his bedroom. Ljosira turned her head to glare at him as she fumbled with her dress.

“I have never been so mortified in my life! You forgot to lock the door!”, she snapped, although it did not sound quite serious. A lace slipped between her fingers and she huffed in frustration.

“All right.”, Loki hurried to assist her. Helping Ljosira get dressed in the morning was becoming a sort of ritual for him.

“I thought I had locked it.”, he murmured, pushing her silver locks aside so he could finish the last tie.

“What did Thor want, anyway?”, she wondered curiously, her hand reaching up to hold the strands out of his way.

“I will explain in a minute. First, I wanted to ask you something, days ago actually. What do you know about black holes? Magically, I mean.” Ljosira turned around and faced him, looking befuddled.

“Black holes? They are just simple energy sources. Siphons, to be more precise. They gather matter, magic and even light into their core.”, she replied, tilting her head.

“What is inside the core? Where does all the energy go?”, Loki asked, feeling an unexplainable chill travel down his spine. Ljosira turned thoughtful.

“I wouldn’t know. Our clan does not use such magic. We feed from the light of stars. Black holes are created by the sorcery of shadows – the Darkflight’s domain.” Loki straightened, his expression grave and apprehensive.

“Loki, you look troubled. What is going on?”, she inquired, concerned now.

“I’m not sure… There have been reports from Alfheim about miniature black holes scattered around the border.”, he said slowly. To this, Ljosira forced a laugh.

“That is impossible. There has to be some kind of mistake. It is strictly forbidden to siphon energy from the realms themselves. Surely someone confused a similar occurrence with a black hole.”, she tried to diffuse his suspicions, only she did not manage to sound completely convinced.

Of course, Ljosira would not want to suspect the Darkflight. For all she knew, they were now a loyal clan like the others, although not exactly a picture of warm friendliness. Loki couldn’t forget the way Natta had looked at them both, with such open contempt. How she’d seemed giddy with excitement when the tendrils of darkness forced their way through the realms.

On the other hand, such was her nature, not very unlike to himself before he met Ljosira. Maybe causing some minor incidents around the realms is the Darkflight idea of a really good jest. Despite all that, Loki could not shake the nagging suspicion that something was wrong. Someone played their shenanigans out on forbidden grounds, veiled from sight by a cloak of shadow. But secrecy was his element, and he would get to the bottom of this. Nobody outwitted the god of mischief in his own game. He put his hands on Ljosira’s shoulders and looked at her, his deep eyes imploring.

“The warriors Thor sent to investigate these disturbances are missing. Whatever is going on, there is only one way to find out. You should pack something warm. We are going to the highlands
Cold wind howled between the jagged rocks of the mountain pass, splattering them with icy rain in one unending downpour. On a small advance, overlooking the forest beneath from a clearing, a hooded figure loomed in the shadow of an old, stone archway. It had been magnificent once, marking a spot where travellers could rest on their way to the mountain top, but it had long since fallen to ruin.

A sphere hovered beyond the archway, an orb of pure darkness which seemed to suck the very light from its surroundings as it pulsed. Occasionally, the pull of its core would tear off small chunks of rock, swallowing them mercilessly. The black hole seethed with purpose. It was close to its goal, nearing the end of its life, almost ready. But not yet. The hooded figure cast a fleeting glance at it as if checking the progress, then turned back to the horizon, where the great city of Asgard lay somewhere in the distance.

“As expected, the crown prince is on the move. Is everything in place?”, a strangely distorted voice came from the sphere. He didn’t bother to face it.

“This one needs at least two more days. Longer than it takes the dragon princess to get here.”, the stranger answered tonelessly. Behind him, the edges of the black hole quivered.

“Never mind her now. I am going to stall her until you are finished.”, the bodiless voice spoke like a silken caress.

“What about her… ‘mate’?” The rain seemed to become even more insistent, making the stranger pull his hood farther over his face.

“If he had been convicted at that travesty of a trial, we wouldn’t have to bother with him.”, the voice said, and the sphere seemed to pulse with anger. Then, almost soothingly, it continued.

“But… He hungers so obviously for power, it is almost boring. Why not tempt him with it? Imagine the irony. These creatures are so vulgar. No finesse. I tire of them, this one especially.” The words were followed by a dark chuckle.

“And if he interferes?”, now the figure turned to its master, sounding unsure. A moment of silence passed. The wind howled without stopping for breath.

“Then dispose of him, but properly. I am sure you’ll figure something out, my pet.”
XVIII. Into the Unknown

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the kudos <3!! Each one motivates me to keep going!
Fight scenes are white hard to write. I hope it came out okay. We are closing in on
some major plot-happenings now! Also, I really like the legend of Sköll and Hati :)
Norse mythology is just great!

XVIII. Into the Unknown

This early in the morning, the palace landing site stood quite deserted when Loki and Ljosira arrived to find that Thor seemed very serious about going through with his plan. A sky-striker hovered at the far end, packed with some blankets, leather bundles and bottles of water. Ready to set off towards the thick forests and towering mountains in the highlands.

Thor greeted them enthusiastically, before he helped Ljosira step onto the deck. As she sat down and began fidgeting with the fur-lined collar of her cloak, her two companions took their places at the stirring wheel. She had requested travel clothing for cold weather, but it felt very strange to wear leather breeches instead of skirts. Loki had of course made no effort to hide his amusement at the way she’d pulled and fiddled with the snug fabric around her thighs. How could men possibly put up with that confining stuff around their legs, all the time? It mystified her.

Loki and Thor had not changed their attire much. They both wore cloaks slung around their shoulders, but other than that they looked all the same to her. Cold did not affect them the way it affected a Lightbringer, a being used to magic radiating from her dragon form in an eternal fire.

The sky-striker rose into the air and folded its gleaming metal wings, carrying them away from the landing site. Tall towers flashed by as the palace grew smaller. Below, the glossy buildings and neatly trimmed gardens of the city seemed like perfect miniature copies of themselves.

“So, we really are doing this, then.”, Loki threw in over the headwind as they gathered speed.

“We are. I don’t like the thought of formidable Asgardian warriors simply vanishing from the face of the earth.”, Thor replied, sending the vehicle through a narrow space between two towers confidently. His driving style was as bold as most of what he did, and just a little disconcerting. The city quickly thinned out the closer they came to its borders. Higher buildings were scarcer here, instead melting seamlessly into radiant meadows and noble houses. Still further, civilization dwindled entirely to make way for rolling hills flanked by high treetops.

“You think that the Darkflight dragons are behind this?” Thor asked, casting both of them a worried glance.

“I would definitely not rule them out. Personally, I trust them as far as I could throw them. Which is not at all. Ljosira… she begs to differ.”, Loki answered, looking over to her meaningfully. Ljosira sighed to this.

“I simply cannot fathom a reason why they would bother with such a thing. A small black hole would not give enough energy to a grown dragon. At least not enough to justify trespassing one of
our most sacred rules.

For a while, their journey continued in mutual silence. Thor watched the horizon in a slightly bored manner while Loki wrapped one of the blankets around Ljosira. Although the sun had risen sometime after they’d left Asgard behind, its warmth felt diminished, muted. Even the light seemed much dimmer than Loki remembered it. As though shrouded by a thin, dark veil. After a few hours of lush grassland and leafy trees, the great mountains became visible in the distance. At the foot, dense pine forests tinted the land in cool, dark green. Further up, it all faded into slate grey.

The wind was getting considerably stronger now, rattling and shaking the poor sky striker more often than not. The source of these violent currents loomed before them: Above the snow-powdered mountain-tops, the sky darkened with heavy storm clouds, massing into a churning vortex. Lightning flashed across impenetrable blanket. The crack of thunder that followed made Loki and Ljosira flinch. Thor, of course, had no reason to fear a storm. He was practically one himself. But even his brow furrowed a little as they closed in on their destination, the mountainside right below this raging tempest.

“That doesn’t look very inviting.”, Loki mumbled after yet another clash of thunder.

Their vehicle crossed over the edge, from calm skies into a violent gale. The sun vanished so suddenly, it felt as though being blindfolded. Darkness fell. Icy drops hailed down from the angry heavens, stinging like needles on the skin. Ljosira started shivering at once. She pulled the blankets around herself, but they didn’t help at all. The deluge was battering her relentlessly, the howling wind wailed without an end.

Cold, so cold. Chill enthralled her in its merciless clutches, sinking its claws into her very soul. She lost sensation in arms and legs as they turned clammy, permeated by a bleak, hollow sort of cold. Thor did his best to keep the sky-striker on its course, but the vehicle buckled and struggled, tossed this way and that by the fierce currents. The chattering of teeth alerted Loki to Ljosira’s miserable state. He was by her side immediately, alarmed at how upset she looked. He had never seen her like that, shrunken in on herself. Her grip on the fur-trimmed cloak was so tight her knuckles had gone bone-white.

“Cast spell to keep yourself warm! You look terrible.” He had to raise his voice so it would not be drowned out by the chaos around them. Ljosira shook her head desperately. Her numb fingers moved, but no magic came from them. Loki felt a feeble little tendril trying to lift the shackles on his sorcery, before it flickered and waned like a dying light. Her face contorted in panic. She was rendered unable to call forth her magic, for the first time in her life. The sudden tide of fear overwhelmed her, making her frantic.

“I need to… shift. I can’t take this anymore.” Loki sensed something inside her flutter against the edges of her being like a scared bird, desperate to break free. A deep instinct told him that shifting into dragon form would be exactly the wrong thing to do now. This was no natural storm. It had been designed to weaken a Lightbringer.

“No! Not here, not in this storm! It’s too dangerous. Thor!”, Loki called to his brother, pressing Ljosira tighter against him while she struggled and flailed, as if shaken by a seizure. “We need to land, now!” His brother stared at him blankly.

“But the thunder cannot hurt us! Not with Mjölnir!”, he yelled back.

“Forget the thunder, Ljosira can’t take this weather much longer! Something’s wrong with her. We need to get her somewhere warm and dry. Land this wretched thing, now! Please!” The urgency in his voice made Thor act without delay. Maybe even with a little too much haste. He ripped the
stirring wheel around and the sky-striker lurched downward.

For a sickening moment, the passengers were in free fall. The ground expanded rapidly, trees rushing towards them as though they grew from the earth with incredible speed. There was a horrible shriek as the engines rebelled against such mutilation. Thor almost broke the brakes in his effort to slow down the descent. He managed, barely. By a hair’s breadth.

The hull hit the ground with a bone-rattling impact, cutting a swath of destruction through the mossy undergrowth. It unearthed a dozen unlucky saplings before it finally grinded to a halt. All coherent thought was slammed from Loki’s mind for an instant. Then he released Ljosira from his iron grip and started yelling at his brother at a volume that rose even over the cacophony of thunder.

“I said land us, not jam us into the ground like a dowel, you idiot!” Loki showered Thor with a wide variety of profanities, all during which they hurried to wrap every blanket they had brought around Ljosira. She still trembled like a leaf, but at least she did not flail to shift anymore. She just huddled into the damp wool, a picture of misery. Loki lifted the bundle of her into his arms and proceeded to glare at Thor.

“Oh will you stop looking at me like that! Next time, you fly the darned thing.”, he made an impatient gesture, wiping splatters of rain from his face as he gazed around. “If I recall correctly, there is a hunting village not far from here. One of the most remote settlements. This way, I think.”, he pointed into the utter blackness of the woods.

The trees leaned ominously over them, but at least the thick needles provided some protection against the downpour. Each flash of lightning lit up the surroundings for the blink of an eye, presenting it as an eerie army of jagged, sinister shapes. It left dancing dots in Loki’s vision and he shook his head to clear the dizziness. He could think of precious little that was less inviting than hiking through a creepy forest in the middle of a raging tempest.

The worry about Ljosira ate at him persistently. He only hoped the village would not be too far, and that they did not meet any more surprises on their way there. With Ljosira securely in his arms and Thor scouting a little ahead, the three of them left the sky-striker behind and ventured onward into the unyielding wilderness. Above their heads, the storm wailed like a banshee.

“I’m so sorry… I don’t know what is wrong with me.”, Ljosira said after a while, her voice brittle. Her head had settled against Loki’s chest, most of her face submerged between layers of wool. Yet he could still make out the silver of her eyes, glazed with exhaustion.

“Do not worry about that now. Keep your fire burning, my light. We will get to the bottom of this whole mess.”, Loki replied, his words ringing with determination. Thor stopped short and turned around, frowning.

“What are you saying, Loki?”, he asked in a serious tone.

“I think…”, Loki answered, his jaw rigid, “Someone is trying to slow us down.”

He had just finished his sentence when a low, menacing growl sounded from the deep shadow of the trees ahead. The sound made every hair on his nape stand to an end. A pair of piercing, yellow eyes appeared in the darkness, watching them with the predatory intellect of an ancient beast. A being whose sole purpose for hundreds of years had been the hunt. Loki could almost sense the creature calculating its newest prey, weighing strengths, divulging weakness.

Another bolt of lightning illuminated everything around them, and for a split second, Loki could
see him. Enormous in size even for a mountain wolf. Jet black fur, eyes glowing with a primordial appetite. Huge, white fangs flashed as he snarled, likely capable of biting a man in two with little effort.

Thor cast Loki a quick, deeply uneasy look. They both knew what the other was thinking, for there was only one wolf like this. Before them stood Sköll, a wolf so old and awe-striking that legends were devoted to him. In his malice and insatiable hunger, he chased the sun across the sky, pursuing it for all eternity. Of course, those were stories parents told their children, and Sköll did not actually chase after the sun trying to swallow it. But he was a very real wolf and, as all creatures of Asgard – whether people or beasts – blessed with exceptional strength and a long life.

“You know, brother... I am starting to think you are right.”, Thor said in a low, sarcastic tone. His hand went to Mjölnir’s handle, while the thoughts in Loki’s mind raced ahead of him. Ljosira was still too cold to muster much of her powers, but he needed his to protect her. She stirred when she felt the tension in his muscles. Although she couldn’t see much from the cocoon of blankets around her, she instinctively recognized the threatening presence. With great effort, her clammy fingers began moving. They weaved a very simple spell, but it took a great deal of concentration and strength.

Several things happened at once. Sköll flattened to the ground and lunged an instant later, right at Loki and Ljosira. He was much too clever to attack Thor, who stood unhindered and armed; the beast opened its jaws wide, his two rows of razor-sharp fangs glistening inside the great, abyssal maw; and at the same time, the shackles suppressing his magic were lifted from Loki. Finally, he was free. A dull clank resonated through the air as Mjölnir hit Sköll mid-flight, smashing him bodily aside before he could reach his prey. Howling in frustration, he crashed to the ground.

Loki used the small distraction to set Ljosira down near a sturdy-looking tree-trunk. After weeks of confinement, his sorcery burst from him like a riptide. Runic shields and banishing circles he weaved around Ljosira, draping a whole tapestry of protective spells over her. If her magic was weakened, so were the usual defensive enchantments around her mortal form.

“Be careful, Loki. He is old. Ancient and cunning. And very angry.”, she warned him, sounding worried. Loki gave her a roguish smirk. His silhouette flickered for a moment as he turned, watching Sköll charge at Thor in a flurry of claws and teeth. His brother was slammed into the ground, buried beneath the giant black shape.

“Stop courting the lady and do something, for Valhalla’s sake!””, Loki heard Thor yell, muffled by heaps of grizzled fur and muscle. Loki didn’t hesitate. With a graceful jump, he landed on Sköll’s back, hand digging through the thick coat until he found the skin below.

He had never liked this spell, yet it had a very immediate effect. The magic coursed through his arm to the fingertips and the wolf let out an wounded howl. Simple pain worked every time. Boiling blood, aching bones, stinging sinews. The beast thrashed around wildly to throw off the source of his agony, spitting and snarling in his fury. He trampled Thor in the process, extracting angry grunts – and much less civilized curses which all centred around relieving Loki of his favourite body parts when this was over.

Loki himself was about to drive a spectral dagger into Sköll’s side, when he heard a high cry from very close by. His head whipped around just in time. The ground rumbled beneath the thuds of giant paws running at full speed. The next moment a blur of grey burst from the shadows, charging right at him.

“Loki!” Ljosira screamed. But before the crushing jaws could rip him apart, his shape flickered and dissolved. There was a massive impact as the two wolves collided and went to the ground in a
heap. Thor came to his feet immediately, Mjölnir soaring into his hand.

“Great job, Loki! You summoned Hati too.”, he yelled accusingly. Loki appeared from behind a tree, huffing.

“You say that like I did it on purpose!” The two hunters disentangled themselves and both leaped again, one at Loki, one at Thor. The thunder prince met Sköll headlong, slamming Mjölnir into the wolf’s muzzle. The horrible sound of breaking bones carried over the storm’s uproar. Sköll still managed to scrape his sharp claws across Thor’s armour before he was thrown to the ground, whimpering.

Hati on the other hand moved swiftly and much less straightforward, rather zigzagging towards Loki, who followed every motion with tense precision. Where his brother relied on strength and a fierce fighting style, Loki made use of evasion, quick feints and most importantly, his magic. He had always trusted his sorcery more than any weapon.

Hati dashed and sidestepped around him in a predatory dance, but Loki would not be outwitted so easily. When the wolf made a sharp turn and leaped, he fell backwards, flattening to the ground. The claws missed his face by an inch as Hati soared by. Almost gently, Loki reached forth a hand and touched the wolf’s downy, vulnerable underside. *Fly!* The force of his spell hurled his opponent through the air, furry limbs flailing helplessly. Hati crashed against a tree with a painful, loud snap.

Silence fell, even the howling wind dissipated. Both wolves lay still for long moments. Loki flicked his wrist, a smile quirking his lips as the magic came so naturally to his fingers. It felt good to let loose again. Thor swung Mjölnir idly. Sköll and Hati gathered themselves again, swaying on their feet, tails tucked between their legs.

The wolf brothers seemed to understand that they had bitten off more than they could chew. Hati scuttled to help a whining Sköll, whose jaw stood in an odd angle after meeting with Mjölnir. Both pairs of beast eyes were fixed on Thor and Loki defiantly. Such creatures would not run. They would go down meeting their killer’s eyes, although too weakened to put up much of a fight.

“Quite a shame to put an end to legends, but you asked for it.”, Loki commented, readying a spell. Thor grunted his assent, swinging Mjölnir.

“Wait!”, Ljosira’s voice made them stop short. She had dropped a few of her blankets and now shuffled towards the cowering wolves. “Don’t kill them…”

Hati and Sköll eyed her cautiously, but neither attacked. Even with their backs hunched, they towered several feet over Ljosira. Loki fought the urge to drag her away from them.

“Animals like these sense disturbances of space and time. Your home changed. It frightens you. It’s dark and confusing now.”, she said softly. Sköll growled, but Hati hung his head in a resigned manner.

“We want to stop it.” Ljosira met their eyes without fear. It was then that Loki realized her lips were not moving. She projected her thoughts telepathically. “Will you leave us be?”

Sköll let out a snarl, his hackles raised. But Hati silenced him with a snap of his jaw, and his brother gave in reluctantly. Limping and battered, both of them trotted away into the thick woods, disappearing between the shadows of the trees. Loki sighed and relaxed from the tense battle stance. The storm seemed to be receding, thunder and lightning more distant now. The relentless rain had died down to a drizzle. But the darkness and the chill stayed adamant, unwilling to release
their grip on the highlands.

“Well, this has been an adventurous day so far. I will have to hand this armour in to the blacksmith for repairs...”, Thor murmured, using his drenched cape to clean the cuts Sköll’s claws had left on his torso. They weren’t deep – his armour had taken most of the blow. Just a slight bleeding that was more of a nuisance than a real injury. Loki proceeded to re-wrap Ljosira into the blankets, as she had started shivering violently again.

“Their auras were confused, agitated.”, she explained, closing her eyes in relief while he rubbed the wool to warm her up. “So forlorn somehow, behind the ferocity. They had lived their whole lives in the mountain forest, and then something changed. It felt all wrong ever since.”

They took up the journey from before, Thor scouting ahead while Loki carried Ljosira in his arms.

“Does this cold not bother you at all?”, she asked after a while. They had started climbing a steep hillside. Loki didn’t seem the least bit exerted by her weight.

“We could be in a blizzard and it would not matter to me. I reckon it’s the one advantage of my Jotun heritage. I do not feel cold.”, he smiled in a self-deprecating way.

“But you feel warmth.” Her voice was muted through the blankets, but it made his features soften. “Unlike me right now. I feel all… hollow and numb. Weak. Drained.”

“The settlement should not be far. Thor?”, Loki called to his brother, who had taken the lead again and was squinting up the moss-covered slope.

“Up above, I think I can see a light.”, he answered hopefully.

After an hour of climbing uphill on the slippery, sodden soil bent on slowing them down, they reached a large, even clearing. Several sturdy huts stood before them, built in a loose circle. Their shapes reminded Loki of pincushions, for the rooftops were porcupined with wooden or ivory spears. These remote highland villages were much more modest and primitive than the imposing gilded metropolis at Asgard’s heart.

Traditionally, the walls of these huts did not reach very high. Their roofs, on the other hand, resembled giant helmets on too small heads. And all of them were oddly slanted, sometimes so askew that they touched the ground and soft mountain grass grew up their spiky backs. Each hut had a stone chimney puffing out happy wisps of smoke into the cold air. Light glimmered in the dozen round windows.

The centre of the clearing was taken up by a large bonfire. High above, several canvases stretched between the trees, likely to protect against rain or snow.

Men and women dressed in thick furs and leathers sat around the crackling flames, enjoying a hearty meal of roasted venison as they talked. It smelled delicious. The princes of Asgard halted, both of their stomachs reporting in with a hungry rumble. Thor holstered Mjölnir safely to his belt and walked stepped boldly into the cone of firelight.

“My humble greetings, highlands hunters.”, he said in a sure voice, revealing his presence. A few people jumped to their feet, obviously startled by his sudden appearance. Two men unsheathed their weapons at once, when a woman with long, grey hair stood and waved at them dismissively.

“Wool-for-brains! Lower your weapons. Do you not recognize who stands before you?”, she shunned the hunters. Her face was weathered and wrinkly, with wise, dark eyes glinting below thick grey brows. She had to be ancient. Her unerring gaze shifted to Mjölnir, a smile spreading
across her lips.

“Bow to the crown prince of Asgard, before he decides to crack you like a nut!”, the woman snapped sharply. The young men who had drawn their weapons suddenly looked very embarrassed and bowed down respectfully before Thor. As did every other person seated around the fire. But their gazes darted back up again when Loki stepped into the light, holding Ljosira in her bundle of blankets.

“If you’d be so kind… We really need a good, warm hearth. Our friend did not take the storm well.”, Thor continued slowly. He had barely spoken the words when a heated discussion broke out between the villagers, who pretty much picked each other apart in their eagerness to offer hospitality. In the end, the grey-haired woman silenced them all and declared that the princes would stay in her hut, since whoever they brought with them probably needed the attention of a healer. The others accepted this with a few disappointed mumbles. There could be no doubt who was in charge here. Highlands folk, Loki thought humorously. They respected their elders.

“My name is Grafa, I am the healer of this humble village. Come, come.”, she told Loki and Thor, leading them to her hut. A wreath of thistles had been hung above the low door. Rune-carvings adorned the frame and Loki smiled faintly when he recognized an old saying: The shame you cannot lift away, you had better let lie.

Grafa welcomed them into the cosy warmth of her home. A merry fire burned in the hearth, pots and pans arranged neatly along the walls. Next to a bookshelf stuffed with dusty tomes, there was a second rack which held countless tiny boxes. A strong herbal scent emanated from them. Thor had to duck at some point so his head would not brush the feather bundles hanging from the ceiling. Grafa directed Loki to a quilted armchair, into which he gently lowered Ljosira.

“Cold as ice…”, Grafa mumbled as she put a hand to Ljosira’s cheek. “Strange. Asgard’s women are resilient to the cold.”, she mused, hurrying to her herb-storage. She began plucking leaves and roots in a seemingly arbitrary order, mixing them inside a mortar.

“She is not of Asgard. She’s a dragon, a Lightbringer in her mortal form.”, Thor said meaningfully. His words made Grafa spin around, awe-struck.

“By my old bones… Torchbearer.” Her eyes went wide, fixating on Ljosira, who smiled in a kind, yet tired sort of way.

“Thank you for your hospitality, good elder. I feel better already.”, she told the old woman. And it was true. The numb cold from before was starting to fade. All the shivering and teeth-chattering had completely exhausted her. Leaving behind a bone-deep weariness that made her eyelids droop as sleep beckoned her.

Ljosira wondered fleetingly if Loki had been right. A storm usually did not rob her of strength in such a frightening way. Cold and darkness weakened her mortal form, but they would not make her incapable of calling forth her magic. Then there was the unfortunate encounter with Sköll and Hati… And her sight… Something was wrong with her sight, too.

While Grafa prepared her a warm soup, Loki and Thor spoke in hushed voices. Ljosira tried to look beyond the hut’s walls. Every aura she glimpsed was strangely distorted, clouded by a thin veil of magic that seemed to linger on everything. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. Maybe she was just too exhausted right now.

“If I can help you in any way, don’t hesitate to ask.”, Grafa stated proudly when she handed Ljosira a bowl of steaming hot, delicious broth. “You must be on an important task to come to the
highlands yourselves… Two princes and a dragon. We never get such esteemed visitors.” Thor cleared his throat, looking a little uncomfortable about her open praise.

“Actually… Have four warriors travelled through here? It must have been around five days ago. I sent them to investigate unusual magical occurrences here in the highlands.”, he asked politely.

“Yes, they came through here. They were headed for the mountain pass.”, Grafa frowned as she answered. “I told them not to. Strange things happen at the mountain these days. The wolves howl all night, like there is no tomorrow. The path lies in darkness, the sun never seems to reach it anymore. And something moves in the shadows…”, she murmured, her eyes unfocused. Thor and Loki looked at her, then they shared a worried glance between each other.

“I am sorry, my princes. Excuse an old hag’s doomsayer tales. It just somehow doesn’t feel right… I hope your warriors are well. But I suggest you let the dragon lady rest for the night, before you venture on.”, Grafa indicated Ljosira, who, after finishing her soup, had fallen asleep at once, curled up on the armchair.

“I have a small guest room where she can sleep. But for you…”, the old woman began.

“Loki stays with her. As for me, I’ll be just fine here on the floor.”, Thor said with a grateful smile.

A few minutes later, Loki had set Ljosira down on the narrow cot in the spare chamber and covered her with enough furs to keep her warm and snug. There wasn’t nearly enough space for him to lie down next to her, so he half-sat, half-stretched out in a creaky rocker, the only other notable piece of furniture in the room.

Despite the troubling conditions of their journey, it was exceptionally soothing to watch Ljosira in her sleep. The soft lamplight lent her features a gentle, golden glow. As the rocker swayed, Loki was overcome by drowsiness and before he knew it, a strange sleep had enveloped him, in which he wandered an empty plane covered by thick mist, blind to what lay before or behind him.
XIX. Neglect

Chapter Notes

Neglect (noun): a situation in which you do not give enough care or attention to someone or something;
to neglect (verb): to not do something, often because you forget;

Things pretty much... go to hell from here.
I enjoyed writing the conversation between Natta and Loki. I think despite the difference in power, they are evenly matched in cleverness.

I'm still amazed about the kudos I'm getting - I didn't think I'd get this many! Thank you so much! <3

XIX. Neglect

He woke with a jolt to complete darkness. Panicked, Loki strained his eyes, but he calmed down quickly when he heard Ljosira’s even breaths. Still, something was wrong. A shiver went down his spine, his senses alert and on edge. It felt as though unseen eyes were watching him from the shadows. No beast eyes, like those of Sköll or Hati. But the regard of something much older and cleverer, the cunning of eons coiling in its dark gaze. And then it spoke in a smooth, velvet voice, whispering his name into the moonless night.

“Loki.”

He shuddered and went completely still, listening. Had he imagined the call? Silence surrounded him, a stifling kind that seemed like a pressure on the ears.

“Come.”, it spoke again. Wind whistled through the window-cracks, a high, eerie sound grating on his nerves. He looked at Ljosira, still fast asleep beneath the blankets. His mind calculated through options quickly. The whispers came from outside the house, and he was sure only he could hear them. Beyond the glass of the small, round window, utter darkness gaped back at him. If he woke Ljosira now, the presence might disappear and he’d lose a chance to gain some crucial information. Loki rose and concentrated, his eyes straining to grow accustomed to the shade.

“That’s right. Step into the night.” Darkened shapes of trees, bushes… He blinked several times. There. In the dead of the night stood a hazy silhouette, almost indistinguishable. He could only make out the whites of its eyes. They stared right at him.

“Who are you?”?, he demanded wordlessly.

“Come closer. You will see.” Loki hesitated for a moment. Yes, it would be better to lure the uninvited visitor away from Ljosira. In her weakened state, she was vulnerable. But following the voice might also expose him to dangers unknown. He sighed once, before he lifted a hand to let the illusion spell flow from his fingers.

“Tut-tut.”, the dark voice chided in disapproval. “You make it too easy.” Something reached out for him, grabbing hold of the spell he had tried to weave. He felt the cold touch like a band of steel
around his wrist and was visited by a derisive sort of amusement. Mortals. With a violent jerk, Loki was pulled forward, simply slipping through the wall as if it were nothing but smoke.

Emerging on the other side feeling slightly nauseated, he found himself at the back of the hut. The figure loomed before him, a string of pearly white teeth gleaming mockingly. It looked downright ghastly, but Loki was not easily frightened. He surveyed the stranger with wary suspicion, walking closer in a deliberately casual stance. No matter how much he focused on it, the contours of the shape never became clearer. They stayed fuzzy and blurred, while the two eyes and the grin followed his every move.

“I don’t have much patience for people who threaten me but are too craven to show their faces.”, he began arrogantly, turning to leave again. But he didn’t get far. The shade was upon him before he could take one step, claw-like fingers grabbing hold of his throat. He was pressed against a tree so fiercely, the bark cut into his neck and scalp.

“Your conceit is only outmatched by your idiocy.” The shadows exfoliated from his attacker like the shedding of a mask, and Loki was brought face to face with a pair of abysmal eyes, glaring at him from a hawkish, etched face.

“Natta.”, he managed breathlessly. The pressure on his windpipe did not diminish the contempt in his voice.

“It seems I made an impression. How droll.”, she sneered. Her grip loosened and she backed away one step. The Darkflight leader was of average size, smaller than him, with a wild mane of raven hair framing her sharp features. She wore a full-length gown which clung to her female shape like a second skin. Black feathers formed a wing at her shoulder while countless small ties criss-crossed the revealing neckline. Her dark beauty was alluring, mesmerizing… and at the same time all of his instincts screamed danger. He faced a woman who would pull weak-willed men into her tangled web, where they would be kissed by death for their mistake. Natta smiled at him, as if she knew the exact direction of his thoughts.

“I suspected you were behind these disturbances all along.”, Loki stated humourlessly, rubbing his sore throat. Natta walked between the tree trunks, her movements languid and fluid, blatantly sinful. She played with the sleek fabric of her gown carelessly. Mocking you, Loki observed to himself. Telling you in the most casual way how powerless you would be if you decided to attack her now.

“How have you survived this long, I wonder? My brethren tell me you have a strong sense for self-preservation. Yet I have to question that when you shoot your mouth off at someone who could end you in a heartbeat.”, the Darkflight dragon mused in a vaguely interested tone. Her long-nailed fingers traced the feather arrangement of her dress.

“I really can’t stand you, Loki. You freed my most precious prisoners and drove them to near extinction in your childish crusade. And then your brother – and you, to no small part – stopped Malekith. All my little joys, trampled in the wake of your foolishness.” She shook her head and sighed as though she found him incredibly disappointing.

“Of course, I could always just kill you.”, she pondered in an offhanded tone. Loki’s eyes flickered towards the hut, where Ljosira slept. The surreptitious gesture did not escape Natta’s notice. “Oh, she wouldn’t even notice. Not before it was too late. I’m very good at what I do, and despite her successful rite of passage, the dragon princess is still just an amateur.” Loki bristled at the contempt and unveiled insult in her words. He battled down his unease, forcing himself to remain calm and detached on the outside.
“What do you want?”, he asked quietly. “Your threats are beginning to get quite tiresome.” Her obsidian eyes locked with his, glinting and furious.

“And you are quickly outliving your usefulness, mortal. Unless…”, she paused dramatically before going on. “Despite the error of your ways, you have a very redeeming quality.”

“Which is?”, Loki asked tonelessly.

“You are clever! Schemes and plans, working from the shadows. That is our way, the Darkflight way. We are more alike than you know. And I am willing to forget our past differences and form a mutually beneficial alliance.” Loki merely snorted to this, but Natta didn’t seem to care.

“All this heroes-save-the-world business is such an awful bore. I like an underdog, enjoy the struggle of the little guy. And you are little, compared to your… mate. You know that, right? Aesir, Jotun, whichever you impersonate, you are still mortal. Fragile creatures.”, she explained, striding around him as her hands made wide gestures.

“Do you honestly think the dragon princess will stay by your side? Sure, you are a fine sorcerer. But someday – it will come sooner or later – your existence might become a burden to her. Your life-bond turns into shackles that bind her to a diminished life of clipped wings and eternal resentment. You know it’s true. You have felt this fear before.”

Her voice was shadow-spun silk, wrapping itself around the doubts and insecurities he didn’t even dare to acknowledge to himself. Caressing and nurturing them, like an affectionate lover. She leaned closer to him, until she was just an inch away. Her eyes were yawning chasms where no light ever reached.

“I could bestow a dragon’s powers on you. Oh, don’t look so shocked, as if you have never done unspeakable things for your own selfish desires. You could become the most powerful sorcerer in the Nine Realms. Equal to a dragon. And the princess would be yours, as is your due.” Tempting, so incredibly tempting. One part of him gloried at the outlook, while another part struck alarm bells ceaselessly, screaming at him that this was a trap, a ploy, nothing but a ruse. But, but…

“You would only need to do me one, tiny favour. You need to convince the fledgling and your brother to return home and leave whatever issues they think they might find in the highlands alone. You needn’t even lie! You’re so concerned about the princess, she’s so weakened… Just a trifle to delay for a few days, until she feels better. Isn’t that a negligible price for what you gain? The powers of an immortal creature. Power is always preferable to weakness.”, Natta purred. A few months ago, he might have agreed. He might have welcomed her offer and even applauded her.

“I could bestow a dragon’s powers on you. Oh, don’t look so shocked, as if you have never done unspeakable things for your own selfish desires. You could become the most powerful sorcerer in the Nine Realms. Equal to a dragon. And the princess would be yours, as is your due.” Tempting, so incredibly tempting. One part of him gloried at the outlook, while another part struck alarm bells ceaselessly, screaming at him that this was a trap, a ploy, nothing but a ruse. But, but…

“No, it isn’t. It isn’t preferable. You are wrong about me.”, Loki said, his voice confident and even. For the fraction of a second, unspeakable rage flared in Natta’s eyes, of a magnitude that made him wonder if she might go through with her threat and annihilate him on the spot.

“Do not lie to the mistress of shadows, trickster. I am the night. Don’t think I haven’t heard what you entrust to me in your darkest moments. What you whisper when qualm envelops you.”, her words were low and menacing, the hiss of a snake. Loki held her gaze, although it was by far no simple task. It took all of his willpower, and more courage than he had thought himself capable of.

When he spoke, each word dripped with contempt.

“There is no temptation, no amount of power, no immortality you can offer me that would justify
“Betraying Ljosira.”, he spat out at her. “Consider this a refusal.” She bared her teeth at him, her stunning beauty overtaken by an ugly snarl.

“Men like you don’t change, mortal. They might try. They might even persuade themselves that they are capable of change. But in the wake of peril, they welcome the comforting darkness back into their souls. You above all should know… An illusion cannot turn to reality. You are still the same squirming, lying, helpless creature who has no business in a life of light. Before the end comes, you will realize that.”, she said gently before she stepped back.

“I wonder how wise you will find your decision to refuse me in the light of day?”, Natta questioned. Her lips formed a gruesome grin, and in the next moment, her form blurred and melted into the shadows.

“Oh, and if you happen to breathe a word about our little chat to anyone… No council decision can save you from my wrath. I will see to it that nothing but a pile of ash remains of your miserable excuse for a life. And then I’ll move on to show your mate what pain truly means.” Loki shuddered at the alien, malicious sensation when her mind invaded his, projecting her thoughts into his head.

Then Natta was gone, and all he could hear were the sounds of the forest. During the conversation, everything had been eerily silent. Owls had stopped hooting; the distant howls of wolves had quieted. Now they resumed their nightly symphony, cautiously, lest they draw the attention of the dark entity back to them. Loki stood in the gloom, unmoving, trying to grasp the impossible situation he had come to be in. His thoughts struggled like vehicles in a very blocked intersection. No space to move forward, none to turn back.

Natta wanted to keep them from investigating the disturbances, so much so that she would even try and persuade Loki to aid in the deception. He knew she despised him. She had made that abundantly clear. What on earth was she up to? The sense of trepidation slithered down his spine like a shard of ice.

Veils and cloaked agendas, and whatever lay at their heart could only be a nest of vipers. For the first time, he understood fully why the Darkflight deserved their name. It stung him deeply that Natta had spoken out his greatest doubts. That Ljosira would one day tire of him, a mortal so much different from her, and leave him to seek a more fitting fate. Power, immortality… Of course it did not leave him untouched.

I made my decision, he told himself. Natta could not be trusted. Even inside her schemes there were just more schemes, layer upon layer. Unpredictable and very, very dangerous. Now he had refused her, and he had no inkling what consequences that decision would entail. To take the Darkflight leader’s threat lightly would be foolish. He could not tell Ljosira, not yet. They were all of them too vulnerable outside the palace, far from a protected home and deep inside strange lands. Ljosira’s weakness during the storm, the veil of shadow that seemed thick and impenetrable – he was quite sure that Natta had engineered all of those things to divert them from their quest. It wouldn’t be surprising if even Elding’s sight could not reach them right now.

But why? What were the Darkflight hiding? What did they plan to do? Loki returned to the hut silently, brooding over these dark thoughts. Ljosira had not even stirred, immersed in a deep, healing kind of slumber. Loki sank into the rocker again, rubbing his forehead, frustrated. Damn it all. More than ever, he feared for her safety and wished he wouldn’t feel so brittle, so mortal beside her. How was he supposed to protect her? What if Natta decided to take out her vengeance about his refusal on the dragon princess? He wanted to get her back to the palace, soon. But simultaneously, he needed to find out what the Darkflight’s true intentions were. Rip off the mask
of lies.

His choices were terribly limited, if not even non-existent at this point. Uneasiness oozed into him, and he sought the peacefully sleeping face of the woman he had grown so fond of that the mere sight of her calmed the stormy mess of his mind. For the rest of the night, he sat still, gazing at her as if her features would give him the answers to all the questions burning in his thoughts. As the sun rose to bring a misty and greyish morning, the only conclusion he had drawn was that no matter how limited his powers were compared to those of dragon clan leaders, he would use every last ounce to keep his light from harm.

A shred of the pale dawn fell through the tiny window. Ljosira had shifted in her sleep, the blankets slipping to reveal one small hand, tinted in a soft rosy hue. Loki reached out and closed his fingers around hers. Much warmer now. He let a little bit of magic course through the touch. She stirred, eyes fluttering open sleepily.

“Were you up all night?”, she asked with a frown, returning the pressure of his fingers. Loki leaned in to plant a kiss on her palm.

“I have slept. Not much.”, he replied. She moved to sit up, but he pushed her back down gently, sliding from the rocker onto the narrow bed.

“Why? You need all your strength…”, Ljosira argued.

“I find it relaxing to watch you sleep sometimes. And I wanted to be awake in case you need anything.”

A familiar flash of silver rippled across her eyes, and whatever she saw there made the nick between her brows deepen. Her sight was still clouded, although she saw him more clearly – most likely because they were well attuned by now.

“You are worried. And anxious.”, she stated. Loki huffed and casually rearranged her so he could fit beneath the blankets. There really wasn’t much space, especially for his long legs. Still, he propped his head up into one hand and regarded her in an accusing sort of way.

“Of course I am worried. Ever since we left the palace, it’s been one unfortunate event after another. And it’s proving more dangerous for you than for my brother or me. I would rather… know you are safe at home…” He spoke the truth – while omitting to tell her the precise details of it. Her playful smile heartened him though. She looked much better than the evening before.

“It’s fine. I am immortal, you know.”, she teased him, pulling at a strand of his black hair.

“That does not mean you are invulnerable.”, Loki noted a little more grimly than he intended. To this, Ljosira stretched to wrap her arms around his neck.

“You still think the Darkflight have some sinister plan in motion. We will find out the truth soon… but I don’t like to see you so worried. Is it too late to distract you a little before we must move on?” Her lips grazed over his cheek to the corner of his mouth and he relaxed, the touch tempting him to forget his worries at least for a little while.

“Never too late.”, Loki mumbled against her lips, before he sealed them with a kiss that made the narrow space between them seem almost too wide yet. For the first time, he wasn’t confined behind barriers or tied down by a spell. It may have been the reason for his heightened awareness
of the surging energy within her.

Or maybe by now, he just knew her so well he could sense it more distinctly. It tingled at his fingertips like the smallest electric current, playful and searching, just as he remembered it from the day on the balcony. It became stronger with each touch, each shed piece of cloth, each kiss, until Loki lost track of the world around him as she pulled him into her own. And the moment he united with her, he felt the connection between them, stronger than ever before. He would describe it as many things later. But right then, it was like… falling. Falling with the absolute, adamant certainty that touching the ground could never hurt.

It wasn’t until an hour later that a decisive knock at the door returned them to reality. They disentangled themselves from each other reluctantly. The night before, Loki had peeled the damp clothes off Ljosira and set them to dry at the fireplace. He helped her to get dressed, noting the content look on her face at the cozy warmth that lingered in the fur-trimmed leathers.

Thor sat in the kitchen, feasting happily on some juicy-looking venison, while Grafa scuttled around and packed various things into a leather satchel. Bread, dried strips of meat, bundles of herbs.

“Thankfully, that horrible storm is over. But the mountain pass is windy and cold, and it will be a long climb. We do not have much to offer, but this should keep you fed for a while and help with injuries.”, she said, handing Loki the bag. Thor stood and put his hand on the old woman’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Grafa. Your kindness means more than you know.”, he bowed his head humbly. Loki nodded in agreement. For a moment, Grafa’s dark eyes looked watery with emotion, but then she cleared her throat and gathered herself.

Highlands folk were very proud people. They followed the ancient ways of living in harmony with the wild land and valued tradition above all. Which included to treat guests with proper hospitality. It was custom in these regions of Asgard to give a parting guest a small token of respect, a sign of good will and fortune for their further journey.

Grafa too, now arranged three items on the table by the fireplace. Ljosira and Loki could feel the faint echo of ancient magic in each of them. Not the complicated, faceted weaves real sorcerers used, but the simple, old magic of nature. The first thing Grafa picked up looked like an arrangement of long brown feathers. They were pristine, perfectly well-preserved.

“Feathers of the pine-top eagle. Their eyes never fail to see when heavy mists cloud the lands below. Many hunters have used these so their aim would always be true. If you tie them to Mjölnir’s handle, you will hit your target, even if your sight is clouded.”, she handed them to Thor, who did as suggested. Next, Grafa lifted a slender, white object into her hand. Rich carvings covered it, winding around a small row of holes that lined the surface.

“A bone-flute.”, Loki observed when she held it out to him.

“Good eye! Every hunter carries one when he ventures into the woods, and they are passed down for generations. This belonged to my son, heavens grant him rest.”, Grafa said in a grave tone.

“What happened to him?” Ljosira asked quietly, to which the old woman sighed.

“Went for a hunt on a winter day… Left this at home and never returned. The woods can be treacherous, even experienced hunters get lost sometimes. The flute helps them to… find their way back.”, she answered and put it into Loki’s outstretched hand. Respectful silence followed her
words, during which he felt the flute quiver ever so slightly, as though some inaudible tune was 
resonating inside. At last, Grafa walked to a small chest next to her herb cabinet and pulled out a 
faded white cloak that looked like it had been worn once too often. But when Ljosira touched it, 
she sensed a faint, warm tingling in her fingers. Despite the ragged appearance, the fabric was 
icredundly soft.

“Wool of the mountain sheep. It’s old, but you won’t freeze in another storm. Rain will simply 
slide off it. This one was mine, and it served me well for many years.”, Grafa said, draping the 
cloak around Ljosira with an almost rueful expression. There was no arguing with her – she insisted 
on giving them these gifts and would not be deterred.

The villagers gathered together in a small procession leading from Grafa’s hut to the far edge of the 
forest, where a roughly visible path wound towards the towering rock formations of the 
mountainside. As the three travellers walked to the clearing, Grafa shooed the others away and 
turned to face Thor.

“Be careful… Stranger creatures than wolves live up the jagged cliffs. May the Allfather bring you 
back unharmed.”, she said gravely, her hands forming a traditional gesture of farewell.

With newfound energy, Ljosira, Loki and Thor set out on the pathway. Each couldn’t help but 
glance back frequently at the disappearing village, but soon the lingering morning mist had 
enveloped it as they ventured further, and Grafa’s silhouette faded into grey. All they could see 
were the ghostly shapes of trees and the barely discernible track they followed. Since Thor scouted 
ahead again, Ljosira tried to take up a conversation with Loki, without much success. He kept 
glancing around, surveying everything with an absent-minded expression, while his fingers moved 
restlessly as they weaved spells, pretty much without relent. Sometimes, they stopped under the 
protective crown of a tree to eat a bite from the provisions Grafa had packed for them. Ljosira 
traced the soft seam of her cloak, wondering about the ancient tribal magic woven into it. A pity it 
didn’t help her blurred sight. Still, she could not focus, the whole world a distorted picture around 
her.

Walking, resting for a few minutes, eating, walking. Grey in grey, onward through the maze of fog. 
This went on and on for what seemed like hours, and Ljosira was starting to have an unsettling 
feeling she couldn’t quite place.

Even after they reached the mountain foot and began to hike on winding, stony pathways between 
rocks, the mist did not evaporate, although it must have been way past midday. If anything, it 
became thicker, until one could not see even ten feet ahead through the churning haze.

The cliffs stuck out from the ground like serrated blades, yet even they were swallowed by the 
milky ocean which blanketed everything. Ljosira had no idea how far they had come. She glanced 
up into the sky, but found no sun far and wide. Her eyes grew tired as she tried to peek ahead on the 
path, and her thoughts were so sluggish, as though she needed to pull each individual one from 
some sticky ooze pit.

Time lost its meaning. The rest of the world grew distant, drifted away during this odyssey that 
seemed to lead nowhere. Ljosira felt oddly detached. Far from… home. Where was home? What 
was it, exactly? A place of safety and family? The life-bonds she shared with her brothers and her 
father faded, watered down. Slowly vanishing from her awareness, while her mind became more 
and more clouded, indifferent.
The memories of her loved ones blurred like wet paintings, making it harder to remember them at all. Remember… Isolation crept into her, erasing those things of great importance, until she was left in a state of natural solitude, separated. It didn’t seem so vital to be connected to others, why would she need that when she had this comforting emptiness? Did I have something to protect?, she wondered. Or is there only this all-engulfing fog, where I could just wander around, forever? It was peaceful. Calm. As it should be.

Thor stopped so suddenly that Ljosira and Loki walked right into him with a thump. Ljosira jolted out of her trance. She blinked, dazed. Something was wrong. Amiss. Very, very amiss. There had been a thing – several things… She raked her mind for answers, but the thoughts were slippery and elusive, skipping out of her reach.

“This is unnerving me! We have gotten lost.”, Thor snapped, turning around. Loki glared at him, his expression excessively annoyed.

“How can you possibly know that? Have you walked down this path before? Are you some sort of navigational genius?” , he retorted. Something seemed strange about their tone of voice. Magnified, on edge, too much agitation for this simple issue. Ljosira couldn’t muster the proper words to explain this to them.

“Of course not. I will simply conjure a storm to make this damned fog disappear.”, Thor stated. His hand went to Mjölnir’s handle, but Loki grabbed his wrist tightly.

“Are you out of your mind?! You can’t conjure a storm after what happened yesterday! You’ll damn us all!” He was yelling now. Thor joined in, and soon they were engaged in a fierce argument, utterly deaf to everything around them. Ljosira had a mounting feeling of anxiety. This was wrong. Her instincts told her that fighting was the worst thing they could do right now, but her mind moved too slowly…

Why shouldn’t they fight? Lost… they were lost… Solitude… Separation… Those words sounded alarming, but why? Where had she encountered this feeling before? She remembered something… Something about things that were not what they seemed to be. Veils. Veils of mist. But it was useless. No coherent thought would come. She cocked her head suddenly. Had she imagined that faint, far-away voice? A message of urgency had ridden with it, but she couldn’t decipher the words –

“Fine! Go on, then! I’m not walking around in circles anymore, I’m going to find a nice high cliff…”, Thor’s voice echoed eerily back from the rocks.

“May you be struck by your own lightning and drop dead! I’m going ahead on the right way.”, Loki interrupted him, brimming with scorn. And then, they both spun around on the spot, completely ignoring that she was present. They rushed off into opposite directions, one up the path, one down. Ljosira stood, dumbfounded, in the middle.

“We can’t get separated.”, she said meekly to the void, but only silence answered her words.

They were gone. And then, with horrifying impact, the realization dawned on her. Trap. It had been a trap. The mist was no natural occurrence. It had been specifically designed to mess with their minds, to set Thor and Loki against each other.

She sensed the insidious magic in it now as it sought to soothe her, stuff her thoughts with wool and hollow comforts. Everything inside her bristled at the sensation, and yet it was so familiar. Loki had been right all along. The storm, the appearance of Sköll and Hati, the disturbances, the curtain of shadow. All of it screamed Darkflight. Sorcery of the shadows.
And the worst of it was… they had succeeded. By separating her from Thor and Loki, cutting her off from the rest of her world and the life-bonds which were such a crucial part of a Lightbringer, they had effectively outmanoeuvred her. She was lost in this fresh hell, this sinister labyrinth, while her companions wandered blind to the danger. Utterly, painfully alone.
XX. Awakenings

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for your kudos!! I won't stop saying it because I won't stop being happy about them :))

There is a lot of action and plot happening in these following chapters, and some drama and fluff to come. I hope you like it still! Have fun!

XX. Awakenings

Vegr had walked along the lush hillsides of Alfheim for an unmeasured time now, with no sign of any strange magic far and wide. But his dragon senses were on edge. They registered a deep wrongness he could not quite place. His life-bonds were so far away and fleeting, as though they were not entirely real, but rather ghosts of the past slowly fading into oblivion. Never had he felt more cut-off from his family, so alone. He hated it. Since the day he had hatched, the bonds have always been there. Comforting, loving, supportive, like the roots of a great, strong tree. Their absence made him feel hollow, crippled. As though he was the last of his kind, cursed to wander the world without a single kindred spirit to turn to. Was this how mortals felt, all the time? So deeply aggravating.

That moment, he saw the stone circle. Towering high over any human or elven form, a dozen slender rocks stood in formation a few hundred feet further, between the last outskirts of Alfheim’s woodland. And Vegr could sense it, crystal clear and unshrouded in their very centre: A pulsing, seething tear in reality, concocted by those who use the magic of the shadows. Sucking even light into its core, like the maw of an otherworldly monster that devoured and crunched everything in its wake. Black hole.

Vegr had seen them before in their natural states, outside the boundaries of the Nine Realms. But this was a tremendous violation of draconic law – taking even an ounce of energy from the realms could disrupt the balance. It meant stealing from the very thing they protected: Yggdrasíl’s creations. As he closed in on the stone circle, his dragon sight surveyed the powerful magic that fuelled this abomination. Strings of pure blackness swirled around it, distorting the fabric of space. Immense pressure, folding matter as one folded a piece of parchment over and over again. But it did not grow. Why did it not grow?

The crown prince of dragons walked between two of the standing stones, his steps confident. Anger surged in his heart. The Darkflight would be called to account for this. An eerie stillness fell within the circle, all sounds muffled and all movement slowed, as though time stood still. The air felt heavy and thick, each breath like inhaling some sort of gooey oil. Vegr stepped up to the black hole until he was barely an arm-length away. It tore at his dragon magic, trying to grab this powerful source of energy to devour it too. But he steeled himself against the current. His hands began to move with the precision and knowledge only a firstborn son of the Dragon King could muster.

The sealing spell formed slowly from his restless fingers, emitting delicate strings of light, looping as though they had a life of their own. In his effort to concentrate on this complicated sorcery, Vegr
did not feel the presence manifesting behind him. Did not see the dark, hooded figure walk lazily across the withering grass. Did not hear the swish of a billowing robe. It was only when strong fingers closed around his throat that he realized his tremendous mistake. But by then, it was too late. He had walked right into the Darkflight’s trap. Unable to shift, pressured by the black hole’s magic, isolated by the veil they had conjured, Vegr could do nothing but squirm while the ambusher squeezed his windpipe shut and the darkness closed in all around him. The last thought he could muster before he plunged into darkness was dedicated to Ljosira, hoping and praying to Yggdrasil that she was safe.

Loki stopped short quite abruptly. His feet came to a halt on the stone-strewn path almost on their own, and he just stood there, listening to the utter silence around him. The pass – if it even deserved that name – disappeared into the grey wall of fog a few feet ahead. Nothing moved. Strange. Only a few fleeting moments ago, he’d had a clear goal. A purpose he needed to follow to some defined, ultimate end. But now it seemed like a great gaping abyss expanded within his mind, and all the things he had to do fell down a bottomless hole into insignificance.

Why am I here?, he wondered. Alone in the shadows. That should not be surprising. He had always walked his path alone. Or had he? It didn’t feel entirely right to say so, as if some small voice in him tried to make itself known, protest against the notion.

Liar. Yes, he was that. Many had named him so. The chorus of their accusations reached him from far away, a disdainful chant to remind him how the world saw him. But he had spoken truth too. Truth… There had been something important about truth. He rubbed his brow, trying to ignore the nervous vibration which seemed to come from the pocket of his coat. Lethargic, disconnected thoughts hindered his mind, slowed it down until it came to a near stand-still. Unpleasant memories barged in, about times when another had ridden with him like a stowaway passenger, cleverly concealed within the little cracks of his doubts and insecurities.

Kneel before me. I was designed for greatness. Yes, that sounded as though it had really happened. But it had deviated into the wrong thing, ended within a confining space surrounded by shimmering walls. Rule through subjugation – no, that had been his truth, his choice, when he had not known… What?

Chaos follows you wherever you step. Why fight the inevitable? Why tempt fate? Why not give in to what you truly are? The quiver in his pocket intensified, thrumming like the wings of a hummingbird.

“What I truly am…”, Loki echoed slowly. A tall figure emerged from the fog before him. He found himself face to face with Thor, in all his proud splendour. Regal and imposing, a golden crown upon his fair head. He regarded Loki with a regretful sort of pity in his stormy blue eyes.

“Ah, brother. It’s always the same with you. You lose your way, and I need to pull you out of your own mess. Some things never change.” His voice sounded oddly distorted, but the words incensed Loki too much to pay attention.

Nobody believes you can change. Not even those who call you kin. He grew smaller as that knowledge dawned on him, shrinking, while Thor seemed to grow larger until he towered above, gazing down on his brother. A disapproving smile curved his lips.

“Look at yourself.” He did, suppressing a cry of shock when he saw his hands. They were tiny. The hands of a child, not the colour of natural skin but blue, the sickly pallor of a corpse pulled from a
watery grave. Thor pulled Mjölnir from his belt and dropped it before Loki to the ground. It landed with a dull clang.

“Go on. Lift it. If you are worthy, I will give you the crown you crave so badly.” The hammer was so large, his hands could not even encircle the handle. He tried to move it with all his strength, but he was so slight, weak, feeble. A dwarf wrestling with a giant. The divine weapon would not budge, not one inch.

*Unworthy.* Loki felt hollow inside, desperate and maddened. Shadows closed in around him, tendrilled themselves through the fabric of his soul, and he had no light, no safety within his heart to repel them. He heaved and struggled, failing pathetically. Thor threw back his head and let out a booming laugh.

*This again, trickster?* Loki whirled around at the sound of the soft, melodious voice. He saw nothing but mist, yet still a fleeting memory stirred in him then. He had plunged his hands into a river of starlight. Soothing, silver. Peace. The thing in his pocket trembled so wildly now, he thought whatever it was, it would burst apart any second. Some deep instinct made him look up to the grey in grey sky, as if he expected to see something there, a guiding light, a sun maybe –

*No, no. Not there. Much closer.*, the pleasant voice spoke again. Desperately, he looked at his hands, still firmly clutching Mjölnir.

“Give up, Loki? Do you finally realize that you were never meant to wield the weapon of kings? Because you are not a king. You never will be.”, Thor uttered coldly.

*Why do you still seek to surpass him, when there is so much more to you than that? That flailing, weak thing is not who you are. It is the prison of your own making.*

This time, he understood. The voice came from within. The other whispers had draped themselves over it, smothering, silencing. Now he reached into himself, pushing past the veil of darkness to uncover that little light. He was not alone. He never was and never would be again. As soon as he remembered her presence, everything else came back to him in vivid detail. His hand went to his pocket, pulling forth the tiny bone flute that vibrated its agitated song.

“You are right. I am not a king.”, Loki hissed. “And neither are you. Because you are not my brother.” He had barely finished that sentence when his fingers closed around the charm. It shattered into thousands of little fragments in his grasp, and with it broke the illusion of Thor, an expression of shock on his face as he dissolved into dust. Simultaneously, the fog cleared from his mind, replaced by the horrible realization that he had left Ljosira behind in this unnatural labyrinth of clouded judgements.

“An illusion, Natta? Really?!”, he called into the void, his voice full of contempt. “I swear, I will find out what you are hiding and watch with joy how the dragon king decides to punish you!”

He had not expected an answer, which was why he flinched when an unfamiliar voice suddenly spoke out behind him.

“You are such a troublesome fellow, Loki.” A hooded figure walked languidly towards him, catching some of the dust that floated through the air in a casual manner. “You can’t even properly get lost without being a pain in the ass.” The stranger drew two gleaming onyx daggers from beneath his cloak as he went. A hideous smile glinted in the shadow of his cowl. One black blade pointed right at Loki.

“I am afraid this is the end of the line for you.”, the man crooned. Then he lunged.
Ljosira pressed her palms to her temples, crouching on the ground as she tried to muster all of her concentration. Loki and Thor could not have gone far. She needed to find them, and soon. The mounting sense of danger told her that peril was approaching — and fast, now that they were separated and much more vulnerable for it. Forcing her dragon sight to sift through the impenetrable fog was like wading into a thick swamp. It did its best to hinder every little action, but she battled it viciously until she thought her brain had tangled into irrevocable knots. No sign of Thor. He had simply vanished, leaving no trace of his aura.

But with Loki, she shared a life-bond. Danger rattled that bond as a storm rattled a ship on the sea. Her awareness heightened all of a sudden as if she’d been slapped awake, and then she felt him. There! Without hesitation, she bolted into the direction where instinct led her, flying through the mist like a pale spectre.

She almost collided with the two scuffling shapes engaged in a skirmish to the death. They just appeared out of nowhere, making her trip over them. She barely caught her balance, but the next moment she was pushed aside by a forceful hand and went down nevertheless.

“Ljosira!” Loki yelled as he diverted a dagger-strike from his attacker. The hood had slipped to reveal his face — hollow cheeks and dark, malicious eyes set deeply in their sockets. He had sharp features and ghostly pallid skin, but everything about him screamed Asgardian. Loki had never seen the man before. He sidestepped another sweep at his ribcage, dancing out of reach like a tumbler.

“Loki —”, Ljosira scrambled to her feet again, her hands moving fluently as they conjured flaming spears from thin air. The projectiles went flying towards their foe, who cursed and cartwheeled out of the way just in time. Then he threw something at Ljosira — Loki thought it looked like a rope of dark energy. He could not deflect it, but had to watch as the spell wrapped itself around Ljosira’s head, obscuring her eyes. She cried out as the force flung her backwards, but Loki took the moment of distraction to cast a hasty illusion. His opponent grabbed the decoy and let out an enraged howl as his fingers clutched nothing but smoke. Loki delivered a well-aimed kick to the back of his knees, making him stagger.

“Watch out, he is bonded to a dragon!”, came Ljosira’s warning. She was struggling to rip the shadowy creation off herself. As long as her sight was hindered this way, she could not help him. And then the man blurred away for an instant, his silhouette flickering. The next Loki knew, an arm wrapped around his neck, squeezing the air out of him. He fought against the stranglehold, but stars danced in his vision, blackness closed in from the edges.

“Thor!”, Ljosira’s cry went through flesh and bone. Loki gasped, but not a wisp of breath would come.

“How do you like this, asshole? Dying right beside your precious dragon princess. Rather dramatic. I think I will just choke the life from you. Or would you rather I slit your throat?”, his enemy snarled at his ear. He felt the cold blade press to the vulnerable skin above his collarbone.

“Thor!”, Ljosira wailed once more. When Loki thought he would simply feint from lack of air, she suddenly erupted in a nova of light. Like a beacon, she shone through mist and shadow, her desperate scream ringing on and on, echoing off the cliffs.

The man who held Loki captive let out a yell of pain. His grasp slackened, just one tiny bit. Right on time. Because Loki heard the approach of Mjölnir as Thor answered the plea for help. It took all his strength, but he tore himself loose from the death-grip and flattened to the ground as the
hammer parted the mist, hitting the attacker square in the chest.

The force of it threw the man off his feet and he landed on the ground with a dull thud. Mjölnir reverted its course and soared back the way it came, right into Thor’s hand as he appeared from the veil of mist. The pristine eagle-feathers hanging from the handle quivered then settled neatly, as a bird would fold in its wings. Their downed foe groaned in agony, trying to stand again, but Loki quickly weaved solid chains around his wrists, while Thor walked up swiftly and pressed the hammer down onto the man’s ribcage. He whimpered, crushed beneath the weight.

“That was a nice trick.”, the crown prince complimented sarcastically. “Too bad it didn’t work.”

“Ha! You’ll never –” He didn’t go on. Instead, his eyes widened in their deep sockets, making him look ghoulish, mad. His shackled hands lifted and the magical tethers simply tore apart. Before either Thor or Loki could react, he had plunged his dagger into his own heart.

“No!”, Loki yelled, but it was too late. The nameless man croaked and gurgled horribly as his blood soiled the ground, gushing from the deadly wound he had inflicted on himself.

“What the…”, Thor lifted Mjölnir away, his face blank. Behind them, Ljosira managed to free herself before Loki even reached her. She straightened and rubbed her eyes, hurrying over to them. The stranger went slack, his hands sinking to the rocky floor. Then he moved no more.

“Suicide. He rather killed himself than answering our questions?”, Thor wondered in a disgusted tone. Ljosira’s hands went to her mouth in shock when she saw the corpse.

“No. I think he was killed. By his master. Mind-controlled, somehow.”, Loki corrected, turning to Ljosira. “Are you hurt?”, he surveyed her thoroughly. She shook her head.

“No, I’m alright.”, she placated. “He blinded me, but I saw his aura. Bonded to a dragon, in a way I have never seen before. It was… hideous, a parasitic connection. A perversion of the true purpose our life-bonds serve. He used shadow magic. I can’t believe this.” Her voice overflowed with bitterness.

“I think we can safely assume that the Darkflight are behind all of this now.”, Loki said darkly. “I only hope that –“

“Ljosira. Look at this.”, Thor interrupted. They had been so distracted by the attacker’s sacrifice, they hadn’t noticed that the all-enveloping fog had dissipated with his death. As the mist and shadow cleared, the three of them found themselves on a rise between the cliff-sides. A stone archway loomed before them, one of the ancient checkpoints which served as markers and resting places for travellers up the mountain pass. The stones were withered and covered with lichen. Within the circle of columns, there it was. A sphere of pure blackness. Undulating patiently, its shadowy tendrils swirling around it as it drew energy, matter and light from the realm into the crushing core.

Ljosira stared at the black hole, walking towards it like a dreamer. She felt the inexorable pull as it tried to latch on to her being, siphon her power.

“Stay back.”, she ordered Loki and Thor, her voice carrying a steely edge of command.

Both men stopped short. Everything in Loki bristled against letting her enter the circle alone, but he forced himself to trust her abilities. As Ljosira neared the sphere, her hands lifted and began to move cautiously as she weaved a spell of great complexity. She spoke a fluent incantation in a language neither of them knew. Most likely dragon speech, as she had done once before during the
journey to Yggdrasil.

Glowing threads appeared before her, forming an intricate net which she draped to enclose the sphere like a shell. It fastened around the black hole and pulled tighter as she continued. The shade struggled against the confinement, flaring up angrily to break its chains. But Ljosira tightened her magical noose further and further, driving the darkness back until it seemed like a ball of yarn spun too firmly. Then she made a sudden, fierce gesture and her net burned through the black hole with a loud sizzling sound. It died with a violent eruption that shook the stones around the circle and made the ground rumble in agitation.

Loki and Thor struggled to keep their balance as the currents of conflicting energies lashed out to throw them off their feet. Ljosira leaned against the tempest, undeviating and solid, holding the channel of her magic until the hideous disturbance was melted away by it entirely. From one moment to the next, it was finished.

The angry outbursts ceased abruptly and her channel stopped. She let out a relieved sigh, wiping the beads of moisture from her brow. Something dropped unceremoniously to the ground exactly where the black hole had been before. Curiously, Ljosira crouched and picked it up. It was a shard of some sort. A gleaming, onyx piece in the shape of a star, about the length of her hand.

“Can we enter the circle now?”, Loki demanded impatiently. She nodded in a distracted way, surveying the shard. Thor and Loki joined her.

“Well done, Ljosira. It looks like the disturbance cleared up. You have my gratitude.”, Thor thanked her earnestly.

“What is that?”, Loki looked at the piece of metal, suspicious. Ljosira shook her head and frowned.

“I don’t know… It’s definitely been created by shadow magic, but – Ow!”, she suddenly dropped the thing, clutching her hand as though she’d reached into glowing embers.

“It burns! But… not like fire. A cold burn. I don’t think I should touch it. Whatever it is, the magic inside is a negative of mine. One of you should hold on to it for now.”, she murmured, rubbing her palm and wincing. Loki picked up the shard instead. It felt cool to the touch, but did not seem to have the same effect on him as on Ljosira. Yet he had a strange feeling, as though faint whispers emanated from it.

“I don’t like this one bit.”, he said quietly.

“Me neither. We need to get that thing back to the palace and show it to Odin.”, Thor agreed.

“Yes. And we need to contact my father. I can’t sense him right now. The fog might be gone, but my life-bonds still feel… so distant, faint.” Ljosira shuddered.

“I just hope that damn sky-striker can still fly. I could fly ahead with Mjölnir, of course….””, Thor trailed away meaningfully.

“Not a chance, brother. If we have to travel by normal means, you will too.”, Loki retorted in a scathing tone. He pocketed the shard safely into his coat. “Besides, we should not get separated. It did little good the last time.”

It seemed that destroying the black hole had lifted almost all of the disruptive magic which had spread across the highlands. During the hike back to the village, they realized that they had been going around in circles for hours through the fog, thinking they had covered a much greater distance. It was actually not very far.
The villagers welcomed them back graciously and insisted on hosting a meal before letting the princes and the dragon lady leave again. Although all three of them wished to return to the palace as soon as possible, resisting proved futile. So it wasn’t until noon the next day that the villagers finally released them again, not without countless well-wishes and extorting promises of visiting again soon.

“A wonder they did not build us a statue.”, Thor murmured as he slid sure-footedly down the ledge they had climbed to reach the settlement.

“I wouldn’t have minded that.”, Loki commented with a smirk. Ljosira, who deemed herself too clumsy to forge successfully through uneven terrain, was hoisted into his arms. She gave him a rebuking elbow to the ribs. “I was joking, woman!” She crinkled her nose cheekily.

“Half-joking.”, she corrected, the minx.

“You could let one go every once in a while.”, he smiled, very glad that she looked more like her old self again, not the heap of misery she had been during the storm. Still, weariness and unease lingered in her eyes.

Thankfully, the sky-striker was still where they had left it – and mostly intact. It took a while to unearth it and rid it of grime. When Thor activated the engines, they groaned and buzzed in an insulted manner, but the vehicle rose into the sky nevertheless. Loki cast a gaze around surreptitiously. Even though they had managed to disperse the unsettling disturbance, he had a bad feeling that they were only being drawn deeper into Natta’s sinister plans.

As the sky-striker shot off with a blaming gurgle, Loki had a rising trepidation that the Darkflight had let them go much too easily. And not even half-way back to the city, he would painfully be proven right.
XXI. Twilight Falls

Chapter Notes

As promised, a lot of action! Disaster! And finally some real dragons! We are nearing some crucial points in the story, I hope you are still having fun <3

XXI. Twilight Falls

The howling wind rushed by, the sky-striker’s engines roared at a deafening volume, and still Loki could hear his own heartbeat throb in his ear-drums. Great black, winged creatures were shooting like arrows across the sky towards them. Wherever they passed, the world was obscured by shadow. Awful screeches filled the air, making the very fabric of reality quiver. For a small eternity, neither of the three people inside the sky-striker moved. Darkness descended upon the rolling hills and forests. The palace was still miles and miles away. They would never make it, and these dragons did not look as though they had a friendly chat in mind.

Ljosira had gone white as snow, to the point of being see-through. Loki felt the shiver run through her body and sympathized with her whole-heartedly. The sight of the Darkflight dragons in full flight had something truly apocalyptical.

“They want the thing we found in the mountains.”, Loki uttered with absolute certainty. He did not quite know where that knowledge came from, if it was pure instinct or if his mind had somehow put the long line of strange events together and drawn this conclusion. Ljosira shook her head in disbelief.

“Why would they break the ban on their dragon forms around Asgard to get this tiny piece of metal? The flights have lived in peace for thousands of years!” she yelled in denial.

“It doesn’t matter now!” Thor interjected angrily, for the hulking dark shapes were advancing on them rapidly. Thor struggled to keep his control over the damaged vehicle, yet it veered and bucked precariously, as though sensing the approaching danger.

“We have to –“ They would never know what intended to say. The Darkflight swooped in, so close now that Loki could see their onyx bodies contrasted against the dull light which remained. Each of their heads was crowned with six etched horns, their beamless, leathery wings beating the air relentlessly. The unrestrained magic of these creatures slammed the breath right out of him.

One of them – the largest – broke the formation and plunged straight down, an apex predator diving for its prey. And then the dragon opened its enormous jaws and beam of blackest fire shot from its mouth, directly aimed at the swivelling sky-striker. Loki’s heart dropped to his stomach. He knew, from mere, raw instinct, that no power he possessed would stop that flame. Even his gaze seemed to bounce off it. Thor ripped the steering wheel around, making the engines screech. A streak of silver blurred past Loki and he was bodily pushed aside. Everything moved in slow motion as Ljosira skittered between him and the beam, her arms raised as a shield.

A terrifying force rose from her body, erupting like a supernova. Then she simply toppled over. He reached out just in time to catch her before she hit her head, when everything exploded in blinding
light. A white, white world. It was not painful. Not at all. Gentle, enveloping safety flooded him. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if he’d open his eyes and glimpse Valhalla, because he had simply been eradicated by the vengeful dragon fire, finally meeting his fate. But that could not be right. He would never be allowed into Valhalla.

Sound and touch returned first to his senses. Loki became aware of a steady rhythm, like a soothing lullaby. Such unerring certainty in every powerful beat, a thing timeless and yet so vital. A heart. A warm, wide heart which had opened itself to him of all people, drumming its immortal song in unison with his own.

The numbness left his limbs and the blinding flare dissipated. When his sight cleared, he found himself looking at an iridescent scale so pristine, he doubted he would ever be able to tear his eyes away from it. Something held his body pressed firmly against the spot where the impressive heart sent out its calm thuds. They had touched down on the ground, the sky-striker in shambles around them. Ljosira’s motionless body was in his arms, empty of her spirit. She had appeared in her true form at last.

To call her big would have been quite an understatement. Loki saw one of her mighty wings, silken white, subtly shimmering in countless colours. Like a canopy from mother of pearl, fanning out above his head. Thor crouched to his right, Mjölnir gripped in his hand as though he had been about to attack to protect both of them. His brother seemed thoroughly dumbstruck by Ljosira’s appearance. The Darkflight had scattered, momentarily blinded by the Lightbringer’s bright transformation.

“By Odin’s beard, I shall never again judge anything by its size.”, was all Thor managed to say. Loki suddenly understood that Ljosira had deflected the sinister beam by breaking the embargo on her dragon form. That she would violate the laws of her father made him shudder at the thought what would have happened if she hadn’t shifted.

Before he could react in any way, the pressure on his back loosened and the ground shook when she rearranged her body. The next he knew, her sinuous neck bent down and her head came into view before him. She was breath-taking. Lustrous scales covered her smooth snout, the draconic features strangely familiar to those of her mortal form. Anxious grey eyes surveyed him. He recognized her in that gaze, even though the pupils were serpentine slits instead of dark circles. Her flowing silver mane streamed out gracefully behind the six ivory horns as though caught in a playful wind. Loki did not dare to move.

“No, I’m alright.”, he whispered, running his hand over the glossy scales. They were smooth as silk. Then he noticed the ugly burn marks on her folded wing and his head snapped up in alarm.

“Worry not. I have taken more than one beating from my Darkflight brethren in my youth.” She turned to the sky, squinting. The black dragons had overcome their surprise about her appearance and were reforming swiftly. Their leader circled above like a menacing shadow.
“These dragons look as if they are going to war. What do we do? We cannot break an ancient peace treaty on Asgardian ground!”, Thor uttered fiercely.

“Mjölnir allows you to fly without us burdening you. Take the shard to the palace. We will distract them.”, she replied, her tone adamant. Loki swiftly handed Thor the polished onyx star they had found inside the black hole, but not before casting several cloaking enchantments on both it and Thor.

“I doubt they will follow you once I engage them.”, Ljosira added, then lowered her head until it touched the grassy ground. “Loki, climb up behind my horns. Take my mortal form with you.”

Even Thor, who had never been fond of books, knew that not once in recorded history had there been a mention of a dragon allowing anyone to ride them. It went against all rules of common courtesy, but it seemed the dragon princess cared very little about decorum anymore.

A moment of stunned silence passed before Loki snapped out of it and did as bidden. He found himself perched on Ljosira’s neck, her mane coiling all around him, her mortal form still in his arms. It was just too bizarre to be real.

“One I repel them out of Asgard, I shall head for the palace.”, the Lightbringer’s words rang in their thoughts. She paused for a heartbeat, looking at Thor beseechingly. “When I call out to you, will you come to my aid?”

“By my honour, I promise.”, the crown prince answered with pride, slamming a fist to his chest in the ancient gesture of making a vow. Ljosira nodded once, then lifted her head and spread her wings wide. Since she didn’t seem to notice, Loki tied some of the silver strands around her mortal body to tether it. And then she leaped, taking to the skies with all the natural grace of a creature who had lived her entire life in full flight.

Loki felt a surge of vertigo as she gathered speed at an alarming rate. Her wings gleamed like the whitest sails ever made, stretching to part the air during her ascent. The wind whipped around him so sharply, he had to hold on to her horns with an iron grip, but then the realization struck him like a slap to the face: He was flying, flying on a dragon! A thrill of pure exhilaration made him laugh at the top of his lungs like a lunatic.

“Have you gone mad for seeing me like this? I heard about such things happening with Voidwalkers, but our clan usually makes people rejoice… You frighten me, Loki. Are you alright?” Silly dragon! She got it all backwards.

“I have never felt this alive!”, his shout carried over the discord around them. “Is this even real? Am I dreaming?”, he whispered then, knowing she would hear him despite the noise.

“Foolish trickster. Can the master of illusion not tell a dream from reality?” Before he could argue with her, she added: “Now hold on tight.”

With a jolt, Loki was flung rearward by the breakneck speed. Agitated cries erupted all around him as Ljosira shot through the Darkflight formation like an eagle rousting out a murder of crows. Scraps of onyx scales and wings flew past him in a flurry, the deafening roar she let out making his ears ring. She twisted mid-flight and dived again, elegantly soaring through their broken lines.

Screeches and roars alternated endlessly until Loki realized they were talking to each other. Mighty bodies collided, razor-sharp talons scratched and whistled, trying to hit vulnerable points in the scale-armour. Fangs snapped for necks, limbs, whatever they could catch. Probably a dragon equivalent to a heated discussion.
The leader of the Darkflight pack suddenly silenced the others with a nerve-wrecking cry and crashed against Ljosira brutally. Loki thought the force of it would throw him off. He flopped around like a rag-doll on her neck, grabbing anything he could reach for support. The black dragon held the white one in violent death-grip as they went spiralling through the sky, the screams echoing all over Asgard.

The Lightbringer let out a heart-wrenching wail when her brethren bit down on her injured wing with crushing jaws. The life-bond flooded with her agony. Loki was overwhelmed by a divine wrath, his protective instincts drowning out everything else. Even though he was no match for a dragon, he threw every spell that came to his mind at the Darkflight leader. The vengeful, wild array of magic startled the creature. His hold slipped just a little, but Ljosira did not need more than that. She broke free with a white-hot breath of fire.

The bright flames scorched the black dragon’s side and sent him plummeting to the ground, roaring in pain. Some of his minions rushed to steady him, the rest went after Ljosira and Loki, who were gaining speed as she climbed into the dark clouds.

“Are you alright?!”, Loki demanded, frantic. Her right wing was a blur of white and scarlet, which downright terrified him. When she did not answer right away, it pushed him to the edge of madness. He feared for her as he had never feared anything in his life.

“Ljosira!”, he cried once more.

“No need to yell…” Too weak, her voice sounded too weak. She ignored his question, instead adding in a strained tone: “Now, we need an exit strategy.” Loki had to squeeze his lids shut because the whiplash of wind was making his eyes water. But he could hear the Darkflight closing up on them again, the leader’s shriek full of rage. He would not be thrown off, now angrier than ever.

“What about your mortal body?”, he asked uncertainly. Did she plan to hand herself over to the Darkflight? Surely they wouldn’t kill her, the dragon princess!

“You said you trusted me. Now let go. Time is short.”, she repeated, the urgency in her voice galvanizing him. All the tremendous leaps of faith she had taken concerning him flashed before his eyes. It took such substantive courage, and yet at the same time it was so easy to let go.

He fell away from the one thing which anchored him in so many ways. Ljosira disappeared into the clouds while he rushed past several murky, screeching shapes. Violent currents tore at his clothes but he categorically denied himself to look down, keeping his gaze on the spot where Ljosira had vanished. When she reappeared from the shade, he’d already broken through the blanket of clouds, still plummeting relentlessly.

The sight of her in full flight, a shining beacon against the darkness her brethren had conjured – it was something he would never forget. Her silhouette blurred and drowned in a glowing nova, leaving behind her mortal body. It fell even faster than Loki, a streak of silver like a shooting star. He stretched against gravity’s pull as she came closer, but his attention was suddenly diverted when their pursuers plunged from the clouds.
For a split second, he knew a mad terror that they would actually kill her. But the Darkflight never reached them. They collided violently with a barrier of pure light, thrown back and unable to pass such an enchantment. Onyx wings flapped frantically as their short front legs went to their eyes. Blinded and thwarted, their irritated screeches rent the air.

Loki caught Ljosira in the circle of his arms, embracing her gently. He pressed her mortal form against his chest, knowing only relief when she stirred. Her eyes fluttered open and found his.

“Thor…”, she breathed, sounding incredibly tired. It was the most unfitting situation for jealousy, but Loki was about to ask her why, of all the things she could mistake him for, she chose his brother. And then he heard the unmistakable, scarping sound of something approaching with great haste. Thor shot through the sky above Asgard right at them, his red cape a blur of colour in the gloom. Every inch the thunder-god that he was.

The impact when he met them did not even rattle Loki after the ride he had just survived. His brother’s arm closed around his shoulders protectively. Just as they touched down near the palace gardens, he caught one last glimpse of the Darkflight leader. The dragon let out a final, rage-filled roar, threw himself helplessly against the barrier, before he disappeared into the clouds with his minions on his tail. Light returned to Asgard as soon as they were gone. A shy sun poked her head through the heavy blanket of clouds.

“I call that perfect timing! Your little adventure looked much more interesting than mine.”, Thor mused as he let go of Loki and holstered Mjölnir safely to his side.

With his brother’s steadying grip gone, Loki thought his knees would buckle. He felt nauseated, wobbly, but Ljosira’s limp body alerted him into new strength. Her eyes flickered as though she could barely keep them open. She had lied to him. Damn her, she was supposed to be incapable of deception but she had lied to him, to him. Because she was anything but alright. A warm wetness was slowly seeping through his clothes. Blood. Thor still gazed up to the barrier, when Loki’s cry of despair made him flinch. Ljosira grew heavier in his arms, until he could no longer hold her upright and sank to his knees in the grass. Thor hurried to his side.

“She’s injured. She’s bleeding!” Thor had never seen him like this. His brother looked maddened, face frozen solid in a mask of wrath and terror. The gaping tear on Ljosira’s arm shed the life-force from her quickly. That could not be good. Another large red stain drenched the silver robe at her ribcage, growing by the second.

“She needs a healer.”, Thor barked curtly, but when he tried to reach for the dragon princess, a forceful blast wave repelled him.

“Don’t touch her!” , Loki yelled. His magic was weak, diminished by the exertion of the previous fight, not enough to throw Thor off his feet. But it startled him nevertheless. For a terrible instant, he thought that the evil, insane side of his brother had resurfaced. But when he saw the way Loki touched the half-conscious woman’s cheek, murmured unintelligible words to her in a soothing voice, Thor understood. Not the rage of a madman. But the defensive frenzy of someone terrified to lose what mattered most in the world.

“Loki, you are not physically strong enough to lift her. She grows heavy because the enchantments on her mortal form are failing, I think. Will you let me carry her, please? Allow me to help.”, Thor approached him cautiously. Loki’s emerald eyes flickered to his, unfocused. He looked haunted.

“It will be alright…”, Ljosira whispered then, her voice small and feeble. “I’m so exhausted… Can I sleep now?” Powerless, Loki watched her eyes flutter shut, her body going slack and motionless. Thor reached forth and lifted her gingerly. Thank the gods for his brother’s brute strength.
They hurried into the palace, where they were swarmed by guards and frantic people who had watched the whole thing from afar. Healers were called. Thor pushed through the crowd and they parted before him, allowing him space to carry Ljosira through the corridors. In all the commotion, she woke and cast a frightened look around, but all she could see was Thor’s broad, armoured chest.

“Loki?!”, she asked urgently.

“Worry not, little ancient one. He’s right here. You are just a bit too heavy for him right now.”, Thor soothed. Long, familiar fingers wrapped around hers.

“I am right here.”, Loki’s voice confirmed with a light squeeze. They were ushered into a healing room and Thor set Ljosira down on the glowing surface of a soul forge. It groaned forebodingly beneath her weight. Several healers moved to tend to her wounds, weaving runes and complex symbols above her unmoving body.

Loki surveyed their work, a hollow emptiness spreading through his chest. A barren, expanding void. He felt the life-bond dwindle to an evanescent thread. Thin as gossamer, where before it had been a strong, vibrant tie, much like the steady beat of her dragon heart. How much he had taken it for granted, he only realized now that he could barely sense it. This was where he turned to whenever darkness encroached around him, whispering to lie, cheat, deceive. If he lost her, he would not come back from that. He wouldn’t want to.

“Loki. Come, my son.”, the Allfather’s voice broke his trance. “Let the healers do their work.” Odin pulled him out of the room, his hand firmly around Loki’s shoulders. The door fell shut, leaving all them standing in the hallway. Loki slumped onto a marble bench.

“Strange, how we sometimes come to value things the most when we feel them slipping out of our reach.”, the Allfather mused pensively. His younger son kept his silence.

“Can they help her, father? You once told me dragons have exceptional healing powers, but her injuries just passed over when she transitioned into her mortal form.”, Thor sounded troubled.

“We cannot be sure.”, Odin replied, his brow furrowed. “Dragons have a different concept of what passes as violence between their kin. But they rarely cross the line to serious injury. This is a difficult situation.”

“They have been known to kill each other during the Dark Days! This is my fault, I made her vulnerable. She shifted to protect us! What if she dies? How do I tell the dragon king that I might have killed his daughter?!“, Loki burst out.

“You couldn’t possibly have known, Loki!”, Thor hurried to defuse the situation.

“Stop twisting the truth before its time has come, my son. Nobody has died yet. If you think on taking the blame for this, you are painfully misguided.”, Odin interjected harshly.

“I am not…”, Loki began. …Your son. But he was slapped right across the face before he could finish his sentence, so forcefully that it jerked his head to the side. A searing bloom of pain spread on his cheek.

“Oh, but you are. Not by blood, but by every other definition you are my son. I raised you, fool that I am for it, thinking I could bring you to your senses when you always sought mischief instead of reason! And it never worked. Not a thousand years ago when you broke your mother’s favourite vase practicing your tricks, and not today.”, Odin said, the authority in his voice absolute. Then he
turned and walked past a stone-statue Thor.

“Leave him wandering around. His magic is too weak to do any harm right now. I have to reach Elding.”, he whispered calmly to his elder son. His steps echoed through the empty corridor.

Instead of abandoning him too, Thor sat down next to Loki on the bench. Silence fell like a heavy blanket. Neither of them spoke for a very long time, and yet there was a deep-seated comfort in sharing this burden between each other. Brother to brother, as it was supposed to be. After all hubris, Thor still seemed to care about him. It did not lift the weight from his chest or take away his fear for Ljosira. But it felt much more bearable like this, as though he need not carry it alone.
XXII. A Liar's Heart

Chapter Notes

Loki has some pretty crazy ideas, and major serendipity... But it works out somehow :D
I have to say, this is one of my favorite chapters. It has so much feels and still manages to be light-hearted for the greater part. I also love these bonding moments between Thor and Loki. Their relationship is really growing again! Have fun reading and thank you for staying with me and this story 'o/

XXII. A Liar’s Heart

“Remember that time we stole Sleipnir?” It seemed an eternity later that Thor turned to Loki, a half-smile on his chiselled features. Loki snorted derisively.

“Of course I remember. You had me impersonate the horse-mistress. It was humiliating, like most of your ideas. ‘Damsel in distress’, ‘There’s a giant behind you!’, and of course – ‘Get help’, my favourite.”

“It wasn’t that bad. You make a fine woman.”, his brother jested. Loki chose to skip over that comment.

“It only went to hell when you tried to have the horse pull the chariot you got for your birthday. It’s a war-horse, Thor. Not the chariot-pulling kind. What had happened to your goats anyway?”, he mused.

“I ate them.” At Loki’s shocked expression, he threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. “Not alone! Volstagg and Heimdall helped.”

“You feasted on two unique, priceless Asgardian goats? Why am I not surprised?” Despite everything, he couldn’t help it. He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. It was a quiet snicker, yet still Thor had managed to distract him from the worry about Ljosira, for a little while. Loki felt grateful for that, even if he might never find the words to express his gratitude. Thor put a hand on his shoulder. The solid certainty in his grip was heartening.

“There. That’s better. She will be alright, Loki.”

“How do you know?”, Loki sighed.

“Because she has to be.”, Thor replied in a determined voice, implacable. At that moment, the door to their left opened and Midla stepped through, the High Healer. The two brothers came to their feet at once. Loki did not like the strained expression on her face one bit.

“We did what we could but… there is only so much we know about mending wounds in dragons. We closed the tears, but she is still… fading.”, the healer said regretfully. Loki did not wait for further explanation.

Instead, he pushed past her and hurried to Ljosira’s unmoving form. She lay on the surface of the
soul forge, white as bone. He was almost afraid to touch her, fearing that she might become transparent in front of his eyes and just… disappear. Gingerly, he pressed his palm to the side of her neck, where he could feel the slow rhythm of her pulse. Too slow, too feeble. He reached for her consciousness through the life-bond in a desperate search to understand what was going on with her. She was smaller, weakened inside, her incandescent sun a diminishing flicker. And it became worse.

Everything that had happened since they’d left the palace had chipped away her strength, bit by bit. The storm first, the journey through the unnatural fog, her efforts to close to black hole, and then the fight against the Darkflight. Ljosira had done all of those things while she had been cut off from the life-bonds to her family through Natta’s evil schemes. And she had not spoken a word of complaint to him about it, instead expending so much energy, exhausting herself until she had almost nothing left.

“At this rate, she will go into a coma.”, Midla stated bitterly. “We don’t know how to stop it.”

“Where’s my father? He was supposed to be back with the dragon king by now! Elding surely knows –”, Thor began, but was interrupted by a guard who hurried into the room, panting for breath.

“The Allfather sends word that he is trying to reach the dragon king, but with no success until now. It seems the great dragon is away from Yggdrasil right now.”

“Damn it!”, Thor cursed. “Elding could mend this in a heartbeat. But we are like children, playing around with things we barely understand.”

“Everybody needs to shut up so I can think!”, Loki’s yell cut them all short. His mind operated at full stretch, filing through options with lightning speed. Elding was not coming. They didn’t have much time. He needed to get some energy into Ljosira, something pure and undiluted, so she would not slip away. But where would he get something like that – the Tesseract? Too dangerous, volatile. The Bifröst? Bad idea. It could tear the whole palace apart. Every source he knew was somehow tailored for mortal use, unfit for a dragon – except…

And then it came to him as he looked at his brother, towering over the soul forge with his arms crossed, features tense. Loki reached up to the glowing runes and turned them quickly. A second platform rose from the ground right beside the one Ljosira lay on. He circled around in two steps, settling himself on the empty surface.

“Loki, what are you doing?”, Thor asked, frowning as his brother lay back on the soul forge next to Ljosira.

“Listen carefully now.”, Loki ordered in a strict voice. “Ljosira needs energy to sustain herself. This is what we are going to do: While I maintain my connection to her through our life-bond… You will strike me with your thunder.”

“What?!”, Thor and Midla cried out simultaneously. “Are you mad?!?”

“Thunder is light, energy in a raw and fierce form. If I can channel it into her, she can draw from it. It will give her the strength she needs right now.”, Loki explained in a calm tone. He took Ljosira’s hand into his, wrapping his fingers around hers. They were cold.

“That is a giant-sized ‘if’! I could kill you! Why can’t I channel the lightning directly into her? Or connect me to her instead –” Thor loathed his idea, made very clear by the rigid line of his jaw.
“Too dangerous. She is unprotected, her shields are failing. And you share no connection. It has to be me. Midla, pull up the image now.” The High Healer hesitated for a heartbeat, looking uncertain. But then she activated the forge and an astral projection of Loki appeared above, made from countless specks of shimmering dust. He could see the link to Ljosira where their hands touched. It was intact.

“This is madness, Loki. Haven’t you heard what I said? I could kill you.” Thor argued desperately. His brother turned his head, meeting his gaze openly.

“You are a great flame, Thor. But I am the wind to temper it. I have handled you for fifteen-hundred years. And… our mother believed we can balance each other.” he said, emerald eyes serious. The crown prince was rendered speechless by those earnest words. “You won’t kill me. Let me do this for the woman I love, so she lives for me to tell her how I feel. Please, brother.”

The keen sentiment in his admission was what made Thor concede to his insane plan. It had been the first time Loki had spoken about love to him at all, and he could only imagine the difficulty it had taken to admit it. He gave a heavy nod and lifted Mjölnir from his belt.

“Step back.” he ordered the healers, who obeyed immediately. Letting the hammer hover above Loki, he called on the powers which had been bestowed on him. Cautiously. Electricity surged in small currents along his arm and into the weapon, the mounting energy making the air quiver.

“Last chance to change your mind. If I disfigure you, Ljosira will have my head.” Thor felt compelled to point out.

“How about you don’t aim for the face, then?” Loki retorted. “You talk too much. She will have both our heads anyway when she finds out. Go on. Give it your best shot.” Thor issued a defeated breath. And then he let loose the tethers on his magic, striking Loki with the full force of lightning.

The room lit up in a blinding flare of white-blue light. A deafening peal of thunder drowned out his brother’s scream as the raw energy went through him in jagged arcs. His body jerked uncontrollably, but he held on to Ljosira’s hand like a vice, clenching his teeth against the pain. It was nearly unbearable. Nearly. Loki steeled himself to endure it, mustering all of his concentration to channel the power through the life-bond without being torn apart by it.

“Cardiac distress. His heart won’t take this for long.”, he heard Midla yell over the dissonance of crackling thunder. From the corner of his eye, he saw Thor make an uncertain little movement as if he wanted to draw back.

“No! Keep going!” Loki managed to hiss out. The surface of the soul forge cracked beneath the force, the columns all around received deep gashes as forks of lightning lashed out in their direction. Glass burst, lamps exploded.

Loki thought he might shatter into a million pieces, but he did not give in. This had to work. His fingers closed so tightly around Ljosira’s hand, he feared she would be bruised afterwards. And then, suddenly, her spine arched so fiercely that she almost lifted off the surface. She drew a shuddering breath, her fingers returning the pressure to his own. Flickers of iridescent light raced over her body.

“Enough!” Thor reacted immediately. The thunder ceased from one moment to the next, and Loki fell back onto the soul forge like a boneless rag. All of his muscles went slack. After what felt like a lifetime of crushing agony, he could have wept in joy when the pain faded.

“What did you… do to me?” Ljosira’s voice came from beside him, small and dazed. He managed
no more than a sigh to express his infinite relief.

“Little ancient one... I think we just saved you in the most... shocking way possible.”, Thor said unevenly.

“Really, Thor? Is this the time?”, Loki groaned as his brother helped him to sit up.

“You know I get like that when I’m nervous. Let’s not do this again any time soon.”, his brother murmured, the lines of his face tense and worried. “Are you alright? Did it work?”

They both looked at Ljosira, who closed her eyes again. Her grip around his fingers stayed firm. Loki sensed that she merely rested now, inside a deep, healing slumber. The notion of a good night’s sleep seemed incredibly alluring to him, too. He felt drained of all energy, limp like a puppet without its strings.

“I’ll live. And yes, it worked. But I was almost entirely sure it would.” Thor gave him a disbelieving glare.

“Almost?” Even in his exhaustion, Loki managed a mocking smirk.

“I returned from the dead twice. Have a little faith in me, brother.”, he retorted, to which Thor’s features turned serious all of a sudden.

“I do.”

“Thank you.”, Loki said quietly. And he truly meant it.

Ljosira woke to a feeling of being surrounded by stifling heat, as though she’d been thrown into the heart of an exploding star. It would have been comfortable, only it wasn’t. Too heavy, too constricting. As her senses slowly returned, she realized that it came from the irrational number of furs someone had piled onto her.

She tried moving to throw them off and gain her freedom, but was thwarted by the weakness still lingering in every muscle. Groaning out her frustration, she fell back into the pillows. But the next moment, someone uncovered her with swift precision. Loki’s face came into view above the bed, his expression stern and anxious as he sat down at the edge. The surroundings were those of her bedroom in the palace.

“Ljosira... You are awake.” He reached down and tugged her close in a flash, his embrace so tight it robbed her of breath for a moment. She sensed the turmoil inside him as he battled down some very strong emotion so it would not overwhelm him. He just held her for a small eternity, listening to her steady heartbeat, as if he needed a solid reassurance that she was truly back.

“I’m alright...”, Ljosira soothed him softly. He seemed to regain his composure, sighing and pulling back to scrutinize her thoroughly. His perceptive eyes were glazed with exhaustion, deep shadows pooling beneath them. Hadn’t he slept at all? He looked terrible.

“You scared a few centuries off my longevity, dragon.”, Loki said, his voice the slightest bit shaky. “And you lied to me.”

She wanted to protest that it hadn’t truly been a lie – she had really thought she could handle all of it. So focused on protecting him, Thor and Asgard from the Darkflight that she hadn’t paid
attention on how completely she’d exerted herself. Then Loki leaned close, resting his forehead against hers. His next words were a mere whisper. “Damn it, am I glad to see you well.”

The kiss he gave her was so sweet, it made her heart bounce around excitedly in her chest. When they parted again, Ljosira examined the meticulously tied bandage on her arm. There was another around her midriff. Both wounds seemed to have closed, but not fully healed. They stung as she moved, the scar tissue causing a sensation of tautness. If she had been at her usual strength, she could have healed them entirely, but that had to wait for a while. And yet… She did not feel as drained as she should have felt after these turbulent events. Lifting her gaze to Loki, she tilted her head, her lips pressing into a firm line.

“I didn’t lie, you know. I just… thought I could handle it, and was proven wrong.”, she admitted ruefully.

“How are you feeling now?”, he asked in a concerned tone. She made a few cautious movements as if to test the state of her body, then closed her eyes, a faint hum of magic emanating from her.

“Better… Still tired. I could sleep for a month. But otherwise… I think I will be fine.”, she assured him. Then she remembered the brief blaze of awareness she’d had in between the fog of unconsciousness. Violent lightning, terrible pain, the life-bond flaring like a supernova –

“You did something to me.” It was more a statement than a question. Loki’s gaze turned apprehensive, before it slid away from hers.

“We tried a quite… unusual approach when the healers said you were fading too quickly.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I let Thor strike me with his thunder and channelled the energy into you.”

Her face went utterly blank for a moment, before it flooded with a terrified sort of disbelief.

“Loki, that was insanely dangerous! That’s why I felt such agitation in the life-bond, even though I was so out of it. How could you even attempt such a crazy thing!?”, she shook her head in agitated little jerks. Loki remained calm, lifting her hand to gently run his fingers over the snowy white bandage.

“It was the only way I could think of to save you. Our bond had thinned out so much, I could barely feel it. I would have tried anything.”, he said, his tone serious and quiet. Then, he suddenly flashed her a smile so puckish and nonchalant, she could only stare.

“People do crazy things to protect what they can’t live without. It’s what love does, I guess… even to fools like me. Attempting reckless heroics with little chance for success…”, he trailed away, looking at her stunned face. She went very still, unsure if she had heard him right.

“What?”, was all she managed. Loki shifted awkwardly on the spot.

“I’m really not very good at this sort of thing – I mean, I gave you the ring and… I know it’s just an illusion. It was supposed to be… symbolic. But now I have a real one. Maybe I should get it, it’s just over there –“ He made a sudden motion as if to stand, but Ljosira grabbed him by the wrist. She had never seen him so out of his depth. To be honest, it was incredibly endearing.

“Are you… rambling?“ She had a hard time suppressing a smile, which made things worse, it seemed.

“Alright, if you are going to mock me, then I’ll be leaving now –“ The next he knew, she flung her arms around his neck and quite effectively toppled him over with her spirited assault. He landed on
the covers, struggling not to jostle her. Ljosira leaned down to him, nuzzling her cheek against his face.

“I’m not mocking you. I told you once, that is a mortal invention I have no use for.”, she whispered gently, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “But I do love you. With all my heart. You doubted that, truly?” His elegant fingertips feathered over her temple, tracing the fine arc of her brows, which were pulled into a little frown.

“Scepticism is a healthy thing in many situations. It has been part of me for so long, I find it hard to separate from it…”, Loki began, his expression serious. “I try, but it’s you who, more than anyone, has made that possible at all. When I was in the maze of fog, I met one of my greatest doubts. That I would never surpass my brother, never outmanoeuvre him, he’ll always keep succeeding. Winning. It was your voice that told me I am more than that. The humans say: We are what we are. My father once said: We are what we make of ourselves. I think, for the first time, I understand that both are true.”

Ljosira regarded him pensively, a small quirk on her lips. “How are they both true?”, she wondered. He gave her an arch look.

“We are what we are, but we can strive to be more… better, for the ones we love. I will always have a little bit of doubt in me. But I have you, my light, to guide the way. You just keep doing that, and it will be alright.” She reached out to playfully pull a strand of his raven hair.

“What if I don’t know the way?” Her brows lifted questioningly.

“Then we’ll find a way to pass the time as mutual castaways.”, he answered in a roguish voice, making her laugh and blush, just a little.

“But first.”, Loki said, serious again. “We will repay Natta for all the courtesy she has shown us. I have grown quite tired of her games.” To that, Ljosira whole-heartedly agreed.
XXIII. Dragonbane

Chapter Notes

Ominous title, rightly so. With this chapter we enter into the third and last arc of Lightbringer, and if you have stayed with me for this long, you are in for some action and will see our couple journey beyond Asgard to meet some unusual allies, or rather... 'old friends'. But before that, there are still some surprises to come...

XXIII. Dragonbane

“Still no news?” Thor paced the length of the study impatiently, his long red cape billowing behind him. Ljosira sat in Loki’s favourite, elaborate armchair, still a little pale, although her bandages had been removed only three days after they’d been applied. Loki himself was absent. He spent a lot of time in the palace library, trying to figure out the mysterious purpose of the shard they had brought back from the mountains. The thing floated above a marble plinth now, revolving slowly. Thor and Ljosira looked at it with wary expressions. A faint noise seemed to arise from the metal – a constant, eerie murmur that made both of them uneasy just by listening to it.

“No. Another addition to this long string of troubling events. My father rarely leaves Yggdrasil. I can barely sense him… And what’s worse, my brother Vegr disappeared from my sight completely. He is alive, but other than that… I feel nothing. This has never happened before.”, she confessed bitterly. Thor circled the pedestal, shifting on the spot in a restless manner. He had already been approached by Heimdall about the same issue. The Gatekeeper’s vision was severely hindered now as his bond-partner had seemingly vanished, and he spent all of his time at the observatory, sifting through the fabric of the cosmos to find Vegr.

“Maybe it’s time for you to return to Yggdrasil and get some answers, Ljosira.”, he mused.

“I tried. The passage from Asgard is blocked, in the same way my sight is clouded. I could fly, but… Natta already sent her lackeys for this thing once. She will do it again. It cannot stay unguarded.”, she replied in a determined tone. Thor had to admit that she had a point. Asgard knew how to defend itself against almost every threat there is – but dragons were a different matter. Their magic had helped to create the realms in the first place. If they wished to trespass, nothing would stop them.

“I was never fond of books, but I dearly hope my brother finds something, anything, that can explain what this…”, he pointed at the shard. “…even is.”

Ljosira stood and walked to the pillar. She didn’t dare to get too close, for the energy inside made her queasy. A hideous creation, her instincts told her. Made to harm, violate.

“I hope so too.”, the dragon princess said.

Unconsciously, she traced the polished surface of the band on her left ring-finger. Loki had replaced his illusion with a very real ring, made of silver so pure it gleamed like a mirror in the light of day. The intricate setting cradled a small white opal. It shimmered in countless colours, reminding Ljosira of her dragon scales when the sun skipped over them. Compared to the lavish
luxury she had experienced during her time in Asgard – jewelled dresses, gemstone mosaics, gold lining pretty much everything – the ring was modest, artless. Yet in that unassuming simplicity lay its greatest beauty. She smiled at the memory of Loki sliding it on her finger. He had looked quite satisfied with his choice.

“You do know what that means?”, Thor’s voice brought her out of her musings. He wore an amused expression when she lifted her gaze to his.

“I’m sorry?”, she asked blankly. The crown prince tilted his head.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have… I mean, I wouldn’t have known if I hadn’t read up on some Midgardian customs… For the sake of – well, Jane might want to, someday…”, he fumbled, making her frown in exasperation.

“Thor.”, her voice held a warning undertone. He cleared his throat.

“On Midgard, it’s an old tradition to seal a betrothal that way. Left hand, fourth finger.”, he indicated the ring, which was exactly at that place. “I guess you are engaged, little ancient one. Unwittingly so. Congratulations are in order, I assume?” He had to bite back a laugh at the way she turned so vividly crimson, her face rivalled his cloak in colour.

“That rogue!”, she hissed, followed by a string of curses. Thor hid his grin behind one hand, coughing.

“Typical Loki. He knew you would be oblivious. I have to say, this was one of his most masterful tricks.”, the prince chuckled. “But… you will accept, right? Wait… do dragons even marry?” Ljosira huffed, her face conflicted between delight and vexation.

“We do have a special ceremony, when we choose our mate. But as you see, I am not the conventional type of dragon.” She lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers, unable to suppress a smile.

“I will accept. But only if he makes a proper proposal. And since this is a Midgardian tradition, it will have to be on Midgard.”, she announced then, craning her neck in an attempt to look dignified.

“Oh, he will love that. I’m starting to think you have a bit of a diabolical streak, my friend.”, Thor mumbled, sounding a little unsettled.

Her features took on a decidedly innocent expression, but her grey eyes danced with such keen whimsy, Thor was quite convinced Ljosira would handle his brother just fine.

Loki returned to his quarters long after nightfall with an impending headache and again, no revelations or answers to anything. It annoyed him to no end. He feared that they were running out of time. A whole week had gone by since the Darkflight attack on the outskirts of Asgard, and with every passing minute, the possibility that Natta would make another attempt to take the shard became more likely.

Doubtful that Ljosira’s barrier would hold forever, even more so if the witch of a dragon herself tried to break through it. Being thwarted once had surely not made her more agreeable. They had invited her wrath upon them by defeating her mortal champion and stealing the shard under her nose – which Loki had dubbed the Onyx Star since then. He knew not its purpose, but as he had explained to Thor and Ljosira, he was certain it wasn’t the only one. If the black holes had
appeared on Asgard and Alfheim, the conclusion that such shards had been created all around the nine realms would be the only logical one.

To add to the mystery, the crown prince of dragons had disappeared, and the king had left Yggdrasil. Most likely he’d gone searching for his son. A diversion, for sure. To distract from the attack against Ljosira, which had ended in a disaster they’d barely averted.

Loki found her in the study, sleeping on one of the plush settees. Small, luminous threads wound around her body in elegant patterns. She did this often, and the sight was familiar to him by now. Sometimes during the night, he would wake to the tingling sensation of her magic and find her in this state. Dragon dreams. She dreamed as mortals did, too. He knew because he could perceive the images if he concentrated on the life-bond.

But this was different. Her consciousness reached for that immense, incomprehensible construct, treading paths he could not follow – Yggdrasil. He suspected Ljosira communicated with the world tree – although the *how* of it went effectively over his head, and he was not the inane sort.

Seating himself on the edge of the settee, his hand came to rest on hers. Impossible to rouse her from dragon slumber when she was like this. But only a few moments later, the subtle currents of energy around her dissipated and she opened her eyes, her gaze clear.

“She knew.” Loki looked at her blankly. Ljosira straightened, rubbing her temple wearily. “Natta. She knew about the staff. She *wanted* the Chitauri to break their quarantine. Just as she wanted Malekith to succeed with the Aether.”

“But why?”, he wondered, frowning. Her shoulders slumped in resignation.

“I don’t know, my love.,” she sounded frustrated. “But if I had to guess… To distract from her true plans. Sometimes when Yggdrasil speaks to me, I see visions of the past… or possible futures. There is something else, but it’s blurry. She has an ally. A powerful one. I can’t see who it is… How I hate this treachery, these schemes within schemes…” A tired anger rang in her voice.

Loki detested to see her troubled like this. It reminded him of the responsibilities which rested heavily on her shoulders. Not one realm to protect, but all of them. Not one branch of magic to guard, but the entirety of Yggdrasil. It must be staggering. He remembered his conversation with Natta in the mountain village and felt a deep sting of guilt for never having told Ljosira about it. It would have been dangerous back then. But did it really make a difference now that Natta had attacked them anyway? Loki took a deep breath of courage.

“She offered me a deal. In the mountains.”, he confessed. Her eyes snapped to his, wide and unbelieving. With some difficulty, he explained to her what had passed between him and the Darkflight leader and watched the fury bloom on her face.

“That… treacherous bitch.”, Ljosira hissed. “Right under my nose. The insolence!”

“My refusal made her angry. She threatened me that if I told anyone, there would be hell to pay…” But he had to stop speaking, because the air turned heavy with Ljosira’s wrath. Breathing became harder as her magic pressed down on his lungs.

“It’s impossible to give a dragon’s full powers to a mortal! She tricked you, the deceitful wench! Any mortal would simply perish from holding such an amount of energy in their bodies. She’s going to pay for this insult. Nobody threatens my mate.” Her voice had deepened to an angry snarl.

“My light…”, Loki managed against the might of her outburst. “Your anger is painful –“ His
choked plea seemed to snap her out of it. The ugly grimace melted away from her face at once and she relented, going still.

“I’m so sorry…”, she said, reaching for him. He wrapped an arm around her soothingly. “I am proud of you that you refused her outright.” Her praise left him baffled and momentarily speechless.

“You know that you already are a great sorcerer, don’t you?”, Ljosira continued quietly. She cocked her head in that distinct fashion he was by now very familiar with.

“I do alright.”, Loki attempted to flirt with humbleness, which made her eyes glitter humorously.

“Is someone being snarky? You are very bad at false modesty.”, she retorted and slipped from his hold all of a sudden, circling the neat furniture with light steps. Throwing him a sultry kind of grin, her hand went to the ring on her finger.

“After all, you tricked a dragon into betrothal! Maybe I should take this off until you make a real proposal? How do the humans do it – ah, they get down on one knee, I think.” Damn her, she was taunting him. And succeeding. Any thought on continuing the discussion from before evaporated at the outlook of playing this wonderfully wicked game with her.

“You are pushing your luck, woman.”, Loki replied, his voice turning into the dark, smooth one that made her skin prickle. “I thought you have no use for mockery? Don’t you dare take it off!”, he warned.

“Or else…?”, Ljosira mused innocently, fiddling with the silver band. And then he moved quicker than a pouncing cat. With two broad steps he was upon her, strong arms pulling her over the back of the plush sofa. She found herself pinned beneath a very warm, very hard male body. The sensation sent a thrill of anticipation through her. He loomed above, the green of his eyes like fiery arcane embers.

“I think I have to show you what happens when you make me chase you down.”, Loki whispered as one of his skilful hands snaked its way beneath the layers of fabric, sliding up the silky skin of her thigh.

“Here?”, she breathed in a fascinated tone that made him smile devilishly.

“Yes, here.”, he asserted. “So every time you sit here after tonight, you will only think of me, and how it feels when I’m inside you, claiming you as mine.” As he spoke those sensual words, she let out a gasp and her hips lifted in encouragement to his touch.

“Am I supposed to protest now?”, Ljosira asked throatily. “It’s been weeks… You refused to touch me until my wounds were healed. I need you. Go on, have it your way. I will never deny you.” The breath caught in his throat when she pressed herself keenly against him, her legs locking around his waist. The proof of his desire seemed to sear itself through the clothes separating them, down to the very skin.

“Gods, I love it when you’re blunt.”, Loki said before his mouth came down on hers in a fierce kiss. And then he proceeded to show her exactly what he meant, seducing her so thoroughly that the entire world narrowed until she saw only him.

A man who could be infuriating and irascible, aloof like a shadow hiding in plain sight, if he chose to. But also protective and passionate, capable of deep devotion. She felt it in their ardent joining, a thing both delicate and unstoppable in its force. Her blood was honey, her heart danced in unison
with his.

Again and again, he turned to her that night, as if he would never have enough, never tire of her sighs and gasps and delightful shudders, of the rhythmic hum within the life-bond as it resonated with the waves of her longing. And she knew no shame in admitting to herself that she felt exactly the same.

Ljosira awoke with a jolt to utter darkness, shooting bolt upright on the bed. Shivers crept down her spine like thousands of tiny ants. Unease seeped into her, a feeling of horrible foreboding. It should not have been so dark. Through the open curtains, she saw the inky sky outside, but her instinct told her dawn should have come long ago. No stars, no single point of light in Yggdrasil’s mighty branch looked back at her. All was obscured by blackness. She fumbled frantically for Loki. The solid feeling of his sleeping body beside her dampened the panic, a little.

“What is it?”, she said into the silence. Loki stirred in an instant.

“What is it?”, he asked hoarsely, shifting to sit up. “Why is it so dark?” With one flick of her wrist, Ljosira threw a glowing white orb into the middle of the bedroom. It illuminated the gloom, casting eerie shadows onto her stricken features as she turned to him.

“She’s coming. Ah – “, before she could go on, a bolt of pain speared through her temple, making her clench her teeth. Loki caught her shoulders and steadied her, but she shook her head and pointed at the door to the study.

“The shard. It’s the shard. It’s… pulsing.” He cursed colourfully, jumping from the bed, not even bothering to get dressed – he simply waved his hand and his clothes assembled themselves around him. Ljosira staggered a little as she hastily threw on her discarded robe, then followed him into the study. They both stopped short at the sight. The Onyx Star still hovered above its plinth, but it undulated with seething energy now, ejecting violent arcs every few seconds. Loki hurried to the balcony and searched the grounds for anything unusual. The darkness made it all the more difficult to see, but he caught shadowy figures moving across the grand plaza towards the entrance. When he looked at Ljosira, he saw she already knew by the silver glow of her eyes. She stepped back and began to cast a spell, hands moving restlessly.

“Thor is on his way to meet them. Go to him. I will contain this thing. Stall her as long as you can, my love.”, she ordered him in a stern voice, to which he gave one curt nod. “Be careful.”, she added softly. Her fingers described a complex little gesture and conjured a ball of light that followed him outside.

Where he was greeted by chaos. The hallways were alive with guards struggling to grope their way through the darkness, since no torch or magical device seemed to work against the all-enveloping shade. Loki barked orders at them as he hurried by, told them to snap out of it, concentrate, don’t let the evil magic blindfold them. Ljosira’s guiding spell seemed to lift a little of the dark aura, and soon dozens of men followed him through the corridors, weapons at the ready.

“Loki!”, Thor called out at the grand staircase which led out of the palace into the plaza. Mjölnir was in his hand, alight with small currents of lightning. He had used it to illuminate his way. Odin came into view behind him, holding Gungnir like a golden torch. As did Heimdall, his features chiselled from stone, his great two-handed sword ready for battle in his hands. Those weapons, Loki knew, had been imbued with the fire of Lightbringers.
“Natta is coming to take the shard, and it doesn’t look like Elding is going to aid us right now.”, 
Loki stated bitterly as they rushed down the stairs. The guard lined up protectively at the flanks. 
Thor threw him a troubled look.

“I still can barely see beyond Asgard. We are on our own for now.”, Heimdall confirmed, his 
whole posture tense.

“Where’s Ljosira?”, Thor demanded.

“She is trying to contain the Onyx Star. It started pulsing with dark energy just now. That’s how 
we knew.”, came his brother’s answer.

“Natta cannot mean to forcefully barge into Asgard, plunging all of it into shadow! It would 
violate the peace treaty and mean outright war.”, Odin sounded implacable.

“I am afraid that is exactly what she wants, father.”, Thor uttered in a grim voice. When they strode 
into the plaza, everything came to a sudden halt at the sight before them.

Natta walked along the wide, gold-tiled ground in her mortal form. She looked exactly the same as 
Loki remembered her from the trial and their conversation. Wild mane of raven hair and heavily 
liided, sinister eyes. Long black dress clinging tightly to her shape, her stride filled with a sinuous 
grace. A snake’s slither. A dozen shadowy figures walked behind her. Each had one arm raised to 
the indigo sky. They were maintaining some sort of spell on a black shape floating above their 
heads. Loki could not make out what it was.

“Allfather!”, Natta called out fondly, raising her arms in a deceptively warm welcome. Odin and 
Thor stiffened, while Loki hissed in menace. The guards had already picked up on the danger, 
forming a rigid half-circle around the royal family to block the entrance to the palace.

“Why, you don’t look happy to see me.”, the Darkflight leader purred, smiling in a way that could 
have frozen blood. Heimdall’s golden eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Natta, ancient dragon of shadow. Your brethren’s magic disrupts my home and blackens my 
peaceful skies. You bring darkness to this land of light. I have to assume that your visit is not a 
peaceful one.”, Odin answered evenly, stepping forward. Thor and Loki took their places at either 
of his sides.

“Oh, but I don’t think I am breaking any rules by just being here, in this mortal form. No draconic 
law forbids me from visiting the realms, as far as I know.”

Natta assumed such a casual stance in the face of three supposed gods and dozens of elite warriors, 
one could have thought she was having a nonchalant chat with a dear friend. Yet every instinct in 
Loki clamoured that she must not be underestimated. Danger cloaked her like a thick winter 
mantle. The little sphere of light above his shoulder swerved in agitation.

“You say that, but you already broke the law by putting your black holes onto the realms to siphon 
from the fabric which holds them together. You are a thief! You stole from Yggdrasil’s creations.”, 
Heimdall accused her. Anger had entered his voice, the grip around his sword tightening.

“Hmmm. That is quite the accusation you throw out, Gatekeeper. Do you have proof, I wonder?”, 
the Darkflight dragon queried silkily.

“Of course we do!”, Thor interjected in a temper. “We uncovered one of your machinations and 
hold the evidence that will bring you to trial before Elding! And my brother and I witnessed first-
hand the attacks of your lackeys!”
“Is that so?”, Natta mused, unperturbed. “I have only come to take what is mine.”

She lifted a hand and Loki felt a sudden surge of panic through the life-bond. The light-companion Ljosira had conjured evanesced into feeble specs and the next moment, something broke through the palace walls with a loud bang. The Onyx Star soared, right into Natta’s open palm.

“Tired of your games!”, Thor yelled, unable to contain his fury any longer. Loki lunged to hold him back, but it was too late. He threw Mjölnir directly at Natta. She moved faster than lightning, her free hand shooting up.

There was an ear-splitting, metallic clash as Mjölnir collided with something solid, and then the hammer was smashed aside. It crashed into the ground, tearing up the marble and gold brutally. Every Asgardian stared, their faces blank. Natta sighed as if she found the whole situation tiresome.

“I had really wished to do this without violence, but your sons are beginning to annoy me.” She took the shard gently between two fingers and lifted the item she had used to deflect Mjölnir. It was a spearhead of the same metal as the Onyx Star, a black so deep it distorted even the little light that remained.

“Look who decided to join us, and right on time.”, Natta exclaimed. Loki turned to see Ljosira flying down the stairs, her face flushed with insult and wrath.

“Witch!”, she flung at Natta, who merely laughed and fitted the Onyx Star into a socket exactly its shape, right at the heart of the spearhead. The last puzzle-piece. Loki understood then. She had forged shards on every one of the Nine Realms, and this one had been the core of it, the one she needed to complete the weapon.

The moment the Onyx Star slid into place, the weapon erupted with a violent pulse. Every soldier was thrown off their feet while the little group in the centre struggled to remain standing. Loki, Heimdall and Ljosira reacted almost simultaneously. Together, they raised a shield against the fierce currents that marked the hideous birth ritual. In Natta’s hands, the spear’s handle formed from sizzling shadows, and she took it with a satisfied smile on her face.

“Rejoice, people of Asgard! You shall witness an event never seen before. The time of light is drawing to an end. I am sure you shall learn to love the long night. I have done what none have managed in thousands and thousands of years!”, she chanted as the pulses slowly died down. Absolute silence fell, every eye turned to the malevolent spear she now raised high above her head. The figures behind her waved their arms as if in reaction to a hidden cue, and the dark shape they held suspended above floated gracefully forward until it hovered right in front of Natta.

“Behold Dragonbane!”, Natta cried triumphantly. All of her entourage threw off their hoods in unison and Loki knew only horror when he felt the dragons leave their mortal bodies behind, taking to the sky as they manifested in their true forms. The force of their magic was staggering. Wings of nether sliced the air, their beamless obsidian bodies almost invisible against the blackness of the unnatural night. The obscure concealment drained away from the shape before Natta, revealing what she had kept hidden all this time.

“No –“, Heimdall whispered.

Ljosira’s cry drowned out the rising discord of sounds. It was filled with anguish Loki had hoped never to experience. Because Natta’s first victim was none other than the crown prince of dragons, Vegr.
XXIV. Night of Long Fangs

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the kudos! <3 I hope you're not bored yet!
The title of this chapter is a reference to The Witcher 3 - Blood and Wine, where the Night of Long Fangs was the night when a whole city was beset by vampires. The soundtrack has a great track with the name Night of Long Fangs, and I listened to it a lot when I wrote the following events. The entire scene was incredibly difficult to write and I really hope it came out alright. Action scenes are among my weaknesses, but the last third of Lightbringer has quite a few of them. It's good practice, I guess :D
- Have fun reading what I hope is an intense and epic battle!

XXIV. Night of Long Fangs

Ljosira lost her temper. Loki barely managed to catch her before she could lunge at Natta. He had to bodily hold her back, and even with his arms like steel bands around her, she squirmed against his grip like a wild animal.

“Ljosira, no! It’s too dangerous –“, he tried desperately to calm her.

“Release him!”, the dragon princess screamed, blind to all else around her. “Vegr! Vegr, wake up!” But her brother did not stir at her frantic calls. Mjölnir soared back into Thor’s hand. He and Heimdall both assumed battle-stances. The gatekeeper’s face was contorted into a furious grimace. Odin himself raised Gungnir, his features grim and unforgiving.

“It’s useless.”, Natta spoke softly, yet still it resonated like a shout in the graveyard silence which had fallen over the plaza. And then she struck her unholy spear straight downward. The Lightbringer’s mortal body lit up in a flickering rainbow of colors. Loki saw the shield enchantments flare to protect him, but the spear-tip tore through them mercilessly.

Natta drove Dragonbane right into Vegr’s heart. Rich red blood gushed forth from the wound, followed by a torrent of pure light. The dark metal absorbed it all, siphoning the dragon’s life-force from him, sapping his soul. Somewhere above Asgard, a sky-shattering roar answered the scream that tore from the throat of the dragon prince. Another followed, and then another, until Loki could hear nothing but the chorus of outraged dragon cries.

The heavens split wide open as the Lightbringers plunged through the blanket of shadow. Their presence lifted some of the darkness until all of Asgard seemed flooded by a strange twilight, neither night nor day. The circling Darkflight intercepted their opponents’ descent on Asgard, and soon blurs of white and black were spiralling above, engaged in a brutal war. Their angry shrieks were painful to the ear.

Vegr fell to the ground in a lifeless heap, his body empty, and Natta raised Dragonbane, a hideous smile playing around her lips. The weapon brimmed with power, dark energy surging around it. Loki could feel the dragon soul trapped within the metal, almost hear the agonized wails of the immortal creature, now bound to Natta’s will.
Thor and Heimdall both charged in unison, hammer and sword striking out at the Darkflight leader. Ljosira went slack in Loki’s arms like a doll. The next moment, everything drowned in the nova of her transformation. Thunderous screeches rent the air, crashes erupted all around the plaza.

When Loki regained his vision, he saw a great black shape rise from a cloud of dust, her wings a night sky forsaken by stars. Ancient runes glowed on her spiked horns. At the centre of her forehead, there gleamed Dragonbane, fused into her skull as a gemstone into a crown.

Two towers had crumbled entirely in the collateral damage, but Natta freed herself from the rubble, slender and elegant like a winding snake. Before she could take to the sky, a giant white head broke from the ruins. Ljosira’s jaws closed around the sinuous black tail and she bodily flung the Darkflight leader aside. Natta smashed into a metal statue, bearing the entire thing to the ground with her.

“By the gods, what do we do?!”, Thor yelled above the clamour of battle. His hammer clashed with the head of a black dragon who’d landed on the vandalized plaza and was advancing on them quickly.

Beside him, Heimdall leaned heavily onto his sword, grasping his face with one hand as though he’d been wounded. Loki knew that the gatekeeper endured his bond-partner’s agony, felt the full force of such a substantial loss now.

Vegr might not be dead yet, but whatever Dragonbane had done to him, it must have been unimaginably painful to have the soul sheared away from the body by that abominable spear. Sundered and confined into the horrible weapon, he suffered now, helpless as Natta used his power without mercy.

“Mann the cannons! Shoot the Darkflight from the sky!”, Odin barked orders to the guards.

Some of them ran into the palace while others readied their spears. More black dragons landed in the streets between the golden towers and beautiful houses, uncaring that their wings and immense bodies toppled buildings and devastated homes.

Onyx fire seared above the people’s heads. They ran in fear, blind and desperate to escape. Ljosira had freed herself from the tons of stone, but her movements were hindered by the fleeing Asgardians everywhere around her. She spread her wings to shelter the innocent from the rain of stone and glass. Her scream rang on and on like a giant bell. It was answered by a dozen others, one voice carrying over all noise.

Loki looked up to see the largest dragon he would ever come to set eyes on. His body shimmered like the dawn of a new day as he streaked from the gloomy clouds towards Asgard. The sensation of his magic was almost too much to bear for a mind sensitive to sorcery – Loki staggered beneath the onslaught of the dragon king’s rage.

“Elding!”, Heimdall called, straightening out of his crouched posture. The great dragon’s appearance seemed to bolster the soldiers with new strength. They lined up and began throwing spears at the black invaders wreaking havoc on their homeland. Some even charged boldly into the fray with their swords raised.

“To battle!”, Thor cried, throwing his hammer without preamble. It went flying and collided with a Darkflight’s chest. The violent thunder unleashed unto the dragon sent it to the ground in a heap.

Loki could not concentrate under the tidal wave of magical energy. It was just too much. Too many creatures of ungraspable power in one place, and none of them seemed to care anymore. The
Lightbringers were in a mad frenzy because their crown prince had been taken from them. They would fight to the death now to avenge their brother.

He had thought he’d known wrath in all of its many shapes, but he had never felt the collective fury of dozens of immortal beings. It was an unstoppable inferno, a wheel of fire which rolled over everything in its wake. And even this, he knew, had been part of Natta’s plan. She’d wanted the Lightbringers to throw all caution to the wind, had lured them here by her atrocious act so they would make Asgard into a battlefield between the two dragon clans.

The realm would not survive this raw amassing of magical forces. Elding crashed down on Natta just as she tried once again to take flight, while a Darkflight vulture swooped in to attack Ljosira. Loki barely sidestepped some flying rubble. A guard flew past him and he saw Thor and Heimdall, engaged into a desperate skirmish with the dragon they had managed to wound before.

Destruction reigned everywhere. Beams of fire set countless buildings afame, the entire city was engulfed in clouds of smoke and dust. Residents ran screaming through the ruined streets. Ashes rained from the sky. Loki saw Elding tower above the spires, the white-hot flames shooting from his mouth illuminating the eternal night. A petrifying beauty, to watch his eight-horned head rear up as he struck down his enemies.

Natta darted around him like an elusive shadow, intangible and much quicker than the bulky dragon king, who had difficulty moving within the restrictive spaces of the city. She swiped and bit, sending out bolts of devastating energy from the weapon on her brow. Her claws were gleaming onyx scythes slashing audibly through the air. And then another spire fell, drowning everything in impervious dust.

In all the chaos, it only took mere minutes for the battle to become so confusing that Loki lost sight of Thor and Ljosira. He Shouldered the limp body and struggled to find his way through the wreckage to the last place where he’d seen her.

“Ljosira!”, he yelled, desperately. They could not get separated! He had to talk some sense into her before this escalated even further, although he had little idea how to manage that. But if the fighting went on, Asgard would be completely destroyed.

The ground rumbled beneath his feet and he could feel the very fabric that held the realm together quiver, splinter. Groping his way onward, he directed the terrified people to flee into the palace halls if they could. Doubtful they would be safe there for long, yet it was the only thing he could do to help them.

Out of nowhere, a giant onyx tail lashed through the fog of war. It sliced the wall behind him clean in half, and the building came tumbling down in a deafening crash. Loki could not evade it. It would crush him to a pulp –

A wing stretched out above his head just as he wrapped himself around the slender body he carried to shield it. He was buried beneath the leathery mass, but it protected him from the bulk of the flying rubble and metal. A pained screech tore through his heart, making magic spill from his hands like a riptide. Pieces of the crumbled tower went flying as he wiggled free.

“My light!”, Loki cried out. Ljosira managed to pull her wing from the wreckage with his help. Her neck wound in a sheltering circle around him, her great head coming into view. Jaws bloodied, eyes fierce and glinting with savage fury. For a maddening instant, he thought she would attack him. He’d never seen her like that before. She was not violent by nature, none of her clan were. But they had been driven to the limits of their patience and shoved over the edge by the mutilation of their crown prince.
“Are you hurt, my love?”, her voice spoke into his thoughts.

“Never mind me! Here, you need this to be safe.”, he cut her short, climbing onto her neck to fasten strands of her mane around her mortal body. He cast several spells to strengthen the knots.

“My brother suffers unspeakable torment. I can feel his pain as if the spear had been driven through my heart.” She sounded broken, her sorrow like thorns to tender flesh.

“We need to stop this, Ljosira – Asgard can’t take much more of this.”, Loki urged her, slipping to the ground again. The iridescent scales that covered her whole body were dirty and soiled with blood from several smaller claw marks and bites. He pressed himself against the side of her face, wiping the filth from her scales with both hands. It was useless of course, but he had to make a frantic effort to calm her through this gentle gesture.

“I don’t know how. I don’t.”, she squeezed her eyes shut, lip curling into a tortured snarl.

Loki felt the attack before he saw or heard it. A rush of air heralding the approach of something large. The next he knew, Ljosira flung out her front leg and he was pretty much slapped aside. His body soared helplessly through the air and he glimpsed an obsidian mass entangled with a faded white one, before he landed in a mound of glass shards. And still, within all the chaos, Ljosira managed to drape her wing over him as a giant boulder fell from the sky. He huddled into a tiny ball as he’d done so many times as a child. Darkness fell around him.

And then, Loki felt a surge of magical energy, so tremendous that he feared his head might split. It was neither light nor shadow. Instead, it descended on the realm like a silk sheet, enveloping all of Asgard beneath its suffocating force. This is the end, he thought bitterly, unable even to take a breath. He heard one last, incensed dragon roar and thought it might have been Natta. Then it was silent.

Countless light-years away, within the realm of humanity which the Aesir called Midgard, a darkness crept up on the shining beacon in the skies above. It slid slowly into place, overshadowing the sun. The city of New York was one of the greatest settlements ever built by humans, filled to bursting with people. Once, they had walked beneath the night sky and looked up to it for hours, watching in awe as the stars wandered across the endless inky dome. Much time had passed since those childhood days of humanity, so much that most people had forgotten the stories told by the constellations, the legends of magic, the dancing dragons between the clouds.

Pragmatics now, they were grounded firmly to the earth beneath their feet, their eyes fixated onto the things close to them rather than the vast, wondrous cosmos enveloping their world. Most, but not all. Sometimes a little girl or boy would dream of gleaming wings and rainbow scales in the sunlight, like rows and rows of twinkling gemstones. They would wake, excited and hopeful, to gaze out their windows, expecting to see a creature of myth streaking by above their homes.

On the upmost level of the elegant manor house at 177A Bleecker Street, a man gazed through a circular window adorned with a mystical symbol. He had never been a particularly dreamy child, but had preferred books on science instead. Absorbing hundreds of pages on medicine, chemistry, neurobiology the way others drew air into their lungs – and never forgetting a single thing he had
He had come a long way, from ambition bordering on downright arrogance to learning – not always the easy way – that the world was much stranger, and much more complicated than he had assumed. Rubbing his hands to calm the tremble, he contemplated that the most important lessons were usually the ones hardest to accept. It isn’t about you. Well, she had been right, as always. Would that he had her wisdom to guide him through what lay ahead.

“You look troubled.”, a heavily accented voice spoke behind him. Stephen Strange turned around, or rather hovered around, since he levitated several feet above the ground to have a better view of the sky. Wong walked across the meticulously polished parquet floor. His almond-shaped eyes darted to the window and then back to Strange, his ageless features as so often quite stoic.

“Have you seen the sky?” Strange landed on the ground gracefully, the Cloak of Levitation floating around him in a docile manner. Fickle thing. It still sometimes did whatever it wanted, but he was getting the hang of it. Wong nodded.

“Yes, it is why I came. It’s the same in Kamar-Taj, Hong Kong, London. I believe all of Earth is experiencing this total eclipse right now.”

“Impossible. A total eclipse would be seen on a small part of the world, never on all of it. And besides, there are none scheduled until –”, Strange argued, but the librarian interrupted him.

“Because it’s not a natural occurrence. Something is very wrong.”

“Oh, good. Things aren’t just plain wrong anymore, they have to be very wrong.”, Strange commented acerbically. In a more serious tone, he added: “I can’t sense any intruders. But it feels like everything is… muted, disrupted somehow.”

“I feel it too. The intricate fabric of magic is out of balance. I fear something terrible is happening to its guardians.”, Wong mused, lifting his hand to shield his eyes as he gazed at the ring of light in the sky, and the shadow which darkened it.

“I thought we were the guardians of magic.”, Strange said, frowning. Wong sighed in a distinctly patronizing way.

“On Earth, we are. But we are not the apex sorcerers. Have you read The Rise of Agamotto? It was written by his apprentice, supposedly. Many pieces of it are missing, but there is some wisdom to be learned from that book.”

“I may have… skipped that one. I’ve been meaning to catch up on my reading, but the artefacts were acting up and I had to write some checks for the repairs… You know how it is…”, Strange articulated. Wong just looked at him blankly. It seemed he did not know ‘how it is’, being the librarian and all. Skipping over books was likely a sacrilege to him. “Just tell me what it says, will you?”

“Fine. We use Eldritch magic for our shields and portals and most of our spells. It is based on light, the purest form of energy, conjured by drawing upon our astral connection to the greater construct of the universe.”, Wong explained, making the other man huff in exasperation.

“Yes, yes, it’s the first lesson we ever learn. Agamotto discovered how to tap into the astral nexus, other dimensions… and so forth. I am not some half-baked apprentice anymore, you know.”, Strange pointed out.

“Agamotto did not discover Eldritch magic. He was taught how to use it, by the master of masters,
an entity which does not merely know it down to the core, but is magic, made manifest. Even after everything you have seen, you have a rational mind which bristles at the thought of legends being true unless you have laid eyes on them.”

“So, who… or what was this master?”, Strange wondered, intrigued. Wong gazed into the distance, an almost boyish fascination on his face.

“The book only mentions him as ‘the Lightbringer’. As for what he was, or rather still is… there are many names, and everywhere across the world people remember them, but they don’t believe. So little imagination these days. Where I come from, we call them long. Arach, ryu, dreki, Drache. Dragons, my friend. Dragons guard magic.” Stephen Strange, the Master of the New York Sanctum of the Mystic Arts, just stared at him.

“They have not been seen for a thousand years. But I have a feeling the time of their absence has come to an end. You should read up on them as long as you still can. If you are to be the Sorcerer Supreme, you will have to know how to palaver with dragons and not be eaten alive in the process.” Wong let out a barking laugh, as though he found the stricken expression on his sorcerer fellow’s face incredibly amusing.
XXV. Stopper of Clocks

I'm still getting kudos, thank you for every single one! <3 <3 I'm so happy the story is progressing into its final stages! :) I like this chapter, it's one of my favourites! The scenery in the first part just turned out great - and I finally get to write the Midgard storyline and bring in a few Avengers characters - which means a loooot of banter. Because they bicker all the time :D I hope it makes an interesting and fun read!

XXV. Stopper of Clocks

Everything stood still. From one moment to the next, the world had gone motionless. After the clamour of combat, the cacophony of screams and roars and destruction, the silence was a deafening, heavy blanket. Every soldier had stopped in his tracks. Halted mid-step or right after throwing a spear, the weapons just hovering in the air while their faces were contorted in perpetual fury, fear, vindication. Piles of rubble which had been falling a second ago now floated docilely above. Shattered glass domes, their countless shards twinkling in a kaleidoscope of colours.

The dragons too were utterly frozen in the middle of their terrible battle. They loomed among the chaos as the most life-like statues ever made, jaws wide open and mighty wings spread, overshadowing the tiny figures at their giant clawed feet. Their dragon fire hung in the air, streaks of pure shadow or bright-white light. The dust settled upon the figures in a sheet of grey and brown, making them look like curiosities inside an ancient manor, left unattended for ages. Time had stopped. It had become rigid, plunged into a solid state which allowed no flow into either direction. Nothing moved. Nothing, except…

With tremendous effort, Loki pushed the boulder which had almost crushed him out of the way. Ljosira’s wing had protected him from the worst of the wreckage, but she had taken far too many hits of the falling rubble. The Lightbringer’s body lay still between debris and casualties, her gleaming white scales dulled and murky. A Darkflight dragon was buried beneath her, jaws slack and unseeing eyes staring to the heavens.

Loki climbed the obstacles with feline swiftness to reach her head, frantically assuring himself that she was still alive. Shuddering breaths made her ribcage expand and deflate. The fringed spikes on her spine rippled.

“Ljosira!”, he called, sliding down the crumbled side of a wall and nearly colliding with the side of her face. “Ljosira, are you alright? Everything –“ But he never finished his sentence.

The sky suddenly split in two, and when Loki looked up, he saw the winged shape of a dragon above. He had seen Lightbringers, and Darkflight. This one belonged to neither. This being was made of flickering void and elusive arcane energy, fading in and out of reality with every blink of the eye. Indigo scales covered his entire body, the deep violet of his leathery wings almost transparent, ethereal. A creature who both existed and yet not, lived and yet not, forever oscillating between life and death.
Voidwalker. Loki understood without doubt why this particular dragon-clan rarely ever appeared to mortals. Lesser minds would not bear to look at them. They made a terrifying sight, somehow alien to all which drew breath and harboured a beating heart to flush the blood through its veins.

“Andlát.”, Ljosira spoke into his mind, laced with pain and sorrow.

“Princess of Dragons. Ragnarok, the end of days is upon this land.”, the Voidwalker’s voice was just as unsettling as Loki remembered it from the Council meeting. It resonated inside his head, rattling against his skull. Ragnarok?! It couldn’t be! This was not how the prophesy had foretold the end of Asgard. And besides, such windy myths weren’t supposed to come true anyway.

“That is impossible!”, Ljosira answered, shocked.

“And yet it is so. Natta will destroy Asgard if you do not stop her. I have halted time in this realm. Within the great dark beyond, I see many futures and pathways. This one would lead to unmeasurable disaster for all children of Yggdrasil. You have to prevent it.” Ljosira lifted her head slowly, as though it took all of her strength. Loose pieces of rubble rained down and scattered around her. Loki merely stared at the Voidwalker’s hulking silhouette, suspended above Asgard.

“How?”, Ljosira sounded hopeless.

“You need to go back in time. Even a Voidwalker’s grasp on time is limited, and right now we need our powers to keep this battle from escalating further. Too much unrestrained magic has been unleashed. I dare not send you back myself. You have to travel to Midgard.”

“What?!”, Loki and Ljosira both exclaimed with one voice. Andlát’s wings flapped steadily as he gazed down on them with fathomless, blind eyes.

“Find the Wizard. Time is, as always, short and fickle. The Wizard holds a powerful stone which can send you back. But that will not be enough. Seeking to prevent Natta from forging Dragonbane will disrupt every time-line. It is not the right way. You also need the help of the Outsider.”, Andlát explained, although Loki understood very little of it. He had never heard either of a Wizard or an Outsider on Midgard. But Ljosira seemed to know at least one of them.

“The Outsider? But he vanished thousands of years ago! And he cannot be trusted! How could he even -“, but the other dragon cut her short.

“No time. He will know what to do! Find these two and your path will become clear. Now go! Your presence here makes it near impossible for me to maintain the spell around Asgard.”, he said harshly. Ljosira looked like she wanted to argue, but then gave one decisive nod and lowered her head to the ground.

“Climb up, my love. We have to be swift.”, she ordered. Loki obeyed, settling himself on her long neck, musing distractedly that he was about to become a regular dragon rider. Her mortal body lay securely between the silver strands of her mane, protected by the crown of ivory horns. She shook out her mighty wings, dispersing powdery clouds into all directions.

“What about Thor and your father, and Odin? We are leaving them behind?” Not so long ago, the notion would not have troubled him much. But things were different now. His brother was some way off, suspended in the middle of a lunge, Mjölnir held high in his hand. Only feet away from a dragon’s glistening fangs.

“We are going to save them, Loki. We will return. Once we find a way to defeat Natta, for good.”, her telepathic projection rang with undiluted ire.
“Thank you, Andlát.” And then she pushed herself off the ground with her wings battering the air so fiercely, everything drowned in a vortex of dust. They rose in rapid circles and Loki could hear nothing but the rush of the wind around them as Ljosira climbed into the sky like a shooting star. He wrapped his arms around her horns, holding on to her for dear life. The half-ruined Asgard grew smaller below, until it turned into a shining golden coin.

Yggdrasil spread out before them, its star-braided branches enveloping the realms in a gentle embrace. Yet through Ljosira, Loki could sense the world tree’s weeping sorrow for the violence wrought between her children. Far up, he glimpsed Life-Binders tirelessly circling around the crown, struggling to infuse the tree with their invigorating fire. Bright green dots scintillating like emeralds. They worked without relent to stabilize the branches and keep the erratic imbalance under control. Ljosira soared past them, plunging towards the azure and green pearl of Midgard.

“This will be uncomfortable. Close your eyes.”, she instructed Loki. Her entire concentration went into flying at breakneck speed, but her agitation about the battle was such that he felt it like barbed wire cutting into his flesh. Doing as he’d been told, he closed his eyes. A moment later, Ljosira did something. He knew not what, but suddenly they were plummeting down in such a foolhardy swoop that his stomach turned. Breathing was impossible, not that there was any air left to breathe at all.

In a streak of lunacy, Loki opened his eyes again. He and Ljosira flew on a rainbow current of light which flashed in every imaginable colour. A Bifröst. Or something very similar to it, only even faster and charged to the brim with cosmic energy. It catapulted them through the vast distance between the worlds in mere seconds. He had been used to the sensation of travelling along the Bifröst, but this was ten times that speed, the pressure of raw magic near unbearable. He wanted to vomit, and at the same time the overstimulation elicited an insane urge to laugh. Uncomfortable indeed.

“I told you to close your eyes, madman!”, Ljosira battered his mind with her ear-splitting yell. Or was it the rush of the current? He couldn’t say. A moment later, it suddenly waned and stopped entirely as they crossed the border to Midgard. From blinding light to utter darkness to blue skies in a matter of heartbeats. Not many mortals would have even survived such a journey.

Loki breathed in the cool air carrying the scent of sea-water. The rippling blue ocean spread out below and Ljosira descended until he could see the blurred reflection of her body upon the glittering waves. She glided elegantly on the wind, dropping so low her underside almost skimmed the water.

Several times, she lowered her head and plunged her snout in, splattering sea-spray everywhere. He realized that she cleaned the dust and grime from her scales in this way, without having to slow down much. Only that he was equally drenched by her little grooming ritual. After a while of this, she climbed upward again, letting the breeze dry her scales and mane.

Loki looked up into the sky, where Midgard’s sun stood at its zenith. Obscured by a dark disk, the life-sustaining star had lost a great deal of her luminosity. The eclipse served as an awful reminder how the Lightbringers were caught up in a terrible battle right now, unable to maintain their duty to shed light upon all realms.

“Yes, darkness is creeping into this land.”, Ljosira said as though she had read his thoughts. “My presence here holds it at bay, but the other realms are not as lucky. They now live in the long night.” He felt her pain through their connection and crouched between the flowing silver strands
to touch the smooth scales on her nape. The bond was strong here, a gushing river close to the
centre of her consciousness.

“Ljosira.”, Loki sent this one thought to her. The calling of her name, together with an earnest
attempt at reassurance as he had rarely managed to express towards another person. A shiver went
along her spine and her flight became a little more confident, resolute.

“I know. I know. I just can’t… think about it right now.”, she answered his wordless appeal. He
could not say ‘Everything will be alright.’, not even in his thoughts. It just was not like him, to
make such boldly optimistic statements. But he could reassure her that he would do anything in his
power to make things right again.

“Where are you taking us, my light?”; he then asked after a long silence. She made a sound which
sounded very close to a sigh.

“I thought… The ones who opposed you back during the Chitauri invasion. They are protectors of
Midgard, yes? They might know the Wizard.”

Loki groaned inwardly. The Avengers. Great. That plan wore the label ‘The enemy of my enemy is
my friend’ on it so obviously, it almost seemed sardonic. He deliberated if his ‘old friends’ would
rather shoot, maim or behead him on sight. He definitely did not want to meet the green brute
again, the Hulk. And the other one, the arrogant asshole who thought the sun shone out of his
every orifice. What a delightful outlook.

“You told me of this one man who had a tower in a silver city? What was he called again? Steel?”,
Ljosira pondered. Yes, exactly that one.


“Steel is better for weapons than iron. Is he made of iron?”; she inquired further, interested.

“No, he wears this sort of armour… or rather suit. He will be so happy to see me. I look forward to
it with the same joy as to a hole in the head.”, he grumbled sullenly.

“The Man of Iron it is. Sounds rather uncomfortable. And we have no choice. Worry not. You have
me to protect you, trickster.”, she placated. It did not quite comfort him.

“I am not entirely sure how the Midgardians will react to you… They might attack. I hope to speak
to Stark before they can call in the cavalry. We should be careful.”, said Loki, his voice
apprehensive.

“Nonsense! They have seen dragons before. We have visited the humans only a millennium ago.
Surely they will be overjoyed to see me –“ He cleared his throat and interrupted her, trying hard to
be sensible about it, because he could feel that she yearned for any kind of solace to distract herself
from the disaster on Asgard.

“Ljosira, darling, for these people a thousand years is one fifth of their whole history. And history
has a way of distorting the truth. Let’s just… take it slow, gentle. Like picking up a little bird. We
want to avoid any incidents.”, he implored her. If she burst into New York in a volley of fire and
roars, the first thing that would greet them would likely be a nuclear missile. He sensed her
confusion about his unusual new proclivity to follow rules.

“Shame. Midgard is much less magically altered than Asgard, although my father taught the first
human sorcerers. This is one of the few realms where we can appear in our dragon form without
disturbing the fabric of space and time.”, she noted in a disappointed sort of way.
The city rose before them soon, silhouetted against the horizon like a twinkling labyrinth of mirrors. Glass towers speared the sky, battling each other in height and perfect symmetry. Manhattan, a peninsula made of futuristic steel, sharp contours and the constant symphony of honking horns. Home to millions of people. All of whom would still remember that he had tried to force them into submission beneath his benevolent rule.

Loki barely fought down the urge to jump into the churning waters of the ocean and swim to the other end of the world. Trepidation lapped up inside him, followed by a deep regret that he had made the terrible mistake of attacking this place. It had been a pathetic failure, and his whole life had gone downhill from then, until Ljosira had set it on a better course.

Nobody wished to be reminded of their worst deeds. But he would face this ordeal with the very real possibility of a thorough beating, because he had sworn to the immortal creature carrying him that he would change. Walk the path of light. It did not mean he walked it in a casual stroll.

They had barely passed the first gleaming skyscraper when Ljosira suddenly opened her jaws and trumpeted her welcome in a deafening song that vibrated through every fibre of Loki’s body. People on the streets stopped as though struck senseless, looking up to the sky at the giant dragon who danced and vaulted between the towers. Cars nearly crashed with each other.

Traffic came to an abrupt halt on entire boulevards. Humans everywhere poured from shops, restaurants and who knew where else, raising little black squares of unknown purpose above their heads or else gaping, utterly dumbstruck. Loki screamed when Ljosira did a devil-may-care backflip, but he couldn’t even hear his own voice over her keen greeting. So much about taking it slow. Subtlety had never been her forte.

Her dragon shout rang and bounced back from the buildings all around, resonating the benevolent intention of her visit, soothing fears, lighting up the sky. A living sun, come to push back the long night and hold it at bay. Down in the streets, people’s faces brightened with smiles as she flew by. Loki would never be able to put this experience into words.

Speechlessly, he signalled her the way to Stark Tower, although it was quite obvious by the large Avengers sign at the very top. Besides, it was the highest tower in the whole city. Ljosira glided in a gentle descent to the landing site, touching down majestically and folding her wings to her sides. Just the moment when the notorious Tony Stark stepped through the doors in a run.

“Son of a bitch! What the hell is this?!” he shouted, scandalized. One of his hands lifted, clad in some kind of metal glove. The circular light on his palm buzzed menacingly. Ljosira threw back her head and trumpeted one long, musical note which made the whole tower shake.

Loki could almost hear the exact words she intoned: Well met, Man of Iron, protector of Midgard! I come in peace! Stark looked anything but pleased or placated, instead he caught his balance again and pointed his glove directly at Ljosira. It whizzed louder.

“No, wait! Stark –“, Loki began. In that instant, a web-like thread shot from thin air and latched itself to the space between dragon and man. The blink of an eye later, a thin figure jumped out of nowhere, using the web like some sort of rope and landing – in a vigorous tumble – right at the centre. It was a boy, a mere teenager, grinning wildly. Stark uttered a long string of profanities.

“What are you doing here, kid!? You’re not supposed to –“, he advanced on the boy, who whirled around to goggle at Ljosira in awe. The Lightbringer was a stunning sight, standing at full height,
six horns shimmering in contest with her flowing silver mane.

“I saw the dragon, how could I not come, Mister Stark? This is so cool, just like Game of Thrones! You know Game of Thrones, right? There’s this dragon, but he’s not this pretty, more like roar, dracarys, and then usually someone dies. This one is beautiful.”, the youngster babbled while Stark buried his face in one hand as people did when they felt a rising headache. Loki slid from Ljosira’s neck smoothly, but kept his distance for now. The boy caught sight of him and walked up without a trace of fear. The cheekiness of youth.

“Hey, are you a dragon rider? Did you tame this dragon? It’s gorgeous!” His eyes darted back to Ljosira, who cocked her head curiously.

“Most assuredly not. You have a colourful fantasy. One does not tame a creature like this, boy.”, he answered in a calm voice. Stark grabbed the boy and pushed him behind his back, now aiming his energy-sizzling glove right at Loki’s heart. “Stark, wait. We need to talk.”

“Oh when little pink unicorns fly out of my ass, we will talk.”, Stark snarled. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t pulverize you on the spot!”

The ground rumbled as Ljosira stepped forth. Without preamble, her head lowered to eye-level with Stark and her jaws opened wide for a terrifying roar which flung the man backwards and blasted the glasses straight off his face. No more gentle greetings. This was the earth-shaking voice of a dragon protecting a life-bond. She knew how to put up boundaries in a very blunt manner.

“That is my reason. We intend no harm, have come in peace. But to antagonize my mate is… unwise. Let us speak.”, Loki explained, holding up his hands in a pacifying gesture. “Please.”, he then added, not without great effort to sound polite.

“He can’t hear me, Loki! Have the humans become so obstinate, closed-off to magic that they cannot perceive my voice?”, Ljosira intoned into his thoughts, this time leaning close to Tony but hovering in a deliberately non-threatening way. “But his mind! It is very colourful, a great deal of knowledge mixed with some unhealthy delusions of grandeur. He quite detests you, I am afraid.”

“I know that.”, Loki murmured, making both humans stare at him quizzically. He skipped over his blunder with one slight cough. “Asgard has been made a battle-field between the dragon clans. The war between such powerful entities is threatening to destroy our whole realm in what we call Ragnarok, the end of days. We escaped to prevent that from happening, at all cost. We need to find –”, but his explanation was cut off when a fiery, sparkling ring of magic suddenly uncoiled behind Tony and the overexcited boy.

The two of them jumped while Loki’s eyes narrowed. He recognized a portal spell when he saw one. For a brief moment, an elegantly furnished, bourgeois room was visible on the other side, before a tall figure stepped through and the portal vanished with a hiss.

The newcomer had sharp, almost hawkish features. His dark hair was threaded through with two streaks of silver at his temples, their symmetry only outmatched by his perfectly groomed beard and moustache. But the oddest thing about him was the deep burgundy cloak he wore above his unusually traditional clothes. The Wizard, Loki immediately knew.

“Oh great, now there is this guy. Excuse me, who are you?”, Stark inquired in a mock polite tone.

“Strange.”, the man said distractedly, his piercing gaze fixed on Ljosira, whose stance – to Loki’s surprise – seemed perfectly calm. At least compared to the annoyance she had just unleashed on Stark.
“Yeah, I got the ‘strange’ vibe from your… outfit, or whatever it’s supposed to be. Listen Merlin, this is not a gathering place for would-be gods and cross-dressers and giant lizards. If you’d be so kind to escort yourself—”

“I think he meant his name is ‘Strange’, Mister Stark. Hey, I read about him! He’s a doctor.”, the boy piped up. Strange threw him a quick glance.

“Was a doctor. Now Master of the New York Sanctum of the Mystic Arts.”, he merely corrected before turning back to Ljosira, while Stark mumbled something that sounded like “What a mouthful.”. The Wizard’s features were unreadable, giving none of his intentions away. Yet his remarkable blue eyes glinted with a keen interest.

“Dragon… The legends in our oldest scrolls are true.”, Strange said quietly, lifting his hand. It trembled ever so slightly. Loki sensed him evoke magic, in a way very familiar to him – it was almost the same kind of energy that emanated from Ljosira whenever she cast a spell.

As though written by a scorching quill, fine runes appeared before his palm, until they formed neat little bands of light intertwining into perfect circles. Loki instantly stiffened, stepping forward. But Ljosira lowered to face the Wizard, her chin almost touching the ground. Her giant tail flicked in a gesture of curiosity.

“No need to worry, Loki. This one has a good heart, and I sense my father’s hand in what he’d been taught. He just wants to speak to me. Isn’t that right, Man with the Strange name? You can see what I am.”, the telepathic projection of her voice spoke kindly.

“I can.”, Strange said aloud, making everyone gawp at him. But he paid the others little attention, instead placing the glowing rune-circle, together with his hand, on Ljosira’s arcing snout. Loki moved to protest, but she allowed the touch without qualms, which baffled him into silence. They both closed their eyes and he sensed the exchange of magic like little electric currents bouncing around between them. He couldn’t help the ugly rush of jealousy and promptly cursed at himself for even going there.

“Ah, what is he doing? He’s fondling your dragon.”, Stark threw in, wiping his glasses and frowning at the little crack in one corner. Loki sighed.

“She is not my dragon. But she is my wife-to-be. They are having a conversation.”

“Congratulations on making the world’s weirdest match, I guess.”, Stark murmured just as Ljosira opened her eyes. Strange took a step back from her and then bowed low.

“Thank you.”, he said respectfully, making Loki wonder what sort of information had passed between them.

“I am the one to thank you, Stephen.”, he heard Ljosira say.

“I’m getting this odd feeling that I am a fifth wheel in this whole… thing, freak-show, whichever. Would anyone care to fill me in or can I go pour myself a drink? I badly need one.”, Stark commented. There was a sudden flash of blinding light that drowned out everything. Loki shielded his eyes from the flare, but it only lasted for a few seconds before it waned, leaving behind a soft, warm glow.

And Ljosira in her mortal body, wearing completely inappropriate clothing. She might have just walked out of a grand ballroom on the arm of some European businessman, judging by the full-length dress with the very revealing neckline. All gathered parties stared at her with open mouths.
She turned to Loki, confused.

“Isn’t this what the people on Midgard wear to such occasions?” He cleared his throat and nearly jumped to her side, casting a hasty illusion spell because the way the others were gaping at her made him want to thrash them from here to Asgard.

“Definitely not, my light. I really need to lend you this book on dress codes.”, he whispered into her ear and earned a frown for it in return. The illusion he had dressed her with was something far closer to Midgardian standards – a pair of dark pants and an elegant white blouse with a ribbon around her slender neck.

Of the three humans in their little party, the boy was the first one whose trance broke.

“Hi, er, Lady Dragon. I’m Parker. I mean Peter. Peter Parker. Sorry, I just never met a dragon before.”, he stuttered. Ljosira curtsied politely before all of them.

“Well met, protectors of Midgard. My name is Ljosira of the Lightbringers. I come in peace, but bring grave tidings and a great plea to you.”
This chapter is mostly conversation. As most of what happens on Midgard, I enjoyed writing it because of the dynamics between the different characters. I don't know if it came across in the right way, but Tony's nickname for Ljosira is "Frozen", because her appearance reminds him of Elsa in the Disney Movie Frozen :D It both fits her and not, because ironically she is anything but cold, but she does look a little like Elsa. Just a little joke from my side. As always, enjoy!

xxvi. Men with Strange Names

“Alright, let me get this straight.”, Stark began, pouring a generous amount of golden liquid into a crystal glass.

They had gathered in the lavish loft on the topmost level of the tower, sitting on plush leather sofas. Instead of walls, glass panelled the entire room on all four sides, allowing a marvellous view of the countless city lights that were just starting to wake as evening fell. The city that never sleeps, Loki had called it. Ljosira understood why. Even as day turned to night, the artificial luminosity twinkled and buzzed through thousands, ten thousands of lamps, signs, windows…

“You come here because Asgard is on the verge of being blown to bits by a crazy dragon witch of some sort, to find this eighteenth century David Copperfield character”, Tony went on, indicating Doctor Strange, “so he can send you back in time?”

“Yes.”, Ljosira said calmly, to which Stark raked a hand through his hair, exasperated. He emptied the glass with one gulp, making a face as though he’d swallowed some sort of poison.

“I’ve seen a lot of impossible shit. Hell, I made some impossible shit. But I’m pretty sure that if there was a way to travel time, I would have discovered it by now. I mean, imagine if I could just undo all the screw-ups I pulled on Pepper. Stroke of genius. Sorry, I don’t buy it. It can’t be done. Physics one-o-one: Time is a river. It flows one way.” Stark walked around the bar, spreading his hands in a gesture both helpless and arrogant. Strange made a small, derisive snort.

“I would like to explain the many things wrong with your statement, but I’m going to focus on the most important issue. Time is indeed a river. But sometimes, one can steer a boat against the current. It does not mean that one should. You? Definitely not. I’m getting this impression that you are quite a self-absorbed fellow who just loves the sound of his own voice. If I send you back, we might wake up to Tony Stark statues in Central Park and Times Square.”, the Wizard interjected.

“At least they would look good, since I would wear something made in this century.”, the other man retorted sarcastically. Loki sighed, massaging his temple. Humans. They spent so much time locking horns.

“Time is not to be meddled with by those who do not understand the consequences.”, he said, cutting the others short. “But this is a disastrous situation. If we don’t prevent Natta from starting a war on Asgard, she will destroy the entire realm. And she won’t stop there. She will want to
subjugate all of the Nine Realms, including this one. Do you enjoy eternal darkness? Because that’s what we are looking at right now. A long night where the sun never rises.”

“We were sent here by a dragon who now keeps time frozen in Asgard, so we can find a way to save it. He told us to find you, Stephen. ‘The Wizard’. You have something in your possession that can send us back.”, Ljosira said, her piercing silver eyes trained on Strange. He held her gaze evenly.

“You have shown me enough that I understand the necessity of your request. It’s just… I have never used it in the way you intend me to. Not so extensively. I’m not even sure I am capable to do it.”

“Excuse me, are you saying you can manipulate time? Has nobody been listening to a word I said?”, Stark uttered, throwing up his hands. Strange let out a breath, before he pulled a peculiar amulet from the depths of his robe. An ornamented, golden eye, which elegantly slid open as his hands described a complicated little gesture. At the heart lay a glowing, green gem, perfect in its design. Every individual in the room stared at it, mesmerized.

“Whoa. It’s beautiful.”, Peter murmured in awe. Stark lifted a tiny see-through device that emitted a string of excited beeps while rows and rows of little numbers flashed across the surface.

“It’s like the Tesseract. Only, not like it. Complementary forces. How…”, Tony mumbled, looking at his device with obvious fascination.

“We call them Infinity Stones. Artefacts of immense power originating from a time before mortals were even an idea in the grand scheme of the universe. Knowledge about these stones is guarded very carefully by the dragon clans. I learned a little during my rite of passage. It seems they resurfaced again, after thousands of years.”, Ljosira explained. As she did, her hands lifted to conjure some of her uncanny projections. A blueish-white cube. The Chitauri sceptre. The formless liquid of the Aether.

“Space. Mind. Reality. That one…”, she pointed at the green stone inside the golden eye. “Is Time.” A stunned silence unravelled. “They must not ever be used without responsibility. The fact that several of them appeared in the last year alone is troubling, yet that’s a problem we will face on a later day. It would be better if they were never used at all. But these are desperate times. We can’t… afford to play by the rules right now. Please, Stephen. You are the only one who can help us.” Her hand settled on his briefly, her features imploring.

“I will try. But I need to run some probability spells and figure out how to do this. I might need to return to the Sanctum and consult with our librarian…”, the Wizard replied slowly.

“Yeah, okay, you do that, guy.”, Stark threw in then. “But these two are staying here. I’m not letting this one out of my sight.”, he pointed at Loki ostentatiously, who leaned back into the seat, assuming a casual stance and a mocking expression.

“Well, well, Stark. Could it be that you have grown fond of me?”, he couldn’t refrain from commenting in a scathing tone.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Rock of Ages. If you stay long enough, I could schedule another date for you with the big guy.”, Stark retorted, looking incredibly smug when the smirk died on Loki’s lips. Before they could needle each other further, Peter spoke up.

“What are you going to do when you go to the past? Will you fight the rogue dragon in epic battle?”, he wondered. Ljosira shook her head, frowning.
“To attack her first would be reckless and foolish, not to mention that then it would be a Lightbringer breaking the millennia-old peace between the clans. No… I think we have to somehow outwit her in her own game. Which might prove to be difficult, since my kind have no experience with deception and such.” She let out a resigned sigh.

“But I do.”, Loki rested one hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “I think the key to defeating her lies in Dragonbane.” As the others regarded him with blank expressions, he moved to explain: “Our enemy created a weapon in secret, one capable of siphoning the soul of a dragon. This is a very simplified explanation, but dragons are magic given form. Sources of power and energy made manifest, if that is closer to your imagination. A weapon storing a dragon soul…”, he trailed away, but Strange finished his thought.

“Could unleash utter devastation on our world.” Loki nodded heavily.

“Natta used Dragonbane to… extract the soul of a Lightbringer. The crown prince of dragons, Vegr.”

“She killed one of them?”, Stark asked, his asinine demeanour replaced by concern now. Ljosira stiffened beside Loki, whose hand tightened around her shoulders.

“‘Killed’ is not a fitting word. His soul is still within Dragonbane. There are not a great many things in the world that can actually kill a dragon, apart from other dragons. But he is trapped inside, while Natta used the power to wreak havoc on Asgard.”, he said bitterly. Ljosira’s face was a picture of sorrow.

“He suffers such agony. Pieces of him are torn away, bit by bit. She’s a leech, a hideous vampire sucking the life from him until he will perish, bled dry. How are we going to stop it?! All the strain seemed to crash down on her now. She buckled over as though in pain, folding in on herself. Unease bloomed in each face around her at the sight of her misery. Loki felt it seep out of her like blood from an open wound, tinting everything with despair. The neon lamps flickered feebly, the shadows of the room deepening.

“Ljosira, my light.”, Loki whispered, trying to calm her. He received a very disconcerted look from Tony. The man had likely not thought him capable of an ounce of empathy, and some time ago, he would have been right. But Loki could not bother with that right now.

“She’s exhausted. I think she needs to rest. It has been a very long day.”

After Strange had disappeared into one of his sparking portals with the promise to return as soon as possible, Loki coaxed Ljosira to lie down on the wide couch. It took quite a lot of persuasion until she relented, yet the weariness in her eyes told him volumes. When Natta had appeared on Asgard, Ljosira had not yet fully recovered from her injuries. Still, she had joined the battle fearlessly and then undergone the journey to Midgard with Loki, both of which must have cost her great amounts of strength. Stark, who was talking quietly to the youngster, had grudgingly handed him a blanket, which he now draped over Ljosira gently.

“I wonder why Andlát would tell us to seek out the Outsider.”, she whispered, her lids fluttering shut.

“Who is he? Another sorcerer of some kind?”, Loki queried, rubbing a little warmth into her cool fingers. She shook her head weakly.
“No. He is a dragon.” Since her eyes were closed, she did not notice the bafflement on his face. “Or rather he was. It is said that he left Yggdrasil many, many eons ago, on a mad quest to seek forbidden knowledge. When he returned, he was exiled. We do not kill our own kind, not before we exhaust every possible option. His true name was erased from our memory by my father, and he left the world tree, never to return. We call him Utandir. The Outsider.”

“Maybe he has some knowledge we can use to turn Dragonbane against Natta? We need any help we can get right now.\textquotedblright, Loki argued in a rational tone.

“Maybe… But we have to be careful, my love. He cannot be trusted.\textquotedblright, Ljosira said, making his brows pucker.

“Why?”

“Because he tried to usurp the throne.\textquotedblright, came her answer, her voice already slurred with sleep.

“Darkflight?” It was hard to imagine any other of the clans seeking to take over.

“No. He is Life-Binder.” Her words left him so astonished, he couldn’t form a coherent reply. When he moved to speak again, her deep, even breaths told him that exhaustion had claimed her at last. Loki gingerly tucked her hand beneath the blanket, his fingers tracing the silver band he had given her in a light touch. Almost instantaneously, she slipped into her dragon dreams and he sensed as she retreated into herself, to gather strength for the hardships yet to come.

“It’s pretty amazing actually. That woman should not exist, if we go by the general laws of science.\textquotedblright, Stark’s voice became louder as he entered the loft together with the boy Peter Parker, who was listening to his musings avidly. “She’s like a kick in the nuts to everything we know about physics. I scanned her. Frozen has her own little fusion reactor. It’s crazy! What I could do if I had a few weeks to analyse those energy signatures…”

“Maybe you could ask the lady if she’d like to stay after the whole end-of-the-world thing.\textquotedblright, Peter jumped in at once.

“Please don’t.\textquotedblright, Loki interjected, making both of them flinch. The boy promptly turned apologetic.

“We were talking too loud, weren’t we? Sorry, Mister Loki.\textquotedblright, he dropped his voice to a quiet whisper.

“I’m not sorry.\textquotedblright, Tony shrugged. “I live here.” Loki refrained from rolling his eyes in annoyance. No helping it, his old Midgardian ‘friend’ was as charming as ever. But supposedly, he acted this way towards pretty much everyone. A small comfort, at least.

“No Mister. Just Loki.\textquotedblright, he corrected the boy. “And you don’t really need to be quiet. A horde of barbarians would have trouble waking her right now. She is saving her strength, immersed in dragon sleep.”

“Dragon sleep. Even that sounds epic.”, Peter grinned at his mentor, who exhaled a resigned breath.

“It’s late, kid. I don’t want your much too smoking aunt to bite my head off, so I’ll have a car brought around to bring you home.\textquotedblright, Tony murmured awkwardly. Loki glanced at him from the corner of his eye. Despite his aloofness, the man seemed to genuinely care about the youngster, in his own convoluted, obstinate way.

Stark had always struck him as someone who never took anything seriously, instead seasoning
every sentence with a good deal of cynicism. But first impressions could be deceiving. Peter protested vigorously, but his mentor stayed impervious to the badgering and begging. When Tony returned alone a little while later, Loki stood at the grand glass panels, looking out into the artificially enlightened cityscape.

“You know, I have people blocking up my phone lines, asking how the hell I made a three-storey tall big-ass dragon disappear.” He pulled two glittering crystal glasses from the shelves behind the bar and filled them generously from a black-labelled bottle.

“I told her to keep it discreet, but her kind is… Let’s just say they are not used to slinking around in secret. Hard to hide when you are as big as a house and glow in the dark.”, Loki said absently, not moving his gaze from the window. Tony took the two glasses, now containing three hundred dollars worth of single-malt scotch, and walked over to the sofas in a casual stance.

“So, what’s the deal with you, God of Failed Schemes? Turning over a new leaf? Had a change of heart, saw the light? Have you converted to our Lord and Saviour Jesus?”

“Cheeses? You have a god for those? Tread lightly, Stark. I may have no more quarrel with you and your people, but nothing stops me from stuffing your bigmouth with my fist. And I’m faster than your flying suit-parts. You are within arm’s reach.”, Loki warned the other man. Tony eyed him for a long moment before he held out one of the glasses. The so-named God of Failed Schemes took it, turning it so the golden liquid shimmered in the lamplight.

“Fair enough. Violent nature seems to run in the family. Where is your brother, anyway? I had half-expected him to have shown up by now, together with the thunder and the flexing and the unhealthy issues between you two.” Stark took a sip from his whiskey and Loki followed his example. The drink was surprisingly good. Mellow, earthy, and quite strong. He could almost taste the wood of the casket where it had aged, and the flavour spread warmth through his numb insides.

“Gods, you sure talk a lot. Thor is on Asgard. Suspended within the time-stopping spell of the dragon who sent us here. I have to get back there, and soon… Otherwise, all will be lost.”, he sighed, pressing his palm to the glass panel. An uncomfortable silence fell, in which Tony regarded his former enemy thoughtfully, for once refraining from sarcasm.

“The wizard seemed to know his stuff. Then again, he’s a wizard. I honestly don’t know what their stuff is.” It was probably his best attempt at reassurance in this situation. Loki did not speak for quite some time, and when he did, the glasses were almost empty of liquor.

“In all my years, I knew no fear. And I have gathered quite a few years now. I dreaded nothing and no one, but not because I was brave. I had only my own life to protect, felt no allegiance, was arrogantly convinced that I would manage to wiggle myself out of pretty much any peril.”, he said quietly.

“And now?”, Tony asked, his voice quite serious.

“Now… I am terrified. I cannot fail. It’s not an option anymore.” It should have been shameful to admit weakness to an old enemy, should have hurt his pride, and yet he felt no such thing in speaking those painfully honest words. And strangely enough, Tony did neither mock him nor pick apart his admission. Instead he let his gaze wander along the many skyscrapers stretching towards the clouds before his eyes met Loki’s.

“Having something to lose does that to you. No offense, I still don’t trust you. But let’s say I’m about forty percent more certain that you won’t stab me in the back while I sleep.” Stark emptied the remaining scotch and nodded to himself.
“Down the stairs and across the hall, there’s a room you can use. I doubt Strange will be back before dawn. Just… don’t make a mess. It’s Nat’s room. And don’t even think about kinky stuff. I have cameras everywhere.” He pointed a warning finger at Loki, who shook his head in irritation. Ljosira did not stir as he lifted her from the sofa. Before he walked away, he turned towards Stark once more.

“Thank you.”, Loki said, his tone sober. “And, for what it’s worth… I am sorry that I attacked your home. It was a mistake.” Tony stared at him, momentarily speechless.

“Well I’ll be dipped in shit and rolled in bread crumbs –“ But Loki had already descended the stairs, leaving the other man standing alone in the middle of the room with an expression of utter disbelief.
XXVII. Upstream of Time's River

Chapter Notes

I kept the time-travel itself short (there is a part in the next chapter) and distinct from the "first time" this happened so it would not become boring. I hope it came out alright.

I love to write Loki's musings to himself, they give me so much opportunity to explore his character development. I think by now he is realistically aware of his flaws (as he himself states in the conversation with Ljosira about Dragonbane), and although they are not completely eradicated, he tries to master them. But (wisely so) he fears to accept power of such scales as Dragonbane or an Infinity Stone, and I think he is quite traumatized by the Chitauri staff experience. As I said in the beginning, the way to become a hero is not an easy one, but he's doing well :)

XXVII. Upstream of Time’s River

Although Loki should have used the time to get as much rest as possible, sleep simply eluded him. His mind had always been more active at night. Thoughts and schemes flourished better when the world lay in silence and undisturbed, yet the quiet also made room for doubt to creep in. Worry took hold of him persistently, sending its roots down deep.

The general state of things did not look good. If they managed to go back in time without wrecking the natural order of the cosmos, he and Ljosira still only had one chance to put the entire mess Natta had made right. By now, Loki was quite convinced that they needed Dragonbane to do that. He also understood why the Darkflight leader had so casually offered him the powers of a dragon – with the weapon, she herself wielded not only her own magical force, but that of a full-grown Lightbringer too.

Why had he not seen it coming? If he had told Ljosira right away, they still might have reached Elding, and maybe then they could have prevented the situation from escalating so horribly. He felt guilty, dirty even, for keeping the truth from her, although his intentions had been pure. There were so many unknowns, ready to put their mission into peril.

Would the Wizard even be able to send them back to a suitable point in time? And if so, would they be able to divert the time-line so the whole tragedy did not simply repeat itself? Could Natta be defeated at her own game? She was the game of shadows, the night mother, the master of deception. How could they hope to beat her? And before they could get to any of that, they still had to find their second would-be ally: the Outsider.

A dragon exile, a seemingly crucial chess-piece, and Loki knew not what to expect from this one. He had once tried to usurp the throne himself. Rendering judgement over a fellow usurper did not feel appropriate, yet he strongly suspected there was more to the Outsider’s story. Ljosira had said he could not be trusted, while Andlát had specifically directed them to him.

Dragons. Why could they never speak their intentions clearly, or give true guidance without wrapping it up into a neat little mystery? Even the Lightbringers omitted parts of the whole. Right
now, being blind to what might lie ahead could prove disastrous. He would have to question Ljosira on details about the Outsider.

Loki sighed, rubbing his temple as he stood overlooking the streets of Manhattan below. Although long after midnight, the roads were alive with cars rushing by, the sidewalks busy with people. Humans going about their business, living their lives without the burden of having to make monumental decisions. Whatever kept them awake at night, it likely was not about preventing the end of days and mass destruction of their homeland. Well, maybe for Tony Stark, it was. At least he had managed to create a fragile peace between him and the Iron Man, for now.

Once, Loki remembered, glory and recognition had been things to strive for, highly-set goals which he’d desperately tried to reach, the way a vine stretched across a bottomless pit towards the supportive column on the other side. Now he longed to trade the weights he carried for those simple, trivial hardships he believed to be the concerns of the everyday mortal. He had craved to be a king for so long, and now all he wanted was to be done with it and have peace. His old ambitions seemed endlessly tedious and cumbersome.

Above all his crowded thoughts, the single greatest trepidation loomed like a lingering spectre. He had told Stark the truth. He was afraid. Terrified of losing the one thing he could not live without. Memories of his many failures came back to revisit him as painful reminders, haunting the house of his troubled mind. If he only had his brother’s undeviating confidence, or his mother’s fierce determination! The courage of lions lived in them both. He couldn’t find the same mettle within himself. How could he stand against the forces now in motion? He was no hero fighting for a righteous cause. He was a man trying to protect what he loved.

“Your heart is so burdened with worries, I can feel it like a solid weight on my chest. A winter quilt, made of greys and blues.”, Ljosira spoke quietly from the bed. Loki turned to her. She’d sat up, the blanket he’d draped her with sliding from her narrow shoulders with a dying whisper. He walked over, crouching down in front of her.

“You always knew I had a brooding nature.”, he said in a soft voice. Her gaze travelled over his features while her fingers gently traced the frown on his forehead.

“I did.”, she conceded. “It makes your smile all the more captivating.” He closed his eyes for a moment, simply enjoying the touch of her hands. Some deeply buried part of him yearned to lay down his head into her lap and flee away from all troubles of the world, into her loving embrace. That place of complete safety beneath the shelter of her wings. He wondered fleetingly if that wish made him a coward, and then found that he didn’t care.

“Did I wake you?”

Ljosira shook her head slowly, questing for his hand to close her fingers around his.

“No… I dreamed with Yggdrasil, but her lament is hard to bear for too long.”, she answered in a solemn tone.

“Tell me, my light. Can we win this thing?”, Loki lifted her hand to his cheek and pressed a kiss to her palm. She let out a sigh.

“I don’t know, Loki. Andlát believed we had a chance, otherwise he would not have raised the entirety of his clan for the time-spell. He said that preventing her from forging Dragonbane would be the wrong approach.” Loki pondered this for a while.

“So we don’t. We only have to prevent her from using it on Vegr. We let Strange take us to the
moment we found the shard. What do you know about Dragonbane, now that you have seen it used?"

“Not much… I know that no schematics exist on Nidavellir for a spear like that, but it still bears all the characteristics of a divine weapon. I believe the Onyx Star is its heart, infused with power on Asgard, the realm most permeated by magic. We found that shard because it took the longest to make. Maybe… I could turn it?”, she mused pensively.

“Turn it?”, Loki frowned.

“The divine weapons are not just lifeless pieces of metal. Each and every one of them is unique, immaculately made for its purpose. Within the fire of dragons, they are imbued with a will of their own. You wielded Gungnir once, because you are recognized by the Allfather as a possible successor. But you could not swing Hofund as Heimdall does, never even pick up Mjölnir. And neither of us could wield Dragonbane. It answers to Natta only, at least the way it is now.”, Ljosira explained patiently, while Loki seemed baffled. He had thought Gungnir could be picked up by any Asgardian and now felt a strange, old guilt about having betrayed his father’s confidence.

“You want to change the spear’s allegiance. So it will answer to you.”, he concluded after a time of silence. Ljosira looked at him with a crooked smile.

“What would I do with a spear in this clumsy mortal form? No. It will not answer to me. It will be yours.”, Ljosira corrected, her voice determined. Loki gaped at her.

“Mine? You want to give a convicted criminal and the future husband of a dragon princess a weapon named Dragonbane? Are you mad?”, he demanded in disbelief. She shook her head in a rebuking fashion. It looked as if she wished to protest, but he went on. “Ljosira, you have seen what giving me too much power does. It’s not good for me, it clouds my judgement, tempts me to use it, muddles my sane mind –“

“Shh.”, she hushed him and he fell silent. “First of all, you have not made an official proposal yet, so don’t get ahead of yourself.” Loki rolled his eyes in annoyance.

“Gods help you, woman. You know as well as I that ship has sailed long ago.”, he argued, not without a good measure of self-irony. Their lives were bound, and she had no business disputing that – even in jest.

“Appearances need to be upheld.”, she raised her voice so it carried over his, making him huff. Then she became serious again. “Things are different now. You have grown so much stronger. And I need you to wield that weapon when we face Natta once more, on our terms. I trust you. I have faith in the man I love.”

“But…”, he struggled to find words, having a hard time with it. So often he had experienced what it felt like to be mistrusted, suspected of betrayal. But to have such complete faith put in him – that had never happened before. He didn’t know what to say. Ljosira trusted him more than he trusted himself. It was overwhelming, humbling. She cocked her head curiously.

“Do you plan on using Dragonbane on me, my family or any loyal dragon?”, she queried in an offhand way.

“Of course not!”, Loki exclaimed, shocked. Ljosira smiled.

“Then I do not see what else there is to discuss.” Stubborn dragon. There was no use arguing with her.
“How will you bind it?”, he wondered then, stirring the topic into a less controversial direction. Ljosira’s gaze strayed into the distance.

“Not easily. A weapon already created is an entirely different matter than one about to be forged. I think that may be why Andlát urged us to seek out the Outsider. Utandir… knows things. I told you he gathered knowledge from the strangest, forbidden corners of the universe. After we get the Onyx Star… we need to return here.”, she elaborated.

“You think the Outsider is on Midgard?” Ljosira nodded.

“I am quite sure that he is. Life-Binders… they are drawn to vigorous places, where vitality brims in all its many facets. They thrive among crowds, revelry, enthusiasm. And what place is there, other than the world of humans, so full of the chaotic up and down of life?”, she stood as she spoke, walking to the ceiling-tall window. The far horizon lightened now, heralding the approach of a muted dawn. “He had thousands of years to settle in. And he does not want to be found.”

“So how do we find him?” A being who enjoyed mingling within great masses of people – it sounded pretty hopeless, Loki thought. Ljosira faced him, her features enigmatic.

“We ask help from a man-about-town, of course. One who loves exactly the same things as Utandir. Or loved, before he became a hero.”, the silver gleam of her dragon sight flashed across her eyes before she went on: “Playboy, billionaire, philanthropist. Tony Stark.”

“Tony Stark is an arrogant jerk.”, he felt compelled to point out. Ljosira quirked a brow at him.

“Many have said the same about you, my love.”, she reasoned.

“And they are right, in part. I would not trust me, if I met me. But… I trust your judgement.”, Loki amended. He thought he saw amusement ghost across her face as she looked at him.

“You should. I have watched complicated men long enough to know there is more to them than meets the eye.”

A man of his word, Stephen Strange returned by daybreak, casually stepping through one of his portals. Ljosira and Loki were seated on the loft sofas again and the three of them exchanged polite greetings, before Strange looked around, brow furrowed.

“Where’s Stark?”. At that moment, Tony ambled up the stairs with a mug of coffee in his hand. He stifled a yawn and squinted balefully at his guests through puffy eyes.

“Usually still in bed at this ungodly hour. Don’t tell me you’re early birds. I hate early birds. Actually, I think I just hate birds, all of them, period. I built this tower high enough so their chirping wouldn’t wake me in the morning. Didn’t work.”, he grumbled under his breath as he walked up to them.

“Not a morning person, Stark? I’m disappointed.”, Strange commented in a sarcastic tone, to which the other man only grunted. Ljosira rose and bowed to him.

“Apologies for disturbing you, Tony. But we must leave as soon as possible. I believe now is the time.” Stark made a placating gesture.

“No, I’m just… being a grumpy ass. Sorry – Ljosira, is it? A bit of a tongue-breaker.”
“Old Asgardian requires a silver tongue. Better not butcher our elegant language.”, Loki smirked, earning himself a warning look from Ljosira. “I had to.”, he mouthed at her.

“Tony, I have a request to make to you. And it involves you too, Stephen. When you send us back, we will remember all that happened before you did, yes?”, she asked, to which Strange nodded. “Is it possible that you include Tony too, so he remembers?”

“Why would you want him to?”, the Wizard wondered.

“We will go back and acquire a shard of the weapon we told you about. When we return, we need to find someone who is here on Midgard. As a matter of fact, I think he is even right here, in this city. You call this the city that never sleeps, don’t you? Living in this place would be to his liking.”, Ljosira explained. Strange and Stark exchanged a baffled look.

“Who is he?”, Stark wanted to know.

“A dragon in disguise. We call him Utandir, the Outsider. He would look like a mortal. Well, a handsome mortal. Earthy, sanguine. He would surround himself with buoyant people – artists, musicians, actors. He’d be young and charismatic, and quite successful at what he does. As for his occupation… If I had to take a guess… Something in the entertainment business, or theatre.” They all stared at her for a long moment.

“Sounds like quite a genial fellow. If it weren’t for the charismatic part, he might as well be Stark.”, Strange said, twirling his beard. Tony threw him a scathing look, but Ljosira stepped closer to him and lifted her hand.

“Can I show you something? I have seen Utandir only once, but I can impart on you what his aura felt like. You have good instincts, Tony. I ask for your help because I believe you can find him while we are gone.”, she held his gaze steadily.

Loki knew how compelling the undivided attention of a Lightbringer could be. He had grown used to it, but Stark was still new to the whole dragon business. His features softened beneath her imploring regard and for a moment he seemed like a man trying to rein in some strong fascination. Then he nodded. Ljosira settled her palm to his forehead and his eyes closed. Long seconds passed in silence before she lifted her hand away again.

“That was… interesting.”, Tony murmured distractedly, swaying a little. “Your world is more confusing than an LSD trip. How do you stay sane?”

“It’s not like that all the time.”, she amended gently. “Will you look for him, please?”

“I will try.”, he promised her in a serious voice.

A short while later, Ljosira and Strange sat down cross-legged onto the floor, facing each other. Once more, the Wizard summoned the time stone forth from its golden cradle within the Eye of Agamotto. As he described complex movements with his slightly shaking hands, bands of bright green runes formed around his wrists like glowing bracelets, revolving slowly.

“I need you to guide me to the point in time where you want to go. Prepare yourselves, it is not a comfortable ride.”, Strange explained solemnly.

“The ride here was no lazy stroll. How much worse can it get?”, Loki commented with a sigh.

“A lot.”, the Wizard said in a foreboding voice. Stark and Loki watched as Ljosira reached forth and touched the tips of her fingers to the sorcerer’s open palms.
Without warning, the whole world… tilted. It was like being grabbed by the ankles and lifted to hang upside down from the ceiling, while everything began moving backwards – cars in the streets, people on the sidewalks, even the rising sun plunged back over the horizon again. The pace of time reversal accelerated until the scenes rushed past in a blur and Loki became unable to keep track of it any longer. He was vaguely aware of his own movement through time, but he’d never be able to put the sensation into crude concepts such as words. Ljosira, Stark and Strange all disappeared, replaced by a cacophony of images and sounds he could not focus on.

His stomach swooped and turned. He wanted to be sick but couldn’t – not one muscle of his body moved. Forced to look at the flurry of colours and shapes as they whirled around him in an unending vortex. The time stone’s power was tremendous.

A fleeting thought occurred to him, flying by like all the other scraps: He had experienced four of these Infinity Stones and what they could do all on their own. Twist minds of gods, tear holes into the fabric of space, darken all of Yggdrasil. What if some madman decided to collect them all, someday? *It’s what I would have done, some time past,* he mused.

He took solace in the fact that likely no creature in existence could use more than one stone without being torn apart by the power within. Most of them were well protected. The Tesseract on Asgard. The Aether with the Collector. The Time Stone with the Wizard. But the staff… He had lost the staff…

But even that acute worry frayed away from him as threads of a tapestry coming apart. And the next instant, his feet touched the ground again and the time stone released him from its grip. He gasped for air, legs giving up their service so he sagged sideways against something solid. A steadying arm came around his midriff, holding him.

“Loki! What happened?!” Thor’s voice, sounding shocked. “Ljosira!” Loki was simply dragged along as Thor hurried forward.

When the flashy afterimages retreated from his vision, he saw where they were: The stone circle in the mountains, where Natta’s black hole had created the onyx shard. Ljosira kneeled on the ground at the centre, panting rapidly. Strange had sent them back successfully, and they had arrived right after Ljosira had dispersed the shadow magic of the black hole. Loki tried to free himself from Thor’s grasp but the disconcerting dizziness made him sway precariously.

“Pull yourself together, Loki. What the hell is wrong with you two? Ljosira, are you alright? Was it the spell?”, Thor set his brother down beside the dragon princess. He handed them a water bottle and they drank greedily. The nausea was slow to fade, but eventually it dissipated – more or less. A surreal sensation lingered on, as if the ties which held the world together had become brittle around them.

“One moment everything is fine, the spell is gone, and the next you both collapse on me.”, the thunder prince said, his tone accusing and worried. Loki took a deep, steadying breath. Despite everything, he was enormously glad to see his brother safe and sound.

“We are not… us from just a moment ago. We came from the future.” Those words earned him a blank stare from Thor. “That sounded much less stupid in my head.” He wondered if anyone had ever thought about leading off with another line after having time-travelled into the past – then again, how many people have done that, at all? Loki turned to Ljosira while Thor still gaped at them both.

“I’m alright. Such powerful magic… I feel… soiled, twisted, having taken part in it. It wasn’t made for dragons. No matter. Unpleasant, but I will be fine. Take the shard.”, she said calmly,
straightening. Although he did not quite comprehend what she meant, Loki pocketed the Onyx Star once more, wincing when he felt the eerie whispers radiating from it.

“Will you, for Odin’s sake, explain what is going on?”, Thor thundered, making them both flinch.

And so they did. They explained everything to him, from the moment they found the shard to the attack of the Darkflight on their way home to the city, to Natta’s grand scheme of creating Dragonbane. He listened without interrupting, although his expression grew more and more unbelieving as they went on. And troubled.

Loki and Ljosira had agreed wholeheartedly that they would include Thor into the plan to alter Dragonbane – for several reasons. Thor’s friendship to the Midgardians could only prove beneficial, and besides, the three of them had started this together. It was only right to finish it together. After telling him the story of how they had asked Doctor Strange and Tony Stark for help, Thor’s gaze shifted from one to the other and then back again.

“Your story makes about as much sense as horns on a mule. Ragnarok, brought about by Natta… It’s not how the prophesy goes.”, he argued, his prominent brows knitted into a deep frown.

“I know, brother. But you have not seen what she did to Asgard. A little longer, and it would have been the end. Trust me, please. Me and Ljosira.”, Loki implored him, his emerald eyes locking with his brother’s bright blue ones.

“I trust you. Besides, Ljosira’s description of Stark was spot on. You have met him, no doubt about that.”, Thor asserted with a nod. “What do we do now?”, he then asked, his face taut.

“In the past, Natta attacked us on our way home to Asgard. But we have some time before she does. We need to get to Heimdall’s observatory and have him send us to Midgard. We cannot rest with the villagers as we have the last time.”, Ljosira said, dusting off her clothes as she stood.

“But Heimdall’s sight is clouded. Can’t you take us to Midgard in your dragon form?”, Thor pondered, but she shook her head.

“He will have to send us in blind. Shifting would be like igniting a giant beacon to inform Natta what we are doing.”

“And before you ask, no, you can’t fly ahead with Mjölnir. We cannot get separated, nor do anything that might give her a clue before we travel to Midgard. We don’t want her to quicken her plans and attack Asgard even sooner. We need time to find Utandir.”, Loki said before his brother could protest.

“So… What? We walk?”

Loki and Ljosira exchanged a look, before the dragon princess closed her eyes. She did magic, but in a very subtle, almost imperceptible way. It felt as though she let her consciousness fan out into the space around them, over the hills and between the towering pine trees. She called out, her voice a mere sigh dispersing across the untamed land.

A small eternity passed in which all they could hear was the wind whistling through the cracks in the cliffs. And then, from the forest at the foot of the great mountain, came one long answering howl. Another, more ferocious one followed it. Two wolves, singing a wild song in unison as they rapidly drew closer. Apex predators, come to heed the call of a creature whose true nature they knew better than most mortals did. Loki turned his attention back to Thor.

“No, brother. We will not walk, it seems. We will ride.”
Chapter Notes

Our unusual band of allies is searching for the mysterious Outsider, which diverts their journey to a surprising place. So, I am closing in on the final chapters. There will be 34 in all, six more to go now that this one is up! I am so excited to bring this story to an end, and at the same time kind of sad... Or maybe just a little wistful. I have grown so fond of the characters... But it also feels incredibly good to finish an elaborate story like this. Enjoy reading! :))

XXVIII. Hide and Seek

Stark sat in the Avengers command centre, leaned back into his comfortable, dynamic office chair. Wide holograms were erected in a half-circle around him, showing countless pictures of faces accompanied by walls of text which described both official and unofficial information concerning the persons of interest.

The Iron Man watched the flow of intelligence in a distinctly bored manner, sighing ever so often before he took a sip of his coffee. Behind him, floating above the ground in perfect peace, Stephen Strange sat in tailor-fashion with his eyes closed. The green rune-bracelets around his arms indicated that he was not asleep, at least, but in some sort of trance.

“I’m looking for a needle in a haystack here. You know how annoying that is, looking for a tiny piece in this immense… shitload of information?”, Stark commented with some irritation, gesticulating towards the collage of photos.

“I have a faint idea.”, Strange retorted, not opening his eyes. “I am trying to search for a suitable timeline to see when they will return. Have you ever tried looking at all of time? It’s a bit bigger than the internet.” Tony snorted.

“Show-off. There are eight million people in New York City. Jarvis has basically endless processing power at his hands, and he is the first genuine artificial intelligence of our time. But since I have the knowledge of our lost sheepie’s… aura, for lack of a better word, I still should look at every picture. Which makes the process subject to human error. I have to decide with my instincts, she said.”, he explained to his companion, who seemed heartily disinterested in the newest marvels of technology. “She could have given me a strip of paper with his DNA sequence, I’d have found him in a heartbeat.”

“Everything is subject to human error.”, Strange threw in calmly. “Even the things you create.”

“You’re a real smart cookie, you know that? I can live without your attitude.”, Stark griped.

“Sir.”, an artificial, quite emotionless voice said then. Tony turned back to the hologram, where a picture of a man in his late thirties had been singled out from the others. He had dark brown hair and lively blue eyes, emphasized by the little crinkles at the corners as he smiled down from his photograph.

“What am I looking at, Jarvis?” He basically grabbed the picture off the hologram and threw it into
the air, where it appeared in an enlarged version, together with some extensive descriptions.

“Harvey Darcy. An actor in both movie and theatre. British origins, but moved to New York at age of twenty. He does not rank among the highest grossing ones, but he does well for himself. He fits the profile you have given me. Frequent parties and social events, likes to mingle with a wide range of artists and musicians – he even owns an establishment of the energetic sort here in Manhattan. A dance club called ‘The Cradle’.”, Jarvis explained.

“I know The Cradle. I have spent a few dozen evenings there. Pretty good location. Could I have met this guy? He seems familiar. Run facial scan and match it for me, Jarvis.”

“Match it with what, sir?”, the AI wondered curiously. Stark shrugged and made a helpless gesture.

“Anything you can find. I want to know what is to know about this one. Where he has been, who he has met. My instincts are tingling, or something like that.”, he said. As Jarvis initialized the search, Tony turned to his silent companion again.

“You know, it’s kind of ironic to call someone who loves to surround himself with people an outsider. Don’t you think it’s ironic?” Strange let out an exasperated breath and ended his little levitation trick, opening his eyes.

“Do you ever stop talking?”, the Wizard asked in a tortured voice.

“Talking helps me think.”, Stark replied, unfazed. “And thinking is my greatest weapon.” A few minutes passed in which none of them spoke and they listened to the steady beeping of the command centre equipment.

“Sir, I found something… odd.”, Jarvis broke the silence. Both men turned to the holograms. “I ran a facial cue search and found several matches in the past hundred years. On further inspection, I found even more matches – although they are partial, for the lack of photographs. But together with the information you have given me, I found twenty-six historical figures who fit Harvey Darcy’s profile. They are not related or ancestors. In my opinion, these are all… the same person.” A series of photographs and portraits appeared right next to the one of Harvey Darcey. “Mostly writers or actors. Some nobility.” Stark and Strange exchanged a baffled look.

“Well I’ll be damned. Hiding in plain sight, that son of a gun. He never got too successful or well-known. It would have meant danger of being exposed. He did just enough to further his lifestyle. Good job, Jarvis. I think this is our guy.”, Stark said, sounding satisfied.

“Well done.” Strange’s words were sincere. “Now we have to hope that the sorcerer and the dragon succeed before it is too late for Asgard.”

“This is not at all how I imagined this going down!”, Loki called loudly against the rush of wind. They were cutting through the dense forests and across grass-covered fields at a breakneck speed, riding the wolves of legend they had defeated in combat not so long ago. Hati’s great grey paws threw back dull thumps as he ran, while his devil-may-care stride seemed thoroughly determined to rearrange every bone in Loki’s body. He held Ljosira firmly in front of him, making a secure sort of cage with his arms so she would not be jostled too much.
Sköll ran at his brother’s flank, a black shadow flying across the underbrush. Thor rode on his back, scarlet cloak unfurling behind him. The beasts were fast, quicker than any horse bred in Asgardian stables – except maybe Sleipnir. But damn was the ride uncomfortable. Everything rattled with each violent lurch, until Loki thought his jaws would clash against each other so hard it would break his teeth.

Yet the wolves had come to their aid in an hour of need, providing the perfect way to get back into the city without using magic which could have alerted Natta. They had overcome the confused anger the change in their home had called forth and Ljosira had managed to communicate to them that their help was needed now, in order to protect their homeland.

“You’ve gone soft in prison, brother! This is great!”, Thor retorted in a spirited shout. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Loki hissed out a curse, but it dispersed into the whiplash of their daring flight.

“I dearly hope I will still be able to father children after this.”, he mumbled close to Ljosira’s ear. “I’m not ashamed to say that I prefer flying with you over riding a giant wolf.”

“When we tell this story, let’s make it a heroic tale and not the nauseating horror that it was.”, she answered glumly. She held on to the thick fur on Hati’s neck for dear life, but Loki sensed that she had a hard time keeping up her grip. Only their minds had made the journey into the past without being altered, but their bodies were those of the present. Which meant that Ljosira was weakened, as she had been shortly before the Darkflight attacked the first time. They had to avoid any more incidents if they did not want to relive the whole thunder-channelling-experiment.

Thankfully, the city rose swiftly up before them, its glittering golden towers becoming visible against the setting sun. Sköll and Hati accompanied them to the outskirts where the docile farm-houses marked the edge of the Asgardian metropolis. Here the two wolves halted and their riders dismounted, quite happy to be on solid ground again.

“Thank you, friends. We are in your debt.”, Ljosira said in a kind voice, stroking Hati’s forehead, which spawned some satisfied grumbling sounds from him. Sköll just loomed a bit farther back, like a silent black sentinel.

“Return home now. The evil magic should be gone. Hunt well, once more.”, she added, bowing to both animals. They repaid the gesture by bobbing their heads, before they ran off towards the distant mountains again. The wolves were just disappearing behind the treeline when the adventurous trio heard the approach of a sky-striker. And surely enough, one of the golden vehicles descended towards them, navigated by an ever-smiling Fandral.

“Fandral! By the gods, you are a sight for sore eyes!”, Thor called out immediately. The sky-striker landed gracefully on the lush pasture grass.

“That’s a greeting I like to hear. We did not expect you back so soon, but I came when we spotted you. Were those Sköll and Hati, just now? The legendary mountain wolves?”, the handsome warrior asked, sounding quite amazed.

“I’d love to tell you the story, my friend. But we need to get to Heimdall, as soon as possible. Every minute counts now.”, the thunder prince urged him.

“This is about the warriors you lost in the highlands and the disturbances?” When they all nodded vigorously, Fandral ushered them onto the deck. “Get on then.”

Not much later, they walked into the observatory together to be greeted by a severe Heimdall
whose golden eyes were filled with insult. The Gatekeeper despised failing at his duties – and due

to the many unfortunate events since the appearance of the Aether, he had failed several times

now.

“Odinsons. Princess of Dragons. I was worried when you disappeared from my sight into the

storm.”, Heimdall said as they walked up to him.

“Gatekeeper, bond-brother to my kin. We need your help. Vegr faces a fate worse than death if our

mission does not succeed.”, Ljosira squandered no time gilding lilies. In curt words, she

enlightened Heimdall to the Darkflight’s plans. They could see understanding bloom on his

chiselled features as many strange happenings fell into place to form the bigger picture behind it

all. His eyes turned grim and unforgiving.

“Open the Bifröst and send us to Midgard, Heimdall. While we are there, Natta will not attack

Asgard. She needs the last piece of Dragonbane to complete her evil gambit.”, Loki beseeched him

urgently. Heimdall sighed, lips pressing into a thin line.

“If she attacks you on Midgard, you will be defenceless.”, he argued.

“We have friends on Midgard. And Natta has one great disadvantage – she cannot risk her plan

becoming known before it is in its very last stage, otherwise the other clans will rise against her at

once. She moves slowly, has to veil all her doing in secrecy.”, Loki reasoned.

“Besides, Midgard is far away. Even dragons can’t just skip over there in the blink of an eye.”,

Thor added.

“Lightbringers can. They brought us the Bifröst. The Darkflight have other means of travelling.

But you are right, she will think twice before sending dragons to Midgard.”, Heimdall conceded,
climbing the dais as he pulled Hofund from his back. He struck the sword into the socket and let

his gaze pass over the three of them. “I will have to send you in blind. Let us hope that I can

remember the carta of the cosmos well enough, or you might end up in the centre of a sun. Or

worse, in dead space.”

“You have been looking at it every day for four-thousand-something years. Gods, I sure hope you

have it memorized by now. Would be embarrassing otherwise.”, Loki murmured, earning himself a

glare from both Ljosira and Thor. Heimdall, on the other hand, smiled.

“Good to have you back, Tangler. I regretted the absence of your dry sarcasm.”

The shining rainbow beacon’s touch-down onto the landing site of Stark tower could not have been

ignored even if the city around it had been on fire. Stark and Strange hurried to the exit while the

Bifröst lit up the whole surroundings, etching its distinct rune-pattern into the metal ground. When

the light faded, Thor, Loki and Ljosira emerged from it. Thor took the lead, almost instantaneously

grasping hands with Tony.

“Stark. Good to see you. I have urgent news to discuss –“, he began, but Tony waved him off.

“We know. We were part of the whole ‘rescue mission’.” The Iron Man turned to Ljosira, bowing
to her graciously. “Your Highness.” Thor’s expression was somewhat insulted.

“She is Your Highness? You never called me by my title.”
“She is a beautiful woman. And the last time I insulted her, I looked down two rows of ten-inch teeth into the place where I’d end up. Not doing that again any time soon.”, Stark commented, earning himself a shocked look from Ljosira.

“I would never hurt you!”, she exclaimed, horrified. Tony grinned at that.

“Then the point still stands that you are just a stone-cold fox.” Ljosira looked thoroughly confused, while Loki uttered some colourful blasphemy as he stepped forward and glared down at Tony.

“You’re lucky she doesn’t understand that expression, human. And that your woman is not here to hear you say it.”, he ground out before he walked past the other man without a second glance.

“He’s not exactly mellowed since the last time I saw him. Jealousy is still his weakness.”, Stark said, his attention back on Ljosira.

“You shouldn’t antagonize him, Tony. Maybe not mellowed. But changed, he has.”, she rebuked, although the expression on her face was quite kind.

“I know. It’s protocol to bash the new guy a little, especially if he’s a renegade.”, Stark amended. His next words were sober. “I found your Outsider, I think.” The way her features lit up with hope was just a bit dazzling, like looking directly into a very bright light.

“And who is this, then?”, Thor demanded when they came to halt before Stephen Strange at the wide glass doors to the loft.

“The Wizard. He was the one who sent us back in time.”, Loki answered, nodding respectfully to Strange.

“So Earth has wizards now?”, his brother patted the man on the shoulder. The so-named wizard frowned a little, before his face assumed a look of neutral alertness.

“I prefer Master of the Mystic Arts. So, Thor… God of Thunder. Thought I would meet you sooner or later.”

After some introductions and bringing the humans up to speed about their adventure back in time, their little party gathered before Stark’s holograms as he showed them the picture of Harvey Darcy, the supposed Outsider. Ljosira regarded it very methodically, flipping through the facial matchings in history which Jarvis had gathered.

“Yes, it’s him. I can sense it.”, she said into the quiet surroundings. “We will have to be cautious. If we barge into his home or give ourselves away too quickly, he will simply go into hiding for the next century. He is good at that. Almost to be admired, isn’t it? That he managed to blend into human society so seamlessly, for thousands of years. I am sure he has much to tell us.”, she stated enigmatically.

“How do you want to do this?”, Thor queried in an uncertain tone.

“I think we should take a page out of his book. Attend one of his celebrations at the Cradle, disguised as guests.”, Loki interjected thoughtfully. Ljosira inclined her head.

“That is a sound idea, Loki. It appears there is one tonight. Let’s hope we have time until then.”, she sighed in a resigned fashion. “I am exhausted… I would love to sleep for a week, but I think I need to settle for a few hours.” She faced Stark and Strange and gave them a low curtsy. “Thank you both for your help. We couldn’t have come so far without you.” Tony cleared his throat audibly.
“I can do more than that. I will get you into that party. And into something far more… suited for the Cradle than that.”, he indicated Thor and Loki’s typical Asgardian attire and wind-torn cloaks. Towards Strange, he made a decidedly hopeless gesture.

“What’s wrong with this?”, Thor protested in affront.

“Everything.”, Tony answered.

Stark made good on his promise. By nightfall, he had acquired suitable evening clothes for everyone, although Loki would have preferred an illusion over the elegant waistcoat. It felt too tight around the chest, as did the tie and the suit itself, not quite fitting to his height. Ljosira, on the other hand, had received a vintage cocktail-dress, its wide knee-long skirt fanning out in a grey and black gradient of stylized lily petals. The halter neckline left her shoulders and back almost completely bare, emphasizing her slender figure. She seemed equally fascinated and disconcerted by the piece of clothing, constantly craning her neck in an attempt to see behind her back.

“I don’t understand humans. What’s so interesting back there that they must leave it almost naked? I feel exposed.” Loki couldn’t hide his amusement about her usual lack of experience with such mortal issues. She likely had no inkling that every man’s gaze would be drawn to the inviting curve of her spine, the porcelain skin gleaming like ivory. He was both placated and annoyed by Stark’s role in the choice of attire as he looked at his betrothed. She adjusted the skirts around her legs, fidgeting.

“I think you should take it with you when we return to Asgard. No one would notice if it didn’t find its way back to Stark.”, he commented with a smirk. Ljosira scowled at him, confused.

“Why? It would be stealing.”, she replied, oblivious to the innuendo. Loki stepped beside her and let his knuckles skim along the delicate skin at her back. She startled, her eyes snapping to his. His brows lifted in a suggestive sort of way, and the roguish expression on his face brought a rush of heat to her cheeks.

“If we had more time… I would show you why.”, he murmured softly, playing with the end of her meticulously braided hair. “I know we are in a great hurry… But you are effectively distracting me. What are we doing here again?”

“Saving your homeland.”, Ljosira reminded him as she grabbed hold of his tie and tugged him down for a passionate kiss. Her intentions might have been innocent, but he still had to keep a strict control lest he forget himself. There was no time for such things right now, however tempting they might have been. Loki let out a sigh when she pulled back again.

“You look good in a suit.”, she whispered, smiling. Her fingers went to trace the engagement ring on her left hand, almost instinctively. She frowned when she found it unadorned. “My ring is missing…” Her voice sounded saddened.

“It hasn’t been made yet, love.”, Loki mollified her. “Or rather it is being made right now. Don’t be disappointed. This way, you will get a second proposal. Isn’t that what you wished for?” Ljosira crinkled her nose in a cheeky expression.

“That’s not what I had in mind, trickster. But I suppose it will do.”
The Cradle was a sophisticated dance club in the West Village of Manhattan. The people of New York called the neighbourhood the Meatpacking District, although by now it was rather packed with lounges and party locations than butchers. For the first time in her life, Ljosira rode in a car – and she couldn’t rightly say it was a pleasant experience. All dragons were a bit claustrophobic, understandably. Creatures used to skies without end would never truly get used to the confining structures mortals liked to erect.

Not only was this whole city cramped and narrowly built, but the vehicle itself felt like being stuffed into a tiny cell with nary any air to breathe. A luxurious cell, though. Fine leather seats to sit on, every surface or metallic handle polished to a gleam. Stark seemed entertained by the stricken expressions of his three companions sitting across him. With the slight woman between the two imposing men, they looked as though they were bodyguards escorting some out-of-town celebrity.

“You don’t look happy, Frozen.”, Tony threw in after he had ended his lecture on Manhattan party dens and surrounding districts. “This is the most modern limousine ever built. I even added some little… tweaks. Of course, I had not meant to transport three guys and one woman. Rather the other way round.” Thor grinned at that. Loki had disguised Mjölnir as a more-or-less inconspicuous umbrella, which he now adjusted to settle on his knees.

“I am sure it is enjoyable for humans. I just don’t particularly like closed little boxes of metal that move around with me inside. It’s a dragon thing.”, she said, shifting nervously on the spot. After some consideration, Doctor Strange had returned to the Sanctum in Greenwich Village – which incidentally was not far away, as Tony explained. If anything unexpected happened, he would almost be within earshot.

“And yet we are on our way to an elusive lizard who seems to enjoy crowded places more than anything.”, Stark remarked, adjusting his suit so the blueish-white light on his chest was almost entirely concealed.

“Life-Binders are a bit special that way. And this one had enough time to get settled in.”, Ljosira amended humorously.

“Is there anything more you can tell us about him?”, Loki asked, casting a glance out the window. Rust-coloured facades and stylish shop-fronts passed by, sometimes interrupted by glossy entrances to some restaurant or other.

“I have told you all I know about him… His history has been largely erased from our memory. Such was his fate as an exile. I will have to try and make him talk to me. It would be best if he had no chance to escape… But we are on his grounds here.”

“Stay inconspicuous then. You know, mingle, drink, dance. Like real people do.”, Stark suggested with a smirk. Before Ljosira could argue with him, the car came to a halt. “We’re here.”

They exited the limousine one by one and found themselves at the back of a long line of sharply-dressed people. The Cradle rose before them, several storeys high and built from unassuming red bricks, as many other structures in this particular part of town were. The lowest level was lined thoroughly with tiles of expensive mahogany wood, which also made up the wide double doors leading into the club. With complete disregard to cutting lines, Stark walked up to the bouncer – a broad-shouldered mountain of a man who towered even over Thor. They talked quietly to each other while some of the waiting guests called in greeting as Tony passed them by. Others caught sight of Thor and started whispering excitedly.
“I should have disguised you with an illusion. This whole goddamn city seems to know your face.”, Loki hissed to his brother, irritated after the latter had winked at a pair of snickering young women.

“It’s not my fault that your exploits made me famous. I guess I am more likable than you. Stop glowering and smile more, brother. It does wonders.”, Thor retorted, demonstratively flashing his admirers a grin. It spawned some girlish giggles and waves. Loki rolled his eyes in annoyance.

“I never aimed to be *likable*. You don’t have to rub it in my face every time you get a chance.”

“Will you two stop bickering? I am trying to sense where Utandir is.”, Ljosira interrupted them sharply, and as the gentlemen they were, they fell silent at the lady’s request. Right then Tony seemed to conclude his discussion with the bouncer and the man moved to open the door for them. A murmur went through the waiting crowd, but the bass-heavy tunes from inside drowned out the noises of discontent.

“Piece of cake.”, Stark said, sounding satisfied with himself.

The interior of the Cradle was staggering, to say the least. Rhythmic beats pulsed at a near deafening volume, making Ljosira’s chest vibrate with every powerful rumble. Enthusiastic, swaying patrons were everywhere, so tightly packed that moving became a navigational challenge. The air felt heavy with the sheer vigour and excitement of a night spent in ecstatic revelry.

Two floors made up the main hall, the lower one flanked by rows of small tables and chairs. It led off to a bar decorated with artistic rectangular ornaments. At the far side, on a raised platform, Ljosira glimpsed a man dressed in rioting colours, handling a cornucopia of machines and monitors spread out around him. Below, people moved and danced in unison to the rise-and-fall of energetic tunes.

Countless neon lights illuminated the room from above, changing their colours every few seconds. The second floor was built as a gallery, with glass handrails allowing guests to observe the goings-on below. Assaulted by the plethora of sensations, Ljosira felt dizzy mere minutes after they had entered this den of overstimulation.

Her senses were flooded with flickering lights and booming discord – either by the music or the people yelling at each other over the noise. Her sensitive nose could make out a pungent mix of expensive perfumes and the distinct smell of *human*, too many of them in one place, sweating, drunk on the thrill. How could they be enjoying this at all? It mystified her. Parties on Midgard were very different to the feasts she had attended on Asgard.

“*I worry you won’t endure this place for long, my light.*”, Ljosira heard Loki’s voice through the communicator in her ear. Tony had given them these little devices in clever foresight that they might not be able to speak to each other without screaming themselves hoarse. *It’s better than your telepathy thing, because I can hear what you say too.*, he’d explained. She had tried to elaborate to him that he could very much hear her projections, if he would choose to open his mind to her magic. He had frowned at that. The communicators would work just as well.

“You forget I am half Life-Binder too. I will endure it, because I have to. Utandir is here. This is exactly his kind of place. The auras are brimming with the excess of sensations, overflowing with chaotic life-energy. Intoxicated by pleasure, verve and indulgence.”, she said, letting her gaze wander over the dancefloor.

“Ah yes, indulgence! I missed this place. How about a drink? I’ll be getting myself a drink. Our guy will likely be up in the VIP room, on the second floor.”, Tony chimed in.
Thor rolled his shoulders and quite firmly pushed aside a half-drunk dandy who had the misfortune of getting in his way. The young man looked insulted, but his debonair demeanour vanished when he became aware of the tall, muscled Asgardian staring him down. He apologized at once and moved aside so Thor could forge on through the crowd towards the stairs to the second floor, like an icebreaker cutting is path through the frozen ocean. The Mjölnir-umberella held loosely at his side, he seemed out of place despite the fashionable burgundy shirt he wore.

“No outlook on either good ale or a spirited brawl. This place is much too fancy. The sooner we get out of here, the better.”

Ljosira and Loki, who both followed in the wake of his effective lead through the throng, couldn’t have agreed more.
XXIX. The Outsider

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all who have stayed with me for so long!

The elusive Outsider appears! And he's not quite what anyone expected. Harvey Darcy is by the way no randomly chosen name. It's a bit of a tribute and hint to the actor Hugh Dancy, after whom I modelled Utandir's mortal appearance. :) This chapter heralds another action-filled part of the story. Ahh I'm getting so close to the end... Not very much left. The writing is finished, but needs a bit of polishing. I'm excited! Have fun!

XXIX. The Outsider

One could say all kinds of things about Tony Stark, but he indeed had connections to almost everyone who was anyone. He had not just managed to get an invitation to one of the exclusive parties at the Cradle, but had also magically made his own name and those of his companions appear on the VIP list.

Located on the second floor, this room for special guests would have been very hard to get into otherwise. Ljosira had to admit that it was much more inviting than the rest of the club. Wide, comfortable seats were arranged around low tables, where much fewer people gathered than on the dance floor. The music was quite loud here too.

Busy barkeepers served behind a stylishly lit counter. A beautiful waterfall cascaded down a wall made from black marble, while the other walls were decorated with abstract art Ljosira could make no sense of. An eccentric kind of chandelier hung from the ceiling.

“Well, here we are.”, Stark pointed out as he took a seat on a barstool. A tall, olive-skinned bartender hurried to him immediately.

“The famous Mister Stark! You are very welcome, sir. What can I bring you?”, the man greeted in a deep, courteous voice.

“A mug of ale! And make it strong, not some watery swill these milk-drinkers enjoy.”, Thor cut in, earning himself an exasperated scowl from Tony.

“Excuse my blundering friend here. We’ll have a beer. And a glass of scotch. Dalmore, the King Alexander vintage. Make it a double, no ice.” Then he turned to Thor. “You really don't know how to order a drink, Goldylocks. You’re embarrassing me, so just stand there and look pretty. Let me do the talking.” The thunder prince glared at him.

“What about the lady and the doombringer? A drink?” Both Ljosira and Loki shook their heads.

“I can’t see him... He’s not here yet.”, she whispered, sounding tense. Their entire plan would be worthless if the Outsider decided not to show up at all. Tony cast a glance around the room before he turned casually to the bartender now pouring the drinks.
“I’m curious, will we get to see the owner of the Cradle today?”, he wondered, his tone innocent.
“I am thinking about throwing a private party. Everyone knows I like throwing money out the
window. I might as well throw it at him.”

“Mister Darcy usually makes his rounds a bit later into the night. Until then, he likes to stay in his
personal room.”, the barkeeper indicated a corridor at the left corner of the VIP lounge. It would
have been unassuming if not for the two large bouncers standing guard at either side.

“Maybe I could talk to him for a mi –“, but Thor and Loki had already sprung to action, much to
Tony’s dismay. “Meatheads.”, he cursed under his breath as the two Asgardians made a beeline for
the guards. Ljosira trailed right behind.

“Don’t make a scene –“, she whispered to Loki, but the next moment they all had to stop before the
human wall that shifted to block their way.

“This area is off limits for guests, sir. I need you to step back.”, one of the large men said, quite
politely.

“Friends, we just wish to speak to Mister Darcy. The matter is urgent.”, Loki explained in a
deeptively friendly, courteous voice. Thor growled beside him, pacing on the spot in his usual
restless manner. Keeping still and being subtle were neither of his strengths.

“I don’t like the look this one gives me.”, the other guard pointed at Thor. Before Loki could
placate them, another voice spoke from the depths of the corridor. It was deep, melodious, and
slightly irritated.

“What is going on there?”

Both guards turned to the man who had spoken, leaving some space open for Ljosira to peek
through. In a beam of soft orange light that fell in from the room at the back stood a man, dark and
handsome in his hand-tailored three-piece suit. Chestnut brown hair and beard perfectly groomed,
he fit into the excessive mortal surroundings like a puzzle-piece into its assigned place.

But as his light blue eyes locked with hers, Ljosira felt the unmistakable aura as though branded
into her brain. Dragon. Knowledgeable, radiant. Old, almost as old as her father. But… empty,
somewhat, saturated by ancient regret. For a timeless moment, they just looked at each other. He
recognized her for what she was as she recognized him, in the way an animal understood when it
happened upon another of its kind. And then Utandir spun around and ran.

“Wait!”, Ljosira shouted. She leaped through the narrow space between the two guards, who were
momentarily dumbstruck. They quickly recovered though, lunging after her – which was ultimately
a great mistake, since they had forgotten about Thor and Loki standing ready. There was a flurry of
frantic shouts and crashes before the four men went down in a scrambled heap right at the entrance
to the corridor.

“What the fuck!”, one man’s muffled yell carried over the chaos that broke out seconds later.
People startled and jumped out of their seats at the sight of the sudden brawl. Loki was buried
beneath a mountain of muscle, grunting in pain when someone’s elbow hit him in the ribcage. By
the feel of it, it could have been Thor’s.

“What the hell are you doing?!”, Stark’s angry voice cut through the bedlam. Kicking himself free,
Loki saw the guests running for help, but he couldn’t bother with them right now. With some
difficulty, he extricated himself and was helped up by a furious Tony. A dull slap that sounded
suspiciously like metal hitting flesh told him that Thor was about to resurface too.

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difficulty, he extricated himself and was helped up by a furious Tony. A dull slap that sounded
suspiciously like metal hitting flesh told him that Thor was about to resurface too.
“Asgardian idiots! After them, they already have a head start!” Loki didn’t have to be told twice. He charged down the corridor without looking back.

Ljosira couldn’t hear the voices of the others anymore. Like the thumping bass beats of the music in the Cradle, they had faded into the background during her chase after the Outsider. Darkened corridors, shadowy staircases, a winding maze of paths that seemed to have no end. They were built to be confusing, threaded through by magic which struggled to throw her off course the way contenders in a messy race pushed aside their opponents. If she lost sight of him, she would be groping her way through here without guidance, likely for hours. A safeguard, made by a creature who planned for every eventuality.

Letting him escape meant forfeiting the only chance to resolve the conflict with Natta without putting all of Asgard into jeopardy. He could not be allowed to flee. The communicator in her ear was filled with static – another thing the Outsider had seen to, most certainly. She was on her own, for now.

Ljosira rushed after him, her pulse thudding through every muscle, right up to her eardrums. The walls and ground veered precariously, but her eyes were firmly fixed onto the silhouette before her. Suddenly, he threw open a door at the end of the hallway and a cone of artificial light fell through to illuminate the corridor.

Galvanized by urgency, Ljosira took a great lunge and slipped through the door before it could fall shut again. She found herself in a back alley, likely a secret exit from the club. Containers and trashcans lined the building facades, tinted in orange by the street lamps. But she paid her surroundings little heed. The Outsider was running again, and she followed.

“Utandir!”, she cried out, fed up with the damn chase. The calling of his exile-name made the man who dubbed himself Harvey Darcy stop short right where the alley joined a wide boulevard. Ljosira came to a halt a few steps behind him, gasping for air.

“Don’t make me shift to catch you. I will, believe me!”, she added breathlessly. Strangely enough, the streets were deserted. No sign of people, neither of her companions. The isolation was a bizarre contrast to the crowded ambiance of the club. Utandir sighed, his back still turned to her.

“What do you want?”, he demanded in a sonorous voice.

“I need your help. We have to save –“, Ljosira began, but the Outsider spun around to glare at her, his gallant features distorted by anger.

“We don’t have to do anything. Who are you to come to my home, threaten me with your entourage and hound me like some wounded quarry? And you aren’t even remotely good at disguising yourself. Everything about you screams dragon.”, he went on, interrupting her.

“I am Ljosira of the Lightbringers. I –“

“You are Varlitta’s youngest.”, Utandir said quietly. An unreadable expression ghosted across his face, before it disappeared again behind a mask of contempt. “You were a hatchling when I was banished.”

“You knew my mother?”, she sounded dumbstruck. The exile regarded her wordlessly, his lips
forming a thin line of discontent. Ljosira shook off the confusion.

“It doesn’t matter – We don’t have much time and I really need your help. Natta is planning a war against my father, and if I don’t stop her, she will destroy all of Asgard, and likely even more than that.”

“That is where you are wrong, little one. It does matter, more than you know. Why should I care that Elding finally gets what was coming for him?”, he retorted, crossing his arms in a gesture of defiance.

“What…? You are a dragon! Whatever quarrel you had with the dragon king, you are a protector of Yggdrasil first and foremost!”, she almost yelled at him, disgusted by his outright refusal. The selfishness she saw in his aura was like poison spreading through a festering wound. Utandir straightened, his gaze straying into the distance.

“So he did erase me from living memory. Nobody remembers.”, he murmured, more as if to himself. Then he glowered at Ljosira with his piercing blue eyes. Unusual, for a Life-Binder. Their eyes were typically brown or green.

“I am not a dragon anymore. I challenged Elding to fair combat, but instead of getting justice, he stripped me of my name and banished me. It’s almost ironic that after four thousand years in exile, it should be his only daughter who hunts me down. Go home, Lightbringer. I cannot help you.”

She sensed that he spoke the truth about her father – which shook her down to the core. What reason could there be for doing such a thing? Was this how he had tried to usurp the throne? Had he intended to kill her father in a duel and take his place?

“Why do you hate my father?” Ljosira held his gaze, unwilling to let his whole issue go. “Why would you challenge him? He is a good king. He led us into a time of peace that lasted eons.”

Utandir inclined his head, surveying her curiously. He was trying to get the measure of her. She could feel the probing, faint tendrils of his magic. Where Lightbringers read auras with their sight, Life-Binders relied almost entirely on their uncanny instincts to understand the deeper meaning of the world. All of them were exceptional empaths – able to perceive any other creature’s emotions, abundantly. Utandir utilized that sixth sense now, his expression slowly turning into bafflement. Ljosira did not shield herself against the soft touches brushing over her mind. She had nothing to hide.

“You are a strange one. There is something about you… A vivid thing. A charged kind of… mortality. As if you have been touched by their fleeting lives.”, the Outsider observed calmly, pacing in a half-circle around her.

“Aren’t you a little young to have a mate? You are thinking about him right now.”, he continued, his brow furrowing in bemusement. “He came here with you. A mortal? Asgardian. No… A man from two worlds. How peculiar, unheard of… You really love him, fear that I have him trapped somewhere. Do not worry. They will catch up soon. So much trouble in your heart, little one. For your mate, your brother, your family on Yggdrasil… Your life-bonds are strong, and spirited. As mine were, once. They are all gone now.” Deep sympathy welled up in her, against her will. All bonds gone… what a horrible, bleak life. An almost imperceptible smile came to Utandir’s lips.

“Don’t feel sorry for me, Ljosira. I severed them myself. I would rather live the life of a stunted shadow than endure the pain of being forever separated from the ones I loved. You fear for your mate’s life? You dread his death, the agony that would come with it? Triple that pain, multiply it by a hundred, and you will know what I felt.”, he spoke in a quiet voice, void of emotion.
“I don’t understand… Why would you sever them? Why would you willingly suffer through that?” She couldn’t even imagine it. The mere thought terrified her.

“It was the only way I could think of to make the other pain stop. I was promised to your mother, and she to me.”, Utandir said, meeting her eyes in a painfully direct look. Ljosira stared at him, shocked into silence.

“I know she cared about me… But I loved her. And Elding took her from me. At first, I just wanted to kill him for it. But then I… felt that she was truly happy. She chose him over me. And it only made everything worse. So I left Yggdrasil, and went as far away as away goes. I was gone for a long, long time. Still, I carried her with me, like a wound that would never truly heal. I lived my own personal hell. In the end, I came back and had to look upon the future I would never have. It was too much to bear. I challenged Elding, with no intention of surviving that encounter. Can you imagine the irony? A Life-Binder, grown tired of life. But he could not even give me that, that smallest victory of choosing my own end. And here we are, Lightbringer. Truth you wished, and truth you got. You dragged me back into that pain by demanding answers.”

Ljosira struggled to find words in the light of this tremendous revelation. Her mother had not chosen her promised mate as she would have been supposed to. It happened, very rarely. Usually, all involved parties found their peace with the decision as time passed. But Utandir had not. He had never moved on. She took a deep breath.

“My mother is gone, Utandir. She has been gone for many years now. One day, she just… disappeared into dark space, and never returned. We don’t know what happened to her, but… she is no more. I am so sorry.”, she said, her voice filled with sadness. The Outsider looked at her, his lively blue eyes widening.

“What…? No. I would have felt it. I would have known. She can’t be!”, he yelled in denial.

“Ljosira!” Loki’s call echoed through the alley. He was by her side before she had fully turned to him, assuming a defensive stance as soon as he glimpsed Utandir. But the dragon exile didn’t even seem to notice them anymore, his face screwed up in a grimace of misery.

Ljosira whispered quietly to Loki, whose expression turned solemn as he listened. His arm wrapped soothingly around her shoulders. He could sense that she was revisited by the painful memories of her mother’s death.

Grief radiated in tangible waves from the hunched figure of Utandir, only serving to burden the air further with sorrow. Loki did commiserate, yet he also inwardly condemned the dragon for pulling Ljosira down with him.

“Varlitta is gone… My love is gone. All this time, I thought she had forgotten about me…”, they could hear him say, his voice faltering.

“Utandir…”, Ljosira began then, swallowing down a knot in her throat. “My mother would have given her life to protect Yggdrasil. Natta will destroy everything she fought for, everything she stood for.” The Outsider barked a humourless laugh. Loki could almost taste his aura of bitterness, like a tonic of rue.

“Ha, Natta. Even back then, she schemed against Elding. Has she finally found the Black Library?”

“The what?”, Loki and Ljosira asked simultaneously. Utandir slumped onto a metal box and leaned back against the building wall. He had lost all colour. Even his eyes looked dull and lifeless.
“At the edge of the known universe, there is a planet. Nothing there, except an abandoned library, in a temple made of stone as black as the night. Ancient texts from the beginning of time can be found there, forgotten even by the dragons. Spell-books, arcane knowledge, schematics for all sorts of horrid weapons. I went there, during my journey. But the place is hard to find. It drifts through dark space, and is well protected by primordial magic. Don’t look at me like that. I never told Natta anything about it.”, he hissed out at their horrified faces.

It was this moment that the other two of their party exited through the heavy metal door. Thor strode up with broad steps while Tony jogged along, panting. A moment later, a whizzing glove and a de-umberellified Mjölnir were pointed straight at Utandir.

“No more moves, Dancer. Disruption devices in the walls, huh? Good one. Too bad I’m better. One step ahead of the lizard.”, Stark remarked in a fake friendly tone.

“Never should have trusted technology. Magic is much more dependable.”, the Life-Binder uttered. He didn’t seem to care about the obvious threats in the men’s stances.

“I beg to differ. ‘Magic’ is just the name we give technology we don’t understand yet.”, Tony retorted. Loki stepped between the two of them suddenly, pulling forth the Onyx Star from his pocket. Oozing its eerie whispers, it floated above his palm portentously, like a bad omen. Ljosira conjured a projection to complement the shard so it took on the form of the assembled spearhead. Dragonbane.

“Do you know what this is?”, Loki demanded in a stern voice. Utandir gazed at the weapon for a long moment.

“If that is ever completed, don’t be anywhere near it.” That impassive statement was directed at Ljosira. “The schematics for that revolting thing were in the Black Library. It can siphon a dragon’s soul and channel the power. Made from amalgams of Uru and obsidian. The black metal can be found on each of the realms.”

“Only the dwarves of Nidavellir know how to forge Uru. We found this shard on Asgard.”, Thor interjected harshly. Utandir eyed him with a sceptical look.

“And who are you to educate me on that? Some sort of glorified bodyguard?”, the dragon snapped scathingly.

“I am Thor Odinson, God of Thunder!”, the prince countered, clearly insulted.

“Odin had a son, interesting. Figures. I have been out of the loop lately, Your Highness. Well, Thor Odinson – let me explain a bit of wisdom to you. The leader of a dragon flight is a figure of near infinite respect. The dwarves of Nidavellir would have felt honoured to forge something for Natta. They would never have questioned her! And the forge is in Darkflight space. My best guess is she had the shards made and scattered them throughout the realms. How did you find them? Inside black holes, perchance?”, Utandir deduced, to which Ljosira nodded.

“Clever. She charged it with shadow magic. You should never have let her create this thing. Now it’s too late. She has attuned it to herself. It won’t answer to anyone else.”

“We couldn’t prevent it from being made!”, Ljosira exclaimed in anger. “There has to be a way to turn it against her. Change its allegiance. Utandir, you have to help us. You must. You have more forbidden knowledge than any other dragon!” Her eyes bore into him, filled with a hope so desperate it seemed to stir something in the Outsider’s long-frozen heart. He let out a deep sigh.
“Much of your father in you. But down at the core… you are her. Varlitta… Gone… And yet not.”, he said with a strange kind of tenderness in his voice. “There is a way. But the cost is too high. You can’t –” Before he could finish his sentence, a fiery portal uncoiled behind all of them and Stephen Strange stepped through, his sharp features intense with urgency. Every face turned to him in surprise.

“Intruders breached the borders to our world. They are headed here.”, he revealed in a curt and precise fashion.

“Dragons?”, Loki asked without preamble. The others were instantly alert.

“No.”, Strange shook his head. “I would have recognized dragons. These are smaller, although there is one large energy signature. They passed through a dimensional rift of some sort. Our shield did nothing! I came to warn you at once.”

Ljosira whirled around at the high whistling sound of something approaching with immense speed. In the light of many street lamps and windows, she saw it. A sleek figure clad in alien armour, flying atop a nimble metallic vehicle. The javelin in his hand was charged to the brim with sizzling energy. Several more followed behind him, seemingly pouring out of the sky above Manhattan.

“Chitauri.”, she said in a dead voice. Natta’s precious prisoners had come to finish the job for her.
XXX. Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

One of the last big action scenes in the story, and it wasn't an easy one! I tried to make it resemble the scenes from the Marvel movies and therefore it is a little fast-paced, but I like it! After this, we will journey back to Asgard with out heroes for the grand finale (with a short reprieve before that). I hope you like it! Have fun reading :)

XXX. Sacrifice

“Jarvis, I need the Mark 42, now. We have company.”, Stark barked at once.

“Why do you get armour and I have to fight in this… Whatever it is!?”’, Thor grunted, taking up an imposing, protective stance at the front of the group.

“Because you’re not Iron Man!”’, their human companion threw in before he turned his attention to the approaching Chitauri. “I blew up their fucking mother ship! Why are there still some of them alive?”

“Natta must have kept a few back in quarantine. There aren’t many, a skeleton force compared to what I brought with me for the Battle of New York.” Loki pocketed the shard and let a pair of spectral daggers manifest in his hands.

Utandir backed away from the group, his face an ashen mask of shock. An instant later, a gold-and-red rocket shot between the streets right at them, unfolding into a suit of armour as it went. The pieces seamlessly assembled around Stark, clothing him in gleaming, perfectly polished metal. Last to descend was the face-guard of his helmet, before the glowing visor turned towards the Outsider.

“Where do you think you are going, Dancer? No one exits before the show is over.”, the Iron Man spoke with Stark’s slightly distorted voice.

“I’m not getting dragged into your war. If Natta goes through such means, she will stop at nothing. And you should consider fleeing, Ljosira. She seems to want you almost as badly as she wants the shard.”, the exile pointed out, but his words had an effect he surely hadn’t intended. Incensed by the very notion of fleeing, Ljosira straightened to her full height and stared him down.

“I am not going anywhere. I’m not a coward who runs away from a fight. I am Lightbringer!””, her voice gained certainty, almost rising to a roar at the end.

When the last syllable was spoken, the alley drowned in light as she transformed in front of their eyes. Utandir watched the whole thing with disbelief, watched the white dragon fill out the entire boulevard. Her first act was to unceremoniously rip the Chitauri rider closest to them out of the air, crushing him between her jaws. The leftovers of her victim crashed into the side of a building, engulfed in a merry explosion as his vehicle went up in flames.

“Attagirl!”, Stark cried out triumphantly when a violent beam of dragon fire roasted the next rider off his chariot.
“I want her around all the time! Can we hire her?”, he asked nobody in particular, blasting a descending foe to bits with a precise laser strike. Mjölnir soared to the sky and brought bodies tumbling down from it like some bizarre rain of dolls. If they recovered from the fall, daggers skewered them, lasers disintegrated them. Ljosira’s wings flung out to crash chariots and send Chitauri flying helplessly through the air, where they were met by rune-clustered spears of light conjured by the Wizard.

“I don’t think I ever handed in my resignation, you little shits!”, Loki smiled like the devil as he drove a searing blade into an enemy’s throat.

“Why brother, I am proud of you!”, Thor yelled over the clamour of battle while he smashed a reptilian head in with Mjölnir. “You analysed the situation —“, he sent another one flying just by punching him in the chest. “… and came to the right conclusion!” The hammer struck the ground with a deafening clash, electrifying every Chitauri in close vicinity. They slumped to the ground, twitching as they fell.

A trio of chariots were coming their way, fast. Before they arrived though, they were visited by a dozen tiny missiles ejected from the Iron Man’s shoulder-guards. There was little time to glory in the explosions which lit up the nocturnal cityscape.

A shattering roar rent the air, coming from the inky sky above, where a giant worm-like monster was struggling through a gaping tear in reality. Impenetrable armour-plates covered its entire body – except for the abysmal jaws protruding from the reptilian head as it screamed in rage. Leviathan, a gargantuan beast from the depths of dark space.

“Shit. Not one of those assholes! It will wreck half the city before we bring it down!”, Stark shouted angrily.

“It won’t.”, Ljosira’s voice resonated in their heads, momentarily staggering the two humans. Loki turned to her, a wild sort of fear distorting his features.

“No. Ljosira, it’s too dangerous! Don’t take any risks! I’ve seen these creatures fight —“, he stopped short when her dragon eyes swerved to him.

“How will I ever be able to guard Yggdrasil and the ones I love, if I am not prepared to take the risk? I fled from one of them once. Never again.”

Loki wanted to object, but she didn’t allow him room to do so. The ground trembled beneath her feet as she broke into a run. A good thing the buildings weren’t skyscrapers in this part of town, giving her enough space to spread her wings. She pushed herself off and took to the sky, with every pair of eyes following her ascent, even Utandir’s. The bright shape soared to meet the invading monster.

Everywhere in the city, people threw their windows open wide, their faces both horrified and awe-struck. Drivers abandoned their cabs, and those who were stuck behind them didn’t even bother to honk their horns. Waitresses stood motionless outside the late-night diners, their eyes huge and mesmerized. All of them witnessing the great pearly dragon lock jaws with the Leviathan who had come to wreak havoc on their home.

On the completely blocked-up 5th avenue, Nick Fury opened his van door and stepped onto the street. His one eye fixated on the clash of the giants above.
“Is that a dragon fighting a motherfucking Leviathan?”, he asked Maria Hill, who leaned on the open door with the same stunned expression.

“I believe it is, sir. Looks like it’s on our side.”, she managed to answer, spellbound by the spectacle.

“You can’t get a damn sandwich in this city without stumbling over shit like this!”

On the roof of a tall building, an excited teenager pulled a red mask over his face and jumped from the edge gracefully. A violent dialogue of roars and screeches erupted from the fighting creatures, making the glass and steel towers vibrate. Utandir had frozen solid as he gazed to the sky, his expression strife-torn and pained.

“She can’t do it on her own! We need to help her!” Loki picked up an energy blade and struck it through the heart of a sprawled Chitauri warrior.

There weren’t many left, but they were still harassing the ground group without relent. Five chariots darted in their direction, lined up into a perfect formation. The laser beams from their weapons tore up the asphalt as they drew closer, but Strange stepped forth between Thor and Loki. The charged projectiles battered against the golden shield he conjured. The Iron Man moved in with both his hands raised, but before he could do anything –

“Hey, mean guys! Up here!”, a cheerful voice called out.

The next moment, a band of odd white substance shot forth from nowhere, sticking to the side of a building. Like a well-made trip-wire – or a spider’s sticky web - the Chitauri stumbled right into it. Their chariots flew on without them while the web spun them up in a neat little ball of alien yarn. A slender figure landed in the complete wreckage of the boulevard, arms akimbo in a heroic pose.

“Oh, for the love of –“, Stark cursed, but the rest of it went unheard as the chariots exploded in their haywire descent.

“I got this covered, Mister Stark! I’ll handle the perimeter and you take that… thing in the sky. Don’t think I’m up for the big leagues yet, whoa!” He jumped aside to evade a violet laser beam. The one who’d fired it was plastered to the ground a moment later, unable to do much more than wiggle.

“The Spiderboy’s right, Stark.” Thor caught Mjölnir and gave a lunging Chitauri a casual uppercut. “Can’t fight if I need Mjölnir to fly. You’re the only one who can help her. We will protect the youngster.”

“Your word, Thor. I don’t want him hurt.”, Stark’s voice was dead serious.

“You have my word.”

“And mine.”, Loki added sternly. “Now go!”

“Hey, it’s Spiderman! And I can handle it.”, the boy piped up, sounding insulted. The Iron Man made a noise suspiciously close to a fatalistic sigh. Then the boosters on his palms and feet came to life and catapulted him into the air. Like a comet he shot towards the spiralling giants waging their own war above New York.
Ljosira bit down on the plates of armour at the Leviathan’s throat, trying with all her strength to rip them off. Her wings beat frantically against the pull as the creature struggled to throw her off or slam her against a tower. Claws buried into the vulnerable little cracks between his plates, she clung to him like a starving lion to its prey.

The alien beast bled from several gashes to its nose and snout, but she would never bring it down if she couldn’t get through its armour. Again and again she breathed her white-hot flames at the strengthened metal, but she knew it took too long. The entangled mass of flesh, magic and metal just barely soared by a tall skyscraper. A dozen windows burst apart from the flap of her wings.

Millions of people in this city, and only one building coming down would kill hundreds, if not thousands. The Leviathan coiled and aimed to bite down on her neck. A beam of pure energy hit its jaw before it could, making it scream in agitation. From the corner of her eye, Ljosira saw a golden-red figure fly at her flank and several small missiles hit the Leviathan’s side. They did not do much, but brought her a short reprieve.

“Talk to me, Frozen! What do you need me to do?” Ljosira hoped very much that the Man of Iron could hear her by now – it would be a very one-sided conversation otherwise. To perceive her voice clearly, he needed to believe in her, even if just a little. It was a matter of faith, of keeping an open mind to things which simply cannot be explained.

“Tell me where to steer this thing so it doesn’t hurt your people! I need an open space!”, she projected towards him. He streaked along in silence for a long moment.

“Central Park. This time of night, it’s got to be somewhat empty.”, Tony answered.

“Lead the way!”, she commanded.

Her mouth opened for another fire-breath, this time deliberately aiming at the Leviathan’s face. He roared in rage and she let go of him, veering tauntingly in front of the beast, who went into immediate pursuit. Ljosira dodged its giant jaws and vaulted elegantly out of the way, evading the towers.

They must have made a ridiculous sight, if it hadn’t been so terrifying – the flying shape of a man, chased by a dragon, chased by an even bigger monster, like some mad enactment of the saying: ‘There is always a bigger fish’. Mere minutes later, Ljosira saw where Tony led her: A wide green area in the middle of the city of steel, immense in size. She’d have enough space there to bring the Leviathan down without demolishing the whole district.

In a foolhardy manoeuvre she’d learned from her brothers, she dropped straight down and then did a backflip that would have made Vegr proud. The next moment her claws fastened to the Leviathan again and she sent a volley of flames to meet with his weakened armour plate. She let no shudder, no flailing, no violent thrashes throw her off.

“Need some help?”, came Stark’s voice from close by. He hovered to her side until he was literally huddled against her long neck.

“This has to come off, now.”, Ljosira informed him.

“With pleasure.”

They went to work at once. Laser and fire mingled to a ray of pure energy that cut through the alien metal mercilessly. The force of their combined efforts melted a long white crack into the creature’s protection, allowing Ljosira to grab the plate and tear it off. She squandered no time. Her teeth sank
into the soft, vulnerable flesh beneath, tearing through the vital vessels.

No matter where a being came from – the throat was always a weak point, if it had a head connected to it. The Leviathan let out an ear-shattering roar of pain, followed by a disgusting gurgle. Blood gushed from the terrible wound and Tony darted away to avoid the torrent of alien body-fluid. Unable to keep up the flight, the Leviathan plunged towards the dark green gardens of Central Park. It hit the ground with a deafening crash, the giant body cutting a swath of destruction into the well-groomed fields of grass. Trees were uprooted, bushes ripped out by the dozens.

Ljosira released her stranglehold and rose to hover above the beast. The beam of her scorching fire hit her foe right where she had wounded him. The magical flames seared their way into his body, burning him from the inside out. She did not stop until the entire abomination was purged within the dragon fire, reduced to a blackened skeleton encased in half-melted plates of armour.

During this vicious purification, the others arrived through Strange’s portal – all of them, even Utandir. As Stark touched down on the ruined field, his face-guard opened. He wore an expression somewhere between stricken and impressed.

“As far as we know, we saw the last of them.”, Thor commented, casting a glance at the vengeful dragon burning away her enemy’s remains. The others followed his example, their faces illuminated by the dancing flames.

“Yeah, I know. That sight would have me pissing my pants if I were to be married to her. She has a temper. Do not get on her bad side.”, Stark said to Loki, who shook his head and smiled thinly.

“Not planning to. She had a score to settle with this one.”, he replied in a calm tone. Ljosira seemed to be finished with the Leviathan for now. The remnants of the monster smouldered like embers still, and the utter chaos had roused the entire city.

People were standing some way off at the edge of the park, staring at the dragon. They collectively flinched when she threw back her head and trumpeted out her victory in a short, resounding song. Then she turned and walked across the field with ponderous steps, right to the bank of a quiet lake. Its surface reflected the starry sky and the white disk of the moon.

Without preamble, Ljosira plunged her head into the water, accompanied by loud splashing sounds. She drank deeply, before beginning to clean the blood and splatters of green slime from her scales as a bird would preen its plumage. Everyone watched her grooming ritual, stunned into silence.

“They always liked to be spotless, Lightbringers.”, Utandir told the others. They looked at him in surprise, as if just now noticing his presence. “Dirt shows easily on their light scales. And they hate to get dirty. So, first thing to do after a fight... A good wash. Cools the head, too.”, he added.

While the others kept a respectful distance to the dragon, Loki walked up to her in a shockingly guileless manner. He had nothing to fear. During her battle against the Leviathan, the life-bond had burned bright with her rage, but he was the one person who knew her down to the very core. And that core was benevolent and kind, despite the occasional bout of hot temper.

As he approached her, Ljosira casually shook herself to disperse a shower of crystalline droplets from her mane. A wing unfurled swiftly above him. She nosed it over methodically and Loki was reminded of his father’s ravens smoothing their ruffled feathers. Then she folded it to her flank, sleek and clean like a maiden ship’s sail. Her head lowered to him and she nestled the side of her face against his chest. Wordlessly, they assured themselves that neither of them was seriously hurt. A little worse for wear, but otherwise unharmed. A low, gratifying rumble rose from her as he ran his hands over the smooth scales on her forehead. She opened her jaws and issued a giant yawn, her
pink tongue curling lazily. Loki could practically feel the looks of disbelief from countless spectators when he didn’t even cringe.

“You saved this city from a possible catastrophe. I think they might build a dragon statue right here in this park.”, he said with a humorous smirk. She eyed him apprehensively.

“They wouldn’t have needed saving if we hadn’t come here. I wonder if we made a mistake…”

her voice was threaded with bitterness.

“You are disappointed by our supposed ally…”, Loki whispered, although he didn’t really need to ask. Her sentiments towards the Outsider were quite clear, a gouging chip of ice. A dragon who had turned his back on his commitments, on all which is sacred to the guardians of Yggdrasil – out of resentment and hurt.

Her good-natured part pitied him – and at the same time a fierce contempt burned in her for his cowardly ways, for hiding himself away from responsibility. He used the rich company of humans like a drug – to numb the pain, paralyze it and fill the emptiness in his heart. Such selfishness went against everything she had been taught, and she had no respect for it.

“You are right to condemn me.” Both of them turned to see Utandir walk closer across the devastated field. His eyes were trained on Ljosira, who regarded him with her imperious dragon sight.

“I hated my fate. I wanted to forget, run away from it. And I wanted to keep hating Elding for taking what I loved. I became… less. Lost pieces I had once thought priceless treasures.”, he spoke with a deep-seated bitterness which must have festered inside him over centuries, the way disease grows to permeate the trunk of a strong tree, eating away at it. Loki and Ljosira exchanged a long look.

“I know what that’s like.”, Loki said, his voice earnest. “Lying to yourself to escape the truth. And being less for it. You have not lost your honour yet. You are still a dragon. If you had really wanted your life to end, you would have found a way. Yet you didn’t. But if you turn away now, you will truly be what they named you. An Outsider. An exile, forever.” With one fluid motion, he conjured the Onyx Star to float above his open palm, holding it out towards Utandir.

“Help the one who helped me, Life-Binder. And you shall have a friend in her where you had none for a long time.” The exile caught Ljosira’s eye and stood firm beneath her scrutiny.

“A strange day when mortals advocate for dragons. You are an odd, mottled pair. There have been none like you, in all our history.”, he paused and seemed to consider something very seriously. “I shall… help you. Elding means nothing to me, still. But you… you remind me of Varlitta. Brave and loyal. You were right. She would have fought for what she believed in.” Utandir’s lids fluttered shut as he lifted his face to the skies above. A smile ghosted across his lips.

“Let me see… If I still remember what it feels like to be dragon.”

“Take flight with me, and you will remember.”

Ljosira shook off the last drops of moisture from her mane and stepped past Loki without much ceremony. She accelerated to a run and her wings spread to launch her into the air.

The spirit escaped from the Outsider’s mortal form, solidifying in a whirl of leaves to join the majestic white dragon. He was smaller, thinner. Almost a bit decrepit, his verdant wings a little unsteady during his ascent. His scales were the bright green of sunlight falling through summer
A warm breeze swept away the night’s chill as Utandir took flight for the first time in so many years. Ljosira flew by his side, her natural guidance helping him to fall back into a habit equal to breathing for their kind. Together, they vaulted above the city of Manhattan, flew spirals across the velvet sky between the moon and the stars and the towers of steel. Their cries resonated down to the people still watching in the streets, who seemed soothed by the strangely melodious duet.

“Dragon dance…” Thor came to stand beside Loki. Side by side, they observed the two immortal creatures in the sky.

“They make peace this way. Share stories and magic. This world has not seen such marvel for thousand years.”, Loki said thoughtfully.

“How do you know that?”, his brother wondered, to which he earned himself a reproachful glance normally reserved for patronizing wisemen.

“I know you were never fond of books, but it would not hurt you to read one, every once in a while.”

Thor made a disdainful sound, then his lips pulled into a smile.

“The humans will remember this spectacle, I am sure. Oh, here they come.”

The two brothers backed up a little as the dragons came soaring down again and landed in the open space created by the Leviathan’s downfall. Ljosira towered over Utandir, who approached Loki as he folded in his shimmering wings. The dark brown horns crowning his head resembled the proud antlers of a stag. Wherever he stepped, fresh grass grew from the ruined soil, vividly green like a new-born spring bud. His eyes were two brilliant peridots uncovered from the heart of the earth. Such a charismatic creature he was! Despite all that had transpired, it seemed impossible not to feel awed in his presence.

“Give me the shard, Asgardian.”, the Life-Binder’s abundant voice projected into Loki’s thoughts. Doing as asked, he let the shard hover closer to Utandir. Ljosira had stayed behind, but now she made a movement towards them. Her tail flicked out anxiously.

“Utandir. When I asked you for help, I did not mean this –“, she began. The other dragon shook his head decisively.

“It must be done. Nothing less will turn the shard. Remember to temper it in your fire when I am done.”, he told her, his tone harsh. Yet his voice gentled for what he said next. “Do not grieve for one without a name, Ljosira. I am glad I felt the wind beneath my wings, one last time. It’s been… a long time coming.”

Before anyone could react, his jaws opened and the next moment he had swallowed the Onyx Star. Loki felt the slipstream of magic as Dragonbane’s heart-piece siphoned the energy from Utandir, and at the same time the dragon pushed into the depths of the shard, diving into it on his own accord. Violent currents erupted around him, a relentless vortex which tore away at his soul. The verdant creature dissolved into a shifting nebula of cosmic dust, countless ribbons shining in every shade of green there was.

Stunned and motionless, Loki could only watch as the fabric of the Outsider’s being swirled in lively tendrils around the shard, closer and closer to the core. It was like looking at the implosion of a star, the concentration of a vivid force to a single point. The shard took him in, until his entire
soul was compressed into the piece of metal.

And then the torrent of bright white fire engulfed it all. Loki and Thor shielded their eyes against the light, so did their human companions who stood apart from the striking scene. It took several minutes for the roaring flames to dissipate. But when they did, Ljosira stepped through a glittering shower of stardust.

The Onyx Star was no more. Above her hand hovered a pearlescent shard imbued by her magic, intertwined with the soul of a Life-Binder. Still it whispered ever so softly, yet now the voice sounded like a far-away song carried over treetops and fields by a gentle wind. The precious piece landed on Ljosira’s palm and she gazed down on it, her features suffused with a bittersweet wistfulness.

“The stars will remember your sacrifice to protect these realms, and your brethren. Your name will never be forgotten again. Anganir, the Joyful One. You are Outsider no longer. Yggdrasil welcomes you home.”
XXXI. Before the Storm

A quite sedate chapter before the big finale... Three chapters left plus one Epilogue afterwards. This chapter is exactly what the title says - it's the calm before the storm. I liked writing the heartfelt scenes in this one very much and loved describing Loki's thoughts about his homeland, for which he fights with all his heart, for the first time in his life. Those thoughts are the culmination of his long journey from a villain whose only allegiance is to himself to an honorable man willing to put himself between the ones he loves and danger. I listened a lot to the song Medhel an Gwyns from the Poldark Soundtrack while writing some of the scenes, especially the last one (it means "Soft is the Wind"). Have fun reading and awaiting the things to come! Not much more left!

XXXI. Before the Storm

Dawn followed that night of strife and hardship like a shy lover rising from her bed, and she draped the world in her cloak of pale lavender. The city of New York lay still and silent, as if holding its breath, expecting the return of a dream both terrifying and awe-inspiring. Many would later tell the story of a dragon fighting a monstrous abomination in the dead of the night, while others might speak of jewelled serpents cavorting through the sky together in an invitation to peace.

Yet all would mourn the dragons’ sudden and quiet disappearance, and wonder if it had, after all, been a dream. They’d venture out to the giant burnt carcass in the midst of Central Park – roped-off and quarantined – and watch it be transported away by sharply dressed, taciturn men who refused to give any statement about what had or had not happened there. Until nothing remained to hint at the great battle of giants that had shaken the city to its core.

But those who had seen it with their own eyes would, after this experience, always believe that there were dragons in the world, and that these marvellous beings would come to visit again, should the need arise. Ljosira stood on the empty landing platform of Stark tower, gazing out over the many glass towers fracturing the cool morning light. The honking horns and awakening bustle reached her ears as a muffled murmur. It was strangely harmonious, as if order somehow found balance in chaos. Such were humans.

“I never endeavoured to work this kind of influence on your world. Like a spirited colt, you run and race ahead of yourselves, and we should take care lest we make you stumble.”, she spoke towards the three humans in their company, her voice distant and foreign. Stark and Strange exchanged a look behind her back, while Peter Parker ruffled his hair, confused.

“Colt? Like a revolver?”", he muttered to Tony in quiet embarrassment.

“Like a young horse.”, Strange corrected wisely. “She means our world, or humanity in general. To her kind, we are young.”

“Never been compared to a horse before. Seems like I should feel insulted, but I’m not sure.” Tony squared his shoulders, his lips pulled into a winning smile. Everyone knew that his remark held no
trace of gravity. Ljosira turned to face them. Loki and Thor were by her side, dressed traditionally Asgardian again to mark their imminent departure from Midgard. The dragon princess regarded the humans, regret and fondness vying to govern her features.

“I apologize, my friends, on behalf of all dragonkind. Your world should not have been made to suffer damage because of a conflict between our clans.” And then, to everyone’s utter astonishment, she bowed her head low in a gesture of deference that made all of them inherently uncomfortable. Loki and Thor stiffened visibly while Strange and the boy seemed at a loss for words. Only Stark, forever incapable of holding his silence, managed to speak.

“Please stop.,” he uttered in a strangled voice. Then he cleared his throat and settled into his well-known, sarcastic tone. “If I got all of this straight, by helping you we help ourselves. And I mean, after the way you torched that Leviathan, I’m not speaking a word that could anger you, Frozen.” Ljosira straightened and smiled at him like a radiant sunrise.

“Do you have to leave already?” Peter cut in, unable to keep the disappointment from showing on his face. Loki nodded gravely.

“Anganir sacrificed himself to grant us mastery of Dragonbane’s heart-piece. Now we return home to Asgard, and inevitably to another confrontation with Natta.”

“We need all the time we can get to bolster our defences against her and devise a plan of action. But I will return when all is safe. We need to have words, Stark. There is an item we have to find and secure.,” Thor added, weighing Mjölnir with a grim kind of determination.

“The Chitauri staff. I’ll make some inquiries.,” Stark deduced at once.

“Will you return, too?”, he asked Ljosira then, an odd inflection in his tone. She gave him no answer spoken out loud. But when the Bifröst shot from the sky to engulf her and the two brothers, Tony heard her voice in his thoughts, her unknowable mind whispering against his like the caress of gentle summer breeze.

“We shall meet again, Man of Iron. Know this, from me to you – you will always have a friend among dragons, and the eternal gratitude of this particular one. Thank you, Tony.”

As the light waned and revealed the vacant spot where they had been standing just a moment before, Tony cast a glance at Stephen Strange and Peter Parker. In their faces, he saw that the dragon princess had given each of them words of gratitude, as she had to him. Yet he did not ask or pry. Like all private exchanges shared between friends, this one was just as deeply personal and meant for him alone. And humans – however obstinate they may be – knew such subtleties, almost as well as dragons did.

Arriving in Heimdall’s observatory after a familiar journey on the Bifröst, Loki, Thor and Ljosira were met by a solemn gatekeeper.

“Welcome back.” His golden gaze assessed them expectantly. “Were you successful on your quest?” It was Thor who answered the query.

“I believe we were. Did you not see us?” Heimdall shook his head once, stiffly.

“I saw disconnected images, as a man delusional with fever would. I hope we have a way to end this maddening state of blindness. It is getting difficult for me to keep calm, and I worry about my
bond-brother.” For a moment his face lost all austerity and he closed his eyes, letting out a deep sigh. It was the only concession to his anxiety about Vegr he allowed to show, yet it was enough to unsettle both Thor and Loki. They knew him as a man who always kept his composure.

“I worry about him too, Heimdall. I have seen what happens to him if we fail, and I won’t let it come to pass. He lives… Natta needs him to live, so she can trap him into Dragonbane. But the weapon is ours now.”, Ljosira broke the silence, showing him the pearlescent shard which now harboured the Outsider’s soul. By merely looking at it, the gatekeeper knew its nature.

“A long-troubled soul found purpose at last.”, he confirmed sagely. “I hope it will be enough.”

Securing Hofund across his broad back and leaving the observatory empty, Heimdall escorted them back to the palace, where they all reported to a grim and taciturn Allfather. He listened to the account of their adventures and accepted them much more easily than they’d expected, then ordered the palace and city to be readied for battle.

Loki brought Ljosira to the safety of his quarters, but he did not stay with her for long. He wanted to oversee the preparations and speak with Thor, for he knew they did not have much time left. A night, maybe two, until Natta would fall on Asgard again to reclaim the last piece of her weapon designed to end dragons.

Ljosira let him go, but not graciously. Apprehension marred the fey light-heartedness of her face, engraved onto it by lines and crinkles which hadn’t been there when she had arrived into his world many weeks ago. If he could have wiped those worries clean as one smooths out the folds from a piece of silk, he would have. But that was not a power he possessed. Neither of them had slept through the night undisturbed for days. Only bringing an end to Natta’s threatening presence would grant them peace, he knew.

It was with a heavy heart that he climbed the steps to the palace battlements in search for Thor. Evening descended upon Asgard when Loki emerged onto the wide walkway. Great cannons lined the entire battlement at perfectly measured intervals. Dormant but ready, their polished and oiled barrels glistened in the sunset, pointing to the sky like immense cautioning fingers.

The scent of late spring rode with the lively breeze, and beyond the brass balustrade the city stretched out to slope seamlessly towards the glittering waves of the Edge Sea. The blazing sun slid closer to the far border of the horizon, setting the world aflame with her fiery colours. A landscape of vermillion and orange and mauve to dance across the water and paint the golden city anew.

The waterfall plunging over the vast disk’s boundaries reminded Loki of his visit to Yggdrasil. It looked like thousands of jewels released into the great endless space. He stood still at the balustrade and drank in the spectacular view before him, wondering why he had never paused to appreciate the arresting beauty of his home. Tiny figures moved in the spider-web of streets below, each of them a colourful dot within the intricate mosaic of the living world, each of them carrying a precious little soul inside.

Maybe, Loki thought, his perception of the universe had changed, slowly, in the wake of his life-bond to a dragon. He was coming to see things as they did, understand that everything was connected, like a myriad of beads on a gossamer thread. And how easily this delicate balance could be upset, sending the entire creation clattering to the ground. It was an unsettling knowledge to have, for a mind not designed to see things on such a scale. And yet he felt richer for having it, while he dreaded the consequences if Natta succeeded in tipping the scales.

Soon, he would pit his own mastery against hers in the game of shadows and attempt to trick the one who could not be tricked. He had already devised the gambit he would play. One chance. The
responsibility felt like walking around with a hatchet dangling above his head. Well, that was not quite right. Loki did not fear the consequences to himself. But he could not fight the night mother in open combat, he could merely even the odds and pave the way. The ultimate confrontation fell to Ljosira, and that outlook flooded him with trepidation until he thought he was a cup running over. He took a disjointed breath.

“You can summon a gloom to your face fit for a sepulchre, brother. I don’t know how you do it.” Thor came to stand beside him at the balustrade, following his gaze over the evening city. Loki did not reply at once, instead allowing himself another moment of enjoyment found in the calm before a storm. When he faced Thor, his brother regarded him with open fondness.

“I ponder serious matters. Contrary to you.”, Loki observed. There was no amount of bite in his tone. Thor gave a crooked smile, then his eyes turned sombre.

“I find myself, for once, pondering serious matters as well.”, he mused darkly. “These Infinity Stones, they are dangerous. And several are still lying around somewhere, for any ignorant creature to pick up and wreak havoc with it. Or worse, someone who actually knows what they are and can do. It eats at me like a persistent nightmare. But I cannot concentrate until we finish this more immediate threat. There is always something, isn’t there? And our father… He walks a dark path, Loki. He pulls further and further away from us, and I fear we will soon be left to face the darkness alone. There is more to come, and we need to be ready for it.”

“Spoken like a true king.”, Loki said, his voice sincere. The ancient, jealous demon that had tormented him for so long stayed silent inside him now, a skeleton slowly returning to the earth. He wondered if it would ever come alive to rear up again, and then shook his head as if to banish the thought. The shame you cannot lift away, you better let lie.

“We will defeat Natta. This time, we protect Asgard together.” A stunned silence followed his single-minded declaration.

“Tell me our plan. I am sure you have one by now.”, Thor then requested hopefully. Loki inhaled a heavy breath, knowing that his next words might chafe his brother’s pride.

“I cannot tell you the plan. This is to be my most dangerous ploy, and with any luck it will be my last. But if I reveal it to you, you might give us away before I can close the trap. I know you would never do it intentionally, don’t look at me like that. Natta is a formidable opponent, and I am not even sure I will be capable of fooling her. I can’t take any risks.” He tried to explain the situation judiciously, so Thor would understand the importance of keeping all of it secret, yet still his brother’s brow furrowed in displeasure. A strange hurt marbled his chiselled features.

“Remember when I told you about the past we erased? Ljosira got hurt, and we brought her back to life by channelling your thunder into her through me. I asked you back then to trust me. Now I ask for your trust once more, although I know I have broken it before. Have faith in me, brother.” Thor regarded him steadily for a long time, before he gave one curt nod.

“Alright, Loki.” Then his hand came up to rub his bearded chin in a contemplative gesture. “How did you even persuade me of that insane plan? I could have killed you.” Loki turned his eyes back to the dying daylight. A smirk played around the corners of his mouth.

“I told you that you are a great flame, and me the wind to temper it. That we balance each other, as mother had told me when I was still a child. I hope she watches over us now.”

Thor seemed floored by that. They stood watching the marvellous sunset in companionable silence for an unmeasured time.
“She was home.”, the thunder prince finally said, his deep voice muted.

“She still is, and always will be. In this beautiful city she helped to shape, in the people who loved her. In you, in me, her sons. We made a terrible mess of it, haven’t we?”, Loki mused thoughtfully.

“Ah, well. And that too, would not have surprised her.” Indeed, it wouldn’t have., Loki agreed.

Night had fallen in earnest when Loki returned to his quarters through the darkened palace hallways. The sense of impending battle charged the air, the tension plainly visible on the faces of every guard he passed. They were like animals who had scented the change of atmosphere which heralded a thunderstorm, stiff and alert. He found Ljosira on the balcony, staring off into the distance with an expression people wore when they looked, but did not really see. She spoke without turning towards him as he entered.

“She is getting ready, just as we are. A night, maybe two.” Her voice was soft, suffused with a tiredness beyond belief. Shivers made her shoulders tremble.

“Come inside, my light. You’ll catch a chill, and I need to speak to you.”, Loki bade her, and she obeyed, seeking warmth in the closeness of the coal-pan he had moved to his quarters some time past. Loki surveyed her features as he moved to her side. She was still as a statue hewn from white marble, but he sensed the turmoil inside her.

“I hate waiting for calamity to come calling.”, Ljosira said, lifting her gaze to his. “I understand that you cannot tell me what you will do to trick Natta. Me, of all people, who can neither lie nor deceive. But it feels like I’m deserting you, leaving you to fend on your own…” She trailed away, surreptitiously tracing the naked finger where her engagement ring had been. Loki had not given it to her yet in this present. “Tell me at least that you won’t do anything reckless. That you don’t plan to meet her head-on –“

He stilled her before she could talk herself into distress, squeezing her narrow shoulders gently.

“I only have one moment to make her assemble Dragonbane without noticing that we claimed it through Anganir’s Sacrifice. It has to come as an utter surprise. Please, Ljosira, don’t look at me like that. I can’t bear it.”, Loki murmured at her strife-torn expression. She hated to be blind. She knew she had to be. Those contradicting feelings fought over her like wolves over a downed deer.

“Especially when I have to ask you for a leap of faith, yet again.”

“What is it?”, she asked, suddenly alert at the outlook of being able to help.

“During the meeting with Natta… I need you to undo your shield enchantments.”, he answered heavily.

Ljosira’s face went blank as she struggled to keep her composure. Even so, she could not disguise the uneasiness that lapped up in her at his request. He was asking her to drop all protection when they came face to face with their nemesis. He could just as well have demanded that she lay down with her throat bared to Natta’s jaws. She swallowed once, compulsively. Then she nodded. The fact that Ljosira did not demand an explanation was a hallmark of her tremendous trust in him. Loki hoped desperately that it was not misplaced.

He made a small movement to pull away from her, intending only to take a seat close to the heat. But she reached for him instantaneously. The next he knew, he was tugged down and her lips
fastened to his so fervently, all coherent thought ceased. Her kiss was a brazen, scorching encounter, and it caught him completely unaware.

Ljosira didn’t allow him room to wonder what had brought this on, but instead her unbridled, almost desperate longing drenched him down to the marrow. She hid her fear very, very well. In between the hastily divested clothes, behind the bold touch of her hands, under the heady perfume of her skin. She pushed it to the far corner of her mind while she claimed him implacably as her own, sought comfort in his strong arms, in the naked flame of desire she kindled with such ease.

He gave her what she craved willingly, keenly. And yet as their bodies joined in a near feral coupling right there on the thick hearthrug, warmed by glowing embers, Loki felt the anxiety she tried so badly to conceal. Don’t leave me, the life-bond chanted over and over. She feared losing him in the coming battle.

“Never, never, never –“, he answered hoarsely, the words coming in rhythm with his frantic thrusts. He didn’t know how many times he repeated himself. He knew precious little besides the way she clung to him, wrapped herself around him, gasped and moaned his name like a blessing, went tighter and tighter –

“Mine, mine forever.” It came out as a growl, and the next moment he swallowed the cry from her lips, tasting the rush of exhilaration on her tongue. Yes, yours, mine, forever, she echoed, her body writhing in the throes of release beneath him. And that was when finesse abdicated and instinct took control. He pushed into her welcoming heat until he thought he would be lost inside her, plunging past the point of no return. She joined him there, and for those few fulfilling seconds, all was right with the world.

As soon as the dancing stars had retreated from his field of view, Loki lifted her limp body effortlessly and carried Ljosira to the bedchamber. Time passed, in that strange way only lovers knew. Quickly, slowly, minutes, hours. Who could say?

A peculiar silence fell between them then, one that needed no words to fill it. Although physical exhaustion plucked at him persistently, his mind was wide awake as he lay beside her. Sedately he kept vigil over her light snooze and wallowed in the perfect calm she always seemed to drape over the two of them, without effort. Legs tangled languidly into the sheets, one dainty foot nestling in a bed of luxuriously thick fur, toes curling in enjoyment of the texture.

She hadn’t bothered to get dressed. Dawn was still some way in the distance. Naked as the gods made her, or whoever could conceive of fashioning a creature of her likeness. Skin as white and immaculate as the pillow she rested her head on, the dense fans of her lashes kissing her high cheekbones. She did not sleep. He sensed her wakefulness hum quietly, but it was a fuzzy sensation.

Some men bragged about bedding a different woman each night, over hundreds of nights. He thought himself ten times a fool for once having agreed with such men. They would never know what he knew, the many delights to be learned by joining with the same woman, a hundred times. He was the keeper of her secrets, and felt not an insignificant amount of smugness about it either.

Reaching forth, he let his hand settle on her nape. One of his favourite places on the ever-captivating landscape of her body. If he touched her here while making love to her, he could feel everything she felt, in vivid detail. The first time she had allowed it had been a near overwhelming experience. A doubled, multiplied perception which stacked his own pleasure upon hers and amplified it to an intense rapture he could still not describe in words. Now the wide river of her consciousness flowed serenely by under his fingertips, and a considerable current meandered directly to him.
“Sleep.”, she suggested. Her lips did not move.

“Not today.”, Loki declined gently. For an unmeasured moment, he simply let the reassuring steadiness within the life-bond wash over him.

“What happens, when a dragon dies?” The abruptness of this context-free question made Ljosira open her eyes and regard him searchingly.

“Die? Mortals can die, my love. They are given that choice. Dragons… go on.” As cryptic an answer as she had ever given him. In his opinion, death was no choice, but quite the opposite.

“Explain it to me, please. Plainly.”, he added the last in case it wasn’t obvious. Ljosira gave a sigh.

“When we cease to exist as ‘dragon’, it may be called dying, because we retain no physical form, nor truly a diverse consciousness for that matter. We return to Yggdrasil and go on as part of her. Magic doesn’t cease to exist, it merely changes. When a spell is cast, you weave energy drawn from your own spirit and the world around you, changing it to take form. It is the same with dragons, on a larger scale.”

“So… You are a spell, woven by Yggdrasil?” Loki frowned. His imagination didn’t go so far as to encompass such an abstract concept. “I thought you hatched, born to a father and a mother.” Ljosira bobbed her head to his observation, then smiled at his puzzled expression.

“I am afraid it is more complicated than that. I am both of those things.”, she simply said. It did nothing to further comprehension on his side.

“Does that mean that you could be reborn? Yggdrasil could… create you again?”, he asked cautiously. By now, Ljosira’s eyes had grown suspicious. Her answer was guarded.

“It… doesn’t work that way. Once you go on, you do not come back. Not us.” Her voice sounded sad and forlorn.

“Mortals, then? What happens when we die?”, he pressed on, knowing he had already pried too far into issues she did not wish to speak about. He could see it in the rigidity of her jaw and the way she straightened, a deep nick between her brows.

“Loki, that is a journey you are not supposed to undertake before the time comes. Why do you seek to pry an answer from me? Why are you suddenly avidly interested in death? Do you expect to die? To you expect me to die?” She was angry now, although she concealed carefully where that anger came from. He sensed it was not directed at him, not really.

“I just wanted to… plan for every eventuality.”, he defended himself lamely. Ljosira took a breath and exhaled it in a rush. The implication in his words seemed to reach her in stages. First came a stunned daze, then disbelief, then annoyance again.

“I can’t believe you are thinking about such a thing!”, she accused, revolted. Loki reached for her even as she flinched back. He stayed adamant, enclosing her in a wordless embrace. So small, so deceptively mortal, with her slender shoulders and elfin features. He didn’t need to explain to her that he wouldn’t want to go on if something happened to her, nor that he didn’t fear death. He feared life without her. Before letting his mind deteriorate into darkness again, he would join her, wherever she went. The knowledge of those feelings flowed between them like wind whispering through leaves.

“Your life, tied to mine. You said it yourself.”, he felt that he needed to point this out. Ljosira shook her head, then her forehead fell against his chest in defeat.
“I refuse to discuss this further. It is a moot point. I will protect us.”, she stated with forced finality. His hand came to rest at the back of her neck again, fingers tracing the downy softness where hair passed into skin.

“You protected us for a long time now, my light.”, Loki spoke pensively. There was nothing more to say to that. She could neither dispute it nor did she want to argue with him just now. Ljosira breathed a sigh, drawing the wonderful fragrance of his skin into her lungs. Forcibly, she pushed aside the worry what tomorrow held in store for them both. And for a little while, she succeeded.
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the kudos! I got so many after this chapter, I was really surprised!
I am quite apprehensive to upload this chapter, mainly because it has a huge, huge cliffhanger at the end and you will probably curse me for it... But what would a good finale be without some suspense? :O In this chapter, Loki becomes a true hero.

XXXII. One Last Ploy

The second time Natta came to Asgard began just as it had the first time. The circadian rhythm of the world was simply halted and a dawn which should have followed a deep night did not come to pass. Darkness instead overstayed its welcome, keeping the city suspended in perpetual gloom. But this time, they were awaiting her arrival.

The lady of the night was allowed to penetrate the heart of Asgard, right up to the golden plaza before the castle entrance, where the royal family, guard and entourage stood to receive her. Again, she brought with her a score of hooded figures and an obscure shape hovering above their heads. And again, her casual, graceful stride betrayed an arrogance beyond words. She walked with in a slyly relaxed pace, like a cat confident that she had entered a kingdom of mice. A false smile lingered on her full lips. So self-possessed about her imminent victory.

Loki clenched his jaw, pushing down the mad urge to lunge and strangle the fallacious creature who had brought so much suffering into his home. Calm now. Ljosira was tied up in knots beside him, her spine stiff as a board, her eyes trained straight ahead. On her right, Heimdall was just as motionless. Thor and Odin stood to the left, royally poised with their faces blank like maiden parchment.

“Allfather! You do not seem happy to see me.”, Natta stepped onto the plaza, her smile still in place. It did not reach her unsettling black eyes.

“Natta, ancient dragon of shadow. Your brethren’s magic disrupts my home and blackens my peaceful skies. You bring darkness to this land of light. I have to assume that your visit is not a peaceful one.”, Odin answered evenly, the same words he had spoken in the past – or rather the last present. Loki inhaled a deep breath. Let the game begin.

“Be silent, old man.”, he interrupted his father rudely, his voice one of open disdain. “You have locked yourself away from responsibility. What do you know about the goings-on in your own kingdom anymore?”

He was very careful of speaking no open lie, making his statement a half-truth he blew out of proportion so it became a believable insult. Odin had indeed been withdrawing, but his sons understood the reasons. Now Loki hoped that his father would forgive him for twisting his grief into a contemptuous thing. Thor stared at him incredulously. Damn it, he didn’t grasp the situation.

“Loki, how can you speak such venom –“, his brother began, but Loki cut him short.
“Oh, do shut up! As if you ever had an inkling about diplomacy. All you want to do is wave your hammer around and boast about your trophies.”, he snapped. By now he could feel the dubious looks of every Asgardian in the circle. He hated to push himself into the role of the betrayer, and yet it had to be. A probing touch prickled along his life-bond to Ljosira. It sickened him that he had to shutter himself from her and watch the flare of insult in her eyes. His whole being bristled against withdrawing from the link they shared. But it was the right decision. For when he met Natta’s gaze, she surveyed him all over as if he was a horse she considered buying. Loki forced a debonair smirk onto his face.

“Excuse by brutish oaf of a brother. He can sometimes be like a child playing with fire, but I know how to temper him by now.”, here he cast a quick glance at Thor and saw the struggle on his features. Comprehension glinted briefly in his eyes. Good, he had caught the hint. Loki focused on Natta again.

“I know why you have come. I think we talked about it at length in the mountains.” He kept his voice flattering and velveteen, an admirer trying to court the subject of his attention. Natta smiled beatifically.

“Ah, indeed. But I seem to remember that you quite ardently refused me, like an infatuated pup. And I have little patience for soppy pushovers. Do you truly expect me to believe you have changed your mind? You are more of a fool than I thought!” She wallowed in the glee about her riposte, letting out a short, pealing laugh. Loki remained undeterred.

“This is a negotiation, mistress of shadows. Bargaining. I do not expect you to believe me without a show of good will from my side.”, he countered softly. He lifted his hand, balled to a fist around the core of Dragonbane. Be small, he pleaded to the soul inside, and hoped that the countless enchantments he had put on it would conceal its nature from Natta for just a few seconds. She stared at his hand, a primal hunger in her glittering eyes.

“Your prize is here with me.” Loki sensed the Darkflight leader groping for her creation with sinister tendrils of magic. He near panicked when he felt her suspicion rise. It was Ljosira, dear and wonderful Ljosira, so incredibly honest, who probably saved it all by reacting exactly as he had predicted. She whirled to face him, disbelief spreading on her face like wildfire.

“You took it from me without asking?”, she demanded, voice shaking. Her surprise was genuine. Loki met her wide, silver eyes for an instant.

“I did.”, he asserted calmly. “It will be over soon.” Then he reached for her. She made a miniscule motion as if to flee, but then froze for a wink, allowing him to grab hold of her. Loki begged her forgiveness as he let the paralyzing spell surge through his touch. No struggle whatsoever came from her.

Her shields were down, all of them. She had done as he’d asked. He gloried in her unquestioning faith for just an instant, before he caught her slackened body with one arm. The horrified outrage of every person in the plaza was likely the hardest thing to endure without batting an eye. Everyone, except Natta, who grinned from ear to ear, nauseatingly pleased. Loki had to forcefully battle down the bile that rose in his stomach.

“Move even an inch and she dies!”, he barked at Thor, who seemed seconds away from pouncing on him. His brother went still, his face settling into an ashen mask of fury. How could you?! it screamed. Who would have thought that it would become so difficult to deceive the ones he loved? Loki chose not to know of their scornful glares. Instead, he shouldered Ljosira roughly and walked across the gilded tiles towards Natta, his stride fearless and uncaring. He would later not remember where the mettle to move his legs had come from.
“You see I have brought you a gift, mistress. Now… I shall show you my hand if you show me yours.”, he cajoled with a charming smile. Never had mere seconds seemed so long, never had he been so on edge, ready to jump back at any second, so aware of the painfully defenceless body he carried. His senses were stretched so taut he wondered if he was on the verge of a breakdown, balancing along the line like a tightrope-walker.

Slowly, so slowly Natta lifted her hand and showed him the spearhead forged from blackest obsidian mingled with Uru. It seethed in anticipation of claiming its core, of being completed, of finally snuffing out the light and burying the world beneath darkness.

“Beautiful…”, Loki whispered. “But missing one crucial piece.” His fist came up and opened, releasing the shimmering shard. He saw Natta’s eyes widen in dismay, but it was too late. The last piece joined the spearhead and slid into its place so seamlessly, as if they had never been separated at all.

The eruption when Dragonbane came alive once more was staggering. The entire plaza shook with arcane torrents and wild bolts of unrestrained energy. Both Natta and Loki were flung back from it, and he struggled to keep his grip on Ljosira as he cartwheeled to a safe distance. He knew that the soldiers were ripped off their feet and hoped that Heimdall had managed to raise a dome of protection as he had the last time, because Loki had his hands full with shielding Ljosira thrice over.

The connection between them had become strong enough that he could feel her restiveness even within the paralysis spell he had put on her to fool the Darkflight. Just a moment, love, he sent the thought to her while lifting his cloak like a curtain against the violent gale. Shield charms were easier to weave when attached to some solid item of the physical realm, and this one he cast roughly, without much finesse for lack of time.

His cloak shone with hastily written runes to hold off the magical shrapnel flying in every direction. A violent tornado of magic, conflicting forces tearing at each other in a war for supremacy. At its centre, Anganir battled the rest of Dragonbane to take control. And succeeded. A few more moments of bedlam passed, before the eruptions ceased just as suddenly as they had started. The marble ground had cracked beneath the onslaught as though harrowed by an earthquake. Ruffled and dazed, the soldiers came to their feet. Heimdall and Thor had managed to brace themselves against the chaos.

In the very middle of the plaza, there floated the spear, almost peacefully. The heart-piece was luminescent white with just a glint of green. Fine, silver veins now plaited through the obsidian metal like a pristine embroidery. Everybody just stared at it, dumbstruck. Natta’s acquaintances had lost their balance – with their concentration gone, the dark shape Loki knew to be Vegr had crumpled to the ground between them. The insidious mistress of shadows was glaring at Loki, lip curling, teeth bared in an ugly snarl. He had seldom seen something so radically spoil the beauty of a woman’s face.

“Wretched mortal! What have you done?!” she screeched, her fury unhinged. Loki huffed once, straightening a little from his protective crouch.

“My name is Loki, Prince of Asgard… Odinson. The rightful King of Jotunheim. God of mischief and master of sorcery. You would do better to remember the name of the one who has bested you, mother of night. In our game, you seem to have come out at a disadvantage.”, he spoke in the most disdainful tone he managed. Murder flashed in her abyss-black eyes. She would have loved nothing more than to rip him to shreds just then. With a calmness he didn’t quite know he possessed, Loki lifted a hand. “I almost forgot – I will have that now, if you don’t mind. Thank
And the moment he called, Dragonbane answered. It soared into his palm so very naturally as though it was the only sensible choice, inevitable. Loki closed his fingers around the handle, almost gently, and felt the dragon soul within sing its assent. Anganir’s Sacrifice, tempered in the fire of a trueborn Lightbringer whose heart was that of a Life-Binder – completing the intricate cycle of magic which had allowed them to turn the weapon, and thus turn the tide of this war. I will not mistreat your gift, Loki formed the thought towards the whispering depths of the spear. Solemn acknowledgement brushed back against him.

Disbelief and wrath twisted Natta’s features in equal measure. The Darkflight behind here were struggling to stand again, but Loki turned to Ljosira instead, still limp and trusting in his arms.

“Wake, my light.” An incantation rode with those words, galvanizing her almost instantaneously. Her eyes opened and found his, both pairs set with determination. A devilish smile tugged at his lips.

“Take a good bite out of her, for me.” Time briefly stood still as she answered his smile with one of her own, and then the spirit soared away from her, sprouting wings as it took flight. She took the mortal body with her, by now proficient enough in her shifting that she needed no assistance to bind it to her dragon form. At the exact same moment, Natta transformed in a ferocious whirl of claws and ebony scales. Just as once before, the two dragons clashed above the plaza in a brutal locking of jaws.

Loki wanted to watch their battle, but his attention was drawn to the hooded figures who seemed to be overcoming their dizziness. He rushed forward. It was so incredibly easy, instinctive. Power surged through the spear into him willingly, unquestioningly – and he pirouetted with candid grace, striking the first cloaked one with the flat side of the weapon.

The pulse of unrestrained magic sent his foe face-first to the ground. Again he danced, and Dragonbane danced with him, scything through the air to fell two more. Loki had no intention of killing them or siphoning them into his weapon. He just slashed and blasted, inflicting minor damage, while he let the spear radiate an aura of disruption that prevented the dragons from shifting.

Never had he wielded such power, and never had he been so mindful not to use it recklessly. He knew he was not so much the master of the weapon as he was its companion – it allowed him to be used. Several hoods slipped and revealed distorted faces, hands pressed to their ears as though they tried to shield their brains from some unbearable discord. One endeavoured to flee blindly, but was hit by a flying hammer and went down like a puppet severed from its strings. Thor walked into the fray as boldly and as grinning as ever, catching Mjölnir in his grasp. The two brothers simultaneously pointed their weapons at the Darkflight in a clear warning.

“If I see as much as a twitch or a wisp of dragon escaping to the sky, I will skewer you in earnest. You have been fools to follow Natta, and you’d do well to realize your mistake. I’d hate to become known as a dragon-killer. Doesn’t bode well for my marriage, wouldn’t you say?”, Loki spat at one particularly sneering fellow.

“Indeed it would not do!” A voice he had never heard before thundered inside his head. Familiar somehow, a mingled essence of Ljosira and Heimdall and Elding – and yet it was very much an individual. Or rather entity, the presence of him both soothing and fierce, both loyal and vindictive, a star bright enough to be glimpsed on a cloudless day. All of this Loki felt in the quick probing touch he received, before the surroundings drowned in light.
Funny afterimages danced before his eyes, but he still saw one giant dragon paw bear down on a black silhouette which had been slinking away. An ant trapped beneath the foot of a giant, the unlucky Darkflight groaned out his pain. How to describe the crown prince of dragons? He was amber polished to a gleam, each of his scales made from the finest beaten gold, as though crafted lovingly by a master in countless hours of painstaking work. Behind the gilded crown of horns, his mane rippled like liquid fire. Once upon a time the many hues of a sunset had saturated his wings, and they were there still, a painting perpetuated on canvas.

Vegr gazed down at the mortals who had freed him from Natta’s fetters, his golden eyes surveying them with gratitude. He needed no words to express his thanks. The burning furnace of his aura was enough to make his meaning clear.

“My brother!” Heimdall pushed between Loki and Thor. Enthusiasm and relief resonated in the deep timbre of his voice. Vegr bent his head to him fondly.

“Brother. I am well. You have been worried, I know. I could not reach you.” He conveyed regret as much as contained anger in his telepathic projection. “My sister battles the hideous snake who brought this upon us! I must help her –“ He started to rise, wings unfurling like the sails of a grand ship. But then he staggered as though in pain. The shimmering crest which ran along his entire back rippled with unease.

Loki tore his eyes away from him and searched the sky for Ljosira – mere minutes had passed since the fight between her and Natta began, but still he had a mounting sense of urgency. The strange twilight had returned to rule the land, a grey in grey world at a time before dawn. A vivid memory flashed before his eyes, of Ljosira standing still and silent, looking out into a sleeping city, features soft, eyes distant. A terrible foreboding gripped his heart and squeezed it tight, but he shook it off as a wolf shaking its coat. Later. He’d worry later –

The two dragons were high up, entangled into a mass of black and white as though fused together inseparably to form some sort of motley creature. Whenever one broke free for just a heartbeat, the other would lunge and fasten herself to her foe again. The lack of roars or screeches was eerie. Their awful silence told a clear story – they had no concentration to spare for dialogue, or to vent their fury into needless insults. This was as serious as conflicts between dragons went.

A fight to the death, Loki realized with rising apprehension. Neither would relent until her opponent had been purged from existence. Ljosira was considerably larger than Natta, but her size gave her a disadvantage against the lightning-quick strikes of the black dragon, and although she tried to push his awareness back from their mind-link, Loki knew she could not win this. She battled a foe who surpassed her in both experience and ruthlessness.

He watched the white dragon fling the ebony serpent farther into the gloomy sky, then dart after her in a careless, bold ascent. Soon they would be out of reach, beyond Asgard’s boundaries and in open space. Vegr still moved in a disjointed way, his strength thoroughly sapped by the Darkflight magic used to imprison him. The telepathic conversation between him and Heimdall hummed at the back of Loki’s mind, distracting him.

“Thor. Can you fly me up there?” He suddenly turned to his brother, who regarded him with a stricken expression.

“I don’t think that’s a wise idea –“

“I couldn’t care less what you think is wise!”, Loki interrupted him mid-sentence, anger and anxiety making him irascible. “Ljosira needs me. She can’t defeat Natta on her own! For once, don’t argue with me, brother!” Thor’s hesitation lasted a mere second, but even that felt like an
eternity. Then he gripped Loki around the shoulders and Mjölnir began spinning in his hand so quickly it was a blur to the eye. They lifted off the ground together, making a beeline for the two writhing creatures contrasted against the clouds.

“I can’t get too close, I have to throw you!” The headwind disrupted Thor’s voice as he clutched Loki’s cloak in an iron grip, readying to launch him towards his destination. They soared close enough that Loki saw the serpentine necks rear with the effort to entrap each other even further, the wing joints driven into vulnerable spots, the gleaming claws skitter over impenetrable scales.

He had watched dragons fight before, and seen Ljosira defeat the Leviathan, but he had glimpsed those encounters from a distance or a perspective too irregular to truly comprehend. This was a whole new level of ferocity. The sheer strength within the thrumming flanks, the raw power of the rippling muscles beneath the scale-armour, the deadly precision of the crushing jaws – it was then that he realized with full clarity what these creatures were capable of when bloodlust overwhelmed them. And he intended to plunge right into the centre of that.

“Gods Loki, you cannot, it’s madness –”, Thor seemed as shocked and awed by the sight as he was.

“I know. I must.” He had no more to say than that and felt his brother’s understanding in the tightened grip of his hand. And then it all happened so fast. Hauled forward by brute strength and momentum, Loki dived. He knew a moment of ugly motion-sickness as his senses rebelled against the complete loss of balance. No earth beneath the feet, nothing to anchor to, scraps of scenery spinning around him. He cried out in both pain and relief when he crashed down on a broad scaled back, but barely kept himself from being thrown off by the uncontrolled lurches. No purchase to be found on the sleek scales, he slid a few feet and faced golden spires smaller than toys, so endlessly far down –

“Madman!”, was the only coherent thought from Ljosira he could decipher. He felt an abundance of other sentiments from her, but they formed an unbridled gush of anger and fear he could simply not acknowledge right now. She did not want him to be here, wished savagely for him to be far away, safe from Natta’s hatred, and then she would be free to throw the witch dragon into the nether to perish –

In spite of that, his daring dragon princess steadied herself to grant him reprieve from the wild ride even though it meant leaving herself open for attack. She went into a short, horizontal glide and Loki struggled to regain balance, find something to hold on to. It was wretchedly difficult, with Dragonbane clamped between ribcage and arm and the violent squalls and the rocking dragon body under his feet. Somehow he grasped the spiked crest on her spine and scrambled his way up her back to her neck. The air grew thin, barely breathable as the dragons climbed and climbed, further into the sky and away from Asgard.

Blackness dotted with stars replaced the grey clouds. The unnatural chill of open space engulfed the world. Still they ascended. A vicious, blade-like tail suddenly lashed out at Loki and he flattened to Ljosira as if an extension of her. It missed him by an inch, swishing by so close to his face that he saw a few of his own black strands be sheared away to join the void.

The whole situation was made painfully real all of a sudden. What on earth did he hope to accomplish here? Fool! He only distracted Ljosira by riding with her, dividing her attention between protecting him and battling Natta’s deadly assaults. No, Dragonbane hummed in his hand. Today, we fight. Knowledge poured into him. Within an instant, he knew everything there is to know about a dragon’s body, knew where to strike to inflict pain and how to go for a kill.

Throat and belly were vulnerable, but the softest spot – right behind the horns, the back of the skull, so close to the seat of consciousness. A pang went through him when he realized how
Ljosira had exposed this weakness to him without qualm, letting him ride at the very spot where he could have easily driven a blade into anytime.

“What do you do, my heart?!” he felt her horror at the plan she saw in his mind, but allowed her no quarter, shrugged off her agitation. Natta’s neck coiled and her maw came down in a vicious bite. The moment she was close enough, Loki jumped. The black dragon reared back to evade him, yet he drove the spear into her and clung to it like a tick to a warm-blooded host.

Incredible luck played into his hands. Natta was so surprised by his foolhardiness, she forgot to struggle against Ljosira for a precious moment. The draconic Bifröst erupted everywhere around Loki, joined by a mingled screech of the two dragons. Blinded and mad with fury, Natta began squirming like a feral thing, and once more Loki fought to keep from being thrown off. She was considerably smaller than her Lightbringer opponent, and much more slippery for it. He had little notion how he managed to make the near impossible climb up the wildly thrashing, scabrous neck, to reach her nape.

Maybe Dragonbane infused him with strength, maybe Ljosira’s iron resolve kept him going, maybe he had finally found his hero’s heart. But reach it, he did. The mistress of shadows sensed the danger. She whipped her head around, battering Ljosira with her thick skull, her open jaws hurling beams of blackness everywhere. The death throes of a doomed creature, unfettered of all caution or fear for injury to herself. All of Loki’s concentration went into his task. Just hold on, just skewer her through that weak spot, just get one good stab in – a short-lived awareness of Ljosira’s presence kissed his mind, falling away from him. She’d been separated, unable to keep her grip through Natta’s insane thrashing.

It was now or never. Loki did not know where they were headed to in this devil-may-care plunge, had no air to draw a breath of courage. Instead he sacrificed his secure hold on Natta to raise Dragonbane with both hands and drove the spearhead into the back of the dragon’s skull. The unprotected flesh swallowed it so deeply, barely half of the handle remained visible.

A horrible screech rent the emptiness apart and Loki was flung into dead space. He felt a giddy rush of victory that lasted for one blink of an eye. Then something hit him. A last flurry of claws, a final act of hatred. If I go, you go. A voice once spun from ebony silk. Now it brought the pain of death on its heels as an unexpected visitor brings icy chill in through the door on a cold winter’s eve. Or was it his own pain?

Chest torn open, lungs skewered, heart pierced. Shredded right through the core. No good, no good at all. Ljosira will be angry, he thought, almost idly, as if he had an eternity to ponder this. She’d be angry that he got hurt and needed healing. He had done exactly what she had begged him not to do, reckless, foolish heroics.

Darkness crept in around the edges of his world. Time slowed to a near standstill, as it so often did when the end was near. But Loki did not understand that, or did not wish to understand. He had always been accomplished at deceiving himself. Oddly-shaped red blobs floated away from him. Bizarre, giant bloody tears., he mused curiously, trying to reach for them, but his body did not obey his command. Somehow, that struck him as vaguely strange.

He sensed something hover close by, a benevolent presence, a mother to all things. She watched him like a patient guest, waiting for him to let her cross the threshold. Or maybe he would cross her threshold – but why? She seemed to beckon him, invite him into her home. To where? Can’t go with you. I still have things to do, so many things., he resolved obliviously, ticking them off on fingers which wouldn’t move.

Ljosira waited for him. He would propose to her on Midgard, for real this time, the ring was even
in his pocket. He would apologize to Thor, for giving his brother so much grief over the years. He would try to patch his tattered relationship with his father.

But maybe sleep first. This dragon-hunting had been so exhausting, it felt as if this whole ordeal had ripped a hole into his chest and leaked out all his strength. He tried to tell the kind presence these important facts, and thought he saw her nod gravely in her silent vigil. His eyes closed. Just a moment of rest. Then he’d go and do all which he regretted not doing until now. Someone close by seemed to weep without an end. That sad song of woe followed him into the darkness.
XXXIII. I Defy It

Chapter Notes

After the dramatic cliffhanger I gave you in the last chapter, I couldn't find it in my heart to make you wait for too long, so I am uploading this a little earlier than I intended. It's also a bit shorter than my usual chapter length, but it has so much feeeeeeels! Have fun!

XXXIII. I Defy It

Falling, whipped around by violent wind and surging energy, until the deep night sky spiralled around her in a dizzying whirl. She had lost her grip on Natta during the wild flight, broken away from her enemy within the depths of dark space. It had been all she could do to let the rainbow current of her magic carry her onward to the place where she felt Loki and the black dragon plummet to. Mere heartbeats passed, inconsequential seconds in the great river of time. And then she breathed Midgardian air, and only an instant later, her heart was cleaved in two. A white-hot bolt of agony shattered her strongest life-bond, a pain which dwarfed all pains one could experience. Impaled, a spear to the core of the soul, fraying, fleeting, dying –

Ljosira lost control over her body. The sensation snatched away all her senses. She fell from the sky like a rock, unable to steady herself, her wings buffeted by the slipstream of her fall. Her eyes wide open but seeing nothing, she crashed to the ground, tearing up the earth as she went. Fields of grass were carelessly devastated as her descent cut through them like a clean blade.

She transformed in full motion still, crudely stuffing her dragon soul into her mortal body, uncaring that the momentum sent her into a dangerous tumble. Sharp stones skinned her knees, dirt and grass soiled her clothes, her arms and legs would be black and blue – but it didn't matter, it was negligible, paltry. Nothing mattered except for the pain, the unbearable pain as if all her limbs had been severed.

Something was missing, she knew, but her mind shied away from the knowledge as one flinched from touching a gaping wound. She pushed it out of reach, instead coming to her feet the instant she regained control over her movements. The surroundings only received one wild, sweeping glance – an endless plane, grass everywhere as far as the eye could see.

Long silvery blades swaying in a gentle summer wind, and some distance away, a large shadow. Motionless in the darkness of the night, it loomed there like a strange burial mound. Only the single obsidian eye caught the starlight from above, reflecting the branches of Yggdrasil it would never see again. Natta was dead, the great Darkflight dragon’s body empty and lifeless.

“Loki!” Ljosira yelled into the graveyard silence. She didn’t recognize her own voice, a shrill and panicky thing that sounded closer to madness than sanity.

Nothing answered her. No stirring shadow, no aura, not even an intake of breath. She ran, questing out into the field with every sense she possessed. Her eyes didn’t seem to work too well. Everything veered out of focus and she knew a sickening feeling she chose not to acknowledge. Viciously she crushed reality, fleeing into denial, denial, denial. Loki had to be here somewhere,
alive, noble heart still beating, vital blood still coursing through his veins – Almost she tripped over him in her frantic search.

In the bed of docile grass, there he lay as if someone had gently set him down beneath the tapestry of stars. Ljosira fell to her knees at his side, reaching for him like a dreamer. She ignored the coppery smell in her nose, the warm wetness on her palms, the sensation of shredded skin at her fingertips. His face had gone slack and expressionless, a serene mask.

In vain she sought the lambent gleam in his half-closed eyes, the glint of life, the flash of a clever smile whenever he had managed to make her blush. There remained nothing of that, only dull blackness. The eyes of a stranger. She poured a tidal wave of magic into him in a desperate attempt to mend, to fix what had been broken, torn and shattered. She knew no restraint, throwing in all she had.

Too much damage, instinct reported to her. There is nothing to do. Gone. Already growing colder. Body and soul disconnecting, the ties coming undone. Mortal. Dead. The energy simply trickled away like water down a drain. It felt as if she tried to revitalize a rock.

“No.”, she said with a finality one can only muster when the truth is unbearable. Abandoning caution and sensibility, she dived deeply into his consciousness, groping for the life-bond. So concentrated was she in her mad quest that she did not see the flare of the Bifröst, did not hear the dull clang of Mjölnir dropping to the ground. Thor halted immediately at the sight before him.

“No.”, Ljosira said again, her voice quaking with despair. At the other end of the life-bond where she had always felt the brilliant, intricate beauty of the man she loved, a yawning abyss looked back at her. The cold void of death.

“No! You had a decoy, an illusion, a plan. You always do. You always have a trick. Open your eyes and laugh, tell me what a clever ruse you thought up! Tell me you deceived me, just another lie. Wake up. Wake up! This isn’t a game! Loki – you can’t do this to me! Stop tormenting me – my love, it’s over, it’s done, we don’t have to play anymore –“

Her words went from anger to misery to pitiful pleading, before she broke off abruptly, drawing a shallow breath. Her hand lifted and she stared at it in the pale light, the black blood in stark contrast to the virgin whiteness of her skin. Her eyes were huge, silver orbs – twin moons glowing in her colourless face as the realization dawned on her. Thor could not move. An excruciating moment of silence came and went.

Then Ljosira began sobbing inconsolably, in dry, wracking heaves that made her shoulders tremble as though fits held her in their throes. Dragons do not weep. They cannot liberate their grief through tears, allow it to flow away from them as mortals do, even if it is just one ounce at a time. Her sorrow was made of magic. A meltwater river bursting its banks, drenching the entire field. It gripped Thor in its inexorable current and saturated him with a helpless longing so strong he thought his legs might give out. Colour bled out of his world, replaced by the bleak, monochrome certainty that his brother was gone.

His own sense of loss crippled him as much as Ljosira’s pain did. He felt disembowelled by grief, hollow inside. Something irreplaceable had been snatched away from him and he’d been powerless to prevent it from happening.

We lost. We lost it all. Cut in two, we are half, half of what we were and we will never be right again. His heart turned over in his chest when she threw back her head and let out a cry. It was the broken lament of an animal wounded beyond healing, calling out for a mate who would never come home.
Ljosira buckled over and gathered Loki’s body into the circle of her arms. Thor could hear her whisper softly to him. She stayed deaf and blind to the sparkling portal that uncoiled on the field and allowed Strange to step through, followed by Stark. Her desolation dwelled in a place words could not reach to describe. It made her ignore all else.

“I felt –“, the Wizard began, but Thor quelled him with a single look. The three of them stood in the darkness. Nobody spoke for an unmeasurable time.

“Go away!”, Ljosira suddenly broke the silence, making all of them flinch. They did not know if she was addressing them or the whole world.

Stephen Strange shuddered and glanced around surreptitiously, the way people did when they heard a strange noise they could not place. Stark had frozen to a marble statue, his lips pressed into a firm line. Even through his grief, Thor felt the faint brush of something against his mind. It passed him by, moving on towards Loki and Ljosira.

He sensed the presence everywhere at once and yet nowhere at all. The reach of its magic seemed to permeate the entirety of things but so softly, softly, one could almost forget it was there. The word being did not fit this entity – too small a name, too clumsy a description. Gentle tendrils wrapped around his brother and tugged at him, calling him to join eternity –

“Go away!”, Ljosira’s scream brimmed with defiance. “He’s mine! You won’t take him!” She encased Loki and herself within something Thor could only describe as a net woven from finest threads of light. She held him suspended there, stubborn to the very end, unwilling to part.

“Who is she talking to?”, Stark wondered quietly. Beside him, Strange shook his head.

“Not us. I can sense… something. But it’s… I can’t even begin to describe it.”

“Is this to be our fate, then?”’, the dragon princess shouted, her voice hoarse, bereft of its musical cadence. “Am I to fly with my wings clipped? Am I to live cleaved in twain? Is that what you wanted me to be until the end of days? Did I protect you to have you take my love from me? After he gave everything to your cause? Are you that cruel, mother to us all? If this is his fate, my fate, I DEFY IT!” The last words tore from her throat like a roar, every syllable ringing with pure denial.

At first, nothing happened. And then, out of nowhere, a great gust of wind swept over the plane of grass. Stark and Strange braced themselves against the gale. Thor watched it lift his cloak, unfolding it playfully.

Strands of Ljosira’s silver hair fluttered in its wake, catching a rainbow of greens and blues. Thor lifted his eyes to the sky to see the source of the reflection – shining ribbons had appeared there, stretching across the dark velvet dome. They shifted from bright azure to vivid jade, from simplistic straightness to entangled curves, intertwining and then unravelling again. A beautiful, calm dance, and yet there was a sadness in it that burdened the heart like a solid weight.

“Aurora borealis. Northern lights.”, Stark said. He sounded baffled, fascinated. The thunder prince had no reply. If he concentrated on it, he could hear something in the whistle of the wind, feel with a sense he had no name for: a song from a time before time had even existed, so old it needed no words. Magic he could neither grasp nor comprehend surged everywhere around and he was overcome by childhood memories he’d thought long lost, scattered into oblivion.

His mother, reading one late winter night to him and Loki as they both gathered in the shelter of her fur cloak. His father, lecturing him for a juvenile prank while he took the blame, even though he knew it had been Loki’s doing. His brother walking beside him, carefree and smiling, still little
more than a boy hoping to embark on a glorious adventure someday.

He had not asked for these images, they had overwhelmed him unbidden, and yet there was such emotion in each of them that Thor could barely breathe. He watched the bands of light lean down from the sky towards the small, silver-haired woman in the field, holding her beloved close. Like graceful, iridescent vines they wound and looped, enfolding Ljoisira and Loki between them. Strange gasped audibly, Stark just stared and stared.

“Mother?” Ljoisira’s voice was filled with wonder. Then she disappeared within the shimmering chrysalis. For a sickening moment, Thor thought Yggdrasil would take them both to where he could never reach them – but then the light waned like the fading, last note of a soft lullaby. Luminous flickers danced around the two figures, huddled together as if they were merely sleeping. Cheek to cheek, their faces peaceful, void of tension and pain.

Slowly, Ljoisira awakened to reality. For a fleeting second, she seemed dazed, unknowing. Awareness had not touched her again yet, hovering close by to push the bare-naked truth upon her ever too soon. And then, impossibly, the stillled heart beneath her palm gave one erratic thud and leapt to life again. Loki took one swooshing breath, his chest expanding to draw air into his lungs. His eyes fluttered open, darting around sightlessly for an instant before they found her face, smeared with blood and dirt. She just looked at him blankly, uncomprehending.

“There you are.” He stopped speaking, momentarily distracted by the roughness in his throat. His voice sounded strange, as if gritty from a long period of disuse. Loki could not fathom why her lower lip trembled all of a sudden. The shiver seemed to spread out from there to her chin and shoulders, and before long, Ljoisira was quivering like a shorn lamb left out in the cold.

“I had a strange dream… You were crying in a dark place, all alone. So much that your tears filled a whole lake, black and deep… You called out to me, but I couldn’t comfort you. I didn’t like that dream… So I said ‘Wake me up’. And someone did.”, Loki sighed, closing his eyes. He couldn’t remember ever being so tired in his whole life. Battered as though beaten senseless, all he managed was to wrap his fingers around the slender hand resting on his chest.

“Was it you?”, he wondered. At the same time, he somehow knew that there should have been pain, injury of some kind, irreparable damage… Only there wasn’t. Every thought came slow and disconnected, slipping away into an opaque haze. He tried to pull them back into focus, but soon gave up. It cost too much energy.

Words failed Ljoisira. She shook her head in tiny jerks, her fingers gripping his so tightly it hurt. Loki didn’t object. He couldn’t have, because the next moment someone else was with the two of them and they were encased into a fierce bear hug by arms that felt like bands of steel. It knocked the breath right from Loki’s lungs, while Ljoisira was pressed up against him. She broke into laughter, a high-pitched, out-of-control sound interrupted by frantic gasps and odd little sobs. The emotions carried to him through the life-bond were so erratic, he couldn’t make much sense of them. It was like sharing minds with a lunatic.

“Have you both gone mad?!”, Loki demanded feebly. “Brother, you’re choking me –“ It appeared that Thor could not have cared less.

“You were dead, brother. For real this time. And now you’re alive.” With a tremendous sigh, Thor seemed to gather his wits and let go of them. Ljoisira stayed, holding on to Loki like a drowning person to driftwood. He wrapped one arm around her, worried. She was beside herself. Never before had he seen her so unhinged.

“You died on her. She just needs a little time.”, Thor replied to his brother’s troubled look. Loki
was vaguely aware of Stephen and Tony standing a little way off on the field, but he was too
overwhelmed to pay them much attention.

“Loki.” The severity in Thor’s voice made him meet his eyes. “If you do that to her again, I am
personally dragging you back from Helheim, or Valhalla, or wherever you will be. I am not
watching her go through it again.” On hearing that fierce, loyal promise, a smile tugged at the
corners of his mouth.

“It’s a deal.”
XXXIV. A Golden Time

Chapter Notes

I am flesh and I am bone
Rise up, ting ting, like glitter and gold
I've got fire in my soul
Rise up, ting ting, like glitter
Like glitter and gold

- Barns Courtney, "Glitter & Gold"

This is the concluding chapter of the main story. I can't believe that I have finished this! I am quite wistful right now __. There is one epilogue after this that I will upload tomorrow. Thank you for staying with this story to the end! I hope this toothache-sweet ending is to your liking :) I just had to do it. I love happy endings, and I think our couple deserved this one very much. I also couldn't resist to finally let the dragon king make an appearance in his dragon form. Enjoy and have fun reading!

XXXV. A Golden Time

Dying is a very tedious business. A broken bone heals slower than a rend to a muscle, and faster than impaled vitals. An injury grave enough to have caused death within minutes, healed within seconds – it left a mark on the body, and took much from it. Loki knew, in that strangely hazy time after his resurrection, that he had indeed been very dead. He had denied it at the time when it had happened, as a mind so often flinches from a horrible truth, but the state he was left in made things quite clear.

Only to Ljosira could he confide about the experience, and even that was a poorly told tale, because he simply had no true understanding of what Yggdrasil had done to him. He had felt the overwhelming presence of the world tree as she had bowed beneath Ljosira's defiance, had felt her effortlessly snatch up the many pieces of him scattering into all directions, and had submitted to her life-giving touch. Wake me up, he had told her, and she had.

A mother, her benevolent amusement washing over him, telling him no, not his time yet after all, he better get back to it now. Gently, she had plucked him from the darkness and shooed him away from eternity as though she was scolding a child for some juvenile prank. Nudging his body to heal itself. And so, it had. But not easily, and not without burning through much of his strength.

Ribcage shattered, heart and lungs shredded by Natta's last cruel swipe at him. He was much more resilient than, say, an average human. But far from being immortal. He had sojourned among dragons long enough to be cured of that delusion. After agreeing with him in that point, Yggdrasil had somehow spilled out the fabric of his soul into the vessel of flesh and bone which had been his home for many years. And Loki had been ready to begin anew.

Time had passed outside of every mortal boundary during this process. While the world tree reassembled him, she simultaneously dissembled the great billowing shadow whose essence he felt nearby, like the breath of a primordial predator down his neck. Natta. Loki had observed with a
macabre fascination how Yggdrasil peeled away the dragon's soul from the rest of her and allowed those remaining pieces to disperse into the cosmos as dark energy.

Despite the black heart she'd harboured inside, Natta became a part of the magical entity which permeates all things, and even her dark wisdom, her ruthless guile, found places in that unending tapestry. Back then, Loki couldn't puzzle out his sentiments about this. Despite the stunning, sad beauty of watching a dragon 'die', it was an incomprehensible concept to him, that the tree of life should welcome one who had sought to overthrow the balance, one so obviously evil. When he pointed this oddity out to Ljosira, she looked askance at him, as if he had asked her a very silly question.

"How else would Yggdrasil learn, if not from mistakes?", was her maddeningly vague answer. Loki had dropped the issue, knowing it was futile, and instead wondered if Natta would not have preferred to merge with her beloved Dragonbane. He had killed her with the spear. It befuddled him why the weapon had not siphoned her soul. To this, Ljosira had a more precise reply.

"For two reasons. First, Anganir resides within Dragonbane. There is no space for another unless he allows it. And the second… Despite being sickeningly proud of her creation, Natta would never have ceded to that eternal confinement. She preferred to go on. I think maybe she even feared the weapon she had created, in the end."

"But Vegr…", Loki protested. She shook her head in a slightly rebuking fashion.

"My brother was greatly weakened, and in his mortal form. She siphoned him while he struggled to shift. At that moment, he was easy prey." The tone of her voice had told him she would speak no more of it. Just as well.

It took longer to recuperate from dying – or recuperate from recuperating from dying – than Loki liked to admit. As soon as Ljosira had gathered her wits somewhat, she had declared that he was much too raw to be transported back to Asgard, when Thor had brought up the issue of returning immediately. Instead, they helped him through one of the golden portals magicked up by Doctor Strange, to Stark Tower. But before that, he reclaimed Dragonbane from the torn earth where the enemy had fallen. Sensing his intent before he had even formed it, the spearhead morphed seamlessly into a double-bladed dagger, perfectly balanced. Loki secured it to his belt with numb fingers.

When they departed, nothing remained of Natta. Yet the field which had become her graveyard would forever be overshadowed by a lingering twilight, a darkness the sun would never truly manage to penetrate. Not even bones did she leave behind. The possibility that Ljosira could have met that fate instead of the Darkflight leader intruded upon Loki's mind, and suddenly he was very glad to leave the melancholy emptiness of the grass sea.

The first few hours after his return bled away from him like thin ink on waterlogged parchment. Thor more or less carried him to the chamber he'd shared with Ljosira during their brief stay on Midgard. His brother and his intended bickered over something, judging by the intermittent low rumbling and hushed singsong whispers, but Loki couldn't concentrate on the topic of their discussion. It was quiet for a time, before the high-contrast dialogue resumed. Maybe sleep claimed him then. He woke sometime later, feeble as a new-born fawn tossed out into the harsh world. Never in his life had he felt so vulnerable, shaking with weakness, exhausted beyond telling.

A man's dignity is a most fragile thing. And that rings doubly true for a man who has more pride than is good for him. Loki ridiculed himself by acting nettled while Ljosira fussed endlessly over him. He despised needing help with the simplest things, and later would curse himself for behaving
like a sulky child. But back then, it was difficult not to. He had flattered himself for never accepting aid from anyone and had always bristled at the thought of how mortal he must seem to Ljosira. It served only to add kindling to his wounded pride.

She endured his churlishness stoically, which was somehow a worse reprimand than if she had reacted with anger. But she had no anger inside her. When he finally gave in to her care and opened himself to the life-bond, the blazing beacon of her relief near blinded him. He was so loved. For no reason he could conceive of. He wrapped his long fingers around her slender ones and lifted them to his lips, brushing a light kiss to her petal-smooth skin. She startled briefly, before her expression melted into one of warm fondness.

"Do you ever wonder if your life would have been easier, were you not bonded to a mortal?", he blurted the question out before he could rein in the errant thought. Loki blamed his bone-deep exhaustion for the mental slip-up. Ljosira cocked her head, that distinctly draconic gesture he knew by heart. It could express curiosity or scepticism, the distinction of which she somehow managed to convey merely through the look in her eyes. Right now, her regard was a pensive one.

"What good does it do to wonder about that? It's a convoluted, mortal thing you do, when you agonize over the past. You analyse your actions and push regret around like chess pieces on a board. Maybe it would have been easier. It would also have meant being without you, without the richness of your mind as you slowly opened it to me. I do not wish to imagine it.", she answered, her voice gentle but firm. Loki felt that he should make amends for his earlier comment, because her words made it sound as if she thought he regretted something.

"Maybe it's a habit for us, turning past events over in our heads. I have never been aware how quickly I could… end. I'd grown arrogant in the fifteen hundred years of having walked through life unscathed. But I think inherently, we mortals know that we do not have unlimited time on this world. So, we try to make sense of it all. Rather poorly, more often than not.", he gave her an arch smile, his eyes dancing with self-irony. Ljosira mirrored his amusement.

"I like that you view yourself with a grain of humour now. You were much more solemn when we met again, and your mockery more cutting than a sharp blade." Her remark made him remember the very first time they had met, at the festival of Mjölnir's presentation so many years ago. And it made him wonder…

"I have one more question.", he began, his voice distant as he tried to recall that day in every detail.

"Just the one?", Ljosira teased whimsically. Loki had the grace to skip over that jibe.

"When we first met, at the feast, you watched me. I noticed you because you were looking at me curiously. Why?" For a fleeting moment, he was sure that she would evade. Then she broke into a wide smile, as if she had been waiting for him to ask that question for a long time.

"I was overwhelmed by my first visit to Asgard. I saw so many marvellous things, but you were a such a mystery to me! Your aura… so intricate, the most complex one I had ever seen. There was light and darkness in it, balanced somehow. I felt drawn to you, but could not explain to myself why. You looked… you looked like I felt sometimes, when my family's overprotectiveness pressed down on me. Like there should be more, more to life, more to fate… Ah, I'm rambling." She fell silent, instead tucking some wisps of starlight hair behind her ear.

"You are not. I understand you perfectly fine.", Loki corrected softly.
Long before he had regained his full strength, the dragon calls began. It was a symphony, not of sound, but of cosmic anomalies which filled the sky above Manhattan. All night the meteor showers fell, bright enough that the city's light pollution could not out-glow them. And all day the pale northern lights billowed across the great azure canopy, like silk shawls caught in a gentle wind. Reports came in of the same phenomena seen everywhere around the world, from Berlin to far-eastern Tokio. Scientists could make no sense of it. But Loki, bond-mate to a dragon, could hear the song of magic the Lightbringers were singing, urging their youngest kin to return home. And he felt the longing in her heart, a persistent tugging sensation she tried to conceal and ignore.

A few days after the spectacle had begun and he was confident enough to climb the stairs to the loft, Loki found Ljosira standing outside on the landing pad. Silently, he stepped out into the cool breeze to join her. She had been subdued ever since the meteorite showers had started and kept sighing frequently, as if her mind dwelled on something distant. It likely did. Lost in deep thought, she seemed to be gazing up into the rain of shooting stars above. But as soon as Ljosira sensed his approach, she turned to face him. A strangely wistful look lingered in her eyes.

"I love looking up into a night sky from a mortal realm." She rested her head against his shoulder. Then her tone turned worried and she gazed up at him searchingly. "Is it getting late? Are you tired?"

"No, I'm not tired at all.", Loki murmured with just a bit of impatience. Although it might have been his nervousness about the question he intended to ask her. He had planned this for a while now… His hand surreptitiously frisked his pocket. Yes, still there.

"In fact, I think it's time for something that has been long overdue."

Ljosira pulled away from him a little, her brow furrowed. Right. Now was the right moment. After all, she had demanded of him to do this on Midgard. And so, up on this tower almost piercing the sky in the city of New York, Loki lowered to one knee before Ljosira, whose eyes went wide and unbelieving like silver dinner plates. She looked stunned, almost comical. He smiled up at her dumbfounded expression, thinking that he couldn't have surprised her more if he'd stripped naked and started to dance.

"What are you doing?", she managed to say in a strange kind of voice. It sounded like a wet rag squeaking over a polished surface.

"You have taught me much, my love, but this is a thing I teach you – we are having a moment. Be still and listen." His gentle rebuke was equally tinted with humour. Ljosira made a small gaspy sound, then she continued to goggle at him. Loki took a breath to steady himself.

"I love you, Ljosira of the Lightbringers, Princess of Dragons, immortal creature who has stolen my heart. I love you selfishly, without shame or limits or even reason. I told you once that I will always have a little bit of doubt in me. But I don't doubt that this is right." Loki paused shortly, shaking off the rambling thoughts which always intruded when he made some great emotional declaration. It still did not come easily to him. Ljosira stared with her mouth open.

"I do not think I courted you as you deserved, with all the fighting and monsters and rogue dragons in the way. You deserve to be treated like a lady… No, a queen, although I am no king."

"You are to me.", she whispered breathlessly. Those simple words made it the easiest thing in the world to pull the ring from his pocket and present it into the small empty space between them. The white opal glittered like a badge of victory, catching gleams of the stellar rain above.

"Then… will you do me the honour of becoming my wife? Marry me." He looked up into her eyes.
They were dewy with emotion. She nodded, not trusting her voice just then. Her hand trembled a little when she lifted it for him to slide the filigree band onto her finger. It was flawless, a perfect fit. And then Loki stood, pulling her into his arms and kissing her with all the ardour and exhilaration he felt. Or maybe those were his beloved's feelings, mingling with his own and amplifying them through the life-bond. But in any case, the night air around them became many a degree warmer.

"Better stop me or I will finish what we started…", he murmured into her ear, his voice smooth as a cat's purr. Ljosira let out a very girlish giggle.

"Not a wise idea. You never know who is watching…" She indicated the star-strewn sky above them meaningfully. Loki deliberated quite seriously if he might not take that risk. Then he gave a resigned sigh.

"Very well. So, my not-so-willing bride, what now?", he queried, throwing her a mischievous wink. He had expected to make her smile, but instead she averted her eyes, her face turning pensive and still. It alarmed him that she would seem so disheartened after the joyful moment they had just shared.

"What is it?", Loki ventured guardedly.

"It's hard to ignore the call. I have never experienced it before… It's not used often. The first day, I could choose not to hear it. But now the voices are persistent, constant. I don't want to leave you…" Her gaze dropped to her feet. Loki leaned in and brushed a tender kiss to her forehead.

"If you are called, you must go. I know you have delayed for my sake. But… you will return, soon?", he couldn't refrain from asking that question.

"Of course! My family just wishes to see me after these turbulent events… And the council will need me to testify about Natta's crimes.", Ljosira mused distractedly. Then, quite suddenly, a determined expression bloomed on her face.

"But before I go… Let us fly, my heart."

"Let us fly.", he echoed softly.

Flying on a dragon would never be an experience to get used to. Each time the wonder of it was renewed, to view everything from so far up that it looked like a pristine miniature, a tirelessly made work of art that represented the real world down to the very last detail. Loki and Ljosira spent the rest of the night cavorting through the skies in companionable silence, enjoying the rush of the wind as she gracefully rode the currents. Watching the glittering waves of the ocean as they reflected the nocturnal heavens. They could have communicated telepathically, shared entire lines of thought in mere seconds through their life-bond. But every once in a while, it felt much more natural to lay speech to rest, and just find peace within the other's ease.

At the crack of dawn, Ljosira navigated back to Stark Tower, while the city still lay in that quiet wooziness before it would need to awaken for a new and stressful day. Stark, Strange and Thor greeted them on the landing pad. The humans seemed bleary-eyed and tired, but immediately brightened at the sight of Ljosira landing on the circular platform. She let Loki dismount, bumping his back with her nose playfully. And then, after a short farewell and many well-wishes, she took off again.

She ascended on pearly wings, growing smaller and smaller, a circling white bird contrasted against the lightening horizon. She proclaimed a long, drawn-out note that sounded like a
bittersweet melody. Then the draconic Bifröst erupted around her, painting a streak of rainbow into the sky. Loki watched her disappear from his sight, soaring on the bridge of magic which would carry her to Yggdrasil. But no matter how far away she flew, his heart flew with her, unwilling to part ever again.

Three restless and distracted days passed for Loki after that. He returned to Asgard together with Thor shortly after Ljosira had left. This time, their homeland had been spared the destruction by Natta, except the damage done to the great plaza in front of the palace, which the stonemasons and goldsmiths had mended vigorously and in great haste. The entire city buzzed with gossip about the recent events, and Loki could not take two steps from his quarter doors without being accosted by eager guards or awe-struck citizens who begged him to tell the story of how he killed the ancient dragon of shadow.

Overnight, he became a hero. His tale was on everyone's lips, and praise showered him like it had never before. For so many years he had hungered for recognition and glory, in vain. Now that the day had finally come for cheers and accolades, he felt oddly outside of himself. As if he had been lifted from his body and walked beside it as a stranger who had no true influence over the happenings. It was an uncomfortable experience, and at the same time a well-concealed, ambitious part of him accepted the acknowledgement gravely, basking in it like a lion in sunlight.

But he missed Ljosira. Painfully so. Without her, all of this meant nothing, and every handshake, every word of gratitude and acclaim had a hollow ring to it. He had no heart to be celebrated if she could not share it with her, especially since she had been just as instrumental to win this victory as he had, even more so. He felt as if he took credit for her tireless work, and that notion left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Worse, the life-bond had gone silent since she had left, and he loathed that silence. Robbed of a sense which had become as vital as seeing or hearing, he felt deadened, blundering on like a man blindfolded. So, on the day where the feast would be held to honour his heroic deeds, he secluded himself inside his chambers with the intention to brood silently.

Ljosira had accepted his proposal. She would return to him, she had promised. But when? Dragons did not count years as mortals did. Maybe it would be decades before he saw her again. No. She'd be back, soon. Loki sighed away the weight of the world, pulling his shoulders straight. He'd never been good at waiting.

"You might soon pace the rugs threadbare, Loki." He turned to see Thor stride into the chamber, dressed in formal attire with a thin golden band circling his brow to mark him as crown prince. His blonde mane was pulled into a tidy warrior's tail at the back of his head. Before Loki could think of a good retort, a sudden shout went up from the gardens and streets below. The collective surprise was followed by an earth-shaking trumpeting of welcome – a dragon roar. For a split second, Loki thought it was Ljosira, but then someone in the corridors shouted:

"Elding comes! The Dragon King comes to Asgard!"

And yes, the giant shape of him appeared above then. The largest of his kind, his wingspan so wide he overshadowed a whole district as he glided on the wind with a grace one could never have expected from a creature of his size. He bugled again, his deep voice echoing the generous nature of his visit. Loki and Thor were already on their way. They hurried down the manifold stairs to the palace entrance, not without being jostled by dozens of guards who were frantic to get a glimpse of the spectacle.
Countless people had poured out of their homes, their voices lifting to an erratic concert of greetings. It was a unique event. Since the dark days, the dragon king had not visited in his true form, and had dictated that only dragons in their mortal bodies were allowed to come to the deeply magical Aesir homeland.

Stunned and marvelling, the people of Asgard watched the greatest guardian of Yggdrasil land in the wide plaza, where only a few days before his daughter had faced down Natta, the mistress of shadows. This circular square could hold five hundred armed men standing comfortably spaced. The dragon filled out most of it on his own. Spectators were crowded back into the mouths of the streets, craning their necks and bumping each other in their enthusiasm to watch.

Thor and Loki were joined by Odin as they stepped forth to greet Elding. Heimdall stood a little apart, a knowing smile on his lips. The dragon king shook out his wings as if making sure each scale was in its right place, and mindfully avoided toppling buildings in the process. His aura would have brought every man in the plaza to his knees, had he not taken great care to temper it. Still, walking into his proximity was like approaching an exploding star.

"Asgard, beautiful Asgard! Long has it been since we met, and how my heart soars to see you well!" His voice boomed in unison with his spirited roar. The projection of his thoughts was a battering ram to the senses. Loki saw several people bow beneath its force. Elding's long neck twisted lazily, his powerful tail coiling in obvious enjoyment. He seemed pleased when his all-penetrating gaze found the royal family gathered below. Loki had endured his scrutiny once, but it had been tame compared to the gold and silver whirlpool which the king turned on him now. The undivided attention of Yggdrasil's eyes was upon him. There seemed to be no air to breathe.

"My gratitude I come to express on this day. Know this: A snake had been plotting in our very midst. The night mother Natta betrayed her kind to follow her evil ambitions, and you paid dearly for it. She lured me from my watch to seek my firstborn, while she readied to deliver a mortal strike to Asgard. Dragon Queen she wished to be, after using my children's souls to destroy me!" His words burned with a terrifying anger for the Darkflight's insolence, but again he bridled the blast-wave of his fury before it became overwhelming.

"Yet she was thwarted by those who defended our cause! My daughter – my youngest – put an end to Natta's insidious plans. And she was aided by one of yours, Asgard. Let there never again be doubt for his loyalty, and let him be lauded as a hero, a friend and champion to dragonkind!", the king thundered, and his cry was joined by all who had gathered in the plaza. He radiated a glamour that possibly entranced people for miles around. Loki thought his heart might jump out of his chest. When the jubilant cheers died down, Elding bent his head closer.

"Step forth, Loki Odinson.", he said, almost quietly, while Loki wished his legs would not feel like two useless columns of jelly. He hardly dared to breathe. Neither did any of the spectators.

"Do me the honour, my friend, to accept my deepest thanks. Not just for giving your life to protect Yggdrasil, but for guarding my heart of hearts in this strife-filled time. You have succeeded where I have failed." Elding's voice was calm, and yet tinted with a deep regret. The gift of speech abandoned Loki like a child dropping its toy. He fumbled for words in the face of this enormous creature's gratitude.

"Your Majesty –" Instinctively, he began dropping to his knees. The dragon king interrupted him before he could.

"No, I will have none of that. Stand tall, son. My kin and I will never forget what you have done. They name you Drekhjarten. Dragonheart. And that, you are. Ah! Would that I had foreseen this fate in you, but my youngest saw truer than me. I stand corrected." He made an amused sound, a
low rumble. It sounded like laughter. Then the giant head on his dawn-hued neck tilted inquisitively. "Which boon would you ask of me? You deserve whatever I can grant you." Loki managed to inhale one shuddering breath. There was only one thing he wanted.

"I ask… for your daughter's hand. In marriage." From which source he drew the courage to meet Elding's eyes, he would later not fathom. But he did. "Your Majesty.", he added a little too late, realizing his courtesy had faltered. When the king did not answer for some time, Loki feared he had asked for too much, too great a request. But Elding regarded him with something that could have been a smile.

"Bold move. You aim high, I'll give you that. But as far as I know, you have already won her approval. Why ask mine, if you could have asked for exceptional magic, or riches beyond measure?", he wondered. Loki had the strange feeling that he was covertly being tested. His voice gained certainty.

"I like to think I do well enough with sorcery, and this land has more riches than I can spend. And also… I know that your blessing would mean much to her, and to me." A look of unveiled pride flashed across the dragon's gold-and-silver eyes, then he suddenly threw back his head and trumpeted out a booming laugh.

"He'll do, little one. He'll do." One of his immense wing unfurled swiftly like a curtain being drawn, revealing a beaming Ljosira who started running without delay. She practically flung herself into Loki's arms and he caught her easily, spinning her around and around until they both were dizzy. Behind them, Thor let out a thundering cheer which was almost drowned out by the exultant crowd joining in. Loki set Ljosira down, kissing her laughing lips with no shame about the people – and her father – watching them.

"Mortals.", Elding said fondly, unperturbed. "It seems I shall have to visit Asgard more often from now on. Should be a nice change." An arm still wrapped around Ljosira, Loki turned to the dragon king as he shook out his wings, readying himself to take flight again.

"Your Majesty…" As he spoke, he pulled Dragonbane from his belt. The weapon morphed seamlessly from dagger to spear. He held it out to Elding. "I thought you might want to take this into your custody." The dragon huffed out a sceptical breath.

"And what would I do with that thing? Pick my teeth?", he hazarded, almost indignantly. "Besides, it wants to stay with you. It would never answer to me, of all people. Wilful and fractious, Anganir always was. You keep it, and keep it well. You'll need it, have no doubt. My youngest has had a talent for trouble since the day she hatched.", this he emphasized with a thorough look at Ljosira.

"Father!", she protested heatedly, but the dragon king was already engulfed by the draconic Bifröst. He rose into the rainbow current with one powerful beat of his wings, and then he was gone, leaving behind only a hint of genuine amusement, like an elusive scent on the wind. Loki and Ljosira were still staring after him when Thor pushed between them unceremoniously, his arms coming around both their shoulders.

"It seems we have a wedding to plan! And we better do it soon. Within the week!", the thunder prince announced in a grand voice.

"Why so hasty, brother?", Loki wondered with a frown. Thor turned a bit grave at his question.

"I have to leave for Midgard soon. The staff you wielded back during the attack on New York. The thing is an Infinity Stone. I want to find it and keep it safe." Ljosira nodded solemnly, while Loki turned pensive.
"Do you need help? Should I come with you?", he offered with some reluctance, but Thor shook his head.

"You'll be a married man soon, with a wife to protect. And I need you here on Asgard, to guard what is dear to us, brother." That baffled Loki into silence. His brother's gaze swerved to Ljosira.

"And you will keep an eye on him, little ancient one? So he doesn't do anything stupid while I'm gone?", he threw her a wink. She graciously ignored the silly title he had grown so fond of giving her.

"Both eyes, my friend. From now until I close them forever." Loki made a gruff noise of disgruntlement.

"You two take pride in handling me, don't you?"

But in truth, it did not bother him one bit. He needed only to close his eyes, and he would see it: The winding, twisting path he had walked, a road of dark cobbles merging into a black-and-silver mosaic. Many names he had been called, many masks had he worn. From each he parted now, gladly, and maybe just a bit wistfully.

A golden time awaited him ahead. He felt neither fear nor doubt, only anticipation. After all, he would not pursue this future on his own. That certainty, that simple truth made Loki smile, and he caught Ljosira smiling back at him, as if she knew the exact direction of his thoughts. She probably did.
XXXV. Epilogue: Infinity

Chapter Notes

Dear readers and followers, thank you for having read and finished reading Lightbringer. I have written this epilogue long before I had finished the main story, and now I am finally uploading it and hitting the COMPLETE button, after having started to write it in 2014.

What a great journey my couple has gone through, I am almost a little baffled when I look at it. They started out as so different - light and shadow, two extremes on opposite ends of a spectrum, their lives bound together by this strange whim of fate, their life-bond created by an accident. Somehow, still, Ljosira knew never to give up on him, always believing there is good in him, hidden beneath the shadows. And Loki knew, maybe by mere instinct, to entrust parts of him to a creature whose nature he understood to be very unlike his own. I like to think that they learned much from each other over the development of their relationship. The Lightbringer dragon who knew no desires, comprehended no passions, became more mortal - impulsive at times, mischievous at others, and even vindictive once or twice. While the God of Mischief grew gentler, more settled, at ease with telling the truth when it mattered, learning not to hide from the connections he made throughout his life - but instead protecting them, in his own way. Every good relationship has its own balance. I'm both sad and happy to see this story - Loki and Ljosira's story - come to an end.

One of the reasons I wrote this epilogue is to show you all their Happily Ever After. I even thought of continuing the story throughout the happenings of Ragnarok and Infinity Wars. Maybe I will someday. In any case, this takes place after the Infinity War, which in my mind went down differently than the movie (of course). So watch for SPOILERS to Infinity War, if you haven't seen it! Now have fun reading, and maybe remembering the name of the young man in the very first scene of the first chapter, who asked his girl if she knew the story about the trickster and the dragon princess.

Translation:

Gildran - Cherished, Of Great Value

XXXVI. Epilogue: Infinity

Thor set the empty pitcher onto the meticulously polished wooden surface. A little foam slid lazily down the glass, pooling at its bottom. He gazed into it for a long moment and reminisced, his mood turning melancholic. At this time of the day, the Bifröst was not well frequented. Quite empty actually. Only a few people sat around the heavy oak tables. Framed pictures lined the ornamented, gilded walls. A marvellous golden city, rolling hillsides, snow-crested mountains. A mighty ash tree. Little pieces of a home which would never return. Runes wound across the supporting beams, glowing very faintly.

"The answer is never at the bottom of a glass.", a deep voice remarked to him sagely. "I have been
trying to tell you that for years." The man behind the bar might have been dressed like a Midgardian, with his impeccable vest above a perfect white shirt, a crisp contrast against his dark skin. But everything else about him proclaimed Asgardian – the defined features of his face, the proud stance. Cleaning a glass offhandedly, he surveyed Thor with his peculiar golden eyes. Dragon eyes. The king looked up above the manifold colourful bottles, where a gleaming sword hung on display, reflecting the muted light.

"It may be yet. Tell me, Heimdall – you went from being the Gatekeeper of the Bifröst to being the barkeeper of a bar named Bifröst. Couldn't you at least pick some wittier name? I mean, where is your imagination?", Thor asked, handing him the pitcher for a refill. Heimdall took it, shaking his head.

"Tiger cannot change his stripes, my king." Thor let out a breath and rolled his shoulders, feeling Stormbreaker shift on his back. It was heavy today, not so much a companion but rather a weight to carry in addition to the ones resting on his shoulders. He had never been a man prone to maudlin fancies. But when he thought of those who had helped him forge this weapon of kings, his heart, so wretchedly mired in isolation, reached for them with a keenness that felt like pain. It likely was.

"King of one village. Barely a village.", he reminded Heimdall. The gate – or barkeeper – set down the glass before him, full to the brim with golden liquid.

"We survived Ragnarok, and then another war that shook the universe in its foundations. Your father did not build Asgard in a day, Odinson. You will rebuild it in time."

But rebuilding it seemed like an impossibly tremendous feat. So little remained. His parents had joined eternity. His friends, the Warriors Three, had died by Hela's hand. The Avengers had their own world to put right after all the destruction. Sif had gone into exile, leaving him, never to return. And his brother, his only remaining family… had vanished from the face of the earth, taking Ljosira with him. He felt like the loneliest man alive. No resolve left. Bled dry. A hardened veteran who had seen one battle too many.

Their absence was a solid thing pressing down on him, a burden he knew not how to shed, a second skin clinging to his own. Life-bonds, Ljosira had once explained, were not exclusive to dragons. Every sentient being capable of emotions such as love and comfort harboured an inherent wish to be connected to others of its kind. Otherwise, we would just be lost, solitary creatures drifting through the vast universe without a single kindred spirit to turn to. Imagine such a horrible emptiness. For dragons, as with everything else they do, these connections were made through magic. For mortals, it was much more elusive. Many spent their whole lives puzzling over the connections they had made, struggling to understand their purpose.

"I just wish…", Thor trailed away, then lifted the tankard to take a long swig. "You know, I always had support and now I feel… drained, less. I don't know who to turn to…. Besides you. I wish I had listened to my father's teachings more. Spent more time with my brother." But Heimdall didn't seem to listen, his gaze unfocused. Thor grumbled irritably.

"You really don't understand how this whole thing works. You are supposed to be the world-weary barkeeper who listens to a tired man's life-story and then gives some really useful advice."

"I believe you have a visitor.", Heimdall suddenly said, cutting him short. Thor followed the direction of his piercing eyes, whirling around on the stool.

Wearing an elegant, dark suit, his hands lazily tucked into his pockets, there stood Loki at the entrance. His expression was on some middle-ground between rueful and glad.
"It's been some time, brother.", he said with a faint smile. Thor just stared at him. Then he stood and walked over, pulling his brother into a tight hug, no argument. For a mere instant, Loki tensed, but then he seemed to relax, returning the gesture in his own subtle way. He patted Thor's back once, vaguely.

But the sigh which left him spoke of a relief going deep, down to his bones. An inexplicable feeling of completeness overcame and held him. He had missed his brother dearly. Whole again. Bring him home., his wife's soft, whispered thought brimmed with acknowledgement. Then she retreated, leaving him to enjoy this reunion.

"Loki, where have you been, you idiot? I could have used your help these past years. Damn you.", Thor grunted in a gruff tone, releasing him.

"I know. There were… difficult circumstances. I will explain. Come with me.", Loki straightened and beckoned him towards the exit.

"Give the lady of the house my warm greetings.", Heimdall called before they left.

Loki led Thor down the main path through the village where the Asgardians had settled down after the devastating events of Ragnarok and Thanos' crusade. But after a while, they diverged into the open fields, the vast highland chosen to be the new sanctuary of the few who had survived such great hardships. They walked in silence for a while. Thor could not quite fathom where Loki was headed to. The planes stretched on for miles, nothing but heaving blades of grass.

"I missed you.", Thor blurted out without thinking. His brother threw him an astonished, awkward glance. "You know, in a 'Where is that mischievous brother of mine, he hasn't tried to kill me in a while, what a bummer' way."

"The deception was necessary, although I regret it. You will see soon. Right about… now.", Loki said. He took a step, and from one moment to the next, he simply vanished. Thor stopped abruptly, staring at the spot. The field stretched out before him, ending in a steep cliff. A lone, smooth stone rose from the grass at the far end. He remembered this place. They had met Odin here for the last time and bid farewell to their father.

"Loki?", Thor asked into the emptiness. He jumped when a disembodied hand appeared before him mid-air. Without preamble, it grabbed him and pulled.

He emerged into an entirely different scenery, stunned by the sight. A beautiful manor stood on the cliff-side, its walls painted in the light colour of an eggshell. Its dark red roof rose like a sentinel against the cloud-patched sky, streaks of sunlight illuminating the solid wooden supports. The lone stone was overgrown by the roots of a great tree whose branches spread out to grant shade and shelter for neat little rosebushes and a docile gazebo. Glowing veins threaded their way through the tree-bark, runes twined across the pale walls.

Little clusters of stars lined the narrow pathway to the entrance. Above the door, Thor could make out a faintly luminous inscription: Vit ru skyldrae. He sensed the unmistakable, unique magic of a dragon interwoven with every brick. A home, built with loving detail, hidden away from the rest of the world by his brother's uncanny illusions. Light and shadow, balanced. Equilibrium. Loki waited on the cobbled path. From the periphery of his vision, Thor caught sight of a glossy ribbon as it danced in the wind. It disappeared behind the tree. They were not alone.

"Before we set out to defeat Thanos… I brought my wife here. There was a very real possibility of losing this battle, and I wanted her to be safe on the off-chance that… I would not return.", Loki explained as they strode up to the manor. It looked so peaceful. A quiet watchman overlooking the
"You could have sent her back to her father, she would have been safe on Yggdrasil.", Thor mused, frowning. Loki cleared his throat.

"That was not an option at that time. Her situation proved to be somewhat… delicate.", he said enigmatically, shifting his weight. Thor intended to question him further on this issue, but he never got that far. A tiny figure flew across the field, running with full speed right at them. His unruly raven locks fluttered in the wake of his race, little face alight with surprise and curiosity.

"Papa, you're back already!", the child called out in a high, clear voice, flinging himself into Loki's arms. His father caught him easily and he wiggled his short legs as he was lifted from the ground.

Thor just gawped, speechless. The boy, no older than four, was a perfect copy of his brother at that age. Almost perfect. There were some softer accents to his features, and most of all his bright grey eyes, viewing the bulky man at his father's side with unveiled interest. Intelligence glittered in his inquisitive gaze, far surpassing his age.

"Mama said you might be gone for days. 'I might finally have time to fix the tree!', she said.", the boy imitated Ljosira's inflection with uncanny skill.

"Brother… meet my son, Gildran. Who is too cheeky for his own good. Where are your manners?", Loki rebuked him. Gildran tilted his head, looking deceptively innocent. Thor was dumbstruck.

"By Odin's pale b-
"

"Language!", Loki interjected harshly, making the boy snicker and squirm in his arms. "Greet your uncle, Gildran.", he added with a squeeze. The little one took a deep breath.

"Well met, Uncle Thor Odinson. It is an honour.", Gildran said in the tone of some haughty nobleman, bowing until he nearly tumbled from Loki's grasp. By mere impulse, Thor reached for the child. He looked like a man stunned out of his wits.

"Uncle… I have a nephew." His voice brimmed with marvel. "Can I hold him?" Loki looked uncertain for an instant, his expression that of a protective father. Thor had never thought he would see the day of this happening.

"It's totally fine, Papa. He's all bright, like Mama! Only not as soft. More like lightning.", the boy babbled.

"Just… Don't drop him, alright?", Loki conceded, handing his son to Thor, who kept a firm hold in the boy. He swung the child up high once, twice, spawning a series of delighted whoops.

"As if. I'm the embodiment of careful.", Thor snorted.

"Not to mention delusional.", Loki gripped scathingly. Gildran stretched towards Stormbreaker, his mouth forming a big circle.

"Whoa, that's great! It's all thunder inside. Mama made that.", he explained wisely, as though educating the other two about this crucial fact.

"Hey, she helped to make it by adding her fire to the forge. But I did the heavy lifting. So it was mostly me.", Thor argued, stung.
"Now you sound like Papa. He says that same thing about Dragonbane.", Gildran nodded decisively, earning himself a sharp look from his father. Out of nowhere, a pleading undertone entered his voice. "When do I get my awesome weapon?"

"Not until you reach your father in height." Thor whirled around. Ljosira strode towards them over the grass, smiling widely. Her silver hair spun into a sloppy braid, the silk robe flowing gracefully around her, eyes flashing with delight. She let Thor pull her into a hearty, one-armed embrace.

"You are radiant as ever, my friend. My heart is much lighter for seeing you well.", the king said with deep sincerity. "Should we call you ancient mother now?", he added jokingly. She threw him a completely ineffective punch to the side.

"No, you big brute. For you, it's always just Ljosira. I missed you, dear brother-in-law." Thor set Gildran onto his feet again. "Go practice your reading, Gil. I'll quiz you later, so no cheating.", his mother sent the boy off. He made a face but obeyed, skipping over the cobble-stones.

"I have to apologize to you about this deception, Thor.", Ljosira said regretfully as they entered the house. The entire interior told stories about the magical talents of its inhabitants. It lingered on every bookshelf, danced over the tastefully arranged settees, dwelled in the very air. Ljosira led the way to the wide living room, offering Thor to sit on one of the plush sofas. Then she turned to Loki, giving him an affectionate nuzzle.

"Welcome home, my love.", she whispered. Loki brushed a fleeting kiss to her silver crown of her head, before taking his seat in an elaborate armchair.

"This place is…" Thor began, searching for words. "Incredible." Loki smiled at him.

"I know. It helps when your father-in-law is the Dragon King. When I learned that… our family would have another addition, my first concern was to get Ljosira to safety. She could not shift while she carried Gildran, it would have put him in danger. She was vulnerable, brother. And those were desperate times. I could not tell anyone."

"I understand.", Thor said, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. He truly did understand. Ljosira returned with an assortment of bite-sized treats and a large mug of beer for Thor.

"Gildran is the first of his kind. He is… we call it Dragonborn.", she explained as she handed him the drink. "Mortal, but with great magical potential. We were afraid… that someone might want to use him. All this conflict and devastation makes people desperate. And there was so much darkness in the world… If we had told anyone…", she trailed away, a look of sadness on her youthful face.

"We had to protect our son. I am sorry.", Loki went on for her. Thor shifted his gaze from one to the other, shaking his head.

"You two… You need to stop apologizing.", he then said, lifting his glass. "I have just learned the greatest news in years. I'm an uncle. An uncle! This is a day to celebrate!" He emptied the whole glass in one long gulp, then let out a triumphant warrior's shout. Both Ljosira and Loki flinched, before they broke into laughter about his obvious enjoyment. All the commotion drew their son's attention and he came running what the fuss was about.

Hours later, they still sat gathered around the table, eating and drinking, telling stories of times both old and new, tirelessly celebrating a reunion of three people who had walked through the fires of hell together.

At some point, Loki leaned back in the comfortable chair, his hand settling on his son's small
shoulder. Fast asleep, too exhausted to keep up with the adults’ lively conversation. His gaze sought
Ljosira, her face luminous and flawless. Breath-taking even after years, even when he knew
everything there is to know about it.

Every once in a while, Loki would still wake from a nightmare of his cell in Asgard, or an image of
his brother's face as he fell away into the void, plunging towards nothingness. And she would be
there beside him, his light. Soothing and dear, ready to break his fall as she had back then, to carry
him on her great wings. Onward, to the endless sky.

He smiled at the great irony, almost poetic. After he had saved her from falling so many years ago,
she had come to return the gesture. And as Loki felt his son, his little miracle, draw breath in his
sleep, he thought… What a beautiful job his wife had done. Because to be honest, it had been
mostly her. And he would love her for it, every day. Always.
Helloooo!
For a long time now I have been absent after finishing Lightbringer, but I somehow always return to this story. I have put so much thought into it, and have grown so fond of the characters that even after I had finished Lightbringer, I couldn't quite let them go. Some of you may have been wondering what happens to Loki and Ljosira during the events of Ragnarok and Infinity War, and I must say that I was wondering the same thing. And then one day, I started writing it.
I began Dragonheart, the sequel to Lightbringer, which will cover Ragnarok and Infinity War and tell the story of our couple's adventures during those troubled times. There will be feels and drama again, with participation of all my favorite Marvel characters of course, and we will meet new, mysterious dragons, journey farther into the wide galaxy than ever before!
I usually don't upload stories until they are finished, but I wanted to give a little teaser for what is coming, even though it will be some time until I start uploading Dragonheart on its own. But to all of you who have enjoyed Lightbringer and have journeyed with Loki and Ljosira to the (supposed) end, look for Dragonheart in the searches if you'd like to know how their destined path continues further!

This is a chapter from the beginning of Dragonheart. My timelines are not entirely in accordance to canon, but the happenings begin shortly after Civil War. After the conflict with Ultron, Thor thought it of vital importance to search the galaxy for the remaining Infinity Stones, because he had a bad premonition that they might be used with ill intentions. Therefore he left Asgard in search for the stones, leaving his brother Loki in charge of the realm as Prince Regent. Odin, the Allfather, had been increasingly withdrawn since the death of his beloved wife. A dark time looms on the horizon as Loki and Ljosira, who have been married for a year now, try to uphold the peace and prosperity on Yggdrasil's golden realm. But the short, calm time is fated to come to an end. Very soon, their bond will be tested in a trial of fire and ashes, and they will have to prevail against the great calamity waiting patiently to be unleashed.

Dragonheart

I. The Vanishing of Odin

"Mourn, and grieve, and remember with all the fibres of your heart. But do not chain what is gone to yourself, do not incarcerate the dead within the land of the living. You will take all the joy from life, and all the freedom from death, and your loneliness will become the jail in which you waste away your days."
Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard, God of Mischief, Master Sorcerer and the man called Drekhjarten by dragonkind, was used to beginning the day in the same specific way each morning. Lying beneath the ebony canopy of his large four-poster bed, surrounded on all sides by lushly embroidered gauze curtains, blanketed with rich silk sheets and furs. And most importantly, with a wife sleeping right beside him. Or in his arms. Or sometimes even atop him, when the mood struck her. But the presence of this wife was a never-changing constant, despite the different ways in which he found her connected to his person.

On this particular autumn morning, Loki awoke to the distinct absence of his wife. The sudden realization made him sit up jerkily, fully alert, although the obstinate pounding on his door might have rattled him from sleep sooner or later. He ignored it for the time being, instead casting a quick survey around the bedchamber. Ljosira was indeed not in it, but he saw her dove-blue dressing gown, draped over a high-backed chair.

Loki sighed as he flung his long legs out of bed and reached for a pair of soft pants, carelessly discarded to the floor. The persistent knocking had acquired a panicked undercurrent, but he took his time smoothing a hand through his raven-black hair. It was slightly too lengthy now to be strictly fashionable, and had an annoying tendency to curl at his nape.

Opening the door to his private study, he found himself looking down on a distraught maid with her hand still in the air, wide eyes fixed on his bare chest. She flushed scarlet with the intensity of a Midgardian traffic light.

“Apologies.”, Loki said, ever the polite aristocrat. His fingers wove a simple illusion spell which swiftly covered his state of undress with a random piece of clothing. “Your knock sounded deceptively masculine.”

“Your Highness.” She managed an awkward curtsy. “The Allfather… wishes to see you. Urgently. And these arrived for you today.” The maid now tried her best to avoid looking anywhere but his chest or his face, and therefore alternated nervously between the two. She held out a pack of envelopes tied together with a thin velvet cord. Daily political correspondence.

This practice had become a habit in the year since Thor had left and Odin had proceeded to pass on most of the realm’s issues to Loki, who was now acting in both their places. He should have felt triumphant about that, elated. For the first time ever, he held the power he had craved since his youth.

Although not a king, he was Prince Regent, and every day he juggled the many responsibilities that came with governing the most prosperous magical land beneath Yggdrasil’s crown. And what a mare’s nest it was, to manage the world tree’s crowning jewel, with an increasingly withdrawn father and a very absent brother.

He accepted the pack of letters, allowing the maid to depart with the demeanour of a rabbit fleeing a foxhole. The younger ones were equally wary and fascinated by him, his wife had remarked humorously some time ago. Drawn to his dark grace, rogishly handsome features and glinting emerald eyes like the proverbial moths to the flame. That he was a former traitor who had cast aside his villainous ways and redeemed himself as a hero only added further to his charisma. But at the same time, they did not dare to approach him. It would have been tilting at windmills, as the humans said.
“I think they just enjoy looking at you when you don’t notice. And then amuse themselves with wild stories about your exploits.”, he remembered Ljosira’s words from one evening. She’d peered at him over the edge of her book. He had eyed her dubiously.

“Do you think I entertain the notion of straying?” She’d given him a quizzical half-smile.

“Well… I don’t know. Do you?” Her silver eyes had glinted with an impish sort of challenge, and he had pulled her across the wide double-settee before she could blink, the book falling to the ground with a thud. What a splendid conclusion that conversation had led to. A night he remembered keenly still.

It was a very simple and widely known truth that Loki loved his wife, the immortal dragon princess who had chosen to leave Yggdrasil and live with him on Asgard. But… Where was she, anyway?

“Another fifty-something letters. If this goes on, you can soon conjure up a rope for me to hang myself from.”, Loki called into the spacious rooms, thinking that Ljosira might just be dressing or in the library. But he couldn’t sense her presence close by, only a faint trace of it which told him that she’d been gone from here for several hours. A little worried now, he let his surroundings fade out of focus and concentrated on the life-bond, a magical connection forged between them many years ago.

This bond allowed them to exchange thoughts, sensations or even the very fabric of their souls with each other, based on mutual consent and trust. It had grown so strong over the years that Loki doubted either of them would survive it being broken. Oh, the body would survive, sure. This was no physical matter, and he, who had died once for real, knew that bodies and souls were two vastly different things. Having a working body inhabited by a soul torn in half – it might be called alive, but it was no life worth living.

In any case, Loki reached for Ljosira through the life-bond and was quite shocked to find her in full flight upon the draconic Bifröst. He pulled back a little, unwilling to experience in force the tremendous speed and pressure which went with that form of travelling. Ljosira’s attention turned to his questioning surprise.

I am almost home again. Have you not read my note? Her thought sounded worried. Loki sensed a strange trepidation tucked away to the back of her mind, something she did not wish to think about just now. Simultaneously, she plucked the answer to her own question from him with ease, since he had opened himself to her perusal. It was quicker this way.

A life-bond is a brilliant and multifaceted thing. Loki could choose to share his thoughts in various stages, beginning from a precise sentence and ending with the entirety of his mind. Laying bare everything was exceptionally difficult, and they did not do it often. A complete resonance held its own, very specific kind of danger. They had both agreed not to take such a risk.

Drifting off, my love?, Ljosira asked curiously. Loki returned to the matter at hand.

Where have you been?, he demanded, unable to keep the irritation from his tone. She had never left without telling him before. In the physical part of the world, he went to his desk and picked up the piece of pristine white parchment with her chaotic handwriting on it, scanning it casually.

I went to see Tony, briefly, on Midgard., she answered in accordance to the message on the note. A vicious, ugly feeling uncoiled in Loki at the thought of her meeting the notorious Tony Stark. Without him. Alone. Ljosira seemed to flinch from the sudden onslaught of jealousy, both insulted and alarmed.
Loki - she began, but he interrupted her.

We will talk when you are back. My father wants to see me. And he pulled away from the connection, leaving her flustered and hurt, but he couldn’t help it just then. He had never liked the easy friendship Ljosira had taken up with Tony Stark during the adventurous journey to defeat the Darkflight dragon Natta. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her. Aside from his brother, she was pretty much the only person he trusted.

An unsettling thought occurred to Loki as he got dressed for the meeting with his father. Maybe he wasn’t so much jealous, but it irked him inordinately that everyone seemed to take an instant liking to his wife, while he more or less fell by the wayside. Wherever she went, the mortals welcomed her.

Even the aloof Tony Stark, who Loki suspected of not liking anything much except his own inflated genius. And me?, Loki wondered. His human acquaintances treated him with the perpetual caginess of being locked inside a room with a sated predator – wondering, perhaps, when he might get hungry again. Waiting for him to revert to his old ways.

The people of Asgard had been the same, until he had become a selfless hero by sacrificing his life in order to defeat the night mother. Loki had fought his way back into their good graces, but he never managed to receive the looks of unconcealed sympathy the Asgardians bestowed on his wife.

And that, he thought bitterly, with a great surge of self-loathing, was the heart of the problem. He was jealous of Ljosira, his better half, for being more popular than him. At that moment, Loki quite detested himself. He felt her brush tentatively against his mind, a gentle, unintrusive touch, but his own shame kept him from answering.

Why did doubt still sometimes get the better of him? So much had changed since the darkness of the staff had held him in its clutches during the Chitauri invasion. So many things had he learned and understood about himself since then. And yet, the deepest nature of a person could rarely, if ever, be changed. He would always be a man with both light and shadow in his soul. Balanced, but immutable.

Loki sighed, coming to a halt in front of the great gilded doors leading to his father’s quarters, having pondered away the entire walk there. A stifling heat hit him when he pushed open the ornamented wood, and the first thing he noticed was that absolutely nothing had changed since he’d last visited his father – two months ago. The state of the room shocked him. Curtains were drawn to block out the light from outside, and a perpetual, roaring fire burned beneath the marble mantle.

Odin sat in the monstrosity of an armchair, so very close to the flames that they might have leaped out to enkindle him before his son’s eyes. Flickering shadows danced against the dark drapery and velvet-covered walls, shivered across the master-crafted furniture. Loki saw his mother’s dresser, with the singular mirror Odin had gifted her on their wedding day. Its frame had no equal even on Asgard, decorated with mythical creatures in priceless gold, the fire making their gemstone eyes glint ruby red, emerald green and diamond silver.

The dresser had been left completely untouched - with various small items his mother had used to ready herself for the day. Loki had a sudden, vivid memory of his childhood, sitting on her lap as she brushed her long golden hair with a gleaming ivory comb, humming to herself. Nothing had been moved, no dust had fallen upon Frigga’s personal keepsakes. Her jewellery box lay open next to the flawless mirror, its contents spilling out in a haphazard fashion, as though she had been in haste when selecting them. Hairpins and powder brushes littered the dresser’s surface. She might just have left the room a moment ago.
But it did not feel like a gentle remembrance of Frigga, this room where his father brooded silently in front of the fire. It felt like a shrine. Or a tomb. Loki sensed Ljosira’s alarm as she fleetingly perceived what he saw. Something was not right.

“Father?”, he said tentatively, approaching Odin. The word still did not leave his lips easily, but he forced himself to say it for the sake of getting the Allfather’s attention. Odin did not face him. When he edged closer, Loki saw that he had one arm wrapped around Gungnir. The spear protruded oddly above the back of the armchair. His father’s free hand curled around piece of fine, sea-green silk.

“Father.”, Loki spoke again, more and more troubled. “Why do you keep the curtains closed? And the fire is too strong – this place is a furnace. You cannot be comfortable in this gloom and heat –“

“Ah, Loki.”, Odin finally acknowledged him. His single eye did not move from the flames. “I hear that Sif has gone into exile. Curious, is it not?” Loki’s face flooded with shock.

“That was two months ago. She left two months ago.”

Odin said nothing. It took a moment for Loki to regain his wits. Was his father’s mind dwindling? He had never been the same after Frigga’s death. But this… How could he have overlooked this sorry state of affairs? Why had nobody told him?

Ljosira had warned him that this might happen. *Grief, she’d said, is a very powerful force.* If not let go, it could consume and destroy even the wisest soul. Odin had absolutely not let go of his grief. Loki knew an unsettling feeling, as though his mother’s spirit lingered somewhere in the shadows, and his father clutched the last vestiges of her presence as he clutched the cloth, binding her to a mortal world she didn’t belong to. He shuddered.

How to deal with such a situation? He had no idea. Chasing away shadows wasn’t his forte, but Ljosira’s. He would simply have to coax his father out of the room, or at least open the blinds, convincing him to eat something, while he waited for her arrival.

“You are not well, father. Come, let us call the maids and put the room to rights –“

“No! Nobody touches anything!”, Odin snapped so furiously that Loki flinched. A log in the fire issued a drawn-out, serpentine hiss. Beyond the closed curtains, a well-known cawing erupted, followed by frantic taps against the window glass.

“You shut out Huginn and Muninn? Why would you do that?!” For the first time, Loki sounded actually scandalized. His father’s ravens were loyal, incredibly clever creatures, and perhaps the most spoiled animals in the Nine Realms. They were doted on endlessly, groomed to perfection and fed the best morsels. Now, their elaborate perch stood empty. They had been barred from entering. Such treatment of them by Odin was unheard of.

“They spoke of things I did not wish to hear.”, he answered dispassionately. The birds tapped the window again, their caws mounting to a forlorn, discordant duet.

“You love those birds!”, Loki protested. “I am letting them in.”

But when he moved towards the curtains, his magical senses suddenly reeled in alarm. Before he could react, he was frozen in place for a mere instant, a cold dread breaking over him like a sheet of icy rain. The sensation went as quickly as it had come, and he whirled around to see Odin had risen from the armchair at last. But the spell hadn’t been his father’s, he knew with an absolute certainty. It had been something else, something utterly foreign. Another long hiss raised every
hair on his nape.

“We are not alone. Show yourself!”, Loki commanded, his hand reaching routinely, instinctively for Dragonbane, but he realized with shock that he had not taken the divine weapon with him. Why would I?, he thought bitterly. He’d only meant to visit his father. How could he have expected the need to arm himself? Odin now wore a queer, sluggish expression.

“Have you gone mad, son?”, he said calmly.

“Me? I’m the mad one?! Have you taken leave of your senses?!”, Loki hurled back at him. “Can you not feel the wrongness of this place? Something… Can you not sense that –”, but he broke off abruptly as he looked, really looked at his father, with a sorcerer’s eyes. The shadow Odin cast onto the wall wavered unnaturally, undulating and writhing as though determined to break free from the wall and reach for him.

Loki flung out his hand at the same moment when Odin raised Gungnir. The curtains were torn open wide, and a blinding shaft of light speared through the darkened room. For a split second, Loki saw it, the third presence, the uninvited guest in their company.

A spectre loomed above like an eerie omen, a ghostly transparent shape which wore his mother’s features and yet wasn’t anything like her. Its sunken eyes widened in shock or perhaps fury, because the next Loki knew, a blasting chill erupted from the thing, exorcising all warmth from the room. Inside Loki’s head, a maddened, wild dragon snarled into all directions, crying danger, crying evil magic, but her voice was distorted, abuzz with strange static – and the ravens outside cried in unison with her, now flinging themselves against the glass with a suicidal recklessness.

The apparition settled one horribly familiar hand on Odin’s shoulder and Loki thought, for a second, that the Grim Reaper had come for his father – even though he knew there was no such thing. He wanted to lunge, to cast a spell, to do anything, but nothing in his many years of experience had prepared him for fighting ghosts! And he didn’t get a chance anyway. The icy deluge settled over him again. He went motionless, hand hovering in mid-air. An outlandish whisper came from his mother’s bloodless lips. Odin nodded gravely.

“Yes, it is time. We shall be gone momentarily.”, he said without a trace of fear. Loki thought he sounded rather intrigued. Then he let out a great sigh, as though he had just put a monumental decision behind him, and Gungnir scythed through the air in a great golden arc. Tongue glued to the roof of his mouth, Loki couldn’t even call for help when his father’s spell hit him. It was not meant to kill, or even harm in the narrow sense of the word. But the magic snatched the awareness from his mind and jumbled it up, before regurgitating it to him in a complete mess. And then, not knowing where he was or why, the world shivered and tilted around him, growing dark and silent and still.
Hello again! I decided to just upload the chapters here, since I think those who are following will have an easier time with it and I like to have everything in one place. This second chapter was planned as a Prologue, but I switched them so this will be like a flashback to Ljosira's visit on Midgard that upset Loki in the first chapter. We see the difficulties Tony has dealing with the events of Civil War, and also the portents Ljosira feels but cannot identify. Intuition plays a strong role in dragon magic, and although they might know that *something* is not right, in many cases they cannot discern the particulars. As a reminder of the dragon clans and characters in this story, I have added short descriptions of them at the end of this chapter. Here is Tony's character description with regard to his previous involvement and current state:

**Tony Stark, “The Iron Man”**
As obstinate and cynical as they come, Tony is in no way the model hero of humanity. Yet again and again, his unusual ways seem to come through. He helped Ljosira and Loki on their search for the dragon exile and formed an easy friendship to the Lightbringer, while retaining a standoffish dislike for Loki due to the latter’s previous exploits on Midgard. They enjoy needling each other and both fiercely refute Ljosira’s remarks on the similarities between them. After learning that Steve Rogers knew about the murder of his parents, Tony returns from the battle with his friend as a betrayed and hopeless man.

Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**II. The Solitary Man**

_In this picture stands a man,_
_Far away, alone and distant_  
_Like a solitary field_  
_In some nameless, foreign land._

_Midgard, The Day Before Odin Vanished_

„You have a visitor, Mr. Stark.“, a cautious voice broke the utter silence.

Tony thought that whoever had the audacity to intrude upon his grudging isolation sounded both worried and timid. Amusing. After everything that had happened in the last weeks, the entire personnel seemed shy to approach him. He sat at the wide meeting table in the new headquarters, absent-mindedly twirling an old-fashioned flip-phone between his fingers.
A letter written by a neat, clean hand lay on the polished wooden surface. He had read that letter a dozen times. Two dozen times. And still the anger burned in him, like a vicious flame, like a furnace of retribution, its strength only outweighed by the complete abandonment he felt. Abandonment… or betrayal? He hardly knew anymore.

The feelings were jumbled up inside him, tied into tight knots which he was unable – or maybe unwilling – to unravel. Steve had protected the bastard who had murdered his parents in cold blood. Who had smothered the sparks of their lives without batting an eyelid. Sleeper agent be damned. It went too far.

“I don’t receive visitors.”, Tony said without inflection. He didn’t move his gaze from the piece of paper on the table. There was a pregnant pause in which the announcer shuffled his feet in a sign of discomfort. After what seemed like minutes, Tony could still sense a pair of uncertain eyes boring into his back. “Am I speaking Russian? Why are you still here?”

“Sir…”, the intruder – probably a secretary – began again. “I honestly doubt that this particular visitor will be ignored.”

“I don’t care if it’s the Queen of England!”, Tony burst out, his anger boiling to the surface now. His head snapped up and he veered around in the chair. “Tell them to shove it in their –“

But he broke off abruptly at the view outside the great glass panels of the meeting room. They looked out over a wide, meticulously manicured lawn, the likes of which would have made the Queen of England envious – had she been the uninvited visitor. She wasn’t. But his guest was just as royal, even more so. Twice over now.

A dragon stood on his front lawn. The stillness in its posture made it appear like a magnificently carved statue, although Tony knew it to be anything but lifeless. About the height of a three-floor building, protected from smooth snout to powerful tail by sleek scales that shimmered with the lustre of a rare pearl. The creature’s large, six-horned head was level with the windows on the second floor, and now wound its sinuous neck to face Tony, as though completely aware of his regard. Its wide wings were the pristine white of virgin snow, folded carefully to its flanks. How a being so big could look so graceful and streamlined, he would never quite understand.

Fathomless silver eyes surveyed his dumbstruck expression calmly, and maybe with a touch of humour at his obvious surprise. A peculiar sensation washed over him, a kind of incorporeal touch, as he looked back into the swirling irises. It was not unpleasant, but more like the gentle embrace of a dear friend, anticipated gladly after a long absence.

And how he welcomed her wordless greeting. Beneath the bleak, overcast sky, she seemed to emanate a strange inner glow, her gaze sympathetic without a trace of pity. Tony had no idea how she knew, and yet knew that she did. He had learned to accept that with dragons, matters sometimes just could not be explained by any rational means.

“You were right. I will receive this one.”, he said, noting how his voice had lost some of the strained edge that had been there for weeks. He turned on his heel and swiftly walked down the stairs to the entrance, feeling his spirits lift from the deep mire of resentment, his cold fury oddly banked all of a sudden.

Dragon glamour. Being in vicinity of such raw magical power was both bewildering and inspiring. They had this effect on mortals, as they called all those who were not of their kind. Their auras – which Tony hypothesized to be very precise, complex energy emissions – radiated from them, captivating the people they touched. This one was a Lightbringer. And true to her name, she exorcised some of the shadows that lingered around him after the devastating events he’d gone
through lately. It did not make the constricted sensation in his chest disappear, but somehow it seemed more bearable with her presence so close. As though there was something hopeful still to look forward to.

Tony stepped out onto the lawn to find a stricken Rhodey pointing two puny handguns up at the dragon, who in turn gazed at him with her head cocked curiously. The scene was so utterly comical that for the first time in what felt like ages, Tony laughed out loud.

Rhodey shot him a look reserved for lunatics freshly escaped from the madhouse. Despite the extensive injuries to his spine, he was steady on his feet. Only the slight quiver of his legs made any concession to the fact that he’d just recently regained their full use. And at the same time, Tony’s friend didn’t seem very determined to actually shoot the dragon. His expression wavered between amazement and a healthy caution for a formidable opponent.

“Tony, please tell your friend that I mean no harm. He seems very disconcerted by my presence.”, the dragon’s mellow voice projected into his thoughts. Rhodey jerked his head to the side, flinching. He must have heard something. Tony remembered the strangeness of perceiving dragon speech for the first time, as an indistinctive hum vibrating through his skull.

“Cool it, Rhodey. She’s a friend of mine.”, the Iron Man said, quite calmly. Without fear, he approached the immense creature, walking into the line of fire. His friend lowered the guns reluctantly. He didn’t look reassured, though, and kept staring at the dragon as though she might decide to gobble Tony up any second now, making one of Earth’s mightiest heroes her next meal.

“Ever thought that your choice of friends might need a little adjustment?”, Rhodey asked with a generous measure of sarcasm. He realized too late that the comment might have sounded like a jibe about the recent fight with Steve Rogers, and looked taken aback by his own words.

Tony said nothing. He’d brooded over the choice of his friends a great deal lately. There had been many issues where he and Steve hadn’t seen eye to eye, different as they were: one a pillar of humanity’s goodwill and justice, and the other an embodiment of… Well, he didn’t know what he was an embodiment of. Cynicism, maybe? Shrewdness? Exhaustion? He wasn’t used to doubting himself, and found it to be a singularly uncomfortable experience.

“Well…” said Rhodey slowly, choosing his words with care. “I’ll leave you to it, then. If you think it’s safe.” The dragon, who had witnessed the exchange with a sort of serene patience, now swerved to settle her imperious gaze on the sceptical, dark-skinned man.

“Be at ease. He’s the safest he’s been for months. No harm will ever come to him through my hands.” Although he might not have understood her exact words, Rhodey did look a shade less wary as he walked back into the headquarters, leaving Tony alone with the imposing creature.

“Ljosira.” He sketched a small bow, a gesture he’d never thought he’d employ with anyone. There weren’t a great many persons in the world who could claim to be on cordial terms with Tony Stark. But Ljosira seemed to bring out some aberrant, polite side of him he hadn’t known he possessed. She returned the courtesy by lowering her large head to eye-level with him. Tony didn’t quail when she hovered close enough to touch. The muted light from above rippled across the side of her face, making it gleam iridescent in a rainbow of colours.

Almost on mere instinct, he reached forth to settle his hand on the smooth scales, understanding that this physical contact held some significance he could not quite put into words. He’d never touched her before. Loki, her mate and now husband, had always been around, his face pinched-up with jealousy whenever anyone had come too close to her. The shifty God of Mischief was nowhere to be seen, though. Ljosira had come alone.
The dragon closed her eyes momentarily, a low rumble rising from her throat. The sound conveyed a disparity of sentiments: She was pleased to see him, yet worried about his state of mind. Tony felt a subtle current of communication flow back and forth between them. He couldn’t help it. It was useless to hide from her, just as it was impossible to hide his own frustration and anger from himself. Instead, he poured those memories out for her to see, wordlessly and with a reckless honesty in the hope that she might snatch them away from him, so he wouldn’t have to live with them. Blissful oblivion.

“Ah, my friend. I am afraid it does not work that way.”, Ljosira said softly, her voice regretful in his thoughts. “This, as the humans say, is your cross to bear.”

“I don’t want it.”, he retorted, and even to his own ears he sounded churlish, like a child refusing an unpleasant chore. His hand fell away from her. She opened her eyes in answer, issuing a sigh.

“How did you know what happened?”, Tony went on. Ljosira lifted her head a little, her long tail curling neatly around her front legs.

“I look out for you whenever my duties allow it. My eyes can perceive things across vast distances. I watched…”, she trailed away, but he didn’t need her to finish the sentence. He knew what she had seen: His desperate, maddened battle in the cold bunker against Steve and Barnes. His failure. The pain of defeat, and the anger which had been his companion ever since. And how he tried desperately to push it from his mind, to become impervious to these crippling feelings of loss he was not used to.

“And yet you didn’t step in.” He tried to keep the accusation from his voice and did not succeed. Antagonizing a dragon was borderline idiotic, but for all his intellect, Tony had never been able to hold his tongue even when he really, really should. He seemed to perpetrate some curiously suicidal mindset these days. Ljosira’s eyes widened, while the serpentine pupils narrowed. Yet her next words were gentle.

“It is not my place to step in. You know that.”

“Why did you come, then? Except to scare the living daylight out of Rhodey.”, he said, adopting the mocking tone he felt the most at home with. She wasn’t cowed.

“I came to see you.”, she simply answered, giving no further explanation than that.

“Well, you’ve seen me.”, Tony said curtly. “Does the God of Failed Schemes know you’re here? He’d have a fit of apoplexy, I’m sure.”

“I did nothing to warrant your insolence. This surliness is unworthy of you.”

For the first time, anger showed on her draconic features at his rude behaviour. Ljosira straightened to her full height, a thin trail of smoke dispensing from her nostrils. For a fleeting moment, her aura branded him with furious indignation. It was strange, to suddenly be subjected to the feeling he had nurtured towards Steve, directed at him instead. The wind taken from his sails, Tony went still.

She did it deliberately, he knew, to teach him a lesson. Had Steve felt such a miserable guilt in response to his righteous wrath? Was that the reason his friend hadn’t fought with his entire strength, not until the very end, when he’d needed to keep Tony from killing Barnes? A tendril of doubt again, and at that moment, he resented Ljosira for holding the mirror of truth up to him. Then it passed, leaving him deflated, the fight gone out of him. He sank onto one of the benches flanking the edges of the lawn, avoiding the dragon’s gaze.
A blinding nova, like the series of camera flashlights during a press conference, told Tony of the transformation into her mortal form, but he kept staring categorically at the faded bruises on his knuckles.

When he finally looked up, a striking young woman looked back at him, her hair the colour of moonbeams, her pale winged brows marring her forehead with a frown. She was slender as a reed, clad in the elegant attire of some high-ranking society lady. Tony wistfully remembered a time when she had been entirely inept about human clothing. It didn’t quite suit her, this clean-cut style. He had liked her more with her small imperfections visible, surrounded by an out-of-one’s-depth-ish air.

But he couldn’t deny that she had been bestowed with an ethereal beauty by whatever higher power had a hand in her creation. As though she was made from an intangible substance, not indigenous to this world. The closest comparison he could think of were Asgardians. They too, to his annoyance, seemed somehow larger than life, and excessively blessed with good looks.

Well, he had only ever met two Asgardians. Maybe they did have their fair share of unattractive people, otherwise one would have to question judicious distribution of genes in the universe. But there was no difficulty in understanding why Loki became a covetous mess whenever men looked at his wife, although Tony had never had any intentions towards her. He just thoroughly enjoyed rankling the God of Mischief by flirting with her.

A sharp longing intruded upon his thoughts as a picture of Pepper’s face flashed through his mind, her features suffused with bitterness. I need a break, Tony. From all of this. Do you know what it feels like, to have the person you love walk into mortal danger on a daily basis? Never knowing if you are safe, if you will return? He’d had no reply to that. The words had gotten stuck in his throat, unwilling to emerge. I didn’t think so., she had said, her eyes so full of disappointment. He’d been a callous ass. Again.

“You are a mess, human.”, Ljosira brought him out of his dire musings. Her voice still held an edge of anger, but the frown she wore as her perceptive eyes peered at him was troubled.

“Why, if you go on flattering me so, I think I’ll blush, dragon.”, he sniped back acerbically. Then he sighed, tired of being irascible. Tired of himself, really.

“Why did you come? Is there something wrong on Asgard?” He had the impression that she hovered on the verge of speech, uncertainty fleeting across her finely sculpted features.

“I came to see you.”, she repeated cryptically. Tony knew he would get nothing out of her by asking a third time. Ljosira lifted her eyes to the upper floors of the compound. Her lips pressed into a firm line of disapproval.

“You really did create a mind from that infernal stone.”, she said, and now she sounded almost disgusted. Had she seen Vision looking down from the windows? Surely he roamed the compound, as usual. Walking through walls, unsettling people. Just regular Vision mannerisms.

“It was the only way to stop Ultron.”, Tony replied defensively.

The Mind Stone, one of six immensely powerful Infinity Stones strewn around the universe, had once been the heart of the Chitauri staff. Loki had been led astray by the whispers from the staff during his crusade to conquer Earth. The Mind Stone had exceptional powers of manipulation, able to invade other minds and turn them to its will. The Chitauri had used those qualities to craft a weapon capable of swaying even a god-like creature. But had it been the Chitauri?, Tony wondered distractedly. Did those ugly shits have the means to create something as sinisterly clever as the
Naturally, Ljosira did not approve of the stone. It had caused many problems for her, and Loki. But after recovering it from Hydra, Tony had studied the staff extensively. And in the end, as a result of Ultron’s quest – which had also been his fault – the stone had become an inseparable part of Vision. Thor’s dire warning came back to him then: *The Mind Stone is the fourth of the Infinity Stones to show up in the last few years. It's not a coincidence. Someone has been playing an intricate game and has made pawns of us.* Almost exactly the same words Ljosira had spoken when he’d first met her, back when she and Loki were trying to avert a great disaster on Asgard.

“I’d rather you had destroyed that thing.”, Ljosira said with one last look of distaste above his head, before she sat down beside him fluidly. Tony cast her a sideways glance.

“Is that possible? Destroying them?” She took a moment to answer.

“Yes.” Pausing, she seemed to consider her words carefully. “You would need a very powerful force which is similar to the energy signature of the stone itself.”

“Fight fire with fire, you mean.”, Tony said, rubbing his chin. It was bristly. He hadn’t shaved in days. “Why are you telling me this? Vision is on our side. He’s an Avenger.” Ljosira surveyed him with a very serious expression that managed to make Tony feel like a scolded youngster.

“Never assume to know the mind of something so alien to your own nature, Tony.”, she said sagely, yet did not elaborate. “I tell you this because it is crucial that you have this information. There is another way to destroy an Infinity Stone – dragon fire. But that method is even trickier. Very few dragons could manage it, myself not included. My father, probably, or one of the other clan leaders. But they have to bolster their fire with the source of energy most attuned to them. Light, with Lightbringers, naturally.”

“Why is it crucial that I know?”, Tony demanded, more and more suspicious of the conversation. He didn’t think that Ljosira had just dropped in to casually inform him about destroying Infinity Stones for no reason. She stayed silent for so long, Tony wondered if she had heard him. Her head fell back, a distant, vacant look in her eyes as she gazed to the sky.

“I dream… Of fire and ashes. Of million points of light dimming from my view. Of life turned to dust, and an unspeakable crime committed in the delusion of benevolence.” Her voice had turned portentous, chilling, and the change was so terrifying that Tony dealt with it in the only way he knew how – he brushed it off with sarcasm.

“You sound like a doomsday prophet. Even dragons have nightmares, surely.” Ljosira turned to him, a small, rather sad smile on her face.

“And you sound like my husband. Almost word for word, you repeat what he tells me whenever I wake from my dreaming with Yggdrasil.” That he might be of the same mind as Loki unsettled him. His dumbstruck expression seemed to mollify her a little.

“You’ll find your hero’s heart again, Man of Iron.”, Ljosira said, her demeanour thankfully returning to her usual self, although as before, the change was quite abrupt. “You are fortunate, you know. The things you lose have a tendency to return to you.”

Despite her infuriatingly cryptic remarks, Tony somehow felt reassured, less burdened than before.

“I’ll take your word on that.”, he murmured, a little uncomfortable beneath her piercing regard. Ljosira stood then, looking out at the trees in the distance wearing heavy summer crowns, and the
mountains barely visible on the horizon. When she faced Tony again, her hand extended, holding something small that fit into her palm.

“I don’t like to be handed things –“, Tony began, but somehow he found himself reaching for it, stopping short when it dropped into his own palm.

At first, he thought it was a pristine, lucent gemstone, glossy even in the muted grey light, teardrop-shaped and thinner than a piece of glass. It felt warm to the touch, as though it had lain close to a heat source until just a moment ago.

The surface was supple and yet incredibly robust, a material unlike anything he had ever seen or held. He flinched involuntarily at the blinding light when Ljosira took on her dragon form. His gaze snapped up to her, and she presented to him a patch low on her neck, where a single scale was missing from the perfect row of its siblings. As Tony watched, the scales settled smoothly to cover the small vulnerability, until her dragon-skin was flawless once more. He couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“In all the battles you have fought since we met, you did not have need of me. Even when you thought yourself defeated, you rallied. That is your strength. That is who you are. But just as today, when you truly need me, I shall come to you.”

And without further explanation, without waiting for his reply, the Lightbringer spread her great wings wide, rising into the air. A kaleidoscope of colours engulfed her as she went, and Tony saw for a moment the inexplicable skill with which she rode the current of energy, the innate grace of an eagle gliding on the wind. Then she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Dragons

Ljosira, “Born of Light”
The youngest child and only daughter of the dragon king, a Lightbringer dragon who shares a life-bond with Loki and was appointed to evaluate him for trial before the High Council of Dragons. During their unusual acquaintance, she fell in love with him and has stood by his side ever since. Usually kind, warm and generous, she does sometimes have a fiery temper, her close connection to a mortal making her adopt their temperament. She left her home Yggdrasil to stay on Asgard after she married Loki. My favorite quote: "Vit ru skyldrae." and “Not all things are great mysteries to be solved. Some are simple and easy.”

Elding, “Dawn”
The Dragon King, a Lightbringer. One of the oldest and wisest creatures in existence. Father to Ljosira and Vegr (among others). He presides over the High Council of Dragons, a quartet of leaders from the four clans. He taught both Asgardians and humans the use of sorcery. His sight and magical proficiency are unparalleled, yet as most dragons, he rarely ever intervenes in mortal issues. My favorite quote: (when being offered the spear Dragonbane by Loki) “And what would I do with that thing? Pick my teeth?”

Vegr, “Honour” or “Journey”
Crown prince of dragons, Elding’s firstborn son. His sight is only second to his father’s. He chose Heimdall to forge a life-bond with, and loves the mortal as though he were a flesh-and-blood brother. Vegr is often described as proud and unyielding, a dutiful heir to his father’s legacy. His justice is quick to come and severe, but always fair, and his name is often used synonymously for honourable deeds.

**Natta, “Become Night”**
Former leader of the Darkflight clan, also called the mistress of shadows, the night mother. A shrewd, fiendishly clever and alluringly conspiratorial dragon who had never been outplayed in known history. Allegedly responsible for many strange happenings that lead up to the creation of Dragonbane and her sinister plan to bring on a war between Lightbringers and Darkflight. Harbouring a deep contempt against Loki and Ljosira for unwittingly thwarting her greater schemes, she became their most dangerous adversary. She almost destroyed Asgard in the process, but was defeated by Loki and Ljosira, resulting in her death by the same weapon she created.

My favorite quote: (to Loki) “Men like you don’t change, mortal. They might try. They might even persuade themselves that they are capable of change. But in the wake of peril, they welcome the comforting darkness back into their souls.”

**Aevi, “Life”**
Leader of the Life-Binder clan. A vivacious, buoyant creature who, as the only dragon known, encourages her offspring to experience and learn from mortals. When not in her verdant dragon form, she takes on the appearance of a beautiful, sanguine woman with abundant auburn hair and is often described in legends as “rich like the very earth”, “crowned by leaves, rooted into the soil”. As all Life-Binders, she is a master empath, a trait that inclines her to grant help to lesser creatures of the Nine Realms – which is, strictly speaking, embargoed by the dragon king.

My favorite quote: (to Ljosira) "Let go of the notion that you are dragon, and nothing else."

**Andlát, “Death”**
Leader of the Voidwalker clan. An unknowable, enigmatic dragon whose physical eyesight had been taken by his many surveys of the great dark beyond. His clan watches over the realm of the deceased, which is only referred to as “the Other Side”. In addition, they peruse the convoluted time-lines to predict the future with varying certainty. Most people (and dragons) agree that Voidwalkers are alien creatures, their mere existence somehow irreconcilable with all things alive.

My favorite quote: "Time is, as always, short and fickle."

**Anganír, “The Joyful One”**
Formerly known as Utandir, the Outsider. A Life-Binder who was exiled from Yggdrasil and lived in hiding on Midgard for thousands of years. Having loved Ljosira’s mother for all his life, he was consumed by bitterness when she chose Elding as a mate instead of him. He sacrificed his own soul, allowing Ljosira to reforge Dragonbane so it belonged to Loki. He now resides within the weapon, sometimes giving Loki useful advice during his many trials.

My favorite quote: (to Loki in one of the chapters still to come) "Do not mourn those who pass through the veil, for all time is merely borrowed from Yggdrasil, a mutual exchange. And all that has form must break down to build anew."
III. The Beginning of the End

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the kudos and comments! I love to hear that you want to read more of my favorite couple's adventures <3

Now, we get going into the events surrounding Ragnarok. I especially enjoyed this first scene here, because I get to introduce an important character of the story. And I also liked giving Hela a bit of story-time, because I liked her in Ragnarok but I thought she was a bit underappreciated by the movie. Things are slowly shifting into place. We also see Loki still struggling with his contradictive relationship to his father, an issue he has not managed to resolve to this day. And he is running out of time...

Enjoy reading and if you like it feel free to leave me a comment any time! :)

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III. The Beginning of the End

“I banish you to this pitiless wasteland,
This mirror-place of your black soul.
For as long as my lungs still draw breath,
You shall not set eyes on the light of day,
You shall not step foot onto mother soil,
You shall not take away a single life.
For nothing but violence dwells in your heart,
And nothing but death flows from your hands.
This is your punishment, and my greatest shame.”
Odin

Odin’s golden realm nestled within Yggdrasil’s crown, showered by her eternal magic, a land of light, warmth and peace. But it is the way of things that every bright coin has two sides, that each tip of the scales needs to be balanced lest chaos takes over the steering wheel.

Every child on Asgard has, at some point during their youthful shenanigans, heard their parents say “Never do that again, or you will end up in Helheim!”. Of all the mythical places to be threatened with, it was the most effective one for sure.

The world tree had made Helheim the exact counterpart to the shining Asgard. As the lowest of all realms, it sits at the roots of Yggdrasil, bleak and empty of life. A dead land where churning black clouds obscure the scarce light from the sky, and the ground is covered always by chilling fog, hiding untold horrors and lost, wandering souls. As far as myths go, this one came quite close to the truth. And yet somehow the most important facts are so very often forgotten when mortals are involved.

It was a day like any other of the thousands, ten-thousands of dreary days which had come and gone on Helheim. A cloaked figure was striding through the billowing mists purposefully,
uninterested in the gloomy vista of their surroundings.

This must have been a frequent visitor, because any newcomer would at least have stopped to look at the towering rune-stones marking the land in a strangely symmetrical pattern. Each of them was the height of a tower, covered by ancient moss and lichen. They were all pointed at the top, making them resemble giant teeth left behind by some primordial beast.

Had anyone bothered to look at the stones from a bird’s perspective, they would have seen the elaborate symbol the markers described: a great spiral, its arms curving out from a relatively small circle at the centre. Incidentally, the cloaked figure was headed exactly towards this circle.

Whoever had erected the runic monuments – it seemed impossible that such a structure had been built by anything but a god – they had gone through great lengths to infuse them with magic. Powerful magic, serving a singular purpose.

Judging by the fluid movements and slight stature, the visiting figure was a woman. She glided up the crumbled steps at the spiral’s heart with an odd, alien kind of grace. Although hidden by the cloak, her form gave the impression of being insubstantial, like a threadbare fabric. Runes upon glowing runes encrusted the centre pillars, as though someone had overwritten their own work several times over countless years.

It became fairly clear why: Within the stone circle floated a cube of translucent gold, brimming with cosmic energy, faultless in its design. And inside this cube sat a woman, her long legs crossed and her arms resting regally at her sides as though she was occupying an invisible throne. Her hair cascaded in an onyx river down her shoulders. The skipping light of her prison brought out the emerald nuances in her black mane, while her sea-green eyes glittered from heavily-shadowed lids – a nocturnal predator gazing upon prey.

She might have been called beautiful, but that word was nowhere among the first ones that came to mind when describing her. Dark and unforgiving as the land she’d been banished to, her features were noble but bitingly severe. And suffused with a cold, calculated anger. She faced her visitor now in the manner of a haughty queen, with a complete disregard for the impenetrable prison that surrounded her.

“You are late.”, she said in an accusing tone, as if she was passing judgement. The cloaked woman inclined her head, the shadow of her hood only revealing white, unsmiling lips.

“Did you have another appointment?” she retorted tonelessly, looking around the deserted plane with a demonstrative wave of her hands.

“I do not enjoy your little jokes, Kvisari.”, the dark lady said sharply, although contrary to her words, her expression relaxed just the tiniest bit. The woman named Kvisari finally pulled back her hood. It seemed a testament to their long acquaintance that the prisoner didn’t so much as twitch, because the face which came into view was a horrible study in contrasts.

One side smoother than marble, pale as a winter sun, with a single lavender-blue eye gazing attentively at her counterpart. The other half was outrageously disfigured, covered entirely by a spider-web of scars, and somehow still more pallid than the hale half. Her right eye had lost all colour in whatever calamity had befallen her. It stared at nothing, sightless, white on white. Even her hair was dualistic – a deep indigo on the left, a snowy shock on the right. What would cause such an antithesis to a person’s face?

“I am still not sure if this path is right, Hela.”, Kvisari spoke after a moment. Strangely, her lips were the one thing on her features not split in two by contradictions. Hela hissed scathingly.
“Not this again! We both know that a time of change is coming. A time of war, destruction. And I have no intention of sitting in this cursed prison while the battle of all ages is fought elsewhere.” She conjured an obsidian dagger and flung it casually at the cube’s walls. The weapon crumbled to dust with a sizzle. “I intend to be at the head of my army, on the throne that is my birth-right. A conqueror. A queen.” Hela paused momentarily before she went on. “If we delay, I might end up ruling a mound of rubble.”

“Have you considered”, Kvisari said calmly, “that speeding the events beyond their natural course might also speed up what is inevitably coming?” Her voice was a whispery, soft sound, like the seam of a robe brushing over autumn foliage. Yet still it carried. Not through volume, but rather through a more subtle, transcendent channel. When Hela didn’t answer, she seemed compelled to clarify her point.

“Make no mistake. We have broken the rules. Well, I have broken them – for you. The futures we created… are uncertain now. Blurry.” Kvisari’s gaze trailed off into the distance, and for an instant her healthy eye glazed over with the same milky veil that inhabited the blind one. Then she blinked, and it was gone. Hela gave a small wave of her hand as if brushing off the mysterious warnings, entirely confident in her course.

“You forget that I cannot be defeated on Asgard. No more of your auguries. Now, tell me, does this mean that Odin –“ Unveiled excitement had entered her voice as she leaned forward to scrutinize the other woman.

“Odin’s power has been waning for some time. But it would have taken much longer, without my spell. Now… Days. Maybe a week.”, Kvisari said, shrugging nonchalantly. “You put strange constrictions on time, I cannot be certain.” Hela allowed herself a minute of looking inexplicably pleased, before a scheming expression returned to her face.

“Who will oppose me on Asgard?” Kvisari didn’t answer right away. Instead, she rose gracefully into the air and hovered to sit atop a crumbled pillar which was level with Hela’s prison. She smoothed the indigo part of her hair behind her ear, pondering.

“Your brother, Loki, will most surely not let you wander into the palace and take the throne. He is Prince Regent now. I also see a strong possibility… No, certainty that your other brother, the one by blood, the one who was named Odin’s heir, will return. Dealing with them should pose no problems to you. The dragon will be your main issue.”

“Dragon, on Asgard? They do still live on Yggdrasil, yes?”, Hela questioned with a frown.

“This is a special case. She will fight you tooth and claw, every step of the way, and she is no easy opponent.”, Kvisari explained, her ravaged face serious.

“I am the trueborn heir! Not even the dragons have a right to dispute that!”, Hela exploded in vindictive ire, making the shiny walls of her prison shudder. But the magic held fast.

“That is a matter of debate.”, Kvisari said, unfazed by her anger. “You intend to bring violence to a peaceful land, disrupting the balance, and the dragon clans reserve the right to judgement about such actions.”

“I shall have to kill her, then.”, the Goddess of Death resolved impassively.

“Have a care, Hela.”, her unusual visitor whispered. Up until then, her demeanour had been calm to the point of disinterest. Now her voice held a dangerous edge, a blade shrouded in velvet. “If you plan to go on a killing spree and start a war with the dragon clans – be my guest. But you will see
no more of me if you do. I am not helping you to murder mindlessly. And what gives you the
audacity to think you can kill a dragon, anyway? Because you killed the Valkyries? Don’t delude
yourself.” Although her eyes narrowed to glinting slits, Hela fell silent.

“The dragons, specifically the Lightbringers, helped Odin to create Asgard. I am sure you are not
as ignorant to the deepest laws of magic as you appear to be. All extremes need a counter-weight,
otherwise the scales tip into chaos. Light and shadow, life and death, Asgard and Helheim. Odin
and you. Once Odin is gone and you begin your crusade, you need to be very careful. Kill too
much, too quickly, and the universe will retaliate.”

“And I thought getting out of here was the tedious part.”, Hela remarked sardonically. Kvisari
shrugged again in a dismissive fashion. During the unmeasured time they had known each other,
she had never once shown any sign that she feared the vicious woman whose prison she guarded.
In fact, one could count the times her expression had changed at all on one hand. It fascinated Hela
that there was a creature so utterly confident about their place in the world that it had no reason to
fear death.

“This isn’t like the time when you conquered the realms with Odin. Everything was in upheaval,
anarchy, disorder back then, even Yggdrasil herself.”, Kvisari said.

“Then do what you do best. Counsel me.”, Hela’s tone was less commanding than it was factual,
although she didn’t seem happy with the way things had turned out.

“Killing the dragon, or even trying, is out of the question. And more importantly, you must also not
kill your brothers before we arrive on Asgard. If you do, the dragon will go berserk, and I don’t
think I could overpower her when she’s such in a rage.” This last thing she said more to herself, in
the half-interested tone of a person pondering if the weather was right for a walk.

“No killing the brothers. Shame. I was looking forward to that.”, Hela interjected with a small,
twisted smile. “What am I supposed to do with them? And how do I deal with the dragon without
killing it?”

“I don’t care what you do with your brothers. Lock them up. Exile them. Throw them into limbo.
This is your family reunion. Be creative about it. As for the Lightbringer… I have a plan.”, Kvisari
lifted her eye to the darkened skies, where the clouds canopied Helheim in one uniform,
impervious blanket.

“I am fortunate that I have you, Kvisari. And yet I still do not understand your reasons for doing
this, when you are so clearly uncomfortable with it.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. For all your idiosyncrasies, you mortals try to fit us into your strange
concepts of the world, as you do with everything else. Maybe we do wrong by taking these forms
you can identify with, or by thinking on your peculiar wavelengths so you can understand us.”,
Kvisari said, her voice empty of emotion. Well, that was no answer at all.

“Are all of your kind so incredibly conceited?” Hela wondered, looking bored with the
conversation.

“Conceited? Hmm.”, the woman of opposites seemed to consider this carefully. It was the oddest
thing yet, that she took no insult from the open taunt, while she had reacted most strongly to Hela’s
idea of killing a dragon.

“Yes, I see why it may seem so to you. No, not all of them are like me. Only those who have seen
where it will all, ultimately, end.”
She emphasized those words by turning both eyes, the seeing and the blind, on Hela. The unnerving intensity of that gaze was enough to make even the Goddess of Death refrain from asking any further questions.

When had he boarded a train? Loki cast a curious glance at his surroundings, wondering how he had gotten here. He was lounging comfortably on the plush leather seats of what looked like an old-fashioned Midgardian train compartment. His father sat across him, wearing a smart pin-striped suit, dozing peacefully.

Rays of pure sunlight fell in through the windows, throwing back gleams from the burnished brass baggage-rack above Odin’s head. The wooden panels covering the walls were slightly faded, but someone had taken care to shine them up recently. The train rumbled along the railroad with a soporific clickedy-clack rhythm that felt soothing beneath his feet, somehow prompting him to relax back against the neck supporter.

Outside, the scenery consisted of only two major features: boundless, bright azure sky and a field of grass as far as the eye could see. Loki still didn’t know how he had arrived into this situation, but he found the sedate atmosphere too pleasant to think much about it. The wool of his own three-piece suit felt incredibly soft. He wore no tie and seemed to have opened the top button of his shirt. The sun warmed the small, exposed patch of skin as though a gentle hand had settled right above his heart.

He closed his eyes, remembering golden days exactly like this one. A general sensation of wellbeing rolled over him, and he sighed his contentment into the quiet moment. The air was fragrant with touches of honey and marigolds, a beloved, familiar scent that put him at complete ease. Where had he smelled that before?

Maybe he should take a nap too. Who wouldn’t, being content and sleepy, safe and sound and wanting for nothing? After all, if his father didn’t worry about their journey or its destination, why should he? Everything was just perfect.

Except… He didn’t feel quite as whole as he usually did. His ribcage rang with a vague, hollow emptiness, as if a sudden vacancy had opened in a place that should have been occupied by… something.

An annoying, nagging thought scratched at the door of his woozy mind, the sort of thought people got when they knew they have forgotten something very important, but just could not remember what.

The warmth on his chest grew stronger with each passing second, until it became a searing imprint against his skin. Loki squirmed awkwardly, using his hands to shield himself from the sunlight. But the heat seemed to come from within him, and it was merciless in its force.

*Forgive me, my love. But you are in deep, and only pain will pull you out. It will be quick.*

And then Loki was in flames, conflagrated, run through by a poker of white-hot iron. He knew a moment of blinding agony, before the gentlest pair of hands reached out to lift him, so effortlessly. On brilliant wings he soared through whirlwinds of fog and light. Up, up, into the waking world. He regained consciousness with a violent jolt, almost shoving aside a white-faced Ljosira who was
crouched low over him.

“Gods above!”, Loki gasped in shock. Heart racing, he tried to sit up, but the slender hand resting on his chest pushed him back down with the slightest pressure.

“Don’t get up yet. You will be disoriented for a few minutes.”, Ljosira said, sounding so relieved that Loki wondered what would have happened to him in that strange dream had he not woken. As his wife bent her head to examine him, her silver hair tickled along his cheek, and it smelled sweet, floral… The realization punched him in the gut. The dream had imitated these sensations to him, these things he loved. His wife’s touch and scent. His enjoyment of soft fabrics and luxurious comfort.

“It was a spell.”, he voiced the suspicion out loud, although he already knew the truth. Only then did Loki take real notice of the scene. Ljosira kneeled by his side, her silhouette outlined by the light falling in through the balcony of his father’s quarters. Six honour guards stood in a half-circle above them, wearing anxious expressions. Someone had opened the windows to let in a cool autumn breeze, together with Huginn and Muninn, who were perched on their stand in the corner. Otherwise, everything looked exactly the same as before he’d fallen unconscious.

“Yes, it was Journey’s Ease. Cast by Odin himself.”, Ljosira confirmed, her brows knitting in confusion. She followed Loki’s eyes to the still agitated ravens hopping left and right on their perch. “I let them in. They were going mad outside. They told me that –“

“Wait.”, Loki interrupted her. He didn’t want the guards to know what had transpired until he had regained control of the situation.

“Leave us.”, he told them curtly. As soon as they had exited the room, he straightened into a sitting position. Anticipating the wave of nausea and dizziness, he closed his eyes, willing his body to master the unpleasant sensation.

“Journey’s Ease… I could have slept for a year or more if you hadn’t woken me.”, Loki sighed, lids still tightly shut. Something upholstered was pushed against his back and he leaned into it gladly. Ljosira had not moved, but the steady flow of magic from her told him that she was assessing the circumstances nevertheless.

“I doubt putting you to sleep for a year had been the point. He knew I would wake you. But you were quite far gone already when I arrived… What were you enjoying so much down there?”, her sceptical voice made him smile despite himself.

“Just an almost perfect day.” The dizziness passed slowly, until he felt confident opening his eyes again. Ljosira surveyed him with a bemused expression.

“Where is my father, Ljosira?”

Her face turned utterly blank for a moment, her eyes unfocused as a bright gleam flashed across them. She looked suddenly frustrated, when Hugin and Munin let out a unanimous caw. Her gaze snapped to them.

“Midgard…? Well, I suppose it would be difficult to see him from here, it always works better at the observatory. But I should still be able to find his signature… He is the most powerful Asgardian alive. Then again… Who truly knows what he is capable of? He might know a way to conceal himself from me if he does not want to be found…”, she argued with herself.

“You can’t see him?”, Loki asked, growing concerned.
“No… But I know that he is alive. I would have felt the passing of such a remarkable soul.”

He sensed her struggling to fight down the same trepidation she’d felt during their talk on her journey home, but he was unable to decipher its meaning. Dragons were highly complex, immortal creatures with an innate connection to Yggdrasil. Something about the very architecture of their minds defied full comprehension. Especially when Ljosira’s thoughts were linked to other dragons or when she dreamed with the world tree, they appeared to him as words written in an entirely foreign language.

“What happened between you and your father today, Loki? I tried to watch but there was so much interference…”

His wife listened patiently as he narrated the short encounter with Odin. She didn’t interrupt when he arrived at the ghostly apparition of Frigga, but Loki saw hesitation in her eyes.

“I swear it was her, or at least some part of her… She was changed, cold, but still…” Ljosira was shaking her head before he had finished speaking.

“My love…”, she said very gently. “She is long gone now. No spell can truly raise those who have joined eternity.”

“That isn’t true. I have died, really died. And here I am, as a flesh and blood proof of life.”, Loki argued. Ljosira sat back on her haunches and shuddered, wrapping her arms around her midriff as though she needed to contain herself.

“I wish… you wouldn’t remind me of that.”, she whispered and took a deep breath. “Yes, you were truly dead. But mere minutes after you died, Yggdrasil herself brought you back to life. Dying as a mortal… severs the body’s connections to the soul. This process was not yet complete when Yggdrasil… heeded my call to save you. And more so, I believe that you were a unique case. Because of our life-bond, a part of you is dragon. Through that part, you are anchored to the world in a way only dragons are.” At his befuddled expression, she gave him an apologetic look.

“I cannot explain it better than that… To some extent, these are speculations. Such interference by the world tree is unprecedented. I honestly don’t know why she granted my wish, I am only glad that she did. But Loki… Neither of the things I said applied to your mother when she died. I… I’m sorry.” Her hand landed lightly on his as she spoke, and Loki realized she was anxious about destroying his hopes that his mother might really have somehow returned from the dead. He pulled her against his chest, brushing a kiss to the silken crown of her head.

“Don’t worry. I mourned her. Properly. I do miss her sometimes… Very much so. But I was worried more for the possibility that someone tore her from her eternal rest with evil magic, to lead my father astray… I know illusions, and that apparition was no illusion. If I’d only taken Dragonbane with me. But I didn’t think there would be any need. How foolish of me to come unprepared…””, Loki hissed out, angry at himself.

“It was not your fault.”, Ljosira said resolutely. She stretched out her arm, allowing one of the ravens to land on it a moment later – Huginn? No, it had to be Muninn, Loki decided. It was very hard to tell them apart, but there were a few tell-tale signs. Finely woven runes decorated their necks and backs, their sable beaks gleaming in the light like polished onyx. Their handsome plumage sported the rich, glossy qualities of any thoroughly healthy creature. Muninn issued a rapid concert of caws. Only Odin could understand their speech clearly, but Loki made out the gist of the raven’s chatter.

“He says my father had planned this for a while.”, he mumbled pensively. Then his voice turned
annoyed all of a sudden – angry even – as he figured it out. “I see. He incapacitated me, so I
wouldn’t try to stop him. Well, fine. If he wants to take a little joyride on Midgard with a ghost as
his companion, he can be my guest. I have no wish to drag him back, after that damned spell he put
on me!”

Ljosira stayed silent, but the expression of rebuke that came to her face made Loki bristle. If he
hadn’t been so exasperated, he would have marvelled at the fact that his wife could make him feel
shame with little more than a look.

“What would you have me do?!”, he demanded defensively. “We don’t know where he is! He
obviously doesn’t want to be found. If you cannot see him, Heimdall won’t find him either. Would
you like us to fly around all of Midgard and hope we get lucky? Should I send men to comb the
entire planet’s surface?”

“I was not about to suggest any of those things.”, Ljosira said, her tone quiet and unruffled by his
crossness. “We shouldn’t leave Asgard now. That would only weaken the realm further. None of
my family has raised alarm… And yet, that ‘ghost’ incident…” She trailed away with a sceptical
emphasis on the word ‘ghost’. Loki could sense her filing through memories in a search of similar
magical occurrences.

Watching her lost in contemplation had an inexplicable, calming effect on him, and the tension in
his shoulders uncoiled a little. She didn’t seem overly worried anymore. There was no need for him
to get riled up as long as Ljosira didn’t show signs of panic. Such was his unwavering trust in her.
Yet… Something needed to be done. Then, an idea came to him.

“We finally have a good reason to call my brother back. To be honest, I half suspect he only left to
avoid the mountains of paperwork.”

“Loki!”, Ljosira blanched at the ludicrous notion of Thor fleeing from something so mundane as
paperwork. In fact, the crown prince had taken the matter of the Infinity Stones so seriously that
he’d departed on a journey to find them – and keep them from falling into the wrong hands. Loki
gave a disappointed sigh.

“I was making a joke. You don’t believe I would call my brother – of all people – a coward, do
you? I thought you had more faith in yourself about reforming a rogue.”, he remarked in a playful
voice, lifting her chin with his forefinger.

“You are still a rogue. But at the right moments.”, Ljosira retorted, the corner of her mouth
twitching suspiciously.

“Am I?”, he mused in the manner of a wolf in sheep’s clothing. “How about now?” When his head
dipped down for a kiss, she was smiling against his lips.
First of all thank you for the wonderful comments and kudos from all who are excited about Dragonheart! I'm so happy every time I see one!!

Sorry for not updating for so long, I am at the end of my studies right now for the university and life has just been crazy for a while.

But I have an update now and am ready to keep the story going!

So, have you all seen Endgame? Did you think it was awesome? I did, and I will definitely somehow weave the happenings in Dragonheart together with what happened in Endgame, but of course with some alterations... Hehe

This is a bit of a bridging chapter which also contains sexual content, so note that it's NSFW below the line break. I wanted to give our couple an intense intimate moment, because as you may know according to the story of Ragnarok, some bad things are about to happen. And it may be that Loki and Ljosira will have to face a difficult time soon, a time in which they will be separated from each other...

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“**IV. Fate’s Gentle Hand**

“I wondered often why humans forever try to outrun the three great inevitabilities of life: Time, Death, and Fate. I think through all my journeys, I have come to understand Time and Death fairly well. But Fate? That last great mystery eludes me, and it is quite alright that it does. Why tempt fate by chasing after it, or else by running from it? I’d much rather stay in the illusion that my life turned out exactly the way that it should. And isn’t the simplest solution usually the right one?”

On the eve of Odin’s disappearance, Loki and Ljosira traversed the scintillating rainbow bridge to Heimdall’s observatory. As predicted by Loki, the gatekeeper could also not find Odin’s presence on the crowded human homeworld, despite the fact that he had inherited a Lighbringer’s unerring sight. He and Ljosira joined their powers of observation, but came to the same conclusion: If Odin was on Midgard, he did not want to be found. As for Thor… He was a different issue altogether.

“Ah…”, Heimdall said with a hint of amusement. “Not where I expected him to be.” To Loki it seemed as though his golden eyes focused on absolutely nothing, but he was more than familiar with this process by now. Ljosira’s sigh sounded strangely exasperated.

“Typical Thor. My dear brother-in-law has gotten himself captured by Surtur on Muspelheim.”

“Muspel… What? By the king of fire giants? So this is turning into a rescue mission after all?”, Loki groaned. “Is he in danger?” Ljosira and Heimdall snorted at the same time.

“It’s a safe assumption that he is *always* in danger. But… something about his situation seems
deliberate. His aura is calm. Playful even.”, Ljosira mused, puzzled.

“Well, he does enjoy a good predicament. Nevertheless, we need him. Heimdall, get him out of there.”, Loki suggested reasonably. But as soon as the gatekeeper turned Hofund in its socket and the dome started shifting above them, Thor’s deep, gravelly voice resounded in all their skulls.

“Not yet, old friend. I still have something important to do here.”, the crown prince commanded. His tone was brisk, brooking no objection. Then, he added more patiently: “But soon. Wait for my signal.”

“Nothing is ever easy, is it?”, Loki said to nobody in particular. A short silence fell in which Heimdall deactivated the Bifröst and Ljosira kept staring intently at the spot where a tiny, fiery disk was visible on Yggdrasil’s stellar branches. Her expression had become uncharacteristically shrewd.

“Wouldn’t it be interesting if the Allfather’s disappearance… and Thor’s important business on Muspelheim were not two isolated incidents?”, she wondered, her voice reserved.

“Are you suggesting…”, Loki began, but Ljosira shook her head and exhaled a long breath.

“I have little ground for a suggestion. It’s rather… intuition.” She threw him a glance fraught with meaning. “Do you know about the Eternal Fire?”

“You wound me, my light. Of course I do. It is a magical fire in the treasure vault below the palace. Burns on its own, with no need of wood or coals for sustenance. And, well, as the name says, it is eternal, which means it never goes out.”, Loki answered a bit haughtily. “While I was imprisoned, my father used it, together with the Tesseract, to rebuild the Bifröst after Thor had shattered it.” A shadow passed over his aristocratic features. He did not like to remember that time. But another thought intruded upon him then.

“It belonged to Surtur, didn’t it? My father defeated him eons ago.”

“Indeed.”, Heimdall said, weighing in on the conversation for the first time. “Odin took the Flame from Surtur, weakening him greatly. That Flame is the source of his power.”

“He defeated the king of a realm and then stole his power as a trophy… Quite the ruthless scheme.”, Loki said, torn between respect and a strange unease about his father’s actions. He couldn’t quite sort out his sentiments.

This story of the past painted a different picture of the benevolent, wise king he had known all his life. In fact, this other Odin sounded much closer to what Loki had been like, during his darker times. He wondered if he should be questioning how much he truly knew about Odin at all.

“Things were different back then. The Age of Strife. A time of great loss, even among the dragons.”, he heard Ljosira say, but only acknowledged her words on the periphery. Something nagged him about this whole affair. Hadn’t he read every book in the gargantuan halls of the palace library? The Age of Strife. Why couldn’t he remember any recordings which described that turbulent era in detail? Had this ancient history been forgotten, or purposely been removed? And if so… Why, and by whom?

“Your Highness.” A golden-armoured honour guard had entered the observatory, ripping Loki from his thoughts. The man paid his respects and dismounted his bay horse fluidly. A slender-legged piebald gelding cantered in his wake. Even as the guard handed Loki a sealed envelope, he already knew what it contained.
“Wonderful.”, he voiced his dismay with regal annoyance. “Someone leaked my father’s sudden disappearance to the public. The council requests an immediate meeting.”

“Another late night in session for the Prince Regent, it seems.”, the gatekeeper observed neutrally. “You two go. I will keep watch, as always. Awaiting Thor.”

Loki glanced at Ljosira from the corner of his eye. She didn’t look pleased, but refrained from speaking. He felt the sting of her disapproval through the life-bond, though, despite her best efforts to conceal it.

“My brother better come back soon. I am sick of being neck-deep in the mess he left me!”’, Loki snarled towards Heimdall, his mood turning glum. Before he left the observatory, he apologized to his wife for having to leave so abruptly. He would likely not return until very late that night. Then he mounted his horse and rode off to the palace, brooding all the way.

In the months since they had married, the increasing demands of Asgardian politics had been putting more and more strain on Loki. He was constantly under stress, harassed by meddlesome council members, approached by problematic supplicants. On several occasions, Ljosira had tried to get him to cede some of the work to trusted advisors, ease some of the pressure bearing down on him. Which in turn had injured his much-valued pride, escalating into many near-arguments.

It was his own fault, to be honest. Thor had asked him to take over as Prince Regent before he had departed who-knew-where on his Infinity Stone search, and Loki had agreed. The knowledge of his own willingness did not make it easier to handle the ugly monster that was his pride. More often than not, he felt overextended, stretched thin, like a man fighting too many battles on too many fronts. But he needed to prove that he was capable of handling it all.

Ljosira accused him of attempting an impossible undertaking on his own, of never delegating, and he stayed obstinate, insistent that he was fine. He had quarrelled with her before, but in the past, one of them had always laid their anger to rest.

This wasn’t the case now. The subject had grown claws and teeth and barbs. Since neither Ljosira nor Loki wanted to provoke an open fight, they tiptoed around it, until it felt like they were co-existing with an overlarge, irritated creature nobody wanted to step on.

Most days, Loki could defuse the tension by making sarcastic comments about the work piling on his desk, or entertain his wife with stories from the council room. And on other days, such as this one, her silences were heavy, multi-layered things which spoke louder than words ever could.

It was such a stupid issue to argue about, really. Ljosira worried about him. And yet Loki wished she wouldn’t. He wished he weren’t always the weaker one, the one with the flawed past, the one who had needed to be resurrected because he was so mortal.

In a moment of anger during one of these arguments, Loki had been invaded by a disturbing thought he barely dared to admit to himself. It had terrified and repulsed him. But where he had once been so proficient at deceiving himself, he was now both blessed and cursed with a painfully accurate self-awareness. And therefore, he knew that sometimes, when he was in the darkest recess of his own mind, he wished that Ljosira were a bit less dragon, and little bit more mortal.

Thor did not return that day, neither did Heimdall send for them with further messages. Long after midnight, Loki entered the joint quarters he shared with his wife. As a child, he had always liked wandering the corridors after dark, when the lights were turned low and the halls lay in twilight. That atmosphere of mystique had promised so many mischievous adventures, secrets to be uncovered.
Once through the door, he began unfastening the buttons of his gold-and-green formal tunic, cursing inwardly at his tailor’s preference to make all his clothes too snug. He felt perpetually strangled by a silken serpent.

The sitting room lamps had been dimmed, and the only light source of the room was a pan of smokeless embers with a semi-circle of armchairs and settees arranged around it. Ljosira lay curled up on the largest one, her small, bare feet peeking out from beneath a fur blanket. Her head had tipped sideways, making her hair spill out over the armrest in a starlit waterfall.

Loki did not take his eyes off her as he walked over and picked up the book which had slipped from her drooping hand. He had a memory of finding her almost exactly like this, following her return to Asgard after his trial on Yggdrasil. He glanced at the book’s cover before he set it aside. Pragmatic Translocation Sorcery. So, his wife was studying portals? Her continued interest in mortal applications of magic made him smile.

For an undisturbed moment, Loki watched her sleep, the steady rise and fall of her chest, the slight parting of her lips as she breathed. He leaned in, cautiously tracing the petal-smooth curve of her cheek with his thumb, the lightest of touches. Even so, Ljosira awakened with a small sigh, her lids fluttering open.

“Hello, beautiful.”, Loki said softly. The corner of his mouth quirked into a prankish half-smile. “Have we met? Did you come to see if the prince is as wicked as they say?”

She let out a surprised snicker when he pulled her close to nip at the delicate shell of her ear.

“Oh, you demon! Stop that, it tickles!” Ljosira gasped, squirming to escape. Her hands flew to his chest, and Loki gave a start when she touched the bare skin between the open lapels of his shirt.

“Gods! You’re an icicle, woman. I told you to have the rooms heated better, now that it’s autumn.”, he reminded her, a little sharper than he intended. One of his hands lifted to easily blanket both of hers, warming the chilly skin. Ljosira felt drops in temperature more keenly, especially in her mortal form. Her kind were creatures of warmth and light. She hated the cold.

“I know.”, she said when Loki had moved on to grasping her feet and tucking them securely beneath the fur. “But you don’t sleep well in the heat. And you are tired enough as it is.” To emphasize her point, her fingers outlined the dark circles beneath his eyes. The scrutiny of his emerald gaze settled on her, glinting with keen wit.

“Why did you visit Stark on Midgard, Ljosira – on the night before my father disappeared?”, his voice carried the crisp chill of a winter morning. She should have known better than to think he would not bring up the issue.

“I… I know what he went through recently. I told you about watching over him. Misfortune followed him since the Battle of New York. That incident with the Infinity Stone from the staff. Then this conflict with his friend, Steve. They had a falling-out. It came to blows, serious ones. Now Steve has left, together with some others.”, she explained while he stared fixedly at the coal pan.

“The starry-eyed idealist who can do no wrong has gone rogue?”, Loki scoffed. “Good riddance.” Ljosira went on as though he hadn’t spoken.

“Tony has suffered great personal losses. He is his usual aloof, cynical self about it, but he is also my friend. Without him, we wouldn’t have found Anganir in time. My instincts tell me that he will continue to play a vital role in the great machinery of fate. People he trusted have turned against
him. I owe it to him to show my allegiance, to assure him of my friendship. He has lost heart… and needed to know that someone was still on his side.” Ljosira met her husband’s piercing gaze unapologetically.

“He has lost heart? Are we discussing Stark’s heart now? And here I thought it universal knowledge that he doesn’t own that particular organ.”, Loki flung back at her scathingly. “And since when do you take sides in mortal conflicts, dragon?” She shot to her feet, her gorgeous face distorted by anger now, her eyes throwing out flaming sparks.

“Do not twist my words, Drekhjarten!”, Ljosira yelled. He couldn’t remember the last time she had raised her voice at him or called him by his formal draconic name. It felt almost like a malediction. The blaze of her ire filled the room with a stifling pressure. That did not bode well.

“You are missing the point of all this! Midgard’s defenders are divided, their leader more vulnerable than ever! You discounted my dreams of destruction as nightmares, but now strange things are happening, things that weaken us. Coincidences? Ha! We thought Natta’s schemes were coincidences, and where did that get us? She killed you!”

“Yes, she killed me!”, Loki shouted with just as much fervour. “Do you have to keep reminding me of my damn weakness? Of how I am just a mortal?! Do you enjoy making me feel even more powerless than I am?”

Ljosira blanched ghostly white at his vicious outburst, her expression at that moment turning into the quintessence of disbelief. Loki’s last words dispersed into a horribly laden silence as they both stared at each other. Somehow this had escalated much too much, much too quickly.

“Is this still your old demon speaking? Do you still think of yourself as inferior? Have you not understood why my kin granted you an honorary name?! Because you faced down a creature which embodied darkness itself and your blade still struck true. You stared into the abyss and never wavered.”

Ljosira’s voice was sharper than steel. She lifted a hand to point at the ornamented rack where Dragonbane was on display, the divine weapon they had won through many hardships. It was a spear of unique design, masterfully crafted by the dwarves of Nidavellir to serve Natta, until Anganir the Life-Binder had committed his immortal dragon soul to the heart-piece. The star-shaped centre radiated a soft, white glow with just a few spring-green nuances. Iridescent engravings wound through the obsidian metal in beautiful patterns.

“You and only you can wield that weapon. Don’t ever say you are powerless, Loki. No powerless man can be chosen by a divine weapon. Even my fire could never have forced Dragonbane to obey you if the spear had not found you worthy. But I knew that it would. I set no limits to my faith in you. And still with the doubt! Damn your pride!”, she suddenly cried out, making Loki flinch from the vehemence in her exclamation.

“Your death tore me in half! I never want to experience that again. I will not have it! Not in a thousand lifetimes. And something – something is wrong – it all feels – I can’t tell what will happen! I am blind!” Ljosira broke off abruptly and turned away from him in a futile attempt to hide her anguish, her fear.

Loki rose from the settee at once to close the distance between them, his arms encircling her narrow shoulders. They trembled in his grasp for a few lingering moments, until he felt her stiff spine relax against his chest.

“You married a horse’s ass.”, he murmured quietly into her hair. He had always been terrible at
apologies, but Ljosira knew how to read between the lines by now.

“Well…”, she said a bit unsteadily. “I’ll have to be the horse’s decent sense then. And apparently its brain, too.”

“You don’t even like horses, my light.”, he whispered in an attempt at humour to lighten her dark mood. It troubled him deeply that she was so distraught. He preferred her anger over her sorrow any day.

“I just don’t want to lose you again, Loki. I can’t bear the thought.”, Ljosira said after some time. She sounded tired and dejected.

“Hush. No more of that tonight. I don’t want to argue anymore. Not with you. Never with you.”

His arms tightened around her, and they stayed locked in this tender embrace for a timeless moment. It made Loki keenly aware that the entire length of her body was pressed to his, and she was wearing nothing but a thin gauze nightgown. Almost instinctively, he buried his face in her hair, inhaling the sweet, familiar scent that never failed to awaken all his senses. Even now, they sang in anticipation. Honey. Marigolds. Sunlight.

Warm summer nights and fire-kissed winter evenings, memories of the short peaceful time they had enjoyed until now, free of worries about an uncertain future. He allowed the images to lap over to her, feeling how her body and mind both unstiffened in answer. It was a quite gratifying turn of events.

His long fingers skimmed along the fabric in the mere suggestion of a caress, down her ribcage, over her flat stomach, as though he was mapping out his favourite places for seduction. When he encountered a lace-trimmed ribbon cinching the gown at her waist, he toyed with the flimsy little band, almost idly, before he pulled it free.

“Loki… What are you doing?”, Ljosira said, her voice a little deeper than usual, throaty. Loki smiled like a boy caught in a prank, although she couldn’t see it.

“Changing the subject.”, he answered so softly it might have been a purr. She gasped when one hand settled on her supple hips and pulled her into him, making her feel his growing arousal. He lifted the abundant locks away from her neck and knew a rush of satisfaction when he found her skin flushed, a deep rose in the dim light.

“Still blushing? How is that possible?” A reply to his murmured words became trivial as he lowered his lips to the sensitive flesh of her throat. His teeth nibbled at the heated skin, tongue darting out to soothe the small bites in languid, playful strokes. But his touch became less subtle when her back arched in demand, a shivery gasp leaving her lips.

More purposeful now, his hands moved down her collarbone to the gentle swell of her breast, just barely grazing the straining tips he could see through the gauze. Then, in a mercurial change of heart, he seemed to think better of it and cupped both delectable mounds, squeezing decisively. Just once. Her ribcage jumped in helpless reaction, and she rubbed her body firmly against his, her backside pressing up to his full erection. Loki uttered a low groan.

“Are you wet for me, wife?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

One of his hands journeyed down the flat of her stomach to the junction of her legs. He covered the
heated mound, rubbing over the cleft that led to her most secret place with a single finger. Ljosira moaned pleadingly, and he shuddered when he felt the moisture of her arousal saturating the thin fabric.

Loki still marvelled at her passionate responses, at the answering need he sensed vibrating through her. She stretched for his touch like a cat demanding to be stroked, her hands coming to rest on his, urging him to continue, pressing his fingers against the cushiony softness where he longed to bury an entirely different part of himself.

“Satisfied, my love?”, she teased in a sultry voice he would never have dreamed of hearing from her when they first met. But she had always been a quick study.

“Oh, no. Not yet. But I will be.”

When he turned her around suddenly, she all but climbed him in her haste. Her arms locked around his neck and she pulled him into a heated clash of lips and tongues that drove all notion of playfulness from his mind. She opened her mouth to his exploration, her passion blooming beneath his kiss with an artless sensuality so inherent to her. It had driven him mad since the first night he’d laid his hands on her. Claimed her as his. And he would do it again and again, with the same unbound urgency, like a man who had traversed a desert to feel a single drop of cool water wash over his tongue.

In one whirling motion he lifted her bodily, and the next moment he’d pressed her up against the wall. Ljosira’s hands scrambled over his arms and shoulders, pushing aside the folds of his tunic. He shrugged out of it impatiently. The fall of his breeches came next, and he couldn’t suppress a frayed sound when he freed his rock-hard erection from the confining fabric.

But to his great annoyance, a tiny, delicate row of buttons still separated him from his wife’s naked skin. He couldn’t muster any patience for that. He had to be inside her. When Loki seized the collar of her nightgown, Ljosira let out a sound of protest.

“Wait, it cost a fortune –“ And then he ripped the priceless thing clean in half. The pearly buttons scattered everywhere.

“It served its purpose.”, he said roughly. “I want you. Now.”

No more words were necessary. He didn’t need to encourage her. Her thighs widened in wanton invitation when he grasped her backside and lifted her off her feet. She wrapped herself around him, legs locking around his waist. He rocked his hips against her, up and down, sliding his whole hard length along the seam of her sex until it was slick with her body’s response to him.

She strained and arched, shifting to welcome him into her tight heat, her breath coming in short, shallow bursts. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her bottom to hold her still while he possessed her mouth with urgent, open-mouthed kisses. A shameless rush of victory filled him as he teased her, using his own body to pleasure her, to goad her with the promise of more.

Ljosira began trembling in his arms, panting between kisses, a series of wonderful female sounds rising from low in her throat. She was close. He knew it, felt the upsurge of her climax like a coming storm, felt the answering bolt of lightning shoot from the top of his head to the tip of his jerking shaft.

And when she hovered at the brink, pleading with him to end it, he impaled her with one swift thrust. Her head fell back as she cried out, her inner muscles clamping down on him before he had even fully entered her. After the countless times he’d experienced this joining, he should have been
sated. It should have been enough. But it wasn’t. It was never enough.

A long hiss escaped him, and his eyes closed for a heartbeat as he struggled to master himself. Stars danced over the blackness behind his lids, rapture shivered along his spine in excruciating waves. Well, this was going to be quick for them both, regrettably. Loki held up her weight with one arm, bracing the other against the wall.

“Hold on to me.” His voice was hoarse with desire, his senses raw and unprotected against the flood of ecstasy. Ljosira clutched his shoulders, pushing her hips forward, closer, deeper, until he was seated inside her to the hilt. Yes, he was home.

They both gasped at the sweet, maddening friction. His loins met the scintillating little bundle of nerves at her centre, teasing it with delicious pressure. She went tight and tensed all over, but he was determined to draw this out at least a little longer.

“No. Wait for me –”, he bit out the words one by one, knowing it was too late. He moved to pull away, but her legs brought him back forcefully.

“I can’t – Please!” she begged, her voice tattered. No helping it.

He surged into her on mere instinct, once, twice, with deep, filling thrusts that unleashed her crisis. She cried his name into the darkened room, the intensity of her climax nearly devastating him. He buried his face into the hollow of her throat, clenching his teeth against the exquisite torture of her tight channel pulsing and throbbing around him. In a slow, careful rhythm he rode her through her peak, gripping his self-control just as firmly as he held her body.

Even when she quieted and came back to herself he didn’t stop, determined to stoke her fire a second time, and if it killed him. She would be sore tomorrow, but he just couldn’t rein himself in. His need for her bordered on obsession sometimes, but it was difficult to care when she sang the same song of passion.

Some nights were exceedingly gentle. And on others, he fell on her like a starving animal, an insatiable hunger making him devour every inch of her he could get to. This was such a night. He ravished the skin of her shoulder, licking along her collarbone, dipping into the recess below her throat.

It didn’t take long until she stirred beneath his searing lips, the unrelenting strokes as he pushed into her again and again. Withdrawing until she whimpered at the loss, then plunging back when her sleek, demanding muscles enveloped his hardness.

“Again, Ljosira.”, he commanded her harshly.

She mewedled in protest and clung to him, her palms sliding across his shoulders restlessly, fluttering as birds did when unsure where to land. His skin was damp from the exertion, his thighs hardening with tension – but he never faltered for a second. He lowered his head to her breasts, taking one hard little peak into his mouth. Sucking gently, he flicked his tongue over the tip, feasted on her taste, and when it puckered, he felt his length twitch and grow even harder inside her.

His patience was finally rewarded. Her second climax came out of nowhere, and she could do nothing but shake uncontrollably in his arms as she was flung over the edge. And only then did he let go too. His thrusts became wild and quick and rough, his breaths turning to fractured pants.

She was still high on the cresting waves of her pleasure when he threw back his head and let out an animal shout. She opened her eyes to see him, because these were the moments when he was
stripped of all restraint, in the grips of raw passion. All his elegance replaced by stark need, his dark grace turned into crude male instinct.

And how magnificent he was. His eyes watching her from lowered lids, dark as coal, consuming as flame. The tendons of his neck were drawn tighter than steel cords, skin glistening with a sheen of sweat, his jaw rigid, teeth bared. He drove into her as deeply as he could go, holding her pinned between his body and the wall as he spilled his release into her. It seemed to go on forever, and she took it all, holding him tightly, savouring his pleasure. When he had given her everything he had, his strength left him at last.

With a shuddering sigh, Loki sank to his knees, but he didn’t let go of his wife. His lungs strained to fill themselves with deep gulps of air. They stayed joined for a small eternity, hearts calming, limbs loosely entangled. Ljosira’s head rested on his shoulder, her fingers playing absently with his. She traced the unadorned surface of his silver wedding band. It looked large compared to hers.

“I love you.”, she said, her voice more breath than sound. The muscles in his arm rippled, firming his embrace for a moment.

“I know. It is always with me, that knowledge.”, Loki answered. He sounded lighter, as though the wild intimacy born from their argument had somehow unburdened him of a weight. “Even in anger… Even when we argue, I still know that you love me. And that I love you.” His words were cautiously chosen, but free of doubt.

“The day fate brought me to my knee,
I saw the paths she spun for me.
Where heavens kiss the endless sea
Heart and soul at last fly free.”, Ljosira recited in her soothing, singsong cadence.

“A quote? Who is it from?”, Loki wondered with a frown, twirling a strand of her hair between his fingers.

“I don’t know. It was in Odin’s quarters, a framed rune engraving on the wall. Have you never seen it?”

No, he couldn’t remember ever seeing such an engraving. Which was strange, since Loki rarely forgot anything he read. He didn’t answer right away, but instead looked down into Ljosira’s softened features, her quicksilver eyes filled with tenderness.

“Do you think fate is cruel?”, Loki wondered distractedly. His wife’s gaze skittered away from his, seeking the distance.

“Sometimes… And other times it has a gentle hand.”, she said, her eyes guarded. She adopted that expression every time he pried into the deep laws of magic, the very foundations of the cosmos which mortals were not to be made aware of. Usually, he did not pressure her for answers, because it put her into a conflict of interest between her duties and her relationship to a mortal. But today was different. He needed to know.

“Which is it this time, Ljosira? The things happening… The coincidences. Cruel… or gentle? We need to be prepared.” His words were imploring, severe. The life-bond showed him her honest attempt to concentrate on shifting, vast things he couldn’t encompass. Even dragons could not predict the future with certainty. Time is not one continuous line of events, but an endless ocean churning with possibilities. Eventually, Ljosira shook her head, looking unhappy.

“I’m sorry… I can’t tell. I could ask my father… But the fact that he hasn’t stepped in can only
mean one thing.”, she said with some reluctance.

“Which is?”, Loki prompted her a bit impatiently. Ljosira took a deep breath before she spoke.

“That whatever happened to Odin… was meant to be.”
Chapter Notes

Thank you for the comments and kudos after my last update <3 <3 They motivated me to keep going and writing!

After this chapter, there will be some action! And since the next chapter is called "Hel Hath No Fury", I think you all know who we will be seeing then.

But for now, the return of Thor after his long absence and some revelations follow for Loki.

I liked the character of Anganir (the Outsider back then) in Lightbringer. Although his name means "The Joyful One" (which he had been in his youth), the course his life had taken hasn't left him as the most cheerful of fellows. I enjoy writing conversations between him and Loki, and in Dragonheart, he still plays a vital role, often counselling Loki in his own particular way. I think of him as an old-fashioned kind of dragon, arrogant and yet somehow fond of mortals despite himself. You will see much of him and Kvisari in the coming chapters.

Enjoy reading and I hope I'm still keeping you interested! \o/

V. Farewell

“Asgard is not a place. Never was.”

After having fallen asleep with Ljosira nuzzled securely to his side, his hand as so often tangled into her silken tresses, Loki was very irate when a commotion in the hallway ripped him from sleep. For the second time in two days, he awoke to frantic knocks on the great oak doors of his quarters – but at least his wife was with him. She stirred sleepily, her tiny stifled yawn making his lips quirk with a tender amusement. He'd tired her out last night, and felt inordinately smug about it too. Her smooth, bare leg slid languidly over his as she murmured nonsense words, still half asleep.

“Whasitnow?”, Ljosira hummed, a frown puckering her brow. Loki sighed as the knocking became nothing short of violent. Then the voice from beyond the door made them both flinch with its near thunderous rumble.

“Your honeymoon is long over, brother! You call me back and then won’t even greet me? Ready or not, here I come!” Thor sounded half-annoyed, half-amused, and entirely as if he would not be ignored.

Ljosira scrambled out of the huge bed with a merry laugh, motioning to Loki to get dressed as she herself disappeared behind the folding screen. Thor’s return seemed to invigorate her, the same way it galvanized Loki from his drowsy state. His brother had always exuded an aura of exuberance and vitality which seemed to precede him into every room he entered. Loki had often mistaken it for arrogance, but he knew better now.
Dressing much more quickly than Ljosira, he exited the bedroom into the adjacent parlour. To find Thor, imposing and dishevelled, in the middle of the room, dripping some sort of revolting goop onto the priceless hearthrug. Two soldiers hovered at the entrance, and between them quivered the maid from yesterday – Hirda, he thought was her name – who seemed unable to tear her gaze away from ruggedly handsome features of the crown prince.

A giant metal skull hung from a chain in Thor’s right hand, while his entire armour was covered in the same green sludge that now soiled his brother’s floors. Soot streaked his face, impossibly adding to his warriorlike masculinity, which stood in a strange contrast to Loki’s smooth, clean refinement.

“Care to explain why you are dripping what looks like ogre drool onto my carpets?”, Loki smirked sardonically, drawing an answering grin from Thor.

“I had an unfortunate encounter with a Muspelheim dragon. Much less courteous than your lady wife, I have to say. My visit there was not very hospitable.”, he said, holding up the skull triumphantly. As Loki looked at it more closely, he recognized it from many illustrations in lore-books he’d read.

“The Skull of Surtur! A worthy trophy indeed. You’ll have to tell me how you went from being in chains to taking his crown and bathing in goo.” Thor handed the skull to the soldiers and instructed them to lock it away in the treasure vaults quite sternly, then proceeded to wipe the worst of the green stuff from his armour with a towel provided by the maid. After handing the soiled cloth back, he turned quite abruptly, pulling Loki into a fraternal hug. It was brief and crushing, as they were both used to, but also rife with the spirit of reunion.

“Brother. It’s good to see you well. I hear you have been managing the mess I left you admirably.”, Thor said, his tone gruff. Loki patted him on the back awkwardly before he was released.

“I don’t know about admirably. It’s a staggering amount of endless negotiations and political squabbles. I should have known you’d do me no favours.”, Loki voiced his sullen opinion.

“Better you than me.” Thor gave him a crooked grin.

Before they could continue the usual jibes, a joyful exclamation sounded behind them and Ljosira rushed into the room. She flew at Thor with a girlish laughter that was somehow reserved for her big brute of a brother-in-law. He caught her easily, ignorant of Loki’s resigned sigh. Despite being prone to jealousy towards everyone and everything that homed in on his wife, he had long learned to tamp down on it when it came to Thor. The life-bond to Ljosira showed him nothing but sisterly affection as they hugged, and he was fairly certain that his brother felt the same way about her.

“Little ancient one! I forgot how small you are.”, Thor jested jovially, releasing her at last. Loki’s rigid muscles unwound a bit. Ljosira’s smile was cheeky as she surveyed the crown prince critically.

“And I forgot your penchant for getting into trouble. You look like you rolled around in some vile beast’s entrails, Thor. You smell like it, too.” She surreptitiously checked her lavender dress for stains, wrinkling her nose.

“I accidentally beheaded a Muspelheim dragon. In my defense, he wanted to make me his next meal. Or was it a she? In any case, I hope you don’t feel offended.”

“Eh, Thor? How does one accidentally behead any kind of creature?”, Loki asked dubiously, but Ljosira made a dismissive gesture, her face twisting with disgust.
“They are little more than brainless, giant lizards. You call them dragons for lack of a better word, but they are nothing like us. Don’t trouble yourself about it.”, she said, her chin lifting in an adorably haughty gesture.

An hour after Thor’s return, when the crown prince had cleaned himself up and changed into a new, more comfortable attire, the three of them sat together in the parlour and updated each other on the recent events. Heimdall had stayed at the observatory, after having informed Thor on Odin’s disappearance. He was still trying to discern Odin’s whereabouts, without much success. Thor in turn listened to Ljosira and Loki’s tale about the strange circumstances of his father’s sudden desertion.

A heaviness settled on his noble face, as he slowly came to realize that things had not at all stayed quiet and peaceful during his absence. He himself had not found any sign of the missing Infinity Stones – which Ljosira identified to him as the Power and Soul Stone. Her explanation was in accordance to his dreams, where he had seen six of them fitted into a hazy object he couldn’t quite categorize.

But other than those disturbing dreams, he’d begun to have different premonitions, of Asgard drowned in flames, his people dying by the thousands. Visions of Ragnarok, the end of days. It had been the reason he’d gone to Muspelheim in an attempt to prevent Asgard’s prophesized fate of destruction by Surtur’s flaming sword.

He listened to the two people across the pan of glowing embers – the brother he’d thought he’d lost forever, returned to him. And the woman who he’d come to love and cherish as part of his family. Thor would have entrusted them with his life, after everything they had gone through together. But that also meant he could sense their worry, see the uncertainty on their faces as they spoke of the ghostly encounter in his father’s chambers, and his subsequent disappearance. This event, together with the portents that plagued his nightmares… It was not a good sign, and they knew it too. Asgard relied on Odin’s strength for stability, and it would be vulnerable now that he had left. But Odin’s strength had been waning since…

Thor let out a sigh at the painful memory of his mother’s death. Her murder. They had avenged her, and yet her loss still hurt. But for his father… He gazed at Loki, remembering what it had felt like to be caught in Ljosira’s sorrow when he had died. To be thrown into the fire of her pain and burn away in it, swifter than dry tinder put to the flames. His brother did not truly know the extent of her despair, he had been dead for those horrible minutes, senseless to the world. If Odin had experienced anything at all close to such soul-crushing grief, then it was no wonder that his life-force had begun trickling steadily from him.

“Your mind dwells on dark things, minn mágr.”, Ljosira interrupted his musings, a knowing glimmer in her silver eyes. She used the old Asgardian term for a relative by marriage to address him, but he had come to think of it as a kind of nickname. His sister-in-law was highly proficient at reading auras, and had likely guessed the direction of his thoughts. Crossing his arms, Loki leaned back against the silk-fringed upholstery, his brows knitted into a frown.

“As long as Surtur’s skull is safely in the vaults, there will be no Ragnarok. The prophesy explicitly states that he needs to be resurrected by putting his crown into the Eternal Fire. It also states that I would be the one to do it, which I have no intention of doing.”, Loki said firmly. He turned to Ljosira with a curious glance. Some subtle communication passed between them, before she
answered the question he had not asked.

“I know the prophesy. I don’t know if it… must… come true. But these events have a certain… inevitability to them.”

“Have you tried to reach your father?” Thor studied her frustrated features.

“Yes. He says… ‘It’s too early to tell.’”, she said, lifting her shoulder in a delicate half-shrug.

“So, what is to be done about our father, Loki? We go after him, of course.”, Thor now turned to his brother with a beseeching intensity in his stormy eyes. Loki issued an indignant noise.

“He attacked me! Why should I force my company upon him if he clearly doesn’t want it?! Some father. He gave up on us, Thor. He gave up on everything the day mother died.” His words were suffused with bitterness and a great measure of insult. Emerald sparks of defiance burned in his intelligent eyes, making him look much younger, closer to the surly man who had been consumed by contempt against his brother.

“Do not test my patience on this. First thing tomorrow morning: You and I go to Midgard and get our father back. I have an idea who might know where he is.”, Thor said in a dangerously low voice. Loki completely ignored the warning undertone, coming to his feet in anger.

“You can’t order me about anymore, brother. I owe that man nothing after the way he treated me these last years! He can pine away on Midgard all he wants – I’m not going to grovel at his feet and beg him to come back. He left us to our own devices and dumped the entire responsibility over Asgard onto our heads, and you want to go and rescue him –“

“And what if he dies there?! Alone, weakened, grieving, in the clutches of some hideous apparition, or just from mere loneliness?!”, Thor thundered, now at the point of yelling. The situation was escalating beyond a mere disagreement as Thor unholstered Mjölnir from his hip, pointing the weapon at his brother. “You are coming with me, and that is final!”

“Oh, you want to bet on that?” Loki sneered in derision, his hand lifting to summon Dragonbane. The spear soared to him at once, but before anything else could happen, Ljosira had pushed herself between them, her arms outstretched to keep them from going at each other’s throats in irrational fury. Her palms settled on either of their chests, right above their hearts.

“Stop! Stop it, now!”, she cried, her voice as anguished as it was rebuking. A stunning calm radiated from her touch, stilling both men for precious seconds. “Both of you, stop this nonsense! We cannot be divided at a time like this. Fighting now is the worst possible course! It only plays into the hands of whoever tries to weaken us. Please. Breathe. Take a step back.”

Miraculously, they did. The brothers lowered their weapons with puzzled expressions, as though they had not truly noticed that they had armed themselves for a real fight. Loki’s annoyance at Thor was trumped by his annoyance at himself, for his childish and rash reaction. He couldn’t bring himself to apologize or even meet Thor’s eyes, and therefore averted his gaze to stare vengefully at some random furniture’s edges.

“You are both of you too high-strung for a reasonable discussion right now. I can sense your exhaustion, minn mágr. Rest a while and we can revisit our options in the evening.”, Loki heard Ljosira speak quietly. Without another word, Loki turned on his heel and stalked away towards the study, mounting Dragonbane back on its rack as he went. But as he fled the scene, he caught Thor’s low murmur to Ljosira.
“Talk some sense into him.”

Loki closed the door behind him, blocking out her reply.

Ljosira left him in peace for a few hours. She knew her husband better than any other living soul, and didn’t even have to delve into their mind-link to understand when he needed his privacy. What an enigma he could be, sometimes. It was not so much difficult for him to admit a mistake – at least to himself – but he could not abide showing shame or contrition openly, prideful creature that he was. She understood that, and suspected Thor did too.

But the argument had cast a shadow upon their reunion at a time when their brotherly bond needed to be especially strong. As often, these things came to Ljosira in the form of intuition, a kind of additional sense that now told her she mustn’t allow Thor and Loki to quarrel.

A finality approached them, and when it came, they had to be prepared to face it together. It vexed her that she could not exactly see what would happen. Premonitions were a foggy sort of knowledge, one of the more annoying sides of her dragon powers – but she was beginning to have a more defined hunch.

When she had spoken to her father in her dreams, she had felt an odd, melancholic gravity within him, a feeling which usually overcame someone before they parted from an old friend. She had not pried. Although it was entirely possible to force a life-bond into submission, to break into another’s thoughts against their will, such an act would be tantamount to kicking down a door which had been deliberately shut against intrusion. A violation of the highest order. It was just not done.

And besides, Ljosira would never have dreamed of trespassing upon her father’s private thoughts that way. Not counting the fact that she could never, not in a thousand years, subdue his will. The king of dragons bent his will to no one except Yggdrasil herself. His mind was the most powerful and knowledgeable one in the known cosmos. The idea of forcing him into submission… Laughable. But that did not mean that his daughter wasn’t curious what had made Elding seem so despondent the last time she’d spoken to him.

“The day fate brought me to my knee,  
I saw the paths she spun for me.  
Where heavens kiss the endless sea  
Heart and soul at last fly free.”

Those words from Odin’s quarters… Every time she thought about them, a heavy weight pressed down upon her heart. The poem sounded… like a farewell. And then a memory came to her, from her fledgling years, sharp at the centre of her vision and blurry at the edges. A dragon whose name she could not remember, but who had been older than even her father, his wings midnight blue, his scales brittle from age. He had plunged from Yggdrasil’s crown, falling, falling down to her roots, only opening his wings when he was at the edge of the nether, gliding away until he had melted into the great dark beyond. Her father had felt the same kind of sadness then, mingled with acceptance. A parting without the hope for return. A farewell.

Ljosira stopped at the door to Loki’s study, her hand hovering above the handle. She understood. She understood what Elding had tried to tell her, so very subtly, and why Loki could not remember the rune engraving or what it meant, and why Odin had truly left. Her breath caught in her throat, a sudden tightness squeezing her chest, making every respiration ache. She also understood that Loki would forever hate himself if he refused to go to Midgard.
Closing her eyes, she sensed her father’s comforting touch, feathering ever so lightly against her consciousness. Her life-bond to him resonated with a singular memory they shared whenever they wished to feel close. His great, dawn-coloured wing folding over her curled-up body as frightening cosmic storms swept over Yggdrasil’s branches. She’s been small enough to fit beneath that warm shelter, that place where no harm would ever reach her. Watching the world outside with a complete sense of safety. Her father had always been such an indomitable force in this universe, just as Odin had been for his people.

Father… It does not seem fair, that my beloved should lose both parents in such a short time. Her thought billowed across the vast distance like a soft breeze.

Elding did not answer in words. He didn’t need to. Ljosira knew he sympathized, but also nudged her to accept what was coming. It could not be avoided, he soothed. Although mortality was a strange and foreign concept to dragons, they lived as guardians over the mortal world. They knew that death was an inevitable part of life, and that every passing signified the beginning of something new.

Such is the intricate balance of the world. Without death, there could be no new life. And even the wisest, oldest souls came to the great final precipice one day, ready to learn what awaits them on the other side. Heart and soul at last fly free.

“I know.”, Ljosira whispered into the afternoon sun flooding the palace rooms with shades of vermillion. She sighed once before opening the door.

Loki sat at his great ebon-wood desk, bathed in the multihued light streaming in through the balcony. He didn’t look up at once when she entered, apparently immersed in the document he was writing. The sun painted a few burgundy nuances upon his raven hair, which he often tied into a sleek queue while working.

Ljosira watched his profile undisturbed for a while, noting the frown of concentration on his high forehead, the perfectly straight ridge of his patrician nose, the stern and yet bold jawline. His lips, usually so skilled at wicked words and sensual kisses, were pulled downward at the corners into an expression of displeasure. For the thousandth time, she mused ruefully that nature had indeed squandered a great amount of beauty on the man she’d married. And fate had loaded such heavy burdens upon his shoulders. He seemed to notice her then, because he flicked her a swift glance from where he sat bent over the parchment, the pen coming to a stop in his elegant fingers.

Ljosira closed the door behind her and ventured into the room, still disturbed by the realization she had come to minutes before. She was surprised to see one of Odin’s ravens perched on the head of a marble bust next to Loki’s desk. As her husband returned to his writing, Ljosira stretched out her hand to the animal in invitation.

Munin came to her in a flurry of flapping wings, landing lightly on her wrist. Another sign they had overlooked, the fact that Odin had left his bird companions behind. He would never have abandoned them if he had planned to return. Carefully, Ljosira stroked Munin’s gleaming folded wings. The raven began preening the tresses of her waist-long hair methodically with its beak.

“Scales like pearls, mane like moon. Nothing to groom.”, he then complained with a sorrowful, musical cry.

“He is lonely.”, Loki commented casually, not lifting his gaze from the document.

“I imagine your father is, too.”, Ljosira said softly, releasing the bird. It landed on the statue’s head once more.
“I know where he is.” This made her husband finally meet her eyes. Resentment flickered in his perceptive emerald gaze, and she sensed how he battled with himself not to ask, not to care. And how he lost.

“He wrote it down for you. The rune engraving. You had never seen it before because it had never been there before. He made it on the day you visited him. To give you… a chance.”, she went on, her voice gentle, cautious, the one people used when trying to calm a skittish animal. Loki set down the pen and stood, raking his hand through his hair. The impulsive gesture dislodged several strands from their meticulous queue.

“A chance for what?”, he asked reluctantly.

“To say Farewell. It is his time.”, Ljosira simply said. He went as still as the marble carvings strewn around the study, his long-fingered hands pausing mid-movement of shuffling some papers. Munin cawed once as if to underline the truth of her revelation.

“I…”, Loki began, then stopped, apparently having lost his words. Ljosira saw the tension in his broad shoulders as she approached him, the almost imperceptible tremble that went through his lean body. She reached for his hand, noting the miniscule twitch, a kneejerk reaction to pull away which he successfully suppressed. Her warm fingers threaded through his, her small hand disappearing in his large one. The knowledge she had uncovered flowed from her touch into him, by way of their life-bond. Loki let out a strange, strangled sound.

“You would never have let him go. Neither of you. He chose to…”, she fell silent for a moment, searching for a sensible way to phrase it. “He chose his place and time to find peace. Where the heavens kiss the endless sea, heart and soul at last fly free."

“But… We are still here. His sons. He could –”, his voice was erratic and uneven, as though he fought an inner battle he was destined to forfeit.

“A great part of him left when Frigga died. Tell me, my love. If we lived together for thousands of years, side by side, watched the world change and our children grow until they don’t need us anymore… And then one day I were gone…”, she spoke both aloud and into his thoughts, her words accompanied by images of a possible future. And a devastating loss to follow. He shut his lids as if he wished to banish the mere suggestion.

“Don’t.”, he willed her not to continue. “Don’t make me imagine it.”

“You can still say farewell. He lingers now, waiting. Don’t deny yourself the chance, Loki. You would regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Can’t we talk him out of it? Maybe it was this strange apparition that tricked him into –“, but he broke off when Ljosira shook her head.

“I don’t know the nature of this… ghost. But I feel the finality of this. I have felt it for some time. This choice is immutable.” She despised herself for smothering the tiny spark of hope in his eyes, for having to watch it flicker and wane like a dying light. But lying to him was unthinkable, even if she had been able to. Sometimes the truth could be a terrible burden. This was one of those times. Her arms lifted to embrace him, her entire heart pouring out into that gesture of comfort.

Loki returned it so tentatively, as if he had never done this before, unsure how to proceed. Ljosira had seen him deal with the loss of his mother, and it had been just as difficult for him to open himself to her. Despite Loki’s detachment and bitterness towards his father, he loved him. It was the confused, reluctant love of a child who did not know or understand his place in his father’s
eyes. Chained down by pride for so many years that it had never been allowed to grow certain of itself. She wanted to assure him, to give him permission for this love, but only the two of them, father and son, had the power to do that.

“Does Thor know?”, Loki asked into the silence, still holding her close as if he could not bear to let go of her warmth.

“No.”, Ljosira answered gently. “And I don’t think it would be…”, she trailed away.

“You’re right. It would not be wise.”, he said, his words tight.

Sometime later, after having found comfort in his wife’s tender embrace, Loki left her sleeping soundly in their bed and went to the parlour instead. He held his disturbed thoughts closely to himself lest the timbre of his mood roused Ljosira. It had happened before.

Feeling both restless and enervated, he went to the weapon rack mechanically. Dragonbane’s weight felt reassuring in his hand, as if by arming himself with the weapon he somehow reclaimed a measure of control over his troubled mind. Loki sat down on Ljosira’s favourite sofa, running his fingers lightly over the fine engravings on the spearhead.

“I could use your counsel now, friend.”, he spoke softly, addressing the vibrant presence within the blade. A wash of light passed across the black metal marbled with silver filaments, like the glint within an eye when its attention was caught by an interesting curio.

“You grieve, Drekhjarten.” Anganir’s voice held a note of reproof. Only Loki could understand the whispers from Dragonbane’s heart-piece, where the Life-Binder resided in eternal, voluntary confinement. Loki was the weapon’s wielder, but never its master – he had gained the permission to use it by proving himself worthy.

“Are you not a great authority on grief? You sound as if you disapprove.”

“We shall be fighting side by side again soon. You cannot be weakened by sorrow when we do. Steel your heart. Do not mourn those who pass through the veil, for all time is merely borrowed from Yggdrasil, a mutual exchange. And all that has form must break down to build anew.”, the dragon said feelingly, but there was also an intractable thread in his words.

“I am mortal, Anganir. I cannot discount the – the passing of my father in such an off-hand way. My wife has the wisdom to accept it, but I have never been wise. Why did he choose…”, Loki broke off, unable to finish the thought. Anganir stayed silent for a while, conveying a vague sort of sympathy through the contact they held by touch.

“He has been warlord, conqueror, king, prophet, husband, father to you and an entire nation. Made mistakes and created wonders to behold. Left his mark upon the great tree’s bark. For him, this will be like lying down to sleep after a day that has lasted eons. You have never known the weariness he feels now. He is ready, even if you are not. Let go.”, the dragon’s soul forged on relentlessly.

Wilful and fractious, Anganir always was., Elding had told Loki once. And yes, the surly exile had been a hard teacher, but they had learned much from each other. He allowed himself a heavy sigh.

“You said we will fight again soon. Who is to be our enemy?”
Anganir said nothing for so long, Loki wondered if he had retreated from their conversation. It was an irritating quirk of his. But then he spoke again, rivalling Ljosira’s streak for thoroughly cryptic explanations.

“One last, best-kept secret, not mine to tell. We go to Midgard, Drekhjarten, and remember this human saying when we do: Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” And with that, the dragon’s presence waned from his mind, his voice dying down until it mingled with the undecipherable whispers coming from the spear.

A sliver of ice slithered along Loki’s spine, and with it came a cold trepidation, closing around his heart like a frosty fist. He couldn’t say why, but deep down he knew a sick, dreadful feeling that he stood at the edge to some unnameable divide, and once he crossed over, things would never be the same again.
Oh dear I left you all hanging >.< So sorry... Master thesis puts a real brake into my writing... Buuuut I'm going to sneak a chapter in here and damn it has a cliffhanger! Which means I'll have to update more soon :D I still hope you enjoy my version of these events! Have fun ;))

VI. Hel Hath No Fury

“The most fertile soil for a grudge is having an eternity to think about it.”

When he went to bed that night, Loki held the slight form of his wife so tightly in his arms, as if he could erase the separation that loomed before them by sheer dogged determination. Ljosira could not accompany him and Thor to Midgard. To keep the realm from becoming too vulnerable, at least one royal family member had to be present in Asgard – even if the relation was by marriage.

Ljosira protested against the crushing embrace for only a moment before sensing the turmoil within him. She subsided at once, melting against him willingly, whispering soft, soothing things. The words were meaningless comforts, yet the gentle, crooning timbre of her voice calmed Loki as nothing else ever did. Until he fell into a restless half-sleep, his dreams haunted by fog and shadow and a rain of ashes. He had not told Ljosira about the knowledge Anganir had passed on to him, and she had not asked why he felt so anxious about going to Midgard. But it would be foolish to mistake silence for ignorance.

A grey dawn followed the dark night, the sun emerging from its hiding place reluctantly, as though she too did not want this day to begin. Loki left the bed before Ljosira was fully awake, dressing in the muted twilight. He did this often, almost ritualistically, so he could watch her during the precious few minutes before she gathered her senses.

She stretched languidly, her pale hands rubbing at her eyes, her gaze not yet knowing but drowsy and soft, and it was in these times when Loki felt the surge of protectiveness most keenly. She looked so young, almost girlish as she combed her fingers through her hair and sighed. Loki came to sit at the edge of the bed, catching a silver tendril playfully. Twining it around his hand, he brought the fragrant strand to his cheek and mouth, kissing it.

“Have I ever told you that you look like a little girl when you sleep? It makes me want to guard you against all the ugliness in the world.”, he said softly. Ljosira’s lips quirked into a tender, indulgent smile.

“The world is not so very ugly.”, she hedged.
“Maybe not… But – I don’t want to leave you.” Loki’s forehead furrowed, his eyes apprehensive. He looked like a man about to hear an unfavourable verdict. “The last time I left you… I made a stupid mistake. Who is to say I am not still that person from back then?”

His wife’s eloquent eyes searched his face carefully, and her hand caught the lapel of his still-open shirt, drawing him down to her. Their kiss was both urgent and unhurried, both soothing and galvanizing. A lesson to be learned, a point to be proven: That was then, and this is now. Loki cradled her face, drawing strength from her certainty as she poured it out willingly. Her trust was more invigorating than a magical elixir.

But what was this strange feeling, this undercurrent of anxiety? This fleeting knowledge that he should savour the moment as much as he could, because it might be the last time he kissed his wife for a long while. Nonsense… Nothing could keep them apart. Whatever enemies lurked in the shadows, they would fight them as they always had: Together. And yet, and yet… Loki almost managed to convince himself. Almost.

Not an hour later, he met up with Thor on his way to the Bifröst. The argument from the day before lingered between them, but neither seemed inclined to bring it up. Not just Ljosira came to see them off, but the Warriors Three gathered at the observatory too. They were accompanied by Skurge, an Asgardian warrior who had fought with Thor when he’d retaken the realms after Loki’s escapades.

With so many other people present, Loki could not bid goodbye to his wife in the way he wanted to. But it was alright. They had said their farewells in private already. And yet, as he stepped into the shining gateway and the dome began spinning rapidly above, he looked back for an instant. Ljosira stood beside Heimdall, her face suddenly fearful, stricken. She made a small movement as though reaching to hold him back, then caught herself and curled her hand to her chest to quell the impulse. To Loki’s right, Thor seemed to sense his hesitation, turning halfway towards the group in the observatory.

“Don’t worry, little ancient one. We’ll be back sooner than you can blink.”

Rainbow light engulfed his brother and then Loki too, but he saw the sad, rueful smile on Ljosira’s face before the Bifröst catapulted him through space and far away from her. And he knew then that she did not believe a word Thor had said.

A moment of blinding radiance and immense speed later, the surge of energy from the Bifröst subsided and Loki found himself standing on a busy sidewalk. People leaped aside from the two towering men who had appeared within the fading ray of light. Already far ahead of things, Loki had cast appropriate illusions on his brother and himself. He now wore an entirely black suit, while Thor was dressed much more casually, holding a fairly inconspicuous umbrella in his right hand.

“What is Heimdall thinking, sending us into the middle of this bustle?”, Loki quipped, jabbing his thumb towards a gaggle of humans who were gawking at them. The brothers took in their surroundings, seeing that they had touched down in a great city which looked suspiciously like New York. A giant pile of rubble towered directly in front of them, obviously the remnants of a demolished building. Lying between the sad brick pieces of debris, a dusty sign read Shady Acres Care Home.

Why in gods’ mercy had Heimdall deposited them here? Was this some sort of bad joke? Loki
turned to his brother and was about to speak, but stopped short. As always, his idiot sibling was surrounded by giggling admirers, allowing them to take pictures of him with their odd, square devices. Upon seeing Loki’s glare, they retreated warily, but continued to whisper and snicker.

“Sorry to hear that Jane dumped you.”, one of them said with a conciliatory pat on Thor’s arm before she skipped away. Catching his brother’s eye, the thunder prince shrugged unconvincingly.

“She didn’t dump me. I dumped her. It was a mutual dumping!”, he fumbled, making Loki shake his head.

“Thor, is this the time for such things? Gods deliver me from –“, he began his tirade but never finished it. A sparkling ring uncoiled beneath his feet, and even though he knew exactly what it was, that did not save him from falling through the portal with all the grace of a dead bird. He plummeted through azure skies, fluffy white clouds, nocturnal shadows, cursing all the way.

From far away, he sensed Ljosira’s presence flare with alarm, before she resorted to an amused kind of chagrin as she recognized the caster of the spell. She was watching over him from the observatory, most likely, but he also felt her very subtly through their life-bond, partially sharing his senses. After some time (thirty minutes to be precise), Loki and solid ground had a very uncomfortable reunion as he crashed down onto a hard, polished parquet floor. He inhaled the scent of old books, spicy cedar and ancient stone walls – as much as his crushed lungs allowed it, anyway.

“Oh, that’s where I left him.”, said a familiar voice, dry and practical, as if this sort of thing happened every day. Loki rose to his feet awkwardly, spewing a string of profanities which belied his usual impeccable demeanour.

“I have been falling for thirty minutes!”, he exclaimed indignantly, brushing dust off his suit and smoothing his wind-swept hair.

The interior of 177A Bleecker street was earthy with a distinctly esoteric air, the walls lined with carved woodwork, every space occupied by some priceless ancient artefact. Instead of creating a plethoric ambiance, the dusk and clutter gave the place a mystical, enticing atmosphere, as though it invited a person to roam its depths and discover its secrets.

Stephen Strange stood at the foot of a great ornate staircase, his dark hair and beard in perfect order, his burgundy cloak of levitation flowing gracefully around him. The Eye of Agamotto hung around his neck, its power to control time dormant now, but still tangible in the very air. Brilliant blue eyes glinted at Loki with something close to humour, but they were the only part of Strange’s face showing any deviation from his usual serious countenance. A strong hand grabbed Loki’s arm, steadying him. He would have recognized the grip anywhere. When he caught Thor’s expression, it seemed his brother tried hard not to grin.

“Lost your footing there, did you?”, Thor said innocently.

“Someday I’ll learn that spell and repay you for these shenanigans.”, Loki snapped at Strange, who seemed utterly unfazed. A moment of laden silence passed, before the two great sorcerers reached out to grasp hands in a gesture of friendship. It was their way with each other to play these small tricks whenever they met – which was sadly not very often. The last time had been some months after Loki and Ljosira had married, and back then Loki had bamboozled the taciturn wizard quite thoroughly with his illusions.

He liked Strange, at least as much as he liked any human, but with Earth’s Supreme Sorcerer he shared a peculiar connection. Perhaps because they both devoted themselves to learning the arts of
the arcane, or maybe because Strange used a similar magic as Ljosira, since it had been a Lightbringer who had taught the first humans in sorcery.

“I think I already know your reason for coming here, Odinsons.”, Strange got right to the point in his usual, straight-forward manner. Then his perceptive eyes caught sight of Dragonbane, which hung securely on the weapon girdle around Loki’s hips, having shifted its form to that of a double-bladed dagger. It was much easier to carry it this way than dragging it along in its original spear-shape.

“That artefact…”, Strange mused thoughtfully. “I never had time to look at it properly. Such powerful magic, hanging in the balance. I wonder if a thing like that should exist at all.”

“I could say the same about that stone you carry around your neck.” Loki remembered what Ljosira had said shortly after they both had been subjected to the Time Stone’s powers: I feel soiled, twisted, having taken part in it... It was not made for dragons. Dragons were magic, given form and consciousness by Yggdrasil. What was the nature of these Infinity Stones, if their power made a being such as Ljosira feel tainted? One of these infernal objects had toyed with his own mind, a mind he had always thought to be sharper than a honed dagger. Although using them to defeat Natta had been necessary, he had no love lost for these incredibly powerful stones.

“I do not disagree.”, Strange said, his tone patient and clinical. “But I averted a great disaster thanks to this stone once, as did you. And since I know of no way to destroy it, I will make sure it does not fall into wrong hands.”

“We didn’t come here to wax philosophical about those damn stones.”, Thor interjected impatiently, yet he let out a sigh and shook his head as though reining himself in. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t, but we have a more immediate concern.”

“Yes, I figured.” Strange inclined his head reflectively. “Your father. You are looking for him, I assume? As a matter of fact, I know where he is.” Hearing his statement, the two handsome Asgardians in his company spawned the exact same arrested expression to their faces. An amused glint came to the wizard’s eyes.

“As any polite alien visitor with otherworldly powers and such, he announced himself at his arrival.”

Thor crossed his arms in a gesture that somehow managed to look both menacing and churlish. “If you know where he is, why have you not contacted me?”

“Because he requested specifically not to be disturbed and… you don’t have a phone.” The last words were sprinkled so lightly with sarcasm, one might not have noticed at all. Loki couldn’t suppress a smirk, but it died immediately when he was reminded of the reason Odin had come to Midgard. And Thor was still oblivious about it. After having lied to his brother countless times in the past, keeping this from him left a bitter taste in Loki’s mouth. His wife’s reassuring whisper caressed his mind, telling him that Thor would not want to believe such news from anyone except his own father. Some things were best revealed eye to eye.

“Yes, well. I don’t have a phone but… you could have sent me an electronic mail, you know?” Thor murmured accusingly. Strange gave him a blank, disbelieving look.

“In any case…”, he said slowly. “He’s in Norway.” Thor and Loki exchanged vacant glances.

“Yes, I know that tells you nothing.”, Strange went on, having guessed their line of thought. “It’s a remote little country, famous for its breath-taking coastal scenery.”
“Where heavens kiss the endless sea…”, Loki murmured under his breath. Both his brother and the wizard threw him a questioning look. He shook his head. “Can you take us there?” Strange sighed in a vaguely exasperated manner.

“I’m not a transportation service, you know. But certainly, I can. Let me see…” And with that, he nauseated his Asgardian guests by teleporting them all around the mansion a dozen times as he searched for a particularly elusive spell-book. Attempting to control his lurching insides, Loki speculated if items describing teleportation might be prone to translocate themselves out of pure glee.

At last, after making the contents of their stomachs slosh around enough for one day, Strange unceremoniously divested Loki and Thor of a dozen hairs, somehow looping them to form one of his typical sparking portals. It looked no different from the other ones he’d conjured, and Loki wondered if this was the wizard’s idea of a good joke. He definitely wore the faintest smirk on his face as he signalled them courteously to walk through.

“You should come and study Eldritch magic sometime.”, Strange addressed Loki with a nod that conveyed both respect and a covert kind of acceptance. Maybe this was the day he would finally be taken off Midgard’s List of Dangerous Alien Individuals, Loki mused, returning the gesture.

And the next moment, he and Thor had stepped from one end of the world to the other, their feet no longer touching hardwood floors but soft mossy ground instead. A wide, wide field of wind-swept green grass stretched out left and right, ending abruptly in a steep cliff dozens of feet ahead. Beyond it, the endless ocean extended into the distance. A vast blanket, unfathomable in its size, untameable in its nature.

Every colour in this place was vivified by the strange, harmonious palette they made – the moist, rain-engorged green of the grass, stirring constantly in the salt-fresh breeze. The churning blueish-grey of the ocean, forever whispering, throwing itself against indomitable stone with abandon. And finally, that pale sky with clouds curving over the horizon like the hands of a weary deity.

For a mere instant, Loki felt Ljosira surge into the connection between them with enough force that she shared his senses fully. It didn’t occur to him to fight it. Thus, he also perceived her closing her eyes, so many light-years away, instead watching through his eyes a place where ending and beginning were the same thing.

It was breath-taking, and melancholy. And yes, inevitable. When his gaze found Odin’s broad back and white shock of hair as he sat on a lone, flat rock at the cliffside, Loki at last accepted what must come to pass. Ironically enough, Thor seemed thunderstruck beside him. Surely he had felt it too, the finality of it, the strange awareness of something magnificent coming to a full cycle.

Yet when Thor stepped forward, he did it as he did everything in his life: boldly, with single-minded determination. Loki followed a few paces behind, until they both came to a halt at either side of Odin, who kept gazing out into the distance absent-mindedly.

“Father?”, Thor said, his eyes strangely uncertain all of a sudden. A gust of wind swept along the plane, bringing an unnatural chill with it. Although inured to cold, Loki knew an uneasy feeling, as though he was being watched by unseen eyes. The tiny hairs on his nape lifted, the back of his neck prickled.

“Look at this place. It’s beautiful.”, Odin spoke in a quiet, calm voice.

“My sons. I have been waiting for you.”, he acknowledged their presence, but little else. Distracted and flustered, Loki kept his silence. Ljosira had retreated from his mind to give him privacy, leaving him oddly bereft, a house without its supporting foundation.

“Yes, we have come to take you home.”

Odin said nothing for the longest time, before sweeping his gaze curiously over the empty space around them.

“Home, yes. Your mother, she calls me.” He almost smiled, cocking his head as though listening to something. “Do you hear it?” Loki and Thor traded a helpless look above his head.

“Is it magic? Is someone tampering with his mind?”, Thor asked, sounding troubled. Loki started shaking his head, but they both startled when Odin let out a quiet laugh.

“Ah, dear boy. No magic can hold me now.” He flicked a glance at Loki. “Did you enjoy my last little sleight of hand? You thought you learned mischief at your mother’s knee, forgetting that I always keep a few tricks up my sleeve as well. I knew your wife would pull you out immediately, of course… She always does.” He fell silent for a minute, looking thoughtful.

“Dragons are wondrous creatures, are they not? Despite the steadiness of their existence, they elicit change in our mortal lives. I am glad you earned their favour. It will make things easier.”

Rendered mute by his words, by the distant, longing expression in his eyes, his sons obeyed when Odin motioned for them to sit on the smooth rock with him. A pained shame distorted Thor’s features when he saw the weakness in his father’s movements. Just this simple conversation seemed to drain him of strength, thinning him out.

“Father… I know we have failed you so often. We were reckless, we quarrelled… Drew blood, even.”, Thor struggled to find the right words, glad for Loki’s almost imperceptible nod of reassurance. “But we moved past it. We can make this right.”

“No, Thor. I have failed you. Both of you. It is upon us. Ragnarok.” The brothers froze.

“No, I stopped Ragnarok! I put an end to Surtur.”, Thor tried to placate him, while Loki shivered with unease. *I do not know if it... must come true. But these events have a certain... inevitability to them.*

“I fear you do not understand. It has already begun.”, Odin said with a sigh, the subdued light gleaming across his golden eye-patch. “Long ago, I made a choice. Some might call it selfish… But I come to this final journey with only a single regret. That seems like a good balance for a life as long as mine, don’t you think?”

“Father, I… I don’t understand. I don’t understand what you are saying.” Thor’s voice had gone from worried to anxious, frustrated by the enigmatic words. He radiated the agitation of a man trapped, cagey and restless.

“What do you regret?”, Loki spoke for the first time, almost in a whisper.

“I regret… That you must face this alone. She is coming…” Suddenly Odin shrunk a bit, his proud features sagging with an ancient weariness.

“Who?”

Thor seemed stunned out of his wits. Loki opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Sister. Firstborn. Firstborn sister. The words bounced and tumbled around his hollow thoughts like a shout echoing in a cavernous emptiness. Even Ljosira, who held a very a gentle grip on their life-bond, was speechless. A last, best-kept secret, not mine to tell. Anganir had said that. Anganir had known.

“Her violent appetites grew beyond my control. So I imprisoned her, locked her away. For many eons she was sealed. My life is all that held her back. But my time has come, as it must. I cannot hold her back any longer…” Odin broke the silence around them, his voice very calm, ringing with acceptance.

“She draws her strength from Asgard and once she gets there, her powers will be… limitless.”

“Whatsoever she is, we can stop her, we can fight her together—” Thor’s face was a picture of denial, going slack when Odin shook his head weakly.

“No… I’m on a different path now. They path fate has laid out for me. With this one regret… I shall pass… Eternity awaits.”

And as Loki fought to regain the power of speech, having lost it despite all bracing, he saw from the corner of his eye a quiver in the air, an ethereal fluctuation that felt foreign and familiar at once. A soft whisper rode on the wind, in the rustling of the grass, in the snicker of the waves below.

“I love you, my sons.” The world’s heart stopped beating for a timeless moment, and Loki was sure his own heart mirrored the sudden halt. His eyes settled on his father’s face, knowing it was the last opportunity to look at him.

Hated, beloved father, the only one he had ever known and yet not known at all. How many more secrets did he take with him to the grave? How could he leave them like this, in a mess again, without teaching them more? And why was there never enough time for anything, why did it always run through his fingers like so much sand—

“Look at that.” Odin pointed at the horizon, smiling, serene. “Remember this place.” He breathed deeply, eyes closed, as if he was just about to fall asleep. At peace.

“Home.”

After having lived longer than any mortal in existence, Odin the Allfather, King of Asgard, benevolent ruler and fearless conqueror, left the world of the living. Before his sons’ eyes, his body dissolved into countless specks of incandescent light, while his soul soared to the infinite firmament above. Free at last.

What he felt at that moment, Loki doubted he could ever put into words. The entire cosmos shuddered in its foundations, paying tribute to his father’s soul with an all-encompassing ripple. And what a soul it must be! Because from far away, the whole of dragonkind bid farewell to him.

A soft melody reached Loki’s ears, more hauntingly beautiful than the song of a deep-sea whale, and he felt great immortal creatures circling somewhere between stellar branches, lamenting in unison. Verdant Life-Binders. Shadowed Darkflight. Radiant Lightbringers. Intangible Voidwalkers. Even Anganir mingled his voice to their eulogy from deep within Dragonbane.

Loki felt Yggdrasil’s presence as clearly as on the day he’d died, surging through every single stalk of grass. He felt the dragon king’s regard as he gave this singular occurrence his undivided
attention, from far up in the world tree’s crown. He felt his brother’s crushing grief and Ljosira’s quiet sadness, somehow joining hands in the turbulence of his own heart. And he felt the flickering, ethereal guest, its signature the same as it had been in his father’s study, suddenly realizing what it had been.

A dragon. A kind that should never appear to mortals except in the moment of their passing, to offer guidance, absorbing all the memories of a life lived and ushering them to wherever souls went. The Other Side. Loki fleetingly wondered why no Voidwalker had come to him at the moment of his own death by Natta’s claws. Maybe this was the meaning behind Ljosira’s strange explanation that he was anchored to the world in a way only dragons are.

But then a heavy hand settled onto his shoulder, grounding his thoughts back into reality. It didn’t matter that his brother’s grip was too tight, painful. Or that the sky had started churning with storm clouds, small currents of lightning licking across Thor’s fingers, electrifying Loki in the process. It wasn’t very strong, only uncomfortable. Anger and distress tended to unleash Thor’s powers even through the restraint exerted by Mjölnir.

“Brother…”, Loki began softly.

“I… I…” Even this one-letter word seemed to cost the thunder prince too much. It came out choppy, almost guttural. They’d always had very different methods to deal with grief. But neither of them was allowed any leeway.

Only minutes after their father had joined eternity, the air on the far side of the field literally split open, oozing black shadow and malice into Odin’s sacred resting place. From this toxic magical cocktail emerged a tall, sinuous shape clad from head to toe in gleaming onyx and emerald.

For the first time in their lives, the sons of Odin laid eyes on the sister they had never known about, in all her dark, vengeful imminence. She was formidable, her eyes utterly glacial, like the cold, hard steel of a sharpened blade. Ready for death to flow from her hands.

But that look was not what unnerved Loki. He and murderous intent were old friends, and he’d seen more death than he cared for. What terrified him was the giant shape that wavered into focus behind Hela with every step she took. It seemed to appear out of thin air, oscillating into view like ghostly apparition, as if having waited right there all this time. At the back of his mind, Ljosira wailed with confusion, anger, fear – Danger! Get back here, right now. Get back!

Death has come, and the Whisperer follows., Anganir hissed out into his thoughts. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, Loki would have mused sardonically that he’d truly become a madman hearing voices in his head. Hela’s harshly beautiful face twisted into a sneer as she looked upon her brothers. The Midgardian illusion had evaporated, leaving them both ready for battle, both with their weapons in hand.

“So he’s gone.”, Hela said in a low slither of a voice. And then her lips curled into a lazy, evil smile, reminding Loki inexplicably of Natta, which made bile rise in his stomach.

The dragon behind her seemed uninterested in the happenings. Loki had never seen a dragon such as this one. Almost bigger than a Lightbringer, the scales an inky blue everywhere except for its translucent, lavender wings and an extensive, snow-white mark on its skull, stretching out over one horn and the side of its neck. Somehow it made him think of a tree split in two by lightning. Nonsensical.

If this was a true dragon, it had to adhere to Yggdrasil’s rules. There couldn’t be another rogue one out there. He felt the dragon’s mind reach for him in a vague, jaded manner, but the cold touch was
intrusive and just too alien. Bizarre. Loki recoiled, because Ljosira recoiled too inside him. She didn’t recognize this member of her species, and something about the creature deeply unsettled her.

“Kneel.”, Hela ordered then, snapping both Thor’s and Loki’s attention back to her. The nerve of this woman! Nobody commanded the sons of Odin to kneel.

“Beg your pardon?”, Loki asked, dripping with caustic politeness. Conjured from seemingly nowhere, a long obsidian blade appeared in her hand, glistening like polished darkness.

“Never.” The word ripped from Thor in a growl, and before Loki could hold him back, his brother threw Mjölnir at Hela with all his strength. Whatever outcome they expected from this attack, they would never have dreamed of what came next. Hela lifted a hand and simply caught the divine hammer before it could hit her, her claw-like fingers gripping it firmly.

“Im…possible –“, Thor seemed in pain, trembling with effort and exertion, his arm still outstretched.

“Darling brother, you would not believe what is possible.” Their sister smiled, but it was the smile of a predator, all teeth and not a modicum of mirth. Her eyes turned flinty with contempt. Mjölnir started vibrating violently in her grasp, sending out bolts of energy into all directions. Electrified cracks appeared all across the immaculately forged metal as Hela’s power pressed down unto the core with such pressure that Loki could feel the magic inside the hammer splinter.

And then, with an ear-splitting burst strong enough to throw mere mortals off their feet, the divine weapon of Thor shattered from the inside out. Fragments of molten Uru clanked loudly as they fell into the grass. She had crushed one of the most powerful artefacts ever made, just like that. Thor stood staring at the sad pieces, stunned, his face deathly pale. But only for a moment. When the realization of what had happened reached him, he looked ready to strangle the life out of Hela with his bare hands. Loki was so dumbstruck, he couldn’t even move.

As his brother lunged, he was aware of several things happening at once. Ljosira burst into his mind, and of the first time ever, she took control. She was the one who grabbed Thor and held him back by something more than physical strength. It was her words Loki spoke, and he heard them both in her voice and his own, ringing on and on:

“Heimdall, the Bifröst! Now!”

The rainbow bridge flared into life around them. Thor thundered his denial – he wanted to fight, not flee, damn them all; the unknown dragon spread its wings almost lazily. Hela pounced like a panther on her prey. And then they were all flying, streaking along the bridge between the worlds.

Loki would later not remember the chaotic skirmish that followed. Hela was right behind them, madness in her eyes as they flashed with every possible colour, her teeth bared into a snarl. Dragonbane’s power roared in Loki’s hands and he lunged across the current of energy to strike his sister down, but a leathery mass buffeted him before he could. The kaleidoscope around him broke into countless shards. Like a ragdoll, he was flung from the Bifröst, yelling his wrath to the great void. Words ricocheted in his skull, making the vertigo worse, vomit-inducing.

“Do not fight the inevitable, mortal.”

“My love, my heart! Stay with me!”

“Loki, no!”

He glimpsed Thor for just an instant, features distorted by fear and fury alike, before the Bifröst
grew distant and he fell, fell away. Only Ljosira’s heart-breaking cries of despair kept him company in the silence as the world dwindled into oblivion around him, and his consciousness followed.
VII. Fafnir's Collar

Chapter Notes

Ahh I left you hanging again! Sorry!! My poor couple separated and Hela on her way to Asgard... This is going to be a difficult time for them... But of course they'll do everything to be reunited! But for now, things don't go quite as planned... Have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VII. Fafnir’s Collar

“As I looked to the sky above the bloodied battlefield, I saw a creature of nightmare descend, and knew that the war would end today, one way or another. When the Winged Twilight appears, death is not far behind. But whose death will it be? Theirs, or ours?”

Bor the Conqueror

“Fandral, get her out of here and somewhere safe! Hela is coming this way –“ Heimdall’s voice ripped Ljosira from the trance she’d fallen into, breaking her hold on Loki’s mind, leaving her bereft and powerless to help him. Her surroundings shifted. There was a strange sensation of weightlessness as she was hauled to the exit of the observation dome by strong arms.

The air filled with the sounds of weapons being drawn, frantic questions what had happened. Ljosira felt ready to break out of her skin, poised to leave her mortal body behind, and at the same time her heart was torn into two opposite directions. Loki needed her, or he would end up who knew where, lost in limbo. But Asgard needed her too, because what would step through that portal on the other end of the dome could wreak untold havoc on her beloved Asgard. These short seconds of indecision paralyzed her.

One moment, Fandral gripped her tightly, dragging her along on the solid rainbow bridge, and the next moment his hands went slack. His strikingly handsome face scrunched up in pain, before he toppled over, almost burying Ljosira beneath him. He didn’t make a sound. She screamed, scrambling out from under him. Her eyes fell on the obsidian blade plunged into the warrior’s back, then snapped up to the two figures who had just trespassed into the kingdom she’d sworn to protect.

Hela’s hand was outstretched. Her first act of violence had felled all three of Thor’s friends. Volstagg and Hogun lay writhing on the ground to her feet, rich red blood pooling around them. Having evaded the initial attack, Heimdall still stood tall, sword held high, unspeakable anger twisting his features.

To Hela’s right, Ljosira glimpsed a woman whose aura was so unfathomable and eccentric, she could make no sense of it. And the face. The face of this woman, it looked like a tragic accident, as if she’d been kissed by ruin, leaving her forever branded. One side scarred and ghostly as bleached
bone, the other flawless and hauntingly beautiful. Her single blue eye focused unerringly onto Ljosira, and in that shortest of connections, a name rose into the jumbled mess of her thoughts: Kvisari. The Whisperer had come.

All of this happened within the short timeframe as the realization sunk in that Hela had just killed three of Asgard’s most formidable warriors in a single strike. After she’d thrown Loki and Thor from the Bifrost by force. They could be dying. They could be dead already. Fire licked through her every limb, shuddering along her backbone. The dragon in her reared its head with a fury beyond sanity, and she let it free.

“Ljosira, no! Princess —“, Heimdall yelled, but it was too late. Light exploded into the dome from outside, but it was drowned out by the great winged shadow that leaped to meet it halfway. Kvisari and Ljosira collided just beyond the fragile observatory’s structure in a thunderous clash of bodies.

It was a desperate, messy struggle. The two dragons latched on to each other with claws and teeth, wings beating violently enough to make them hurtle through the air above the Bifrost, almost as if in slow-motion. Fierce gales of magic rattled the fabric of space around them, their deadly jaws spewing flames of different hues. The bridge began cracking under the force of their battle.

Ljosira went for her opponent’s throat, uncaring that sharp talons dug into her flank, deeply enough to draw blood. Kvisari was a large dragon, matching her in size and strength, but in the haze of her frenzy she realized something even more terrifying during their vicious encounter: the Voidwalker seemed to anticipate every one of her movements, evading her strikes, dodging her razor-sharp teeth, countering her attacks as if she knew exactly where they would come from.

If anything, that made Ljosira fight more savagely, dealing out mad, erratic blows in the hope that there would be no discernible pattern in her strikes. She had never fought a Voidwalker before, and soon paid for her inexperience. Within an instant, Kvisari gained the upper hand, flipping her Lightbringer foe over so they both came crashing down onto the bridge. One wing trapped painfully beneath her body, Ljosira could only sprawl impotently as the crushing jaws closed around her neck.

This is the end, she thought, her throat producing a strange, out-of-control sound that almost seemed like mad laughter. Humiliated, overpowered, she would die here, and no one would come to help her. Where was Father? Where was her brother Vegr? Why did they not intervene?

But Kvisari did not bite down on her throat to deal the death-blow. She merely held Ljosira in a firm grip, her teeth unrelenting but not brutal. It was a universal gesture of dominance among all creatures, holding one’s enemy by the vulnerable throat to force them into submission.

“Do not make a move, princess.”, a calm voice spoke into Ljosira’s thoughts.

“Are you done playing games, Kvisari?”, Hela questioned from inside the observatory. When Ljosira turned her head just the tiniest bit, she saw the usurper standing above a kneeling Heimdall. Hofund lay on the ground a few feet away, and the Gatekeeper’s face was bloodied and bruised. He didn’t look seriously injured, though. But the long black blade pointing menacingly at his heart told Ljosira that his life could be ended in the blink of an eye.

Checkmate. There was no way out. A hundred options flashed through her mind, from trying to fling Kvisari off herself to breathing fire at Hela, and all of them ended with Heimdall dead or caught in the collateral damage. Every scenario in which she tried to free herself would be disastrous to the gatekeeper – yet within all those catastrophic outcomes there was a single, most unlikely choice she could make. It wouldn’t help her. Intuition whispered that her own fate was sealed anyway.
Gathering power within her prone body, Ljosira prepared a very simple spell to go off in a very unusual way. Above her, she felt Kvisari’s bewilderment, while Heimdall’s golden eyes locked with her swirling silver gaze, as if he’d sensed her intention. Trusting in his telepathic prowess, she pierced him with a single thought.

“Flee.”

“I can’t leave you – I won’t!”, Heimdall arrowed back resolutely, but she cut him off.

“You must. You cannot die here. You must protect Asgard and the Bifröst. Right now, the people need you more than they need me.”

Her projection was so severe, so commanding, that he fell into silent acceptance, although she could feel how much it cost him to concede. Everything inside him bristled against leaving her to Hela’s mercy. But he would obey. After an exchange that lasted mere heartbeats, Ljosira let loose all fetters.

“What—” Kvisari’s exclamation was drowned out by the eruption of raw energy. The nova of radiant magic was enough to blind any and all living creatures in the vicinity. All but one.

Hela screamed in rage, covering her eyes with her hands. Kvisari too squeezed her lids shut to escape the powerful light. Ljosira had rigged her transformation spell with enough power to level a city, but she had used it for only one purpose: A few precious seconds to incapacitate her foes, stealing their vision. And when the light finally waned, she knew she had succeeded.

Heimdall was gone without a trace. She sensed his aura, retreating through a secret passage only he knew, but she pulled her attention away immediately as not to alert Kvisari. At least, Ljosira thought bitterly, she had managed to save him, at the expense of her own freedom. It had been the only way. She could do nothing but to hope that he would protect the people of Asgard from Hela’s cruelty. Back in her mortal body, Ljosira lay on the colourful crystal bridge, panting from exhaustion.

She took inventory of her injuries while Hela yelled her outrage that the gatekeeper had slipped through her clutches – and had taken the only key to the Bifröst with him. There were some minor flesh wounds, but those would heal quickly through her dragon powers. Yet she’d consumed a lot of energy for the burst which had allowed Heimdall to flee. It would take longer to recharge from her strenuous clash with this Kvisari creature.

Ljosira sensed a strong pulse of the other dragon’s distorted power, heard swift and resolute footsteps circle around her. The next she knew, a metal collar of some sort was fastened around her neck. It was cold and… wrong. So terribly wrong, hideous magic seething inside it. She tried to struggle, but her opponent was methodical and lightning-quick. Something clicked in place at her nape.

And then it was as if the world had died around her. All of it, all at once. Every magical sense she had, every life-bond, every perception of the cosmos, every aura, deadened. Her body suddenly felt too tight, the flesh and bone and sinew turning into a prison she could not escape. Trapped. Her dragon soul screeched with claustrophobic despair. On mere instinct she struggled to shift, but a bolt of blinding pain shot through her temple, the agony so strong it immobilized her. The collar squeezed down on her very spirit, worrying it the way a wolf shook a rabbit caught between its jaws.

“What did you do to me?!”, Ljosira cried out in sheer, naked panic. “What is this!?” She reached to tear the collar off, but her hands were frozen in place.
“Don’t do that.”, a whispery voice said calmly. “Any attempt to remove it will tighten it. Any attempt to use magic will make it sap more of you.”

Ljosira heard Hela converse with a man who had been in the observatory with the others, the only survivor of this disastrous battle – Skurge was his name. A tidal wave of sorrow went through her when she realized that some of Thor’s closest friends had died to defend his kingdom – his home – today, their bodies skewered by Hela’s weapons before they could even blink. Their vibrant presence had been wiped from the face of the world, and she had been powerless to stop it.

Cold with dread, Ljosira stared daggers at the woman who had put the infernal collar on her. Her face was the same torn travesty it had been before. But no aura came from her, no billowing current of energy. She could only see a face, nothing else. It made her want to scream.

“Kvisari! This clever man has agreed to help us, how about that? At least some good came of this day. How could you let Heimdall escape?”, Hela interrupted, throwing her companion an accusing glare.

“I do not believe I let him escape.”, Kvisari answered easily. Then she turned her eerie gaze to Ljosira. The lavender-blue eye assessed her with an unreadable expression. “Do not struggle with it.”

“What is this thing?! It’s evil magic! Do you even know what this feels like?”, Ljosira yelled, stumbling to her feet. Kvisari reached out and tried to steady her, but she slapped the helping hand away.

“I do.”, the woman said coolly. “Comply, and no harm will come to you. Resist, and you will... know pain.” The words carried no emotion, but a strange implication Ljosira did not comprehend.

Was this how mortals felt? How they saw the world? Unable to understand the ties which held everything together? No. They had never known anything else. But to her, this was like walking without legs, like being blinded, deafened and silenced at once. She hunched, folding in on herself as if she could somehow keep from falling apart, but it did nothing against the hollow desolation inside her.

“You know I was intent on just killing her, so I’m not complaining but... What in gods’ names did that thing do to her?”, Hela wondered conversationally.

“Fafnir’s Collar deadens her dragon powers. She cannot employ any of them to read us, use magic, or shift into dragon form as long as she wears it.”, Kvisari replied, now handcuffing an unresisting Ljosira, who trembled with equal heights of indignation and terror.

“There’s only one of those lying around in the universe? Seems like an item one might want to have more of.”, the usurper queen remarked.

“It is the most... repugnant thing mortals have ever created against us. Imitations were attempted. They all failed, horribly.”, Kvisari said in an offhand tone.

“So we are what, torturing her? Won’t that make the dragons even angrier?”, Hela demanded, although she didn’t seem to care very much about offending the guardians of Yggdrasil. The woman of opposites sighed in an exhausted fashion, before pointing one finger to the sky.

“My spells distort time for a short while. The knowledge that we hold his daughter hostage has not reached Elding yet. You should take the throne quickly and establish your dominance here. Once the spell breaks, he will know.”
“And what will he do?”

Kvisari’s dispassionate shrugs were becoming a real annoyance. “The king himself? Nothing, for now. Not as long as there is a knife to his daughter’s throat.”

“What about the damned gatekeeper? She helped him escape. He will come to free her.”, Hela was growing angrier by the minute, but her strange companion stayed utterly unimpressed.

“I cannot help you with Heimdall. He is… an uncertainty. I saw few futures where he escaped. In most of them, he fights to defend the dragon princess and dies.”, Kvisari explained.

“Heimdall knows Asgard like the palm of his hand. But he’s only one man. You’re the queen. I mean… once you take the throne, what can he do?”, Skurge threw in from the side-lines. Hela seemed to contemplate this for a moment. Ljosira held her head lowered in defeat, trying to listen despite the pack of angry beasts ripping away at her insides.

“That does make sense. I guess we should see to my kingdom, then? Kvisari, take care that our prisoner is escorted right behind me, for all to see.”

The Goddess of Death took a deep breath, stepping out onto the solid rainbow bridge which led into the golden realm. A victorious smile played around her lips, her sea-green eyes glinting with the certainty of her triumph. Skurge walked by her side. Kvisari made a gesture to Ljosira to follow, but the dragon princess gave her a look that could have set an iceberg aflame. The traitor dragon did not so much as wince.

“Comply. You have no other choice.”, she said quietly. Ljosira’s fingers found the cool, silver wedding ring on her left hand. She thought of Loki, thrown from the Bifröst to somewhere so incredibly far beyond Yggdrasil’s boundaries. She thought of Thor, defeated and cast away, his hammer broken. She thought of Heimdall, for whose freedom she had traded everything.

There had been no other choice. She had known that, felt it with the fiery sun at her heart, the senses now banked to simmering embers. But if she should ever be released from this hideous cage, there would be a terrible reckoning. Pulling her shoulders straight, she raised her head high with the pride her father had instilled in her. She wouldn’t accept a defeat so easily. Not yet. Kvisari gave her a look, and for an instant her blind eye seemed to fixate on Ljosira too. A fleeting emotion crossed her ravaged features, here and gone in a second. It had looked like respect.

“You are right.”, Ljosira said in the coldest voice she could manage. “For now.” And then they joined the usurper’s procession.

Hela subdued Asgard by sheer merciless brutality. Ljosira was forced to watch as Odin’s firstborn single-handedly massacred her way through the army and then the palace guards, killing everyone who dared to defy her. Her powers were tremendous, her heart black as the night. She showed no mercy in her grand crusade to retake what she’d been denied by her father, and with every death that flowed from her hands, Ljosira died a little inside.

So many innocent, honourable souls were put to the sword on that day, she was almost thankful that she did not have to feel the auras of their agony. Watch as their precious lights waned and scattered away into the void. When there were no more soldiers left to oppose her, Hela entered the palace as if she had never been cast out of it. As if this had always been her rightful place. Ljosira could not bear to see the evil witch seated on the throne that had been occupied by one of the greatest mortals she had ever known.

Bitter bile rose in her stomach at the thought of Hela trampling all over Loki’s hard work to keep
the realm in peace and prosperity, of her ignorance towards the hardships Thor had gone through to protect his beloved homeland. All of it meant nothing now that this ruthless tyrant had ascended to power. Ljosira averted her eyes from the sight, knowing that if she looked at Hela sitting in that place of honour, she would fall apart.

“Kvisari. Take the dragon princess to her quarters. We would not want such an esteemed guest to suffer the discomfort of the dungeons. Make sure she cannot escape. I shall be sending some guards to secure all doors soon.”, came the queen’s voice, dripping with malice.

While Kvisari led her away, Ljosira caught one last glimpse of Hela. Giant blades conjured by her hands were driven into the beautiful mural spanning the throne room ceiling. Mere hours after her father’s death, she was already demolishing everything that had been sacred to him. And there was nobody left to stop her.

During the first week of her confinement, Ljosira slept nary a wink. Nodding off into fitful slumber every now and then, just to awaken with a wretched, sick feeling almost as soon as her eyes had closed. Since the night they had become lovers, Loki had slept by her side. Every night. The comforting strength of his body, folding around hers like a shelter to guard her dreams. What a cruel irony to put her back into the quarters she had shared with him, because his absence in the giant bed was not just palpable, it was painful.

She had gotten so used to him, she didn’t know what to do with herself, how to deal with the rising despair. No matter how much she heated the room, her skin stayed cold and raw, as though flayed open. No matter how many silk sheets and furs she piled on herself, the shivers still overcame her without mercy. And when she did drift off, she would be woken by horrid, keening noises which she soon realized were coming unbidden from her own throat, the cries of a creature maddened by the absence of her mate, by the uncertainty of his fate. It was in these days, when she lay helpless against the assault of her own yearning, that Ljosira realized how strong the life-bond to her husband had truly become.

Fafnir’s Collar tightened around her throat like a frozen metal vice every time she reached for his presence, even with just the faintest tendril of her magic. The sensation was one of drowning, of being crushed between a giant monster’s jaws. The collar locked her inside the prison of her mortal body with such a suffocating finality, Ljosira thought she would go insane from it. If this thing had truly been made by mortals, its creators hadn’t the barest whiff of a concept what an atrocity they had brought into the world. No mortal could understand how perverse – against nature – it was to keep a dragon forcibly contained inside a mortal’s body.

Although she’d attuned herself to it better than any dragon she knew, she had always had outlets for her magical energy through her life-bonds. And even then, she’d had to fly free at regular intervals, let loose the confines of her magic. Dragons were not made for captivity. Loath to let their unusual relationship become a burden, Loki had never tried to shackle her to him, always mindful that she retained as much freedom as possible. If this incarceration went on for long, Ljosira knew that she would wither like a plant severed from its roots. Or maybe an even more terrible fate lay in store for her.

It happened on the seventh day of her confinement. Unable to abide the cold emptiness of her bedroom, she had curled up on the living room settee when she jolted awake to a strange feeling. Stinging heat in her eyes, cold wetness on her cheeks, a contradicting sensation she had never experienced before. Dazed and confused, her hands flew to the skin of her face, touching it with trembling fingers. They came away moist, and when she compulsively licked the corner of her lips, she tasted salt. Something flowed gradually from her eyes, leaving damp tracks as it went.
Tears. Ljosira couldn’t have been more shocked if she had started sneezing out bits of her brain. An uncontrollable sob came from her burning throat. A weeping dragon. She had never wept in her life. This was wrong. What am I becoming?, she thought, her mind unhinged and quite possibly a bit mad.

“It is a normal reaction.” The calm voice nearly made her jump out of her skin. Kvisari stood at the closed doors of the chamber, gazing at her steadily. “Your mortal body does things which would usually be curtailed by your dragon powers.”

“Go to hell!”, Ljosira spat one of Tony’s favourite curses at the traitor, jolting from the settee to hide the shameful weakness of her tears. But as she sat up, a wave of nausea swept over her, so powerful she was helpless against it. All she could do was to lean over the armrest just in time before she vomited the meagre contents of her stomach out onto the immaculate marble floor.

She couldn’t see Kvisari’s reaction, but heard the rustling sound of movement through the whoosh in her ears. An instant later, gentle hands had gathered the errant tumble of silver locks away from her face. Ljosira jerked sideways from the hated touch as if bitten by a viper.

“Be still or you will soil your mane.” The words were spoken in Draconic, and some subtle note in them made Ljosira subside. It sounded like worry, or maybe surprise, something incredulous and queer. She quaked with another rush of violent queasiness, retching again. More tears stung her eyes, blurring her vision into a watery mess.

“Deep breaths. In, out. Like this.”, Kvisari said as she demonstrated a few lung-filling inhalations. While she tried desperately to emulate them, Ljosira caught the clinking of glass and the sound of pouring water, before a glass filled with cool liquid was held to her lips. Drinking dampened the nausea a bit, but it still hovered with all the threat of a bully readying himself for a gut punch.

The other woman whispered indecipherable words, her cold fingers tentatively wiping the dampness away from Ljosira’s nape. It almost felt like a caress, too intrusive, too gentle. Dredging up equal amounts of agony and revulsion as she was reminded of the only person ever allowed to touch her that way. Although her attempt to squirm away in discomfort was feeble, Kvisari withdrew her hand at once.

“This was not supposed to happen.”, Kvisari murmured quietly, a speculative ring in her voice.

“You think?!”, Ljosira hissed with as much contempt as she could muster. “Is it not enough that you put this abomination around my neck, do you have to invade my privacy too?” With herculean effort, she lifted her head to skewer her mutilator with a baleful glare.

“You brought this sickness on me. Don’t you dare pity me now, you damn hypocrite. Get out of my sight!” She hated the quiver in her voice, the weakness that undermined her threat even as she spoke it. But Kvisari did neither flinch nor retreat. Instead, the strange dragon surveyed her with a long, pensive look from her healthy eye, while the other stayed murky and unfathomable.

“You are not sick, princess.”, she stated with a bemusing certainty. “But… You are suffering the collar’s effects in ways I hadn’t expected. Drink another.” Kvisari handed her another glass filled with water. Ljosira took it grudgingly while their eyes locked in a silent battle of wills, the silver pair scornful, the blue one curious.

“You are not sick, princess.”, she stated with a bemusing certainty. “But… You are suffering the collar’s effects in ways I hadn’t expected. Drink another.” Kvisari handed her another glass filled with water. Ljosira took it grudgingly while their eyes locked in a silent battle of wills, the silver pair scornful, the blue one curious.

“The mortal. Does he really mean that much to you?” Staring into the ravaged face before she could form a sufficiently scathing reply, Ljosira was stunned to see a sharp interest beneath the impassive façade. Kvisari observed her with the inquisitiveness of a scientist trying to dissect some new and unknown specimen.
“You would never understand.”, she answered evasively after a moment, taking a deep breath against the nausea.

“No, likely not. But I would like an answer, anyhow.”

Voidwalkers. They were the so detached from reality, the most remote clan of dragons. Emotions did not reach through to the their abyss-like souls, and they had always stood unaffected in the face of mortal vagaries. A part of this aloofness was rooted within the nature of their magic, which was neither light nor shadow but came from eerie, spectral arcana they drew upon from the Other Side.

Masters of Death, the Asgardians called them, and they would have been partially correct. Voidwalkers led a contradicting existence. Within each of them, a part resided in the living world while the other half gazed into the void of death. Balancing on a knife’s edge between this side and the other. Because of this unique connection to the after-world, these cerebral dragons were the only ones talented in auguries and time sorcery.

Having inherited her mother’s Life-Binder traits, Ljosira had always found the Voidwalkers’ eldritch presence off-putting. Their auras were flickering, unreadable constructs, and their life-bonds billowed around them as intangibly as tendrils of smoke, forever eluding closer inspection. Not that she could see any of it now in Kvisari.

But she had caught a glimpse on the day Hela had invaded Asgard with the subtlety of a rampaging juggernaut. This dragon of questionable motives had shadowed the usurper queen, secrets and portents dancing around her like haunting will-o-the-wisps. Ljosira sighed and shook her head, but stopped at once when she felt the queasiness rise. Distracted by her rebelling insides, she answered Kvisari’s question without thinking.

“He means everything to me.” A minute of poignant silence followed, in which Ljosira wished desperately that the creature would just leave her alone with her misery.

“Are you done rubbing salt into my wounds?”, she quipped at last, a bit surprised at the rancorous edge in her tone. It wasn’t in her nature to be waspish or sarcastic, but recent events and the collar’s constrictions made her tiptoe along the line of her temper like a tight-rope walker.

“I’m trying to understand you.”, came the sighed reply. “You gave up any chance on finding a true mate, one of your own kind, for a mortal. All of their time is limited, borrowed. You will never experience the Joining as a dragon, never hatch your own clutch. You are an anomaly. Why, I wonder? Why did you choose to let sentimentality overpower your nature, against all reason?”

Ljosira let out a laugh that brought a genuinely arrested expression to Kvisari’s face. Although the source of her amusement was bitter, she found satisfaction in having rattled the Voidwalker’s composure. But when she answered, she sounded deadly serious.

“Reason had nothing to do with it! Love is so far from reason, Yggdrasil’s branches would fit into the distance between them. And choice? There was never the question of a choice. He is part of me. And woe upon you when he releases me from this prison, because he won’t ask me to keep my fury in check. He will come for me.”

Against all expectations, a faint smile curled Kvisari’s lips, an outlandish paradox to everything Ljosira had seen on that cold, torn visage before. There was no scorn in it, only a puzzled kind of insight, as if she had figured out an un-unravelable mystery.

“No doubt he will. I am just not sure yet if he should be allowed to succeed.” The remark struck Ljosira speechless. Lifting her shoulders in a dismissive shrug, Kvisari turned and walked away.
Almost at the door, the Voidwalker threw her Lightbringer prisoner an inscrutable glance.

“Drink, and eat well. For now, you are more mortal than dragon. You will need the sustenance.”

As the heavy oak panel fell shut, Ljosira sank into the plush upholstery, the tension leaving her muscles by slow degrees. More keenly than before, she mourned the loss of her dragon sight. Because for the life of her, she could not figure out if this inconsistent other dragon was her enemy or a possible ally.

Chapter End Notes

In Norse mythology, Fafnir is a dwarf who, through a terrible curse, slowly turned into a dragon and is later slain by the hero Sigurd. In Dragonheart, his role is a different one but has some subtle parallels.

Fafnir, the Winged Twilight
A Voidwalker dragon who ruled the clan before Andlát, during the Age of Strife.
Time to see where Loki got to! This encounter in the beginning was really fun to write :D
I won't even say more, just have fun reading <3

Loki woke to pain. Omnipotent, unmanning pain in every single joint and muscle, vibrating through his bones. For a dizzy instant, he thought he was back on Midgard, stumped into a man-shaped hole in the ground after receiving the beating of his life from the Hulk. But no, that couldn’t be right. Please don’t let it be right.

Groaning with agony, he struggled into a sitting position, barely aware that pieces of rubble tumbled to the ground beside him. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he perceived a room lit by nothing more than a single red orb on a wall that looked as if it had been built by a blind man. Several metals overlapping, fitted together crudely, and with the strange crimson light it gave the impression of being locked in a giant garbage container.

The room was wide enough to be cavernous, but it felt empty and stale. Loki looked up to see a hole in the brittle ceiling that matched his size, and found a litter of crumbling roof-tiles on the floor. Well, he had landed… somewhere. He froze when his eyes fell on a hulking shape in the dimness and realized it was a bed of some sort, although this gaudy monstrosity hardly deserved the name. Decorated with cheap, flaking gold and curtains of rioting colours, the thing was offensive to the eye.

And occupied. Instantly alert, Loki drew Dragonbane from his belt. The shape behind the curtains was a mere shadow in the treacherous crimson twilight, but he could make out an odd, oblong object and wisps of smoke curling from its end. A sickeningly sweet fragrance filled the air, and Loki had to keep himself from gagging when it invaded his nose, insulting his sensitive sense of smell.

“Falling from the sky doesn’t make it free, darling. You still have to pay. And patch the roof.” The voice that spoke from the bed was undeniably female, hazy and sensual. It carried a whiff of utterly inoculation against things ordinary people would consider outrageous, such as tall, statuesque Asgardians dropping straight through their roofs. He didn’t recognize the language, but a master
sorcerer could perceive the meaning of foreign words quite easily through a simple spell.

Oh, he had an idea now where he had landed. Anganir’s amusement fluttered through the spear in his hand, eliciting a grunt of irritation from Loki. What would Ljosira think when she discovered that he had fallen through the roof of a brothel, almost directly into a courtesan’s bed?

And then, with the force of a sledgehammer, the memory of the encounter with Hela struck him. Mjölnir, broken into sad pieces like a children’s toy. Being thrown from the Bifröst. Thor’s furious shouts as the bridge splintered and grew distant. Ljosira’s anguish, a riptide breaking into his mind. Blackness.

Right on the heels of that devastating realization came a gaping, horribly empty feeling as he groped after his wife’s consciousness on mere instinct, because he knew where his warmongering sister was headed to on the Bifröst and... And he felt nothing. No. No, no, no. There had to be some kind of mistake. She was always there, always, unfailingly, the single absolute certainty –

Loki couldn’t hold back the desperate cry that built in his throat. The life-bond was intact, but instead of Ljosira’s incandescent mind at the other end, an impenetrable wall blocked his every thought from entering, a sinister, obscure barrier he could not breach. It felt all wrong, twisted, repulsive, making his heart switch places with his stomach.

He uttered a filthy curse which would have made a hardened sailor blush. A cough and a high-pitched laugh came from the bed. The sound grated on Loki’s overstrung nerves. Swiftly he pulled a gold coin from his pocket and threw it at the woman, who caught it with a deft lunge.

“For the roof.”, he said curtly, already searching for the exit from this den of iniquity.

“This is Asgardian gold! Wait, love! I’ve never had an Asgardian before. Is it true what they say about your –”

“Yes, it is. Furthermore, I’m not interested. Married.”, Loki cut her short just the moment he found a ramshackle door which was little more than another patchwork metal plate plastered to the wall. The woman scoffed.

“I can do things your pretty prim wife would never dream of doing!”, she boasted shamelessly, now rising from the bed to approach him. He didn’t so much as glance at her, but saw from the corner of his eye that she was in the nude, her skin more vividly violet than an iris flower. A little humourless smirk fleeted across his lips.

“I doubt it. Damn it all... Where am I? Which realm is this? Vanaheim? It cannot be Midgard.”, Loki demanded in an impatient tone that would have cowed any normal person, but the courtesan seemed inured against angry males, probably dealing with dozens of them on any given day.

“You always sing instead of talking, love? You’re on Sakaar now. No realm here. Just a place for lost and unloved things.”

“Wonderful.” He had never heard the name Sakaar before, in any context. Which was bad, since he had studied the cartography of the Nine Realms extensivly. As Loki opened the door, a narrow strip of blueish light fell into the room, illuminating his face. The violet woman gasped.

“My, but you’re a fine specimen. What’s the rush, handsome? I’ll give you the first round for free.”, she drawled seductively. Loki bestowed her with his most devastating smile, a perfect blend of sardonic wit and roguish charm. She looked positively dumbstruck as he lifted his hand in a mocking farewell gesture. The neon streetlamp’s beams bounced off the polished surface of his
wedding ring.

“Little fool, sooner will poplars grow pears. But you keep trying.” Apparently the courtesan didn’t grasp his clever idiom for ‘not a chance in hell’, and so Loki stepped out onto the street without a backward look.

The most chaotic city he would ever come to see sprung into life around him. People of all kinds passed along on the busy street even though it was night-time. Humanoid shapes mingled with bizarre alien ones that could not have come from any of the Nine Realms, scaled reptilian heads circulating among furry feline ones beneath a never-ending riot of colours. It was even more discordant than New York, which Loki had experienced as a singularly intense metropolis bursting with raucous energy.

Neon signs blanketed every possible space on the haphazardly erected building walls. Towers of rusted, half-heartedly re-painted steel sprouted between much smaller houses that were little more than dilapidated barracks. The entire place had a fierce, violent quality to it. At the same time, everything looked as if some child had cobbled together its most megalomaniac fantasy. Having expected fresh air outside the cloying sweetness of the courtesan’s house, Loki found himself sorely disappointed.

Graceless Sakaar smelled like a trash dump left to its own devices for too long. Burnt food mixed with marginally less burnt food, dirty laundry, dust and the stink of unwashed people curled up his flaring nostrils, and Loki had to swallow against the queasy lurch of his insides. This cesspool of ‘lost and unloved things’ could not possibly be within Yggdrasil’s boundaries.

Panic threatened to overcome him, the pressure intensifying in his chest until he thought his ribcage would crack open. Unwilling to let any passer-by glimpse him in a state that invited robbery or even worse, Loki staggered along the narrow street until he found an opening between two slanted houses. He darted into the dark space, sagging against the grimy wall as his heart accelerated to an uncontrollable gallop. It was as if his logic had been divorced from his mind, leaving it to flop and flail like a fish out of water. He could not form a single rational thought.

Ljosira… Ljosira, my love, my light, where are you? Are you alright, are you hurt? Where am I? How far are we apart?

He threw himself into the flow of their connection so desperately that for a moment he feared he’d unhinged his soul from his body. No matter how violently he battered the wall that stood in his way, he could not get through. His questions pelted against the barrier and bounced off as feeble moths against a window. And nothing answered him. Clenching his teeth, Loki leaned into it again and again, until sweat trickled down his temples from the mental effort, his muscles locking tightly enough to snap. The silence was maddening.

“Drek, stop this. You are wasting away your strength, and mine.”, Anganir whispered anxiously.

Loki had not realized that he’d been siphoning power from Dragonbane to fuel his mad quest.

“Feel the edges of the blockade instead. Let me see. Cunningly now, don’t put force into it. Yes, like that. Wait –” There was a blast of dread from Anganir that rang in Loki’s ears with a horrible knowledge, reverberating through his skull like funeral bells.

“What?! What is it? Tell me right now or I swear I will stuff you down the nearest furnace I can find!”, Loki snarled, the leash on his self-control fraying.

“No need for that.”, the spear’s essence replied. “The feel of that barrier… I think it might be Fafnir’s Collar.”
Images poured into Loki’s mind, but contrary to Ljosira, who always kept her thoughts as gentle as possible, Anganir spared him no quarter. The onslaught was enough to make his knees fold, but he steeled himself to endure it. A collar appeared before his inner eye, an unassuming metal contraption at first sight, an appalling magical artefact at closer inspection. Designed to trap a dragon within their mortal body, cutting off all their magical powers and sealing them inside those claustrophobic confines. Struggling against it would cause pain of repugnant proportions, but living with it… Living with it was slow torture.

The thought that Ljosira had been subjected to wear this abomination around her slender neck caused Loki’s vision turn red with a rage he had never felt before. The utter impotence that he could do nothing right now to help her nearly pushed him out of his skin. He wanted to rip someone to shreds. To burn down this entire city and then the next, and then every single one that stood between him and his imprisoned wife. He would tear apart any living soul who had dared to harm a hair on her head. They would pay their tribute in blood for each pang of pain she was forced to endure, no matter how minor. Tenfold.

“You need to focus. We are far from home, and we are vulnerable. You are not a beast to lash out blindly. You are a blade, sharpened to strike at the heart. Stay angry, but think clearly.”, Anganir commanded harshly.

“Anger is too small a word for what I feel.”, Loki bit out, his face pulled into a grim mask. He was beside himself with fury, barely in control. A man possessed. But Anganir was right, damn him. Forcing himself to take a few deep breaths, he centred his thoughts to the knowledge that, for now, Ljosira was still alive. Hela could have no interest in calling down the dragon king’s wrath, she would keep his daughter as a hostage and guarantee that he did not attack. And Thor… Gods only knew where Thor had gotten to. But Loki would not accept the possibility of his brother’s death until he was presented with a lifeless body.

When he trusted himself enough to recollect a thin semblance of calm, Loki’s eyes scanned the city of Sakaar with the ferocity of a predator homing in on its prey. Between the askance towers, one giant spire stood out, three enormous faces of hammered metal staring straight ahead at the top. Although his usurper days were long gone, he recognized the work of a kindred spirit, a despot who flaunted his power to his grovelling subjects.

He stepped out into the busy nocturnal bustle, and as he made a beeline for the tower, the throng of people didn’t even protest but hurried to leap aside from a dangerous-looking man who had cold, calculating steel in his eyes. And murder in his heart.

The winding maze of alleys and streets was by no means easy to navigate, and several times he had to re-plot his course magically so he would not get lost between the cornucopia of cheap housings and ramshackle peddler stalls. Keeping unwanted attention away was much easier than finding the way to his destination in this messy city. A few diversion spells here and there, and nobody so much as took notice of him. Loki passed several outlandish creatures the likeness of which he had never seen, even in the many books he had read detailing alien races.

“You have been around the greater universe in your time, Anganir.”, Loki murmured as he forged his path through the nightly crowd. He held the spear securely hidden beneath his cloak, but at the ready to deliver a swift death if needed. “Have you been to this place? Do you know anything about it?”

“I have not had the pleasure to visit this particular gutter of anarchy. Back then I sought knowledge, not the dregs of mortal society.”, the dragon soul answered irreverently. “But I have heard a few things. This place is far beyond Yggdrasil’s grasp. As far as I know, its ruler is En
Dwi Gast, an Elder. If you studied early history at all, you might remember that those fossils from a different time are all of them mad as hatters.”

“Elder like the Collector we sent the Aether to? I can’t quite believe that my father would send an Infinity Stone to be guarded by a lunatic.”, Loki mused distractedly.

“Imagine living through the great changes at the beginning of our universe, but not having the mind of a dragon to comprehend what you see. You would be a bit mad too, believe me. They each have their obsessions, and the Collector for one can be counted upon protecting his collection. Incidentally, En Dwi Gast is the Collector’s brother.”

“You are a veritable fountain of information today, Anganir. I don’t think I ever heard you talk this much in one conversation.”, Loki needled him, smirking. The spear’s presence was silent for a moment. Then he spoke again, his voice oddly sympathetic.

“I know what it’s like, to endure the loneliness you feel right now, being cut-off from what you love. Keeping you company occupies your mind. It does not give you permission to mock me, though.”

Loki almost stopped short, narrowly evading a scaled alien who seemed in a great hurry. The exile’s words had shocked him. Anganir was usually not prone to sentimental declarations.

“Thank you.” He said awkwardly, casting a glance above to see if he was still en route to the impressive – if crude – tower structure. “So, En Dwi Gast. What is his obsession, then?”

“Games. Pitting opponents against each other in combat, or other nonsense show downs. This planet is located at the end of countless galactic wormholes, which is how you ended up here, I suspect. Lucky for you, you did not hit the Nether. It’s possible that both Ljosira and Heimdall diverted your course in the last second.”, Anganir explained further.

You saved me again, my light, Loki thought bitterly. I will find my way back to you, whatever it takes. Although he knew she could not hear him, the promise he made to her infused him with determination, lengthening his stride. He would somehow have to win this En Dwi Gast’s favour to escape Sakaar. Surely the ruler of such a place had means to leave it every now and then. Then Loki remembered something else Anganir had said, about the thing keeping Ljosira’s magic contained.

“Fafnir’s Collar. Tell me about it.”, he urged quietly, while pushing aside any odd passer-by who got in his way.

“What is there to tell? It is an evil creation. Like the original Dragonbane, its schematic came from the Black Library. Some delusional mortal found the plans, and in their hubris, went on creating the damned thing. I shudder just thinking about it. No mortal can comprehend what the collar does to a dragon. How could they? If they had understood, they would never have made it in the first place.”

“So the creator was this Fafnir person?”, Loki wondered.

“No.”, the spear answered curtly. It seemed the mere mention of the collar repulsed him. He didn’t sound inclined to divulge more.

“Why is it his collar, then?”, Loki pressed on. “If you know more, you must tell me. I have to free Ljosira from it.”

“You ask many questions today, Drekhjarten.”, Anganir sighed fatalistically. “Later. You need your wits about you now. We have arrived.”
And surely enough, Loki stepped from the bustling street onto the wide plaza surrounding the imposing tower with the giant metal-hewn faces he’d glimpsed from afar. Using his skill at conversation and deception, he asked around the locals to gather as much information about Sakaar as possible. His efforts yielded a few insights which confirmed what Anganir had told him.

En Dwi Gast, the eccentric and coercive ruler of Sakaar, was universally referred to as the Grandmaster, and he presided over the Trial of Champions, a massive arena event that sent the best fighters of the galaxy into the fray against each other. Apparently, these contenders were only partially eager. Most of them were recruited quite against their will.

Loki also learned that the Grandmaster had acquired a special champion some time ago, one who had so far never been defeated. As he listened to the description of this fearsome fighter, his gaze instinctively kept returning to one of the faces displayed on the Grandmaster’s tower, and a shocking realization crept up on him. How had he not seen it before? Maybe the helmet had concealed too much.

The rendition would have been perfect if they had painted him in green. It was impossible, and yet somehow there he was, grimly looking down at the people from his pitilessly carved features. The Hulk. On Sakaar. As champion of the arena. The Grandmaster’s greatest asset.

“Shit.”, was all Loki could say to that. He turned away from the orange-skinned woman he’d been interrogating, ignoring her ecstatic delight about having acquired tickets to see the Hulk fight in the next big event.

The memories of his last encounter with the green brute after the Battle of New York came back to him in full force. He had been thoroughly traumatized by that vicious beating, and would have given a limb if it would have helped him avoid being within reach of the Hulk ever again. But if the way back to Asgard was through the Grandmaster and respectively through another meeting with the “big guy”, there he would go. Besides, his plan didn’t involve fighting. Between Odin’s sons, Thor was the fighter, and Loki the talker. Time to put those skills to use.

Squaring his shoulders, he strengthened the Aura of Enticement spell he’d used to sway the citizens into trusting him with what they knew. This was a complex spell, yet it only worked on weak minds, and would likely not bamboozle the Grandmaster. But it might at least allow him to get an audience with the man.

This close up, the monumental tower seemed even more overwhelming, rising so far and wide one had to crane one’s neck to even encompass half the structure. Loki pondered that En Dwi Gast must be a self-important jackass supreme, if he needed to exhibit his authority in such an architectural hyperbole. As everything here, the seat of the ruler was as makeshift and unrefined as things came, but quite effective nevertheless.

Loki walked across the plaza and up the steps leading into the tower, cleverly avoiding the crudely dressed guardsmen patrolling around. He managed to enter unnoticed, but as he surveyed the interior surroundings, he caught sight of two women conversing next to what looked like an elevator at the far side of the entrance hall. One was large, heavily armoured, with a physique that could have rivalled any butcher. Or a barbarian warrior.

The other was much smaller and sleeker, yet she carried herself with the air of a hardened veteran. If it hadn’t been for the large jug of some revolting liquid in her hand, and the slight sway in her posture, he would have marvelled at her obvious prowess. Loki knew those signs by heart – having seen them so often in Thor when his brother had imbibed more than he could handle. Which was usually enough to send any normal Asgardian to the healers for a cleanse. He pushed aside the troubling, rueful thoughts about his brother and approached the pair cautiously.
The smaller woman had dark skin and even darker hair, braided around her head in a haphazard style. On closer inspection, her facial features struck him as remarkably noble, a strange contrast to her mercenary attire. Finely shaped, high cheekbones, strong but graceful jaw and chin. Her eyes were almost obsidian in colour, glinting with a fire that was only slightly glazed over by intoxication.

Loki’s instincts tingled with recognition – not that he knew her, this particular woman. But he knew his people, their unique characteristics and typical appearance, and there could be no mistake that she was one of them. Asgardian. What were the odds? The drunk mercenary seemed to sense his intense regard and turned suddenly, spearing him with a glare.

“What are you looking at, stretch?” she barked in a harsh voice, but it did not hide the odd little lilt in her accent. It was almost imperceptible, which he took as a cue that she had been away from home for a long, long time. But Loki noticed the give-away even so. When he answered, it was in flawless, royally poised High Asgardian.

“Apparently at someone who is far from home.” Her face flooded with shock for an instant, before she quickly tucked the emotion away and resumed glaring at him. The large, bulldozer-like woman faced Loki too, but somehow she managed to be less intimidating than the needles the other was staring at him.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?”, Muscle demanded to know. With the elegance of life-long aristocracy, Loki bowed and bestowed her with a winning smile.

“Loki of Asgard, Madam, at your service. I have come to offer the Grandmaster my skills to use as he pleases.”, he lied easily through his teeth. Muscle looked momentarily flustered by his courtesy. Despite this one’s iron crust, she was not immune to his charm. It felt good to know that he had not lost his edge. “And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

While the large woman seemed flattered despite herself, the Asgardian’s stance turned downright hostile beside her, two rows of pearly white teeth flashing a snarl at Loki.

“Don’t listen to this snake, Topaz. We should throw him in the dungeons for trespassing.”, the mercenary hissed. Oddly enough, the more antagonistic she became, the more her companion appeared to warm to Loki.

“At least he has some good manners, which cannot be said about you, Booze Hag.”, Topaz sneered, giving Loki the distinct impression that the two women did not like each other very much. Booze Hag let out an irritated sound, unceremoniously smashing the jug to the ground as she whirled around and walked away.

But before she did, she made her farewells to them by way of a very rude hand-gesture. Loki caught sight of a tattoo on the inside of her forearm and nearly gasped in shock. It was a runic symbol he remembered from dozens of memorial markers across Asgard city. The sign of the Valkyrie.

“So, sweet-talker. What kind of skills are we talking about?”, Topaz addressed him almost amiably, but Loki was still reeling from the implications of this previous revelation. He had thought Sakaar to be a rallying point of the galaxy’s filth and outcasts. Nothing mysterious about it. But it was proving to hold more dark secrets than he had expected.

What was a Valkyrie doing here, of all places? Legends said they had all perished in a terrible battle thousands of years ago. Even through his deteriorated mood, he felt intrigued to lift the curtain on this particular hidden tale. Whatever her reasons were of living in such an unpleasant
part of the universe, in theory her kind were sworn to protect the throne of Asgard.

If only Ljosira were with him still. If only he had not lost Thor on the way here. If only his father were alive to grant guidance. It had been years since he had walked through life all on his own. He wasn’t prepared for the wretched loneliness. A difficult thing to accept, that one had become so dependent on other people one felt their absence like a bleeding wound. For a moment he couldn’t even answer Topaz’s query, paralyzed by the pain in his chest.

“No, no. Stop this nonsense. There is no use in drowning yourself in self-pity. How typically mortal. Do you think you are alone, just because happenstance has separated you from them? Have you learned nothing all this time? You disappoint me, Drekhjarten. One who wears such a name should keep his eyes on his goal and know no doubt. Your mate suffers. Your home suffers. Get your act together!”, Anganir broke into his thoughts from the weapon that now lay hidden flat against his chest.

Even if the dragon exile might never learn to deliver his speeches with any measure of kindness, he was right nonetheless. Feeling sorry for himself would not get him back to Asgard, and Ljosira, who needed him more than ever. Loki straightened, bringing his attention fully back to Topaz, his smile in place once more. Time to set things in motion.

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