Frostbite

by Maiden_of_Asgard

Summary

Iceland is nice - sure, you probably should’ve picked a time of year when the weather was a little warmer, but it isn’t too bad, and at least you’re away from your desk job, right? It’s a pretty big adventure.

You’ve always said that you wanted more adventure in your life.

{originally a little Tumblr oneshot}

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

This isn’t right.

It feels like there are ice shards in your lungs; you’re pretty sure you’re about to die.

You’d texted your friend basically the same thing earlier that day, jokingly - why on Earth had you ever decided to vacation in Reykjavik in November? - but now, you realize that you hadn’t even known the true meaning of ‘cold.’

Iceland was cold. Iceland in November was even colder. Unfortunately, this place doesn’t seem to be Iceland. In fact, you’re relatively certain that this isn’t even Earth.

With your arms wrapped tightly around your chest in a vain attempt to maintain body heat, you try to stagger forward through the snowdrifts, vision obscured by the ice pelting down from a grey and stormy sky. It feels as if your limbs are lead, heavy and stiff and pained from the effort.

It’s a good thing that you were wearing your heaviest coat, at least. Best to appreciate life’s small mercies.

Though really, you have a pretty big bone to pick with life at the moment, because you had been minding your own business, heading to the local bakery for coffee and something sweet for breakfast, when some freakish glowing circle opened up in the middle of the crosswalk and dropped you off… wherever this was.

Maybe you’d been hit by a car or something, and this is your preview of the afterlife. If that is the case, your afterlife isn’t looking to be very promising; maybe you should’ve been a little more altruistic.

Hell hath frozen over.

Because this definitely isn’t Iceland. Bluish-grey rocks spike up from the thick blanket of snow that stretches as far as you can see (which, admittedly, isn’t very far). There’s some kind of massive outcropping not far from you, and you head towards it. It isn’t like you have any idea of where else to go.

Teeth rattling together, you hunch your shoulders, trying to tuck your head down as much as possible to shield your chin and neck with your scarf. If only you had a thicker scarf, or maybe even five more layers of coats, but the bakery wasn’t that far from your hotel, and you hadn’t expected to be out in the weather for very long.

Clearly, that had been a terrible mistake.

There appears to be some sort of cave in the side of one of the rocks, and you beeline towards it as quickly as you are able, because your eyelashes are starting to freeze and slightly stick together every time you blink, and you’re pretty sure they aren’t supposed to do that. You always liked reading adventure stories, and you know what hypothermia can do to a human body. It won’t be pretty. And frostbite… well, you like your fingers and toes right where they are, thank you very much.

Briefly, your mind flits to The Empire Strikes Back, one of your all-time favorites - you’d always been so grossed out by that little Tauntaun survival hack on Hoth. Now, you totally get it.

You make it to the cave, barely, and scramble inside. It isn’t very wide, but there’s plenty of room to
stand, and it luckily seems to extend fairly far back into the rock. That’s a good thing - it’ll get you further away from the wind.

*And maybe closer to some kind of creepy cave-dwelling monster, your mind whispers.*

You tell your mind to shut up. It isn’t like you have any other options.

The cave bottlenecks after a point, and there’s a long, dark tunnel leading to somewhere that you’d rather not think about too much, because if you do, you’re probably going to have a panic attack. Crap, maybe you’re *already* having a panic attack. At this point, you’re really too numb to tell.

There’s a little crevice tucked along the back wall of the cave, and you curl up inside it in a tight ball, utterly clueless as to what else you can do. Help has to come, right? You definitely can’t go back out there - hell, even in here, even hidden away from the brutal elements, you aren’t sure how long you’re going to be able to make it.

You should’ve just stayed in bed and skipped your morning coffee.

*Caffeine addiction, kids. It kills.*

You blink slowly, wishing that you had night vision, because the cave is dark and you’d have to pull your hands from where they’re tucked under your arms and remove your gloves if you wanted to try to use your phone. It might not even work anymore, anyway; did technology have a freezing point?

*So, you think, oddly giddy despite being in such a dire situation, I guess when I said I’d rather die than go back to work, I really must’ve meant it.*

Curling up even more tightly, you try to reduce your surface area… that’s a survival trick, right? Your heartbeat is beginning to slow down a bit, and you aren’t entirely certain if that’s a good thing, or a bad thing. Probably a bad thing. In fact, it’s probably best to assume at this point that *everything* is a bad thing.

Before long (or maybe it’s been a while, because you can’t really tell anymore), your eyes start to drift closed. *Bad. Open them.* But resting feels nice, and so you don’t try to resist, the tiny warning bells in the back of your head drowned out by a warm, fuzzy glow.

Your head falls against your chest. A little rest can’t hurt, can it?

A sharp crackling sound snaps you back to reality, and you force your eyes open, though you’re far too exhausted to actually move. You blink, and then you blink again.

And then, you scream, because there’s a tall blue man with glowing red eyes standing just inside the entrance of the cave, illuminated by a light that is *apparently* just hovering over his open palm. There’s a dark stain across his chest - it’s blood, you realize - and you scream again, despite the sting of the icy dry air in your throat.

In his defense, he looks just as horrified as you feel, but then the expression turns to fury, and as he staggers over to where you cower in your crevice, a knife appears in his other hand.

*Out of nowhere.*

*Magic.*

*Hallucinations?* you wonder, trying to remember if that’s a symptom of hypothermia. You hope it is, because otherwise it looks like some blue guy with a knife is about to stab you, and you *really* think
you’d prefer just freezing to death.

“Where did you come from?” he snarls, crouching down and bringing the light to illuminate your face, which is mostly hidden by your hood and your scarf. He doesn’t seem particularly happy about it, and you try not to move as the hand holding the knife comes close to your face, too terrified to scream again.

The blade comes within an inch of your eye as he yanks your scarf below your chin, and then he rocks back on his heels, muttering something in a language you’ve never heard before. It’s rough, and choppy, and it sounds like he’s probably cussing you out. How rude, the delirious part of your brain thinks.

You continue to peer at the knifeblade, expecting it to come into play at any moment.

“All of the realms and all of the creatures in the universe,” he spits, “and I had to be saddled with another Midgardian wench. The Norns must be mad, to test me so.”

Midgardian wench? It would be really helpful if your voice would cooperate, because you really want to know what that means. Are fantasy-novel-style hallucinations really going to comprise your last moments on… whatever this place is?

“Get up.” The knife disappears as he stands, and when you don’t move in the slightest, he glares down at you and seizes you by the collar of your jacket, attempting to haul you to your feet.

He’s strong, and you crash against him as you fly up from the ground, because your legs and feet are painfully cold and numb and hopefully they aren’t going to just shatter like broken glass, because that’s what it feels like.

“Come along, mortal. Quickly.” His voice is impatient now, dangerously so, and his eyes flash. “Else, I will kill you where you stand.”

“Can’t,” you croak, eyes wide.

“What?” The word drops frigidly from his lips, as if he is someone who does not like to be questioned.

In your mind, you tell him that you’re just an ordinary, boring data analyst who took an unfortunate vacation, and that some terrible accident has befallen you. You tell him that you’re lost and afraid and freezing, and that you’re pretty sure you’re dying. You tell him that you’d move if you could, and beg him to please not kill you.

In reality, all you manage is a strangled whine. “Cold.”

“Pathetic,” he sneers, and you kind of want to tell him that he doesn’t look so hot himself, what with the grayish pallor to his blue skin and the crusty frozen blood everywhere.

He stoops and hoists you over his shoulder, and your teeth clack and clatter together as the shivering and the fear twist and mingle. “Be thankful that I can make use of you.”

Your nose is pressed against the back of his jacket, and he smells like leather and blood and snow. Ordinarily, you might complain, but at the moment, you aren’t feeling particularly choosy.

If only he was warmer.

The light flickers out, not that you had a particularly good view of anything besides the slippery,
rocky floor, anyway, and the man starts off towards the tunnel at the back of the cave, jostling your stiff joints. “Who?” you ask, voice muffled against his back. You do sound awfully pathetic, so you try again. “Who are you?”

“Loki,” he bites out, and you can feel him stumble a bit. How much blood has this guy lost? you wonder. And how much does he have left to lose? “Loki of Asgard.”

Your heart stutters, and your next words are shrill. “Loki… New York Loki?”

“Yes.”

Oh no.

But this guy doesn’t look like the Loki that had been plastered all over the news in the wake of the Battle of New York; for one thing, that Loki wasn’t blue. The clothes look similar enough, though - all that leather and metal, just like Thor, the otherworldly Avenger. Maybe that was just how they liked it on Asgard.

The blackness of the cave grows deeper the further he goes, and you can only assume that he must be able to see in the dark. You, on the other hand, cannot see in the dark, and the added disorientation as you bump along upside down only adds to your terror.

And then a rushing sound begins to fill your ears, and you realize that you are on the verge of fainting. You whimper, and a stinging smack on the back of your thigh jolts some degree of awareness back into your system. “Stay awake,” he says. “If you become too burdensome, I will leave you behind.”

Loki, you decide, has a terrible bedside manner. You just hope that wherever you’re headed now is better than wherever you were before he showed up out of the blue.

Blue, hah. Like his face. Your head swims.

He staggers again, and you’re distantly aware of something wet and sticky trickling along your cheek and towards your hairline. Wet and sticky and coppery… blood, you realize, and you nearly gag. Carrying you must’ve reopened something.

Suddenly, Loki comes to a halt, and he drags you off of his shoulder and lets you fall to the ground in a graceless heap. “We are stopping here,” he announces - a bit too late, in your opinion, now that you’ve already collided unexpectedly with the hard rock of the cave floor. “I cannot go any further until I have healed.”

The light appears over his palm again, and he leans down and takes hold of your collar again, dragging you over to the tunnel wall. There’s a small, shallow recess in the stone, and he somehow manages to fold his long frame into it, pulling you in after him.

What is happening? your panicked mind screams, because now you are in his lap, and his arms are wrapped around you. A tingling warmth seems across your skin, and though it isn’t nearly enough, it helps. Is it real, or are you imagining it?

“You are experiencing the side-effects of close proximity to healing seiðr,” he informs you, almost as if he can read your mind. “I am not going to waste anything else on you, but it should be enough to sustain you. For now.”

Great, you think sarcastically, you’re a real prince charming. But then, because you don’t want to die, you manage to actually whisper, “Thank you.”
Loki scoffs. In this close proximity, you notice that there are faint patterns tracing across his skin, which is now taking on an almost-pinkish hue. Fascinating. “I will be rid of you soon enough. Your aura will help to mask my own as I make my way back to my throne.” Something bitter glitters in his eyes as he says it, and you shudder.

“Aura?”

He glances down at you as if he’d almost forgotten you were there. “My presence is very… distinct, and I am currently in no state to mask it. A mortal displaced by the Convergence raises fewer alarms than a dead god. And there are those who will be looking.”

“Oh.” You aren’t entirely sure what half of that means, but you think it’s probably best not to question it.

His hand slides to your neck, pushing aside your scarf, and his lips part as he inhales sharply through his nose. “You are very lucky, mortal, that I found you when I did. The snærúlfar would’ve found your scent in no time at all.” He inhales again, and his eyes flutter closed, his fingers still stroking your throat. “This form heightens my sense of smell,” he comments idly, and you wonder if maybe he is delirious, too. “Interesting.”

Yeah, you think, a near-hysterical laugh bubbling in your chest as you curl up against him and try to ignore the fact that there’s a blue space-god guy bleeding all over you on some deadly alien planet. That’s definitely the word to describe today.

Interesting.

Sleep closes in on you before you have a chance to fight it, and you succumb, falling limp in his arms.
“Wake up, girl.”

Something cold and hard slams against your face, and you are jolted into panicked wakefulness.

It’s the floor of the cave - Loki has dropped you like a sack of bricks.

You glare up at him with a baleful expression, not that it seems to phase him in the slightest. “Ouch.”

“Get up,” he sneers, “or I assure you I’ll do much worse.”

Ass, you think, but you scramble to your feet; arguing with a tall blue magical-alien-man is probably a terrible idea, even if you’re pretty sure you’re going to die soon anyway. Even though you manage to get to your feet, you stagger as soon as you do, your legs numb and tingling. The unpleasant fuzziness from the night before still clouds your senses.

This is bad. This whole situation is very, very bad.

You attempt a step, but you stagger, and now that you’re a little too far gone to second-guess yourself, you grab onto the front of his shirt. It’s crusty with dried, frozen blood, which would normally make you gag, but you’re already covered in it now, the product of a night spent pressed against his chest.

“Please,” you whine, your dignity abandoned somewhere around the same time you realized you’re probably dying. “Everything hurts.”

“Really, mortal?” His expression is sardonic, and he carefully pries your fingers from the fabric of his shirt, holding you at an arm’s length. “Do tell me how painful this is for you.”

Yeah, maybe you shouldn't have complained to the guy that appears to have been impaled straight through the chest. But, he does seem to be a lot more perky now, which is both incredibly impressive and terrifying, because you don’t particularly care to be at the mercy of some maniac who can survive getting stabbed clean through.

“Perhaps I should’ve put you out of your misery. It would be the merciful thing to do, I suppose.” It’s mostly dark in the cave, though Loki’s crimson eyes manage to somehow catch a bit of light, just enough to to make the whole thing a bit more heart-stoppingly menacing.

“No, please.” You’re on the verge of tears.

“Oh, don’t worry, child. I’m not merciful.” Before you have a chance to process the implications of that, you’re upended, face once again smashed against the leather of the back of his coat. “We must move quickly,” he says, and then he starts to move forward, his steps much steadier than before. By the bouncing glow illuminating the cave floor, you assume that he must be using his magic to light his way again, and you are sorely tempted to ask if he might spare some magic to make you warm.

Instead, you ask, “Move to where?”

Please say Earth, please say Earth.
“Utgard.”

Your heart plummets. ‘Utgard’ doesn’t sound very promising.

“Utgard?”

“The capital of Jotunheim. What’s left of it, that is.”

“Why?”

“You’re horribly nosy, aren’t you?” He slaps the back of your thigh again, hard enough that it stings even though your layers, and you wonder if it’s meant as an admonishment or as an attempt to keep you conscious.

“Yes.”

The nearly-inaudible sound he makes at that might be a laugh, but you can’t be certain. “I told you already, girl. I am going to claim my throne.”

“Oh.” The buzzing in your head is just as persistent as before, and you realize that, on top of the freezing cold and the blood rushing to your head from the awkward position, you haven’t eaten in a while.

*Does this guy have to eat?* you wonder. Surely he does; he’s big and strong - something has to be fueling all that muscle, right? He’ll have to stop eventually.

Wait… he isn’t going to eat you, is he? It sounds kind of crazy, but you aren’t exactly exploring familiar territory, here. You reassure yourself that he probably isn’t going to eat you, not after he went to the trouble of snuggling you all night to stay warm.

Probably.

*Hopefully.*

He *does* seem like kind of a dick, though. And he says he’s the same guy who tried to destroy New York City with a brutal alien army, so you probably shouldn’t get very comfortable. If you even could manage to get comfortable in the first place; the way he’s handling you isn’t very gentle.

Loki carries you along in silence for a few moments, his rapid strides taking you further and further into the dark, winding tunnels of this place that’s apparently called *Jotunheim.*

“And after that?” Your voice is muffled against his back, and you feel your eyelids growing heavy again as warmth slips across your skin. *Hmm,* that feels nice.

“And after that is none of your business, is it?” There’s a terse, mocking sort of pleasantness to his tone, and you close your eyes. *Ass,* you think again. Not that you care - you just want to sleep. Sleep is nice. It’s warm and fuzzy and you don’t have to feel cold anymore or listen to *him.*

“Girl.”

His voice is distant, now. Actually, you might be dreaming. That’s probably what all this is - just a bad dream. You don’t bother trying to respond.

“Mortal.”

Your equilibrium spins. *This is such a weird dream,* you think. Your imagination is being
particularly creative. And your hotel bed must suck a lot worse than you remembered, because it’s hard and flat and uncomfortable. You try to roll over, but your body doesn’t move.

There’s a faint sound that kind of reminds you of a zipper, and then you feel hands sliding against your skin, pressing into your chest; they’re cold, and you grimace. “Go ‘way,” you slur. You’ll be damned if you’re going to let nightmare-Loki freeze you.

It’s a shame you can’t move.

“Shut up, you stupid wench.”

The icy feeling spreads, digging into your heart, a contradictory sort of burning spreading through your veins in its wake. It’s incredibly painful, and you’re pretty sure dreams aren’t supposed to be painful. You force your eyes open just the slightest bit, the world around you narrowed to a tiny, dimly-illuminated slit.


Oh no. You begin to feel a little more alert. Maybe it isn’t a dream?

You blink slowly as the burning continues to creep through your limbs, trying to lift your head; you’re flat on your back, you realize. And the zipper-like sound you thought you’d dreamt up apparently really was a zipper, because your jacket is open and Loki’s hands are under your sweater, one placed directly over your heart. He’s worryingly close to cupping your breast, as a matter of fact.

“Hey,” you mumble, indignant. He ignores you. You’re dangerously close to bursting into tears; why won’t he just let you sleep? You close your eyes again.

“Open your mouth.”

When you don’t make any move to obey, you feel his fingers squeezing into your cheeks, and then something burning and acidic hits your tongue. Spluttering, you glare at him; whatever he just forced down your throat tastes like nail polish remover smells, and you wonder if he’s decided to kill you after all.

His hand clamps over your mouth and nose. “Swallow it.”

Your eyes sting and you can’t breathe, so as horrific as it is, you have no choice. The burning in your veins eases a little, but the aching remains. Loki removes his hand, wiping it on the front of your sweater as if he’s disgusted to have touched you. The feeling’s mutual, you think, bizarrely offended.

“A total waste of resources,” he mutters. “You’d best hope Heimdall didn’t notice me opening up one of my pockets.”

You have no idea what the hell that means.

“Did you just poison me?” Your voice, you’re surprised to notice, is a bit stronger, though it’s still pretty raspy.

“Unfortunately for me, no.”

You’re still struggling to move, and he yanks down your sweater and re-zips your jacket as he crouches over you. Glancing to the side, you finally find the source of the dim light - there’s a luminous ball floating a few feet off of the ground. Huh, you think. Your mind is having a difficult time processing all of this magical stuff.
Loki tugs off his weird leather and metal coat-vest-thing and hauls you into a seated position by your collar. “Stay,” he says, and you try not to fall back against the rocky cave floor as he wraps the thing around your torso. “Useless,” he mutters.

Apparently not, you want to snap, because clearly he needs you for something, otherwise you’d be a popsicle right now.

This time, when he lifts you, he cradles you to his chest instead of slinging you over his shoulder. It’s a massive improvement, although you don’t know really how you feel about having this guy carrying you bridal-style into the dark on a weird alien planet. At least you can see where you’re going now, and the glowing ball of light illuminates the tunnel as he presses onward, his pace becoming more and more rapid.

He is clearly in a hurry. You are, too; whatever he did warmed you up, sure, but this place is clearly not designed to accommodate human physiology, and you want to get home.

You squint up at his face. There was a pattern there when he first showed up, you’re almost certain, but now, his skin is smooth. Smooth, but still blue. “So,” you say. “Does Thor look like this sometimes, too?”

Based on the fire in his eyes as his gaze snaps down to your face, that might’ve been a bad thing to ask. “What?”

“Blue. Does Thor turn blue?”

“No.”

Even though the layers of your jacket and the leather wrapped around you, you feel his grip tighten. You lapse into silence; the more alert you become, the more you remember that you really, really need to be careful with him. He’s extremely dangerous, and the broadcasts from the Battle of New York flash across your memory. Extremely dangerous, and he has no regard for human life - just who you want to have staving off your seemingly-inevitable demise.

Unfortunately, the fact that you’re a little more clear-headed now just makes the awkwardness and the boredom of being carried along in silence that much more awkward, and you lean your face against his chest. It’s not very comfortable, what with all the leather and metal and blood, but you’re past caring.

“If you start to fall asleep again,” Loki says suddenly, “I am going to hurt you.”

“What?” you squeak. That hardly sounds fair, especially considering that you have literally nothing else to do.

“If you fall asleep, you will very likely not wake up, and that would mean I wasted my efforts for nothing. So, remain alert.”

Groaning, you turn your head to burrow further against his chest. Loki tenses. “Talk, then. Tell me the plan.”

It’s bold of you to ask, and you don’t expect a response, but after a moment of uncomfortable silence, he speaks. “Jotunheim is mine by birthright. When we reach Utgard, I intend to seize the throne.”

Yeah, good luck with that, buddy, you think, because your new travel partner doesn’t look like he’s in the condition to do much conquering. He’s probably going to get both of you killed. “Why do you
want this place?”

“I don’t. I want Asgard.”

Asgard is a somewhat-familiar concept… that’s where Thor is supposedly from, right? And Loki too, you’d thought, since the word on the street was that they’re related. “Why Asgard?”

“Because it is mine,” he snarls. “Mine by legal succession, and it was taken from me.” He looks like he’s contemplating murder as he stares ahead down the tunnel.

Okay, maybe we should talk about something else. “Aren’t you cold?”

“No. I was born in this realm.”

Oh.

“We will stop and rest again once more,” Loki says, “before we arrive in Utgard. I am still mending my wounds.”

You hum in acknowledgement. “You wouldn’t happen to have food, would you?”

He sighs in irritation. “No. You’ll have to wait until we reach the palace.”

Considering he’s supposedly the inspiration for the mythological God of Lies, he definitely isn’t proving to be a very good conversational partner. For a while, you simply look up and study his face. Once you get past the strangeness of the different color scheme, you can see the resemblance to the man from the broadcasts of New York. There’s a sort of smooth sharpness to his features - he definitely has that classical handsome villain thing down.

And his hair is nice. It looks a little crazy right now, but it’s still nice. Probably soft. And his mouth is kind of nice, too, when he isn’t sneering.

Probably gonna die anyway, might as well enjoy the scenery.

Loki gives you a strange look. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” you mumble, cheeks crimson. Could he tell what you’d been thinking? No, of course not. He just noticed you staring for too long.

But his face is perplexed, now, brow creased in confusion; it’s almost endearing, after all of the snarls and glares. “Your scent changed,” he says carefully, almost accusatory.

What. The. Hell.

“Sorry.” If you could die of embarrassment, it would probably be happening right now, because the objectively-handsome weirdo who’s probably going to get you killed can apparently smell when you’re feeling amorous. “I don’t know why.”

“Hmm. An effect of the potion, perhaps.” But he says it stiffly, like he knows.

He knows.

Chapter End Notes
Can I have too many Loki fics going on at the same time??
The answer is apparently NO.

Shameless self-plug to invite you to check out my other fics on Ao3 and to keep up with me on Tumblr, beautiful people!

Also let's all take a moment of silence to appreciate this face:
This weird frozen planet is cold, and Loki’s attitude is even colder. Luckily, he’s at least keeping you alive... for now.

And if what he says is true, you’re about to be part of a coup to take over a planet you hadn’t even known existed.

What a *fantastic* vacation this is turning out to be.

“So, maybe you could elaborate a little on this plan of yours,” you venture to say. It’s been a long trek in awkward, near-total silence, and you’re about to either go crazy or fall asleep in his arms. “For taking over the planet, I mean.”

Loki’s face remains stoic, but there’s a bit of a bite in his tone when he replies. “I know that you aren’t being sarcastic with me, are you, girl?”

“No.” Maybe a little. “Genuinely curious. And trying to stay awake, like you told me to."

“Hmm.”

“Please? It’s not like I’m gonna run off to sound the alarm.”

He laughs, a short, startled bark of a laugh that bounces along the icy cave walls. “No, I suppose you won’t. Very well. The realm is currently ruled by a queen regent, until the eldest of her two sons comes of age.” A frown crosses his features. “Actually, Helblindi might've come of age while I was lost in the Void.”

*I don’t know what any of this means,* you want to scream. *You’re terrible at explaining things.*

Maybe he’s doing it on purpose. That seems likely.

“And you’re planning to... what? Assassinate them, or something?”

“If they do not recognize my claim to the throne, then yes.”

“Your claim?”

“I am the firstborn son of Laufey, King of Jotunheim. Fárbauti’s children will stand aside, or I will kill them.”

“That seems... harsh.”

Loki snorts. “Do not pretend that royal houses are any different on Midgard; I have witnessed *thousands of years* of murder and bloodshed on your world.”
“That doesn’t mean it’s okay,” you mumble, but really, you aren’t about to argue; he’s keeping you alive, for now, and that’s all you can really bring yourself to care about at the moment.

“The Jötnar are giants,” he continues, seemingly unbothered by your judgment.

“Yeah, well you’re really freakin’ tall yourself.”

“Not tall.” He almost sounds amused. “Giants. You’d best be prepared.”

You want to ask why he isn’t a giant, then, but you decide you’d rather not know - you prefer him this way, where he’s at least slightly human.

Human ish, at least.

Although, it might be nice if he wasn’t quite so attractive. It’s kinda worrying you, actually - the guy is a murderer, on top of the whole not-human thing. You wonder if maybe it’s kind of like some sort of survival mechanism, like Stockholm Syndrome.

Yeah, that’s probably it.

“So. How are these giants going to react to seeing an Earthling showing up uninvited?”

“I suspect that they would play with you, mortal. Until you died, that is.” Loki’s tone is serious, but there’s a hint of mischief sparkling in his eyes. It isn’t very comforting.

“Play with me?”

“No need to worry,” he replies breezily. “If I claim you as my pet, I’m sure you’ll be fine. The Jötnar may be a bit savage, but they do respect property rights.”

“Property?”

Your voice cracks, and so does Loki’s composure; he grins down at you, though it isn’t particularly friendly. “Of course. My very own little mortal pet. A bit of an antiquated notion, to be sure, but it is an intriguing concept.”

If he wasn’t keeping you from freezing, you might try to wriggle away in the face of such outrageous claims. Much to your chagrin, however, you find that you’d much rather be a pet than a popsicle.

“You looked displeased, girl.”

Frowning, you avert your eyes, turning to watch the ever-approaching darkness of the tunnel ahead. “I’m a person. Not property.”

“Oh? I think that your tune will change rather quickly if I decide to leave you to the elements.”

His grip begins to loosen, and you scramble to clutch at his tattered tunic, crying out in alarm. Loki snickers and pulls you back against his chest. “That is what I thought.”

He’s so damned smug. This weirdly-upbeat mood he’s suddenly in is almost worse than the temper he’d been in when he’d first found you; at least then, you kind of knew what to expect.

At the same time, you’re feeling weirdly-upbeat, too. Maybe it’s because, while you still aren’t feeling particularly great, you’re definitely no longer on the verge of freezing to death. Maybe there was something in that potion-thing he gave you to make you calm down.
You glare at him, suspicious. “What’s that even mean?” you mumble.

“What does what mean?”

**Being your ‘pet,’** you want to say, but you think better of it. “Nothing.”

“Hmm.”

“I’m really hungry.” And you are - now that the novelty of simply being *alive* is beginning to wear off, your empty stomach is making itself known.

“I’ve already told you, it will have to wait. I have nothing with me.”

“This is the *worst* political coup I’ve ever been a part of,” you grumble, and Loki gives you a strange look.

“I do believe that the Asgardian mead in that potion might’ve been a bit strong for you, mortal. You’ve become worryingly bold.”

The frown on your face turns into a scowl. *Stupid spoiled brat sorcerer prince.* But his mention of the potion *does* remind you of his ‘pockets,’ and you brighten almost immediately.

“Hey, that pocket with the potion… got any more of those? With food, maybe?”

“Those ‘pockets’ are essentially interdimensional portals,” he replies, “and the amount of power required to open them is difficult to mask.”

“But you already did it once.”

“Yes, and now you will not stop talking. Perhaps I should consider muzzling you…” He actually looks like he’s considering it, and you fall silent.

You aren’t about to let yourself get muzzled by some power-tripping weirdo in a cave on an alien planet. A *sexy* power-tripping weirdo, though.

*Stupid sexy blue man.*

Loki releases a startled huff.

**Oops.** You might’ve said that out loud. *Crap.*

“What was *in* that?” you squeak, cheeks heating. Actually, now that you think about it, everything is starting to feel a little warm.

“Nothing *harmful,*” he replies, and you can practically see the wheels in his mind begin to spin. “Nothing that would cause any significant side-effects to an immortal, at least.”

“What?”

“It is hardly my fault that you are mortal,” Loki snaps.

Your mouth gapes. “As if this is my fault?”

“Hush.”

And so you hush. But then, you notice if feels a little like you’re floating through water, and your
brain decides that it’s *imperative* that Loki knows this.


“Does ‘hush’ have a different meaning on Midgard?”

“Sorry.”

“I much preferred you half-dead; at least then, you were *quiet*.”

*Rude.*

You may be a grown woman, but you aren’t above pouting - as much as you’ve been through the last day or so, you figure you’ve earned it. When you turn your face into his shoulder, you notice for the first time that underneath the sickly metallic smell of his bloodstained clothes, Loki’s scent is actually kind of… nice. *Minty,* almost. *Crisp.*

Do *you* smell nice? Suddenly, you’re self-conscious; he apparently has a wickedly-strong sense of smell… and even if he *is* a terrifying former-supervillian, you kind of hope he doesn’t think you smell like garbage.

That would be *really* embarrassing.

Though you keep your eyes open due to Loki’s earlier warnings that you’ll be in serious trouble if you fall asleep, you allow yourself to drift off into daydreams.

Most of them are food-related.

When you’re back on Earth, you decide, you’re going to eat a metric ton of fried chicken and mashed potatoes. Or maybe just a cheeseburger or three.

*Ooh, or a hot cinnamon roll.*

This isn’t really helping with the hunger pains.

You want to ask if you’ll even be able to eat anything at this palace Loki’s apparently planning to take over, considering his medicine has you intoxicated and sweating like a sinner in church.

Wait, you’re *sweating*? That doesn’t seem right.

“I’m sweating,” you announce.

“So I’ve noticed.” The disdainful curl of his lip makes you cringe, suddenly even more self-conscious than before. “I believe that you are metabolizing the ingredients of the potion differently than intended. It seems you’re experiencing something akin to arousal.”

You’re pretty sure your face turns beet-red at that.

“Sympathetic nervous system arousal,” he continues, giving you another one of those strange, half-amused looks. “You are having something like what you would call an ‘adrenaline rush.’ I am certain that it must feel *quite* unpleasant, combined with the sedative effect of the potion itself.”

“Very unpleasant.”

“It will pass soon enough. At least, I believe that it will.” His smile is thin. “Consider yourself a test subject.”
Oh, great. A lab rat for a mad sorcerer. That’s just how you wanted to spend your vacation.

“We are stopping here.”

You kind of expect him to just dump you onto the cold rock floor again, but instead, Loki gracefully folds himself to the ground with you still clasped securely in his arms. Impressive.

“How long?”

“Until I feel ready to continue.”

Okay, you think. That’s fair. He’s the only thing keeping you alive, so you’d prefer for him to stay in good shape. Especially if his next move is gonna be taking over a planet. “Take your time.”

Loki snorts. “It should be safe enough for you to go to sleep now. In fact, please go to sleep now, I beg of you.”

“Fine.” You suppose that in the grand scheme of things, Loki telling you to shut up isn’t that big of a priority at the moment, but it still grates on your nerves. Squeezing your eyes closed, you snuggle closer, thinking about what a weird story this is going to make for the therapist you’re undoubtedly going to need once this is all over.

You flinch slightly when Loki rests his head against yours, and you hear him inhale deeply though his nose; he’s smelling you, again. Well, at least that kind of answers the question of whether or not you smell like garbage.

Creep, you think, but you’re also just the tiniest bit… happy. That’s weird - you shouldn’t be happy that this dangerous otherworldly nutcase is sniffing your hair in the middle of a dark cave. That’s what your brain says, at least. Your body seems to be of the opinion that it’s kind of hot.

Or maybe that’s just the potion. Either way, you’re feeling warm and tingly, and some part of you is thrilled at the fact that he’s cradling you so carefully in his lap.

This is pretty messed up, you chastise yourself. Stockholm Syndrome. Or maybe traumatic bonding. Definitely one of those.

But that doesn’t keep you from releasing a sigh of contentment when his hand creeps up to pet your hair, and you’re sliding into sleep before you have a chance to second-guess why that might be.

Chapter End Notes

Grouchy Jotunn!Loki FTW <3

What do you think - is he going to go on the attack, or try for the subtle Trickster approach?
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Loki claims that he has a plan, but you aren’t certain that you entirely trust him - he *is* the mythological God of Lies, after all... isn’t he?

And his ‘plan’ mostly seems to consist of marching into enemy territory and announcing that he’s the rightful king.

There’s no way that can work. Can it?

Chapter Notes

Lord help me, I'm *trying* to keep these chapters shorter than my usual since I'm also posting this fic on Tumblr, but I AM SO BAD AT IT.

SO

Here’s your first meeting with the Jotnar, Dear Reader, who we’re going to be spending a *lot* of time with in the coming days.

Pray that Loki knows what he’s doing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When you wake up the next morning (or afternoon, or night, because time has begun to lose all meaning in these endless, dimly-illuminated tunnels), Loki is already on the move, holding you clasped against his chest once more.

That was actually kind of nice of him, you muse, to let me keep sleeping like that. Or maybe he just didn’t want to deal with your conversation.

“Feeling better?” you ask. You figure you might as well suck up to him as much as possible, because you’re really starting to get concerned about the whole ‘no food for days’ thing, and it’s looking like Loki has become your meal-ticket for the foreseeable future.

“Well enough.”

Wonderful, he’s in a crappy mood again. “So, anything I should know? Maybe some background on this alien race we’re about to conquer?”

Loki scoffs. “You aren’t going to do anything, girl. Keep your head down and stay quiet. I’ll do the talking.”

“Message received.”

You’ve notice that the weird, sorcery-induced sweating has stopped; that’s a relief, but you’re still
feeling pretty giddy, and now you’re kind of sticky and uncomfortable, too. You’d kill for a nice pair of fuzzy pajamas right now, fresh out of the dryer, and a huge, cuddly blanket. And you’d really like to wash your hair, too, because you’re pretty sure you look disgusting at this point - you certainly feel gross.

“We’ve almost arrived,” Loki says, and your heart skips.

“What, already?” You’re about to meet actual, living giants - giants that Loki wants to fight. You definitely aren’t mentally prepared to deal with this yet.

“Yes. Keep your hood up; we will be outside again soon, and the wind is biting.”

He isn’t lying - the moment you emerge from the tunnel, the wind feels like it’s trying to tear you to pieces, whipping at your clothes and stinging your eyes. You close them and turn your face to burrow against Loki’s chest, which is starting to become something of a safe haven in this bizarre little adventure of yours.

Snuggled up against the hot, dangerous alien god’s chest is probably not the best place to want to be when you’re feeling scared, but emotionally, that’s just where you’re at right now. Bonding through trauma, you tell yourself. Just wait and work it out in therapy.

Because right now, you aren’t about to give up anything that makes you feel even a little bit better about this whole nightmare.

And it really doesn’t seem like Loki minds the clinginess, either.

“Keep your head down,” he reminds you, and you take that literally, because when you hear the clanking of metal and the sound of rough voices calling out in a language you don’t recognize, you tense and press your nose further into the fabric of his tunic.

You wonder if you’ll ever manage to escape the smell of ice and blood.

“Laufeyson.”

That sounds familiar, and as you focus your attention, you find that the beings around you have switched to something you can understand. That’s… interesting. Fascinating, really. How does that work?

“Take me to your queen,” Loki says, his tone dripping with an impressive amount of casual arrogance. If he’s as worried as you are, he certainly isn’t showing it.

You feel him striding forward again, and there are some disgruntled mutterings around you - you make out the word ‘mortal,’ and your panic spikes up a notch or two as you remember Loki’s warning that the Frost Giants would be more than happy to do terrible things to you.

He drops you to your feet, suddenly and without warning, though he catches you by your forearm to keep you upright. You barely have a moment to catch your bearings before he continues, dragging you through a massive entryway into an enormous room that appears to be made entirely of ice.

Now you see your welcoming party for the first time, and it’s all you can do not to scream; the beings around you seem to range from about seven to ten feet tall, and they’re all blue, all crimson-eyed, and all incredibly muscular.

Soldiers, you realize. You’d thought Loki large, but he seems incredibly small in comparison to these brutes, whose reactions to your appearance seem to range from amusement to outrage.
At the end of the hall sits a large wooden throne, embedded with chips of reflective glass - or maybe that’s ice, too; it would hardly be surprising, at this point. On the throne sits a woman, incredibly fearsome, but with a striking sort of beauty about her features. Her hair is sleek and black, and she appears to be wearing a cloak and boots and not much else.

She smiles, and your skin crawls - her violet lips hide bright white teeth, and her eye teeth appear to be filed into sharp points. *Or are they naturally that way?* You try to glance around without drawing too much attention to yourself, but it seems like only some of the giants have pointy teeth - Loki certainly doesn’t.

In fact, Loki *also* doesn’t have pointed ears, but the queen and some of the other giants do… and some of them barely have earlobes at all.

*Okay, you tell yourself. Keep that curiosity under control. Keep your head down. You can ask him about it later.*

“Loki Laufeyson,” one of the soldiers next to you announces, and there are a few gasps and murmurs from the giants mingling in the hall, particularly those lounging about on the steps leading to the queen’s dais.

“Ah, and so the lost princeling returns to us once more.” Fárbauti’s smile remains on her face, though none of it manages to reach her eyes, and she glances at the small giant at her side; he’s only a boy, it looks like, and you’re guessing that if he were human, he’d be in his early teens. “Come to see all the destruction you’re wrought on your homeworld first-hand, have you?”

“Actually,” Loki replies, stepping past the soldiers as if he hasn’t a care in the world, “I’ve come to claim my rightful place, Queen Mother. I am the firstborn of the bloodline of Laufey, and I will have my throne.”

Her laugh rings out through the hall, and you curse Loki to hell and back in your mind. Is this *seriously* the best he can do? “That is true, Laufeyson, but you’ve no friends here. Do you have anything besides Laufey’s blood to recommend you?”

“*Actually,*” Loki replies, stepping past the soldiers as if he hasn’t a care in the world, “I’ve come to claim my rightful place, Queen Mother. I am the firstborn of the bloodline of Laufey, and I *will* have my throne.”

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“Of course. There is my power, which you can *feel*, Fárbauti, and that is why your heart pounds with fear, because you know that I could kill your son where he stands.”

The murmur in the crowd cranks up a notch. *Damn it, Loki.* All he’s doing is pissing everyone off.

*So why aren’t they attacking?*

“And there is my sorcery,” Loki continues, smiling pleasantly, “and my knowledge of the workings of the Nine Realms. There is the fact that I was *raised* to be a king, and that I have many powerful allies across the worlds of Yggdrasil. There is *also* the fact that I can restore to you the Casket of Ancient Winters and bring Jotunheim to its former glory. I can bring this realm back from this dark age, Fárbauti. What say you to that?”

She doesn’t look particularly *happy* about any of it, but there is calculation in her crimson eyes, as if she’s carefully weighing her options.

“Unless, of course, you wish for one of your sons to challenge and kill me - that *is* the only way that the rightful-born king can be ousted from the throne of Jotunheim, is it not?”

Fárbauti now seems sullen. “We will have to consult with the Völva, of course. As with all great matters of state.”
“You’ll forgive me for saying so, Fárbauti, but I must wonder at the practicality of your seeress; surely if she were that useful, Laufey would still be alive.”

“Actually,” the queen replies, red eyes glittering with some sort of malevolent mirth, “the Völva did warn Laufey that he would die at the hand of his son - he, of course, assumed that meant Helblindi, or dear little Býleistr.” She ruffles the hair of the boy at her side, who remains impressively stone-faced. “Everyone thought you dead. Loki Laufeyson, the prodigal firstborn.”

Loki appears unfazed. “Yet he let them live?”

“Yes. Laufey always did think that he could outplay the Norns.”

“Consult the Völva then,” Loki says smoothly, though there is an undercurrent of irritation in his tone, “if that is what custom dictates.”

“Do not sound so sullen - you should be delighted, princling. Perhaps she can tell you more about your wretched mother, as she was also a Storm Giant.”

At that, Loki’s grip suddenly tightens, his fingers digging into your skin so fiercely that you want to cry out in pain, but you bite your lip instead. “What of my mother?” he says, his words as cold and hard as the rock and ice of the palace itself.

The queen’s laugh is shrill. “Ah, the boy does not know! Yet another sin of Odin Allfather.”

“Get on with it, Fárbauti. You test my patience.”

“Gunnlöð was a petite little thing,” she says disdainfully. “Most of the coastal tribes tend to be on the smaller side. Harsher climate, I suppose.”

“And?”

There’s no holding back your whimper, now, because you’re starting to feel like Loki might accidentally snap your arm like a twig. His grip doesn’t loosen.

“And Laufey, in the height of foolish youthfulness, wedded and bedded a little witch with absolutely no standing whatsoever. It was an outrage.”

Oh God, you think, Please, lady, stop talking. Loki’s on the verge of exploding - you can practically feel the energy humming off of him - and if he loses it, you don’t stand a chance. You probably don’t stand much of a chance.

“He even refused to take any other consorts or concubines, defying our ancient traditions. And do you know why?” Fárbauti’s fingers curl around the ends of her armrests as she leans forward, eager to deliver the next blow. “For love! Imagine that, princling - it was the seed of that love that destroyed him.”

He actually does a pretty decent job of reining himself back in - you suppose thousands of years of being in a royal court must’ve taught him some manners, even if he never bothers to waste them on you.

“If you’re quite finished reminiscing over the honored dead, Fárbauti, then I would like to be shown to my chambers.”

She snorts and leans back in her throne, evidently disappointed by Loki’s subdued reaction. “Of course, of course. Are you taking that little warm-skin with you?”
Loki almost seems taken aback at the reminder that you’re there, despite his vice-grip on your arm. “Yes. You know how mortals are; I’d best keep her close at hand.”

You’re incredibly relieved at that, because no matter how much he absolutely sucks, at least Loki needs you alive. That’s more than you can say for the rest of these… creatures.

“Skrymir,” the queen calls out to one of the towering brutes at the end of the hall. “See to it that the feast-hall is prepared so that we may welcome Loki Laufeyson home.” Her lip curls around the word rather unpleasantly, and your stomach churns; you really hope Loki knows what he’s doing, because you don’t really want to get murdered at a giants’ feast.

It sounds so… storybook. It turns out that fairytales are much more frightening in real life.

“Skaði, escort our prince to his chambers.”

One of the women seated at the foot of the throne nods and gracefully rises to her feet; she isn’t absurdly tall, though she does stand maybe half a foot over Loki. You feel incredibly tiny and incredibly vulnerable.

The giantess brushes long, black hair over her shoulder as she leads Loki through the polished hallways, and you’re barely able to keep up. In fact, were it not for his bruising grip on your arm, you probably would’ve already fallen to the icy floor. “Laufeyson,” she says, and the playfulness in her voice instantly sets you on-edge. “You mean to take the throne?”

“The throne is mine for the taking.”

“Do you suppose the Queen Mother agrees?” Skaði’s smile is sharp, her white teeth contrasting brightly against her skin.

“I trust the Queen Mother will support whatever is best for Jotunheim,” he replies smoothly, “which is me taking my rightful place as King.”

“King Loki, heir of Laufey.” The girl seems to mull the title over carefully. “Perhaps you will give consideration, future-king, to those of us who are loyal to the bloodline.” She laughs and tosses her hair again, ushering the two of you into a large room.

Well, ushering Loki - she’s barely even glanced at you this entire time.

“The baths are down this hall,” she says. “There is a stairwell that leads down to the steam-pools below the palace. You are welcome to use them at your leisure.” She winks. “And you will have your women to attend to you, of course, once this whole matter of succession is settled.”

“Are you so fickle, Skaði, that you will withhold your attentions unless I wear the crown?”

“I am sworn to the King of Jotunheim, and you, Loki Laufeyson, are not yet king.”

She smirks as she turns to leave, her hips swaying in a way that is obviously supposed to be seductive.

You’re really starting to dislike this chick.

Loki waves a hand and the doorway seals shut behind her. It’s ice, you realize, a magically-formed chunk of solid ice.

Great. That’s a ‘no’ on sneaking out in the middle of the night, then. Not that you had anywhere to
There's an amused sort of smile on his face, and it twists and scratches at your temper. "So," you begin snidely, "you're gonna try to sleep with Smurfette, huh?"

He lets out a short bark of laughter. "Consider it a good sign, mortal. If Skaði thought my claim to the throne invalid, she would not try so brazenly to capture my attention."

You snort.

"Mind your manners. If you act this way in front of the Jötnar, I will have to discipline you. You do not want to be disciplined, do you?"

"No."

"No, Master."

"What?"

"Perhaps you've forgotten my threat to muzzle you if you keep up that horrific shrieking of yours," Loki says, but you can see that he isn't angry. No, he looks incredibly pleased with himself, now that everything seems to be going according to his plan.

If this was according to plan. You're still not entirely certain that he isn't just making it up as he goes along.

You decide that it's best not to argue, for the time being, at least. Not while you're scared and starving and relying on a worryingly-attractive, temperamental alien for survival.

Instead, you survey your surroundings. The room you're in now is... odd. The outer walls seem to be some sort of blueish-grey stone, while the inner walls are a dark, opaque ice. Must make for easier renovating, you think.

You congratulate yourself for maintaining some semblance of humor during this whole ordeal.

There's a massive bed in the corner. Well, something like a bed, at least. It's a platform carved out of the stone itself, covered with layer upon layer of blankets and skins and furs. You've yet to see anything furry on this godforsaken planet, and these humongous pelts aren't exactly good for your nerves.

They probably have some sort of freaky mutant polar bears for pets here, you think. Fantastic.

Your reluctant savior takes notice of your gaze, though he misinterprets the reason for your angst. "You are going to be sleeping there," he says. "With me. You might as well get used to the idea."

Great. Now you have something else to freak out about. Somehow, the idea of crawling into an actual bed with him seems much more serious than the last few nights of snuggling in the caves to survive.

"How about I take the floor?"

He laughs. "Mortal, you're going to have much less bravado when that potion finally wears off and the cold truly begins to settle into your bones."

Your heart drops. "It's gonna wear off?"
“Of course. Nothing lasts forever. And even if I do spare some of my power to charm you, you are still going to be very, very uncomfortable here.”

Fan-friggen-tastic.

“I need you to listen very carefully to me, and heed my words: when we are among the Frost Giants, speak only when spoken to, and act as demure and obedient as possible. It will make your time here far more pleasant.”

“Alright,” you mumble.

Loki stares at you, brows lifted expectantly.

“... I’m not gonna say that.”

“Master or sire are your options, mortal. Choose your poison.”

“Alright, sire,” you snap. At least that one sounds a little less degrading.

“Wonderful. You are learning so quickly.” The sarcasm makes you scowl, but you keep your mouth shut. Keep your head down, you tell yourself. Survive. That’s all that matters.

There’s a scraping sound as Loki opens the ice-door again, and he beckons you forward. “Come along,” he says, a worryingly-mischievous smile on his face. “Let us bathe.”

Chapter End Notes

I started dreaming up my own spin on Jotunheim after I wrote A Thief in the Night, which was supposed to be a one-shot, but... I apparently can't leave one-shots alone. (Does this mean that MoA is a crazy person with YET ANOTHER story she's dying to write? Yes. The answer is always yes).

I digress.

Anyway, contemplating where that would go made me think of just how crazy it would be to actually explore Jotunheim, since we barely see it in the MCU. And then there's that "Rightful King of Jotunheim" line...

And now, Dear Reader, here we are!

Try to stay warm ;
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A bath. Surrounded by giants that look less than pleased to see the two of you show up out of the blue, and Loki wants to take a bath.

Under the giant ice-palace on the frozen ice-planet that he claims is his to rule.

Oh, and he says you’re coming with him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You keep your mouth shut as Loki marches you down the hall. He’s gripping the same part of your upper arm that he nearly crushed during Fárbautí’s earlier taunting, but you don’t dare to mention it, because there are other giants in the hall, and they’re all watching you.

You’re pretty sure he wouldn’t care, anyway.

The boots you were wearing when you’d set out on your fateful trip to the coffee shop in Reykjavik were thankfully thick-soled, but they clearly weren’t designed to handle slick, iced-over stone floors, and you eye the approaching stairwell with increasing apprehension.

This place sucks. It’s pretty, but it sucks. You’re going to end up falling and accidentally breaking your neck, assuming one of these giant blue people doesn’t decide to do it for you.

Loki releases your arm and takes hold of the back of your collar, practically dragging you down the steps; it looks rough, but he does keep you from taking a tumble, so you figure he’s just putting on a show.

God, this sucks.

And you can tell that the warm buzz of the potion is starting to wear off, and whatever bravery you’d felt is quickly fading alongside it.

The room he pulls you into has a thick, heavy-looking wooden door, which Loki easily shoves closed. Could you even open that? It’s like everything on this planet is designed to make your life miserable.

To remind you that you’re trapped.

Loki begins to take off the armor-things on his arms, and you take a moment to take stock of your surroundings. Maybe if you figure out the layout of this place, you can make some sort of… plan? Probably not. But it’s worth a shot.

This room, at least, isn’t covered in ice - no, it’s stone, shiny and polished, with intricate patterns of parallel, swirling lines carved into the floor and walls. The majority of the floor is taken up by a large, dark pool, and steam is rising gently from the water’s surface. Light streams from several sconces situated about the room, though they don’t appear to house actual fire, but rather some sort
of glowing-white orbs. They’re surprisingly bright.

Maybe too bright, because Loki is stripping off his tunic now, and you have way too clear a view.

“What are you doing?” You scrunch your face down further under the scarf and the collar of your jacket, hoping to hide your blush.

“Strange. I thought modern mortals were familiar with the concept of bathing.”

He bares his teeth in a pained grimace as he rips the stained fabric from his skin, dropping it in an unkempt heap on the ground. Damn, his whole upper body is a mess. You can’t even tell what kind of shape he’s actually in, because there’s so much dried blood and weird grey ash matted against his skin, accompanied by a generous smattering of dark purple bruises across his ribs.

“What happened to you?”

“I was nearly killed,” he replies, unfastening one of the buckles on the leather belts wrapped around his waist. “While saving all of creation, as a matter of fact. You’re welcome.”

You stare at your toes; after everything you’ve seen the last few days, you aren’t even going to question that. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Come here.”

He’s pointing to the ground by his feet, and you frown. “What?”

“Come here and unfasten my boots, mortal.”

“What? No.”

“Fine,” he says, a smile on his face. “Then go wander the halls of Utgard on your own, and see how long you last. I assure you, I’ll manage quite well without you.”

Scowling, you drop to your knees at his feet and start yanking at the ridiculous leather straps on his ridiculously complicated boots. What an ass.

He’d really do it, too - he’d seriously let you die just to teach you a lesson.

“Also, bending over is incredibly painful at the moment,” he adds, patting you on the head. “And as you know, I do not yet have anyone else to attend to me.”

You glance up, softening just the slightest bit. He’s been so swaggeringly confident, you’d kind of forgotten the fact that getting stabbed through the chest probably hurt like hell. “Oh.”

The boots are finally vanquished, and you sit back on your heels, trying to ignore the fact that you’re still on your knees in front of the supervillain who destroyed a good chunk of New York City.

“Hey,” you say, trying to sound more confident than you’re feeling, because there’s no good way to ask this, but you really need to know. “What exactly is the… relationship between you and the queen? Your mother was… someone else?”

His hand clenches at his side; maybe it’s good that you aren’t standing, because it’s much easier to avoid his eyes this way. “I was raised on Asgard, under the pretense that I was the son of Odin Allfather and Frigga Allmother.” There’s a strange detachment in his voice, and it makes your skin crawl. “Brother to Thor. Odinson.”

“You didn’t know?” you whisper.
“No. No, I did not know. Frost Giants are abhorred on Asgard, you see. I knew very little of them, until after I discovered the truth of Odin’s folly. I began to study all that I could; my moth- Queen Frigga helped me. She thought that it would soothe me, I suppose. It did not.”

*Odin. Frigga. Thor. Loki.* Hell, you’re even pretty sure that you remember seeing mentions of *Jotunheim* in your mythology books, although it was *nothing* like this. Nothing could’ve prepared you for this. Your head is swimming.

Fárbauti said that the old king, Laufey, refused to take any other wives or concubines because of Loki’s mother… but he clearly *had*, because otherwise she wouldn’t be sitting there on the throne looking all conniving and smug.

Which had to mean that Loki’s mother was dead. And he hadn’t even known her name. Your heart twists. *God, that's brutal.* How can he seem so *calm*? Despite nearly breaking your arm, that is.

Loki’s hand is on your head again. “I am getting in the water,” he says. “And so are you. Undress.”

Then his hands are on his belt, and you scramble to your feet, backing away. “I’m *not* getting naked with you,” you squeak. “No way.”

“Yes, you are. It will warm you, and besides that, you currently smell like my blood and Svartalfheim ash. I’d *strongly* prefer not to have the reminder.”

“But—“

“No arguments. If you don’t undress, then I will drag you into the water clothed, and you’ll have nothing dry to put on when you re-emerge.”

Your eyes are wide. “That would kill me.”

“Yes, well, that’s *your choice,* isn’t it?”

Squeezing your eyes closed, you fume as you wait to hear the rustle of fabric and the gentle rippling of the water.

“Do hurry, mortal. We haven’t got all day.”

When you open your eyes, you nearly scream again, because the man watching you from the pool *isn’t* the one who’s been carrying you around for days. *No,* this is *definitely* Loki, the guy from the news footage of the Battle of New York, pale and submerged up to his shoulders in the dark water.

“What the *hell.*”

Loki snickers. “I *am* a shapeshifter, girl. This form is much more comfortable; my birth-form is actually rather unstable.”

“I thought you were avoiding using magic.”

“Powerful magic,” he corrects. “Interdimensional magic. *This* hardly qualifies.”

“Oh.”

*It's the same guy,* you tell yourself. *No need to freak out even more. It's just Loki. Loki is Loki.*

And *Loki* is a freaking *shapeshifter.*
“Come in, little mortal,” he purrs, and now he’s clearly trying to freak you out. He reaches for you.
“The water is warm.”

*Crap.* Your cheeks flush even more.

“Could you turn around? Or… or close your eyes?”

“This is absurd - I am not tempted by you, girl.”

But he turns around anyway, and you let out a sharp, relieved breath. *Okay, hurry and get in the water, before he changes his mind.*

Your fingers are shaking - maybe from the nerves, maybe from the cold - and you struggle to unzip your coat and pry off your boots. The room *is* relatively warm… relatively. You tear off your sweater and undershirt next, and then your jeans and thick socks.

Now, it’s just your underwear left to go, and you stare at the back of Loki’s head suspiciously, expecting him to turn around the moment you’re naked.

But while it isn’t *freezing* in this steamy bath-room, it *is* chillier than you’d like, and so you take a deep breath and quickly slip out of your underwear and bra. *Survival,* you tell yourself.

*Just pretend that this is a locker room. A locker room in Hell.*

There don’t appear to be actual *steps* anywhere, because *of course* that would be too convenient, so you sit on the edge of the pool and awkwardly slide into the water, crossing your arms over your chest as Loki slowly turns, alerted to your presence by your less-than-graceful entry.

The water honestly feels *so damn good* that for a few seconds, you forget to be totally mortified about the fact that you and Loki are naked in a gigantic hot tub under some freaky alien palace.

But *only* for a few seconds. *Sure,* the water seems pretty dark, but how much can he really see?

Loki’s hand emerges from the water, pointing to a shelf that juts out just below one of the sconces. “Go fetch that. You’re going to wash me.”

“I’m not-“

“Just do it,” Loki snaps. “You are testing my patience.”

You shut your mouth and flounder over to the shelf, which is kind of awkward, because the bottom of the pool floor slopes and becomes deeper the farther in you go; by the time you reach the shelf, you’re on your tiptoes.

“This looks like a *sponge,*” you say, baffled. You pick it up and squeeze it - it *feels* like a sponge, too.

“That’s probably because it *is* a sponge.” *God,* you hate it when he sounds so snide like that. “The oceans of Jotunheim are more bountiful than many of the continents.”

“Huh.” You squeeze it again; it’s so *surreal,* somehow, finding something as ordinary as a sea sponge in the middle of this weird, menacing world.

Turning, you work your way back towards him; otherwise, he’ll probably just come after you, and that’s a much more terrifying concept. It’s kind of funny, in a way, that him looking like a normal (albeit incredibly handsome) man is almost more unsettling than him being *blue,* because blue Loki is
at least familiar.

This is Loki the god; Loki, brother of Thor, Loki the supervillain… Loki, who’s looking at you now like he’s about to lose his temper. You pick up the pace. At least he’s got the decency to stay in deeper water.

“Uh… here.” You brandish the sea sponge in his general direction, and he looks at you as if you’ve lost your mind. He raises his arms, just barely skimming them along the surface of the water.

“I am in a great deal of discomfort, mortal, and I am trying to be generous enough to give you a purpose that merits all the trouble you’re certain to cause me. So please, don’t be difficult.”

Is this my life now? you think. Am I gonna spend the rest of my days giving Thor’s villainous not-brother sponge baths on a frost planet full of blue giants?

The theory that you’re having some sort of bizarre hallucinations as you freeze to death in the cave is seeming more and more likely to be true.

“Consider also,” Loki continues, “that were I in the mood to have my way with you right now, the short amount of distance you are trying so valiantly to maintain would do absolutely nothing to stop me.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

He shrugs. “Take it how you will.”


And honestly, once you do start scrubbing the grime and leftover blood from his skin, you also start to relax just the tiniest bit, because Loki remains incredibly still; you do your best to pretend he’s a statue. It would help if he’d stop watching you.

You wash his chest and his back under the merciful cover of the water, trying to actually touch him as little as possible, but when you finally reach the small of his back, you hesitate.

He can’t possibly expect you to go any lower… can he?

But you never find out what exactly Loki might have intended, because just as he turns slightly to say something to you, there’s a booming knock on the heavy door.

A familiar, unpleasantly-cloying voice follows it. “Prince Loki?”

Damn her, it’s the one from before - Skaði. Loki’s eyes meet yours as he glances over his shoulder, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“No,” you squeak, dropping into the water up to your chin. “Don’t you dare -”

“Enter,” he shouts, and you cry out in outrage as the door begins to swing open.

Chapter End Notes
"Loki, you ass" - Reader, probably

Thank you for the comments, lovely readers! <3 They make my day!
Chapter Summary

Loki’s the worst - it’s official. And apparently, he meant that whole ‘pet’ thing pretty literally.

So now you’re headed to a Frost Giant feast, and you’re pretty sure that everyone in the room probably wants Loki dead. Since Loki’s the only thing standing between you and a gruesome demise... that’s pretty concerning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You’re going to kill him.

You’re absolutely, positively going to kill him.

That’s the only thought left in your mind, because the rest are drowned out by internal screams of embarrassment and fury at the fact that not only are you and Loki naked in an underground hot spring together, but now you’ve got company.

The smarmy blue wannabe gold-digger is staring down her nose at you as if you’re pond scum.

You bite your tongue to keep from cursing him out loud, because that might actually make things worse... if that’s even possible, at this point.

You don’t care if he’s magical and villainous and supposedly-immortal… you’re going to kill him.

“What is it, Skaði?” he asks, practically purring, and you glare at his shoulder, having sought shelter behind his back.

“The Queen Mother wishes to inform you that the feast-hall is prepared, and that she would be delighted if you might join her and Prince Býleistr at the high table.”

“Inform the Queen Mother that I will be there shortly. I am also in need of clothing, as mine was ruined in my last battle. And I want you to find something for my pet to wear, as well."

“I see.” You can hear the smirk in her tone, and you hate her just a little bit more for it. “I also see that you bring your little mortal pet into the bath with you… how positively old-fashioned of you, my prince.”

He shrugs, and you try to ignore the fact that the whole muscular, covered-in-water thing is really starting to get to you, because he sucks as a person and you definitely hate him. “Why would I not? She’s certainly much more useful to me here than she would be freezing out in the hall. A king does need someone to attend to him, after all.”

“True enough. I’ll see if any of the servants can find something… some hand-me-downs from the children, perhaps.”
If you weren’t naked and nearly two feet shorter than her, you’d almost be obliged to charge forward and chew her out for talking about you like you’re some kind of dog, but you jab Loki in the spine, instead, hidden under the cover of the water.

Get rid of her, you think, so furious that he can probably feel the heat of your temper. You absolute ass, just get rid of her.

“Be off with you then, Skaði,” he says, and it sounds like he’s on the verge of laughter. “Have the servants leave whatever they find outside the door. I will join the queen and her son shortly.”

She halfway bows and leaves, the door slamming shut behind her. “Okay, what the hell was that?” Your voice nearly cracks, and Loki turns to look down at you, apparently amused by your distress. “That was not cool. I’m naked, and you’re naked, and we’re taking a bath, which is already not cool, and you just let some weirdo sashay in here.”

Loki raises one long finger to his lips, shushing you, and your voice falters. It’s probably for the best - you were starting to babble, anyway. “Would you prefer for them to imagine that I have no use for you?” he asks, that faux-pleasantness in his voice that you’re quickly learning to dread. “Or for me to actually leave you outside? What do you suppose lovely Skaði would do, if she found you alone? I doubt that it would be very enjoyable.”

“No.”

“Sullen as ever, I see. No matter - if you want to live, you’ll do as I say. Now let’s wash you off, for we cannot keep the Queen Mother waiting, can we?”

And then, before you can respond, his hand is on the top of your head as he forcefully shoves you under the water, his blade-thin smile the last thing you see before you’re completely submerged.

You come up sputtering, red-faced and furious. “Why?” you cry. “You could’ve just told me to wash my hair, and I would’ve done it.”

“I know. This is more amusing.”

Then his fingers tighten in your hair, and you barely manage to hold your breath before he does it again. You’re sorely tempted to kneel him in the groin, but considering how well he held up against getting stabbed, you aren’t sure if it would even phase him. It would probably just piss him off, and you’re really rather not give him any ideas when he’s already practically drowning you.

When he drags you back up, he seems satisfied, and you glare at him as he releases you and pats you on the head. “There. That was not so terrible, was it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’d best prepare yourself, mortal, because it is going to get so much worse. I have absolutely no idea what this feast will entail, but I can only imagine that you’ll be a topic of interest for all of the Frost Giants in attendance.”

You try to smooth down the wet strands of hair clinging to your forehead. “You aren’t going to let them... do anything to me, are you?”

“No. You’re my property, and I am unquestionably possessive. But as I said before, if your actions merit discipline, then I will discipline you. I will not jeopardize my plans to become king simply because your role makes you uncomfortable.”
Your role.

Okay, you think, taking a deep breath. Find your zen. Imagine that this is a role. You’re an actor. This is all just a role. A really messed-up role that can get you killed if you mess up. Yeah. Just a role.

“Is that how you do this?” you ask, suddenly curious. “Is it all just like… a game for you? An act?”

“All the world’s a stage,’ little mortal.” He grins. “One of your Midgardian poets said that, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” you gripe. “Shakespeare isn’t exactly niche or anything.”

He shrugs again, and you’re taken aback by just how young he looks. It’s weird. “I am getting out,” he says. “So if you wish to avert your eyes like a blushing maiden, now is the time to do so.”

You turn your head to the side as he surges from the water, scowling. I am a blushing maiden, you utter bastard. What a dick.

Way back in high school, you remember one of your science teachers telling you that cursing could reduce pain. Maybe venting your frustration in your mind could help keep you sane; you were much too afraid of him to actually say most of it aloud. If he could hear in your mind, he might actually drown you.

You keep your eyes averted as he prowls about naked, the sliding sound of the door against the stone catching your attention. “They’ve brought nothing for you yet, mortal, so you’ll have to redress in your old clothes.”

“Fine by me.” You don’t particularly want to wear some giant’s old clothes, anyway.

“Get out and get dressed. Quickly.”

Loki’s blue again when you finally turn towards him, floundering back to the edge of the pool. He’s wearing pants and boots, with an impressively-heavy looking cloak draped over one shoulder.

“Where’s your shirt?”

He laughs, kneeling down to haul you out of the water as if you weigh nothing. You shriek - you should’ve known better than to trust him to keep his eyes and hands to himself - and as soon as he sets you down, you flee to your pile of clothes. You’re surprised to find that he doesn’t turn to watch you.

“It is apparently a sign of strength, in the Jötnar court, to wear fewer layers of clothing. That is why their soldiers go into battle practically naked and with minimal armor - it is meant to be intimidating. Believe it or not, this temperature is not particularly ideal even for me.”

You try to towel off with your scarf; you definitely don’t want your underwear and bra clinging to your wet skin and freezing you to death once you step back out into the cold. “So, the fact that I’m bundled up like this just makes me look even weaker, right?”

Nearly dressed, you zip up your jacket, lamenting your wet hair. What if it just… freezes and breaks off? Can that happen? You’re pretty sure someone told you that that’s a thing that can happen.

“Essentially,” Loki replies. “They’re very aware of how tender and soft and vulnerable you are, I assure you. I’m afraid you don’t really have any other options. In fact, I should probably renew your charm before we leave. Come here.”
Reluctantly, you shuffle to his side, entirely vexed that he’s actually doing something considerate. It makes you less inclined to despise him, and it’s a lot easier when you can despise him.

Loki puts his hand on your head again, and you shiver as a soothing sort of warmth slides over your skin. The weight of your wet hair also lightens, and you realize that he’s dried it with his magic. Which means…

“Hey,” you say, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “If you could just dry me off, then why’d I have to take all my clothes off?”

“I thought that it would be entertaining.” You swat his hand away as he snickers. “And I was entirely correct.”

He steers you out into the hallway as you seethe, not trusting yourself to say anything that won’t instantly get you into trouble. “You know,” Loki remarks, “I rather like it when you pout, mortal. It keeps you quiet, at the very least.”

Ten minutes later finds you in the grand entryway of a massive room, which is completely packed with long tables made out of some sort of dark, shiny wood. The trees here must be massive, too, even though you can’t imagine where any trees would dare to grow.

There are Frost Giants of varying sizes and states of dress already seated at many of the tables, including the one that stretches down the very middle of the room on a raised dais, which is where you’re apparently headed.

The queen is sitting there waiting, the stone-faced boy at her side, along with several other giants you recognize from the hall when you’d arrived, and many more that you’ve never seen before. Skaði’s there, too, of course, watching Loki with that calculating smirk of hers.

In fact, everyone in the room is now staring at the two of you as you make your way to the head of the table, some more blatantly than others.

Screw this. Freaking Frost Giants and their stupid frozen planet.

You trail just behind him as he makes his way to the seat that’s clearly meant for him… but it’s a single seat. There’s nowhere for you to sit next to him, and your blood seems to surge through your veins as your anxiety spikes.

But Loki seems to notice, as well, and he halts as he nears his seat. Somehow, it doesn’t seem to bother him that all eyes are on him - in fact, he seems to almost relish it. He turns and beckons to one of the giants standing behind the queen’s chair, who inclines his head so that Loki can whisper in his ear.

It’s honestly surreal how comfortable he seems to be giving orders to a being that is at least two feet taller than him.

The servant nods and quickly walks off, and Loki slides into his seat, ignoring you entirely. You stand awkwardly behind him, cold and miserable and experiencing what is probably the worst case of stage-fright in existence.

“So, Queen Fárbauti,” he says, a sly smile on his lips. “Have you consulted your soothsayer?”

“The Völva has been sent for, Laufeyson, and she journeys here to meet with you even now. Apparently such significant events require more pomp and ceremony than a single raven can convey.”
Damn, you think, slightly impressed. Honestly, even though you’re pretty terrified of the queen and don’t really care for her… you’ve gotta admire her ability to snark back at Loki so effortlessly.

“Wonderful.” He then turns his attention to the boy sitting opposite him. “Greetings, Býleistr.”

There’s something odd in his voice, almost challenging, and you remember that he’d threatened to kill the kid that very morning, and he’d done it right to his face.

Ouch. Major family issues, there.

“Greetings, Brother.” His voice is as flat as his expression, and you think you see Loki flinch slightly, though no one else seems to notice it.

The servant scurries back to Loki’s side, placing a large heap of furry pelts on the floor beside his chair, arranging them until they begin to resemble something like a nest.

It’s basically a dog bed, you realize, and you stare at the pile of furs at his feet, completely aghast. As the servant bows and retreats to his place behind Fárbauti’s chair, Loki raises his hand and snaps his fingers, then points to the pile.

He doesn’t even turn to look at you.

Son of a - Your blood pressure skyrockets.
I’m going to kill him, you think once again, but at least the freaking pile of furs looks warm, and at least you’ll be out of view from most of these terrifying giants who probably want to kill you, so you swallow what’s left of your dignity and burrow into the pile.

You curl up and sneak peeks at the tables around you, trying to determine if you’re actually going to get anything to eat, because it’s been days at this point and you’re seriously starting to get worried that you’re going to starve.

Loki and the queen are sniping at each other again in that semi-polite, courtly way of theirs, and you drown them out - it’s only making you more nervous. He was right - even with your clothes and his warming charm, the room is chilly, and you pull one of the loose pelts around your shoulders.

And then Loki’s hand appears in front of your face, holding a chunk of… well, you aren’t sure what it is, exactly. Maybe some kind of alien fish? It smells kind of fishy, and you wrinkle your nose. But it appears to be cooked, at least, and that’s promising. And he probably wouldn’t feed you something that would poison you, right?

You reach to take it from his fingers, and he pulls away, glancing down at you from the corner of his eyes as he continues to talk with the giants around him. Oh, hell no, you think, realizing that he’s intending to hand-feed you like some kind of spoiled little lap dog.

Oh, hell yes, your rumbling stomach responds, and need overrides emotion as the morsel approaches your face again. You take it from his fingers with your teeth, making sure to give his fingers a sharp bite.

If he’s going to treat you like some kind of animal, then by God, you’re going to act like one.

But Loki seems unphased. In fact, he looks like he’s trying not to laugh, and a minute later, another bite of the probably-fish is in front of you. Sighing, you remind yourself that you promised yourself that you’d survive this inadvertent adventure, no matter what it took.

And apparently, that meant literally eating out of Loki’s hand. Fine. Whatever. There were worse
things that could happen, after all. You can handle the indignity, playing your part. The role of a lifetime, your sarcastic inner voice provides.

And when this is all over, you’re definitely going to kill him.

Chapter End Notes

Why is writing Loki as a smug jerk so. much. fun?? I love hearing what you guys think - thank you for the love! <3 <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which Loki continues to be unnecessarily difficult, you attract way too much attention, and you decide that banquets definitely aren’t your thing.

Particularly when Frost Giants and Gods of Mischief are involved.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You’ve managed to put down a fair bit of the salty fishy stuff, deciding that it’s actually not that bad. Sure, you might not choose it at a buffet or anything, but it’s a hell of a lot better than it could be, all things considered.

After a while, Loki passes you a bowl of some kind of brothy soup. This, you decide, is much better; it tastes kind of like beef, it’s also pretty salty, and it’s full of little flakes of something that looks surprisingly similar to seaweed.

The monotonous voice of the young giant prince catches your attention. “- mortal. I’ve never seen one before, not in real life.”

Maybe you should be paying more attention; you’d really like to know how that train of conversation got started.

“Well, of course not, dearest,” Queen Fárbauti replies. “We stopped keeping mortals ages ago, after Odin Allfather decided to overstep himself and cut off our access to other realms. And they’re hardly worth the effort it takes to keep them in working condition.”

Oh my God. All those ancient myths about people getting stolen away by elves and trolls and giants… they must be true. These giants actually used to keep human pets. You guess that explains why no one’s really batting an eye at Loki’s decision to keep you around.

Oh, crap. That also explains Skaði’s comment in the bath chamber about Loki being ‘old-fashioned.’

“I want to look at it,” Býleistr says. “Ask it to stand.”

“She can understand you.” There’s amusement in Loki’s voice, and you wish that you had a fork so that you could maybe stab him in the leg or something. “Stand, mortal.”

Reluctantly, you clamber to your feet on top of your little nest, but then your eyes land on something on the table that nearly makes you scream, and you clap your free hand over your mouth, eyes wide.

It’s the head of a dragon.

Or… or maybe a giant snake, or something?

Whatever it is, the head alone is probably at least three feet long, and the rest of its body is stretched out along the table, skinned and cooked. The head is covered in slick scales and has weird, spiny fins
sticking out from behind its jaw, and its open mouth is filled with rows upon rows of razor-sharp, pointed teeth.

A bulky giant further down the table begins to laugh. “The mortal has never seen sjøormar before, it seems.”

“There are no more sea serpents loose on Midgard,” Loki replies smoothly. “Not since Thor and I bound Jörmungandr.”

“An impressive feat, that.” This giant is on the smaller side, and he’s wearing a vest, so you assume maybe he isn’t a soldier… that’s how it works, right? You really need a study guide or something.

And then there’s the fact that you’ve been eating sea serpent. Alien sea serpent. This thing looks like it’s probably super poisonous.

You stare at your bowl, suddenly apprehensive.

Loki notices. “Drink,” he says. “You will take what is provided.”

Apparently, some of the others have noticed, too, because a pointy-toothed female from down the table is now leering at you with a decidedly vicious expression. “Be grateful that you aren’t on the table yourself, little warm-skin.”

You choke on your mouthful of broth, covering your mouth as you start to cough, attempting to maybe maintain some shred of dignity. Christ, you’re humiliating yourself. Does it even matter?

These… these aliens are probably going to end up murdering you.

Most of the giants at your end of the table laugh at your shock, and even Loki snickers. Some saviour you are, you fume. God of freaking Making-My-Life-Miserable.

Býleistr cocks his head, the corner of his lip curling up in a smile. It’s the first shred of emotion you’ve seen him express. “They are playing with you, mortal,” he says. “We do not eat humans. Or at least, we have not done so in thousands of years.”

His smirk deepens slightly, and his mother scowls. “Really, my son, you should not suggest such things. None of the civilized tribes ever ate the creatures. How distasteful.”

You’re pretty sure she doesn’t think it’s ‘distasteful’ for the same reasons you think it’s ‘distasteful.’

“It is hard to enjoy a meal that can argue with you.” The giant who says this is on the taller side, and his skin is slightly more grey than Loki… a different variety, maybe? He almost sounds like he’s speaking from experience, and you shudder.

Then Loki’s hand is on your shoulder, and he gives you a subtle, gentle squeeze - a threat, or a reassurance? “Sit, girl,” he commands. “If Býleistr wishes to examine you further, he can do it after we’ve eaten.”

Your heart rate skyrockets at the thought of being ‘examined’ by any of these giants, especially without Loki around… but then he squeezes your shoulder again. “You can stop by my chambers this evening, if you wish, Brother.”

He isn’t going to leave you alone with them.

Relieved, you sink back into your nest, your bowl of broth still in hand. You aren’t going to ask what’s inside it. It’s better not to know. If ‘fishy’ means a freaking sea monster, then you can only
begin to imagine what ‘beefy’ might be.

Honestly, this pet-bed on the floor is starting to seem better and better; you’re kind of hidden away, at least. And no matter how super messed-up it might be, Loki’s occasional pats on the head are actually kind of soothing, like a nice little ‘hey, I’m not gonna go off and let giants eat you’ reminder. It’s nice that it’s warm, too.

You think about what Loki told you, that the Frost Giants aren’t totally immune to the cold, either. Watching him from your place on the floor, you decide that he’s a pretty amazing actor - he looks totally at-ease, smiling and taunting and laughing as if it’s just another day for him.

Being royalty must suck, if this is the kind of dinner party he’s used to, you muse.

There are about a million questions swirling around inside your brain, and you’re itching to get back to Loki’s bedroom and see if he’ll answer some of them… if he can. It sounds like he might not exactly be an expert on Jotunheim, himself, which is pretty worrying. It’s not like you can just whip out your phone and start Googling everything.

“Hey, Siri, are Jotunheim sea monsters poisonous to humans?”

And then, you’ve also got to deal with the possibility of Loki’s kid brother coming by to take a closer look at the exotic little pet, and that kind of puts a damper on things. So far, you haven’t been able to get a good read on Býleistr - he doesn’t seem quite as aggressive as some of the others, but that doesn’t mean that he isn’t just as dangerous. You also can’t tell how old he actually is… he’s only around the same height as Skaði, but he looks kind of lanky, which leads you to believe that he isn’t finished growing.

Damn, if he’s over seven feet tall now, how tall is he gonna get?

Hopefully you’ll be long gone before you have a chance to find out. A giant prince’s angsty teenage phase isn’t exactly something you want to stick around to see.

Although, that brings up another question: how old is Loki, relatively? Because he looks pretty young, too; if you’d seen him in his human-looking form just out on the street one day, you’d’ve guessed he was maybe in his twenties.

Must be one of the perks of being immortal.

They’re talking about this Völva lady, who’s apparently on the way with an entire entourage. From what you can gather, she’s some kind of oracle, and it sounds like she’s a really big deal, to the extent that they might legitimately make Loki king if she says that’s what’s supposed to happen.

This is crazy. But then, you know of countless cases in human history where one relative murdered another to take the throne and everyone in the kingdom just went along with it - it isn’t exactly like Loki’s breaking new ground here.

You also wonder if it has less to do with what the Völva actually says and more to do with Loki’s powers, because aside from all of the weird ice-doors and frozen weapons, you haven’t seen any of the other Frost Giants do anything even vaguely magical. Maybe the queen just needs an excuse to save face, to hide the fact that she’s afraid that Loki will really kill her and Býleistr if they get in his way.

You really don’t want to be in the middle of all this drama. If he gets himself assassinated, you’re toast.
“Would you like for me to escort you back to your chambers, my prince?”

“But of course, lovely Skaði.” Scowling, you glare up at him - she isn’t that lovely. And she has a terrible personality. “Come, mortal.”

Silently, you deposit your now-empty bowl on the table and scurry to keep up with their long strides, because there’s no way in hell you’re getting left behind.

As you follow them down the icy halls, trying not to slip, you turn a critical eye to Skaði’s form. She’s wearing a fair bit of clothes, though the cloth seems kind of thin; her dress is essentially just a long, straight tube with open-shoulder sleeves, belted to show off her waist. You notice for the first that there’s a knife tucked in her belt, carved out of what appears to be jade, and you blanch - as if you needed more to worry about.

So what’s her social ranking, exactly? Whatever it is, she’s clearly looking to improve it.

“You must go hunting with me sometime, future-king,” she says as she reaches the door. “If you are around long enough, of course.”

Loki grins. “I am certain that I will be.”

I am so sick of this.

He actually gets rid of her pretty quickly, and you heave a sigh of relief when the door closes behind her. Geez, you never thought you’d be relieved to be trapped in a room with him, but here you are. Loki stretches, reminding you somewhat of a cat, sighing deeply.

Maybe he’d been more tense than he’d let on.

“You might as well get on the bed,” he says. “Keep it warm for me. I have no doubt that Býleistr will come calling, if he can manage to give his mother the slip. It seems you’ve already managed to find an admirer.”

“Great.” You’re too tired and stressed out to argue with the whole bed-warming jab, so you climb onto the heap of fur covers and pull a heavy woolen blanket around your shoulders. Does it still count as wool if it doesn’t come from sheep? You’re pretty sure it does. “So, do you plan on letting me actually eat like a normal human being at some point, or…?”

Loki snickers, which is an immediate bad sign. “No.”

“You’re gonna keep hand-feeding me.”

“Yes.”

You can almost envision a vein throbbing in your temple from your frustration, just like a cartoon character. “Why?”

“I find it entertaining.”

Eyes narrowing, you glare at him suspiciously. “You’re... are you getting off on this? What the hell, Loki!”

He just laughs and unfastens his cloak, letting it drop to the floor in a heap, then goes to rummage in a trunk at the foot of the bed that must’ve been placed there while you were gone. “I am glad to see that dinner has revitalized you so greatly, mortal. What a shame it would be if you were to die.”
Your jaw clenches at the not-so-subtle reminder that he’s your only lifeline, and you keep your tirade internal. *Stupid arrogant kinky bastard.* You’re going to bite him harder next time.

With his cloak and the belts that had held it in place now gone, his wounded chest is on full display, and you frown. “Why did you go like that?” you ask. “You look like you’re half-dead, you know. Won’t that just make it more likely for them to take you out, while you’re in bad shape?”

“I am going for the opposite effect - if I can survive this and have the power and confidence to stroll in and demand the throne mere days later, then how likely is it that any of them can finish me off?”

“Oh.” That makes sense, actually.

There’s a knocking sound from outside, and Loki waves the door open. Býleistr steps in, and it looks like he’s gone to the effort of changing into casual-wear, because he’s wearing a tunic and leggings made out of some kind of leather, his hair unbound and falling around his face.

In fact, it *almost* looks like he’s snuck out after he’s supposedly gone to bed, and you start to wonder if the queen keeps him on a tight leash. At least he doesn’t have any knives… that you can see.

“Býleistr,” Loki greets. “You wished to see my mortal? Stand up, pet.”

*Bastard,* you chant in your head as you force yourself to stand on shaking legs, the blanket still clutched around your shoulders.

*Bastard bastard bastard.*

Why does he have to be so terrible?

The younger giant steps closer to you, a look of fascination in his red eyes. *Wonderful. Mr. Apathy finally shows interest in something, and it's me. Of course.*

“She is so small,” he says. “Are all mortals this height?”

“Most of their women are near to her in height, though she is slightly on the shorter side. I would be considered tall for a mortal man, though not unnaturally so.”

Býleistr glances at Loki, as if he’s somehow forgotten that his elder brother is practically a foot shorter than him. “I see. How long can they live?”

“No more than a century.”

His brow furrows. “That is longer than I thought. This one looks young.”

“She is, but she is fully-grown.”

Part of you is insulted and annoyed that they’re discussing you right in front of your face, but another part of you is grateful that Loki is doing all of the talking.

He leans closer, and you tremble as he reaches out and touches your cheek. “They truly *are* warm,” he says, slightly surprised, “and soft.”

*Oh, God,* you think, your stomach churning, the waves of panic beginning to rush through your veins. This is too much attention - you weren’t prepared for him to actually *touch* you.

Býleistr takes a deep breath, cocking his head to the side - it’s weirdly reminiscent of Loki, considering they’re only half-siblings and they’ve never met before, but it makes you wonder what he’d look like in a more-human form. “She smells frightened.”

*Damn it,* you’d completely forgotten the whole scent thing.
“She is frightened,” Loki replies, finally moving closer to you. “Humans are weak creatures, ill-suited for this climate. One must be careful to keep them alive.” There’s a slightly hard edge to his voice, and Býleistr’s hand drops away.

“Are they alike to us in form? Underneath all of this?”

Okay, wow, you think. Rude.

“They are,” Loki drawls, “though I will not disrobe her. It is cold, and I do not want her to get frostbite.” He grins at you, and you’re overwhelmed by the urge to punch him right in his smug, handsome face.

The younger giant nods thoughtfully. “We have depictions of them, of course, but this is much different, actually seeing one in the flesh.”

“Queen Fárbauti was alive during the days of human thralldom - you should turn your questions to her, if you find the mortals so interesting.”

Apathy smooths back over Býleistr’s features. “Mother does not like discussing the old days. It makes her bitter over what we’ve lost.”

You suppress a snort. Like she’s a ray of sunshine the rest of the time?

“You say you have depictions of the humans - is there an archive in the palace, Býleistr?”

“There is. I can show you in the morning, if you wish.”

“I would be extremely grateful.”

That’s apparently meant to be a dismissal, because with one more long, curious look at you, the prince turns and leaves. You realize that you’re still shaking, and you sit heavily on the bed as Loki kicks off his boots, fading back to human-paleness, the patterns on his skin smoothing over. You’re never going to get used to that.

“Take off your boots. And your jacket, as well. You will not need it in the bed.”

“About that…”

Loki crouches in front of you, staring you down, and you freeze like a deer in the headlights. “Very well,” he says after a moment or two of tense silence. Grabbing you by the ankle, he stands suddenly, and you fall onto your back.

“Hey!”

He tears off one of your boots and drops it onto the floor, then captures your other flailing foot and does the same. “Do I need to treat you like an unruly child?” he asks pleasantly, one of your ankles still caught in his grip, “or will you be a good girl and do it yourself?”

You huff, putting every bit of spite you can muster into your glare, but your fingers find your zipper anyway. “I’ll do it myself.”

Your ankle is released, but before you can feel relieved, he leans over you, his hands on either side of your head. “I knew you would make the smart decision.” His smile is smug, and your face heats. He’s so freaking big, and he’s all up in your space, and his eyes are sparkling like he’s about to do something you probably won’t find nearly as entertaining as he will. “You are such a good little pet,
after all.”

And that’s when you finally snap and slap him across the face.

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh, Reader.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

So, maybe slapping Loki wasn't the *best* idea you've ever had...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki’s head jerks sideways as your palm connects with his cheek; you must’ve caught him off-guard. For a moment, he just looks at you, expression indecipherable.

*Oh, God. Why did I do that? What the hell was I thinking? He’s going to kill me - he doesn't even have to kill me himself. He can just toss me out into the hallway and let one of the others do it for him. Or let me freeze. He’d probably enjoy that. Christ, I’m going to die.*

And then he slowly smiles. Somehow, your stuttering heart finds that even more frightening.

“And you’ve even bitten me, mortal. If you want to act like an untamed little beast, then I will treat you like one.”

He stands, snatching you up by your collar, and your world spins. “Wait,” you squeak. “Where are we going?”

Loki doesn’t break stride as he drags you across the room. “You’ve made it very clear that you have no intention of behaving yourself. You’re going to sleep outside my door. You can serve as my watchdog.”

“What? No!”

He pauses, one hand raised in front of the door. “No?”

“No!” you sputter, outraged. “Please, I’ll freeze! Or one of those giants will get me. Please, Loki.”

And then, much to your eternal shame, you burst into tears.

“Oh, dear. Are you actually crying?” He gives you a bit of a shake, pretending to be perplexed.

Or maybe he actually *is* perplexed; Loki doesn’t exactly seem to have the best understanding of
human emotions.

“Do you want to stay in the bed?” he asks, hand still raised to the door, as if he’s ready to toss you out at a moment’s notice.

You nod, frantically scrubbing the tears from your cheeks. The floor is much colder with only your socks as a shield, and your qualms about sharing the bed with him are quickly fading.

“Are you going to try to murder me in my sleep? Or are you finished with this little episode of defiance?”

“No. I’ll… I’ll be good.”

“Excellent.” Apparently satisfied that he’s terrorized you enough, Loki hauls you over to the bed and pulls back several layers of blankets and furs, then shoves you onto it. “Get in. You’ll be sleeping next to the wall.”

You do as he says, burrowing into the giant nest of a bed in search of warmth. “So that I can’t run away?”

He snorts. “Yes, and also so that anyone who might come calling in the night won’t be able to kill you without first going through me.”

That’s not an answer you were expecting. “Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh.’ Ungrateful little wench - you act as though I am not putting forth an irritating amount of effort just to keep you alive.”

You lie frozen as he climbs in beside you, and the lights in the sconces on the walls go out as he pulls the heavy layers of covers on top of you.

“Come,” he says, dragging you into his arms. “I wish to feel your warmth.”

Okay, adding his voice to the list of things I hate. Why does he have to make everything sound so inappropriate?

“Hey, Loki?” You wiggle around, trying to get comfortable - to be such a standoffish brat half the time, he sure as hell gets clingy when he’s about to go to sleep, and he’s got his face pressed against your hair. Great.

“Yes?”

“I have questions.”

His weary sigh ruffles your hair, and you expect him to tell you to shut up… but he doesn’t. “Go on.”

“Why do some of them so… different-looking?”

“There are many varieties of Jötnar. ‘Frost Giant’ is used to refer to the entire species, for all Jötnar can manipulate ice, but it also refers to a specific tribe: the tribe of Laufey. They are large and fearsome in form, and native to the lands surrounding Utgard, where everything is bitterly cold and harsh year-round. Supposedly, they were the first giants of Jotunheim, and all others came from them.

“I do not know much about the others; there are few records of the Jötnar on other realms,
particularly after they lost the war against the Æsir. Apparently, my mother was a Storm Giant - if Fárbauti can be believed."

"Huh." You’re kind of shocked that he’s being so forthcoming. Maybe it makes him feel a little less lonely, having someone to talk to who’s even more clueless about the situation than he is. “So do you know what Fárbauti is, then?”

“I believe they are called Skógr-Jötnar. Forest Giants.”

“There are forests here?”

“Further south, yes. They are known for their many exalted huntresses, Skaði being the foremost among them. She is known even on Asgard for her skill with the bow.”

Great. So if she doesn’t stab you or strangle you, she can always shoot you.

“Is that why they have the pointy ears? Like elves?” Forest elves, you’ve heard of before… forest giants are a new concept.

Loki chuckles, though it quickly morphs into a yawn. “I would not let one of the Light Elves hear you say that. They detest the Jötnar almost as much as the Asgardians do.”

“Elves are real?”

“Of course. You’ll likely meet one, sooner or later. Now, sleep.”

Elves are real. Woah. It shouldn’t be that surprising, you guess. Not after everything else you’ve seen. “Loki?”

“What?” he mumbles.

“Thanks. For talking to me, I mean. It makes me feel less afraid, I guess. So... I appreciate it.”

He doesn’t say anything, and you realize he’s fallen asleep.

“I’m not sorry that I slapped you, though,” you whisper under your breath. Warm and full and exhausted, it doesn’t take you very long to fall asleep, either.

He’s already awake when you open your eyes in the morning, and he’s staring at you.


“You are an odd creature, did you know that? You sleep as if you haven’t a care in the world.”

Uncertain of how to respond to that, you simply shrug. You’re definitely not going to tell him that he’s pretty comfortable, or that you feel (relatively) safe when he’s around. Nope. He’d only use it against you.

“One of the servants brought clothing for you, as well as food. There are only two actual meals per day, but I thought that we could both use something to tide us over.”
“Someone’s been in here already?” Your cheeks heat at the thought of some strange giant coming in and seeing you cuddled up in Loki’s bed, but he doesn’t seem overly bothered by it.

“Yes, and you did not even stir.” The familiar smirk appears. “You would make a terrible watchdog. I suppose it’s for the best that I kept you in the bed with me.”

You frown, irritated. Trust him to be his usual, insufferable self first thing in the morning. “Can we just eat?”

“Change into your other clothing, first.”

“Yeah, whatever. Fine.” Shoving the covers aside, you hop to your feet, a little startled when Loki stretches out on the bed and throws his forearm over his eyes.

_Huh._ You hadn’t even asked him to look away. Maybe he’s just tired, and it’s a coincidence.

“So where are these clothes?”

“You change as quickly as possible, one piece at a time - there’s no way you’re going to get totally naked and lose all your body heat. The clothes they’ve brought for you are… interesting. There are thick, knee-high socks and a long-sleeved shirt that reminds you of a turtleneck, both made from the same wooly material as your blanket. On top of this you layer a thick pair of leathery leggings, followed by a heavy, floor-length tunic dress-thing that has slits running up to your hips.

There’s a fur-lined cloak, too, and you decided that’s your favorite part of the whole ensemble, because _man_, it is ever cozy. It even kind of matches your hat, which has nifty little ear-flaps. Yes, you think. _This is amazing_. You aren’t even overly concerned about where all these furs come from anymore; you just care that they’re _warm_.

“I’m dressed,” you announce, shoving your own boots back onto your feet. “No boots?”

“Apparently, those will have to be made.”

“Oh.” They’re gonna _make_ things for you? That’s… surprising.

You go peer at the tray that’s on the table by the door, wondering if sea monster’s on the breakfast menu. There’s a big wooden bowl filled with some kind of chunky soup, and… is that some kind of _bread_? They kinda look like little biscuits, but they’re _green_.

“Bring the tray over, mortal,” he says. “Let’s see what we have.”

It’s heavy, and you’re kind of afraid that you’re going to drop it and make a huge mess - you’ve never been particularly graceful. But you make it to the bed without any upsets, and you set it down between you and Loki, retrieving your blanket and tucking it around your lap.

Any _extra layers_ are a good _idea_ right now, you reason. Once you leave the room, you’re going to be missing this nice little furry nest. “Any idea what this stuff is? And if it’ll kill me?”

He takes the spoon from your hand and pokes at the soup experimentally, flashing you a surprisingly genuine smile. “What a terribly tragic death, to be killed by soup.”

If it wasn’t such a genuine fear, you might’ve even laughed. “Hey, I’m actually worried here.”

Loki takes a bite, chewing thoughtfully. “I believe this is some sort of tuber,” he says. “Similar to
your potatoes. It is not unpleasant.”

“And these?” You tap one of the green biscuit-things, frowning.

He passes you the spoon and then carefully selects one of the biscuit-things from the tray, taking a large bite. You sample the soup while he polishes it off - it’s actually extremely similar to potato soup, but there’s that familiar salty-fishiness from last night, which makes you suspicious that there is some sea monster in it.

“I have no idea what is in these,” he finally announces. “But they taste like bread. Slightly bitter, but edible.”

“Bitter bread and fishy potato soup. Breakfast of champions.” But you shove another spoonful in your mouth, anyway, and then follow it up by cramming one of the biscuits into your mouth. You grimace - he was right, they are bitter.

Snickering, Loki takes the spoon from you and continues to eat, and you try to ignore the tiny flicker of something you feel when his fingers brush against yours. He isn’t making you eat from his hand, you realize… in fact, he’s acting almost normal, like there isn’t some weird power dynamic at play.

Should you ask about it? Probably not.

“I am hopeful that Býleistr will come soon and show me to the palace archives,” Loki says. You wish he wouldn’t make eye contact with you like that while he’s licking the spoon clean; it feels almost indecent. “The Queen Mother will want to keep me in her sights as much as possible, so we will likely spend most of the day in the throne room.”

“Do I have to come?”

“Yes.” He grins. “You are my pet, after all.”

Welp, there it is. At least he’d managed a few minutes of not being completely horrible.

“I know you aren’t entirely stupid,” Loki continues, “so keep your eyes and ears open; there is a very good chance that the Frost Giants will let things slip in front of you that they would not dare to mention in my presence, or in close proximity to Queen Fárbauti.”

“Wait. Does that mean that I won’t be in close proximity to you?”

There’s a bit of an odd smile on his face. “I won’t let you out of my sight.”

You’re relieved. Unfortunately, he knows you’re relieved, and he seems delighted by it. Ass.

Býleistr appears at the door just as the two of you finish off the contents of the breakfast tray, and Loki pats your head as he stands, shifting back into his blue-form; his brother watches the transformation with an expression of discomfort. You can relate… it’s weird.

“I thank you for your time, Býleistr,” Loki says, fetching his cloak from the floor and swinging it around his shoulders. “Fasten this for me, will you, pet?”

Let the show begin, you think, fighting the overwhelming urge to roll your eyes. Even so, you try to be fairly gentle as you pull the belts tight through the buckles - his chest is still all bruised up, and you don’t want to give him any excuse to be even more of a diva.

And maybe part of you just genuinely doesn’t want to hurt him, too.
“I thought it might be entertaining.”

Damn, they even sound kind of similar. It’s weird.

Prince Býleistr casts his crimson eyes on you, and you stand stock-still at Loki’s side. “Your mortal has changed into our clothing. How strange it looks on her.”

You almost feel like he’s baiting you. That can’t be it, can it?

“Her Midgardian clothing is filthy. I could not allow her to stay in such a state.”

Loki keeps a firm grip on your upper arm as Býleistr leads you through the shining hallways and up several flights of stairs. Part of you wonders why he doesn’t just hold your hand, if he’s going to drag you around all day. Part of you wants to try it, just to see what he’d do. He would probably lose his mind.

You smile faintly at the thought.

The doors that you finally halt in front of are made of the same heavy, dark wood as the banquet-hall tables, decorated with highly-stylized carvings of terrifying-looking animals. A depiction of one of the sea serpents from last night’s dinner can be seen curving up the side of the door. The reminder that even the animals here are completely different from those on Earth makes you feel a little ill.

Býleistr shoves open the doors, and Loki pulls you along into a massive, rounded stone room - a tower, maybe? There are windows, though the glass in them is bubbled and thick. All along the walls are mosaics, pieced together from what looks to be brightly-colored glass.

It’s kind of beautiful, you have to admit.

And there’s a fireplace, which seems kind of weird. Maybe this is where the Frost Giants go when they aren’t trying to show off how tough they are.

There’s a particularly large mosaic over the fireplace, and Loki releases your arm and goes to stand before it, staring. There’s an odd look on his face, and you cross your arms, slightly uncomfortable.

“Gunnlöð,” Býleistr remarks, that characteristic flatness back in his voice. “Queen of Jotunheim, when she still lived.”

Gunnlöð. You’ve heard that name before, and you search your memory; you definitely remember Fárbautí saying it…

Loki continues to stare up at the mosaic, seemingly stricken.

And that’s when you remember.

Gunnlöð was his mother.

Chapter End Notes

#FrostbiteFridays It's a thing, y'all. (Or at least, that's when I plan to update this story for
the next few weeks)!

P.S. I SWEAR the next chapter of The Gladiator is mostly done for those of y'all who've been patiently waiting for an update on that one <3
The giantess in the mosaic is pretty, with a thin, willowy sort of frame - a far cry from the towering strength of Fárbauti. Her hair falls around her shoulders, and her eyes are a solid, gleaming emerald-green; in fact, those might actually be emeralds. In one hand, she holds a trident, and in the other, a golden goblet. Green and golden rays radiate from behind her head, and her feet seem to hover just over a line of crashing waves.

And Loki can’t seem to look away.

You wish you could say something, or maybe even go put a hand on his arm, but that would probably be a terrible idea. Acting out of character in front of Býleistr might get you in trouble.

“She holds *skáldskapar mjöðar.*” Býleistr glances at you. “The Mead of Poetry. I suppose that is how you came by your serpent’s-tongue, Brother.”

Loki doesn’t respond.

Býleistr seems unbothered, and he steps in front of you. “Mortal,” he says, “can you read?”

You blink up at him, heart racing - Loki told you to speak when spoken to, but he didn’t tell you what to say. *The guy’s a prince,* you reason. If you met a human prince, you’d probably call him… what?

Your Highness? Sire?

“Yes, sire.”

*Come on, Loki. Snap out of it.*

The younger giant seems a bit startled to hear you actually speak, and he goes to one of the shelves nearby, plucking down a thin, weathered-looking book. He returns to you, holding it open in front of your face, watching you expectantly.

You look at the page, then back at Býleistr, baffled. *What am I supposed to do, a trick?* These are runes. You don’t know runes. And even if you knew what sounds they stood for, it isn’t like you know their language.

“How can you not read these?”

“No, sire,” you reply, weirdly embarrassed by your lack of understanding. You guess it’s because you’re the only representative of humanity these giants have seen in at least a thousand years - you feel a sort of duty to be impressive. “It’s a different language.”

He frowns down at you. “But this is the script of the Æsir. Is this not what Odin gifted to mankind?”

Loki finally seems to take notice, and he turns away from the mosaic. “The mortals have evolved many languages over the centuries, and many forms of writing to accompany them. She will not be able to recognize anything here.”

“Hmm.” He flips through the pages, then holds the book out again; there’s a painting of what you assume is a human woman on the page, kneeling at the side of a towering blue giant. “A mortal girl,”
he says. “Taken from Midgard, during the Golden Age.”

_Not the Golden Age of Midgard, from the looks of it._ You imagine being an ancient human, having to worry about one of _these_ guys popping up out of a snowdrift and grabbing you, and your skin crawls. Why is he even showing you this?

“Are there any accounts of the tribes of Jotunheim?” Loki asks, and _Býleistr_ closes the book.

“Yes. I suppose that it is only sensible that you’d try to learn about the people you intend to rule.”

You’re afraid that a fight is brewing, but Loki simply laughs. “Indeed it is.”

_Býleistr_ shows Loki to a shelf on the far side of the wide tower-room, and you keep your feet planted firmly, unsure if you’re supposed to follow. While you wait, you check out the other mosaics on the wall; most of them depict giants and crazy-looking gigantic animals, though there are a few that seem to show battles with beings in golden armor.

_Asgardians?_ you wonder. _Or elves, maybe?_ Since those apparently actually exist.

Loki is quickly enthralled with scanning through the books, and his brother wanders back over towards your side of the room. He doesn’t say anything - he just _looks_ at you.

It must be a family trait.

A female giant you don’t remember seeing before appears in the doorway, bowing; you assume she’s a servant. _Býleistr_ goes to speak with her, and you can’t make out any of what they’re saying, though he does gesture at you a time or two, and you think you make out the words ‘ _in unga._’

Whatever the hell _that_ means.

The giantess bows again and leaves, and Loki continues reading, as if he hasn’t even noticed that you’d had company.

“Mother summons me,” _Býleistr_ announces. “I will take my leave.”

“Please inform the Queen Mother that I will join you shortly.”

Loki finally looks up at you once the door has firmly closed. “Be wary of him,” he says.

“I’m wary of _everyone here._”

“Yes, I suppose you are. Still, you should endeavor to keep your distance. I can assure you that striking _him_ would not be a very effective deterrent.” It almost sounds like he’s teasing you, and you’re kind of weirded out by it.

Then he sticks his nose back in his book. You’re getting major Belle vibes here - but then, if _he’s_ Beauty, then who’s the Beast in this scenario? Your face scrunches up. _Wrong fairytale, I guess._

“Hey.”

“Yes, mortal?”

“Didn’t you say there was another brother? Hell-something?”

_‘Helblindi._ You were not paying attention at the feast last night; the queen says that he is on a hunting trip in the southern forests.”
“Tough name,” you remark. If he’s going to respond, then you’re gonna keep talking; you’re kind of almost *enjoying* it. Maybe you should’ve slapped him sooner. Or maybe you shouldn’t have done it at all; you’re kind of shocked that it didn’t end in your untimely demise.

“Hel-blinder. It suggests one who can defy Death itself.”

“Hmm. What does *in unga* mean?”

“Who said that?”

“Myth. He pointed at me when the giant lady came in.”

Loki snorts. “Congratulations, mortal. It seems you’ve gotten a name.”

“I already *have* a name,” you snap. Not that you ever use it.

“It means ‘The Young One.’ You should be thankful - it could’ve been much, much worse. The giants are fond of their bynames.”

“Yeah?”

He grins at you over the book in his hands. “They call me Ormstunga. Serpent-Tongue. On other realms, I am Silver-Tongue. My tongue is well-renowned, it seems.”

Then, he actually has the audacity to *wink* at you, and your face flushes as Loki snickers.

“And after my little stunt with the Bifrost,” he continues, “I am also Inn-Illi - ‘The Evil One.’”

“Bifrost?”

Loki looks startled for a moment, as if he’d honestly expected you to know what the hell he was talking about, and he beckons you forward. “That,” he says, and then he points to the mosaic behind you, “is the Bifrost.”

You turn - it’s a gigantic beam of rainbow-colors, and there’s a city at its base.

“It bridges the realms,” he says. “I turned its power against Jotunheim, once. It destroyed much of Utgard.”

He doesn’t sound very regretful, and your mind spins. “Wait - you tried to torch the *whole* planet, and they *still* might make you king?”

Shrugging, Loki shelves the book. “I suppose conquest must be in my blood. Come along; we should go join the court. Appearances are everything, after all.”

Your heart plummets. “Do we have to?”

“You will be fine, girl.” He seizes your arm and guides you towards the door, giving you an odd sort of look out of the corner of his eye. “You have spirit.”

*Wait... is that a good thing?* You thought he wanted you to be meek and obedient and all that jazz. *They should call you ‘The Fickle One,’* you think.

It seems like there are more giants out and about in the palace today, and you wonder if it’s because you and Loki have made such a stir. You can practically *feel* the tension in the air, and you try to stay calm, reminding yourself that they can apparently all *smell* when you’re panicking.
Well, you think guiltily, *panicking or turned-on*. Because Loki had *definitely* noticed when you were turned-on that time in the cave.

*Ugh.*

*And you know* that’s *gonna happen again*, an insidious voice in your head whispers. You sneak a furtive glance at the god at your side, instantly on-edge. He might be nuts, but he’s also *hot*, and you’re basically stuck with him 24/7. Or however long the days are around here. And that includes bedtime and bathtime, apparently.

That’s going to be a problem.

Then he looks down at you, and as soon as your eyes meet, you feel that increasingly-familiar fire flush across your cheeks.

Loki smirks.

*Of course,* you think, *that’s probably why he’s so arrogant - he’s used to being ogled all the time.* Embarrassed, you turn and stare down the hallway; you’re just giving him more ammunition.

The throne room is full of Frost Giants, and without all of the massive soldiers crowding around you, you see that there are benches and cushions spread around the edges of the room, almost all of them occupied. The queen sits on her throne, and her son is seated in a smaller (but still pretty impressive) seat on her right. There’s a conspicuously-empty seat on her left.

Now that you know to look for the similarities, you notice that all of the giants lounging on the steps of the dais have the same pointed ears as Fárbauti and Skaði, and the same lean-but-muscular bodies. A group of the female giants near the foot of the stairs laughs at some unheard joke, and you’re close enough now to see that they all have those same pointy teeth.

It looks like she must keep her clan close. That’s probably smart, considering that the giants don’t seem to mind murder all that much. You’d surround yourself with lackeys if you were the queen, too.

Except, what lackeys is *Loki* going to surround himself with, if he ends up becoming king? *You?*

*God,* you hope he makes some friends soon.

There’s a familiar-looking nest of furs at the base of the dais, which is a good twenty feet from where Loki is presumably going to sit, and you are none too pleased when he shoves you onto it; you guess that’s what he meant when he said you might not be in close proximity.

But you *are* in eyesight, like he’d promised, so that’s… good, at least. You *guess.* There are dozens of pairs of crimson eyes on you, and you try to ignore them, wrapping yourself in your cloak as you settle into your cushioned seat. *Become a burrito,* you tell yourself. *Just like when you’re curled up on the couch at home. A nice, warm, content little blanket burrito.*

Except this isn’t home.

You’re trying to keep your gaze downcast, because the last thing you want is to make awkward eye contact with one of the giants, but then two pairs of legs appear in front of you, bare to the knee.

*Don’t look up, don’t look up.*

But you don’t have to, because they simultaneously crouch down in front of you. You blink - they’re
identical twin giantesses, and your heartbeat spikes, because they are both staring at you with a worrying amount of curious fascination. Both of them wear long-sleeved, knee-length tunics, and both have their raven hair pulled into single braids - though one’s hair is braided on the left side, and the other’s is on the right.

“Just look, Greip,” says the one on the right, smiling excitedly, “In-Unga, Loki’s mortal.”

I have an actual name, you want to snap, but you keep your mouth shut.

The one on the left - Greip, apparently - taps her chin thoughtfully. “Prince Býleistr spoke truly, Gjálp; see how small she is.”

“You speak, mortal, do you not? The prince says that you speak.”

They both have a sort of childlike glee radiating from their features, and you begin to suspect that they’re probably no older than Býleistr. You swallow, mouth suddenly as dry as dry as cotton. “Of course I do.”

Gjálp claps her hands together, delighted, and you flinch. “Of course she does! How precious!”

“How did Loki come by you, little one?”

Greip has a slightly-huskier voice, you note, and her braid is on the right, which is… something distinguishing, at least. You groan internally - you’re never going to remember their names.

“I… I fell through something. On Ear- on Midgard. A portal.”

The twins turn towards each other, appraising.

“The Convergence?”

Greip nods. “Likely so.” She smiles at you, and while it’s teasing, it isn’t necessarily cruel. “How unfortunate for you, mortal, to fall into the grasp of Loki Inn-Illi, God of Lies.”

“Yeah.” You lick your lips, wondering what you should say. “Bad luck.”

They both burst into laughter. The blood rushes from your face - should you not have said that? But Loki isn’t rushing in to save the day, so either he hasn’t noticed or doesn’t think you’re in danger. You hope it’s the latter.

“She is bold,” Gjálp declares.

You don’t feel very bold.

“Can you work seiðr, In-Unga?”

Seiðr? That sounds vaguely familiar; did Loki mention it? “No.”

“Hmm.” Greip is tapping her chin again, scrutinizing you carefully. “Can you fight?”

I took a kickboxing class, once, you want to say. That probably doesn’t count. “No.”

“Hunt?”

“No.”
Her brow furrows. “Well, what can you do, mortal?”

Your mind goes blank. Is there anything that you can do that would impress them? You’re pretty smart - or at least you like to think so - but they won’t think so - you have no idea how anything on their world works, and you can’t even read their books. You’re an okay cook, but you doubt that your fillet-of-sea-monster would be up to par.

You lead a pretty modern life; you doubt that Frost Giants are going to care about your extensive knowledge of pop culture trivia, or your schooling, or your boring Earthly hobbies.

“Not much,” you finally say, and the twins start giggling again. You pull your cloak tighter around your shoulders, humiliated. Yeah, well, I bet you guys couldn’t use an iPad, so...

“I am going to touch you,” Gjálp announces, reaching out slowly, like you’re some kind of skittish animal. You guess that’s a pretty fair comparison. At least she gave you a warning - that was more than you could say for Býleistr.

Her cool fingers brush your cheek, and she lets out a huff of surprise. “Warm-skin,” she says. It’s the first time you’ve heard it said where it doesn’t sound like an insult. “You are very delicate?”

This is so weird. “I guess so.”

Gjálp’s hand drops away, and she turns towards her sister. “Such a fragile thing… Loki must be very gentle with her.”

Greip snorts. “Loki Laufeyson is gentle with no one.”

You’re strangely torn - some part of you almost wants to defend him, while another part of you is pretty sure that it’s better for the both of you if the giants think he is just a cold-hearted monster. They don’t seem to have much respect for supposed ‘weaknesses.’

Maybe you’re supposed to make him sound mean and tough and unfeeling - that kind of seems like the vibe he’s going for, right?

Earlier, you’d resented the way he was telling you how to act… now, you’d be grateful if he’d written you an entire freaking script, because worrying over everything you say to the giants is way too stressful.

Greip rummages around in the pouch on her belt, then holds her hand out to you. It’s full of some kind of reddish-pink… seeds? Or maybe tiny berries? You stare at them, perplexed. Are they… are they trying to feed you, like people feed ducks at the park?

Or maybe they’re trying to poison you.

Or, even if they’re genuinely trying to be kind, they might poison you accidentally; just because you can eat some of the food here, that doesn’t mean all of it is safe. But, you also don’t want to piss them off by refusing…

“Eat, In-Unga,” Gjálp says, smiling.

Your mind races. “I…” You glance over your shoulder, anxious. “I don’t know if he’d approve.”

“Ah.”

You expect for that to be the end of it, but it isn’t - Gjálp seizes one of the berries and springs to her
feet, practically skipping up the steps of the dais to Loki’s makeshift throne. You blanch; you can’t imagine that he’ll be happy about being disturbed with anything regarding you, especially after he told you to keep a low profile.

Twisting, you watch anxiously as the girl says something inaudible to Loki, then holds out the berry. He shoots a quick look your way, bemused, then takes it and pops it into his mouth. He’s making sure it won’t kill me, you realize, and the thought makes you weirdly… happy.

Loki nods after a moment, and Gjálp bounds back to you, smiling brightly. “Your master says that you may have them, mortal. Eat!”

You hold out your hand, trying to still your slight tremor, and Greip drops them into your palm - at least they aren’t trying to hand-feed you. The berries (or whatever they are) are sweet and tart, reminding you slightly of oversized pomegranate seeds. “Um, thank you?” you manage to say, eyes darting between the eager faces of the two young giantesses.

Gjálp pats you on the head, chuckling. “Precious little thing.”

“Greip, Gjálp. What is this?”

Well, there’s a familiar voice, and you twist your neck around to find Skaði standing a few steps behind you, a frown on her lips.

Greip looks slightly abashed. “We are only feeding the mortal, Lady Skaði. Prince Loki said that we might.”

“Come. Queen Fárbauti has sent us to escort the Völva into Utgard. You can play with Loki’s pet later.”

“Of course, Lady Skaði.”

They both rise as she comes to stand at the foot of the steps, and you’re startled to see that they’re slightly taller than Skaði, though they’re also a good deal lankier - you assume it’s because they’re still young.

With one last glance at you, Skaði strides away, and the twins follow after her. Part of you is relieved to see them go, but another part of you is almost… sad. They talked to you, at least.

And they didn’t mention eating you.

The Völva.

If she’s almost here, then big things are about to go down, one way or another.

You aren’t entirely sure that you’re ready.

Chapter End Notes

#FrostbiteFridays. I was so impressed/excited about how many of you guys seemed to like the idea of that becoming a thing!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which you meet more giants whose names you’re *never* going to be able to pronounce, and Loki slithers closer to his throne.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s a lot of tension in the throne room, and it’s getting more and more crowded by the minute; it seems like everyone in the palace knows that something big is about to happen, and whatever it is, they want a front-row seat.

You, on the other hand, have a front-row seat that you’d be entirely happy to forfeit.

The way you figure it, this is going to go down one of two ways: either the Völva says Loki has no claim to the throne, and everyone immediately tries to murder him, or she says that he does have a legitimate claim… and everyone immediately tries to murder him. You can’t really imagine a scenario where no one tries to kill the usurper that they literally call “The Evil One.”

Everyone seems to be moving towards specific positions in the throne room, and you can only assume that they’re getting formal in preparation for what might end up being the announcement of their new king.

Many of the lithe, pointy-eared giants in the queen’s entourage stand and move from the steps of the dais, their spots soon occupied by giantesses and children of various ages. Loki seems to be ignoring them entirely.

You turn forward again, but staring at the massive entryway is doing terrible things to your blood pressure; every time a new group of giants enters the room, you assume it’s going to be the Völva and start panicking all over again.

There’s a new group of what you guess must be the ‘true’ Frost Giants hanging out in a pack not far from where you’re bundled up, because they’re tall and honestly kinda rough-looking. Laufey’s kids must take after their moms, you decide; Loki is objectively hot, and Býleistr honestly doesn’t look half-bad either, even if they are both creepy as hell. You wonder what this Helblindi guy looks like.

A lot of the giants are blatantly staring at you, and you try to ignore the sensation, peering over your shoulder once again to see if Loki’s making sure no one is going to do anything painful to you, but he’s busy surveying the room. Several of the giantesses seated on the steps of the dais are openly gawking at him, some with disgust, some with fascination, some with a mixture of the two.

*Staring must just be a thing here.*

As if on cue, Býleistr makes eye contact, and it must catch Loki’s attention, because he turns and looks at you, too, frowning slightly. *Damn it.* You turn scarlet and huddle down into your blankets. Maybe you should start putting some of your energy towards coming up with an exit strategy for when things start to inevitably go south.
You can’t really think of anything viable, though - even if you give the giants the slip, the climate will kill you, and quickly. And even if you somehow managed to survive the freezing temperatures, there are clearly a lot of wild animals that would be delighted to find a tasty little snack like you wandering around all alone.

There’s also the fact that the freaky magical space-portal that dropped you here was apparently a one-time thing; from what you can gather, Loki is your only ticket back to Earth. Ugh.

You can still feel his eyes on the back of your head, and you pull your cloak more snugly around your shoulders. You’re screwed. That’s all there is to it - you’re at the mercy of a superpowered shapeshifter who likes plotting hostile takeovers of entire planets. Fantastic.

There’s an unpleasant wailing sound that kinda reminds you of a bugle, and all of the giants in the throne room seem to perk up and turn their attention to the open doorway. Oh, God. You honestly feel a little lightheaded, and perversely enough, you suddenly wish that you were at Loki’s feet, his reassuring hand on your head.

Messed up, you think. It’s only been a few days, and I’m already messed up.

Skaði and a group of similarly-attired giantesses appear first through the doorway, the twins Gjálp and Greip among them… though you’ve already forgotten which is which. There are some of the usual burly-soldier types in the little processional as well, and they step to the side and form a pathway to the dais. It’s all very showy, and your teeth clench in anticipation.

But the giants that walk towards the throne then are… not really what you expected. They certainly don’t seem as fearsome as their escorts, at least. First in the line are a boy and a girl, likely around the same age as you (well, relatively). They look young, at least, and they’re slightly small and lithe, their blue skin a few shades lighter than that of Fárbauti and her kin.

Perhaps most startlingly, both of them have hair that is platinum-blond, almost white; you haven’t seen any giants with anything other than black hair so far, and some of them don’t even have hair to begin with. They’re also wearing plenty of clothes, and they don’t seem very worried about how ‘weak’ it might make them look - in fact, if anything, they look completely oblivious to the stares of the crowd.

Following along behind them is probably the oldest giant you’ve seen so far, shoulders visibly stooped from age, her fingers wrapped around a long, shining silver staff. Her hair is just as white as the boy and girl in front of her, though hers is cropped short.

Geez, you think, if most of these giants are thousands of thousands of years old and don’t look a day over twenty… how old is this lady? A million?

A few more giants follow behind her, and you realize that none of them are over seven feet tall. Must be a Storm Giant thing - hadn’t the queen made some snide comment about Loki’s mother being petite? They’re still pretty terrifying, even if they’re relatively small compared to the rest of the room, and you notice that most of them are armed in one way or another.

The boy and girl walk to the foot of the dais, and the old giantess who can only be the Völva comes along with them, while the rest of the giants in their party blend into the crowd. The girl throws her head back, her hand on her hip. “Loki Laufeyson of the Stormr-Jötnar has summoned the Völva before him to bear judgment. Here stand I, Heiðr, daughter of Hrímnir, and I speak for the Völva.”

“And here stand I,” the boy beside her declares, “Hrossþjófr, son of Hrímnir, and I speak for the Stormr-Jötnar.”
You feel, yet again, like you’ve fallen into some kind of medieval fantasy novel, and you risk a glance over your shoulder to see how Loki’s taking this latest development. He’s sprawling on his makeshift-throne, a small smile on his lips. Of course, you think. Nothing ever gets the freaking God of Chaos down.

Except maybe getting stabbed through the chest. He’d definitely been pretty furious about that.

“Here I sit,” he replies, his smooth, cool voice surprisingly loud in the silent throne room. “Loki, son of Laufey, God of Mischief, rightful King of Jotunheim, and I speak for myself.”

There are some murmurs in the crowd, so you assume he’s being intentionally rude... but you also think you see the Völva crack a small smile. God, Loki, please don’t start a riot.

Her escorts seem less amused. “The Völva sees the threads of Fate, Laufeyson,” the girl says, and there’s a slight hint of admonishment in her tone. “She sees that you are the firstborn son of King Laufey, and your birthright is the throne.” The crowd in the throne room grows louder, and it isn’t exactly a happy sort of loudness. “The Völva wishes to know if you are prepared to accept the trials of kingship, Loki Laufeyson.”

He leans forward in his seat, his bright teeth gleaming. “I am.”

“There must be a blood-sacrifice,” Heiðr replies, “one made by your own hand. The Völva will consult with the Norns to learn if you will be a worthy king. Are you prepared, Loki Laufeyson, to make this sacrifice?”

“But of course,” Loki replies easily. The queen looks irritated; she must’ve planned on doing all of the talking. Býleistr simply looks bored, though you catch him glancing at you for just a second or two.

Fárbauti finally speaks. “What is it,” she says, “that Loki Laufeyson must sacrifice in order to prove his worthiness for the throne?”

The boy at the foot of the dais smiles. “A hunt is a traditional demonstration of strength, Queen Fárbauti. Is that not so?”

A voice slides out from the edge of the crowd, sweet and sharp. “How fortunate for Loki Laufeyson,” Skaði says, “that he has already brought a blood-sacrifice along with him.”

And your blood runs cold as she points directly at you.

If the Frost Giants had somehow managed to forget about your existence during all of the excitement of the Völva arriving, they certainly remember now, and the room is filled with excited chatter (and more than a few unkind laughs).

Holy Hell. They’re going to sacrifice you?

The newcomers look surprised to notice you sitting there in your heap of furs, save for the Völva. You guess that it’s probably difficult to surprise someone who can supposedly see into the future. Trembling, you turn back towards the thrones; he’d really do it, wouldn’t he? Loki’s already told you that you’re just there for him to use while he takes over everything... and this is going to make it easier for him to take over everything.

Loki scoffs. “While I admire your efficiency, Lady Skaði, I will not be making a blood-sacrifice of my little mortal. For one thing, she has very little blood to spill.” There are actually genuine laughs at that, but you’re far too relieved to care.
“Show the Völva and her kin to their chambers,” the queen declares. “Then we shall feast and await her instructions for the making of the future-king.”

One of the massive giants that you remember the queen talking to when you’d first arrived at the palace steps forward and bows, and the Storm Giants follow him from the throne room, the buzz in the crowd swelling in their wake.

That… went better than expected, honestly. Or at least, it seems to be going pretty well, so far. You’re still alive, and Loki’s still got that stupid arrogant smile on his face, so maybe it’s all going according to plan.

The hall falls back into gossiping groups of giants, and though it’s much louder than before, it seems like the show is mostly over, for now. You squeeze your eyes closed and try to drown it all out. As some of your fear recedes, you become increasingly pissed that Skaði actually suggested sacrificing you.

C’mon, you tell yourself. Daydream about something nice. Something light and pleasant. Instead, your stupid brain conjures up the image of Loki in the steam-pool, his stupidly-pretty hair curling slightly around his stupidly-perfect face. Damn it. This place isn’t good for your sanity.

When you give up and open your eyes, you’ve got company; Greip and Gjálp have returned, and the white-haired girl and boy from the Völva’s entourage are with them. What are their names, again? Something with an H? They’re all staring at you, apparently captivated.

You’re honestly getting pretty tired of being so captivating.

“By the Ginnungagap,” the girl remarks, eyes wide. “It truly is a mortal.”

Up close, you realize that the boy and the girl look almost identical, save for his short hair. They did name the same father, didn’t they? You peer up at them, suspicious. “Are you twins, too?”

The boy crouches down, grinning. “She speaks,” he says. “We are, mortal. This surprises you?”

“It’s just… twins are rare. Where I’m from. Earth, I mean. Midgard.”

“Not so on Jotunheim.” He reaches out and pulls back your hood - what is it with the giants just touching you whenever they want? - and his smile widens. “What an interesting fate you have.”

His twin crouches at his side, cocking her head, her fingers skimming over your leg. “Loki Laufeyson has charmed her.” Her voice is matter-of-fact - can she do magic, too? “Can you feel it, Hrossþjófr?”

He nods, and you shiver as he tucks a strand of hair behind your ear. “It is a strong charm, Heiðr.” There’s a faint stinging where his fingers rest behind your ear, and your arm suddenly burns. Hrossþjófr tuts. “He has injured her, also, Heiðr.”

Gjálp frowns. “Has he?”

The girl - Heiðr - seizes your hand and pushes up your sleeve, revealing a dark purple bruise. Your stomach churns; it’s where Loki had crushed your arm so tightly when Fárbauti first mentioned his mother. With all of the chaos and adrenaline, you must’ve blocked it out.

“He has,” Heiðr says. “How cruel - he could heal her with his seiðr, if he wished.”

“Come, In-Unga,” Greip says. “Loki Inn-Illi says that we might take you to the kitchens. There is a
fire and food, and the children of Hrímnir require something to eat after their travels.” The terror in your eyes must be evident, because she pats your head. “You will not be punished,” she reassures you. “He wants you out of the way while the sacrifice is discussed, I believe. You are a distraction, and it is a serious occasion.”

“Oh… okay,” you whisper, and you aren’t entirely certain how you manage to make it to your feet, but you do. If something is sketchy about this, you assure yourself, then Loki will swoop in and stop it. But he doesn’t, and you grit your teeth as the two sets of twins escort you around the edge of the throne room and towards the doorway. Lying bastard said he wouldn’t let me out of his sight.

But then you think about the way Skaði’s eyes glittered as she offered you up as the royal blood-sacrifice, and you decide that maybe he’s actually looking out for you. Maybe.

They guide you through the hallways, which are mostly empty at the moment, and before long, you find yourself in a small stone room with a large fire at one end and a round table in the middle. It’s completely covered with food, though it all looks a little… odd.

“This is where the servants sometimes eat,” Gjálp says, “but I thought that you may find it comforting, In-Unga. Does it remind you of your home?”

You blink up at her. Does she… does she really think you live in a place like this? Maybe if you’d lived in the Middle Ages…

Part of you wants to correct her, but another part of you appreciates the gesture. And at least there’s a fire. “Thanks. The fire is nice.”

“You may sit by the fire, little one.” Greip slides into one of the seats around the table, and you curl up against the stone hearth. The floor isn’t exactly what you’d call comfy, and you kind of almost miss your nest. And the bed. You actually miss Loki’s bed. Ugh.

The rest of the young giants settle in around the table, and it doesn’t take long for them to tear into the food. You wonder if it’s safe for you to eat.

“Here, mortal.” Heiðr holds out a bowl to you, and you take it, though it’s mostly to be polite - you aren’t planning to eat anything without Loki there to check it. Her lips quirk up in a smile. “It is safe for you to eat, In-Unga. Loki Laufeyson himself had it sent here for you.”

“Oh.” The bowl is full of some kind of thinly-sliced meat, and there are some more of the tubers from breakfast in there, too. It smells pretty good, all things considered.

You’re apparently supposed to eat this with your fingers, and you try your best, though you’d really kill for a fork. As you shove food in your mouth, you glance up at the two sets of twins at the table, examining their features. The boy notices.

“What are you searching for, mortal? You may speak.”

Great, thanks for the permission. “I just… I just was wondering why you look different. All of the tribes, I mean. The pointed ears, the pointed teeth… all that.” You shrug. It’s an awkward finish, like most of your other interactions with the giants, and your cheeks flush.

“Curious little creature, are you?” Hrossþjófr laughs, pushing his plate aside. “The females of the Skógr-Jötnar and some of the other tribes sharpen their teeth to show that they are ready to find a mate. Is that not so?”

Greip nods; her sister is busy in a whispered conversation with Heiðr on the other side of the table.
She bares her teeth for a moment, showing off their smoothness. “My sister and I are young,” she says. “We are near to the age for it, but we are not ready to find husbands yet.”

Ah. “Is there a reason for it being, y’know, your teeth?”

“There is always a reason for everything.” Leaning forward, Hrossþjófr smiles, and the firelight sparks in his eyes. “Mating is a primal expression of dominance, little mortal. Our women are strong, but our men are far stronger. It gives them a fighting chance. The women of the Forest Giants dig their teeth into their men to show that they are strong enough to bear their children.”

Greip puffs up in a temper. “It is symbolic,” she huffs. “And all Jötnar bite, it is the way of things.”

“No all Jötnar snap and claw when they consummate their unions quite like an íviðja in heat.” Snickering, Hrossþjófr artfully dodges her hand as she swings at him from her side of the table. “Peace, peace,” he says, holding up his hands in surrender. “Peace, O mighty warrior-maiden. I mean no offense.”

“You are an honored guest of Queen Fárbauti,” Greip mutters. “Else I would see you repaid for your cheek.”

It suddenly hits you that you’ve essentially been left in the care of oversized teenagers, and you frown. As opposed to… what? your mind argues. An oversized twenty-something? Isn’t that essentially what Loki is? It doesn’t make much sense to try to judge their maturity against that of a relative human lifespan, you suppose.

“I thought you guys spoke for the Völva,” you say. “Don’t they need you in the throne room?”

“In official circumstances, yes.” Heiðr snorts and rolls her eyes, brushing her pin-straight white hair over her shoulder. “It is part of my training. Though in practice, the Völva speaks for herself.”

You kind of like teenaged giants, you’re starting to decide - or at least, you kind of like these guys. Sure, you’re still terrified, and you don’t want to push your luck or anything, but they’re pretty kind. A little patronizing, maybe, but kind.

“So… I’m not gonna be sacrificed, right?”

Every giant in your entourage laughs. You fail to see the humor in it; everyone here is constantly reminding you of how tiny and weak you are… being sacrificed seems like a pretty legitimate concern.

“A mortal would be an unfit sacrifice for the making of a king, In-Unga,” Heiðr says. “There is no challenge in it.”

Hrossþjófr nods decisively. “Sister is right. Skaði likely just wished to tease Loki Laufeyson.”

“And you are the only mortal on Jotunheim,” Gjálp adds. “You are a prize, and Inn-Illi would not wish to give up one of his treasures so easily.”

Fantastic. So I’m laughably weak, but one-of-a-kind. At least that combo seems to be working in your favor.

Your heart nearly bursts from your chest when the door suddenly swings open, admitting a massive Frost Giant woman with a frown on her face. “It has been decided,” she says to the others, entirely ignoring your presence. “Loki Laufeyson is to be king.” Her voice curls sourly around the title, and her eyes finally flicker down to you, only for a tense moment.
“It will be announced to the assembly,” she continues. “Children of Hrímnir, your presence is required in the throne room.” The giantess scowls back at you as she turns to leave. “And bring Loki’s mortal.”

Chapter End Notes

#FrostbiteFridays!

Guys, if you saw my tumblr post this week, you know things are kind of particularly rough at the moment IRL... so I just want you to know how much I appreciate the love, the comments, the reblogs, the good vibes... it all means SO much! ❤️

This one probably needs more proofing but I'm gonna go ahead and put it up while I've got a minute. :D

Much love!
MoA
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Really, at this point, why even bother trying to figure all this giant succession crap out? It isn’t like there’s anything you can do about any of it, anyway. Whatever happens to Loki next... well, you’re along for the ride.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“See how our lady Angrboða frowns, Sister; why could that be, I wonder?”

“Could it be, Brother, because Loki Laufeyson will be king?”

“Or could it be because she was sent from the court to fetch the children of Hrímnir, like a common thrall?”

“Perhaps,” Heiðr replies, a mischievous smile on her lips, “it is because the lady Skaði is already closest to becoming the First Wife.”

“Ah, perhaps. Perhaps I am to blame, Sister - surely my ghastly powers make the lady uncomfortable.” Hrossþjófr wiggles his fingers playfully, and a lumescent green glows from his fingertips.

Well. That’s certainly something to ask about later.

You glance at the Forest Twins for guidance; the walk back to the throne room is proving hellishly awkward so far, and you’re pretty sure the huge giantess leading the way would’ve already throttled the Storm Twins, were they not some sort of ‘special guests.’

Gjálp and Greip both look pretty uncomfortable, too, though you think you see a look of surprise flicker in Greip’s eyes when Hrossþjófr shows off his magic. She quickly looks away, tucking a wayward strand of hair back into her braid.

Interesting.

Heiðr grins at her brother. “It may be that Lady Angrboða simply finds herself ill-at-ease in the presence of the Stormr-Jötunar.”

“Honored Speaker for the Völva,” the woman called Angrboða practically snarls, “perhaps you should hold your tongue.”

Hrossþjófr turns and winks over his shoulder, and you could swear you see Greip’s cheeks turn the faintest shade of lavender.

Hah, you think, weirdly smug about the observation. So Frost Giants can blush, after all.

Maybe this is the kind of stuff that Loki was talking about you overhearing, all this weird tension between tribes. If he likes the gossip that you bring in, will he reward you? Probably not. But maybe
he’ll be a little more pleasant, at least.

You decide to pretend that you’re a spy, working deep undercover. Maybe that’ll help you get through all of this ridiculous pet nonsense. It does seem like the giants are willing to say almost anything at all in front of you, probably because they think you’re too stupid and scared to do anything with what you overhear.

The dull roar of the crowd in the throne room is audible even before you reach it, and some instinct is really, really urging you to just turn tail and run. You don’t have the best sense of direction, but hey, maybe you could find your way back to Loki’s room, right?

Except you’d probably get all of two steps before a giant snatched you up. You might kind of like your twin-guards, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re still essentially guards. Plus, Angrboða looks like she’d be pretty happy to snap you like a twig.

A hand rests on your shoulder as you follow the Storm Twins and Angrboða into the massive hall, and you look up to find Gjálp smiling down at you. “I have never seen a new king made, In-Unga,” she whispers, “but I expect that this part will not take long; once the announcement is made, there will be an uproar, and the royal family will likely want to retire from court for some peace.”

That’s the best news you’ve heard all day. Well, except for the ‘not becoming a sacrifice’ thing. And the ‘Loki is actually legit so probably don’t kill him for claiming the throne’ thing. Although, the uproar part sounds a bit sketchy… today is just a rollercoaster of emotions, you decide. It seems like things are probably going to stay that way for the foreseeable future.

Loki honestly looks a little bit like a maniac when you risk a glance up towards his throne as you’re making your way to your nest; there’s a thin smile on his lips and a gleam in his eyes, and he looks massively entertained, despite the fact that the general vibe of the room suggests there’s been some fighting.

Maybe that’s why he looks so massively entertained.

“Go to your place, little one,” Greip whispers, and you’re a more than a little concerned by how tense she seems.

Still, it clearly isn’t the time or the place to start an argument, and you tuck your head down and shuffle towards your little refuge as quickly and as inconspicuous as humanly possible, avoiding most of the crowd of giants like the plague.

Unfortunately, as you reach your place, you notice that quite a few of the giants are actively staring at you now, and you wonder what, exactly, it was that the court had been discussing.

And you can’t help but wonder, too, if maybe the whole ‘sacrifice the mortal’ topic was revisited in your absence.

You dig your teeth into your lip, biting down so hard that it nearly bleeds; what will you do, if they try to kill you? Would any of the twins help you run? Would Býleistr?

No, of course they wouldn’t.

They’ve got to be vulnerable to something… would it be in one of those books in the archive, maybe? Something that will weaken them, or… or something?

Yeah, your inner voice chimes in, maybe there is. In one of those books you can’t read.
Heiðr’s clear voice rings out, breaking your mind free from its panicked ramblings, and you curl your hands into fists, wishing you weren’t quite so small, quite so soft, and quite so alone.

“The Völva speaks,” she loudly declares, and you’re a little surprised by the blunt simplicity of the announcement, “and Loki Laufeyson will be King.”

There’s absolute silence. You can hear your heart beating.

Her brother stands beside her. “The Stormr-Jötnar claim Loki Laufeyson as the rightful King of Jotunheim.”

The giants in the crowd are all looking to each other, as if they’re all expecting someone else to start screaming about how all of this is insane and they’re not going to stand for it - but no one does.

After an uncomfortable pause, a few whispers breaking through the throng, Queen Fárbauti rests a hand on her son’s shoulder, her face perfectly blank. You can barely make out just how tightly her fingers are digging into his skin, but Býleistr doesn’t flinch. “The Skógr-Jötnar claim Loki Laufeyson as the rightful King of Jotunheim.”

There’s that uproar you’d been warned about. Apparently, the court was not expecting the queen to throw her clan’s weight behind Loki, and while there are - shockingly enough - quite a few giants that look more entertained than displeased, a lot of the Jötnar-proper look pissed. Since they’re some of the tallest and strongest-looking, you find that… concerning.

Loki doesn’t look surprised.

“Tonight,” she continues, “we feast to welcome the honored Völva, and tomorrow—” Fárbauti glances towards Loki for only a moment, expression indecipherable “—tomorrow we crown Loki Laufeyson as King.”

Then she stands abruptly, Loki and Býleistr joining her, and save for the old Völva and the Storm Twins, everyone else falls to their knees. It’s honestly a pretty spectacular sight, and you feel a bit awestruck, easily imagining some grand orchestral number sweeping to life in the background.

The moment doesn’t last long, because as the royal family begins to make their way down the steps of the dais, you suddenly become terribly worried that you’re about to be left behind, and being left behind in a room full of giants who are clearly very on-edge is probably about the same thing as a death sentence.

Crap.

But when Loki reaches the foot of the dais, he pauses for a moment, almost as an afterthought, and turns to you, crooking his finger. Your cheeks heat - is he trying to draw as much attention to you as possible? You thought you were supposed to be keeping a low profile.

He’s crazy, you remind yourself. Chaos personified.

And so, even though you’re shaking so hard that your teeth are chattering - and this time, it’s not from the cold - you push yourself to your feet and scramble after him. You’re almost relieved when he seizes your arm and drags you alongside him from the hall full of giants.

Servants and guards are waiting outside the throne room to escort everyone to their respective chambers, and you suppose that security is a little more high-alert at the moment, considering all of the important guests (and the political upheaval).
The hallway that you’re led down is near to the one where you’ve been staying, but you’re pretty sure it’s on a different level; honestly, with all of the small staircases and unusually-sloping floors, you’re having a hard time telling how many levels the palace even has.

When you finally come to a halt, it’s in front of a pair of massive wooden doors, carved to rival those of the archives. The only difference, as far as you can tell, is that these appear to be inlaid with gold.

Damn. It’s pretty impressive.

The doors swing open with a wave of Loki’s hand, and the servants look slightly unsettled. Oh, you think, that’s right - it doesn’t seem like regular magic is much of a thing here.

‘Regular magic.’ What kind of ridiculous world have you fallen into, that you feel the need to distinguish between ‘regular magic’ and other types of magic?

The room Loki yanks you into is much larger than the one where you’d spent the night, and you’re still trying to take it all in when he sends the servants away, the solid sound of the door swinging shut grabbing your attention.

“Behold,” he says, sweeping his arm out grandly, “Jotunheim’s royal chambers.”

He sounds way too flippant for your liking, considering that there might very well be a riot brewing outside. “Did you just kick the queen of the planet out of her bedroom?” you ask in disbelief, because honestly, you wouldn’t really be that surprised at this point.

“No, don’t be stupid. Fárbauti has her own chambers, of course. What sort of king shares his private chambers with a woman?”

Huh. It’s kind of interesting that that’s a thing on this planet, too; it seems really medieval. But at the same time, you aren’t terribly surprised, because you aren’t sure if marital romance is even a concept here. It seems like the circumstances surrounding Loki’s parents’ relationship are pretty much universally reviled.

“So, where am I going to sleep, then?” You peer about as you take off your cloak, looking for a door to a servant’s chamber, or something else predictably archaic and ridiculous.

There’s a large stone fireplace in the middle of the outer wall, surrounded by a few large, plush cushions, and there are more windows made of the bubbly-looking glass, stretching from the floor to the ceiling. A dark wooden desk sits to one side, and on the other, there is a large, polished table that almost looks to be made of some sort of cream-colored marble. There’s an open doorway not far beyond the desk, and you see what you’re pretty sure is another fur-covered bed behind it.

Pretty sparse furnishings, all in all, for a king.

You turn back to Loki, who’s giving you a strange look. “You will sleep in my bed, of course.”

“But you just said—”

“You are a pet, not a wife,” he scoffs. “There is a difference.”

Okay, freak, you think. Whatever you say.

Loki flings himself down on one of the cushions, groaning, and you assume he must’ve irritated one of his injuries. “You did well, girl.” It’s almost insulting how comfortable he seems around you, like he’s rubbing it in your face that you can’t do anything to him. “The children of Hrímnir seem rather
taken with you."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It is an interesting thing. Had the Völva and her kind seemed more keen on the idea of sacrificing you, it would’ve been terribly bothersome."

You feel cold. "So that wasn’t just… a really bad joke?"

"No." Loki props himself up on his elbows and waves you forward. "Come here."

You eye him suspiciously, but you edge closer anyway, knowing that it’s probably for the best if you keep him in a good mood. "Why?"

"Because I am your master, now your king, and I wish it," he replies with a snide smile, and once you’re only a few feet away, he lunges forward and captures your wrist, yanking you forward.

Spluttering in outrage, you fall across his lap, and Loki artfully splays you over his body, your back pressed against his chest. He sighs contentedly, his arms wrapped around your waist, pinning you to him. "I cannot imagine what you hope to accomplish by wiggling about like this, but I would advise against it."

A fire springs to light in the hearth, and you give up and fall back against him. Asshole.

He tosses your nice little furry hat aside and nuzzles your hair, and you suddenly realize, both horrified and fascinated, that you’ve become some sort of comfort object.

Loki’s cool hands slide under the slits in your tunic-dress, somehow managing to work their way past your layers to find your skin. You stiffen, but he doesn’t go any further than that - he just leaves them there, on your belly.

"You are terribly warm," he says.

"Are you… are you using me as some kind of human blanket?"

"Yes." His amused little huff ruffles your hair. "I suppose that I am. I may have a Jötunn’s form, but I was not raised here - I am not acclimatized, I suppose. Asgard… well, the shining Realm Eternal is a very sunny, warm place. I almost find myself… craving it."

He sounds wistful, and maybe a little confused, and you can’t help but feel… pity. He’d probably be angry if he knew. You try to relax against him. It’s super weird, but this whole situation is weird, so you might as well enjoy the peacefulness while you can.

When his hands stir, you flinch slightly, but you don’t try to push him away - he’s simply stroking your skin lightly, absentmindedly, and it honestly feels nice.

You realize that you’re really, really tired, and he probably is, too. You’d spent days half-dead in a cave, and he’d been in rough shape even before that.

This could’ve been nice. It’s a little uncomfortable to consider, but if only Loki was some normal human man, instead of a crazy magical space-prince - well, make that ‘space-king,’ now - you could’ve… enjoyed this kind of closeness.

Or at least, maybe your enjoyment wouldn’t have come along with such a terribly guilty conscience.

You’ve only just begun to truly sink into Loki’s strangely-comforting embrace when someone bangs
on the door, causing you to jump.

Feeling embarrassed at being caught, you try to scramble away, but his large hands on your belly keep you soundly in place. “Don’t,” he murmurs. “Stay. It’s better this way.”

You aren’t really sure what he means by better, but you go slack as the door swings open; it’s probably a bad idea to have any giants see you trying to wrestle away from their new king.

Especially since he just magnanimously declined killing you.

It’s Býleistr. You should’ve guessed. He’s watching you both with a mixture of horror and fascination, as if he’s seeing something he knows he shouldn’t find interesting, but he does.

Heat floods your cheeks; you guess this does probably look pretty suggestive and scandalous, particularly since you’re a human.

The door swings closed, but not before the guards outside manage to sneak a peek. Wonderful. If Jotunheim had gossip magazines, you’re pretty sure you would’ve just made the front cover.

“I come to offer congratulations, Brother,” Býleistr finally says, stepping closer. Beneath you, you think you feel Loki tense slightly, but he doesn’t budge.

“Do you intend to challenge my claim, Býleistr?”

“I will do what honor demands.”

Loki’s laugh is harsh, and the fact that it’s right in your ear causes you to cringe. “Don’t try speaking in riddles with me, boy. We may be kin, but only I am the God of Lies.”

“Very well.” He sits on one of the cushions, leaning his forearms on his knees. “Let me speak frankly, then, with the God of Lies. I do not care what happens to the throne, Brother -mine. I do not cover it, as you do.”

“However...?”

“However, my elder brother Helblindi does.”

Loki’s fingertips dig into the soft skin of your stomach ever so slightly; it’s the only reaction he shows. “So, then, what am I to expect, Býleistr? You and your brother will attempt to overthrow your rightful king?”

The younger giant steeples his fingers, and you marvel at just how casual they’re being about what essentially amounts to treasons and assassinations.

Creepy-ass Laufeysons...

“Mother has pledged you the fealty of our clan, and I will abide by this, but who can know what Helblindi will do? He has always been quite ruthless. Father favored him for it.”

He stands, rolling to his feet with a grace that you’d never expect from someone so tall. “If Helblindi challenges you, Loki Laufeyson, then I will stand with my brother. My true brother.”

“How touching.”

“It is not a matter of sentiment; as I said, I will do as honor demands.”
“Let us hope, then, that our brother Helblindi can be made to see reason.” Loki’s voice is cold and sharp, and you try to pretend that you’re invisible. “Lest blood be shed unnecessarily.”

The young giant’s gaze falls to rest on you for a moment or two, then, and you try to resist the urge to burrow back against Loki. “Yes,” he says, and that seems to be the end of it. “Let us hope.”

Hesitating, Býleistr turns back at the door, his expression a blank mask. “Brother… the Lesser Sons of Laufey might consider your presence as an opportunity to advance themselves. You should be wary.”

Loki appears taken aback, though he recovers quickly enough. “I am grateful for the warning.”

The younger giant simply looks at the two of you for a moment, gives a slight shrug, then leaves.

“What does that mean?” you hiss. “Who are the Lesser Sons of Laufey?”

“Laufey had other children, with his other women. Helblindi and Býleistr are the sons of Laufey’s queen consort, so they are considered legitimate heirs to the throne, as I am. The rest are relatively far-removed from the line of succession.”

You stare at him over your shoulder, dumbfounded. “You’ve been doing a lot of studying since we got here, huh?”

“Necessity is the greatest motivator.”

“So basically, you’ve got a bunch of half-siblings who probably think that murdering you is the best way to climb up the social ladder, is that right?”

“To murder both of us,” he amends. “And that is correct.

“Wonderful. Great. And why did he tell you?”

Loki scoffs, pressing his nose into your hair once again. “Býleistr might not covet the throne, but that does not mean that he does not covet.”

Your head is throbbing, and you squeeze your eyes closed and lean into the crook of his neck. *Freaking space giants can’t give a straight answer to anything…*

“So, what does that mean? What does he want?”

“You,” he replies. “Is it not obvious? Rare things are meant to be envied, and you are Jotunheim’s only mortal. If I am murdered by someone else, you will likely die alongside me.”

...what?

“What?” you manage to whisper after a moment, horrified.

“Calm yourself, girl. I am notoriously difficult to kill, if you’ll recall.”

*Yeah, you want to say, but I’m not.*
#FrostbiteFridays! I love writing this fic so much. While I don’t want to go on long rants about my Jotunheim and its culture and occupants on every chapter (and believe me, I could), if you ever have any specific burning questions, feel free to hop on over to my ask box and AMA!

<3
You’re staring in the shiny polished mirror in front of you, Gjálp and Greip hovering expectantly at your side. Honestly, you aren’t… entirely sure what to think. They’ve kind of made you look… well, you look grey, for lack of a better description. They’ve cooled your skin tone and darkened your eyelids, and now Gjálp is painting your lips an interesting shade of violet.

“Um,” you begin, but she shushes you and frowns as she brings a bright white crayon-looking thing to your forehead.

Greip rolls her eyes. “The mortal does not need that,” she tells her sister. “She has no markings to highlight.”

“I know,” Gjálp replies, frowning in concentration as she traces down past your eyebrows. “I am going to invent some for her. Inn-Illi’s chin looks like this, yes?”

She leans back, and Greip peers over your shoulder. “Yes.”

“I’m… you’re making me match the… the king?”

“Of course. You are his mortal, after all.”

“Oh.”

Gjálp taps the white makeup-stick to her chin as her eyes rake down your face, and you blush. But hey, at least maybe with all this weird grey powder on your face, your blush will be hidden. That’s a good thing, right?

“We could sharpen her teeth.”

“What?” you squeak.

Her bright red eyes are amused. “You have reached… ah, how to say it? You have reached sexual maturity for a Midgardian, have you not?”

“Of course she has.” Greip plucks the white makeup stick from her sister’s fingers and leans closer to the mirror, beginning to trace along the ridges on her own cheeks. You’re kind of surprised - she doesn’t particularly strike you as the type to get dolled up for a feast. “The king keeps her to warm his bed, after all.”

Heat bleeds across your face at the casual implication, but you’re too distracted by Gjálp’s cool fingers on your jaw, pulling open your mouth to examine your teeth. “So we could.”
“Do not be ridiculous, Sister; In-Unga is neither Jötunn, nor is she able to court.”

It’s super surreal to see a giant pouting, but that’s definitely what Gjálp is doing now.

“Well, In-Unga does not need to court,” she argues. “And--”

“If she presumes to bite the king,” Greip cuts in, “he might kill her.”

**What?**

Gjálp appears suddenly sobered. “That may be so, Sister.”

“What?” you finally manage to ask aloud. Your back is stiff, and your muscles are probably going to ache like crazy in the morning just from the tension.

They both seem almost surprised at the reminder that you can speak. “I thought that I had heard you speak of this with Hrossþjófr. Among the Skógr-Jötnar, as well as some of the other clans, the sharpening of the eye-teeth signals--”

“I know that part,” you blurt out, too horrifically embarrassed to remember that interrupting giants is probably a terrible idea, even if these twins seem relatively chill. “I mean, why would something like that make him kill me?”

Greip tsks. “A mortal pet attempting to mate-mark a king? And not just any king… Loki Laufeyson is wicked and temperamental. He would snuff you out--”

“--like a candle,” Gjálp finishes. “Even Skaði fears him.”

“Sister! Your tongue will get you in trouble.”

“It is the truth.”

“Wait,” you say, deciding to push the whole ‘mate-mark’ thing into some dark recess of your mind to mull over later, “if she’s so afraid of him, then why is she all over him all the time?”

The twins exchange a look, and you wonder if there’s some conversation happening there that you aren’t privy to. “Skaði is meant to marry the king, In-Unga,” Greip finally says, almost gently. “She had her sights set on Prince Helblindi, but now that he has been removed from kingship…”

“She needs Loki if she still wants to be a queen.” Your chest is doing something weird, and you focus on your reflection in the mirror.

“Yes.”

“And the first wife,” Gjálp adds, “is usually the most influential, so it would do her well to move quickly.”

“Like Loki’s mom?”

An awkward pause follows your question, and you think that maybe you shouldn’t have asked; after all, they’re part of Fárbauti’s clan, and Fárbauti definitely had issues with Loki’s mother. But she was the old king Laufey’s first wife, so that has to be significant, doesn’t it?

Clearing her throat, Greip hands the white stick to her sister. “We are much younger than the king, of course. We were not alive when Gunnlög was Queen of Jotunheim.”
Well, it doesn’t look like that line of questioning is going to get you anywhere. “Why does Skaði hate me?” you ask instead. That’s a fair question - she did just suggest that you be used as a human sacrifice. Your stomach twists and churns at the memory.

“Lady Skaði is old enough to remember fondly the days of human thralldom,” Gjálp says. “Most Jötunar were alive during those days, In-Unga. Odin Allfather decided that Midgard was to be the playground for the Æsir alone, and he stole our ancient treasure and cut us off from the rest of the Nine.”

“It is truly the fault of the Æsir, not you little mortals,” Greip adds, patting you on the head. “But the fact remains that many would like to see you suffer for it.”

“And there is the fact, also, that Skaði is jealous that you share Inn-Illi’s bed.”

“Sister!” Greip looks appalled, but Gjálp simply snickers.

Okay, so maybe the makeup isn’t heavy enough to hide your blush. I don’t share his bed, you want to say. At least, not in the way that you’re suggesting. But maybe it’s for the best; at least everyone thinks that Loki doesn’t want you dead.

For now.

The twins deposit you at the door of the king’s new chambers when they’re finished dolling you up, and you step into the main room, feeling incredibly uncomfortable. The looks that the guards sent your way as they’d opened the door to admit you hadn’t been exactly friendly.

Loki is seated at his dark wooden desk, a scroll held in front of his face. His hands, you notice, are pale. Must not be feeling very blue today, you think. He also doesn’t appear to have noticed your arrival, though you guess it’s more likely that he simply doesn’t care.

You shuffle around, wondering what you’re supposed to do. This ‘pet’ thing didn’t exactly come with an instruction manual. Then, you sneeze, and the sound echoes in the nearly-silent room.

Loki glances over the top of the scroll, and you’re startled to find that his eyes are crimson; it’s a weird in-between of the forms you’re used to, and you wonder if maybe he’s having a hard time keeping up with which body he’s supposed to be in.

Weird shape-shifter identity issues.

His eyebrow elegantly arcs in an expression of aristocratic bemusement, and the scroll lowers slightly. “What in the Nine is all this?”

It’s not a tone that suggests overwhelming approval, and a lump forms in your throat. “The twins decided to… well, to decorate me, I guess. Make me look more Jötunn for the celebration tonight.”

“You look like a corpse,” he comments, his eyes flickering back down to the scroll. “Dreadful.”

Well, damn. That stings a hell of a lot more than it has any right to; it wasn’t like you picked out this look in the first place, and even if you had, why do you care what this asshole thinks? Blinking furiously, you try to suppress your tears. Don’t cry, don’t cry.
“I think the idea was to make me look less human.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“They mentioned sharpening my teeth.”

*That* gets his attention, and he carefully places the scroll on the desktop, leaning back in his seat with an expression you can’t quite read. Honestly, those eyes make him look like a freaking *vampire*. Unfortunately, it’s a good look on him.

“They did, did they?” His long fingers curl around the ends of his armrests, and you suddenly feel like maybe you shouldn’t have said anything, because now that you *have* his attention, you aren’t entirely sure what to *do* with it. “And why, one must wonder, would they suggest such a thing?”

You swallow, your nerves cranking up a notch or two. It’s clear his convoluted mind is racing towards some conclusion, though you have no idea what it might be. “I guess they think maybe you’ll be nice to me if I look… good.”

He laughs, and it isn’t very friendly. “Or, perhaps, they wish to make you look more pleasing to some *other* Jötunn male. Perhaps they think that someone might *save* you from me, pitiful little thing that you are.”

“You sound paranoid,” you whisper. “I’m just ‘Loki’s mortal,’ remember?”

You flinch when he stands suddenly and stalks towards you. *God,* you need to learn to just keep your stupid mouth shut.

“That’s right,” he says, tipping your head back with a finger under your chin, and you realize that his eyes are scanning the marks Gjálp has traced across your face. “You are just *Loki’s mortal.*”

Breathing is forgotten, somehow; maybe you’ve been hypnotized. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time. He angles your head to the side, frowning slightly, and your heart stutters as he leans close to examine the lines running around your eyes.

“Interesting,” he says. *At least ‘interesting’ is better than ‘dreadful.’* “Little Gjalp did this, did she? It is a surprisingly accurate recreation.”

You nod.

“Hmm.” Loki’s hand drops away. “Go get in the bed, girl. I have business to attend to before the festivities begin.”

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“Hmm.” Loki’s hand drops away. “Go get in the bed, girl. I have business to attend to before the festivities begin.”

“Can I… can I stay in here?”

He pauses, halfway turned back to his desk. “Why?”

The lump in your throat is still there, and you try to swallow it down. “I don’t like being alone.”

Loki sighs, dramatic as always, and a fire roars to life in the stone hearth with a wave of his hand. “Very well,” he says. “But do not dare to complain of your discomfort.”

You curl up on one of the large cushions by the fire, a little bothered by how relieved you are. But really, *even Loki* is better than being completely alone with nothing but your own thoughts to keep you company.
“What are you doing, girl?”

He was bound to ask, you guess - it isn’t like you’re a master of stealth, and it would be pretty hard to miss you slipping up closer and closer to the desk. In fact, you’re honestly a little surprised he’d let you peer over his shoulder as long as he had.

“I’m trying to figure out these characters,” you say. No point in lying to him, after all. “Those don’t look like any runes I’ve ever seen.”

His handwriting is exceptionally neat and blocky, and the runes he’s writing look kinda familiar, but they’re more spindly, with too many lines and dots to match up with anything you’ve ever seen on Earth.

“That is because this is a script used in the court of Jotunheim; the runes you are familiar with correspond more closely to the True-Speak of the Asgardian peasantry.”

“Huh.” You watch him for a few more minutes. He’s a fast writer, and you wonder what it is that he’s so eager to finish before the feast.

“Do you need something?” Loki doesn’t look up from his work as he says it, but the politeness in his voice is blatantly forced.

“Can you show me how to write my name?”

He pauses, sitting back in his chair and turning to look at you, tapping his pen against his lips. Apparently, something about that is funny, because he looks like he’s about to laugh.

Your eyes narrow. “You don’t remember my name, do you?”

“No,” Loki replies. “I confess, if and when I do give any thought to you, you are simply ‘mortal’ or ‘pet.’”

Bastard.

But even though you’re careful not to actually say it aloud, he grins, like he knows. “What a fearsome temper you have, and for such a little thing.” Glaring, you turn to stalk back to the fire, but a hand on your arm stops you; it’s where the bruise is, hidden beneath your sleeves, and you flinch. “Go on, then, mortal. Tell me your name.”

And so you do, even though you’re pretty sure he’s just going to use it to tease you.

“Here,” he says. Keeping hold of your arm with one hand, he takes the pen and scrawls something on the bottom of the page. “Your name, pet.” He taps the pen on each rune, sounding it out for you, and you feel a faint heat rising to your cheeks.

“I… can I keep it?”

“I hardly have any use for it, now do I?” Letting go of your arm, he tears off the scrap of paper, dangling it in front of your face. “Now, how badly do you want your name, mortal?”

Is that supposed to be some kind of innuendo? You bite your lip, blush deepening.

“I need something from you,” Loki continues, a smirk on his face. “Since Geirröðr’s daughters seem
so terribly taken with you, I want you to find out everything you can about these many siblings of mine.”

Oh. Not innuendo, then. That shouldn’t be disappointing, right? “Can’t you just order someone to come tell you everything you wanna know? You are the king now, I mean.”

“Precisely. I am the king, and I do not want to make it seem as if I’m concerned about such things. It will be taken as a sign of weakness.”

“But… are you concerned?”

“Not unduly. As I said, it is nigh impossible to kill me. Now, what say you, pet?”

“Okay,” you mumble, snatching the paper from his hand.

At least it’s something to do, I guess. And you had already been planning to report everything to him anyway, because for better or for worse, it looks like you and Loki are a team.

What a terrifying thought.

Chapter End Notes

#FrostbiteFridays continue! This one’s shorter and dialogue-heavy, and I hope you enjoy it!

Today’s random fact: Gjálp and Greip are giantess sisters in Norse mythology who are killed by Thor (though, to be fair, Gjálp *does* try to kill him with a river first). They are also mentioned as two of the god Heimdall’s nine mothers!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The next time someone tells you to go easy on unfamiliar drinks at a Frost Giant feast... you should *probably* listen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Anything else you’d care to mention?”

“Um… well, there was one giant lady who seemed super pissed. Ann… anger…”

“Angrboða, I assume.” Loki snorts, sinking back into his cushion. “Unsurprising.”

“Why is it ‘unsurprising’? Other than the fact that basically everyone here *hates* you, I mean.”

You catch yourself too late, but fortunately, he looks more entertained than offended. “This is why mortals are so *widely* regarded as one of the most foolhardy races in the Nine,” he says, extending a hand. “I allow you some *small* measure of independence, and you are so emboldened that you’d dare speak to your master this way.”

*Oh, great. There’s the M-word again.* “I’m just trying to be realistic,” you reply, holding up your hands in a gesture of innocence. You can never be entirely certain if his smiles are masking that ruthlessness that seems to always be bubbling away inside of him, so you figure it’s best to try to soothe him, just in case. “If we’re in this together, then… y’know, I should know what to look out for.”

He gives you a pointed look, hand still extended, and you take it with a sigh, not entirely certain if it’s *good* or *bad* that you aren’t surprised *at all* when he pulls you into his lap.

*At least it isn’t sexual, right?* That’s probably something to be thankful for; other than the teasing that’s *clearly* meant to unsettle you, Loki’s seemed to make it pretty clear that he isn’t interested. What was it that he’d said in the bath? *Oh, right; it was, “I am not tempted by you.”*

*Rude.*

Although, at least that would be less bizarre than being some sort of… *therapy pet,* or something. Or maybe it *wouldn’t* be, because the non-romantic nearness is already confusing enough, and you can’t imagine what it would be like if he actually *tried* something…

And there’s the tricky fact that, when you don’t consider all of the *complications* - the fact that he’s crazy, that he tried to take over Earth, that he’s basically holding you prisoner in the freaky ice palace that’s now technically *his,* to name a few - you might actually be *attracted* to him.

Loki gives your cheek a light pinch. “Are you even *listening* to me, girl?”

“I was distracted.”
“Of course you were.” You try to ignore the way his thumb idly strokes your cheek as he says it; it probably isn’t intentional, anyway. “I said that Angrboða is likely appalled that she’ll have to wed a runt if she wants to solidify her position in court. I am hardly the ideal Jötunn male.”

*I strongly disagree,* your mind whispers.

Oh, no. That’s not what you should be thinking right now, and especially not while you’re in his lap...

“I thought Skaði was supposed to be marrying you.” Internally, you cringe; you feel like an idiot for blurting it out like that, like you care. You *don’t* care.

“Oh? Did you somehow miss the fact that a Jötunn king is expected to take many wives?”

“I didn’t miss it,” you mutter, pulling one of the fur blankets up to your chin. You hope that you manage to melt him. “I just didn’t expect you to suddenly start following tradition.”

The new king snickers. “Norns help me, you are a mouthy little wench. Were you not so terribly irritating, I might almost find it endearing.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t pout, mortal. Your condition could be much worse, you know. You could’ve frozen in that cave, or been devoured by wolves…”

“I get the idea.” Sighing, you wiggle slightly to get comfortable, and Loki suddenly clears his throat. “And I’m grateful,” you bite out. “Is that what you’re waiting for? I’m glad you saved me from dying in the snow. Thank you. I hope you keep it up.”

“Hmm.” Loki is silent for a moment, and you watch the fire crackle, wishing you were in some nice little log cabin, tucked away somewhere pretty and picturesque on Earth. Hell, you wouldn’t even mind having to share it with him, at this point. Your standards have dropped significantly.

“I have to slay some legendary creature,” he says suddenly. “A vargr, a tremendous wolf by the name of Mánagarmr. That is my sacrifice, in your stead.”

He sounds surprisingly serious, and you twist to look up at him, though his expression doesn’t give much away. “I… I didn’t realize it was that close of a thing.”

“Mortal blood,” he says simply, as if that explains anything.

“How is the wolf-slaying thing gonna go down?”

“We will travel to Járnviðr, the Iron-Wood.” Loki smiles, glancing down at you. “On the outskirts of Skaði’s domain, in fact. I think she was pleased to be so included.”

“We?”

“Would you prefer to be left behind, mortal? All of your new little friends will be traveling with me. Save for Býleistr - I am certain that he would be happy enough to stay behind—”

“Okay, okay. I’m going on the trip, I get it. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“And I hope that you know that I’m only allowing you to be so free with me right now because of how cross and frightened you surely will be at the banquet tonight.”
“Cross and frightened?”

“Yes. The feast last night was relatively tame; I expect this one to be a bit more… raucous. As you’re my little treasure, I’m certain that you will be a topic of much conversation. And no,” he continues, shooting you a warning look as you open your mouth, “you will not be absent from the feast. You will sit at my feet and do as you’re told.”

You clench your teeth, squeezing your eyes closed as you fall back against his shoulder.

“Understood? In-Unga?”

“Yeah, Inn-Ill,” you snap, knowing full-well that if you did open your eyes, he’d likely be grinning. “I understand.”

A really, really stocky giant sitting at one of the lower tables with Angrboða keeps making awkward eye contact. You aren’t really sure what to do about it. Close your eyes, maybe? But then you’ll just look like an idiot.

Plus, since Loki’s just handing down bites of food whenever he damn well pleases, you don’t want to accidentally end up with soup spilled on your head, or something else predictably humiliating.

No, probably best to just try to ignore the ten-foot-tall, beady-eyed slab of blue granite who keeps looking right at you.

Since Loki’s sharing the head of the high table with the queen now, your nest is awkwardly off to one side of him - you aren’t really as sheltered as you’d like. At least you have your hat again, and that kind of hides your face. The hat is a definite plus.

You’re definitely keeping it as a souvenir; you deserve a souvenir.

“Here,” Loki says suddenly, thrusting a mug in your face. “Only a sip.”

The mug is fancy - you guess it must be his, which means it probably isn’t poisoned. Or does that mean it’s more likely to be poisoned than any other mug in the room?

Probably the second one.

Smiling slightly, you realize that you’re the exact opposite of a traditional royal food taster; the king is checking the food to make sure it’s safe for you. The thought flusters you slightly, though you reassure yourself that it’s likely just because of the fact that he spent the entire afternoon holding you in front of a fire.

In his palace.

Loki didn’t bother to look down or explain what the drink is, but it’s dark and reddish, and it smells incredibly sharp and spicy. Okay, you think. Here goes nothing.

Whatever it is, it’s warm - you feel heat curl through you almost instantly, and it’s a happy, pleasant sort of warmth. In fact, it makes you realize how cold you’ve been during this whole adventure, even when you’re snuggled up with Jotunheim’s most eligible bachelor.
So, deciding that it’s a sensation worth chasing, you take another sip.

And another.

His hand rests on your head, and you blink slowly as he glances down at you. “Better...?” he begins to ask, but then he sees that the mug is now half-empty, and he pauses for a moment.

_Oops._

“Oh, dear,” he says, deftly plucking it from your hands. “Such a terrible lack of restraint. I do hope that doesn’t kill you.”

He’s such a _drama queen._ You scoff, languidly tilting back your head so that you can see him better. “I’m _warm,_” you announce.

“You are _besotted._”

As soon as he turns back to the table, his hand still resting on your head, you risk a _tiny_ eye-roll. _Stupid Loki._ You don’t _actually_ drink, but you’re _pretty sure_ that isn’t how it works. It’s only been like… five minutes. _Right?_

That one _troll_ of a giant sitting with Angrboða makes eye contact again, and you’re starting to feel a little pissed about it. “Hey,” you whisper, tugging on Loki’s pant leg - _not very easy,_ by the way, since they’re _tight_- “that guy over there is creeping me out.”

You see his jaw clench. _Oops again;_ that’s a violation of the ‘only speak when spoken to’ thing, probably. _But it is a nice view of his jaw from down here…_

He keeps up whatever conversation he’s got going on up there for a while, and in the meantime, you continue to tug on the material of his pants, trying to figure out what exactly it _is._ It’s gotta be some kind of leather, surely, but its super soft and sleek. His hand leaves your head after a moment or two, and as he leans down slightly, frowning, his fingers curl around yours.

“What?”

“That giant. The one with the angry lady. He’s _staring,_ and I don’t like it.”

“ _Norns,_” Loki hisses. “ _Everyone_ is staring, mortal. I’m the _king,_ and you’re the _only_ human in the realm.” He sends a searching look towards the table holding Angrboða’s group, then lets out a resigned sigh. “Alright, then.”

And with that, he grabs you by the back of your tunic and hauls you into his lap.

There’s a slight lull in the conversation in the hall, but you barely notice. His _kingly_ chair is pretty roomy since he isn’t insanely massive, and you curl up pretty easily.

_Hah,_ you think, feeling slightly smug, _suck it, angry-face. Can’t get me now._

He’s chilly, but since you’re _all_ warm and fuzzy, the contrast almost feels nice. _Refreshing_, kind of, like a breeze on a sunny beach. _Hah._ Loki’d die if he heard that. It’s enough to make you giggle, and you eventually doze off with a small smile on your lips.
“Bring her,” you hear, and while you don’t bother opening your eyes - the dark fuzzy warmth is just too nice, honestly, and you’re pretty sure Loki would try to wake you if you were dying - you feel your body being jostled, the background noise soon fading away.

A girl’s voice comes next, slightly amused. “She is very light, sire.”

“Small and foolish - a dangerous pairing. She is to have no more spirits.”

“Yes, my king.”

There’s silence for a while, then a light scraping sound. “Put her on the bed. I will deal with this.”

You aren’t moving anymore, and there’s a nice softness cushioning you. A contented sigh slips out. Perfect.

“Is there anything else I might do for you before you retire, Your Majesty?”

“It has not gone unnoticed, Geirrødardóttir, that you choose to address me as the king before my coronation.”

“Of course, sire; if you are to be the King of Jotunheim, then the King of Jotunheim you shall be.”

“Poetic. You and your sister will keep an eye on my pet when we journey to Járnviðr. Do you accept the task?”

“I do.”

“Good. You may go.”

There’s something soft around you, and something hard beneath you; groaning, you turn your head away in a desperate attempt to avoid the light that’s managing to seep through your eyelids.

The smooth surface pressed against your face stirs, and you force your eyes open as your head practically screams in protest.

Oh. It’s Loki’s bare chest.

You groan again.

His arm wraps around from behind you, his hand covering your eyes. “Wishing you’d listened to me now,” he mumbles, “aren’t you, mortal?”

“Mmm.”

“Pathetic.” Loki sits up, and your head falls against the furs beneath you. You yelp - even that hurts. “I did not even get to bathe last night, since you drank yourself into a stupor. I suppose it might’ve been a good opportunity to drown you.”

Being drowned right now sounds pretty good, actually. Pressing your fingers into your eyes, you roll onto your stomach, trying to burrow away from the daylight. “Go ahead,” you whine. “Kill me.”
Loki laughs. “Don’t tempt me, girl. You can stay in the bed for now, but when I leave my chambers, you’re coming with me.”

Twisting slightly, you peek up at him through your fingers. “Magic?”

“Absolutely not. I have no inclination to waste any more magic on you. And I did warn you. Here.” He plucks a crystal-clear cup from the table by his new massive bed, then drops something in it. “This should make you slightly more bearable.”

Sitting up, you take it from his hand, frowning as the bitter taste creeps down your throat. You feel like you’re going to vomit, and you can only imagine how that would go. Last night is… spotty, at best.

Oh, God.

“Did… was I in your lap? In front of everyone?”

Loki crouches beside the bed, grinning in earnest now. “Why, yes, mortal, you were. I also thought it prudent to abandon my efforts to continue feeding you after you licked honey from my fingers.” He snickers as the blood drains from your face, clearly delighted. “Had you forgotten?”

“Liar.”

“Oh, no. I’m afraid my memory of the evening is all-too-perfect. Ask your little guardians, if you must.” His eyes sparkle. “Ask my brother. I’m certain he noticed.”

The pounding in your head seems to spike. “Oh, God.”

“Yes?”

“Stop smiling like that. Please? What was in that?”

He stands, mercifully, and crosses over to a massive trunk on the other side of the room, which he promptly begins rummaging through. You realize then, much to your embarrassment, that you’re only in a few of the many layers that you’d started with last night.

Wonderful. It just gets better and better.

“I believe it contains some sort of tree sap,” he says. “And a distilled berry from the south, perhaps? I don’t particularly recall - it’s nothing I’ve ever had before.”

You’re about to go on a tirade about him giving you something when he doesn’t even know what’s in it, but he starts to strip off his pants, so you settle for awkwardly averting your eyes and silently burning in mortification.

“At least it warmed you for a time, I suppose. You did mention that in bed last night. Repeatedly.”

He’s just screwing with me now, you assure yourself: No way I was babbling like an idiot in the middle of the night. While snuggling up to the god-king bastard who’s keeping me trapped here. Nope. Didn’t happen, and he can’t prove me wrong.

“Today will be taxing,” he says. You risk a peek and find that he’s already dressed. And blue. “I’ve tasked Geirröör’s daughters with keeping an eye on you.” Loki seems to spot the confusion on your face. “Your little Forest Twins, as you call them. Really, girl, you must become better with names if you’re going to be any use to me.”
“They’re tricky names.”

“I know.” He rests his fingertip on the rim of the glass for just a moment, and you watch in fascination as it refills itself. “Drink that,” he says, “and lie down. I’ll fetch you when I need you.”

You feel way too crappy to argue, and you’re practically asleep by the time you bury your face back against the bed.

In fact, you almost entirely miss the way Loki pulls more of the blankets over you before he leaves the room.

Chapter End Notes

For today's Frostbite Friday fun fact, let's consider the character of Gunnlöð (who I've decided to make Loki's mother in this story). In the actual myths, she's a female jotunn tasked by her father with guarding the mead of poetry... who's then seduced/tricked into giving it up (by Odin).

Of course, in this story, things are a bit different. But, after all, in the original tales, Laufey is Loki's mother and Fárbauti is his father, so I guess some artistic license is ok ;D And, on that note, the whole family seems to have names that hint at early nature myths surrounding the creation of wildfire (according to some theories).
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

You've got a hangover, Loki's having an identity crisis... perfect time for a bath, right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You wake up before Loki comes for you, and your mouth feels like cotton. Your head kind of feels like cotton, too, all fuzzy and dry and scratchy… The crystal water-glass on the table by the bed is full again, and you grab it and drain it.

*Big mistake* - there’s more of the bitter stuff in it, and you gag. *He’s definitely just torturing me for not listening to him*, you decide. But you do feel a little better than the first time you woke up, so you manage to choke the rest of it down.

*God*, you’d kill for a hot chocolate right now.

As you rub your aching eyes, you realize that there *should* be weird gray makeup smeared all over your hands... but there isn’t. Maybe it’s just melded into your skin - that would be just your luck, wouldn’t it?

The room needs a mirror; you feel like you probably look pretty wild at the moment, and even without looking, you know your hair has seen better days. Whatever. It isn’t like you’re here to impress. Except, you wouldn’t *totally* mind if you managed to impress Loki a little, if you’re being completely honest with yourself.

*Ugh. And what did he do with my clothes, anyway?*

Your outer layers are nowhere to be seen, and even though leggings and an under-tunic might be plenty on Earth, it certainly isn’t ideal here. *Though*... it’s warmer in his room than you remember it being yesterday - still a bit cool, of course, but not as frigid as the rest of the palace.

*Hmm. Maybe you’re just getting used to it.*

Apparently being *king* means that you get rugs on the floor, which seems like a pretty fantastic perk, considering how cold and unforgiving the floors in this place tend to be. You pull one of the blankets off of the bed and wrap it around yourself, padding across the floor in your thick socks. The room sways, and you throw out your hands to steady yourself, though it really doesn’t do much for your balance, so you end up just feeling like an idiot.

Taking a deep breath, you look around the room, waiting for your stomach to settle. There’s honestly not much to look at; other than the trunk against the wall and the side-table, there are a few shelves carved into the walls (mostly empty), some tapestries of strange animals, and not much else. Did the old king have more things, and they just cleared it all out when he died? Or are the Frost Giants really just this spartan about their personal rooms? After all, the library’s pretty grand, and so is the rest of the palace.

Once you get your balance under control, you head out into the main room, grimacing at the
heaviness of the bedroom door as you shove it open; it *looks* like wood, but it *feels* like stone. *Freaking Jotunheim.* Nothing is normal.

“Feeling better, little girl?”

*Condescending ass.*

Loki’s back is to you as he sits at his desk, and since he doesn’t turn, you stomp around in front of him. “What happened to the rest of my clothes?”

“I removed them. You’ll have new ones made before we leave for the Iron Wood.”

He doesn’t look up from his book, and you’re sorely tempted to try snatching it from his hands. Maybe you can blame it on this tree-sap hangover or *whatever* it is you’ve got going on right now. “Am I still gray?”

The corner of his lip turns up slightly. “No.”

Frowning, you look at your fingers again, feeling a little suspicious. If it didn’t all just smear off during the night, then he must’ve washed it off himself, which is… Well, you don’t know *what* it is, but the mental image of this giant, arrogant, *(handsome)* villain washing your face carefully enough not to wake you makes your heart do funny little flips.

*Don’t be stupid,* you tell yourself, trying to force you blush away. *I was so out of it last night he probably could’ve slapped me and I wouldn’t have noticed. Maybe he did. Maybe that’s why he’s smiling like that.*

“No more makeup from now on, I’m guessing?”

He laughs. “The lines are acceptable,” he says, and he puts the book down, leaning on one arm as he regards you with bright red eyes. “And some of the court did seem to find it intriguing, so I believe little Gjálp was rather proud of herself.”

*Crap.* How much of the night had you entirely missed? Enough to not even know that you’d been discussed at the dinner table, apparently. “What happened?”

“Quite a bit. My dear brother was rather distant last night. Knowing, as I do, the plight of jealous younger brothers, I can only assume that he was sulking because of the callous way I’ve been flaunting my mortal in his face. It isn’t as if he can *say* anything - Fárbauti would be appalled. I don’t believe your charms have had any effect on her yet, pet.”

“My charms? You make it sound like I’ve got some sort of plan.”

“Even *you* are clever enough to know that your best chance of a comfortable life here involves winning over as many of the Jötnar as possible, mortal. So, *yes,* I do think that it’s planned.”

You keep your mouth shut. It isn’t like the thought hasn’t crossed your mind… and it *is* one of the reasons you try to talk with the twins as much as you do, to make them realize you’re an actual *person*…

“Tell me this,” Loki says. “If another Frost Giant - Býleistr, perhaps, or the as-yet-unseen Helblindi - were to come to you and offer to return you safely back to Midgard, *if only* you would help them to be rid of me, would you not take the chance?”

You tense; is this a trick? *Freaking Trickster God…* “No,” you say, almost surprising yourself, “I
“Why?”

You can’t tell what he’s thinking, and knowing him, it’s probably a dangerous toss-up between amusement and anger. It’s a good question, too; why wouldn’t you jump at any chance to make it back home? *I kind of almost like you, from time to time, you think. I don’t want you to actually die...*

“You saved my life. I figure that deserves some loyalty.”

Loki grins. “Then you’re a bigger fool than I thought, mortal.”

*Yeah, your mind whispers. You’re probably right.*

He’s kept his distance for most of the morning, for which you’re extremely thankful. Really, with all of these uncomfortable feelings you’re having at the moment, the last thing you need is to have him start petting you again.

Would you really not turn on him, even if it meant giving up a chance to go home? And why - just because he’s beautiful? No, it’s more than that. It’s because of the fact that he’s keeping you alive, and you can’t trust any of these other giants any more than you can trust him. Really, there’s no reason to think that they’d keep up their end of any bargains.

That’s a reasonable excuse. But there’s also the fact that you truly do feel some kind of loyalty to him, and it goes beyond whatever you might owe him for saving your life. If you didn’t know any better, you might even think that you were developing a crush.

**Bad. Very, very bad. And stupid. Stockholm Syndrome.**

“You really need to eat something.” Loki’s voice is startling after a long period of silence, and you jump slightly. “Finish your porridge, and I’ll give you a treat.”

You frown down at the unappetizing-looking bowl of ground-up *something* in your hands. “I’m not hungry.”

“Yes, you are. Your stomach will only pain you more if you go without food any longer. Do it.”

Sighing in resignation, you shove a spoonful in your mouth, surprised that something that looks so bland actually turns out to be a little spicy. It’s honestly not too bad. If only you had a camera, you could write a killer food-and-travel blog about this whole thing.

When you’ve scraped it clean - and you actually do feel a little better, though you’d never admit it to him - you get up and go to the desk, holding it in front of you like a prize. “Finished.”

“Good girl. Where is the paper I gave you?”

Flushing slightly, you reach down the front of your tunic and fish the folded-up little slip of paper out of your bra. Where else were you supposed to keep it safe? Loki’s smirking slightly as he plucks it from your fingers, and it only makes you feel more awkward.

He starts scrawling something next to your name, and you lean over the desk, even though it’s
upside-down and in runes you don’t understand. “Come here,” he orders, and you move around to his side of the desk, peering over his shoulder.

“What’s the rest of it say?”

“In-Unga, Lokakona.”

Your eyes narrow. “I know what the first one means. What’s the second?”

Grinning, he hands you back the paper. “Loki’s woman.”

“What?”

“In case I ever misplace you,” he says. “You would want to be returned safely to me, wouldn’t you?”

And though you glare at the paper in your hands, you are kind of fascinated by it. You have always had an interest in languages. “‘Loka’ is possessive?”

He seems startled. “Yes.”

“Hmm. Could you write the sounds underneath? With my alphabet?”

“Next time, perhaps.”

Bribing you with knowledge - truly evil. You decide to change subjects, trying to seem casual and not-awkward as you carefully fold the little scrap and tuck it back into your shirt. “When are we going to the woods with the monster-wolf?”

“Tonight.”

Your heart begins to hammer in your chest; you’ve kind of gotten used to being hidden away by the fireplace, you guess. “Tonight?”

“Must you question everything I say? Yes, tonight. I suppose that was something else you missed while you were drunk out of your mind. The Völtva insists that this sacrifice must be made as soon as possible, otherwise my kingship will be doomed.” Loki rolls his eyes. “The whole ordeal promises to be entirely miserable.”

He touches your cheek suddenly. “You are trembling, mortal. Are you cold? I’d thought that the charm—”

“No,” you bluster, heat bleeding into your cheeks, which he’s certainly going to notice, “I’m just… you know, the last time I was outside here, I almost died. And now we’re going back out. And I’d rather not die yet.”

Loki’s hand drops away. “I see. While I can assure you that it won’t be comfortable by any means, I’ll keep you alive. Never fear.” Then he stands, a mischievous look in his eyes. “The journey will be long,” he says, “and arduous. We should enjoy small comforts while we can.”

With him standing so close to you, you have to tilt your head to meet his gaze, which does absolutely nothing to help your blush. “Meaning…?”

“Meaning, girl, that we’re going to the baths, and I intend to enjoy it fully, for in a few days’ time I’ll likely be battered and covered in wolf-blood.”
“Oh,” you reply. “Uh… have fun.”

“When I said ‘we,’ I meant you and I, and you know it. Now, come along. It isn’t far from the king’s chambers, so I doubt you’ll catch your death of cold along the way.”

Reassuring, you think sullenly, but you shut your mouth and follow him from the room.

“Must we go through this every single time?” His expression is predictably dramatic, his brow raised, as if he’s some sort of long-suffering martyr.

“Yes.”

“Fine,” he sighs. “Go call for Skaði, then. Perhaps she and some of her women would be happy to tend to me.” You sit on the edge of the pool, still entirely-clothed and glowering, and he glides closer to you in the water. “Go ahead, mortal. I’d thought you’d prefer to be alone, but…”

Damn you, Loki.

“I’m keeping my underwear on this time.”

“No, you aren’t.” He smiles up at you cheerily, and you take note of the fact that his eyes have stayed crimson this time, even while the rest of him has shifted back to human - or Asgardian, technically. It’s kind of weird to think about, all of the shapeshifting stuff. If the eyes are the window to the soul… Loki’s soul must be pretty bloody.

“Yes.”

“No. Is it not said on Midgard that cleanliness is next to godliness? Undress and join me, before I lose my temper.”

There’s a slight hint of a bite in that, though he’s still smiling, and you feel your resolve crumple. “Okay,” you mumble, “but please don’t look.”

The look he gives you says something along the lines of, “Why would I, idiot?” But he slides entirely under the water, anyway, and while it’s kind of freaky to think that he’s just lurking down there in the dark of the pool, you guess it’s all the privacy you’re going to get.

You carefully stash your piece of paper with the rest of your clothes, far from the water, then brace yourself as you shimmy out of your underwear, just knowing that he’s going to pop up and start laughing at any moment. Your life has basically become the real-world equivalent of waiting for the jump-scare in a horror movie.

When you slide into the pool, it’s no more graceful than the last time, and you can’t hold back a yelp when Loki pops up directly in front of you. “You remember where to find the sponge, I assume?”

Lips pressed in a thin line, you nod, floundering over to the shelf. Why does it have to be placed on the deeper end of the pool? But then you remember that you and Loki are very much on the shorter side of the Frost Giant height spectrum, so it probably isn’t that inconvenient for the others.

Maybe if I suck up enough, you think, I can convince him to do some renovating.

There’s a little crystal bottle of something next to the sponge, and you snatch it down, too. You give it a sniff, and decide that it smells a little bit like cinnamon, but more… flowery, maybe? Interesting.
Maybe it’s shampoo?

He’s doing the staring thing again - you can feel his gaze on the back of your head. It almost makes you afraid to turn around, but you force yourself; after all, you were just considering the perks of getting on the king’s good side.

Loki’s staying near the edge of the pool, and you make your way towards him, holding up the little bottle. “Is this… a hair thing?”

“Yes,” he replies, amused. “I believe so.”

Coming to a halt about a foot away from him, your chest just barely concealed under the water, you look up at him with a perplexed frown. “I don’t know how this is gonna work,” you gripe. “You’re tall. I can’t reach.”

He scoffs as if you’ve said something ridiculous, but sinks down until the water is up to his shoulders. It’s weird being taller than him for once, and it also brings his eye-level closer to everything you’re hoping is hidden by the darkness of the water, so you decide to get this over with as quickly as possible.

The cinnamon-smelling stuff doesn’t really lather up very well, but you assume it’s supposed to be like that, reaching to work some through his dark hair. At least he has nice hair…

But your heart nearly leaps from your chest when Loki suddenly surges up to his full height, taking hold of your wrist. He twists it carefully, examining your arm. “When did this happen?” he demands, and you realize that he’s talking about the bruise that’s now had time to fully form.

“Oh. It’s from when we first got here. Remember? The queen was insulting your mom and you…” You don’t finish the thought, because Loki looks irritated. Probably shouldn’t mention his mom, you belatedly remind yourself.

“Why did you not tell me? This is deep.”

Seriously, dude? “Didn’t think you’d care,” you reply, trying to tug away.

Loki says nothing, just studying you with a perfectly-blank expression for an uncomfortable moment or two. “I suppose you’re right,” he finally says, releasing you, and then he sinks back into the water. “Continue.”

Oookay, you think. Awkward.

You quickly decide that moving behind him is much more conducive to reaching his long hair, and it has the added benefit of hiding you from those eyes that seem to see way more than they should. When you announce that you’re finished, he ducks under the water, then turns to you as soon as he surfaces. “Yours, as well. Unless you want me to do it for you.”

His sly smile reminds you of the way he practically drowned you last time he ‘washed your hair,’ so you’re quick to do it yourself. Still, some part of you can’t help but wonder what it would be like to have his long fingers working against your scalp.

In fact, despite not having much experience with this sort of thing, you can only imagine that those hands would feel nice everywhere, particularly if he took the time to be gentle...

Christ, you’ve got to learn to chill. Squeezing your eyes closed and holding your nose, you plunge under the water, hoping that maybe it’ll also rinse some of this stupid desire away, too.
But when you open your eyes, Loki’s face is right there, and you’re so close to the edge of the pool that there’s really nowhere to go. “What were you thinking, mortal?” he says, his voice like silk. “Just now. I am terribly curious.”

Damn it. Caught red-handed. You wish you could just die on the spot. “Midgard,” you blurt out. “I mean, Earth. I was thinking about someone on Earth.”

“Were you?” he breathes, and you can hear your heartbeat rushing in your ears. Those hands you’d been checking out so shamelessly are suddenly on your waist, though he doesn’t actually pull you any closer. “Who might that be?”

“A friend.”

His eyes narrow slightly as he smiles, and think you know now what a rabbit feels like right before it’s caught in the jaws of a fox. “You were not thinking of a friend, little liar. Does my thrall have a paramour left behind on Midgard?”

Say yes, you tell yourself. That’s the best thing to say, right? If you tell him that you’re just daydreaming about some non-existent human boyfriend, then maybe you can hide the fact that you were really daydreaming about him.

“Yes,” you whisper.

Loki looks slightly surprised for a moment, but then the predatory look returns, his fingers digging lightly into your skin. “More lies. You have no lover on Midgard, mortal; I can see the deceit in your eyes.”

That’s really not fair, you decide. Why does he have to be the God of Lies? But one of his thumbs is stroking the skin of your side, now, so you just dig yourself deeper into the hole with another attempt to mislead him. “But there’s someone I like. A guy I know. On Earth.”

“I see. Does this mortal man have a name?”

For God’s sake, Loki, you think, just let it go! Please. Naked interrogation really isn’t fair, and neither is his freakish sense of smell that can apparently pick up on feelings. But Loki isn’t really the type to just let things go, and your mind races to come up with something reasonably convincing. “Chris?” you venture, cursing yourself for making it sound like a question. “Chris.”

“What a dull name.”

“Well… I like it.”

“I’m sure you do.” One hand leaves your waist, coming to rest on the ledge behind you. He’s got you trapped, even more so than usual.

Oh my God, you think, pressing yourself against the stone. What is he doing? Loki’s gaze is hypnotizing, and you’re entirely lost. Should you try slapping him again, maybe?

He takes a deep, slow breath, and his lips part, an almost-eager look gracing his features. “What are you thinking now, girl?”

On the verge of choking from the tension, you almost let out a sob of relief when someone knocks on the door. I don’t even care if it’s Skaði, you decided. I don’t care who it is, as long as they distract him.
He *sees* your relief, too, and he smirks, not budging even a *single damned inch* as he calls for whoever it is outside the door to enter. At least whoever it is can’t see your face, which is surely flushed to a ridiculous degree.

“*Sire?*”

*Damn it, it’s Greip.* You sink further into the water, wishing you could just die right then and there. At least Loki finally breaks eye contact.

“Leave them on the floor, and pack the rest. We will be going directly to the throne room from here.”

You hear the door close again. It wasn’t much of a reprieve.

But Loki looks almost confused as he examines you now, his brow furrowed. “What are you playing at, mortal?” His hand doesn’t leave your side.

“*Me?* What the hell are you *doing?*”

Your voice cracks, but you can’t be bothered to care, too busy processing the fact that you basically just shrieked in his face. *While naked.* And if *memory serves,* Loki doesn’t particularly care for shrieking.

“You—“ Stopping abruptly, Loki shakes his head, and his eyes bleed back to that interesting shade of blue-green. He takes a deep breath, then finally lets go of your waist.

*Now if he’d only back up a step or two...*

“It is your *scent,*” he accuses. “How are you doing this?”

Your mouth falls open. *How am I...?*

The big icy idiot doesn’t *know,* you realize then. He hasn’t figured it out - he knows that your scent is occasionally *changing,* and he might have some vague sensation of the feelings inspiring it, but...

*He doesn’t understand it.*

Loki’s frown deepens. “Well, mortal?”

*Poor guy,* you think. It must be a new thing for him, like some sixth sense he never knew he had. *Or seventh sense.* *Dude already probably has a sixth sense.*

“I’m not... Loki, I’m not *doing anything.*”

“*Sire.*”

“*Sire,* then, I’m not *doing anything.* I’m just... existing. I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s some giant thing, I guess.” His expression isn’t changing, and you’re getting more and more flustered.

“I’m a human!” you cry. “I can’t magically alter my *smell. You’re* the superpowered one here, okay?”

His head cocks slightly to one side, as if he’s mulling it over. “I do not care for this,” he says after a moment. “Spending so much time in this place. In my *birth-form.*”

There’s a little bit of a snarl in there, and it makes you jump, but it’s not like you can back up any
But he stops himself abruptly once again, his lips pressed into a thin line. Without another word, he steps back and sinks under the water. You gape, staring at the ripples on the surface, afraid to budge even an inch.

Oh, fantastic, you think. He’s cracking up. Losing it. The pressure’s getting to him, and the whole ‘finding out he’s a different species’ thing isn’t helping. You can’t let him have a meltdown, though – he’s your ticket out of this frozen hellhole.

Teamwork makes the dreamwork.

And so, by the time he pops back up out of the steaming water, a faintly pink glow to his pale skin, you’ve decided to try to delicately steer him in a more stable direction. Apparently, though, it isn’t necessary, because the smug king-of-everything look is back on his face.

You wish you were that good at hiding your feelings.

“No matter,” he says lightly. “I am, above all else, adaptable. These primitive sensations are a minor distraction, at most.”

Yeah, okay, buddy, you think. Like you didn’t just look like you were about to take a bite out of my neck like some kinda bad Twilight reboot. Maybe the earlier observation about him having a kind of vampiresque flair was a little too spot-on. Freaking space giants and their creepy-ass red eyes and talking about biting people—

“Get out. We need to prepare.”

The guy’s gonna give you whiplash. “Prepare?’

“Yes.” Loki glides over to the ledge and hoists himself out of the water with no warning, splashing you and giving you a good view of his… back. Yeah, his back. That’s definitely all you saw. You sink up to your nose in the water. Can today get any worse?

And your freaking tree-sap-hangover-headache is still lingering, too.

“I need to ensure that you’re well-charmed before we leave Utgard,” he says from somewhere behind you. “We will be making few stops along the way, and I’d rather ensure that you aren’t simply a frozen corpse by the time we arrive in Járnviðr.”

“How long will it take? The trip, I mean. How long will we be on the road?”

“According to Skaði, it should only take four days. Give or take, depending on the conditions.”

“Four days?” You risk a peek over your shoulder; luckily, he’s got his pants on already. “I can’t… I mean, I don’t think I could survive four hours out there, much less four days.”

Crouching by the poolside, Loki pats you lightly on the head, smiling like he didn’t almost just have a major identity crisis in the middle of bathtime. “Not to worry, pet,” he says. “I shall keep you warm.”

He rises and makes his way to the door, and you turn to watch him. “I will be outside the door,” he says. “You have five minutes.”

That isn’t much time at all, and as soon as the door shuts behind him, you scramble from the pool,
heart pounding in your frantic race against the clock.

The coronation is surprisingly low-key. Maybe it’s because all of the Frost Giants are kind of unenthused about their unexpected new king. *Maybe* they’re hoping that the monster-wolf is going to eat him (and you), and that they can just resume with their normal routines next week. That’s not to say it isn’t grand, or stressful... but at this point, maybe you’re just too tired to really take it all in.

Greip and Gjálp are both glued to your sides, because your usual pet-bed arrangement isn’t there. Apparently the whole ordeal involves a lot of alternating standing and kneeling, and Gjálp’s hand on your shoulder lets you follow along with the whole thing without really understanding any of it.

Because whatever language is being spoken now isn’t one you can understand. All you know is that there’s a good bit of rhyming going on, and people talking in booming, rhythmic verses. You kinda feel like you’re watching a bizarre interpretation of Shakespeare.

The royal family stands at the foot of the dais with the Völva and the Storm Twins, and the large throne and the two smaller ones beside it are conspicuously empty. *Geez*, you think. *Sucks for Helblindi, coming home and finding out that his seat’s been taken.*

And then you remember that Helblindi is supposedly hunting in the south, which means you’re apparently going to be heading straight towards him. Him *and* a monstrous, giant-eating wolf.

It becomes very difficult to pay attention to anything after that - your odds of survival seem like they might be dipping once again.

Fárbauti herself eventually puts the crown on Loki’s head. It must be ceremonial or something, because you haven’t seen it before, and it looks like it’s made of stripes of ice and gold. They really seem to like their line-work, you muse, glancing at the carved walls. *Must be because of their skin.* You also decide that the crown is *surely* made of some kind of glass or crystal... even Frost Giants wouldn’t actually wear a crown of ice, *would* they?

The queen says something and everyone falls to their knees, and you get dragged along with them. Loki turns and stalks up the steps, a new fur-trimmed red cloak billowing behind him. He *does* look pretty impressive, you have to admit. *Regal.* It’s honestly kinda doing things for you, you’re embarrassed to note, and you’re pretty glad that he’s a good distance away.

But Gjálp *does* give you a strange look, and you wish you could just melt through the floor.

And then tables and cushions and food are brought into the throne room after a few more impassioned (but completely incomprehensible) words by Heiðr, and Gjálp steers you from the room, her sister following close behind.

“She wishes for us to feed you well away from the others, In-Unga,” she whispers. “The royal caravan will depart once the feasting is done, and you are to be safely packed away in our sleigh to await His Majesty’s convenience.”

*Oh, am I?* you think snidely, though you keep your mouth shut. Loki hadn’t really bothered to tell you much of *anything* about this stupid trip, other than demanding you put on a few extra underlayers. You kind of feel like a marshmallow, bundled up in fabrics and furs. At least *that’s* a positive, you guess - even if you do slip in the icy halls and fall flat on your ass, you’ll be well-cushioned.
The twins lead you back to the little side-chamber where they’d taken you before, and the fire is already roaring along in the hearth. All of the food on the table is familiar (well, familiar for Jotunheim cuisine, that is). Loki must be trying not to get too experimental with your tolerance for foreign foods right before he drags you out into the wilderness. How considerate.

You decide to be daring and actually sit at the table like a normal human being this time, and though Greip and Gjálp share a slightly-bemused glance that doesn’t go unnoticed, they don’t say anything. Instead, they sit down beside you and start eating with a ferocity that is honestly a little impressive.

Gjálp slurps down a bowl of broth, wiping her mouth on her forearm, and Greip appears slightly exasperated. “I do hope that you remember not to demonstrate such an atrocious lack of manners in front of Mother and Father,” she says.

“I am more a lady than you, Sister, when the situation calls for it.”

Scoffing, Greip turns to you. “Are you recovered from the night, mortal?”

“Um.” You stare at her for a second, spoon frozen in your hand, totally mortified. You’d hoped that the stares and smirks from some of the giants in the throne room was the only reference to the previous night’s transgressions that you’d have to endure. Apparently not.

“I mean your intoxication,” she clarifies, “and falling asleep in the lap of Inn-Illi.” Her look is one of wide-eyed curiosity, like she genuinely believes you didn’t understand the question, and not that you’re just too horrifically embarrassed to answer.

You shove a spoonful of tuber-soup in your mouth to give you a second or two to stall, but now both of them are watching you. Can’t catch a break.

“The king did not punish you too harshly, did he?” Greip asks.

What an awkward question. Are you supposed to say that he did, or that he didn’t? Apparently it’s something he’s expected to do, and it’s not like he hasn’t threatened it before… And as far as they know, that bruise on your arm was entirely intentional on Loki’s part.

Maybe you should be vague.

“Nothing too bad,” you mumble.

The twins exchange a look, but they don’t ask you anything else as you finish your soup, and before you know it, it’s time to pack up on your sleigh and ride off into the snowstorm.

You really hope Loki’s charm continues to hold.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all make me so happy <3 I’m gonna try to catch up on replying to comments ASAP, but I also wanna take a moment here to say that they’re wonderful and I appreciate them so, SO MUCH!!

Longer chapters were requested, so longer chapters are here!
Poor Loki. I can't even imagine just being able to like... smell lust, or fear, or anger. He's so used to thinking of the Jotnar as animals, and it's almost like a confirmation for him that he's more monster than man.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

You aren’t too sure about this whole ‘leaving the palace’ thing. After all, the palace is at least... kind of safe, right? Relatively?

Too bad you don’t have a say.

Chapter Notes

When the twins mentioned a ‘sleigh,’ you weren’t entirely prepared for this… thing. For one thing, it’s so massive that it almost reminds you of a train car, and for another, it’s entirely enclosed.

More pressing than its sheer size, however, is the fact that the thing appears to be pulled by two terrifyingly-large, white-furred wooly rhinos. You freeze just inside the entrance to the courtyard where the sleigh is parked, your knees shaking.

“Is that…” you begin, but you falter as the twins both turn to stare at you. “Are those rhinoceroses?”

You can tell from the expression on their faces that they have no clue what you’re talking about, and Greip steps up to pat one of the beasts on its flank. It kneads its feet against the ground like an excited cat, and you notice then that the thing has claws. Big ones.

Oh, God. Not a rhino, then.

“This is Hornburi,” she says proudly, “and beside him you see his brother Vámúli. I have reared them since they were small. They are very loyal.”

The thing makes a loud bellowing sound, and you jump, fighting the urge to go flying back into the palace to look for Loki. You’re pretty sure he won’t let some freakish prehistoric rhino-tiger hybrid eat you, and right now, that’s the kind of reassurance you need.

“There is no need to be frightened, In-Unga,” Gjálp is quick to reassure you, steering you towards the door of the sleigh-carriage. “Poor little thing. I told you he should keep her in the palace, Sister.”

“Without the king here to keep her alive, how long could she survive the court?”

Please stop talking over my head, you think. Especially about me dying. Not really helping.

Gjálp sighs loudly. “We could stay behind.”

“Lady Skaði would never permit it.” She cocks her head slightly. “Get her inside; I can hear stirrings. The feast is likely ending, and the king does not want her out in the chaos of the leave-taking.”

You have to be practically hoisted up to reach the step into the sleigh, and you don’t make a very graceful landing. Everything is made of dark wood on the inside, though it’s filled with mats and cushions. In fact, even the inner walls are covered with thickly-woven swaths of fabric. There are a few windows, but they have that same bubbly, thick glass as some of the ones in the palace, so other
than letting in some light, you can’t imagine that they’re very useful.

Gjálp clambers in after you. “This is very exciting,” she says. “I have never travelled in such a large convoy before, and we have never had an entire sleigh to ourselves.”

You find a nice little nook in between some boxes and baskets that presumably hold some kind of supplies, and once you’ve snuggled in, she drops a massive duvet-like blanket in your lap. “No one else is riding in here?”

“No one else,” Greip calls from the door, “unless one of the riders tires of the elements and decides to shelter with us. If we do not reach a resting-post before the party decides to halt for the night, we may have company, but I am hopeful that we will not be disturbed.”

The doorway is fairly wide, and over her shoulder you see several giants start to trickle into the courtyard, carrying bags and shields and all sorts of other interesting-looking things. You’re so distracted staring behind her that you almost miss the flash of bright-white fur that appears by her knees.

“My,” she gasps, “wherever did you come from?”

Gjálp moves forward for a better view, but you stay firmly where you are - no more freaky alien creatures for me, thanks, you think.

“What is it, Sister?”

“A melrakki.” She stoops down and hefts the thing in her arms, and it makes an obscenely loud purring sound. You’re almost shocked by how familiar it looks - it’s a fox. A worryingly-large, fluffy, suspiciously-feline looking fox, but still… the thing is definitely some kind of fox.

“Where is your collar?” Greip coos, and the fox - melrakki, or whatever it is - purrs again, its narrow, shiny-black eyes giving off a look of supreme satisfaction.

“Do you suppose he is feral?” her sister asks.

“He does not seem feral. In any case, they are said to be auspicious. I say we bring him along.”

Hell no, you think. Like, sure, he’s cute and all, but this isn’t some little earthly Arctic fox - the thing’s the size of a sturdy wolf, and you can see its sharp little teeth as it yawns.

But it looks like you’re overruled, because Gjálp claps her hands in excitement and hefts the giant furball into the sleigh, and Greip climbs in after, pulling the door closed. The twins both settle cross-legged onto the floor near you, and you keep a wary eye on the toothy interloper that almost seems to be grinning at you.

“What shall we call him?” Gjálp asks, scratching the melrakki behind one of its large ears.

“Hvítaský,” Greip declares.

Yeah, no, you decide. That thing’s a Snowball if you’ve ever seen one. “How about ‘Snowball?’”

They both look amused at that. “It is a very strange name, In-Unga,” Gjálp says.

“A strange name for strange times,” Greip remarks. The creature pads over and climbs into her lap, curling up with its tail under its chin. “I like it. Snowball he shall be.”

You can’t help but laugh a bit at that; she says it like it’s some sort of grand, exotic title. “It’s fairly
common as a name for pets, where I’m from.”

It’s good that you have something to talk about to distract you, because there’s a lot of noise outside of the sleigh now, and it’s making you tense. Part of you almost wishes Loki would just sling you over his shoulder again; at least you know he’s capable of magicking up miracle cures when you’re about to die of hypothermia.

Greip seems incredibly taken with her new pet, which already seems to be on the verge of falling asleep in her lap. “Mortals have pets?” she says, slightly surprised.

You blink. “Of course,” you say. “I mean… humans are the top of the food chain on Earth, you know. On Midgard, I mean. We have all kinds of pets.”

“I should like to visit Midgard, someday,” Gjálp declares. She’s kneeling by one of the trunks now, digging around for something. “Father says that there are many interesting plants that grow on Midgard, and that even the winters are mild.”

“He’s… he’s been there?”

“Yes, many Jötnar have been there, though we have never had the opportunity, as we were born after Odin’s War.”

“Oh.”

Gjálp pulls a heavy-looking tome out of the trunk and places it in your lap. “Prince Býleistr thought that this might entertain you for a while, mortal. There are pictures, even if you cannot read it.”

That’s… interesting. “What’s it about?” you ask, flipping open the cover. The pictures are brightly-colored and gilded, and the first page shows a massive tree.

“It is an account of the Nine Realms,” she replies, glancing over the page. “And its peoples.”

“Oh.” You flip to the next page, and there’s a portrait of a young, white-haired young giant with a smirk on his face. His eyes are green. “Who is this?”

“I am not certain.” She plucks the book from your hands and holds it up so that her sister can see, and you watch Greip quickly scan over the page.

“It is the Witch-King Hveðrungr,” she says, wrinkling her nose slightly. “Of the Stormr-Jötnar. He wrote it, in ancient days. It is said that he traveled all the worlds, in the days when Borr, son of Búri, ruled the Realm Eternal. He was an Æsir-friend and elf-friend alike.”

From the tone of her voice, he isn’t a very well-thought-of historical figure on Jotunheim, but that sounds to you like a pretty impressive resume. “He has green eyes.”

“The mark of a sorcerer.” There’s a little bit of awe in her tone, mixed with the disapproval. “And a shapeshifter. The Stormr-Jötnar are rife with them, and always have been.”

The fox in her lap makes an irritated little yelp, and she continues petting him. What an attention hog, you think.

“Mother says that they mixed with the Vanir in the old days,” Gjálp helpfully adds. “But I have also heard it said that they have Ljósálfar blood.”

You aren’t entirely sure what all of that means, but it’s clearly not a good thing. “Ljósálfar?”
“The Light Elves of Alfheim. They are known for their skin-changing.”

*Skin-changing makes it sound even creepier,* you decide. “And he’s… dead now, I guess?”

“Killed in battle,” Greip says. “They say he went mad.”

Gjálp places the book back in your hands, and you smooth your finger over the runes at the bottom of the page, wishing you could read them. The witch-king on the page… well, you can’t deny that he looks a *lot* like your own *favorite* blue sorcerer - it’s something in his eyes, like he knows some big, secret joke.

Maybe you can ask one of the Storm-Twins more about him. Greip and Gjálp seem to think of magic-users in general as pretty *scandalous*, and you doubt they know much beyond the fact that the guy went crazy and had to be killed.

There’s more bellowing outside only a few minutes later, and you can only assume that more of the rhino-things are being brought in to load up for the trip. Nerves on-edge, you flip to another page, wishing that Loki would make an appearance. He *promised* he’d keep you safe.

Someone knocks sharply on the door, and then it opens to reveal a pointy-eared giant wearing a *surprising* amount of layers. *I guess no one wants to be completely miserable for a road trip that might last almost a week.*

“We are ready, my ladies,” he says to the twins, giving a slight bow. “We will be near the head of the convoy. Is there anything you require?”

“No,” Greip says. “We are ready to depart.”

He closes the door firmly, and you try to ignore the rapid pounding of your heart as the sleigh lurches into motion.

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You aren’t sure how long it’s been, though it’s been dark outside for quite some time now, the sun fully set and only a bit of moonlight making it through the whirling snow and in the thick windows of the sleigh. One of the benefits of being relatively tiny, you’ve decided, is that you can move about pretty easily inside the sleigh, while the twins have to duck their heads anytime they want to stand. You’ve gotten pretty restless.

Greip has been asleep for a while with the purring Snowball curled up in her lap - you’re still getting a kick out of that name - and Gjálp is reading something by lamplight. You’re tempted to try asking her a bunch of questions, but… things are kind of weird, and you aren’t really sure how chatty you can get before they decide that you aren’t being very ‘pet-like’ and get annoyed.

But you *have* noticed that Gjálp seems to be the more sentimental, excitable of the two of them, so maybe you can get her to share some interesting gossip. You are *supposed* to be Loki’s spy, right?

And then you remember the whole ‘Lokakona’ thing, and you grimace. *I’m not his woman,* you think, pulling your quilt tighter around your shoulders as you try to make out what lies beyond the window at the front of the sleigh. *I’m not ‘his’ anything. Ass.*
Unfortunately, with nothing to distract you, your mind begins to wander, and where it decides to wander is right back to the steam-pool where Loki’d looked at you like he wanted to devour you.

*Kill me now.*

Heat burns through you, and you peek over your shoulder to make sure Gjálp isn’t giving you any knowing looks. You’re relieved to see that she still has her eyes glued to her book. For a minute, you almost consider asking her about the scent thing, because human senses definitely aren’t that advanced, but you’re too afraid that she’d figure out why you were asking.

You can’t blot out the phantom sensation of his thumb stroking the soft skin of your side, or the way his dark hair clung to his neck from the steam of the bath, or the rasp in his freaking voice…

*Gotta get a hold of yourself, lady.*

“Hey,” you ask, “when do you think we’ll stop and eat, or take a break?” Hopefully, you sound casual - you really don’t want anyone to figure out that you’re just really wanting to see Loki.

Gjálp looks up. “I doubt very much that we will stop for hours yet, In-Unga,” she says. “It is best if we travel as far as possible, while the weather allows. There is food here, if you are hungry. I would also suggest that you sleep, if you are tired; it will be a long night.”

“Oh, okay.” You return to your spot and curl up with the book again, hoping that maybe you can at least let the whir of the wind outside lull you to sleep.

“Sire!”

Greip’s startled, sleepy voice wakes you suddenly, and you open your eyes to find Loki perched in the open doorway, his cloak whipping in the wind. Snow filters into the sleigh, and you realize that it’s still speeding along.

You stare at him. *So how…? Did he just leap onto the side of a moving sleigh?*

Loki slips inside and pulls the door closed behind him, dusting snow from his clothing. “I tire of the wind,” he announces, his lips turned in an imperious frown. The twins exchange a look, but he ignores them, carefully selecting a large cushion at the front of the sleigh, upon which he promptly sprawls.

Once he’s settled in, he raises his hand, pointing one long finger at the fox-creature in Greip’s lap. “What,” he says slowly, “is this?”

Its long tongue lolls as it appears to grin at him, and you notice that Greip leans forward, slightly protective. “This is a melrakki, sire. We found him in the courtyard, and—”

“And naturally,” Loki drawls, “you decided that he should be brought along on this expedition.”

Gjálp clears her throat awkwardly - at least you aren’t the only one he intimidates. “They are good omens,” she offers. “And he is clearly domesticated.”

“Hmm.”
The melrakki ducks its furry head under its tail as Loki continues to glower at it, but then he suddenly breaks into a smirk. “Auspicious, indeed,” he says. “Come here, mortal.”

You stare at him. Is he really going to make you come… cuddle with him? In front of the twins?

He crooks a finger, his eyes dark in the dim light. Apparently so.

Full of apprehension, you flounder your way to your feet and shuffle to his side. Oh my God, you shriek internally, what is the matter with you, Loki? Can he not see how horrifically awkward this is for everyone?

Loki spreads his legs slightly as he settles back against his cushions, and your face feels like it’s catching fire. What…?

“Sit, pet.”

You try to gingerly perch on his knee, despite the sleigh jostling along, but Loki is quick to wrap his arms around you and drag you back against him as he lounges. Body stiff, you do your very best not to melt when you feel his breath against your ear.

“After last night,” he whispers, “you can hardly pretend to be bashful, can you?”

Damn him. Closing your eyes, you try to force your muscles to relax. It’s not like you can throw a fit in front of the twins, because knowing Loki, he’d probably lose his mind and actually punish you for it. And even if Greip and Gjálp are weirded out by their new king popping in for a surprise sleepover, they’re both too afraid of him to actually say anything about it.

“You’re king is going to sleep.” Loki tucks the quilt around you both, as if he hasn’t a care in the world. “I suggest you all do the same.”

You wake up some time later, not even having realized that you’d fallen asleep. The inside of the sleigh is dark, only one hanging lantern left swaying at the other end. Gjálp is slumped over with her book in her lap, and Greip is curled up on a cushion not far from her, the aptly-named Snowball nestled against her side.

And Loki… well, you don’t know how you managed it, but you must’ve rolled over to get more comfortable at some point, because you’re laying flat on top of him now, chest to chest, your head tucked under his chin. His breathing is so steady. Peaceful. Loki isn’t someone you’d typically describe as peaceful.

He makes a sleepy humming sound, and you cringe as you realize that your stirring must’ve woken him. Or maybe it didn’t, because instead of the half-awake grumbling you anticipate, you feel one of his large hands rub a few light circles on the small of your back.

Almost like… almost like he’s trying to soothe you back to sleep.

You aren’t really sure what to make of that.

But it feels nice, and you don’t have much time to fret over it all before you slip back into dreams.
The fox-thing is right in your face when you wake up again, peering down at you with a toothy grin. Your heart nearly stops, and you’re pretty sure it’s laughing at you. Greip’s face appears above it only a moment later, blinking sleepily.

“We’ve come to a halt, In-Unga,” she says. “There is a small lodge by the river here, and the king has called for a rest. The animals need to be fed and watered.”

You sit up; Loki is nowhere to be seen.

Thank goodness, you think. I really need to pee. For a so-called ‘primitive’ race, the Frost Giants seem to have pretty high standards as far as the whole interior-plumbing situation is concerned, so you’re hoping that holds true even for whatever medieval version of an econo-lodge you’ve stopped at now.

“Can I get out?” you ask.

“Of course. We shall all go inside and refresh ourselves. Because we are near the head of the convoy with the royal party, we will be first.”

Gjálp slings a large bag over her shoulder and opens the door, hopping out into the snow. It’s daylight now, but it still looks cold as hell, and suddenly you’re kind of second-guessing your eagerness to get out of the carriage. “Come, mortal,” she calls, holding out a hand. “We must move quickly; I do not imagine the king will wish to stop for long.”

You let her help you out of the sleigh, immediately sinking into snow up past your knees. Great.

“Goodness,” Greip says, laughing as she jumps out behind you. “Such short little legs you have! Carry her, Sister.”

“Oh,” you begin, flushing, “you really don’t have to—”

“Nonsense.” Gjálp kneels down, apparently unbothered by the snow. “You will be terribly slow if you try to push through this. Come.”

And so you climb onto her back, accepting the fact that you’re pretty darn useless outside on this stupid planet. At least they’re being nice about it, you guess.

Snowball bursts out of the sleigh behind Greip and starts bouncing off through the snow with unbridled exuberance. “Wait!” she cries, but the fox-thing has already disappeared into the snow-covered brush alongside the roadway, and her face falls.

“I am certain he will come back,” her sister reassures. “It is the nature of wild things to run, after all.”

“You are right,” Greip agrees, but she still looks pretty crestfallen.

While it would probably be wise to keep your head down, your curiosity gets the better of you, and you peer around from your vantage point. Once Gjálp rounds to the other side of the sleigh, you spy the so-called ‘small lodge,’ and surprise, surprise, it isn’t really all that small.

I guess everything’s bigger on Jotunheim.

The lodge is round, with a large, domed roof, and save for the doorways, the entire stone structure is covered with a thick layer of dark ice. Cool, you think. Like a crazy giant igloo.
There are a lot of Frost Giants milling about outside, some that you kind of recognize from the palace, some that you’ve never seen before. One particular cluster seems to have caught notice of you, and from the way they’re staring, you guess they didn’t get the memo about Loki’s mortal.

“...frá Miðgarði,” you hear one of the men say as Greip and Gjálp pass by them. Hey, you think, Midgard! I know what that means. Then you realize that they’re probably saying something pretty unsavory about you, and some of your excitement fades.

Once you enter the lodge, you find that almost the entire structure is made up of one large, open room. There’s a huge fire burning in the center, and stone tables and benches are set up all around it. In some ways, it almost reminds you of a cafeteria, or like… a really sparsely-decorated event center.

Heiðr and Hrossþjófr are already seated at a table, and they wave you over. Gjálp settles you carefully onto one of the benches, and you try to ignore the fact that a ton of giants are watching you with apparent consternation.

Welp, it seems like humans at the dinner table must be a pretty big faux-pas.

“How fares our mortal?” Hrossþjófr asks, crossing his arms across his chest. “It seems that you’ve survived the night in one piece.”

“Of course she did,” his sister says. “Fate wills it so.” And then she smiles at you, eyes sparkling. “And so does Loki Laufeyson.”

You aren’t entirely sure why, but that makes you blush. They must’ve been traveling with him at the front of the caravan - do they know that he snuck away during the night to snuggle up to you like some sort of fickle, bad-tempered cat? Probably.

“I don’t think that Fate really likes me all that much,” you say softly, surreptitiously searching the room for Loki. Where is he? You’d actually kind of hoped you’d get to be with him for a little while, considering he’s… well, you aren’t sure what he is anymore. Not a friend, of course, but…

Something.

“Nonsense,” Greip says. “Fate shines on you, In-Unga. You have a place and a purpose. What more could a mortal desire?”

Oh, boy, you think. There’s so much I could say to that.

Hrossþjófr beams at her, teeth bright. “And you, ívíðja? Are you enjoying the journey?”

“Call me that again, seiðberandi, and I will string you up by your ears once we reach my Father’s forest.”

“I only wish that you would dare attempt it.”

Is she blushing again? She’s definitely blushing again. “Come, mortal,” Greip says brusquely, taking the bag from her sister. “Let us go bathe and change, and then we will eat.”

It’s kind of nice to have someone else’s drama to mull over as she steers you through the crowded room, because it lets you pretend that you don’t have your own issues to deal with right now. Once you’re alone with her in one of the bathing-rooms, you figure that it’s safe to speak.

“What’s ívíðja mean?”
She huffs. “It is what they use to refer to the giantesses from the forest. It implies that we are troll-like.”

*Of course trolls are a real thing. Of course.* You take a breath. “And seiðberandi?”

“Soðr-bearer,” Greip says, rummaging in the bag and pulling out a bundle of assorted fabrics. “A wizard.”

“Oh, like Lok— like the king?”

She gives you a strange look, like she can’t believe you almost said his name. “Yes,” she replies, “like the king.”

“And that’s… an insult?”

“For most of us, yes.”

Huh, you think. You’ll have to remember to listen out for that one. The bathing-room you’re in now pales in comparison to the one in the palace; instead of a fancy pool, there are several long trough-like sinks along the wall, flowing with water that (fortunately) appears to be steaming.

“Go relieve yourself,” she says. “That room there.” She points to a door near the back, and you bolt for it. *Don’t mind if I do.* You’ve always hated that about road trips - the bathroom situation can get pretty sketchy.

When you come back, she’s stripped off already and is scrubbing herself down with a sponge. *Oh, great,* you think. *More naked giants.* “Quickly, In-Unga, come and bathe; we are not in the palace, and the water will not stay this scalding for long.”

Scalding water is too tempting to resist. *Okay, so this is happening.* At least you aren’t having to take another bath with Loki, so that’s… good.

Whatever charm he’s put on you is impressive, but you still feel like you’re gonna freeze your butt off when you start washing off, and so you speed through and pull on your new clothes in under five minutes. *Good enough,* you tell yourself. *Who cares if I smell a little funky? They’re the ones dragging me across the wilderness. They can deal.*

Loki’s sitting with his brother when Greip finally brings you back through the lodge common room, and other than a hint of that blade-thin little smile of his, he doesn’t seem to take any real notice of you. *Whatever,* you think. *At least that means less attention will be on me, maybe.*

A bowl is placed in front of you at the table - Loki-approved, you assume - and you’re honestly pretty hungry, so you try to dig in. It’s shredded meat of some kind, and more of the suspicious green biscuits.

*I just want a salad. A nice salad, some fresh fruit, and maybe a soda.*

Both sets of twins are teasing at each other, and you honestly aren’t really following most of it. Teenage giant insults must be in their own class, you guess. The Storm-Twins are definitely a lot less dignified when they aren’t standing up in front of everyone making speeches.
But then Heiðr looks up at something behind you, and you can see the playfulness smooth from her features. “Prince Býleistr,” she says, “how may we serve you?”

You don’t turn; you don’t have to, because you can feel his stare. “I am starved for entertaining conversation,” he replies. “I wish to join you.”

Gjálp is beaming, but her sister looks slightly tense. “Of course, sire. We would be honored.”

“Good,” Býleistr replies, and you do your best to keep your eyes fixed on your lunch as he slides into the space beside you.

And when you do risk a glance towards the fire, the king’s red eyes are staring right at you.

Chapter End Notes

It’s already Friday somewhere, right? <3 The next update that I get to will most likely be for The Gladiator, so if you’re reading that... yay! (And if not... go check it out)! ;D
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

They say that roadtrips are a good way to test a friendship. What they *don’t* say, however, is what roadtrips are supposed to do for uneasy alliances.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You’ve started to notice that sometimes the giants’ eyes seem to glow a bit more than others, almost like they’re catching every bit of light in the room. Considering that their eyes are mostly varying shades of red, it’s a pretty terrifying effect.

Loki’s got that going on right now. Instinct is telling you to run. *Running is probably a bad idea.*

Apparently, no one else at the table has noticed, and you cram one of the bitter, crumbling biscuits in your mouth. *Ugh.* Okay, so now is probably a good time to evaluate the situation. First up, you’re basically a glorified lap dog here, and you aren’t supposed to be sitting at the table… but you are.

Secondly, one of the planet’s terrifying princes has decided to sit down right next to you, which probably makes the whole thing a lot more scandalous.

Thirdly, that prince’s nutty, jealous older brother looks like he’s pretty pissed about it.

Well, Loki, you think sourly, *maybe if you’d kept me a little closer, I wouldn’t be stuck at the table with your brother*…

And then you mentally slap yourself; what are you thinking, wishing that you were at his side or on his lap, rather than sitting at a table like a normal person? But his lap, you concede, is certainly much more comfortable. And he does smell really nice.

And he did sneak away to hold you during the night, which honestly was probably just him being selfish, but… he’d known you were afraid, and he’d known that you were worried about the trip, and some part of you can’t help but hope that part of the reason he showed up was just to check on you.

“Did you show the mortal the book, Gjálp?”

“I did, sire. She has been enjoying the illustrations.”

“A book for a mortal, Prince Býleistr?” Heiðr asks lightly. “And what sort of book might that be?”


Heiðr shares a quick look with her brother, and Hrossþjófr leans forward, a slight, almost-conspiratorial smile on his lips. “Truly? I did not know that Býleistr Fárbautason had any interest in the history of Hveðrungr Úlfgrønir, renowned seiðr-master.”

The apathy in Býleistr’s voice doesn’t waver in the slightest, and if you were brave enough to risk a look at him, you’re certain that he’d be doing that weird little head-cocking thing that must be a
family trait. “It is the business of princes to be well-learned, is it not? Besides, despite his many faults, the witch-king was a masterful painter, and as the mortal cannot read—"

“I can read.”

Your eyes widen in shock as you realize that you’d actually said - well, snapped, really - that out loud, and every giant at the table turns their attention to you. That’s exactly what you wanted to avoid… why can’t you just keep your damn mouth shut?

Greip seems pretty tense, too, so you can only assume that this is another one of those situations that might merit the ‘punishment’ you keep hearing about, and you’re pretty sure you’re starting to get a little lightheaded. Oh, crap, you think. I’m gonna die for my pride. I guess that’s my mortal sin.

“Can you now, In-Unga?” the prince asks. “But nothing of our world, correct? Nothing useful.”

Christ, he’s just as condescending as his brother. Maybe even more. Is Loki still watching you? Probably. Blushing, you think of the little scrap of paper tucked away in your bra. “I’m learning,” you hurriedly reply, not taking quite as much time to consider your words as you should.

Oops. That definitely did not help with your ‘not seeming interesting’ agenda, apparently; the next thing you know, there’s a finger under your chin, and Býleistr’s twisting your face around so that he can look at you.

“You are learning?” He almost sounds surprised, so maybe teaching a human pet to read is some kind of scandal, too. Loki doesn’t seem to particularly care much about being scandalous.

You decide to keep your mouth shut.

“Well, mortal?”

“Yes,” you manage to bite out. “Sire.”

There’s a slight shift in his expression as he seems to come to some kind of understanding. “And masterfully instructed by none other than my exalted brother, no doubt. He certainly spends more than enough time with you.”

It’s then that you notice the ever-so-slight flare of his nostrils, and you realize that he’s scenting you like some kind of bloodhound. Great. And you can only assume, based on the very vague sense of irritation you’re picking up from Little Brother here, that you must smell strongly of the king.

Maybe that’s a good thing.

“Why would he not?” Hrossþjófr asks in-between tearing bites of some kind of meat from an oddly-curved bone. He doesn’t seem nearly as concerned about propriety as the others, and you wonder if it’s because of his special status as part of the Völva’s little entourage, or if he’s really just that careless.

Maybe both.

“The lords of old kept mortals to warm them at night,” he continues, “and some of the ladies were said to, as well.” Grinning, he looks around the table. “It is practically a tradition. You truly cannot criticize the king for that.”

If possible, your cheeks flush even hotter. Oh, wonderful, you despair. Everyone thinks I’m banging Loki, that’s just—
And then you flinch as a hand suddenly squeezes your shoulder, and Býleistr releases your chin, looking instead to whoever it is that’s now standing behind you.

Except… you already know who it is, even before you hear the silk of his voice. You’re starting to notice that you can smell him, too. Damn. That’s probably not a good thing.

“How true, Hrossþjófr,” Loki says. “In fact, one might even say that it is unwise to criticize the king at all.”

His thumb presses into the muscle at the juncture of your neck and back, and you realize then just how tense you’d become. It hurts a bit, but it’s also almost… relaxing. Across the table, poor Gjálp’s blue skin has paled slightly, though the Storm-Twins are apparently unconcerned about the decidedly-malevolent presence hovering behind you.

“Ah, King Loki joins us,” Heiðr says.

“I come to tell you to make ready to leave. Lady Skaði claims that a storm is brewing to the east, and I would like to make as much progress as possible before we are trapped here.”

Hrossþjófr’s smile is sly. “I might’ve thought that you’d wish to rest longer, sire, after riding out in the snow all through the night.”

You don’t miss the confused look Gjálp and Greip exchange at that, but it seems like they aren’t going to question it, and you certainly aren’t going to risk saying anything else, either. But does that mean that he somehow… snuck away from the head of the convoy without anyone else noticing? How?

And why would he go to that much effort - just to avoid looking weak for needing a rest?

“Yes, well, seiðr is useful for many things, isn’t it? Get up, mortal.”

I’m not finished with my freaking lunch, you internally gripe. Or breakfast, or… whatever this is. You’ve kind of lost track of time. Being surrounded by a pack of giants had kind of stifled your appetite, but that doesn’t mean you won’t be hungry later - you’re probably burning calories like crazy just to stay warm.

Still, this is definitely one of those don’t-argue-with-Loki moments, so you awkwardly scramble off of the bench, trying not to kick either Býleistr or Greip in the process. It isn’t exactly easy, and the fact that the bench is really too tall for you just makes the whole thing worse.

You’re kind of expecting Loki to bark out some kind of orders once you’re on your feet, but he doesn’t; instead, he seizes hold of your arm and drags you towards the door. Or, at least, he makes it look like he’s dragging you away - you can’t help but notice that his grip isn’t actually all that tight, this time.

The snow is deep outside, and he pauses for a moment on the threshold, almost as if he’d forgotten that you’re even shorter than he is and you can’t exactly speed-walk through it. You realize that he’s just being impulsive, then, and you fight the urge to roll your eyes. Idiot.

Loki sighs, and that should be your clue to expect something ridiculous, but he moves before you have a chance to react, slinging you over his shoulder.

And then he stalks forward, the snow simply melting away in his path. If you were to close your eyes, you could almost pretend you were back in the cave - except, of course, you aren’t currently dying, and Loki doesn’t smell like blood.
So, all things considered, you guess it could be worse.

Some of the giants outside are watching with open fascination, particularly the ones that seem to be local to whatever this particular place is. *What a show they’re getting,* you think. *Their new surprise-king and his pet human, all at once.* One of the older-looking men actually has the nerve to point at you, and you’re pretty sure you hear the word ‘Midgard’ drifting through the wind.

“Take a picture,” you mutter. “It’ll last longer.”

Loki lets out a surprised little huff. *Was that a laugh?*

You don’t dare say anything else until he’s hauled you into the sleigh and shut the door firmly behind you, dropping you carelessly onto one of the piles of cushions. “You just caused a scene,” you hiss. “Everyone probably thinks—”

“I don’t particularly care *what* they think, mortal. Those in power are always afforded their eccentricities.”

*Whatever.* You curl up under one of the blankets, determined to sulk. “Why did you do that? You told me not to draw attention to myself, but *you* keep drawing attention to me.”

“Whims of the king,” he says dismissively. But then he hesitates as he turns to leave, coming back to crouch before you, a puzzled sort of frown creasing his brow. “You were frightened.”

“Well, yes, I—”

“It angered me.”

You aren’t really sure how you’re supposed to respond to that - and in fact, Loki almost looks surprised that he said it. Instead, the two of you just stare at each other in silence for a moment or two.

“You could just keep me with you, next time,” you finally say, “but I guess I wouldn’t be very good at collecting gossip that way.”

“No,” Loki replies, “I suppose you wouldn’t.”

Clearing your throat, you finally force yourself to break his gaze - you’re kind of worried that he’s hypnotizing you. It would probably be a good idea to ask someone if that’s a thing sorcerers can actually do here, because Loki’s definitely got something unnatural going on with his eyes, and you aren’t entirely certain how to combat it.

“Speaking of gossip, is it against some kind of law for me to learn to read? No books for lowly humans, or something?”

Loki cocks his head. “I neither know nor care,” he says. “I am above the law, and if I want to show you runes, then I will.”

A tiny prickle of excitement sparks in your chest at that. Being able to read some of the books on this stupid planet would be so, *so* incredibly wonderful. It would give you something to do other than sitting around simultaneously bored and panicking, at least. “So… you’re going to show me more?”

Whatever strange mood he’s in finally seems to break, and he grins. “Of course, mortal - *if* you earn it. Was that not the bargain?”
“Oh. Do you want me to tell you everything I’ve heard so far?”

“Now is not a good time, I’m afraid. I spoke the truth; we do need to leave as quickly as possible.” But he doesn’t move for the door, and your breath catches as he reaches forward and gently angles your head back, dragging his thumb slowly across your chin.

*Almost like he’s wiping Býleistr’s touch away.*

But no - you tell yourself that you’re just being stupid, probably reading *way* too far into it. He’s just a fickle, handsy guy, and he likes keeping you on edge. *Probably.* That’s probably all it is.

Loki’s lips part slightly, and you freeze, your heart hammering against your ribs. The moment is broken by a rustling outside, and he rocks back on his heels. “I will see you tonight, pet,” he softly assures, and then he’s gone, disappearing into the flurry of snow outside the door.

The twins join you only a moment later, an overjoyed Greip holding her giant, snow-covered fox in her arms. In no time at all, the sleigh lurches into motion.

You’re still trying to remember the way his fingers felt on your skin.

Knowing the king like you do, he’s going to either be really pissed or really impressed that you’ve convinced the twins to show you some more runes. Granted, they aren’t exactly fantastic teachers - they tend to just point to random characters on the page and make the sound - but it’s better than nothing.

You’re hoping he’ll be mostly impressed.

Gjálp and Greip have both been slightly subdued ever since Loki tossed you into the sleigh, and as nosy as they usually are, you’re kind of surprised they haven’t asked anything about it yet. Based on how stricken Gjálp looked when he appeared at the table, they must think that he dragged you off to do something terrible.

The really embarrassing thing is that, given what they’ve said so far, they could either be assuming that the ‘something terrible’ was straight-up *beating* you, or… well, probably something sexual.

Snowball rolls onto his back, dragging your attention back to the present. He nips at Greip’s finger, and when she hisses and bares her teeth at him, his ears flatten into what can only be interpreted as remorse.

*Huh.* You watch as the fox licks at her fingers. Just like that, all seems to be forgiven, and Greip turns back to her book. You’re kind of starting to notice that the Jötnar are… *exceedingly* cat-like. You’d thought that it was just a Loki thing, but maybe it’s actually an all -giants thing.

Maybe you should try hissing at Býleistr the next time he gets too close. *Or Loki.* Loki would probably lose his damned mind if you tried something like that. The image you conjure up of his face is pretty priceless, and you let out a sharp laugh.

“What is the matter, In-Unga?”

“Oh, I…” But what can you say? Definitely not the *truth.* Maybe a half-truth will do the trick. “I was
thinking about the king,” you say. “He’s confusing. Well, this whole place is confusing, really.”

Gjálp clears her throat. “He was not harsh with you, was he? I cannot imagine why—”

“You are naive,” her sister interrupts. “Inn-Ilí is clearly angered because Prince Býleistr has taken an interest in his pet. Býleistr intentionally needles him.”

“Do you know the prince well?” you ask. “I mean, it seems like he’s pretty comfortable around you, and… you’re around the same age, right?”

“Yes, indeed,” Gjálp replies. “The Queen Mother is from our clan, you know; though King Laufey was of the Hrímþursar, the princes spent much of their youth in the forests.”

“Hrímj—”


“I thought they were just called Jötnar.”

Greip shrugs. “By most, they are. They prefer it, certainly; Hrímjursar is a tribal distinction, and Laufey’s people like to imagine that they are above the tribes.”

“Now who is it that speaks too boldly, Sister?”

“It is true. With Loki Laufeyson on the throne, the Stormr- Jötnar are certain to use it as an opportunity to regain prominence, and neither the king nor the Stormr- Jötnar have any love for Laufey’s people.”

Well, you think, that’s definitely some promising gossip.

“So… you think the Storm Giants are going to try to take advantage of some kind of… clan loyalty? Because I don’t think Lo— I don’t think the king really cares too much about clans or anything like that. It isn’t like he even knew about his mom before a few days ago.”

Greip leans forward, conspiratorial, even though there’s no one around to hear. “I think that, while he may be entirely mad, Loki Laufeyson is certainly clever. He will naturally fall in among his mother’s people, and they would be delighted to support the reign of another witch-king.”

“But the queen says she supports him, too.”

“Well, yes. But the court is a dangerous place, little mortal.” She wraps her arms around the purring melrakki in her lap, rubbing her face against his furry head. Snowball looks exceptionally pleased by the attention, his tiny pink tongue peeking out between his teeth.

You wish you felt that content.

“These are not things for you to fret over, In-Unga,” Gjálp says, giving you a reassuring pat on the head. “Court intrigue is hardly the concern of a mortal.”

Well, maybe it wouldn’t be, you think, if I wasn’t caught smack in the middle of it.

“He’s going to be back tonight.”

Greip looks up from Snowball’s fur, startled. “What was that?”

“The king.” Sighing, you snuggle further back into your cushions, picking up Býleistr’s book and
flipping to the next page. “He’s going to come back tonight, like he did last night.”

“Oh.”

They exchange a look, but you pretend not to notice, keeping your eyes glued to the page. While you can make out a couple of runes on the page, you have no clue what they combine to actually say, and you give up after a few minutes and go searching for the next illustration.

A flash of color a few pages away captures your attention, and your lips part in surprise as you uncover a very unexpected sight - a human woman. You’re almost positive that she’s human; there’s a forest behind her, and it looks familiarly Earth-like. Her clothes look like something you’ve seen in history books, and her hair falls in sandy waves down to her waist.

Most surprisingly of all is the sheer level of detail - the human woman in the book Býleistr had shown you in the archive was clearly just some unnamed prop, but this… this woman’s eyes are deep and somber. The painter clearly knew her.

And the painter, you suddenly remember, was the supposedly-mad witch-king Hveðrungr.

You can’t resist. “What does this say?” you ask, turning the book around. “Who is this?”

Gjálp takes the book from you. “Oh, a mortal! She is Víf, it says. Perhaps Hveðrungr met her on Midgard during his travels. This,” she points, “says that the forests of Midgard hold special magics.”

“So, she’s not someone you’ve heard of?”

She looks slightly uncomfortable at that, and her sister rushes to save her. “Mortals are rarely recorded in history, In-Unga,” Greip says gently. “They live and die so quickly.”

An awkward silence falls, and Gjálp hands the book back to you. You don’t really feel like reading anymore, though, and so you curl up instead, pulling the blanket almost entirely over your head. Somehow, despite the fact that literally everyone here calls you ‘mortal,’ it’s hard to really conceptualize the idea that you’ll die of old age in what probably seems like no time at all to them.

Well, you think, if I even make it to old age.

You don’t want to freak the twins out - it isn’t their fault, and they’ve been sweet, even if they can be kind of obtuse sometimes - and so when you start to cry under your blanket, you hold yourself as still as possible. Maybe they can hear it, or maybe they can even smell it, but they give you your space.

You appreciate that, really. It isn’t like there’s anything they can do. Eventually, you manage to fall asleep.

When you wake next, it’s from a combination of things - a sudden drop of temperature in the sleigh, the sound of an irritated voice, a fuzzy tickle against your chin.

“Why,” Loki is asking in that deadly-pleasant voice of his, “has my mortal been crying?”

You open your eyes to find the twins hovering near you, Snowball half-sprawled across your lap. *Good lord, he’s heavy.* From the scene in front of you, you can only assume that the twins, in some
sort of attempt to comfort you, decided that maybe snuggling up with a pet of your own was the way to go.

It’s incredibly touching, but also *not* incredibly comfortable, because the melrakki-fox-thing isn’t exactly housecat-sized, and he’s currently attempting to curl up on your chest. You wheeze.

“Oh,” Greip says, “In-Unga was not feeling well, sire, and my sister and I thought that a pet might be comforting…” She falters under the weight of the king’s glare. “They have them on Midgard,” she tries again. “Pets, that is…”

Snowball turns his head to smugly survey the room, as if to say, “Hey, am I doing a great job or what?” And then, as Loki’s eyes narrow, the melrakki turns back and gives your face an enthusiastic lick.

“That’s it.” Loki crosses the sleigh-carriage in two strides, snatching the melrakki up by the nape of his neck and bodily dragging him to the door. He shoves it open and tosses Snowball outside, then slams the door closed again.

“Oh!” Greip cries.

“He is a wild animal, isn’t he? He will survive.”

There are tears in her eyes, though she blinks them back convincingly enough, and Gjálp puts a hand on her shoulder. *Way to go, Loki,* you think as he takes up his spot at the opposite end of the sleigh. *They think you’re a raving lunatic. Maybe he’s like the giant version of people who can’t stand cats? Maybe he’s allergic and too embarrassed to admit it?*

The thought of Loki - proud, haughty, *kingly* Loki - having a sneezing fit is weirdly amusing.

Or maybe it is just that he’s a raving lunatic.

You make your way to him without even waiting for him to demand it; no reason to keep the crazy king waiting, after all. And besides, despite the awkwardness of it all… you’d honestly been looking forward to it. *Maybe,* Just a little.

*Slumber parties with the king. Yay.*

*And* the supervillain. You should probably do a better job of remembering that part - the dude did devastate New York. He *feels* nice, though. Listening to his heartbeat is incredibly calming. That probably doesn’t make it *okay,* but there it is.

“Why were you crying?” His voice in your ear is so soft you can barely hear it over the noise of the wind outside and the creaking of the sleigh, and that softness makes it seem so much more… *significant.*

“Concerned about dying.”

“Don’t.” There’s a pause for a moment or two, and you squeeze your eyes closed, pressing your cheek against his chest. You wonder if his injuries are still bothering him. “Would you like for me to spell you to sleep?”

“No,” you whisper. “No, this is fine.”
I love reading all the speculations as to what’s going to happen next. Y’all are wonderful! The response/interest in this story completely blows me away <3

Today's fun fact: Hveðrungr "The Roarer" is a byname of Loki in actual myth :D
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Some tension, some flirting, some disasters. Y’know, just your typical alien roadtrip stuff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s early morning, you think, though it’s still so dark out that not much light is making it in through the windows. Based on the way the sleigh is jerking and rumbling along, that storm Loki’d mentioned must finally be rolling in, and you snuggle more soundly into the crook of his arm. It’s a good thing that he’s still asleep, because you’d probably die if he knew you were voluntarily cuddling up to him like this.

But it’s cold. Really, really cold. The temperature must’ve dropped during the night; you can almost see your breath fogging in the air. That’s a good reason to stay cuddled up with the king, right?

The twins are asleep, too, and with no witnesses to catch you, you crane your neck to study his face. That’s when you notice that there’s a tiny hint of a smile on his lips, and your eyes narrow in suspicion. “You’re awake, aren’t you?”

Loki cracks one eye open, his lips parting in a silent laugh. “I am. Please, don’t let that stop you - you are almost pleasing when you forget yourself this way.”

You’re such an ass, you think sourly, but you also don’t budge an inch. “You’re a lot more pleasing when you’re asleep.”

“Careful, mortal. You wouldn’t want to wake your little friends, would you? I can hardly let you speak this way to the king, can I? I’d have to punish you.”

There’s a slight purr in his voice that immediately chases away the chill from the frigid air. “What are you gonna do,” you bluster, trying to sit up a little to at least pretend you aren’t entirely complicit in this whole cuddling thing, “toss me out into the storm, just like Snowball?”

Loki snorts and pulls you closer. “Spare me,” he says. “That little wretch is far better-suited for the climate than I am, and I cannot particularly recall you fretting over my wellbeing.”

Is he pouting? “I kinda figured you could take care of yourself, Your Majesty.”

“Hmm. I am rather exceptional.” There’s an audible little smile in his voice, a pleased sort of contentedness that you aren’t really familiar with, but you kind of… like.

Huh, you think. Maybe this is almost what he’s like when he isn’t taking over planets. Except, is Loki ever not taking over planets? From what you know, his track record isn’t exactly great.

The twins are bundled up together, and you feel a pang of sympathy. Poor Greip. “It’s gotten really cold,” you say. “Are you sure that Snowball—”
Groaning in irritation, Loki rubs his cheek against your hair. “A truly idiotic name,” he says.

“Hey, I came up with that!”

“Obviously. In any case, if that creature wants to find its way back to her, it will.”

The sleigh sways sharply, and when you tense, Loki’s embrace tightens ever-so-slightly. You pretend not to notice. Maybe he’s just tense, too.

“They think you hurt me, you know. The twins.”

“Don’t I?”

It’s not what you were expecting him to say, and it takes you awhile to think of a reply. “Not really. I mean… not like they think. Not like you could.”

“Hmm.”

“Does that bother you at all?”

“Does what bother me?”

“Being Inn-Illi. The bad guy, the villain—”

“No,” he says. “No, mortal, it does not bother me.”

“I can’t believe they’re still asleep. Hasn’t it been, like… years? I’m gonna end up spending the rest of my youth in this stupid sleigh on this stupid snow planet.”

Loki sighs deeply. “I am finding myself fantasizing with increasing frequency about the prospect of having you muzzled, mortal. Imagine that - sweet, blissful silence. Peace.”

“I think you’re lying, sire. You’d get bored.”

“You are a thorn in my side,” he replies, but there really isn’t much force behind it. “It has only been seven or eight hours, I’d expect. There is no reason to waste the energy to stay awake; you would do well to follow their example.”

“I slept already. More than you, actually. Don’t you need to sleep?”

“I am not in the mood. Besides, I must be alert when it is time to halt and make a temporary camp. Burden of the crown, and all that.”

The sleigh jerks again, and your fingers reflexively dig into the loose tunic he’s wearing. In a way, it’s kind of nice to think about the fact that he’s probably pretty miserable in this freezing weather, too, even if he isn’t at risk of actually dying from it. You’re very much at risk of actually dying from it.

It probably helps with the sense of camaraderie, also, that he’s lost his blueness sometime during the night. Is that an intentional thing that he does when he’s around you, or does he not even notice? Does he just gradually revert to pale-Loki whenever he isn’t putting on a show for the Frost Giants?
He definitely seems to refer to his “birth-form” as something clearly distinct from his ‘real’ self.

Poor guy. It’s pretty messed up.

“Are you gonna disappear again when we stop?”

He gazes down at you with a critical eye, and you take note of the dark circles that stand out much more sharply when he isn’t blue. “Hoping to trade my company for that of the furball, are you? Or my dear little brother?”

“It’s Snowball,” you huff, “and no on the brother. Definitely not. You know Býleistr makes me nervous.”

“I know.”

Loki falls silent, and though his eyes close as he reclines his head back against the cushion, none of the tension leaves him. There’s something… brittle about him, you decide, something that makes it seem like he’s barely holding all of the pieces of himself together.

That’s not good. It’s not good because you need him to keep you alive, and it’s doubly not good because you’re starting to actually care, and—

The thought suddenly shoves all others aside. You care? You really shouldn’t. God knows he doesn’t care about you. Except…

“How’d you know I’d been crying?”

“The salt of it in the air was unmistakable,” he says, “and disturbingly potent. I’ve been plagued by your weeping before, you’ll recall.”

Yeah, well, that was your fault, you think. “I don’t get how all of this scent stuff works.”

“Yes, well, neither do I.”

That doesn’t surprise you, but the fact that he’d admit it does.

“I’ve experienced vaguely similar sensations while in animal form,” Loki continues unbidden, and the jostling of the sleigh leaves his hand resting on your hip, fingers splayed. “But this is… different, more keen. And I…”

He cuts himself off abruptly, drumming his fingers on your hip, watching them while he drifts off into thought. You wish, suddenly and surely, that there were fewer layers between his hand and your skin.

“And?”

“I do not enjoy feeling like a beast when I am in the form of a man.”

Oh, boy. That’s a lot to unpack. You aren’t really sure that he’d appreciate anything comforting you might try to say, anyway. “Is it the same with the others?”

His fingers continue to drum. “Meaning what, mortal?”

“Like when you made Greip cry, was it just as unpleasant?”

“Hmm. No, as a matter of fact. Everything from you is much… stronger. How interesting. Perhaps it
is a species advantage, making prey easier to sniff out.”

“Prey?”

“Yes,” Loki replies, a hint of amusement - and maybe something else - in his voice. “My little mortal prey, so terribly easy to hunt. I wonder how far you’d have to run for the snow to hide your tracks from me.”

Your heartbeat quickens. “I’m… you know I’m not going to run, right?”

“It would certainly be foolish, but oh, what fun.”

He’s doing that thing again, the problematic thing where his voice drops and gets all gravelly. Damn him if he’s doing that on purpose, you think. In fact, damn him either way.

Because the thought of some nutty alien king chasing you down through the snow shouldn’t make you blush - it should just freak you out. But you’re definitely blushing. Time to change to subject.

“So, this monster-wolf… how big are we talking?”

“I have no idea. He is tremendous, no doubt.”

Your fingers fidget with the material of his shirt. It’s honestly a little rough - much rougher than whatever fabric he’d been wearing when he found you in the cave. “But, not too big for you, right?”

“No.” Loki pats you on the hip, apparently amused. “He won’t be too big for me.”

“Oh. That’s good. But what—“

Raising one long, elegant finger to his lips, Loki shushes you. “Your little friends are beginning to stir,” he whispers. “Best hold that tongue of yours, In-Unga.”

Just use my actual name, you ass. But you know by now that he’s doing it on purpose, and the more you react, the more he’ll enjoy it. He’s a weird one, Loki; how long will it take you to feel like you can really keep up with his games? Maybe more years than you have left.

It’s a sobering notion.

Greip wakes first, her back curving impressively as she stretches, yawning. You notice that Loki’s staring at her, and for some reason, it’s kind of annoying you. Why can’t he just act like a normal guy? Would it kill him to not be—

Well, yeah, your logical inner voice interrupts. It might kill him, and you. You’re in enemy territory. Appearances are everything. Just deal with it.

It seems to take the giantess a moment to notice that she’s captured her new king’s attention, and her hands immediately drop to her lap, vaguely contrite. You want to tell her that she shouldn’t worry; he’s pretty terrible, yes, but maybe not quite as terrible as she believes. Then you remember that he tried to destroy the entire planet she lives on, so maybe Greip is actually the sensible one, and you’re just overly-confident in the quality and quantity of Loki’s mercy.

“Awake at long last,” Loki says. His fingers start their drumming again - is he annoyed, or just anxious? “I begin to believe the two of you could sleep through Ragnarök.”

Flushing, Greip opens her mouth to say something, but he cuts her off with a dismissive wave. “You’ve travelled this route before, haven’t you?”
“Yes, my king, we have.” She gives her sister a sharp nudge with her booted foot, and Gjálp bolts awake. “There is only one clear path to Járnviðr at this time of year; any other routes are blocked by snow and ice.”

“Go on, then,” Loki replies, nodding towards the door. “Tell me where we are.”

Is he nuts? You can hear the roar of the blizzard outside… does he really expect her to just hop out into it?

Apparently he does, and after exchanging a slightly confused look with her twin, Greip gracefully rolls to her feet. He must be testing her, you realize, though you aren’t really sure why. Loyalty? Obedience?

Maybe he just likes making people jump.

Cold wind blasts into the sleigh as soon as she cracks the door open, and you burrow deeper under the blankets and into Loki’s chest, silently cursing his name. Greip leans outside and reaches up somewhere above the door, hoisting herself up with surprising nimbleness. If Loki is equally impressed, he doesn’t show it.

Gjálp seems to be doing her best to avoid blatantly staring at the king, but she’s failing pretty miserably, and you can feel him tense as he takes notice. “I choose my skin as I see fit,” he snaps suddenly. “Does this bother you, Geirröðardóttir?”

Oh, yeah. He’s not blue.

“No, sire,” she hurriedly replies. “I only… I am reminded of when you came to court when King Laufey still lived, with the… Asgardians.”

Her voice peters out as she finishes, and from the look on her face, she’s sincerely regretting saying anything. Unexpectedly, Loki laughs. “So you have seen Thor Odinson in all of his glory, then, have you?”

“I have, just as I have seen you in yours.”

“You fear me.”

“Every subject fears their king, sire.”

You’re absolutely dying to know what they’re talking about - the mention of Thor was unexpected, but at least he’s kinda familiar. You’ve seen him on T.V., and he’s one of the good guys; maybe if you’re lucky, he’ll show up. That would be nice, right? Have an Avenger show up and swoop you back to Earth?

But what about Loki?

That nagging worry is quickly buried as Greip tumbles back into the sleigh, wrenching the door closed behind her. “We near the cliffs of Ymir’s Teeth,” she announces, rubbing her arms. “It is almost impossible to see the way, my king; the snow is thick in the air.”

“I see,” Loki replies. “And you believe that we should halt, isn’t that so?”

She appears taken aback, and you are, too - Loki doesn’t usually seem to care much about advice. “I would not think to question—”
“Speak freely, girl.”

Greip clears her throat. “I would stop before the path narrows, sire; the ice will be treacherous, and the beasts and their drivers are likely worn thin already. I know that time is of the essence, but… it is a risk.”

“Do you suppose your Lady Skaði would agree? It is she who directs this convoy.”

“Lady Skaði is doubtlessly braver than either of us,” Gjálp says. “Sire.”

“Hmm.” For a moment or two, Loki simply studies the two of them, and Greip reclaims her seat by her sister, clearly ill-at-ease with the idea of challenging Skaði’s wisdom. “Tell me,” he finally says, “do you suppose that your lady will be eager to allow me to leave, once I am confined within the Iron Wood?”

The twins look to each other, eyes wide. Is he really just outright asking them if Skaði is planning treason? Does he expect them to know something like that?

And if they did, would they even tell him?

*But he’s the God of Lies, you remind yourself, so maybe he’d know.*

“You needn’t answer,” Loki says suddenly. “I am certain that your people are not foolish enough to test me.” He disentangles himself from you and the blankets and rises to his feet, stretching languidly. “And as it happens, Greip, I believe that you are correct about the storm. It will only worsen as the night comes.”

Part of you feels almost *mournful* as he moves to the door. Hey, you think. *You’re my heating pad. Don’t go.* The other part of you is massively relieved, because the nervous tension in the carriage is so thick you could probably cut it with a knife.

“We will halt soon,” he says, “as soon as there is cover. Keep warm, and make certain that you eat.”

Once he’s gone, the twins visibly relax, though they both still seem a bit stunned. It’s no wonder, really - what Frost Giant would expect Loki Inn-Illi to show any modicum of *care*? There clearly isn’t a lot of trust there, if there’s even any at all.

*You’re a strange man, Loki.*

“A stop will be good,” Gjálp says, a forced sort of cheeriness in her voice. “We will be able to stretch our legs, after sitting idle for so long.”

“Speak for yourself, Sister. I find myself very well-exercised; had the wind blown any more fiercely, I might’ve found myself in a ravine.”

Well, that doesn’t sound good. “We’re riding past ravines right now?”

“Yes, mortal. Jotunheim is covered with cracks and canyons… did you not see them when you arrived here?”

“No,” you reply. “I couldn’t really see… well, I couldn’t see anything but snow. And then I found a cave, and then Lok— and then the king found *me*. There was the cave and then the palace, and I guess that place we stopped to take a break yesterday. That’s all I’ve seen of this whole planet.”

“Ah.” Gjálp nods sagely. “It is no surprise, truly - I would be shocked if you had managed to
navigate much of the landscape alone and unaided. Even if you’d managed the cold, your warm blood would’ve attracted all manner of wild creatures.”

An anxious knot forms in your stomach at that - hadn’t Loki basically said the same thing, back when he’d first found you? *Fee-fi-fo-fum,* you think. *I guess the fairytales are true.*

It’s a relief when the sleigh finally comes to a stop, because you really do want to get up and move around, and the path has been so rough all morning that you can’t keep your balance as the sleigh jerks and sways. Gjálp opens the door, and you’re shocked to discover that there isn’t a thick whirlwind of snow in the air. “Lady Skaði must’ve chosen this resting-place,” she says. “It is slightly off of our original path, but it offers better shelter. Come see, In-Unga.”

Your joints are stiff and protesting as you climb to your feet, and you haul one of the larger blankets with you as you go to the door. Just because there isn’t a full-blown *blizzard* sweeping into the sleigh doesn’t mean that it’s magically become any warmer.

She steps out into the snow, and you stick your head out to peer after her, gasping in shock. *National Geographic* has nothing on this. The massive sleighs have been pulled into loose ovals, and the weird clawed-rhino things are being untethered and herded into clumps. What makes this truly impressive is the fact that all of it, *the entire convoy,* is situated under an overhang of rock that curves for hundreds and hundreds of feet above you. On the one side, there is the rock wall, and on the other… nothingness. It looks like a sheer drop into nothingness, and the next flat land you can see beyond that appears to be incredibly far away.

Suddenly, the Grand Canyon doesn’t seem so *grand.*

“Um.” That knot in your throat is back. You’ve never been a fan of heights. “This doesn’t seem… safe.”

“This is what much of the route is like,” Greip tells you as she brushes past to join her sister. “In fact, we have been travelling single-file for much of the morning, as the paths along the canyons often crumble and narrow when storms pass through.”

*Oh, God,* you think. *I should’ve just stayed in the sleigh. I did not need to know this.* “What’s down there? At the bottom?”

“A river. A river too deep and fearsome to freeze.”

*Great. It can’t just be a normal river, it has to be a deep and fearsome river. I hate this planet.*

The twins both seem pretty perked-up by the prospect of getting out of the sleigh, and you give Gjálp’s hand a skeptical look as she offers it to you. “I don’t really want to get out.”

“Oh, come now, mortal. It will do you no good to hide away.”

She sounds kind of coaxing, and you realize that they probably aren’t allowed to leave you alone, which means that either they’re trapped with you… or you have to go outside. You take a deep breath. “Don’t let me freeze, okay?”

The ground outside is icy, but hard-packed for the most part, and you’re kind of relieved to find that
you aren’t going to have to suffer the indignity of getting hauled around like a sack of potatoes. *It’s the small things.*

“Hail, Forest-Daughters,” a voice calls out from the top of the sleigh ahead of yours in the line, and you squeak in surprise as Hrossþjófr lands on his feet only a pace or so in front of you. You’re starting to think he’s a little nuts, because the guy is almost always smiling, including now, when his eyelashes are coated in ice.

Maybe the rest of the giants are right, and magic just makes people crazy.

“And mortal,” he graciously amends, but his cheerfulness does nothing to soothe Greip’s glare. “How fortunate we are, to find ourselves in the same fire-circle.”

“There is no fortune in it,” she scoffs. “There is only duty. We are to keep near to the king, as are you.”

“Oh, then the Norns must favor me, íviðja.”

He snickers, and Greip’s face flushes lavender. You can’t tell if they’re flirting, or about to stir up some kind of old clan feud, and it’s kind of a worrying range of possibility. “Or they seek to test me —” she begins, but Hrossþjófr holds out a fist, smiling winningly at her sister.

“I’ve a gift for you, Geirröðardóttir,” he says to Gjálp, “something that might’ve been meant for your sister, had she a softer tongue.”

Gjálp’s eyes widen as he drops something into her palm, and Hrossþjófr smirks over his shoulder as Greip seems to freeze. “I suppose I’d best help with the fire,” he continues. “They could likely use a seiðberandi to start the spark, don’t you think?”

He winks at you as he turns and saunters towards the pile of logs that some of the other giants are amassing in the middle of the loop, humming some nameless tune as he goes. *Damn, he’s cocky.* You kind of like him, though… assuming he isn’t actually planning to kill you. That’s actually your big caveat for Gjálp and Greip, too - you like them, but you’re also kind of terrified of them.

“What did he give you?” you ask, dying of curiosity.

Gjálp twists her palm, and a silver chain unravels, a tiny leaf-shaped pendant falling at the end of it. It looks to be made from the same stone as Skaði’s dagger, and it’s clearly very well-made. *Hah,* you think. *I guess I was right about the flirting.*

“Here,” she says. “Take it, Sister. If it was meant for you —”

“I do not want it,” Greip quickly replies, her confusion evident. “Coming from a Stormr-Jötnar, it is like as not charmed or cursed. Leave it in the sleigh.”

Her sister shrugs, but complies, and you nearly die of relief when the three of you finally - finally! - move closer to the now-crackling fire.

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Loki spends most of the day and night bossing people around, from what you can tell, but he does stop by your fire a time or two under the pretext of strengthening whatever spell he’s using to keep
you warm. As his fingers slip under your hood to ruffle your hair yet again, you can’t help but wonder if he actually just misses you. At the very least, he seems to crave some sort of comfort. It’s… almost kind of nice that you’re comforting.

Heiðr and Hrossþjófr have managed to keep up a pretty decent conversation going with Greip and Gjálp for the past few hours, though the leaf-necklace remains unmentioned. You guess it makes sense; there don’t seem to be very many younger giants on this trip, and the only other ones who look like they might be anywhere near them in age are servants.

Well, servants and Prince Býleistr, who is thankfully keeping his distance.

“You should turn in,” Loki tells the twins. “The weather is clearing, and we will be on our way as soon as the sun rises.”

He doesn’t make an appearance in the sleigh during the night, and while you’re sure Greip and Gjálp are probably overjoyed, you’re honestly kind of disappointed. It’s actually a little worrying how difficult it is to fall asleep without listening to his breathing, and it seems like your eyes have just fluttered closed when Gjálp is shaking you awake again.

“Wake up, In-Unga,” she says, smiling brightly. They actually both look a lot perkier than yesterday. Of course, you think. The probably haven’t been sleeping well with the broody sorcerer-king bunking with them.

“Morning already?”

“It is,” Gjálp replies, “and the air is clear! We will be leaving soon, but we thought that we might go to one of the lookout points a bit further up the path; the view is stunning, and I know you have not had the opportunity to see much of Jotunheim.”

Rubbing the sleep from your eyes, you attempt to stifle a sigh. It probably is stunning, but it’s also probably cold, and you’re tired. The twins are both thrumming with excitement, though, so you cave pretty quickly. “Okay.”

After all, Loki’s just renewed your warming charm, hasn’t he? And he’ll only be right down the path, after all. You doubt you’ll even be far enough away for him to lose your scent - a fact that should be really damn creepy, but is actually starting to seem a bit reassuring.

“Where do you go?” Heiðr calls out as you pass by their sleigh, and her brother’s head pops out of the doorway only a moment later.

“We are taking In-Unga to see the sunrise,” Greip tells her. “She has seen very little of our world.”

That’s apparently seen as an invitation, because they decide to join you. Look at me, I have an entourage, you think, smiling faintly. The coolest kid on the block.

It would be really nice if you knew that things wouldn’t turn sour if their clans decided to oppose Loki at some point. It would be nice to know they were actual friends.

Stockholm Syndrome, you remind yourself for what seems like the millionth time. Don’t fall into that trap. They think you’re a pet, not a person.

The sunrise over the wide expanse of canyon is admittedly breathtaking… but in a terrifying sort of way. The rocks that you can make out through the blankets of snow and ice are blue and sharp, the cliffs sheer. You’ve never been able to see the sunlight clearly here, but it isn’t a warm, sunny yellow like it is at home, and it does nothing to soften the cold of the landscape.
It’s beautiful and harsh and *alien,* and you feel a tiny bit of panic bubbling in your chest. This isn’t Earth. You’d *known* it wasn’t Earth, of course, but… you weren’t quite prepared to actually come to grips with it. “It’s beautiful,” you whisper, “but I think I’d like to go back now.”

“Of course,” Heiðr begins, but she’s interrupted by a loud bellowing from the camp, and then all of their eyes widen in panic. For a moment, everything freezes.

“Take her!” Greip cries, and you realize, as Heiðr seizes your shirtfront and practically throws you towards the wall of the canyon, that their sensitive ears must’ve picked up the sound of the falling boulders seconds before your own. The world blurs past as you land heavily against the stone, and the ice on the path around you cracks and splinters as the rocks hit.

The Storm Twins reach your side first, but Greip and Gjálp are still rushing across the ice when one of the larger boulders crashes down right in front of you, and someone is screaming, and you realize that it’s *you.*

What is probably only a millisecond later, but *feels* like hours, the spray of rock and snow settles. Gjálp is wailing by the shattered edge of the cliff.

Greip is gone.

“It’s over,” Heiðr is telling you, but you can’t entirely hear her. “It’s over, mortal. *Please,* stop screaming. *It’s over.*”

Her brother is cursing, you think, though it’s not in any language you recognize, and you follow stiffly as they rush to Gjálp’s side. She’s crouched on the lip of the cliff, searching, searching…

“You *cannot* go after her, Gjálp,” Heiðr says, grabbing her arm and trying to pull her away. “The footholds are too narrow; you will fall, as well.”

“No!”

“What good will that do?”

But as they’re grappling, your eyes fix on Hrossþjófr. He’s standing silently, peering down into the canyon, his lips pressed into a thin line. Then he mutters something under his breath, and before you can stop him - before you can even cry out to *warn* the others of what he’s about to do - he’s diving off of the edge.

Gjálp and Heiðr stop their struggling, and you rush to look over the cliff, your adrenaline somehow making the height seem much more dizzying and much more surreal. You can make out his form plummeting for just a split second, but then, before he collides with the ribbon of water churning so *far* below you, there’s a flash of green.

Hrossþjófr is gone, and some kind of fish hits the water in his place.

Your shock hasn’t had time to register by the time Loki reaches you, and you feel like a ragdoll once again as he yanks you away from the precipice. “Where are the others?”

“My brother,” Heiðr says woodenly. “My brother jumped after her sister.”

“He turned into a *fish!*” Gjálp wails, her face falling into her hands. The rest of what she says is muffled, but weirdly enough, Loki doesn’t seem all that surprised. He *does,* however, seem *pissed.*

“*Foolish* boys and their *heroics,*” he snaps, and then he closes his eyes, taking a long, deep breath.
And then he’s flying into the vast emptiness of the canyon, too.

Chapter End Notes

Dun DUNNNN <3

Well, at least I got the chance to update one fic this week! I’ve been looking forward to parts of this one for a while... I hope you enjoy it, too! I’m 100% certain that it probably needs more proofing, but... I just want y’all to be able to read it ASAP, haha
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

You should probably be worried about yourself, but instead, you’re mostly just worried about him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Loki falls, your heart plummets alongside him.

Maybe you should just toss yourself off the cliff, too; things probably aren’t going to work out too well for you if your lifeline has just killed himself in a bout of reckless heroism. Though… you have to admit, the reckless heroism is, in and of itself, pretty swoon-worthy - provided that he doesn’t actually die in the attempt.

It’s a pretty big ‘if.’

You find yourself at the lip of the cliff again, realizing belatedly that you’d scrambled back to the edge as soon as he’d disappeared over it. Loki would probably be upset about that, wouldn’t he? He’d only just snatched you out of harm’s way.

*But then he threw himself off of a cliff, you think, so he can’t really judge.*

Somehow, he seems to fall more slowly than Hrossþjófr, but you’re pretty sure that’s not how physics works, so maybe your mind is just cracking up a little under the stress, making your senses distort. A shimmer of light glides over him midway down the canyon, and your stomach lurches as his form slides and morphs, a massive black raven streaking straight towards the foaming ribbon of river below.

His angle changes sharply and suddenly, and the bird-that-was-Loki skims along the water for a moment before diving beneath the surface, quickly out of view. The entire thing, from the avalanche of rocks until now, couldn’t have taken more than a minute or two.

*Idiot,* you think, tears blurring in your eyes. *Idiot, idiot. How could he leave me like this?*

But then, some other part of you is almost proud of him. You can’t help but wonder, too, if he would jump after you like that, so quickly, so instinctively; common sense and reason tell you not to count on it, but the part of you that’s quickly starting to crave his company likes to imagine that he would.

Behind you, there is chaos.

Gjálp is still sobbing, and Heiðr is apparently the only one out the three of you who has it together enough to stand and face the crowd of Frost Giants rushing down the path to find out where their king ran off to so suddenly. She’s rattling off something in a language you can’t understand, and when you turn to look over your shoulder, you find that she’s addressing the Völva.

The old woman seems remarkably calm about all of this, and you don’t know if that should be reassuring, or infuriating - how can she stand there looking so emotionless? Even if she doesn’t really
care about Loki or Greip, Hrossþjófr is practically her family. As you watch the Völva nod slowly, you realize that whatever Heiðr is saying, it doesn’t sound like the language the other giants occasionally use in the palace.

Apparently, you aren’t the only one to notice this, because as a ring begins to form around the three of you on the edge of the cliff, one of the bigger guys pushes his way forward, impatient. “Enough with your serpent-tongue, seiðkona! What has become of Loki Laufeyson?”

Silence falls; apparently, that’s considered pretty rude, even for giants. Skaði and Býleistr are just making their way into the circle as the Völva gives an odd little half-smile and points down into the canyon.

Skaði’s eyes are wide - you wonder if it’s sincere concern, or if she’s just riding the wave of panic from nearly getting crushed by a waterfall of rock. “What has happened to the king, Speaker? How did he fall?”

Heiðr blinks slowly, and you worry that she’s about to faint; you know you are definitely on the verge of it. “The king has gone to retrieve my brother Hrossþjófr,” she says, “as well as your kinswoman, Lady Skaði.”

Murmuring breaks out at that, and you edge away from the cliff, though the idea of crawling closer to the giants isn’t very promising, either. “Perhaps Loki Laufeyson thought to flee his impending battle with Mánagarmr,” one of the other Frost Giants barks out, hefting what looks to be some kind of club over his shoulder. “A liar-prince and a coward, like all of the Æsir.”

The whispers from some of the giants standing near him seems to indicate that a significant portion of them think that Loki is actually crazy enough to risk cliff-diving to escape a fight, and your fists clench. Surprisingly, it is Býleistr who responds. “Silence, Snæþrima” he says, “you speak of your king.”

“Would he have survived a fall from such a great height?” Skaði asks, turning towards the prince. “With his wounds still so fresh with Dark Elf-magic, and after spending his seiðr to shield the camp?”

Oh, no. Is she trying to say that he’s dead? Loki can’t be dead. He can’t be. You curl in on yourself, shivering - shivering, but not freezing, which must mean...

“He’s alive!” you blurt out, battling the urge to scoot backwards as a sea of red eyes turn their attention to you. No one tells you to be quiet, though; they all just stare. The Völva still has that creepy-ass half-smile on her face, and Skaði’s eyes are quickly narrowing, so you look towards the only face in the crowd that seems completely neutral: Býleistr.

“His magic.” Your voice is shaking, but they already think you’re weak and useless, so you guess it doesn’t matter too much. “The king’s magic, I can still feel it on me. The charms are still working, I mean, so he can’t be—”

“Why does the mortal speak?” one of the other giants asks, the ridges on his forehead creasing as he frowns down at you.

“We should return to the palace with Prince Býleistr,” another says. “This folly with Odin’s son is ended.”

And then another giant chimes in, a pointy-eared woman standing just behind Skaði’s shoulder. “No,” she argues, “we must continue to Járnviðr, to meet with Prince Helblindi and relay all that has
happened in his absence."

“This entire journey has been cursed from the start!”

“Watch your tongue, hrímþurs,” an older Forest Giant snaps. “Your kind may not abide by oaths, but the Skógr-Jötnar are true to their word, and Queen Fárbaúti has pledged our loyalty to Loki Laufeyson.”

*Please,* you pray, your eyes starting to water and sting, *please, someone, say that you’re going to help Loki.* If they don’t... you’re likely as good as dead, because even with all of his strength and magic, there’s no way he can make it all the way back up here alone.

Býleistr is still studying you. You have to give him credit - you expected him to be a lot more satisfied with the fact that his usurper half-brother is probably on the verge of dying and being out of his way for good. He holds out a hand. “Come here, In-Unga,” he says.

You blanch, but there’s no one there to protest for you; Gjálp is too much of a mess to notice or care that you might be in danger, and it’s not like you can really *blame* her for it. Knees shaking, you push yourself to your feet, tottering over to him as the giants all seem to inexplicably grow taller and more menacing.

Fear is funny like that.

Not knowing what else you can possibly do, you gingerly take Býleistr’s hand. He raises it slightly, presumably so that everyone has a better view, and a faint blue sheen creeps over your skin. There’s a faint stinging, and you flinch - but nothing happens.

“The mortal spoke truly,” he declares. “My cold will not burn her; my brother’s magic is still intact. This means that he must live, does it not?” He looks to the Völva, who nods. “Then we will go deeper into Ymir’s Teeth and hope to intercept them further down the path. Can you lead us further down, Lady Skaði? Closer to the river?”

“It will lengthen the journey, sire, but I can.”

Býleistr snorts. “There is no point in the journey without the king and his wolf-slaying. Make ready to travel, and do it with haste.”

To say that you’re shocked would be an understatement.

It would be really nice if he’d let go of your fingers now, though.

“Very well.” Skaði pulls Gjálp to her feet, quickly passing her off to one of the other women. Apparently, she isn’t the comforting type. *Unsurprising.* “We will need to push the damaged sleighs into the canyon, lest they gather ice and impede our return.”

“See it done.” And then he turns, pulling you after him through the throng of gathered giants. “Come along, mortal,” he says. “You will be riding with me, now.”

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He sits cross-legged before you, his chin resting in his hand. A few other giants are lounging in the back of the sleigh, but Býleistr has seated you at the very front, surrounded by a mountain of scarlet
pillows. You aren’t really sure if that’s meant to make you feel more secure, or more trapped; at the moment, you’re kind of bouncing back and forth between the two.

“Do you truly fear for him?” he says, following what has probably been the most uncomfortable silence in your life. “Can a mortal feel such loyalty, and to such a creature as Loki In-Illi?”

You open your mouth to reply, then realize you don’t know what to say, so you close it again. Býleistr continues to stare at you. What would he look like, you wonder, if he had the same light eyes and pale skin as Loki? Would he be any less frightening?

“You are very frightened?”

“Yes,” you whisper; there’s no point in lying. Even if he couldn’t smell it, your teeth are practically chattering, and only some of that can be blamed on the cold.

“I can see the question in your eyes, girl. You may ask it.”

“Okay.” Your mouth feels like cotton, but since your usual defender isn’t around to keep you safe… it can’t hurt to entertain the brother who’s currently in charge, can it? “Why did you tell them to go after him?” you ask. “I didn’t think you would, especially with the others saying… what they were saying.”

“Hmm.” Býleistr leans forward slightly, running a finger down your cheek, and your heart pounds, but you’re able to keep yourself from lurching away. He doesn’t look menacing, really, just… fascinated. “These tears you’ve shed,” he says, “are they for him, or for yourself?”

“Both. For the others, too. They’ve been… they’ve been kind to me.” You picture Greip curled up happily with Snowball, and Hrossþjófr’s cheeky grin, and Loki, and your eyes start to well with tears all over again. Oh, Loki. Is he really alive? You don’t know how magic works… maybe the spell is feeding off of you, somehow, making it last. Maybe he’s down there in the river, broken and bloody, worse off even than he was when he’d first found you.

Býleistr’s hand drops away. “Have I not been kind to you?”

You don’t answer.

“The others despise him because they do not want a son of Asgard on the throne of Jotunheim, even if he has Laufey’s blood, even if the customs demand it. They think that Helblindi should be king; he is very much his father’s son, though less clever, perhaps, and more brutal.”

“And you?”

He smiles. “I despise him because he laid waste to Utgard, all to please his false father. He killed our father.” The smile slides away. “Though, I must admit that I understand his actions, as well; the legacy of ancient kings can be bitterly oppressive.”

“I… I don’t understand.”

Stretching himself back against the cushions, Býleistr gives a half-hearted shrug. “As I said before, I will wait to see how my brother Helblindi chooses to act. My mother swore loyalty to Loki Laufeyson, for now, and I see no need to break it. And for his part, Loki is clever - I cannot help but wonder if he is truly as great as he claims to be. I always was the curious sort.”
After a tense hour or two of answering the prince’s questions about Earth - which seem to have no discernable rhyme nor reason - he leaves you at your end of the sleigh, moving to talk to the giants at the opposite side. They don’t bother speaking in any language you can understand, and you’re kind of relieved, because it makes it easier to tune them out.

You don’t know what to do with yourself, and some desperate, pitiful part of you just wants to turn back the clock to the last time you were sleeping on Loki’s chest, his arms wrapped around you. He may be a little crazy and dangerous, sure, and wildly unpredictable, but… you trusted him. It might not be smart, but you felt it in your bones.

And so you curl up into a tiny ball, praying to anyone who might be listening that they all somehow made it to the bottom of that canyon in one piece, that they didn’t shatter and drown on impact, that they’re all still breathing…

The path is even sharper, now, so steep that you can actually feel the incline pulling you closer to the wall of the sleigh. If it wasn’t for the wooly rhinos’ claws digging into the packed snow of the trail, you’d probably be careening wildly down the slope. The thought makes you sick.

You doze for a while, but you can hear the rumble of the boulders and Gjálp’s shrieking every time you close your eyes. Eventually, you sleep long enough to dream - it isn’t pleasant. In your dreams, Loki’s skin shifts and morphs into a terrifying, unnaturally-large black bear, and then he starts to chase you through the snow. You try to run, but you’re moving as though you’re swimming through molasses, and he’s almost on you when you start awake, your head cracking against the wall behind you.

Pushing yourself up, you wipe the sleep from your eyes, wondering if it was all just a terrible, terrible dream…

But it wasn’t. You’re still in Býleistr’s sleigh.

“We are stopping now to rest the animals, In-Unga,” he tells you. “We are much deeper into the canyons, now, and the path is difficult. You may go outside.”

Normally, your answer to that would be a resounding ‘hell no,’ but you’d much rather be with Gjálp or Heiðr right now; they’re probably the only other people in this entire convoy who want Loki to appear as badly as you do.

You figure you’re supposed to wait until he leaves - that’s how royalty works, right? They do things, and everyone else follows? The cold bites into your skin as your boots hit the snow. The warming charm is fading, you realize then. Does that mean that Loki is fading, too, or is it just that it’s been awhile since he renewed it?

Gjálp is huddled in on herself by the fire someone’s hastily built, one of the other Forest Giants sitting with her arm around her shoulders. You hesitate, unsure if your presence will be welcome. What if she blames you? Greip was focused on saving you when she…

You blink fiercely, and thankfully, the tears don’t come this time.

It’s a good thing, too.
In the cold wind, they might freeze.

Time passes. You don’t know how long - time has stopped to mean anything in this place. When they tell you to wake, you wake. Otherwise, you sleep. The sun doesn’t shine any longer, and the heavy grey clouds make you doubt that it was ever there, at all.

Some inkling of scientific curiosity makes you wonder how long the days are on Jotunheim. How many days have passed on Earth? Has it been long enough for them to report you missing? Long enough for them to declare you dead?

Heiðr finds you standing on the edge of the path, trying to see down into the shadowy ravine below. The snow is falling, now, and your breath ghosts in front of your face.

He has to be alive. Doesn’t he?

“She says after a moment or two, placing her hand on your shoulder, “but my brother is not weak, and neither is your master.” You glance up, but she’s staring down into the darkness, too. You wonder if she can see anything more than you.

“Lady Skaði,” one of the giants standing watch suddenly calls from a little farther down the path, “do you smell that?”

Skaði isn’t far from you, and you can see the confusion in her eyes as she stands from her place by the fire. “I do,” she says. “Jötunn blood.”

You run down the path, slipping and sliding on the ice; it’s stupid, and it might get you killed, but… if it’s his, then he needs help, and you’re all he’s got.

Even with a moment’s delay, Heiðr catches up quickly, and soon there’s a whole trail of giants following behind you, driven by either the curious scent of their king’s blood, or by their desire to see Loki’s mortal foolishly slip and fall to her death.

“There!” Gjálp cries, and you squint as the wind burns your eyes, struggling to make out any movement as your strange entourage makes it to a sharp bend in the road.

It looks like the snow itself is moving on the edge of the cliff, at first.

Then you see shining dark eyes, and the flattened ears of a very, very contrite-looking melrakki.

He scrambles (or is tossed) over the lip of the cliff, and he staggers a step or two, then rolls onto his back, his tongue lolling from his mouth as he pants furiously. Heiðr claps a hand to her mouth, a sudden sob of relief torn from her throat.

A blue hand grips the icy rock of the ledge only a second later.

“What—” Skaði begins, but Greip’s limp body is shoved onto the snow next, and the king climbs up after her, covered in ice and blood, his breathing ragged.

His eyes are fire as he surveys the silent throng around him, chest heaving.

But then Gjálp falls to her knees at his feet, clasping his hand. “Sire,” she says, “sire, thank you,
thank you.”

Loki looks down at her for a moment or two, apparently dumbfounded. He carefully extricates his hand from hers, awkwardly patting her on the head. He says nothing.

Instead, as whispers start to break out among the crowd, he stalks over to the mewling Snowball, fixing him with a deadly glare. “Change,” he demands, “the longer it’s out of socket, boy, the worse it will be.”

Oh.

There are plenty of disapproving gasps as Snowball melts and morphs away, leaving a very grey, very miserable-looking Hrossþjófr in his place. Heiðr doesn’t look very surprised, but she also seems frozen in place, as if she’s afraid that if she starts to move, she might find out that he’s not really there at all.

“Sit up.” Loki takes Hrossþjófr’s arm and twists it none-too-gently, and your stomach lurches as his shoulder pops back into place with a sickening crunch. Hrossþjófr wails, and his sister seems to finally break free from her trance, rushing to cradle him in her lap.

There’s a lot of talk in the background, but it all drowns out in a blur.

He’s okay.

Skaði is kneeling by Greip, who - unlike Hrossþjófr - isn’t even conscious, the blue almost entirely seeped from her skin, leaving a stony grey in its wake. “Does she live?” she asks, looking over her shoulder to where Loki stands swaying.

You want to run to him.

But you don’t.

“Yes,” he replies. “Take your brother to the Völva’s sleigh, Heiðr. Býleistr, if there are any healers among you, you’d best have someone fetch them. Gjálp?”

She looks up at once, though she keeps her sister’s hand pressed against her cheek. “Yes, sire?”

As he steps closer, there’s a look on his face that you’d almost describe as gentle. “I am going to have to cause your sister a great deal of pain,” he tells her, crouching by her side. “Her bones have begun to heal too quickly; I am going to have to break them to mend them. Do you wish to accompany me, or remain behind?”

“I… I will stay at her side.”

Loki nods once, then stands; you wonder if anyone else notices how he lurches slightly to the side as he does. How badly is he hurt? “Someone bring her, then, and quickly.”

He stalks past the rest of the crowd, then, back towards the sleighs, barely hesitating as he snatches up your hand to pull you along with him. His skin feels like cold fire, and you gasp. Glancing down to where your hands are joined, Loki frowns, and the burning eases a little. There’s no heat left in him, you realize. No warmth, and probably almost no magic.

Considering all that’s just happened, you don’t feel like it would be very wise to complain about your own discomfort.
You can’t really tell the sleighs apart from one another, but when he throws open the door to the one he’s dragged you to, you realize it’s the one you’ve been sharing with Greip and Gjálp (and him). There’s a bit of a manic, distracted sort of look in his eye as he unceremoniously lifts you by the waist and heaves you inside the sleigh, and then one of his cold, cold hands is cupping your cheek.

“Are you warm enough?” he says, an evident strain in his voice. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” you whisper, and then the dam breaks and the tears start to flow, and you throw your arms around his neck as you silently sob against him.

You’d thought he was dead.

Loki stiffens, and then gingerly pulls you away from him, his eyes narrowing slightly. “What has Býleistr done to you?” he asks, his voice deadly-soft. “Has he touched you? I can smell him on you.” He spits it out, like he hates to even admit that he can.

“I… He had me ride in his sleigh, that’s all. He didn’t… he didn’t do anything… bad. It’s okay.” You try to force a convincing smile, but you’re such a mess right now that it probably looks more pathetic than encouraging. “I’m okay.”

He studies you for a moment, then nods, like he’d somehow scanned your brain for lies and you’d come up clean. “Good.”

You feel a sharp loss as he pulls further away from you and hops back out into the snow, but he isn’t quite quick enough to hide the fact that there’s genuine relief in his eyes. “Stay here,” he says. “Open the door for no one but myself. I will be back soon.”

It feels like hours before he comes back, but it’s probably been less than one. A servant helps carry Greip into the sleigh, and once she’s settled, Gjálp curls up around her, burying them both in blankets. You can’t tell very much about her condition, but she’s a little more blue, at least, and the fact that she’s even there must mean that she’s on the mend.

Loki leans out the door and barks orders, and the sleigh is already lurching into motion by the time he collapses beside you. “Warm me,” he says, the dark circles under his eyes so pronounced now that they can be seen even through the blue of his skin.

You like to imagine that he says ‘please,’ because you’re pretty sure he’s thinking it.

You gather every blanket you can reach and climb into his lap.

His arms wrap around you beneath the layers and layers of covers, and he starts to go slack almost at once. You want to ask him a million and one questions - how did he do it? Did he already know about Hrossþjófr? Is Greip going to be okay? Is he going to be okay?

But you know he’s spent, so you hold yourself back. It can wait.

Instead, you tentatively slide your fingers through the edges of his hair, which is slightly damp from melting ice; he hasn’t even taken the time to use his magic to dry it, or maybe he just didn’t have any magic left.
“Loki?”

“Yes?” His voice is so soft you can barely hear him, and you press your cheek against his chest.

“I’m really, really glad that you’re okay.”

He hums in acknowledgment, and his hand comes up to cradle your head, almost as if he’s pressing you closer to his heart.

When you finally sleep, the nightmares don’t dare to come.

Chapter End Notes

The excitement for this story continues to amaze and inspire me - thank you all so, SO much! <3

I am going to take a two-week hiatus from Frostbite Fridays - I’m having a hard time keeping up with everything (IRL & fanfic-wise), and I want to get some work done on my other stories/get a little ahead for this one. So! The next #FrostbiteFriday will be Oct. 19th!

(In other exciting news, I’ve actually just outlined it alllll the way to the end, and I usually don’t outline, so I’m pretty pleased with myself, haha).

Lots and lots of love,
MoA

(p.s. Shoutout to those who figured out who Snowball was!)
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Loki's going to end up giving you whiplash. One moment, he's playing the heroic king, and the next, he's Inn-Illi, cold and distant.

And to make it even more confusing, no matter *what* happens during the day, he always wants you by his side when the night comes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You’re pretty sure that Loki hasn’t moved even a fraction of an inch the entire time you’ve been asleep. In fact, when you first open your eyes, you think that maybe you’ve barely slept at all.

But no - your mouth is dry and your eyes are bleary, and there is a slight bit of light illuminating the window, which means that it’s most likely a new morning… you think.

Really, who knows?

Gjálp sits beside her sister, sharpening a knife. She’s staring into space, and the look on her face is kind of intense. The stone strikes her blade again, and you think you see a spark fly.

Oh, crap, you think, eyes widening.

“Gjálp?”

She looks up, startled. “Oh,” she says. “You are awake, In-Unga.” Her voice drops a bit as she whispers, “Is the king still sleeping?”

“Yeah.” Sleeping is probably an understatement. It seems like he’s practically in a coma. “Uh… what’s that for?”

Gjálp slides her sharpening-stone against her blade again, a look of determination set on her face. You realize that you haven’t seen her try to look stern very often, and it doesn’t fit her all that well. “The king is vulnerable, and if anyone truly wishes him harm, now is the opportune time to strike.”

Her jaw tightens, and she looks back to the work in her lap. “I owe Loki Laufeyson a life debt,” she continues after a moment. “Beyond my fealty to him as my king, that is. I will die for him, if I must.”

Oh, God, that’s heavy stuff for first thing in the morning.

“I guess… let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, right? People dying?”

“One can always hope.”

That’s not exactly reassuring.

She seems pretty focused on the whole knife-sharpening thing, and you figure maybe it’s just her way of dealing with the stress. Worried that you’re bothering her, you turn instead to the king
beneath you, wiggling around in his lap to get more comfortable.

Then you decide that, if he’s going to be unconscious for a while, maybe you should try to rearrange him a little. Being half-propped on the cushions might not be comfortable in the long run, especially if you’re planning to stay on top of him - and you are definitely planning to stay on top of him.

You stand and try to drag one of the cushions from under his shoulders, hoping to get him into more of a normal sleeping position, but the man is ungodly heavy. It makes you realize just how much he usually accommodates you, because you can barely budge the dead weight of his arm, let alone his whole body.

*How is he so freaking heavy?*

“Do you need help, In-Unga?” Gjálp sounds like she’s about to start laughing, and you sheepishly nod; Loki isn’t going anywhere anytime soon with you trying to move him on your own. She tucks her knife in her belt and comes over to join you, and between the two of you, you get him spread out on the sort-of-mattress you’ve cobbled together from a bunch of large pillows.

To be entirely fair, Gjálp did most of the actual work.

“Should we do anything for them?” you ask. Now that he’s flat on his back, he looks a lot more… dead. Blue-grey, stone-still, and lifeless. It’s making you a little panicky, honestly. Now you get why Gjálp was so focused on sharpening her knife - standing around watching someone recover from a near-death experience isn’t exactly good for a person’s nerves.

“I cannot say. I know that Inn-Illi expected my sister to sleep for some time, but he did not reveal the extent of his injuries. I do not believe that it would be wise to reveal that he is… in this state.” She gestures helplessly at his prone form. “I suppose they both need rest.”

“What about food? They were in that canyon forever, freezing, and they need fuel to recover, right?”

“Everything that we have in the sleigh would be difficult to feed them, for now. A broth would be ideal, I suppose.” She frowned. “Or a soup.”

*Are those even different things?* You aren’t sure. But you do agree that something liquid would probably be easier to get into Loki and Greip than whatever sea-monster steak they’ve probably got packed away. “Okay,” you say. “Let’s get them some soup. Or broth.”

“I will, as soon as we stop to rest. The king was very insistent that we reach the forests as quickly as possible, so I do not know how long it will be before Lady Skaði decides to call for a halt.”

“Oh.”

She places a hand on your shoulder. “Do not worry,” she says, though she doesn’t sound quite as convincing as she probably hopes, “for I have witnessed Loki Laufeyson’s magic, and I am quite certain that he will be just fine.”

You feel a little guilty, then, because Greip is in a lot worse shape than Loki, and here her sister is, trying to comfort you. “You should get some sleep. We should both get some sleep, I mean. Can’t look after them if we’re worn out, too.”

Gjálp manages a smile. “This is true, mortal,” she says, and then she goes back to rejoin her sister.

That leaves you and Loki at your end of the sleigh, and you only hesitate for a second before you curl up against his side, pulling the blankets back over the both of you. Really, at this point, you
figure it doesn’t even matter how ridiculous the whole thing is; you feel better when you’re pressed up against him, and you hope that it’ll make him feel better, too.

His clothes are kind of gross, and you’re noticing now that he’s got a faint wet-dog smell about him, but you guess that it’s probably more of a wet-melrakki smell. The guy needs a bath, ASAP.

But tragically, the idea of giving Loki a bath just reminds you of the last time he got you alone in the bathing pools below the palace of Utgard, which makes you feel… things.

*Embarrassing* things.

They’re things you *probably* shouldn’t be feeling about the jerk who’s basically kidnapped you, who’s *literally* keeping you as a pet… but that doesn’t stop you from smoothing his hair from his face, or from wrapping your leg around his. You do it *tentatively*, sure - you wouldn’t want him to wake up, after all - but you still *do* it.

It’s just to make sure he stays warm enough while he’s recuperating.

Still, even though you’re exhausted, you can’t seem to fall asleep, so you end up running your fingers through the edges of his hair and *thinking*. There are many thoughts warring for attention in your mind; all of them pretty much hinge on Loki.

Loki, who’d probably throw you out with the bathwater if it came down to it. He’s already told you that you’re disposable, hasn’t he?

You realize that, as eager as you are for this hellish adventure to end, you can’t quite imagine it ending. How can you go back to your normal, boring life after meeting someone like him? And will they even *let* you? You don’t know exactly who ‘they’ are, but you’ve seen enough movies to know that people who hang out with villainous aliens don’t usually get to just *go home*.

Cold fear races through you, then; what if they lock you up?

You’re basically an accessory, right? If Loki gets called up before some kind of galactic senate for judgment for taking over Jotunheim… are they going to take you, too? Should you *hope* for some sort of force for good to sweep in and intervene, or should you hope that he’s successful in his coup?

Because if you’re being totally honest with yourself, you *almost* kind of hope that he ends up being successful.

Loki starts twitching and scrunching his face up at some point, and you wrap yourself around him a little more tightly as you realize that he’s shivering. Maybe it’s some kind of fever, or maybe it’s some weird magical thing, but you figure that all you can really do is hold onto him and hope for the best.

If he really *is* as cold as the shivering makes him seem, at least maybe you’re helping.

You’re a little startled when he cracks open one eye; it’s still got the faintest tinge of red, though the rest of him has faded back to normal-Loki. Or is blue-Loki really the ‘normal’ one? You aren’t really sure how to think of that. In addition to the redness, his eye also has a little bit of a glazed-over look to it, and you start to get a little worried.

“You,” he says.

You wait for him to say something else, but he doesn’t. “Yeah,” you finally reply. “Me. I’m here. I’ve… got you.” *Maybe he’s looking for comfort*, you decide, and so you tentatively run your thumb
along his cheek. “I’m here.”

Loki scoffs, but with his face half-smushed against a pillow, it doesn’t look nearly as intimidating as usual. “Of course. Always are. Human.”

Should you feel insulted, or amused? At least he called you something other than mortal.

“Yeah. I am a human. You’ve got me there.”

There’s a tiny chance that you’re enjoying this opportunity to be a little extra sarcastic, but it isn’t like you get to actually sass him out loud very often. Really, you figure you deserve it.

Scowling, Loki closes his eye and shoves his face further into the pillow. You’re fairly certain you can see sweat starting to bead on his skin. “Pretty little wretch,” he mutters.

You’re frozen. Did he just…?

But he’s already fallen back asleep.

Loki’s a lot warmer now.

Or maybe you’re just burning with awkwardness, because he’s managed to roll over enough to spoon you while you were asleep, his arm and leg draped over yours, half-crushing you. Every time he takes a breath, you feel it barely brushing against your hair… and it’s making you feel a little insane.

Why is he so damnably hot?

You tell yourself that you’re really messed up for having the urge to press yourself back against him, but it just seems so natural, like some long-hidden instinct is calling out to you, encouraging you to curve and mold to his form.

The guy is essentially hibernating, your inner voice scolds. Stop being creepy.

It looks like you aren’t going to manage to escape his clutches anytime soon, so you try to fall back to sleep.

You aren’t really sure if you actually hear him mumble your name as he nuzzles against the back of your neck, or if you’ve just dreamed it.

“Mortal.” You’re being shaken, and you realize groggily that there’s a firm hand on your hip. “Mortal, wake up.”

Grunting in annoyance, you push yourself over onto your other side. Loki is staring at you, a surprisingly-petulant look on his face. Oh, right, you remember as the sleep clears. He’s in bad shape; I’m supposed to be taking care of him. “How’re you feeling?”
“I feel like I leapt off of a cliff into a freezing river, then carried two nearly-grown Frost Giants out of it with no assistance whatsoever,” he says. “I feel like I’ve used every ounce of seiðr in my body, and that I am currently extremely vulnerable. But primarily, I feel hungry.”

You nearly laugh in his face; it’s a pretty abrupt end to an otherwise-serious tirade. “I’ll get you something, okay? I thought soup would be good, but… Gjálp said there’s no soup until we stop. Should I tell someone to stop? I’m not really sure how—”

“No,” Loki interrupts, and then there’s an awkward pause as he seems to study you for a moment. Did you say something weird? You don’t think you said anything weird. “Get whatever you can find; as deep as we are in the canyons, now, we should not stop until we reach another village.”

“Okay.”

There are villages around here? It seems like a terrible place to try to settle, considering the fact that there’s almost no shelter from the wind - then there’s also the avalanches to take into consideration. Still, you can’t help but be a little excited at the prospect of stopping for a break. A bathroom would be nice, and so would a fire.

The twins are both passed out, and you don’t want to bother Gjálp, so you dig around in the baskets and trunks until you manage to scrape together what you think is a pretty decent snack. There are salted cracker-things - every bit as green as the weird biscuits, but not quite as bitter - and dried jerky made from some animal that you prefer not to picture.

You open a few flasks, trying to find some water, but everything you find smells suspiciously similar to the mead or tree-wine or whatever it was that basically destroyed you back in Utgard. Even though you don’t have any intention of touching the stuff with a ten-foot pole ever again, should you try to get him to drink some?

Well, why the hell not? you think, tucking it under your arm. Maybe it’ll help.

It’s not like you have any experience in taking care of Frost Giant sorcerers, or anything. Maybe it’ll at least warm him up a little.

Loki pushes himself up on his elbows as you stumble back to his side, the rocking and bouncing of the sleigh making you even clumsier than usual. Honestly, it’s a blessing that you don’t end up falling flat on your face. Sinking to your knees beside him, you hold out the flask.

“Here,” you say. “Drink up.”

He takes it and gives it a suspicious sniff, and you think you see a little bit of a spark return to his eyes. “Trying to intoxicate me, mortal? What an interesting ploy.”

“I’m trying to help, actually.”

His lip curls slightly in the ghost of a smirk, and then he proceeds to drain the entire thing.

“You might want to take it easy—”

“I am in extreme pain at the moment, mortal,” he says bluntly, recapping the flask and dropping it on the floor beside him. “I believe I’ve earned the relief.” Then, he pulls something from some pocket you hadn’t even noticed he had and pops it in his mouth.

Frowning, you hold out the trencher - you’re pretty sure that downing industrial-grade alcohol and popping mystery medicine isn’t all that advisable, even for an alien sorcerer.
“Eat something, then?”

Loki nods, but he doesn’t make any move to take any of the food from the little wooden trencher balanced on your lap, and you’re overcome with dismay as you realize that he’s probably going to make you feed him. Somehow, the idea of feeding him seems almost more scandalous than him feeding you.

He does seem like he’s struggling to even keep himself propped up, though, so you tell yourself that it’s kind of a special scenario. To be totally fair to Loki, he did just risk his life to save two people - people that you actually like.

So that’s why you tear off a tiny piece of sea-monster-jerky and hold it in the air in front of his face, feeling incredibly self-conscious. You’ve never nursed anyone back to health before, and it’s very intimate, and—

Eyes locked with yours, Loki opens his mouth. This doesn’t mean anything, you tell yourself. This is entirely clinical. You shove the tiny little morsel into his mouth as quickly as you can, and his eyes glitter as he chews.

Unfortunately, it seems like the king has decided to interpret your speed as some kind of stupid challenge, because every time you bring another bite to his lips, he seems to move a little more quickly, too, and by the time he manages to capture your fingertips in his mouth… you can’t even begin to pretend to yourself that it’s accidental.

You rock back on your heels, cheeks crimson. Loki’s actually got a bit of a flush going on, too. Is it from the fever, or because he’s drunk? Maybe both.

“Are you… done?” There’s an embarrassing strangled quality to your voice, but you comfort yourself with the fact that he’s probably too out of it to even notice.

Except really, he probably notices everything, no matter how under-the-weather he is. Ugh.

“For now.” His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and then he abruptly falls back against the cushions. Eyes closed, he fumbles around until he’s managed to grab you by sleeve of your tunic, and he then proceeds to try to drag you to his side.

It’s actually a little disturbing how weak he seems, the fact that he’s even having to try to move you. You shove the trencher and flask out of the way and climb under the blankets; you can deal with the mess later.

As you rest your head on his chest, Loki lets out a little sigh. “You smell like me,” he whispers, like it’s some sort of proud secret. “Safe.”

Does he mean that you’re safe, presumably from his brother, or that he feels safe now? The fevered ramblings of a half-dead inebriated sorcerer-god should really come with some sort of interpretation guide, you decide.

It’s probably best to split the difference. “Yeah,” you whisper back, “we’re safe.”

“Good pet.” He pats the side of your face - you’re assuming that he meant to go for a pat on the head, but his aim is clearly off at the moment. “Little mortal.”

Strangely enough, it makes you smile.
By the time the convoy comes to a halt, Loki seems like he’s slept off most of the fever, as well as most of the effects of… whatever it was that he took. He’s back to his usual grouchy self, from what you can tell, and even though he isn’t exactly springing back to his feet, he is being exceptionally bossy.

He orders Gjálp to wake up Greip and make her drink some water; you’re a little embarrassed to realize just how many containers of water there are stashed away in the sleigh, considering you couldn’t find any when you went looking. Maybe you aren’t cut out for this whole ‘servant’ thing.

It’s a relief to see Greip awake, though, even if she still seems incredibly groggy. Loki has Gjálp send for servants to come help move her sister from the sleigh to wherever it is that you’re going to be taking your break from travelling, and he manages to get himself upright before they show up.

_Say what you want about the man_, you think, _but he’s good at keeping up appearances._

Skaði is waiting just outside of the sleigh when you emerge. “My king,” she says, inclining her head in a slight bow, “you seem much recovered.”

“Well enough.”

“The village leaders are very eager to meet with you, sire. They would like for us to dine with them, if you’ll permit it.”

“Of course,” he replies. “We need to stop for a time to rest, and we might as well spend that time indoors. Lead the way, Lady Skaði.”

She smiles and takes his arm, and you’re left to trail after them as they follow the path towards the cliff-wall, like some kind of forgotten third wheel.

_Like a pet_, the insidious, increasingly-worrisome side of your mind whispers. You shouldn’t be bothered by it, right? It’s really dumb to feel anything like jealousy over Loki. And you tell yourself that it isn’t jealousy, and really, to a large extent, that’s true.

A lot of your dislike for Skaði does come from the fact that she acts like you’re about as important as a bug, and from the fact that she seemed way too entertained by the idea of using you as a blood-sacrifice. But, if you’re being completely honest with yourself, part of it probably comes from the fact that she’s apparently Number One on the list of Loki’s potential wives, too.

That’s the part that you should probably try your best to snuff out.

The giants in this village live in halls carved directly into the cliffside, and so you’ve decided to call them Cliff Giants in your head. Someone mentioned some other name for them, you think, but you can’t remember what it was. No one is really bothering to explain anything to you, this time, and it makes the whole thing a lot more uncomfortable.

The Cliff Giants literally look like they’re made out of rock, and after seeing so many shades of blue for the past week or so, it’s kind of odd just how grey they are, their skin flecked just like a smooth
river-pebble. They also don’t seem to be particularly fond of humans, and you’re starting to wish that you’d been left in the sleigh.

Overall, you’d have to describe this village as kind of claustrophobic. The homes that they’ve carved into the cliffs are nice, you guess, and pretty impressive, but some of the giants’ heads nearly touch the ceiling, and even though you don’t exactly have that problem, the overall vibe is cramped.

You prefer cozy to cramped - for example, ‘curled up by the fire in Loki’s spacious bedroom’ as opposed to ‘crushed into a corner surrounded by nine-foot-tall giants.’

Because these giants are definitely on the taller side of the spectrum, it seems, and that makes the whole thing a lot more stressful. You never thought you’d think of the twins as petite, but that’s how they seem now. Or at least, that’s how Heiðr and Gjálp seem - their twins aren’t present in the hall. You figure that Greip and Hrossþjófr are probably tucked away somewhere to recuperate.

Really, you’re surprised that Gjálp isn’t with her sister.

Loki is seated at the main table with all of the giants that must be important; there’s an older giant sitting next to him, and he’s big - not only tall and broad, but also on the portly side. You get the impression that he’s the boss, or lord, or chief, or something like that. Býleistr sits on the other side of the giant-lord, and Skaði is at Loki’s right hand.

You’re left standing in the corner behind them, feeling for all the world like a petrified block of angst. There’s been a lot of staring. There’s even been some conversation that was clearly about you, but it wasn’t anything you could understand.

If you tried to crawl into his lap, would he shove you to the floor? Probably.

Gjálp is the only one of the giants that you really know that you can actually see well, since she’s seated further down the table. She keeps fidgeting and looking around the room, like she’s waiting for a fight to break out, or for an assassin to spring from the shadows. Maybe she really is expecting something like that.

Does Loki even know that he’s got a new loyal bodyguard?

One of the giants who’s been walking around serving food eventually saunters over to you, a tray tucked under his arm. Go away, you think, craning your neck to look up at him. Either bring me something to eat, or go away.

The giant looks you up and down slowly, as if baffled by your very existence. You remember then that you’re supposed to act timid to avoid trouble, so you drop your gaze. Except… some part of you thinks that it’s pretty stupid that you have to act so subservient to a guy who’s clearly just a servant, considering you literally sleep with the freaking king every night.

Without warning, the giant reaches out and pinches your cheek. The only sound he makes is a curious hum, like he’s evaluating the ripeness of produce in the grocery store.

You’re too startled to hold back a tiny cry, clamping your hand to your face as you press back against the stone. It hurts.

Loki’s voice cuts across the room then, low and sharp. “You might wish to inform your thralls, Inn-Magri, that the price for playing with my mortal is a steep one.”
He hasn’t even turned to fully look at you, though many of the other giants at the table have swiveled on their benches to stare.

**Great.** Now your cheek is sore and you’re about to be in the middle of one of Loki’s tempers. At least the giant who pinched you retreats, moving to stand further down the wall. He doesn’t look very contrite, though, and your own temper builds.

The lord laughs, loud and grating, “You will have to forgive his curiosity, sire; many of the young ones have never seen a mortal. All of ours died out centuries back. They do not breed well, you know. Terribly expensive to keep a good stock, even when we were free to bring them from Midgard.”

You feel sick.

“Of course, Inn-Magri,” Skaði says quickly. “Mortals are such odd creatures. But very entertaining, are they not?” And then she puts her hand on Loki’s, and your heart lurches.

“Are they so entertaining?” another giant at the main table asks, her voice dripping skepticism. “It looks very frail. What sport can be made of such a creature?”

“Yes, yes,” the lord says, craning his neck to take another look at you. “It’s hardly the sort you’d use for fighting, or baiting the hounds. Those were always my favorites. What is your mortal good for, sire?”

Your fists clench, your nails digging so deeply into your palms that you almost expect them to bleed. At least the sensation is something to focus on, because you feel like you’re about to start screaming.

Loki’s head finally tilts slightly, raising his jaw as he glances at you from the corner of his eye. “Nothing,” he replies, expressionless. “Nothing, aside from keeping me warm.” There’s some rude laughter from around the table, and your nails dig deeper into your palm.

He turns back to the table, and even though you don’t have the best view of his face from where you’re standing, you can see the corner of his lip turning up in a smile. “And if any of your men put a hand on my mortal again without my explicit permission, I’ll cut it off.”

There’s a moment of awkward silence; a few of the Cliff Giants look downright offended, while some just seem a little surprised. Then the lord lets out a gurgling sort of laugh, and a few of the other giants follow suit. “Perhaps they should call you *The Greedy One,* instead, Inn-Ilili.”

“No,” Loki says, “I find that ‘Inn-Ilili’ suits me quite well.”

That’s one of the creepiest things about Loki, you think, the fact that he can just say things like that with a charming smile on his face, going about his dinner like he’d never been interrupted. *The Evil One.*

A few more giants laugh; it seems like this group just seems to find everything funny, including death and dismemberment. *And torture,* you remind yourself. *Torturing humans, to be specific.*

You really, really wish you were still in the sleigh.

Gjálp looks tense, but she doesn’t budge from her seat, which is a little disappointing; you were hoping that Loki would send her over to take you somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

The woman who spoke before, the one who seems so skeptical of your entertainment value, speaks
again. “Is that truly all that it can do? I do not understand the appeal.”

“Actually,” Býleistr cuts in, “she speaks well enough. Her tales of Midgard are amusing, I’ve found.” He sits back, arms crossed, and you can tell from the angle that he’s looking right at Loki. “In fact, I’ve even heard it said that she can read.”

“I cannot imagine why you’d take the time to teach a mortal to read, sire,” the lord declares at that. “By the time it’s learned anything, it will be dead. This one probably only has—” he cranes his neck to look at you again, squinting in contemplation “—what, twenty or thirty years left, at most?”

Christ, you think. I hope not. Where is he getting that number from? And then you realize that ancient humans on Jotunheim must’ve had pretty short lifespans, and the churning in your stomach builds.

“Perhaps less.” Skaði sounds way too happy about that, and if you didn’t feel so sick, you’d probably have a lot more energy to devote to being furious.

Loki pulls his hand away from hers and picks up his cup. “How far would you say that we are from the forests, my lord?”

“Well, sire, if you do not stay the night, you’d likely reach the very edges of the Iron Wood within the next day. Geirröðr’s keep is not far, by my recollection.”

Gjálp looks up. “That is correct, sire,” she says, a slight strain in her voice. “If we forge ahead, we can make it to my father’s keep within the next day, and we may rest there for a time.”

The lord scoffs. “I doubt that your father will be pleased to accommodate all of you, girl; you do travel with a pack of storm-witches.”

Her face darkens. “We honor the authority of the Völva, my lord,” she says, “as I am sure Lady Skaði will tell you. To suggest otherwise—”

“Peace, child,” he says, and you can tell that his patronizing tone grates on Gjálp’s nerves just as much as it grates on your own. “I have known Geirröðr for much longer than you have even been alive. I know his ways, and I know how he feels about Stormr-Jötnar.”

You’re not surprised that the Völva remains silent, since that seems to be her whole schtick, but you are surprised that Heiðr doesn’t speak up. You guess that she must be preoccupied.

“We are a kingdom united,” Loki says. “The Forest Giants are happy allies of the Storm Giants now, is that not so, Lady Skaði?”

“His Majesty speaks true; Queen Fárbauti has pledged us to the king, as have our Stormr-Jötnar friends. It is time to let old things die, I suppose.”

The lord grunts. “The dawn of an interesting era.”

“Indeed, my lord.”

It seems like you’ve been mostly forgotten as the chatter about alliances and rivalries continues, and you sink down against the wall, your legs finally giving out. You’re cold, you’re hungry, and you’re...

You’re hurt.
Even knowing that he’s playing games, that he’s acting a part, the fact that Loki looked at you and called you worthless in front of a room full of people sting. True, he did also say that he’d start cutting off hands if anyone else touches you, but…

You feel dehumanized, and bizarrely enough, Býleistr’s the only one who even referred to you as something other than an ‘it.’

No one bothers you, though, and you guess that even though they thought Loki’s threat was entertaining, they must’ve also taken it seriously. Wrapping your arms around yourself, you daydream of hot food and crackling fires. Eventually, the dinner begins to wind down, and when Gjálp comes over to get you, you’re so relieved that you could cry.

“Come along, In-Unga,” she says, her hand resting on her dagger-belt. “I am going to fetch my sister and help her back to our sleigh, and I do not think that it would be wise to leave you behind. The king is… preoccupied.”

Stiff from sitting on the stone floor for so long, you force yourself to stand and follow her into one of the hallways that leads away from the main hall. Loki does seem preoccupied; as you pass behind the table, you notice that he seems to be deep in conversation with the Cliff Giant lord and Skaði, and he doesn’t even glance up at you.

Is the spell he’s using to keep you warm fading because he’s exhausted, or has he just forgotten about you?

Greip is awake and nursing a bowl of soup when you reach her room. You guess that it must be some kind of guest-hostel or infirmary, because there are quite a few narrow cots, with the door to a small bathroom off to one side.

“Wash up quickly,” Gjálp tells you. “I will bring something for you to eat in the sleigh. I… I do not like this place, or Inn-Magri. The king will do well to leave as soon as he is able.”

Yeah, you think, I bet that I like this place even less than you do.

You’re relieved to have access to a bathroom and some mildly-warm water, even though the facilities aren’t exactly fantastic. Still, scrubbing your face feels nice, and it gives you the sense of being a little more put-together, more in-control.

Gjálp hands you a bag as soon as you re-emerge, and it’s heavy. “Can you carry this? I need to help my sister.”

“I am fine—” Greip begins, her voice rasping.

“No, you are not. You nearly died, and there is no reason for you to pretend that you are already healed. I will help you walk, or I will carry you, but those are your only options.”

Greip relents, and her sister helps her from the bed, wrapping her arm around her waist. You notice, then, the tiny leaf-pendant hanging from its chain around Greip’s neck.

“Is Hrossþjófr okay?” you ask, hefting the bag over your shoulder. You don’t really mind; at least Gjálp had the decency to phrase it as a request, rather than a command.

“He is recovering,” Gjálp tells you, “but the king has had strong words with him over his irresponsible use of magic. I know little of such things, but what he attempted was apparently far beyond his novice skills as a skin-changer; the king said that he is lucky that he did not kill himself.”
“I can’t believe he was Snowball.” You watch Greip’s face out of the corner of your eye, trying to judge her reaction. Her lips press together in a thin line, but she doesn’t say anything. You’re assuming that she hasn’t had a chance to confront him about that yet… but man, it’s sure to be explosive when she does.

Even after the convoy moves on, Loki doesn’t show up in your sleigh, and the hours crawl by. You think about Skaði taking his hand, and you think about him saying that you’re good for nothing, and you think about him whispering your name in his sleep and saying that you’re pretty, and it all becomes jumbled up into one huge mess.

Gjálp’s made good on her soup promise, and she’s given you a big container of it - something that looks a little bit like the thermoses you used to take for lunch in school. More salty-fishyness is inside, and slices of something that look like mushrooms. Considering that even some mushrooms on Earth are poisonous, you hope that these won’t kill you. At least they taste pretty good, if they do.

Your standards have really dropped, since this whole thing began.

You notice that Greip seems a little stressed when her sister mentions that you’re heading straight for their parents’ place to spend some time, and you also notice that her hand closes around the leaf pendant, which she quickly stuffs back under her tunic.

Uh-oh, you think. That’s not a good sign of things to come.

“Are you alright, In-Unga?” Greip asks, resting her head back against one of the cushions. It seems like she’s determined to stay up for a while, even though she looks like death. “Your cheek is red.”

“Oh, I… I got pinched. One of the servants thought it would be funny, I guess.”

She looks aghast, which you think is kind of funny, in a weird way, considering she was in the court when you first arrived, when people were joking about literally eating you. Have things changed that much, since then?

Maybe they have.

“The giants there seemed… harsh,” you add. It seems like the twins weren’t big fans of them, either, so you figure it’s probably okay for you to let off a little steam.

“They are. Those who dwell in the canyons and cliffs do not care much for the rest of the realm’s affairs, and they are known for playing to whatever side offers them the most wealth. Other than travellers, they rarely interact with any outside of their clans, especially since the war.”

“Oh.” You rub your cheek, hoping that maybe it won’t actually bruise.

“It will be better for you in our father’s house,” Gjálp says. “We will make certain of it.”

He doesn’t show up until much later, long after you’ve all fallen asleep. You wake up to his hand on
your cheek, and your first instinct is to smack him away. Instead, you grunt in annoyance and try to roll away, only to realize that he’s lifting you into the air.

He must be moving you back down to his end of the sleigh, and your irritation builds. He didn’t seem all that interested in you before, and now he wants to cuddle up?

“Nothing, aside from keeping me warm.” Such an ass.

“Lemme go,” you mumble as Loki settles himself heavily onto the bed you’d made for him, his arms holding you tight. And then, just in case he didn’t get the message, you add, “I’m not in the mood.”

“Not in the mood? It is your job.” He sounds a little amused, at first, but when you remain stiff, you can feel him tense behind you. “What is the matter with you?”

It probably isn’t a good idea to pick a fight with him, but… you’re having a lot of feelings, and you’re pretty sick of it all, so you figure that there’s no point in trying to hide it. “Nothing,” you reply, and there’s a little bit of venom behind it.

“Oh, I see. Come here.”

“I am here.”

Loki huffs, then twists you around until you’re face-to-face. Asgardian again, you note, taking in his light eyes, the pallidity if his skin; there are bruises and scratches that you hadn’t been able to see before, and you wonder why he hasn’t managed to heal them yet.

“You have no right to take this tone with me, mortal,” he snaps. “Do you really not understand how delicate things are? How very close it is to falling apart at any given moment?”

“You said that I’m nothing!”

“You are nothing.”

The words hit hard, and you try to recoil, but there’s nowhere for you to go, so you settle on closing your eyes. You might have to listen to him, but you don’t have to look at him.

Loki sighs, presumably finding your feelings frustrating. “How do you fail to realize that it is better for you to be nothing?”

“That’s not—“

“Did you know that this is all smoke and mirrors?” he presses. “Look at me, girl.”

You obey, albeit reluctantly.

“There is hardly a drop of magic left in me - not enough to even fully heal myself, or enough for this.” He taps your cheek, and you wince. “This is not some kind of game. What would you have me say - that I’ve gone soft, and for a mortal?”

He just doesn’t get it.

“I am not going to risk my throne for you,” he says, voice hushed, “nor have I given you any reason to expect it of me; at the most, I’ve offered you protection, and even that is conditional.”

But no matter what he says, as he runs his thumb across your cheek, you can’t help but notice that he looks a little distressed. God of Lies.
You decide to take a risk.

“Am I really nothing?”

Loki frowns, and as he opens his mouth to respond, you quickly add, “To you?”

He pauses, and his eyes flicker from yours to the mark on your cheek - the one he’s still stroking. “I do not know what you are,” he says after a moment or two.

You wait for more… but he doesn’t say anything else, and you bury your face against his chest, your heart falling. It was stupid to even ask. What had you really expected him to say? Like he said before, he’d never promised you anything, not really. You’re just two people stuck together in bizarre circumstances, trying to stay alive.

The cuddling thing is just some weird coping mechanism, it doesn’t mean anything. Wanting it to mean something isn’t going to change that.

It’s infuriating that you’re close to tears.

*Just go to sleep,* you tell yourself. *You’re tired, and you aren’t being rational. Just go to sleep.*

And you think that he’s fallen asleep, too, until he pulls you closer, your head tucked under his chin. “You shouldn’t be,” he says, so softly that you almost can’t hear him, “but you are something. Someone. To me.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaand we’re back!! I loved writing this chapter, and I’m very excited to resume FrostbiteFridays. As always, I love and appreciate the comments, and you can always pop over to Tumblr if you want to send me an ask! You guys are amazing. <3

I’m *also* going to take a second to plug a new one-shot I wrote: Brother’s Keeper. If you like post-canon fix-it… check it out!
Chapter Summary

Dealing with unwanted feelings is hard enough; add in some inter-clan tension and an extremely uncomfortable banquet with Greip and Gjálp’s parents, and you’ve got a recipe for disaster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Has something… happened, In-Unga?” Gjálp asks, placing another card onto the floor of the sleigh. You don’t really understand the game, yet, but you don’t mind - at least they’re trying to teach you. It’s sweet, and the distraction is nice.

“What do you mean?”

“The king seemed very odd when he left.”

Odd. Yeah, that’s one way to describe it. “I don’t know,” you tell her. “I guess he’s got a lot on his mind, considering everything that’s going on. You know?”

She nods thoughtfully, and Greip leans over your shoulder, tapping one of the cards in your hand. “This one,” she whispers. “It will destroy her lands.”

“Oh.” You set it down, and Gjálp sighs in frustration.

“I always win at this,” Greip tells you, smiling as she twines the chain of her necklace around her fingers. “You could not find a better teacher.”

“Yes,” her sister says, “which is why it is not fair. I’d thought that I might win a game, for once.”

You laugh a little, glad that the conversation’s been steered away from Loki. He barely even looked at you when he slipped away earlier, and he seemed irritated that you’d even woken up, like he’d been hoping that he wouldn’t get caught.

It’s because he said that you mean something to him, you think, and now he regrets it. Typical.

But you tell yourself that it’s okay; you were just feeling a little extra-vulnerable anyway, and he’s just had a near-death experience. Really, the whole thing is probably adrenaline-bonding - with maybe a little Stockholm thrown in. Don’t count on him, you tell yourself. He’s too fickle; you can’t afford to count on him.

You kind of… get it, too. If Loki acting weird and out-of-character around you in front of the giants is going to cause chaos, then you guess you’d rather just suck it up and deal. Hurt feelings are better than being dead, right? Because if anything happens to Loki, if he loses the throne… you know you’re as good as dead.

Greip and Gjálp couldn’t save you - they might want to, but they’re basically just kids. If you’re caught up in some kind of revolt, if the tide turns against Loki, then all bets are off. No protection.
No chance of ever making it back to Earth.

So, with that in mind, you tell yourself to get a grip and stop letting your feelings affect you so much. It’s a lot easier said than done.

The game eventually wraps up, and the three of you decide to snack. “Are you excited to be going home?” you ask. “Back to the forest?”

“Yes,” Greip says, “only it will be difficult, I think, to know how everyone will react.”

“Our father is extremely loyal,” Gjalp hurries to add, “but… our clan has expected Prince Helblindi to become the king someday, you see.”

“Having a Skógr-Jótnar on the throne is very important,” Greip says. “With the line of succession disrupted, everyone is waiting to see what Loki Laufeyson will do. Which tribes will he give the most honor? Who will he wed?”

“And,” her sister continues, “the fact that he is a seiðberandi, and that the Storm Giants are with him… there is bad blood there, In-Unga, and it cannot be erased so easily.”

“But, it was Queen Fárbauti who called the Völva in the first place,” you say. “I don’t understand; if you guys don’t like magic, then why let a magical lady say who gets to be king?”

“The Völva is different,” Greip says patiently, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “She is blessed by the Norns; who are we to question what has been decreed by the Norns?”

That isn’t exactly a fantastic explanation, but you decide to let it go, for the time being. The one thing that you know they’re right about is the bad blood. It seems like everyone has an axe to grind with everyone else, and Loki’s landed you smack in the middle of it all.

You can’t help but worry that the twins are kind of underselling the level of danger involved in this whole expedition. “Will Prince Helblindi be at this place?”

“It is more likely that he will be at Þrymheimr,” Gjalp says, “the hall of Lady Skaði’s father. That is our eventual destination, and it is from there that the king will go forth to slay the wolf Mánagarmr.”

“What does that mean?” you ask. “The wolf’s name?”

“Moon-Hound. It is said that he will devour the moon, someday, and feast on the dead after the Twilight of the Gods has come.”

Bleak. Are there not any positive myths around here? Fun fairy-tales, stories with romance and happily-ever-afters? It sure doesn’t seem like it. Interesting reflection of the culture, you think. Maybe they’d be a bit more generally pleasant if they did have more happy stories.

“Father will likely hold a feast.” Gjalp seems to have noticed that you’re brooding, and she smiles at you, patting your knee. “Would you like for us to dress you up, In-Unga?”

“Dress me up?”

“Yes, as we did before? I am certain that we have some clothes that will fit you, from when we were children.”

“With the makeup and everything?”

“Yes.” She looks excited, and considering the terrible few days she’s had, you can’t really bring
yourself to shoot her down. It’s harmless, and it’ll give you something to do. Maybe it’ll help Greip relax, too, since you’re suspicious that she’s super fixated on the whole ‘parents finding out a Storm Giant with a crush tried to save her’ thing.

“Okay,” you say, returning her smile. “Sure. Just… maybe only the lines, this time? You can make them match the pattern on Loki’s face, right?”

If you’re going to let them play dress-up, you might as well make a statement.

“Of course.”

“Hey,” you ask on impulse, “do you guys have, like… razors, or anything like that?” They both stare at you, so you add, “a straight razor, even? For shaving?”

“Shaving?” Greip cocks her head. “Well, we use a blade or scissors to trim our hair… is that what you mean?”

“I mean… shaving body hair?” They both continue to stare at you. “Legs?” you try, feeling increasingly awkward. “Armpits? No?”

They shake their heads, and you decide to give up. You’re not about to try to shave your legs with a freaking dagger, so bring on the fuzz. It doesn’t really matter that much, anyway - perks of being bundled up on an ice planet.

“How long before we get there?”

“It should not be long, I think. Rest, In-Unga, and try not to worry; everything will be fine.”

It turns out that Gjálp and Greip’s father lords over a massive wooden fortress, surrounded by a palisade that seems to be built around actual living trees. The trees themselves are massive, but they seem a little thin relative to their height, and the few branches that they do have are laden with snow. Seeing trees at all seems odd, now, after so many days of nothing but rock and ice.

A big grassy field would be amazing, one filled with wildflowers.

You’re guessing that it’ll probably be a long time before you see anything like that again.

Gjálp keeps you close as she helps her sister to the gate; most of the convoy haven’t even emerged from their sleighs, but you can’t really blame her from being eager to get inside. If there’s one thing you understand completely, it’s homesickness.

The gate opens, and giants spill out - all lithe, all pointy-eared, and most scantily-clad. It’s a tiny bit warmer here, maybe, but you still think the whole ‘lack-of-coats’ thing is kind of ridiculous, even for ice-planet aliens. Maybe they’re just showing off because they have visitors.

As the sisters start giving people instructions - from what you can gather, these must be servants - you hang back and try to study the crowd. There’s an actual child among them, one of the first kids you’ve seen this entire time… and he’s only a few inches shorter than you, which you find terribly disappointing. “What is that?” he blurts, pointing directly at you.

“This is Loki Laufeyson’s mortal pet,” Gjálp replies, putting her hand on your shoulder. “In-Unga.
She is not to be touched without the king’s permission.”

The kid gawps at you, and you pull on your hood, trying to hide as much as possible.

“Go start a fire in the king’s chamber, Bjarki,” Greip says, “and make sure that there are plenty of furs; mortals have thin skin.”

He scampers off, watching you over his shoulder as he goes. You fight the urge to stick out your tongue at him, and then you remember that he’s probably at least a few centuries old, and the whole thing weirds you out.

“We will take you to our rooms, for now,” Greip whispers in your ear. She’s leaning on you a little heavily, you notice, but you don’t want to say anything; you doubt that it’s intentional - she really shouldn’t be trying to stand on her own at all, considering everything that she’s been through.

The rest of the members of your party begin to trickle into the courtyard. Heiðr and Hrossþjófr join you soon, arm-in-arm, and Greip stiffens. You’re pretty sure that she wants to escape, but since her sister is still busy chatting… she’s stuck leaning on you.

Hrossþjófr’s smile is faint, and so is his voice. “You look well, íviðja. Are you going to string me up by my ears, as you’ve promised?”

She stares at the snow for a few moments, and when she replies, her voice is equally soft. “You lied to me,” she says. “You thought to make sport of me.”

“Greip,” he begins, “you must know that—”

“Stop. You should not speak so freely with me; I do not wish to hear it.”

Heiðr clears her throat. “Come, Brother. We should attend to the Völva, and to the king.”

He looks like he wants to argue, but since Greip won’t meet his eyes, he gives up. “Very well,” he says stiffly. “I understand.”

They turn to leave. Greip’s hand is clutching at her tunic - probably where the pendant is hidden, you imagine. It’s a lot easier to let yourself get caught up in someone else’s drama than to worry about your own, so once you’re fairly certain that there’s no one within earshot, you ask, “Do you really not want to know what he was going to say?”

Her shoulders sag. “There is no point to it.”

And as you glance around the courtyard, you realize that Heiðr and Hrossþjófr, along with all of the other Storm Giants, are being given extremely wide berth, along with some pretty open glares. It isn’t going to be a fun night, you can already tell.

Loki’s standing with Skaði, again. You’re basically in her domain, now, so it makes sense, but… you still feel kind of petty. “Hey,” you want to say, “remember last night? Remember that?”

Like that would go over well.

Greip and Gjálp eventually take you inside the wooden fortress and guide you to their room. There’s a large fireplace, which is a massive relief, because your hands and feet were starting to feel numb from standing out in the cold for so long. Their beds are simple wooden platforms, covered by a thin mattress and more heaps of blankets, and the decorations are sparse. You’d expected something a little more homey.
“We must go greet our father and mother, mortal,” Gjálp tells you, settling her large satchel onto her bed. “You had best stay here, for now. We will lock the door; you will be perfectly safe.”

“Okay,” you say, rubbing your arms. It really feels like you can’t catch a break; you’ve been starting to really feel comfortable with the twins, and Loki said that he kind of cared, but somehow you’re still being left alone in yet another unfamiliar giant abode.

They leave, and you take the liberty of curling up on one of the beds, your muscles tense and knotted from stress. Loki… he isn’t going to make you sleep here, is he? You mentally slap yourself - you should be worried about the opposite. If you had any sense at all, you’d be glad that you get to hang out with the girls instead of being Loki’s blanket or pillow or pet or whatever you are to him. Something.

At least you’re something to him.

This might be the worst giant-feast you’ve been to so far, and that’s saying something.

It’s just so freaking tense. Greip and Gjálp’s dad, Geirröðr, is an imposing sort of man, even though he definitely isn’t the tallest giant you’ve come across so far. He’s loud and opinionated, and one of those opinions is apparently ‘all Storm Giants suck.’

Most of the house seems to be pretty disapproving of humans, too, which is really disappointing, but not all that surprising. You’ve already overheard people asking the twins how fast you can run, and ‘what color you bleed,’ and a dozen other questions that scream ‘red alert.’

The nice thing, if you can really call it nice, is that Loki has magnanimously decided to keep you in his lap. Of course, Loki being Loki, he’s also basically managed to ignore you the entire time you’ve been here, despite the fact that you’re literally on top of him. Why does he do these things?

But at least you aren’t off in a corner somewhere, or sitting on the hard-packed dirt floor; at least none of the other giants are going to try to touch you, considering the king doesn’t seem very keen on sharing his toys. You curl against his chest, feeling embarrassingly clingy… but then, what’s wrong with being clingy? The last time you were very far from him in a strange place, you got your face pinched by some eight-foot-tall oaf.

Said cheek is currently pressed against Loki’s shoulder.

“How do our daughters fare in the court of Utgard, Lady Skaði?” Geirröðr asks.

“They do you proud, Geirröðr. The queen regards them highly, as does our new king. Is that not so, sire?”

“Very loyal girls,” Loki says, resting his hand on the top of your head, his fingers drumming against your hair. “They’ve proven invaluable to me.”

“Have they?” Geirröðr’s wife smiles thinly over her mug. “Yet they’ve been set to work with witches and that mortal.”

“We all journey together, my lady,” Skaði says. “In these times, it is important to keep our friends
close, you know.”

Yeah, right. All of the Storm Giants have basically been shoved into a corner at their own table, including the supposedly-revered Völva.

Loki tucks a strand of your hair behind your ear. “Do you not approve of seiðr?” His voice is smooth, charming, but the fact that he’s fidgeting with your hair kind of betrays the fact that he’s feeling tense, too.

Geirröðr laughs. “Seiðr makes men mad,” he declares, apparently not worried at all that he’s just insulted the new king. “Kings, too. But everyone already knows that you are mad, Loki Inn-Illi.”

You expect Loki to freak out at that, but he doesn’t even flinch. “A man is a fool who does not make use of his gifts, Geirröðr.” He leans back slightly in his seat, a slight shift of posture that you doubt the others will even consciously notice; he’s sprawling, trying to look carefree and confident.

It’s hard to block out the memory of him telling you that he’s basically running on empty, as far as power goes. The show is all that he has.

“Perhaps,” Loki continues, “if Laufey had been a bit more appreciative of spellwork, he’d still be alive today, sitting here to chat with you about the glorious past.”

“Perhaps he should have shown more caution when mingling with Stormr-Jötnar, and you would not be sitting here chatting with me about your glorious present.”

It’s a clear taunt, but apparently baiting each other with insults is just a common Jotunheim pastime, because Loki just laughs instead of punching the guy in the face, which is what you halfway expected him to do. Heck, you’d want to punch someone in the face for making snarky comments about your long-lost mother like that, and you only have a tiny fraction of Loki’s pent-up rage.

The rest of the dinner goes by pretty quickly. For the most part, Loki sits back and lets the Forest Giants do all of the talking, though you notice how easily he seems to slide into any train of conversation, when he wants. It’s mostly names and places you’ve never heard before, and you mostly tune out, only to snap to attention when Greip and Gjálp become the center of attention.

“They should have their teeth sharpened when they return to Utgard,” their mother says. “They have been old enough for it for several years, and it is time to look for matches for the both of them.”

Neither of the girls say anything. In fact, while Gjálp has a pleasant, agreeable smile fixed on her face, Greip doesn’t even look up from her plate.

“You will oversee it, Lady Skaði, will you not? Or Queen Fárbauti?”

“I would be honored, and I am certain that the Queen Mother would be pleased to assist, as well.”

“I do not suppose that you’d have a place for them at your table, would you, sire?” Geirröðr asks, red eyes glinting. “As you have found them so invaluable?”

You’re confused, but you feel Loki stiffen slightly. “We shall see,” he says, and Greip seems to sink even lower into her chair.

The conversation moves on to something about crops; you try to pay attention, but you’re really tired, and by the time the dinner has ended, you’re practically passed out in his arms. That seems to be a trend, and you should probably be a lot more concerned about it than you are.
He doesn’t carry you to bed, which is a disappointment, but an expected one. Instead, you trail behind him as a servant leads you to the bath, because apparently no giant worth their salt builds houses without indoor bath-pools. To be fair, these are smaller, and from the raised flooring, you get the impression that they’re probably heated with pipes or something similar, but it still seems a little over-the-top for a fortress in the woods.

Loki follows you inside the steamy bathroom, and the two of you undress back-to-back; he still hasn’t really said anything at all since he told you that you’re someone, and you’re getting the impression that he’d probably take it back, if he could.

Great, you think. I’m so astoundingly awkward that I broke ol’ Silver-Tongue himself.

You race to hop into the water before he decides to be his usual inappropriately-teasing self, but the water isn’t nearly as hot as you’d expected, so you yelp in surprise. Loki spins around, and you screw your eyes away from his gloriously naked form; you definitely didn’t see anything inappropriate. Nope, no way.

“The water is kinda cold,” you hurry to tell him. What does he think, that assassins are in the bath, or something? Though, the instant turn to rush to your aid - because that’s what you’re letting yourself believe he was about to do - is pretty nice for your ego.

Loki lets out a long-suffering sigh, then joins you, the blue receding from his skin. He looks like a marble statue, you decide. A bruised, battered marble statue. Get it together, girl.

“So,” you say, wrapping your arms around yourself under the water, “what did you think of my look?”

He rolls his eyes. “It did not differ too greatly from your previous look, did it? I imagine that poor Gjálp constantly laments the fact that they cannot bare your skin enough to make you truly fashionable. At least you do not look like a corpse, this time around.”

“Oh. Yeah, I… I told them to go easy on the makeup, this time.”

It’s a little hard to concentrate on the carefree attitude you’re trying to project, because Loki’s decided that now is a good time to crowd into your space, tilting up your chin. His thumb swipes across your skin. “Good.”

Don’t think about it, you tell yourself as he rubs his fingers on your cheek, smearing the lines away. Don’t think about him touching you, and definitely don’t think about how gently he’s touching you.

“Is something the matter with you, mortal?”

“No. I mean, there’s a lot going on.”

“Hmm.” Loki pauses for a moment to rinse his fingers in the water, then starts working on your forehead. You’re frozen. It feels nice. If you move, you’re afraid that you might ruin the moment. “I want you to stay close to me, while we’re here. Close, and silent.”

“Close? You left me alone all day.” You probably shouldn’t have said that, but Loki doesn’t look angry, like you’d expect; he just looks tired. Somehow, that makes you feel worse.

“There was business to discuss.”

“Business?”
Loki sighs, sinking into the water up to his neck. “Wash my hair.”

As you run your fingers through his hair, you have a weird urge to just… wrap your arms around him, to press yourself against his back. That’s crazy, right?

But you do it anyway.

He stiffens as soon as your arms are around him, which is honestly a little discouraging. Oh, no, you think, I’m such an idiot, I—

“What is this?” His voice is slightly strained, but he doesn’t pull away, so that’s something.

“A… a hug?”

“I see.”

When he doesn’t say anything else, you give up and go back to washing his hair, horrifically embarrassed. Loki dunks himself under the water, and when he reemerges, he turns to face you, straightening to his full height. His wet hair clings to his forehead and cheeks, and you’re horrified to realize how badly you want to touch his face, to brush it away.

“Skaði expects that I will make my intentions towards her clear,” he says suddenly, “once I have defeated Mánagarmr and solidified my position.”

He’s watching you carefully, like he isn’t quite sure what to expect, and your heartbeat begins to quicken. “Your intentions?”

“Yes. The choice of a first wife is a very tricky thing, it seems; the Skógr-Jötnar feel that it is only right that Skaði receives the honor, as she was promised to Helblindi, when he was to be king. With Skaði following Fárbauti as queen, they’ll have established something of a Forest Giant dynasty, and I risk losing their support if I threaten to disrupt it.”

You cross your arms across your chest, feeling exposed, despite the fact that you’re just as hidden by the water now as you were two minutes ago. It… it kinda feels like you’ve been punched in the gut, which is stupid, because you already knew that this was a thing that was happening. None of this is new information. “Oh.”

“You seem to disapprove.”

“You’re just… are you just going to go along with that? Skaði…”

“Well?” Loki prompts, and his own arms are crossed now, too. “What about Skaði, mortal?”

“I don’t like her.” You probably shouldn’t have said that, either, but it’s true.

He laughs. “Would you prefer that I consider the alternatives, then? There is always the lovely Angrboða - I am certain that she would be a delight. Inn-Magri was quick to recommend his sister as a prospect. Or, if I truly wanted to cause chaos, I suppose I could choose Geirröðr’s daughters and let the Skógr-Jötnar tear themselves apart with in-fighting. Which of those would you like?”

“What? The twins?”

“How in the Nine did you miss that? Their father has all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t raised in a place where people try to sell off their twin daughters to the king —”
Loki clamps a hand over your mouth. “Quiet,” he hisses. “Don’t you dare raise your voice to me, not here. Remember that you are a pet, and I am a king.”

Message received, you think, glaring at him. Ass.

“Believe it or not,” he continues in a hushed voice, “I cannot simply alter the customs or the political structure of an entire realm. You have no right to judge.”

You tug his hand away from your mouth, but he’s probably right about the dangers of being overheard by sharp-eared, gossipy giants, so you keep your voice down. “You brought it up!”

He frowns, then pulls his hand from your grasp. “You should be informed,” he says. “As my accomplice and my thrall, I must keep you abreast of my plans.”

It’s hard to hold everything back. Liar, you want to call him. You want to tell him that you aren’t quite as oblivious as he seems to think, and that he clearly has a hell of a lot of issues with emotional attachment. You want to tell him that he clearly doesn’t care much for the rules, or he probably wouldn’t be taking over a planet in the first place.

But you don’t say anything.

Loki almost seems disappointed. Maybe he was hoping for a bigger response.

“Your cheek.” He reaches out to touch it, briefly. “There is a bruise forming.”

Oh, so we’re just dropping the subject. Perfect.

“Say something.”

“Yes, there is a bruise forming.”

Closing his eyes, Loki takes a deep breath, then moves towards the edge of the bath. “We should go to my chamber,” he says. “You need sleep, and I have reading to do.”

He dresses quickly, and you don’t even have to ask him to avert his eyes; he stands by the door, drumming his fingers on the frame, oozing impatience.

The evening has not been going very well.

On your silent march to his room, you decide that there’s no point in pouting; you do want him to talk to you, even if some of the topics of conversation are infuriating. Besides, you think, the more he talks to you, the more he’ll maybe start to realize...

Realize what? What are you hoping for, that he’s going to suddenly decide that he likes you? This is crazy - you’re just setting yourself up for disappointment. Even if you do mean something to him, you don’t belong here; this isn’t your world.

It’s stupid to get too attached.

The bed in his room is pretty nice, and you clamber in as soon as the servants escorting him around everywhere leave the two of you alone. You’re a little surprised when Loki settles down beside you,
a book in his hand - you figured that he’d choose to brood in one of the chairs by the fire, given the current mood.

He tucks a strand of his hair behind one ear as he reads, and you’re immediately reminded of the way he’d been fidgeting with your hair at dinner, the tension you’d felt in his frame. It softens you, just a little. Sure, your life sucks… but his does, too.

“Hey,” you say, “your hair’s still kinda wet. What about your magical blow-dry?”

Loki doesn’t look up from his book. “I do not have the power for it,” he says.

Damn. You didn’t realize he was still that low. “But, aren’t you uncomfortable? It’s cold.”

Shrugging, he licks his finger and flips to the next page. “Are you trying to convince me to go sit by the fire?”

“What? No—”

“Because you can have the bed, if you’d like.”

What the hell? you think, completely baffled. He thinks you’re mad and trying to get him to go away… and he’s willing to actually do it? “I don’t want the bed. I mean, I want to sleep in the bed. But I want you to sleep in the bed, too. With—” You hesitate for a second, because ‘with me’ sounds a little embarrassingly needy. “Together.”

Loki finally looks up at you, his eyes slightly narrowed. “You are very odd.”

Me and you both, buddy.

Maybe if you’re lucky, you’ll get rescued before he actually has to get married to anyone, but even the thought of that makes your chest clench. You’ll still know…

You can’t let this become some kind of thing. You just can’t. There’s no happy ending.

“I cannot renew your charm,” he says suddenly, “but with any luck, I’ll be able to restore it before we resume our journey. In the meantime, you must tell me if you feel that you are growing too cold.”

“Okay.” The space between the two of you feels immense. “Actually, I’m pretty cold right now.”

Silently, Loki raises his arm, and you tuck snugly against his side, your heart fluttering. He keeps reading, and with nothing to listen to but the crackle of the fire and his steady breathing, you’re soon dozing off. You wonder if he realizes that you’re still awake when he shifts slightly and presses a featherlight kiss against your hair.

For both of your sakes, you pretend that you’re already asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Friday is here again! I can’t tell you all how much the comments and everything meant
to me, coming back from the break. You’re all wonderful! <3

I’m also doing a fanfic HalloWeek, if you haven’t seen me mention it elsewhere. I’ve got a five-part vampire-Loki horror fic called Monstrous going up throughout this week, Halloween-inspired Lokane & Tasertricks one-shots planned, and (hopefully) an update of Your Ghost! sPoOkY
Loki keeps you close for the rest of the time you spend at Geirröðr’s fortress, though he doesn’t seem particularly keen to do much talking. You tell yourself that you can worry about all of this feelings stuff once the two of you have made it safely back to Utgard - right now, there are bigger fish to fry.

Well, bigger wolves to fry.

Because if Loki is really as weak as he claims - and you can’t imagine that he would ever pretend to be weak - then this whole Moon-Hound situation is even more concerning than you’d previously believed. If the two of you don’t even manage to survive this trip, then everything else is kind of a moot point.

It isn’t really any of your business who he marries, anyway.

He leaves you with the twins to pack up for the last leg of the journey, the trip through the forest that will bring you to the castle of Skaði’s father, and it’s nice to have a few minutes away from him, because being near him and unable to actually talk is maddening. You know he would probably talk to you, if he could, but damn, he’s a good actor. Sometimes, you wonder if you’d dreamed it all up - the words, the concern, the kiss…

King Loki Laufeyson has a very cold public persona.

Gjálp and Greip both seem tense as they gather their things, and you wonder if they’re relieved that they’re going to be able to leave soon. You’d be relieved, too, except you can only expect things at Skaði’s castle to be worse; that seems to be the general trend for this whole adventure - things just keep getting worse and worse.

“Hey, Gjálp?”

“Yes, mortal?”

Might as well just ask, you think. See if he was telling the truth, or just trying to get under my skin. “Is there a chance that you’re going to end up married to the king?”

You’re pretty sure she nearly drops the bag that she’s filling, and Greip turns, too, her cheeks a bit pale. Maybe you shouldn’t have asked, after all.

“What?” Greip says.

Gjálp drops the bag onto her bed and comes to sit beside you, her hands fist in her lap. “He has not… he has not said anything, has he? The king?”

“I mean…” Crap, what to say? “It just seemed like that was being mentioned as a possibility, that’s all, and I thought it would be… I thought it might be weird.”

“It would bring prestige to the clan.”

“Isn’t that what Skaði’s for, though? Being a Forest Giant on the throne?”

Gjálp chews on her lip for a moment, glancing to her sister for guidance, but Greip seems reluctant to
speak. Finally, she sighs and relents. “One must also consider offspring, In-Unga,” she says. “If the majority of the next generation of the royal family is from one clan… it makes things easier. The princes have many siblings who are rivals, and the in-fighting is tremendous.”

You hadn’t really bothered to pay attention to the rest of the old king’s court back in Utgard, but all of the women on the dais staring at Loki with horror and fascination makes a lot more sense, now; a lot of them were probably either mothers of his half-siblings, or lesser wives that feared that he would take them for his own… which is apparently a legitimate possibility.

“But no other Storm Giants, I’m guessing? Lok— the king is the only one whose mother was a Storm Giant?”

“Yes, the only one. So you see, it is a very precarious place to be in, for Loki Laufeyson.”

“And marrying a bunch of people is going to solve that, somehow.”

They seem to catch on to your tone, and you remind yourself that you’re supposed to be staying calm about the whole thing. It’s much easier said than done.

“Well… yes, mortal,” Gjálp says. “That is the way that it has always been done.”

You notice that Greip is fidgeting with her pendant again, though she still has it tucked beneath her tunic. In fact, you haven’t seen her take it out the entire time you’ve been here, just like you haven’t seen her so much as make eye contact with Hrossþjófr.

‘The way things are done’ doesn’t seem to be working out too well for anyone, you think.

The mood of the convoy is one of terse excitement as you leave from Geirröðr’s Keep. You figure that everyone is probably just ready to get the whole thing over with, whether it results in Loki becoming king or him getting eaten by a monster. It’s been that kind of road trip.

There are no stops along the way, and even the twins, usually so eager to curl up and nap like giant cats, move about the sleigh restlessly. It’s hard to tell how much time has passed, but it feels like way too long since you’ve slept, and you really wish Loki would show up for a nap.

Greip seems to be doing a bit better, at least; most of her color has returned, and she looks a bit less exhausted, though she’s definitely melancholy. Part of you wants to ask her about Hrossþjófr, but you don’t know how she’ll react. Besides, it isn’t like you’re some kind of Jötunn relationship expert, clearly.

You don’t want to inspire some kind of Romeo and Juliet scenario.

But when Gjálp slips from the sleigh to jog ahead and make sure that everything is going okay with the king, it’s Greip who decides to turn the topic of conversation towards relationships. “You are worried,” she tells you, slapping one of her playing cards down onto the wooden floor. “You care for Inn-Illi, mortal, and far more than you should.”

“What brought this up?” you ask, knowing full well that she’s trying to do the exact same thing that you’ve been trying to do - distract herself from her own drama by sticking her nose in someone else’s.
“I have seen the hurt on your face, when he ignores you. It goes beyond that of a neglected pet, I think.” She leans across. “This card has just been destroyed,” she says, smiling slightly, “but you are learning very quickly.”

“Thanks.” You try to figure out your next move, shoving aside the embarrassment you feel at essentially getting called out for mooning over Loki like a lovesick calf.

“Was I mistaken?” Greip asks after a moment or two of silence. “If I was, then—”

“No.” Admitting it is hard, but at the same time, it feels nice to have someone to talk to about the whole mess that your life has become. And really, what’s the worst that can happen? You might be humiliated and teased if the others find out that you’re catching feelings for Loki, but you doubt they’ll kill you for it. Though, knowing Skaði…

“I believe that he will defeat Mánagarmr. I also believe that he will not allow anything to happen to you, In-Unga. And if my clan…” She hesitates for a moment, her pendant clenched in her fist. You wonder if she even notices how often she fidgets with it.

“If my clan turns on the king,” she says, “my sister and I will stand by his side. We have decided it.”

Skaði’s father’s castle is a monstrosity of ice and stone, surrounded by a forest so dense that the light barely shines through the cover of the trees. God, you think, I just want to go back to Utgard. Just to Utgard! Is that too much to ask?

Apparently so. You’re so tired of this whole damned trip.

Greip pulls you aside as everyone unloads from the sleighs, bending down to whisper in your ear. “Mortal,” she says, “have courage. Lord Þjazi is very stern, and very taken with the old ways. You must remember that your master is not as cruel as he may act.”

Bad Sign Number One.

Loki barely acknowledges you when you join his entourage, which isn’t quite enough to count as Bad Sign Number Two, but the way that Skaði has plastered herself to his side is probably worrying enough to make up the difference.

Then there’s the fact that, as your party is escorted through the throngs of gathered giants to the main hall, giants aren’t just staring - they’re openly glaring. Bad Sign Number Three.

No one tells you to stop and wait somewhere, and you aren’t about to get lost in the crowd when everyone look pissed off before even a word’s been said, so you stick close to Loki, practically tripping over his cloak. That’s what he’d told you to do, right? To stay close to him?

And so you end up marching practically up to the dais where Skaði’s father Þjazi sits. He’s a big, big guy… and so is the younger giant sitting next to him. Neither of them look very happy, and in fact, the younger one looks downright pissed. You try to sneak another peek at them while keeping your head lowered, and that’s when you notice that the younger guy doesn’t have the hallmark pointy ears you’ve come to associate with the Forest Giants.

That means he probably isn’t entirely a Forest Giant, which means… Oh, crap, you think. That’s probably Helblindi.
Helblindi is massive. Though he isn’t the tallest of the giants you’ve seen by any stretch, he’s built like a linebacker, broad-shouldered and muscular. You were kind of hoping that he was all hype, but the dude definitely lives up to the fearsome name.

“Three sons of Laufey under my roof,” Þjazi says, his voice booming across the crowded room. “Three brothers.” Even for a giant, he’s loud, and you wonder if anyone would notice if you just snuck under Loki’s cloak and hid.

Probably.

“Father.” Skaði bows her head and steps forward, the only one in the room who doesn’t seem like they’re waiting for an axe to fall. “I formally introduce Loki Laufeyson, King of Jotunheim.”

Murmuring breaks out, and you try to keep yourself from looking around the room, knowing that you’d probably just have the bad luck to draw attention to yourself. From the sounds of things, the giants of the Iron Wood must’ve heard that Loki was coming, but had decided not to believe it until they saw it…and they were clearly not happy to see it.

“I remember when you were born, boy.” Þjazi leans forward on his seat, gripping the arms of his chair with heavily-ringed fingers. He must like gold. “Tiny thing, you were.”

“I am no boy now, Lord Þjazi, and if you refer to me as such again, I fear I’ll have to kill you.”

Damn it, Loki. No one told you that this wasn’t one of the usual ‘smiles-and-fake-politeness’ situations. Apparently it’s more of a ‘we-all-openly-hate-each-other’ situation.

“That is what Laufey would’ve done,” Loki continues, his tone light and flippant, “and I would so hate to disappoint him.”

Þjazi’s weathered face twists a bit, though you can’t quite make out if he’s trying to grimace or smile. “So eager to be king. I have been told that you are to rid my forests of Mánagarmr, to prove your worth as king.” He turns to look at the giant beside him. “What think you of that, Prince Helblindi?”

Where Býleistr is the model of apathy, Helblindi is bubbling with emotion; every single thing that passes through his head also seems to be passing across his face. You see his disgust as he looks at Loki, his offense at Býleistr, his annoyance at Þjazi for being called on to participate in the conversation when he’d clearly rather sit and fume in silence.

“Well,” he says, “if the Queen Mother and the Völva have decided on his divine birthright, then I must hope Mánagarmr sees differently.”

Okay, so things aren’t looking great…

You wonder if Helblindi knows that his kinda-fiancée is scheming to marry his brother, now that he’s been knocked out of his promised throne. Sucks to be Helblindi, you think. Sucks to be Loki. Sucks to be me… This whole place sucks.

“I thought that I smelled a mortal,” a long-legged, gold-bedecked giant comments, sidling up near Þjazi’s seat. “An Asgardian and a mortal, how fascinating.”

“My uncle, Gangr,” Skaði tells Loki quickly. Even her smile is starting to look a little forced. “The king has turned his back on Asgard, Uncle; his hatred of the Æsir surely rivals your own, if it does not surpass it entirely. Odin Allfather made his entire life a falsehood.”

“Jotunheim will surpass Asgard in both power and prestige, under my rule,” Loki declares. “The
Casket of Ancient Winters will be restored, and Utgard will be rebuilt.”

_Tough talk for a guy who can’t even manage a little warming spell_, you think, even though probably half of your shivering can be attributed to anxiety. Skaði’s uncle - _Gangr_, you think his name was - is watching you. Every time you glance up, you notice his eyes on you, and your blood runs cold.

Tjazi declares that the wolf-hunting will begin first thing in the morning, and as terrifying as _that_ thought is, you’re excited at the prospect of leaving the hall and hopefully going somewhere private to cuddle up and make a plan of action… only, nobody leaves. _How long can they possibly stand around insulting each other?_ you wonder, despairing. _Jotunheim needs more hobbies._

“I want to see the mortal,” Gangr says suddenly, holding out a hand.

_“I do, as well,”_ Helblindi adds, sitting up a little straighter in his seat. _“I have never seen a mortal before.”_

Panicking, you finally dare to look up, meeting Loki’s eyes as he glances over his shoulder, acting almost as if he’d forgotten that you were there in the first place. _Please, _you think, _not this again, please._ Mentally, you’re begging, _pleading…_ but he just looks vaguely irritated.

_“Go on, mortal,”_ he says.

You glance around, looking for someone to come to your rescue, and that’s when you notice that Byleistr’s usually-blank expression is slightly ruffled, and you don’t even want to _think_ about what that means. Gangr’s hand is still extended, rings glinting on his fingers. _“Come, mortal. Your master has commanded you.”_

But you feel frozen in place, and Tjazi suddenly laughs, slapping his brother on the shoulder. _“Loki Laufeyson thinks to rule our realm,”_ he says, “and yet, he cannot even rule over a _pet._”

Loki’s eyes flash, and you realize immediately that you’ve made a terrible, _terrible_ mistake. “Take her to whatever chamber has been prepared for me, Geirrødardóttir,” he says to Gjálp. “I will deal with her disobedience _later_, at my leisure.”

Gjálp nearly drags you from the room, hurrying through the hallways in silence. Seeing her act so spooked just makes you worry even more, and you’re practically in tears by the time you reach his room. _“In-Unga,”_ she says quietly, leaning in the doorway as if she’s afraid to step inside, “you have chosen a very _poor_ time to embarrass the king. When he comes, you must beg his forgiveness.” Her face crumples slightly.

_Jesus_, you think. _Was it really that bad? What the hell does she think he’s going to do to me?_

_“Promise me that you will beg his forgiveness,”_ she says. _“He is very angry.”_

You hear her bolt the door as she hurries to leave, and you stand there for a few minutes, stunned by the turn the night has taken. Why was he angry with _you?_

What had you _done?_
It’s hours before Loki storms into his room, discarding his coak on the ground as he stalks towards the bed, where you’ve made yourself a pretty impressive nest. “What in Valhalla is the matter with you, mortal?” he snaps, seizing the blankets and yanking them towards him, dragging you along with them.

“I was just… I was just afraid—”

“This is no place for fear,” Loki says. “They can smell it on you.” He grabs the neck of your tunic, hauling you close, the blue fading from his skin as he does. “They can smell it on me when I feel it for you.”

And then he seems to realize what he's just said, and he drops you like you're on fire, his eyes wide.

He's afraid for you.

Chapter End Notes

Back to a shorter chapter for this one, but I'm predicting that the next one will be big and busy, so consider it a breather! <3 Happy Friday, everyone!
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

You never imagined you’d be off hunting monster-wolves on an alien planet, but... well, here you are. You’d better hope Mánagarmr isn’t quite as fierce as he sounds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An admission of fear on Loki’s part is unexpected, so unexpected that neither of you quite seem to know what to do. You kneel on the bed, tangled in the blankets, watching as he paces. Back, forth. Back, forth.

“You’re... worried?” you finally ask.

Loki pauses and glares at you. “You do realize that all it takes is one errant backhand to kill you, don’t you? You have the relative durability of wet parchment.”

“Yeah, of course I know. I think about it all the time, in fact, hence the whole ‘keeping my head down’ thing. Jesus, you can be so...”

“So what?”

“You can be a real dick,” you snap, and then you scramble back as Loki narrows his eyes and makes a beeline towards you, crawling onto the end of the bed and settling himself down cross-legged.

He holds out a hand. “Come here, mortal,” he says. “We need to talk.”

“I’m pretty sure I can talk from here, thanks.” There’s kind of a weird look in his eyes, and you don’t feel like finding out exactly what that’s all about at the moment - not until he calms down a little bit.

Closing his eyes, Loki takes a deep, slow breath, and you imagine that he must be counting to ten or something, because as soon as he’s done, he darts forward, grabbing your ankle and dragging you towards him.

Major déjà vu.

You’re quick to push yourself up on your elbows, your cheeks burning. “Seriously?”

“If you would just do as you’re told,” he says, his grip on your ankle still firm, “then perhaps we would not be in this situation.”

“What situation? I didn’t do anything; I froze up because that guy looked creepy as hell, but that’s not a crime, is it?”

“You have no idea what has happened, do you?” He reaches forward and lifts you the rest of the way into his lap, and you try to ignore the fact that you’re now straddling him; at least you have your irritation to focus on, so that’s something.
“No, obviously.” Loki looks stern, and his face is way too close to comfort. You cave. “Okay, so I didn’t obey, and I know that looks bad, but—”

“That is not it.”

“Then what is it?”

He sucks on his bottom lip for a moment, as if he’s debating over the wisdom of actually explaining things to ‘the pet.’ Honestly, you feel like you’re at the point where full disclosure - or even mostly full disclosure - is a good idea. He’s the one who said the two of you needed to work together, after all.

“Þjazi and his brothers are ancient,” Loki finally says, “as old as Odin Allfather, and very powerful; they are not easily misled. I had hoped… I had hoped that they would not find any weakness in me, for they are certain to make use of it.”

_Crap._ It isn’t like you don’t get why that’s a problem; right now, a good chunk of his support comes from the fact that people are afraid of his magical powers and the fact that he’s kind of crazy - crazy in a ruthless, ‘destroy entire cities’ sort of way.

“So… so we just need to make it _look_ good, right? Like you punished me?”

He sighs, and you can practically see him reeling himself back in, the worry melting away from his features. You’ve never really noticed just how long his eyelashes are; it’s kind of a weird observation to make, considering the circumstances. Although, you normally don’t have intense conversations this close to someone else’s face, so maybe that’s part of it.

“That we will do, and it will certainly help to keep up appearances for the rest of the court, but as for Þjazi and Gangr, the chink in the armor has been revealed. If I have any _emotion_ tied to you, mortal, it will be exploited.”

Loki’s forehead rests against yours. “I cannot feel anything for you,” he says. “Understand?”

“Yeah,” you reply. And you _do_ understand; you really can’t afford to feel anything for him, either. But you do.

——

“So,” you say eventually, breaking the surprisingly-companionable silence, “what’s the plan? There is a plan, right?”

“There _was_ a plan, but it has been entirely derailed at this point.”

He’s been rubbing your back for a while, nearly lulling you to sleep, and you’re pretty disappointed when he stops and practically pushes you out of his lap. You climb under the covers as he goes to dig through one of the bags that’s been left near the doorway; it’s _cold_, and you don’t really want to complain about it, because you’re pretty sure there isn’t much Loki can do about it at the moment.

“You want me to scream?” you ask, only half-joking. “We can put my acting skills to work, pretend that you’re beating the crap out of me for being a terrible pet. Will that help?”

There’s a hint of a spark in his eyes when he turns back to you, and even though that usually means
trouble... you’re kind of relieved to see it. “Actually,” he says, “that is not a terrible idea. A bit of sport - I suppose I could use the diversion.” He holds up a thin band of gold, then, one that looks suspiciously like a collar. “This, as well.”

“Um… isn’t that a little extreme?”

Loki gives you an extremely judgy look as he drops the collar into your lap. “I can see that my continued leniency has given you a false sense of security here, mortal. Consider this a small price to pay for your protection. Besides, I thought that mortals lusted after gold.”

The runes inscribed on the collar are familiar, and you squint at them, frowning. “I know that says ‘Lokakona,’” you tell him, “and I also know what ‘Lokakona’ means.”

“Do you have a point? Lift your hair.” He takes the collar back from you, bending it open, and your eyes widen; it’s yet another casual display of strength, and it’s unsettling. How does he not crush you every time he moves you around?

Must have very finely-tuned reflexes.

But you figure it’s a fair move; you can consider it a prop, can’t you? All the world’s a stage...

Besides, collars are kind of in, at least in some fashion circles. “This is just a temporary thing, right? It’ll come off once we get back to the palace, once things settle down?”

“We will see.”

He bends it around your neck, and you try to swallow down the lump that forms in your throat. You wish you could slap a collar on him. Fair is fair. At least it’s pretty lightweight. Listen to yourself, you think, trying to talk up the pros of wearing a freaking pet collar.

You look up, poised to complain, but there’s a kind of funny look on Loki’s face as he slides two fingers under the band of the collar, presumably checking to make sure it won’t choke you; that’s what you’re assuming, even though the way he’s lingering seems a little gratuitous.

Your neck is much more sensitive than you’ve ever realized.

“Hey, Loki?”

“Hmm?”

“I think the collar’s good.”

“Right.” His hand drops away, and he looks you over, contemplative. “I could actually punish you,” he says. “You have certainly earned it, after all of the trouble you’ve caused me.”

“Or we could go with the whole ‘faking it’ plan. I like that one. Plus, it’ll look like you healed me, right? And that’s extra cruel, you healing me so that I’m still functional, and it makes it look like you’ve got power to waste.”

“Impressive. I suppose you do have your moments, mortal. Come, let us act.”

Loki pulls you from the bed and sets you on your feet - you’re almost starting to get used to how physical he is all the time, and you wonder if that’s a bad thing. There’s a hint of a smile on his face as he leads you close to the doorway and presses you back against the wall, and you suddenly find yourself rethinking the entire endeavor.
Maybe if he didn’t have that little mischievous sparkle in his eyes, or if he’d keep his freaking hands off of your waist, you’d be able to keep your cool. But he isn’t, and you’re not.

Well, figuratively, at least - you’re very much keeping your cool in a literal sense, because the temperature in the room seems to be dropping as the night progresses. When you get back to the palace in Utgard, you might just beg to hang out in the steam pools for a few days, because this constant cold is miserable.

“Go on,” Loki whispers. “This is the one time you have my permission to wail like a banshee.”

This is so awkward. Why does Jotunheim have to be such a miserable, backwards place? And poor Greip and Gjálp are probably going to be losing their minds if they hear about this, especially after Gjálp has decided that she owes him some kind of life-debt.

You try to remember what one of your friends told you about fake-crying, a long, long time ago. *Fake the motions. Think of something upsetting.* That part is easy enough - you’ve got plenty to cry about, these days. Face screwed up, you clutch at Loki’s tunic, willing some tears to come to make it all extra authentic. “Please,” you plead, “please, sire, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

Loki looks startled - and maybe even a little impressed. You don’t have much time to revel in your success, though, because he rips your hands from his chest and pins them by your head, his eyes narrowing. Okay, you think, your heart picking up the pace, I guess we’re getting into character now. That’s cool.

He brings his mouth close to your ear; you must be the only one who’s actually supposed to get overheard during this bizarre performance. “Louder,” he says, his voice soft.

“Please!”

“I should give you away, shouldn’t I? Let someone else deal with you.”

You’re kind of surprised that you can see what he’s going for so easily, surprised that the two of you seem so… in sync. “Please, please don’t — master, forgive me—” He claps a hand over your mouth, and you pour as much sound as you can into a long, drawn-out shriek.

Loki grins, dragging you back to the bed almost immediately. “I admit that I am impressed,” he says as he climbs in beside you, heaping blankets on you both. “I had no idea that you were such a conniving little actress.”

Such a patronizingly-delivered compliment shouldn’t make you feel like blushing, but it does. You tell yourself that you’re probably still just riding on the waves of awkwardness from essentially *roleplaying* with him.

“I think it’s pretty messed up that you’re having to pretend to be some kind of brutal tyrant.”

“Do you mean to suggest that I am *not* a brutal tyrant?”

He wraps his arms around you, and it’s all you can do not to audibly sigh in relief; he may not be *radiating* heat, but it still helps. “I don’t think a brutal tyrant would pretend to discipline a slave instead of actually *doing* it. I don’t think a brutal tyrant would *throw himself off a cliff* to save two teenagers he barely knows.”

“Hmm.” The mirth has left his eyes, and you’re sorry to see it go; you can’t really tell what emotion it is that’s taken its place. “Would a brutal tyrant lead a conquering army to Midgard?” he asks. “Murder his sire and attempt to destroy the realm of his birth?”
That hits hard. Why do you keep forgetting? Or maybe you're not forgetting — maybe you’re just choosing to ignore the facts. It’s almost impossible, sometimes, to remember that he’s that Loki, the one from New York… “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Do you know how many of your kind perished, when I last visited Earth?”

“I do.” What sort of point is he trying to make? “I get it, you’re terrifying.”

“I am,” he replies, sighing and tucking your head under his chin, “and I don’t believe that you do.”

You wake up shaking in the middle of the night, the bed beside you empty. Immediately, your mind begins to race; did something happen? Is he safe? Are you safe? Pushing yourself up on your elbows, you peer towards the far end of the room, dimly lit by firelight. “Loki?”

“Here.”

He’s sitting cross-legged by the fire, a knife-blade glinting in his hands. Jesus, you think, why do I keep waking up to people holding knives? It really says a lot about your current quality of life.

“You should sleep,” you tell him. “Tomorrow’s a really big day. I know you’re tired.”

“What woke you?”

“Well… it’s cold.” You feel like you’re admitting something shameful. Sorry for my warm, squishy body, I guess. “It’s really cold, and you weren’t here, so…”

“You can come here, if you like.”

Don’t mind if I do. Dragging as many blankets as you can manage, you pad across the room, wincing as the cold seeps through your socks. “I wish I had a thermometer,” you tell him. “I want to know how cold it actually is here.”

“We’ve actually experienced a great deal of fluctuation in the temperature; it is only near-freezing, now, but you are able to feel it more keenly without the charms at full effect.”

“What? It’s been colder than this?”

Smiling faintly, Loki sets the knife aside and opens his arms, leaning back against one of the chairs as you settle into his lap. You have a sudden, intrusive memory of when you were a little kid, curling up under piles of warm, toasty laundry, fresh out of the dryer… that’s probably what you look like right now.

“What’s going to happen tomorrow, Loki?”

The bigger question, the one you’re afraid to really ask, still hangs in the air - what happens after tomorrow?

“I assume you’ve never been on a hunt,” he says. “We will go into the forest and track down Mánagarmr; he is apparently something of a menace, terrorizing many of the smaller forest villages. It will be up to me to actually kill him, of course.”
“Is that... is that really feasible? Don’t get mad,” you hurry to add, knowing how easily offended he gets, “but I’ve never seen a giant wolf-monster before, and I’ve also never seen you fight.”

“It is feasible, but that does not mean that it will be easy. It would be less complicated if not for you; I’ll have to keep you with me, now that Þjazi has taken an interest in you. Leaving you here would be a risk.”

“I want to go anyway.” Damn, is that really true? It must be - you said it without even thinking. “We both go down together, you know? I feel like I should be there.”

“Ridiculous,” Loki says. “You should not be here at all, and you’re addled if you think that you have any place hunting for a warg—”

“Does that mean you’re gonna send me home sometime soon?”

He falls silent.

_Hah, checkmate._

“Stay out of my way,” he finally says. “When we are out there, mortal, no matter what happens, you are to remain wherever I leave you. Do you understand? You are not to interfere in any way.”

_Like I’d voluntarily try to take on a monster alien-wolf, you think. Yeah, right. “Okay.”_

You’re warming up a little, now, though you can’t imagine that he’s very comfortable in this position. Going out in the snow tomorrow is going to suck. Then you remember that you haven’t really had anything to eat, either, and you’re just about to ask about breakfast—

“If I die tomorrow,” Loki says, “you should throw yourself upon the mercy of Býleistr. His interest should be enough to keep you shielded from the others for a time, and Heimdall might eventually spot you and send aid.”

“You aren’t going to die. Don’t say that.”

“Well, I certainly hope not, mortal, but it is best to plan for contingencies. If I survive, as I plan to do, then things are going to get very complicated, and quickly; there will be no choice but to accept me as king, and any who dare to oppose my throne at that point must be dealt with, and swiftly.”

“Helblindi,” you say, rubbing your cheek against the fabric of his tunic. It feels nice; a little rough, but nice. “You’re worried about Helblindi.”

“‘Worried’ is a bit of a strong term, but yes - Helblindi seems troublesome. I am relying on Fárbauti and Skaði to keep him in line. If he has no support, then perhaps he will be too fearful to make a move against me.”

“This is exhausting. All this drama.” You yawn, your capacity for middle-of-the-night scheming entirely used up. “Bed?”

“You sleep,” he says. “I’m fine as I am.”

You’re pretty sure he didn’t sleep at all, based on the dark circles under his eyes and the way he’s
pacing around the room when you wake up a few hours later. It’s like someone who stays up all
night studying for a really important final exam… only much, much worse.

“I have food for you,” he says. “Finding a way to feed you in the hall with the others seemed
complicated, and I thought that you might prefer the privacy.”

“You thought right,” you tell him, shoving the covers away and rushing across the cold floor to put
on your boots. “They’d probably expect me to eat scraps off of the floor, or something stupid like
that.”

Loki’s smirk is teasing, but tired. “Likely so. And to think you once protested eating from my hand.”

“I was still processing how screwed-up this whole ‘human pet’ thing is. Still think that, by the way -
not a fan of being a human pet.”

“I know. Eat.”

Your appetite isn’t exactly fantastic, despite the fact that you should be starving right now. It must be
the nerves. “Is this a hard-boiled egg?” you ask suspiciously, picking one up from the bowl on the
table and hefting it in your hand. It’s really big - really big, and kind of weirdly elongated.

“I believe so, yes.”

That’s not exactly convincing. Expecting it to taste weird or bitter or fishy, you’re a bit shocked when
it tastes exactly like a normal egg. It’s probably best that you don’t know what kind of freakish alien-
creature it comes from, you decide. Ignorance is bliss.

“And… is this milk supposed to be pink, or…?”

That actually manages to earn a laugh. “There are berries crushed in it for flavoring,” he says. “I’ve
had some; it’s surprisingly good.”

It reminds you of watery yogurt. Not too bad. A little more tart than you’d like your milk to be,
maybe, but not too bad. “Have you eaten?”

“No, I will dine with the others. Eat, and then we will freshen up. You should always look your best
when meeting your destiny, you know.”

‘Freshening up’ doesn’t turn out to mean a full bath in this case, and you tell yourself that you aren’t
actually disappointed. Really, though, you’re already courting disaster - might as well get naked one
last time before you potentially get eaten by a monster, right?

Girl, your priorities are getting really messed up.

You aren’t a fan of how judgy your inner voice has been getting, lately.

The hall has been arranged with two long tables down either side, while you’re with Loki at the head
table, in full view of the entire room. There are a lot of curious looks aimed your way, and you’re
pretty sure you notice a few double-takes at the collar around your neck. He’s decided to keep you
right at his feet, which you’re pretty grateful for, considering the fact that there are a bunch of mangy,
lion-sized dogs fighting over bones in the middle of the floor.
Truth be told, you’d scramble right up into his lap, if you thought you’d be able to get away with it.

You’re also grateful that Býleistr is sitting on the other side of you, because you’re at least relatively certain that he won’t decided to just randomly squash you for the heck of it, which seems like something Helblindi might do.

But despite Loki’s best efforts to make it seem like you’re not really worth mentioning, you keep getting brought up in the conversation. Gangr, in particular, seems way too interested for comfort. “What good fortune you have, Loki Laufeyson,” he says, “to not only have found a mortal in your possession, but to have found a female, and one so young.”

Creep, you internally shriek, practically clinging to Loki’s leg. All at once, you remember all of the comments about mortals being kept to ‘warm beds,’ and you remember Loki telling you that Gangr is really ancient and skeevy, and you remember how tense Loki’d become as soon as he took notice of you - hell, how tense even Býleistr had become…

“Fortune favors me.” Loki puts his hand on your head. Maybe when he gets all of his magic back, you can ask him for a charm that would let you punch people twice your size without breaking your hand. Some of these giants definitely need a solid punch or two.

“She looks mouthy,” Gangr continues, and even though you’re hidden from seeing him, his grating voice makes your skin crawl. “It is all in the eyes, you know. You can see when they are thinking. The last mortal I had - oh, it was nearly two millennia ago, now - she was a bitter little creature. Spiteful. They need discipline.”

Helblindi speaks up from the other side of Býleistr, curiosity evident in his voice. “What became of yours? Did it learn?”

“Alas, no.” He laughs, and you see Býleistr sneak a peek down at you; it’s clear that he’s heard this story before. “The fool thing tried to flee. The dogs got her. A waste, really. And then the war started, of course, and our supply of mortals dwindled.”

Poor woman, you think, your stomach turning. Imagine being here, with no magical savior, no support…

‘Throw yourself upon the mercy of Býleistr,’ Loki’d said; now, you understand why. On the spectrum of creepy giants, he isn’t looking quite so rough these days.

Þjazi laughs from the other side of Loki, too close for comfort. “I will never understand why some of them tried to flee - an exercise in futility. You must keep a close eye on that one.”

“Perhaps you simply do not understand how to handle mortals,” Loki says, “as mine has never attempted to evade me. In any case, I have more pressing things on my mind.”

“Such as being devoured by Mánagarmr?” Helblindi asks, and you hear a dull thwack as he slams his mug down onto the table.

“You have never even left Jotunheim, have you, boy? It is easy to speak boldly while you still cling to your mother’s skirts.”

“So says Loki Odinson, who all the realms know clung so tightly to the skirts of Frigga Allmother.”

You can feel his temper swell, but he settles back into his seat instead of lashing out, his legs splayed wide. Casual power stance. You’re growing weirdly attracted to that.
“My prince,” Skaði says, “there is no call for these squabbles—”

“Silence, Skaði. My quarrel with my brother here is just - or have you forgotten so quickly that I am meant to be king?”

“It is time.” You weren’t expecting to hear Heiðr speak, and apparently nobody else was, either; silence falls. “It is time to go forth to seek Mánagarmr,” she says. “The Völva has spoken.”

You’re clinging to the mane of a very, very shaggy, massive pony, one of Gjálp’s arms wrapped around your waist. A fall from this height would be extremely unpleasant - you really wish you got to ride with Loki. Though, maybe it’s best that you aren’t with Loki, considering he’s the one most likely to be caught up in a battle sometime soon.

The woods are eerily quiet, and every cracking branch and errant whistle of the wind puts you more on-edge. You’d imagined that there would be a whole hunting posse sent out into the forest to hunt for this monster-wolf, but no - it’s just Loki, you and Gjálp, Býleistr, and Hrossþjófr, who’s still looking a little under-the-weather. All of the other giants hung back at this huge hunting outpost at the end of the road; you guess they must be waiting to see if Loki crawls out of this one alive.

“Where are we going?” you whisper. “How do we know where to go?”

“Scent,” Gjálp replies. “Inn-Illi is tracking his scent, I’d expect.”

“Oh.”

The ground starts to slope downwards after a while, and there are a few ragged spires of rock jutting up through the trees here and there; based on your limited knowledge of topography, you assume that you’re probably headed towards another river. Don’t wild animals usually hang out near water sources? It’s the easiest place to find prey.

This giant wolf will probably consider you prey. Ugh.

Eventually, the horses stop near the edge of a steep dip in the terrain, one that looks particularly tricky to navigate. You’re shaking like a leaf - partly from the cold, partly from stress. There’s a little bit of a sixth sense warning you that something in the woods isn’t quite right; maybe it’s the fact that there aren’t any other animal sounds.

Loki frowns. “There is no need for the rest of you to come any further.” He swings down from his horse, resting his hand on the hilt of the dagger in his belt as he edges closer to the rocky ditch. There’s also a knife strapped to his arm, just inside the sleeve of his tunic - you know this because you’re the one who put it there.

No magic this time, only the man.

To say that you’re worried would be an understatement.

“The cave is further along the creekbank,” Býleistr says. “He is certain to be near.”

“I know.” Loki pulls a little bottle out of one of his saddlebags and takes a swig, then grins. “There are benefits to being a sorcerer, Little Brother.”
You’re going to have to talk to him about all this potion-drinking he seems to be doing lately.

Then he heads down into the creekbed, without so much as a wave goodbye.

It feels like it’s been hours waiting for some sort of sign, but according to Gjálp, it’s only been a few moments. No one is doing much talking, which makes the whole thing seem that much more ominous.

A howl suddenly rings through the woods, startling you so badly that you nearly fall off your horse. Hrossþjófr slides from his saddle, giving his own pony’s flank a reassuring pat. “That is no wolf,” he declares. “That is Loki Laufeyson.”

Another howl comes only a moment later, and his face is grim. “That is Mánagarmr.”

In the silence of the still forest, it isn’t exactly difficult to hear when the snarling starts, or the trees cracking as something - or someone - presumably crashes into them. It’s too much; you have to see… He could be dying, not very far away, while you sit here. You’re tired of waiting around, helpless.

“I want to get down,” you say. The howling seems to get louder as soon as you say it, and your adrenaline is cold in your veins.

“I understand that you are concerned, In-Unga,” Gjálp begins, “but the king has given me strict orders, and besides that, it would be the highest dishonor to interfere—”

But being tiny has its advantages, and you manage to duck under her arm, tumbling to the ground; the snow breaks most of your fall, but it’s still extremely unpleasant. Move, you tell yourself. Move, move. He needs you.

Maybe the giants expect you to run away from the danger. Maybe that’s why it takes them a moment to react, and in that moment of delay, you run towards the sound, skidding and slipping on the icy stones that lead to the creek bed. You hear a snarl of rage that’s most definitely Loki - you’d recognize it anywhere. Somehow, you know that he’s hurt. You don’t question how you know, you just run.

“Stop, mortal!” Býleistr shouts. You’re probably going to get in trouble for ignoring a royal command later… if you survive.

You round a sharp corner, and nearly tumble off of a sharp drop-off - it’s most likely a waterfall, when the water is really flowing. Below you is… well, you don’t really know what you were expecting.

It’s a wolf.

It’s a really big, really angry-looking wolf. Your head is filled with a string of curses; the thing’s got to be at least ten feet tall, at the shoulder. Maybe taller. Its ears are pressed flat against its head, and it’s snarling, circling Loki in a weird sort of dance.

Oh, God. There are bones everywhere. This must be where it drags its meals back to feast.

Loki’s hands are empty. That’s bad. There’s a knife stuck in Mánagarmr’s shoulder - also bad.
Where’s the other one? you think. Why doesn’t he have the other dagger?

The wolf darts to one side suddenly, and that’s when you spot the glint of the other knife, lying on the icy rock near the entrance to the cave that the wolf must call home. Crap. Crap crap crap.

And there’s blood on the snow, at least some of which must be Loki’s, judging by the way he’s clutching his shoulder. Without his knives or his magic, what has he got? It isn’t like he can just wrestle the thing to the ground.

He feints to one side, then rushes forward; he’s trying to work his way closer to the knife, and somehow, Mánagarmr seems to realize it, too. The wolf’s lips peel back in a snarl, and you can tell by the way he’s pawing at the snow that it’s gearing up to pounce. One bite with those teeth…

You’ve got to do something.

You jump to your feet and wave your arms. Loki will get to the knife in time, right? Too late to back down, now. “Hey!” you yell, and you nearly faint when the wolf’s head snaps towards you, its shiny black eyes narrowed. “Hey, wolf!”

Loki glances up at you then, his face full of pure, abject rage. No time to worry about that now.

There are rocks everywhere, and in your moment of recklessness, you decide that throwing one at the monster-wolf makes about as much sense as anything else that’s happening right now. Mánagarmr’s growl rattles the snow from the trees as it stalks towards you, its hackles raised. One good jump, and it could probably reach you…

You stagger backwards, then crouch to feel for another rock - not that the first one actually did anything, but still. Turning to run seems like an even worse idea, because it’s not like you can outrun that thing.

And then Loki leaps onto its back, burying the second dagger into the thick fur at the base of Mánagarmr’s neck; it seems to be more of an annoyance than anything else, but it does distract it from you for a moment, and it throws Loki from its back and charges towards him, its maw gaping—

Loki thrusts his bare hand forward, ice appearing from seemingly nowhere to encase his arm in a long blade as the wolf’s momentum carries it forward; you scream as its teeth clamp down on Loki’s arm, but then it staggers back and collapses into the snow, blood pooling around its mouth.

As for the king, he’s on his knees, his arm hanging uselessly by his side, dripping melting ice and blood into the dirt-churned snow. You practically throw yourself down to the basin floor, rushing towards him.

“Go carry the word that Loki Laufeyson is victorious,” Býleistr says, “and that he is injured; have healers ready for him.”
“Yes, sire.”

“And Gjálp? Tell no one that the mortal interfered.”

She nods, and despite your protests, she throws you over her shoulder and hurries back to the ponies. “They will watch over him,” she says. “Please, In-Unga, stop this struggling.” You’re tossed across the saddle, and then she climbs up behind you, and the breakneck ride back to the outpost begins.

It’s chaos, after that.

Once she delivers her message to the giants at the hunting outpost, Gjálp turns to ride for Þrymheimr; apparently, she’s considered to be one of the faster riders around, and so the unfortunate job of delivering news of Loki’s success to Þjazi and the rest of the court falls to her. You’re pretty worried about how they’ll take it.

You’re also starting to worry that maybe leaping out into the snow without one of Loki’s extra-strength warming charms to keep you safe wasn’t such a good idea, because that sleepy, fuzzy feeling that you had when you first met him in the cave is starting to set back in. It’s the worst possible déjá vu.

“Gjálp,” you say, trying to sound as calm and collected as possible. “I think I’m freezing to death.”

“What?”

“Freezing to death,” you repeat, wrapping as much of her cloak around you as you possibly can. “It’s pretty bad.”

“Oh, by Hvergelmir,” she cries, “will the trials of this day never end?” She cradles you closer to her with one arm, leaning forward as the horse speeds across the ice and snow. “Hang on, In-Unga, we are very nearly there. Just hang on.”

You’re left bundled up in front of the fire in Loki’s room, instructed not to move until someone comes for you. Really, you’re too cold and stiff and aching to move even if you wanted to; what the hell were you thinking, using yourself to bait some freakishly-enormous wolf? And you apparently ‘interfered’ in some sacred rite, which is a big enough deal for Býleistr to try to cover it up...

Loki’s going to kill you.

But if you’d done nothing, he might not even be alive to kill you… so at least there’s that.

When he storms into the room hours and hours later, his arm heavily bandaged and his eyes flashing
fire, you instinctively try to scramble to your feet, tripping awkwardly as the blankets tangle around your legs. “Loki,” you exclaim, “thank God, you—”

“I told you. I told you, y**retched** little thing, to stay where I left you. Did I not?” He stalks closer, and you take a hesitant step backwards. “You have interfered with my fate, you have disobe**yed** me yet again, and you’ve very nearly gotten yourself eaten.”

“I saved you!”

He’s in your face, and there’s really nowhere left for you to go; the stone wall is right behind you, and judging by the vibes you’re getting off of Loki, he isn’t about to let you wiggle away. “You should by all rights be dead now, mortal, for your ceaseless stupidity—”

You raise your hands to shove him away, an instinct that still remains strong, despite how futile you know it will be, but before you can do anything, he lunges.

Loki’s long fingers are wrapped around your jaw, and you’re starting to grow concerned that he might’ve forgotten that you’re not quite as sturdy as everyone else on this godforsaken planet, because it hurts.

“Go on, mortal,” he snaps, his crimson eyes sparking. “Strike me, I beg of you.” Your hands wrap around his wrist as he pushes you back against the cold stone wall. “Give me yet another reason.”

His teeth are bared, and he looks slightly unhinged, so maybe that’s why you panic; instead of doing the smart thing and going limp and maybe even begging for forgiveness, you flail out and kick him in the ankle.

It can’t possibly have hurt him, as invulnerable as he seems to be, but Loki lets out what sounds like a curse, eyes narrowing, and then he hisses your name, and then his lips crash into yours.

For someone who typically seems so exact about everything he does, it’s a surprisingly messy, urgent sort of kiss - his teeth scrape against your lip, his tongue pressing into your mouth. You could swear that his hand is burning your skin as his grip softens, sliding from your jaw and down your throat.

Oh, no. This is one of the things you’d feared in the beginning, isn’t it? The crazy god-king deciding to take advantage? Only…

Loki breaks away, his hand still holding you against the wall, and you’d never imagined that crimson eyes could look quite so lost.

When he finally speaks, his voice is strained, but surprisingly soft. “Kiss me,” he whispers. “Must I order you?”

“No,” you reply, voice equally hushed. “I just… I’m… I’m afraid—”

“It’s because your brain is still a little scrambled from the suddenness of the kiss, or because you can tell he’s about to start ranting again (and you really aren’t in the mood to listen to it). No matter the cause, when you reach up and seize him by the hair, he lets you pull him forward without any struggle.

And when you kiss him, you guess he must be in shock, because it takes him a second or two to
respond.

Loki drags you with him as he stumbles back towards the bed, hissing as he lands on his injured arm. It doesn’t seem to distract him for long, though, and as you fall on top of him, he cradles your head and guides your lips back to his. He smells so, so good, like sweat and snow… they aren’t even things you knew you liked, and now, you can’t imagine ever getting enough. Don’t stop, your mind whispers. If you stop, he might never kiss you again, and right now, that’s one of the worst things you can imagine.

You wish that his arm wasn’t injured, and that he could touch you. You wish that you weren’t wearing a million layers, because feeling his skin pressed against yours suddenly seems like the most desirable thing in the world. Brushing his hair aside, you pepper kisses down his jaw, his throat… Loki makes a strange sound and slides his hand down to your lower back, pressing you against him.

Okay, so he likes that. He really likes that.

When kissing his neck earns you another appreciative roll of his hips, you sink your teeth into his skin, and Loki groans. “Wench,” he says. “Disobedient—” Tugging your hair, he pulls you away from his neck, capturing your mouth again. “Disobedient little wench,” he continues as soon as he breaks away, his eyes dark.

“You like it,” you whisper accusingly, twining your fingers in his hair.

“Perhaps.” He fumbles around for the covers, dragging them over your back, trapping in the warmth. “If you’d been eaten, I never would’ve forgiven you.”

He’s exhausted, and you’re exhausted, and you rest your head on his chest, smiling slightly at the way his heart is pounding. Mine, too, you think.

“Same.”

Chapter End Notes

FrostbiteFriday is here again! I’ve been waiting for this chapter for a long, long time... SO! I really hope you all enjoyed it, and thank you SO MUCH for your continual support and sweet comments! <3
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

You know what Loki isn't good at?

Talking about feelings.

When you wake up the next morning, the first thing your sleepy eyes focus on is Loki, standing half-naked in the middle of the bedroom.

Only it isn’t Loki.

It’s two Lokis, one blue, one pale, and they’re frowning at each other.

You yelp and scramble back against against the head of the bed, and blue-Loki turns and crooks his finger at you, the frown still firmly in place. “Come here, mortal.”

Oh, he’s pissed. You can hear it in his voice - that overly-polite, ‘I’m going to stab you and smile while I’m doing it’ tone that sends shivers racing down your spine. But it’s either get up of your own volition or wait for him to drag you from the bed, so you gingerly climb to your feet and pad over to where he stands.

“What is that?” you whisper. Asgardian-Loki (because you don’t really know what else to call him), is identically dressed - or rather, undressed - and he looks kind of… bored. Bored but irritated.

“A double,” Loki snaps, waving your questions away as if you were an annoying gnat. “The chamber has no mirror.” Wrapping his long fingers around your arm, he yanks you closer, pointing to his double’s neck. “Explain this.”

Blood rushes to your face. “That’s a… hickey?” you venture, trying to be hopeful, though the twins’ words from the day of the coronation echo in your mind.

“A mortal pet attempting to mate-mark a king? He would snuff you out… like a candle.”

The grip on your arm tightens. Oh, crap. Because it clearly isn’t just a hickey; it’s very obviously a bite-mark, and bizarrely enough, it’s slightly raised from his skin, almost like an old scar.

“How did you manage this, girl?” He gives you a rough shake, and your heart feels like it’s about to beat out of your chest. “Were you given something? Have you been caught up in some Stormr-Jötnar pranks?”

“I don’t…” You falter, lost for words, and you meet his gaze, hoping that your wide-eyed confusion will at least convey your innocence. “I don’t know. I didn’t think I could break your skin. I mean, I didn’t break your skin!”

He’s glaring down at you, and your arm is really starting to hurt. Great, another bruise. Except, at the moment, you might have a lot more to worry about than accidental-bruises. “Come on!” you plead, desperate for him to see that you’re even more baffled by this whole situation than he is. “You’re basically made of granite! I’m a mortal, remember?”
“Oh, I remember.”

“You’re hurting me.”

His hand drops away at once, and the double fades. “There is some magic in this,” he says, “but I cannot tell—” Words seem to fail him, and he turns to pace. “Do you realize the effort it takes to scar me?”

“Yes. I’m freaked out, too, okay? Maybe we should ask the Völva—”

“No. We are not discussing this with anyone. Norns help me, I live an accursed life.”

Great, you think, feeling a little sullen as you rub the feeling back into your arm. I guess we aren’t going to make out this morning, then. “You really know how to make a girl feel special, you know that?”

Loki covers his face for a moment or two, pressing his temples. “My apologies,” he says. “It is common for warriors to return from a battle seeking another outlet for their remaining bloodlust, and I should not have used you. It was irresponsible.”

The hell is he saying? What is this, some kind of courtly morning-after dismissal? “Are you—”

“It won’t happen again.”

Your temper curls in your chest, surprisingly potent. “Do you have that speech memorized or something? It might work on some random chambermaid, Loki, but it’s not gonna work on me.”

“I am giving you the benefit of the doubt that this was not intentional,” he snaps, pointing at the bite-mark. “Do you really think it wise to test me now, mortal?”

You glare at him, biting back words that you’ll probably regret later, and he glares right back.

“I will have one of the twins fetch you.” Loki is across the room in only a few long strides, and he pauses by the door for a moment, his back towards you. “It would be best to keep your distance.”

Then he’s gone, and you feel the tiniest bit of a crack beginning to form on your heart.

Greip eventually comes to get you, but instead of taking you to the hall where you figure everyone else must be gathered, she leads you to a room not far from the one you’ve been staying in with Loki. She seems a little awkward and stiff, and you hope it’s just because there are servants and guards in the halls, and not because she’s upset with you for some reason.

At the moment, you could really use a friend.

She practically slams the door closed once you’re inside, leaning against it with a heavy sigh. “Oh, In-Unga,” she says, “what a day this has been.”

“Is everything… okay?” you ask. “I mean, with the king? Is there a reason I’m not…” The look on her face is making you anxious, so you trail off, wrapping your arms around yourself. “Am I just going to hang out here, then?”
“Oh, mortal… I saw it.”

Crap. You’re pretty sure you know where this is going, but you decide to play innocent. “Saw what?”

“You bit the king,” she whispers, moving away from the door. “You marked him, and he is not married yet; do you know what Lady Skaði will do, if she sees?”

“I didn’t—”

“There is no use pretending. I know it was you - the king never smells of any woman but you. I did not even know that the bond would take with a mortal…” Her eyes widen suddenly, and you flinch on instinct as she unwinds the scarf you’ve got wrapped around your neck, pulling open your cloak and tugging at the neck of your tunic.

“What—”

“Has he not marked you?”

“What? No.” But something flutters in your belly at the thought of his mouth on your throat, and you imagine that you’re going to just melt into an embarrassed puddle of goo on the floor.

“I am baffled by this,” Greip declares, still frowning at your bared skin, like she’s expecting something incriminating to suddenly pop up. “This is not how things are done, and you are not even a Jötunn… By the Norns, does this say ‘Loki’s woman?’ What is he thinking?”

Now you’re definitely blushing.

“I am sorry, In-Unga.” The embarrassment on your face must’ve been interpreted as something else, because Greip looks like she’s starting to get emotional. “It must be terrifying, for him to use you this way, and we heard—” her voice cracks a bit —”we heard of how he punished you the night prior to the hunt. I do not understand it; he seems so protective of you…”

Oh, God, what to say? You really don’t want to make her cry over nothing. “We were just… that wasn’t serious,” you manage to squeak out, struggling to keep a straight face. “We were just fooling around.”

That doesn’t appear to have cleared anything up.

“But if he is not—”

“He kissed me,” you blurt out, “last night. And now, he’s acting like he wishes he hadn’t.”

Greip just gawps at you for a moment or two, and you wonder if maybe kissing is a bigger deal here than it is on Earth. “In-Unga,” she says finally, “this attachment that you have with the king… it is not wise. Loyalty is one thing, but to nurture feelings that cannot be returned is folly. You will only cause yourself more misery, in the end.”

Her hand is clasped around the pendant on her neck.

You decide to let it go.
"What’s going on now?" you ask. "It sounds kind of rowdy out there." You’re pretty sure you can hear drumming coming from somewhere, and there have been a lot of footsteps running up and down the hall outside of the twins’ door for the past few hours.

It isn’t exactly relaxing.

“There is feasting,” Greip says, “to celebrate the death of Mánagarmr - and to honor the new king, of course.”

“Most of the people here didn’t seem like they’d be super eager to honor him.”

She shrugs. “How can they do otherwise? In his victory, he shows that he is the rightful king, his fate woven by the Norns. Moreover, the court will wish to ingratiate themselves with him, now. Especially as this is the Queen Mother’s clan, and that of the princes.”

“And he doesn’t… doesn’t he want me there?” You feel kind of pathetic for mentioning it, but she already knows you’re attached to Loki, so what does it really matter, in the long run? “Usually, he likes keeping me close.”

“The king thinks it best for you to stay here, for the time being,” Greip says. “I believe that he is hoping to keep you away from the others for your own wellbeing, truthfully. And considering the fact that you’ve marked him… Well, I do not know what to expect, In-Unga.”

“Oh.”

“These are very strange times.”

She’s stretched out on her side on the other end of the bed, a pillow hugged against her chest, and suddenly, you can’t help but conjure up memories of slumber parties and sleepovers long past. Typical girl talk, right? Kings and giant wolves and human pets and forbidden feelings? Speaking of forbidden feelings...

“Have you talked to Hrossþjófr any?” you ask. “Since… well, since everything happened, I mean.”

Greip isn’t a very good liar; her eyes widen slightly, and she bites her lip. “Why would I?”

“He did jump off of a cliff trying to save you. And there’s the whole fox thing - figured you’d want to talk to him about all of that. Ask him why, or something, maybe?”

Her cheeks start to turn slightly lavender.

“You have talked to him, haven’t you?”

“He has approached me, yes.”

You smile, hoping to be encouraging - or supportive, at least. The twins are almost becoming something like friends. It’s a little weird, but nice. There’s some genuine trust there, and it’s something you’d like to nurture. “And? C’mon, there’s no reason not to tell me. I’m the weird little human, remember? No one cares what I know or say, anyway.”

“That is not entirely true,” she replies, rolling onto her back, “as you have the ear of the king himself. But I will tell you this, In-Unga - the boy vexes me.”

Definitely getting slumber party vibes. “How come?”
“He represents his clan and the honored Völva, yet he completely lacks decorum! And his interest in me is entirely unwarranted. A Stormr-Jötnar, and a skin-changer at that - I cannot imagine what my father would say, if he knew, or even Lady Skaði…” Sighing, she covers her eyes. “I do not know how to dissuade him.”

“Why is it such a big deal? I thought all the clans mixed and mingled anyway, for alliances and stuff. There are all kinds of giants in Utgard.”

“The royal court is different,” she says. “And the enmity between us and the Stormr-Jötnar goes back many millennia, rekindled once more when King Laufey forsook his betrothed and took Gunnlöð as his queen, instead.”

“Wait, he was supposed to marry someone else first?”

“Yes. Queen Fárbauti had been promised to him. The breaking of that vow led to many centuries of grief for Jotunheim.”

Jesus, you think, it’s like a soap opera. The king causes chaos by running off and marrying the woman he loves, instead of the one he’s supposed to marry for the good of the kingdom, the girl dies - you still haven’t heard how that supposedly happened, but it seems increasingly sketchy - and the original betrothed ends up on the throne. His first-born son ends up growing up on a different freaking planet, believed to be dead...

“It’s okay to like him, you know,” you tell her. “On Ear— on Midgard, things used to be more like that. More strict about who could be together. And they still are, in some places, I guess. But love is a special kind of thing, and if you’re lucky enough to think that you might be able to find it with someone—”

“No,” Greip says. “Oh, no, mortal; this is not— You do not understand. It is not practical. That is not the way of things on Jotunheim. Any inclinations one might have are fleeting, and it is best not to dwell on them.”

You’re lying to yourself, you think, but you keep your mouth shut. How can you talk? It isn’t like you’re some sort of expert - you’re the idiot who made out with the crazy supervillain who once wanted to conquer Earth. You don’t exactly have room to call anyone else’s priorities messed up. Besides, she’s right; you don’t understand. How far would the clan really go to keep her from being with a Storm Giant sorcerer?

Maybe you should take a page from Greip’s book and reel in your emotions a little.

The two of you play some card games, and then you read for a while, but it’s really, really difficult thinking of anything other than Loki and how much you want to both chew him out and kiss him again. I saved his life, you think, your irritation mounting as the hours pass. That ass.

Greip leaves at some point to bring you food, and as you pace, you realize that you feel more like a prisoner now than you have at any point thus far, even including when he first dragged you out of that cave and you realized you were stuck on real-life Hoth for the foreseeable future. By the time you’ve eaten, you feel like you’re about to lose your mind.

“Hey, Greip?” you say. “It’s pretty late now, isn’t it? Can I go back to Loki’s room to wait for him?”

Frowning, she puts her book aside. “I do not think—”

“And then you could spend some time with the others,” you hurry to add, “and you know he always wants me around when he’s sleeping, so I’d much rather just go to sleep there. Plus, there are guards
and stuff, so I’ll be safe.”

To be perfectly honest, you aren’t entirely certain about that last bit… but you do want to be there whenever he gets back from the celebrations. Maybe he’ll have cooled off a little, and the two of you can sit down (or cuddle up) and figure out this whole mate-mark thing. Maybe you’ll actually get an apology for him storming off in the morning like he’s ashamed of you.

“Well,” she finally says, “I suppose that is true. But you do not wish to have company?”

“I’m pretty tired, honestly.” Lies - you’re practically crawling up the walls, you’re so antsy. “I just want to sleep, and I don’t want to get in trouble if I’m not where I’m supposed to be when he comes back to bed.”

That’s not entirely true, either, but you can see the hesitation in her eyes as soon as you mention getting into trouble. “Very well, In-Unga. You may wait for the king in his chamber.”

The fire is starting to die down a little, and you’ve run out of logs to add to it, so you’re bundled up and sulking hours later, when you finally hear noise outside of the door. Too much noise for Loki, actually. You stand as the door opens, and you were right - it isn’t just Loki.

It’s Loki and Skaði.

The charming fake-smile leaves his face as soon as he sees you, his eyes narrowing. “You,” he says. “What are you doing here?”

She’s clinging to his arm, leaning into his side… for a moment, you forget how to speak, caught somewhere between disappointment and anger. “This is your room, sire,” you finally manage to say. “Where else would I be?”

Skaði laughs. “Such a loyal pet you have, my king. Come.”

And then she moves to step further into the room, but Loki doesn’t budge; he’s still glaring at you, like you’re the one who’s somehow in the wrong here. Was he seriously bringing her back to his room like some sort of—

“Sire?” she prompts, tugging on his arm.

“Leave me, Skaði,” he says, still standing stock-still just inside the doorway. In fact, now that he isn’t leaning against her, he doesn’t look incredibly steady on his feet.

Is he slurring his words a little? you think, incredulous. Is he really drunk right now, or just about to faint from exhaustion? Is he trying to get himself killed? Damn it, Loki…

At first she looks confused, and then pissed; her eyes catch some of the light from the fire as she turns back to glare at you. Apparently glaring-at-the-mortal is the theme for the evening. “Sire,” she says, turning back to him with a patient smile, “I do not mind if the mortal—”

“I said leave, Lady Skaði. I am in no mood for company.”

“Of course.” She nods in the barest hint of a bow, then all but storms out of the room, and Loki pulls the door closed behind her, bolting it shut.
For another moment or two, he doesn’t move.

Loki almost looks small as he stands there, the blue fading from his skin, revealing just how bruised and marred he remains from his battle with the wolf. His arm is still bandaged, too, which must mean that he hasn’t been able to heal himself… that’s probably why you’re still basically freezing, too.

*He’s making it all up as he goes along.*

“What was that?” you ask, your voice a lot more wobbly than you’d like. “After last night—”

“It is to be her,” he interrupts, his face surprisingly forlorn, though the expression only slips through for a moment or two. “*My queen.*” Waving you away, he moves towards the bed, where he collapses with a tired sigh.

Your heart stops. “You… it’s official?”

“It might as well be. Her clan is large and well-connected, her father is wildly rich, and placating the Skógr-Jötnar will ensure that at least a few less knives will be aimed at my back.” His forearm drapes across his eyes, and as you go to kneel on the bed by his side, you notice that there are bruises mottling his ribs, too.

Things must’ve been going pretty rough with Mánagarmr before you showed up.

“It will be declared soon enough,” he says. “I might as well get it over with.”

You peer down at him in the dim light, your heart still racing. There’s anger there, of course, but mixed in with it is an odd urge to protect him. The collar of the leather vest he’s wearing is covering his neck, and you tug it out of the way as he moves his arm, meeting your gaze.

*Welp.* “So, that’s still there,” you say. Loki just watches you, and you tell yourself that you’re probably more than a little crazy as you throw your leg over his hips and straddle him. Sending up a prayer to anyone who’s listening, you think. *Let’s hope he doesn’t finally kill me.*

“What are you doing?”

What are you doing? “Being your human pet, I guess.” You’re poised so stiffly that he could probably breathe on you and you’d fall over; *why did you decide to do this, again?*

But you can’t look away from the mark on his neck.

And so you lean down and kiss him - only once, softly, and your fingers trail along his throat, brushing over the barely-raised lines that your teeth have left on his skin. You can feel his breath catch, his body tense, and you manage to pull yourself away from his lips.

“What are you doing?”

What *are* you doing? “Being your human pet, I guess.” You’re poised so stiffly that he could probably breathe on you and you’d fall over; *why did you decide to do this, again?*

“Stop,” he says, and his irises bleed into crimson. But he says it in an odd whisper, and his eyes flutter closed, so you continue tracing over the raised lines with your fingertips. “I said *stop,* wench.” Now it’s a snarl, and he snatches your hand away. “You have started something that you do *not* understand, and you would do well to heed me now, lest I *finish* it.”

“You… you don’t understand it either, do you? At least, not really. That’s why you’re so freaked out.” Taking a deep breath, you meet his gaze. “And because you *want* to finish it, *whatever* it is. Don’t you?”

The sound he makes could best be described as a growl, and you flinch slightly as his fingers dig into the blankets by his head. *What the hell am I doing?* you think once again, heat flooding through you.
Oh, God, why did I decide to climb on top of him?

Kiss him again, some other part of your mind urges. Don’t worry about talking, just kiss him.

“You have no idea what you are doing,” Loki says. “There is some spell at play here, there must be.”

“It’s not just that; you know it’s not—”

He needs no further convincing, apparently, because he suddenly wraps his arm around your waist and pulls you down to him, and he doesn’t even seem to notice the way that your chin smacks against his, or the awkward grunt you make as you topple - he’s too busy trying to devour you.

You aren’t really sure how he manages to roll you over before you’ve even had the chance to realize what’s happening, but he does, and you find yourself pinned beneath him, your bottom lip between his teeth. Okay, that was definitely a growl. Part of you is a little freaked out, but the other part - the main part - is cheering and waving pom-poms on the sidelines.

But then he pulls away, sitting back on his heels as he glowers down at you, his teeth clenched and his muscles taut. He closes his eyes, taking one long, slow breath, and then another. The crimson is gone when he opens them again, but the conflict isn’t.

“Go to sleep, mortal,” Loki finally says, and then he moves away and curls up on his side, his face turned away from you. “Before we find ourselves with even more regrets, just sleep.”

You stay awake for a good chunk of the night, long after Loki’s fallen asleep beside you. There’s one word that keeps circling around in your head, over and over and over, and that word is ‘regret.’

What is it, exactly, that Loki regrets? Keeping you alive, maybe? Taking over Jotunheim? Trying to take over Earth? Or is he just ashamed that he’s slumming it up with a mortal, showing some of the most vulnerable parts of himself to someone he considers inferior? Does he consider you a downgrade - not up to his standards?

No, you don’t think that’s it. You tell yourself that’s not it; it doesn’t make sense.

Is it the loss of control, the confusion? That seems more likely.

He makes a sleepy, satisfied hum when you wrap yourself around him, and you tell yourself that he’s right. You should just go to sleep. There’s no point in torturing yourself like this, and as fickle as Loki seems to be… well, who knows what tomorrow will bring?

Tomorrow brings monotony.

You’re bundled back into your sleigh before the cold sun of Jotunheim has even managed to fully drag itself over the horizon, and the caravan sets out for the return journey to Utgard with surprisingly little fanfare. Greip and Gjálp are both subdued; you wonder if they’re worried about what will happen when you make it back to the palace.
Loki doesn’t join you.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Loki has decided to keep his distance.

You didn’t think the roadtrip from hell could get any worse... but you were wrong. This is definitely worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

You haven’t seen Loki in over two days. At least, you think it’s been two days. It’s kind of hard to tell.

He’s with his brothers, the twins tell you, and with the Völva and Skaði. There’s a tiny flicker of jealousy in your chest at that, but it’s easily drowned out by worry, because you can’t imagine that Loki and Helblindi are off to a good start, at least as far ‘brotherly love’ goes. Gjálp seems relatively worried, too; she leaves the sleigh to sprint ahead to check on things fairly often, and there are occasional long stretches where it’s just you and Greip.

“Hey, Greip?” you ask during one such occasion, feigning nonchalance as you flip through the pages of the book that Býleistr’d left for you, “does Gjálp know about the whole… well, the kissing thing? And the mark?”

“She does. I thought it best to tell her, in case of any complications.”

“‘Complications?’ What ‘complications?’” Your mind races, wildly chasing down a million different worst-case scenarios - things you’ve seen in movies, or read in stories, or conjectures based on your short time on Jotunheim. “I’m not going to die or something if he doesn’t… bite back, right? Or spontaneously combust if another guy touches me?”

Greip gives you a strange look. “Well… no, mortal. Of course not. But it is incredibly shameful for the king to have such a mark from a thrall, and particularly a human one - and especially for him to have acquired it while he is supposed to be courting a noble lady.”

“It’s not magical?”

That doesn’t fit well with the fact that it exists in the first place - there’s no way that it should even be there, if it isn’t some kind of magic.

“Such things do not require seiðr, if that is what you mean. If you were fully bonded, you would feel it.” Her face scrunches up. “I do not know how to explain it, and obviously, I have never experienced it for myself. You’d best be thankful that Inn-Illi has chosen to keep his distance.”
“We are taking a different route,” Gjálp declares, shaking snow from her hair as she pulls the sleigh door closed behind her. “Above the canyons. It will take us three more days, likely, but that is why we will not be stopping at our home again.”

She doesn’t seem to be overly bothered by the idea of not seeing her parents, and Greip looks downright relieved. “This pace is mad,” she says. “Will we be stopping soon to refresh? It is very harsh on the animals, and I do not want Hornburi and Vámúli to take injury.”

“Is it that, or are you truly more concerned with seeing the seiðberandi?”

“Sister!”

Gjálp shrugs one shoulder, then settles cross-legged beside you. “If you do wish to have words with him, you would be wise to do so before we reach Utgard. You heard Father - Lady Skaði will ask the queen to begin looking for prospects for us. Besides, the Stormr-Jötnar are not likely to stay long in Utgard, unless King Loki wishes to cause even more strife with his father’s court.”

“I have nothing to say to Hrossþjófr.”

Yeah, right, you think. Just like I have ‘nothing’ to say to Loki.

As the sleigh rumbles along, there isn’t much to focus on other than the fact that life sucks.

How much longer can you think of this as a crazy adventure, rather than a ‘this is my life now’ sort of scenario? Is time even passing the same way on Earth? God only knows how long you’ve actually been here. The authorities have probably already told your family that you’re most likely dead. The thought turns your stomach.

It helps to imagine how ecstatic everyone will be when you’re finally home.

If you ever get home.

Bored and restless, you keep turning back to look at the picture of the mortal woman in The Annals of Hveðrungr - Víf, wasn’t it? You wonder what ended up happening to her. It was probably nothing good, considering she must’ve spent enough time around the giants for one of them to paint her. Did she die young?

Grim.

Stretching, you grimace; your back aches, and your muscles are stiff. Stupid Loki, you think, massaging your neck. Screw him, leaving me here like this, while he’s probably cuddled up with Skaði…

That insidious trickle of jealousy trickles through your veins, stronger than you might’ve expected. Woah, you think. Calm down, dude. But even though you tell yourself that there’s no good reason for you to feel so angry, you can’t seem to help it. The mental image of anyone else touching him—

“In-Unga?” Gjálp says, a hint of worry in her voice. “Are you well?”

Startled from your sudden temper, you realize that you’ve got a white-knuckle grip on the book; you probably looked like a maniac, glaring off into space. “Sorry,” you reply, embarrassed. “I was just
“And it’s really cold,” you hurry to add, hoping that’s a better excuse for why you’re so miserable. “The magic to keep me warm is wearing out a little bit, I think. It’s been days since the last time he fixed it.”

“I will let him know, when we have stopped. It should not be long now, I think. Will you be able to manage until then?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.”

When Greip wakes you up, the caravan must’ve already been stopped for a little while, because there’s a few large fires already crackling along on the rocky ground outside of the sleigh. It isn’t snowing, which is a blessing, though the wind is cold and bitter. What makes the rocks so blue? you wonder, grimacing up at the tall, precarious-looking spires that seem like they might crack and crush you all at a moment’s notice.

“Over here,” Greip says, and it doesn’t escape your notice that she leads you to a different campfire than the one where the Storm Twins are already sitting. The ground is slippery, and you feel like a newborn deer as you cross the icy ground on shaking legs. There are a few small stone huts nestled at the base of some of the spires, and giants are coming and going through the open doorways.

You don’t see Loki.

Greip gets you settled onto a log by the fire, then drags a few blankets out of the sleigh, wrapping them around you with careful precision. It’s sweet; it’s this sort of little thing that makes you feel like the twins genuinely care. Your eyes almost tear up a little. Damn, you think, why am I getting so emotional?

Stew seems to be a pretty popular dish on Jotunheim, and a metal pot is brought out from one of the huts and hung up over the fire. You try not to pay too much attention to the ingredients that are dumped into it; it’s probably best not to know, and you really can’t forget the face of that sea serpent that was spread out on the banquet table back in Utgard. Ugh.

Could be worse, you tell yourself. I could’ve run into one of those things while it was still alive.

The other giants who settle in around your cooking fire are all from the Forest Giant clan, you think. You’re getting better and better at distinguishing all of the subtle variations, as the days pass. Even their eyes have more shades than you’d really appreciated in the beginning - initially, you’d been too freaked out just by the concept of red eyes to notice all of the different hues. Greip and Gjálp’s eyes are really more of a maroon, while Loki’s are more of a straight crimson when he’s in full-out Jötunn-form.

The super-pale hair is still a mystery, though; so far, you haven’t seen anyone other than the Völva and the Storm Twins with white hair, other than the witch-king in your book. Maybe it’s just a Storm Giant thing, though none of the other giants travelling with them have it, and you’re assuming they’re all from the same clan.
The Storm Giants seem pretty merry, even though it’s been evident from the beginning that most of
the court doesn’t want to have them around. In fact, they’re laughing and talking loudly enough that
you can hear them where you’re sitting, even though you can’t make any of it out. It almost sounds
like they’re speaking in rhymes.

Gjálp notices you looking over your shoulder. “They are flyting,” she says. “Is this done on
Midgard?”

“That’s the insult thing, right?”

She looks like she’s holding back a laugh, so you guess you must sound pretty unsophisticated. “It is.
It is a poetic duel; you should ask your master, for Loki Ormstunga is called so, in part, due to his
sharpness when flyting.”

“I think that used to be a thing on Earth, a long time ago. Now, we just have rap battles.”

Her brow creases. “Rap?”

“It’s a kind of music. Hey, did you mention to the king that I’m freezing? It’s getting pretty bad, even
with the fire and blankets and everything.”

“He is hidden away in some discussion with the princes,” she says, pointing towards one of the huts.
“I left a message with one of Lady Skaði’s thralls. I am certain that he will come to you soon, In-
Unga.”

“Oh.”

“Here, eat. It will make you feel better.”

The smile she gives you as she hands you a wooden bowl is encouraging, and you try to return it,
even though you’re shivering and kind of pissed off at Loki’s continued absence. And she’s right;
the stew is hot and salty, and it does help a little bit. Some of the giants around the fire are chatting,
but the mood is generally subdued. Is it because you left so abruptly from the forests?

In contrast, the giants at the fire behind you are clapping, and while Greip seems determined to
ignore the commotion, you can’t help but turn and look. Hrossþjófr has pulled out what appears to be
some kind of stringed instrument from somewhere, taking his place at the center of the Storm Giant
fire-ring with an exaggerated bow. Is that a fiddle? It looks like a fiddle.

Whatever the instrument is, he tucks it under his chin and draws his bow across the strings, and you
notice a few more of the giants at your own circle have turned to watch him. He plays for a moment
or two - you’re a little surprised that he’s actually good at it - and then he starts to sing.

His voice is nice; it has a playful sort of lilt to it. A few of the Storm Giants laugh when he presses
his hand to his heart, reveling in overdramatics, and Heiðr is grinning.

“What are the words to the song?” you whisper.

“I do not know.” Greip is frowning, but she finally turns around to look. “It is some tribal tongue.”

Hrossþjófr begins to play the tune again on the thing that you’re just going to go ahead and call a
‘fiddle,’ and then he glances up and winks in your general direction. When he starts to sing again, it’s
in a language you can understand - and judging by the lavender blush on Greip’s cheeks, so can she.

“A beauty walks in shadow ‘neath the forest’s snowy boughs;
O, lead my love to seashores far, where we may take our vows;

May the Norns guide her to roam,

To her lover, far from home;

I know that I can win her heart - O, Lofn, show me how.”

Laughing, he bows to the applause of his fire-circle, and even some of the giants from the other circles join in with a few scattered cheers. Jesus, you think, the guy isn’t exactly being subtle. Though, maybe it’s just because you know where to look; it doesn’t seem like anyone else has noticed the slightly-stricken look on Greip’s face, except for you and maybe her sister.

“The Norns are like the Fates, right?” you ask, your voice still hushed. “But who is Lofn?”


“His voice is fine,” Greip declares, “but his verses are poor.” Abruptly, she stands and stalks off, and Gjálp seems torn between running after her and keeping an eye on you.

Loki’s still standing behind you, his hand on your head. You’re really tempted to smack him away. “Don’t let your sister wander off,” he says. “We will be leaving here soon.”

She hesitates for a second, then nods and hurries after Greip, and you’re left alone with a bunch of unfriendly giants you don’t really know and him. Can he tell how mad you are? How hurt? Part of you really hopes so, even if it’s petty.

“Come,” Loki says, “I will restore your charm.”

You push yourself to your feet and follow him behind one of the sleighs, just slightly out-of-view from most of the camp. Even though you can feel his gaze on your face, you stubbornly keep your eyes locked on his chest, even when he brushes his knuckles against your cheek. The magic sparks and causes you to shiver.

At least, you hope it’s just his magic. You do feel warmer.

“You are cold?”

“Of course. Sire.”

Sighing, he slides his hand to your neck, and the warmth increases. Guess he’s getting his powers back, then. As frustrated as you are with him, you’re also a little annoyed that he isn’t dragging you off to the sleigh to cuddle up. Maybe he’s getting enough attention from Skaði. He’s still got his neck covered - has she seen it? Has anyone else?

The fact that he’s basically got your teeth branded on him makes you feel… weirdly possessive. Almost proud, if you’re being completely honest with yourself, and maybe even a little smug.

Huh, you think, startled by the realization. Didn’t realize I was into that.

“Are you feeling well? Look at me, mortal.”

“I don’t want to,” you whisper, wrapping your arms around yourself. You expect that he’ll tilt your chin up and make you look at him, like he’s done so many times before, but he doesn’t. In fact, Loki doesn’t say anything at all.
The warmth spreads across your skin and seeps into your bones like a warm, cozy blanket, shielding you from the cold wind. Somehow, though, it doesn’t even come close to matching the heat that you feel when he’s wrapped around you. There’s a lump in your throat. “Are you coming back to our sleigh?” you ask, your voice hushed in the hopes that no one else will hear.

Loki flinches - barely, but you feel it, all the same. “No.”

You hang your head, and his hand drops away from your skin. The magic worked - you’re warm again - but you’d almost rather feel the cold. It fits better with your mood.

“Go back to the fire,” he says. “Stay with the twins. We will reach Utgard soon - three days, four, at most.” Nodding, you turn away, wondering why your chest suddenly feels so hollow.

“Mortal?”

You freeze in your tracks, but you don’t turn back.

“It’s for the best.”

*If only you believed him.*

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The caravan barely makes any other stops on the way back, and when it does, the twins usually just rush you out of the sleigh to take care of the necessities and then right back in again. Most of your meals are eaten on the road, and you’re starting to get really, really tired of jerky and green crackers. At least Greip has some dried berries to mix things up a little.

You almost hope that there’s a feast when you get back, and even though you feel guilty for wanting it, you daydream for a minute or two about being curled up in Loki’s lap at the head of the table. *Where I belong,* some insidious part of you whispers. *Where everyone can see that he’s mine.*

Groaning in frustration, you rub your temples. This *craving* you have for him is *weird,* and you’ve never felt this way about any guy before, even in the throes of your worst crushes. *This is nuts,* you tell yourself. *He’s hot, sure, and we’ve been through a lot together, but this is too soon. It hasn’t even been a month… I think. And he’s a total dick.*

It feels like it’s been years.

Gjálp hasn’t mentioned the mate-mark any, but she’s been watching you like a hawk, and so has her sister. It’s got you feeling even more jittery - what are they expecting? Do they think you’re crazy, or something? Or are they worried that Loki is going to get rid of you, once you’re back in Utgard?

As the prospect of being back in the palace draws closer, you can’t hold back any longer, so you finally ask, “What’s going to happen when we get back to Utgard?”

They share a look. “We do not know, In-Unga,” Gjálp says. “Loki is King of Jotunheim now, by blood and deed, so we can hope that things will remain peaceful. As long as Queen Fárbauti continues to support him, everything should be fine.”

“But what about me? Do you know… has he said what’s going to happen to me?”

“No.” She seems a little surprised by the question. “I assume that things will be the same as before. I cannot imagine that he would keep you anywhere but his own chambers, given your value.”
My value as a person? you think sullenly. Or does she mean my value as a pet?

How is that going to work, anyway, if he’s planning on getting married? But then, you remember what he said about wives having their own chambers, and your heart plummets even more. He wouldn’t dare to keep you in his room, coming and going as he spends time with his wives… would he?

You’re aching and sore by the time your sleigh reaches Utgard, and you’re in a pretty foul mood, to top it all off. Everything hurts, and you’ve been jostling around in this stupid box for what feels like an eternity, tormented by dreams of Loki and his stupid mouth and neck and eyes…

The twins usher you into the palace as the rest of the convoy begins to unpack, and you don’t even manage to catch a glimpse of Loki. “I want a bath,” you grouse, too exhausted to care that you sound like a petulant little kid. “Can I take a bath?”

“Of course,” Greip says. “I could use one, as well. Then we will find something to eat.”

“Something fresh, maybe?”

She laughs. “I will see what I can do.”

Once you’ve had your nice toasty steam-bath and gotten dressed in a new change of clothes - clothes that Loki must’ve had made for you, since they actually fit pretty well - the twins bring you back to their room. Your dinner mainly consists of some of the tuber things you’ve had before, thinly sliced and salted. Hmm, you think. If I try hard enough, maybe I can pretend that these are chips. Unfortunately, that seems to be beyond the scope of your imagination; they’re way too soggy. At least it’s something other than dried meat and soup.

“I’m so tired,” you tell them, rubbing your back. The trip must’ve really done a number on you. “Can I go to bed?”

“Yes,” Greip says. “The king has not given us any instruction to keep you elsewhere, so we can take you back to his chamber, if you wish?”

The fact that she phrases it like a question, like they’re giving you a choice, makes you smile. “Yeah. That would be nice.”

There’s a fire already burning in Loki’s room when you get there, which is nice; they must’ve sent someone to freshen it up and get it ready for his return. The guards at the door give you the side-eye when the twins let you into the room, but they don’t say anything.
Alone again, naturally. God, what a depressing song to have pop into your head.

You feel a little sick, but you figure it’s probably from everything your poor body has been through over the past few weeks. Maybe it’s from all of the emotional mess, too. Maybe it’s a side-effect of being kept under the influence of Loki’s magic for weeks on end.

Curling up on the bed, you burrow under as many blankets as possible. The bed smells like him, and while it makes you feel safe, it also fills you with a terrible sense of longing. Is he even going to come back here tonight? Is he going to come back ever, or is he going to hide you away here and keep pretending that you don’t exist?

I can’t live like that, you think, on the verge of tears. I can’t. I’ll beg him to send me home. I’ll make him send me home.

“Mortal?”

Loki’s face is right in front of yours, and his eyes are wide. You blink up at him, confused; is this a dream? He starts peeling back blankets, and you roll to your side, groggy. “What—?”

“The guards smelled blood,” he says. “And now I do, as well; it’s yours.”

A string of curses flies through your head as the realization hits hard, and you try to wrestle the blanket away from him. “Stop!” you cry. “I’m fine.”

“But—”

The aching, the cramping, the exhaustion… I’m an idiot, you think. Can’t believe this happened. “How long have we been here? Since you found me?”

He frowns, the blanket still in his hand. “Almost three weeks.”

“It’s my… it’s that time of the month,” you squeak, heat flushing up your neck. “Can you get a girl, please?”

Though, God only knows if the twins will be able to help - do things work the same way for Frost Giants? Will they know what to do? Even if they don’t, it can’t be any worse than having Loki staring down at you, his irritation visibly increasing by the second.

“Month?” he says. “What of the month?”

Guess that’s not an expression on Jotunheim. Or Asgard.

“I… the menstrual cycle?” He cocks his head slightly. Okay, that’s not working. “Um, girl things? I…” Just say it, you tell yourself, for heaven’s sake, you’re a grown woman. Get it together. “The female reproductive cycle,” you finally manage. “I think it’s that point in the cycle when you bleed. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—”

Loki looks at you like you’re crazy. “Mortal women experience this monthly?”

Oh, God, you think. I keep forgetting that I’ve got a thing for an alien. “Is that not a thing where you’re from?”
“Norns, no. It is very infrequent - every few years, at most.” He starts tugging on the blanket again. “Are you certain—”

“I’m certain!” You wrap your arms around your the blanket, hugging it to your chest, and Loki’s frown deepens. “Look, this is incredibly embarrassing, okay? Like, worst nightmare material.”

“Is that so?” He almost sounds amused. “Worse than being trapped on Jotunheim? Worse than being my little mortal pet, or facing Mánagarmr?”

Yeah, it might actually be.

“There is no reason to be so bashful,” Loki adds after a moment, finally releasing the blanket. “I have some training as a healer, you know. I’m hardly appalled by the notion of blood.”

Is he trying to be nice? You can’t decide if that helps, or hurts. “Thanks.”

You’re definitely certain, now; the math adds up, and you’re cramping pretty badly. Is Advil a thing here? Maybe a heating pad? I didn’t exactly pack for a trip, you think, panic rising, so what am I gonna use to—

“Calm down.” Loki crouches by the bedside, his hand on your knee. He looks like he wants to say something, but he’s struggling to find the words. “I will send one of the twins to you. You are… in pain?”

“Yeah, kind of, but I can deal with it.”

He just looks at you in silence for another awkward moment, then sighs. “I will return,” he says. “Later tonight, I will return to check on you.”

“Oh, don’t act like you actually care—”

“But I do.” He actually has the nerve to look hurt, and you want to shove him away. “You know that I do.” Loki stands, fidgeting with his fingers. “You barely know me, mortal. If you did, you would understand that I am acting in your best interests, not only my own. You agreed to trust me, did you not? Trust me now.”

“A lot has happened since then.”

“I suppose.” He looks like he’s going to say something else, but then he shakes his head. “I will be back,” he says. “Rest. Try not to dwell on things that you cannot change.”

Somehow, when he leaves, you feel even worse than before.

It takes some convincing to get Gjálp and Greip to understand that things on Earth are different, and that you aren’t actually dying. Apparently, it’s something that they’ve only had to deal with a handful of times in their entire lives, so they seem pretty baffled at the idea of it being a semi-regular occurrence. You can’t help but feel a little jealous.

You’re absolutely mortified, but they’re nice enough about it. They help you get everything cleaned up and taken care of, though they’re a little perplexed at the fact that they’re supposed to bring you back to Loki’s room. “Usually at such times,” Greip tells you, “a woman stays in a room apart; it is
“Well, I’m a human. I’m guessing nobody is too worried about my manners, you know?”

Gjálp laughs. “True enough, In-Unga.”

There are fresh blankets on the bed by the time you get back; in a way, it kind of sucks, because you miss the Loki-smell, even if you don’t want to admit it. Curling up, you rub your stomach a few times, wishing that you had something fizzy to drink. ‘Sanitary products’ on Jotunheim are apparently several decades behind those on Earth, so you’ve basically had to belt some cloth monstrosity around your waist. It really doesn’t help with your misery.

You consider waiting up for Loki, but eventually, you give up; besides, with how he’s been acting lately, he might not even show up.

The fire burns low, and the night grows colder. Burrowing deeper under the blankets, you fall asleep.

The bed dips, and you stir as the covers are pulled aside. “Shh,” he whispers. “It’s only me. Sleep.”

You squint over your shoulder; in the dark, you can barely make him out. The discomfort is strong and sharp; you wonder if the cold is making it worse. “Don’t feel good.”

“I know.” Loki pauses for a moment, and you bury your face back into the covers and curl up more tightly. Maybe if you go to sleep, you’ll feel better when you wake up.

The blankets move again, and you feel him slide into the bed behind you, curving against your back. He’s warm; it feels good, and you sigh in relief. The tunic you’re wearing is loose, and he pulls it up, placing his hand on your bare belly. That feels good, too.

“You will be fine,” he says. “Sleep.”

He’s gone when you wake up the next morning, and if it wasn’t for the scent of him still clinging to you, you might’ve thought that you’d only dreamt it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much! I’ve been back around online more this week, trying to get through asks and comments and all that good stuff, and I’ve been so happy to hear from everyone!
Check out the amazing reading of Frostbite by Mavis Reads on Youtube (Ch. 1 & 2 are up, so far)! I’ve also started working on a Spotify playlist, if you’re into that sort of thing.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Tensions are brewing in the Royal Court of Jotunheim... or at least, you think that they are. You’ve been stuck in the king’s bedroom all week. But it’s Loki, after all, so the odds are pretty good that chaos is on the horizon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For most of the morning, you’re left all alone in Loki’s room, which is fine by you; your cramps are pretty strong, you feel bloated and miserable, and you really just want to sleep. Sleep and chocolate. Hot chocolate. God, this planet makes you crave hot chocolate. It’s starting to become a real problem.

He isn’t coming back. It would really be best for you to just accept that and try to get on with your day, but you can’t. It would really help if he didn’t act so sweet sometimes; that’s what’s got you really messed up. If he was just terrible across the board, then you could at the very least hate him and be glad that he’s staying away from you.

But, the fact that he spent half of the night rubbing your stomach kind of makes that impossible.

Ass.

You wonder if he just didn’t sleep at all, or if he just has some sort of internal alarm clock that helps him sneak away in the morning before you wake up, sparing him any awkwardness. They both seem equally likely, considering that it’s Loki.

Gjálp stops by for a moment or two to escort you to the bathroom and leave some food for you, but she’s off again almost immediately, and she seems pretty preoccupied. You wonder if maybe tensions are running high in the royal family, now that the former future King of Jotunheim is back in the capital.

When the door scrapes and slides open, you sit up in bed, expecting (hoping) that Loki has decided to come check on you and maybe even snuggle up for a bit.

But it isn’t Loki.

It’s Býleistr.

He saunters into the room, the door sliding closed behind him, and your pulse pounds. How did he get in? Does Loki know…?

At first, he simply looks at you, his head cocked slightly, expressionless. “So,” he says, “In-Unga lives.”

You nod, petrified.

“There were rumors to the contrary.” Some confusion creeps into Býleistr’s eyes, and you realize
that he’s probably smelling you, too.

Great, you think. No wonder giant women hide out when they’re dealing with their periods. You’re starting to think that sounds like a pretty fantastic approach.

Byléistr comes and sits at the foot of the bed. Your heart is in your throat. What the hell is he doing? Loki is going to lose his freaking mind. And why is he here?

“Are you dying?” he says. “I am sure that it would make Lady Skaði happy, if that is the case.”


He frowns. “Then what?”

I am not explaining the intricacies of the human reproductive cycle to another Frost Giant, you think, pulling your blanket up to your chin. “It’s just a human thing. Happens every month, sire.”

“Ah, another mortal weakness, I suppose.”

Yeah, sounds about right.

You don’t know if you’re supposed to say anything, so you just stare back at him as he studies you, wishing he’d just go away and leave you alone. Of course, if you were a little more sure of what was going on in his head, you might have the nerve to ask him how things are going in the throne room; he probably knows better than anyone how Loki and Helblindi are getting along.

“It would be a shame if you were to die,” he finally says. “I doubt that Jotunheim will see another mortal for many years, and I’ve only just begun to study you.” He crosses his legs, resting his chin on his hand. “Of course, if my esteemed brother is to be believed, we will soon be able to traverse the Nine Realms freely again. What do you think of that?”

“It… depends. Sire.”

“What does it depend on, mortal?”

“If you’re planning to go to war, I guess.”

“Hmm. I should like it, I think, if Midgard fell under the rule of Jotunheim. You should hope for this, as well; if you were kept there, you would be much better suited for the elements, wouldn’t you?”

What to say to that? “I want to go home,” you finally respond, “but not if it means my whole planet is going to be enslaved.”

You wonder what he’s thinking; whatever it is, it isn’t showing on his face. “You are not as servile as Loki Laufeyson would have us all believe,” he says. “There are still thoughts of rebellion in you, of escape. Isn’t that so? I did not realize that mortals were so tenacious.”

You open your mouth to respond, then close it again, unable to think of a safe response. Of course I want to rebel, you think. Of course I want to go home. Who wouldn’t?

“I know that the king was with you last night, but I also know that he has largely set you aside. I suppose it is to ease Skaði’s mind. If he does not want you,” Býleistr says, “then I would be happy to accept the burden of your care.”

He stands and moves to the door, and you just sit there, completely dumbfounded.
“You may tell him that I said so,” he adds, and then he’s gone.

*Crap,* you think, sinking back down into your nest of blankets. *What the hell just happened?*

Loki’s eyes are practically glowing when he storms into his bedroom a few hours later, the door slamming open and making you jump. “Býleistr was in my chambers,” he snaps, stalking over to you. “Wasn’t he?”

“Well, yeah,” you answer, too irritated to be as intimidated as you probably ought to be. “It’s kind of your job to keep everyone out of here, isn’t it? What exactly was I supposed to do?”

He takes a deep breath, likely about to launch into some sort of tirade, and then his eyes narrow. When he speaks, his voice is little more than a hiss. “Why does my bed smell of my brother, mortal?”

“Because he sat on the foot of the bed!” you cry, pointing. Loki’s got a look in his eyes that isn’t entirely sane at the moment, and you aren’t sure what to make of it. “Um, hello? Everyone here is a giant, remember? Remember how you said I’m basically supposed to just smile and nod?”

“And did you *smile* for Býleistr?” He leans over you, and you feel a surge of jealous temper flash through you.

“No more than you *smile* for Skaði, you hypocrite.”

Loki bares his teeth. “Careful.”

“By the way, he says he doesn’t mind taking care of me, if you’re *done* with me now.”

“Did he?” His hand is on your neck - there’s no pressure, just a light sort of caress, his thumb stroking the hollow of your throat. The sudden shift in his expression leaves you reeling. “I will have to make it clear that I am not *done* with you, then, won’t I?”

“I—”

He’s kissing you before you have the chance to offer your opinion on the subject, crowding onto the bed and bracing himself over you. You should probably be pissed, but the jealous, increasingly unnerving side of you is gloating, instead. *Take that,* you think, *you big idiot. Can’t stay away, can you?*

Because somehow, you *know* that he can’t - and you don’t want him to, either. Twining your arms around his neck, you pull him closer, you discomfort momentarily forgotten. You bite his lip, and he makes a frustrated little groan, whispering something you don’t understand.

“What was that?”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he says. You aren’t entirely sure if he’s answering your question, or just making an observation, but it only makes you want to be closer to him, and you kiss his chin, running your fingers through his hair.

He lets you pull him down so that his mouth is on your neck, and you feel like you’re catching on fire when his tongue slides against your skin. “Loki,” you whisper. “*Please.*”
You aren’t even sure what you’re asking for, but you just assume that he’ll understand. And maybe he does, because he tears himself away from you immediately, breathing heavily. Loki sits back on his heels, wide-eyed, and you push yourself up, already missing his weight.

“Loki?”

“I think that should suffice,” he says, his hands curling into fists as they rest on his thighs, as if he wants to grab hold of something, but doesn’t think that he should. “You are mine, and all of Jotunheim knows it. If my brother, if anyone tries to interfere, there will be consequences.”

“What, including your eventual wives?”

Loki glares at you, and you realize that that look is still there. “Anyone,” he snaps.

Oh, wonderful. “What do you regret?” you ask, suddenly desperate to know.

“What?”

“You said that you didn’t want to have more regrets, last time. What do you regret? Cozying up with a human?”

His jaw clenches, and you wonder why that would make him angry. “No.”

“Then what?”

“I regret that I’ve given you a reason to think that you care for me,” Loki says, his voice harsh. “I regret that I have allowed you to develop these feelings.”

“Then send me back to Earth,” you demand, pointing an accusing finger at his chest. “Send me back to Earth, because I can’t keep doing this and not feel something, and neither can you.”

“No.”

A strangled cry of outrage escapes you, and you heave a pillow at his head - but of course, he easily avoids it. “Why not?”

“Because I want you here, you stupid creature.”

“Oh, you don’t know what you want,” you retort, “but you better figure it out fast, buddy, because this whole hot-and-cold act is getting really old.”

His eyes narrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. Apparently, I’m a pretty hot commodity, anyway. Jesus, even freakin’ Býleistr is more consistent than you are.” Suddenly on the verge of tears, you curl back up on your side, dragging your blanket up to your chin. “I don’t even feel good. Just leave me alone.”

Doing your very best to ignore his presence, you squeeze your eyes closed, that always-lingering sense of despair closing back in. You’re going to absolutely lose it; how long can you be reasonably expected to deal with this?

You feel him move away, and you’re caught somewhere between relief and disappointment, but then he sits by your side, his hand on your hip. “I want you,” he says after a moment. “I do. But, do you really want to be irrevocably bonded to me in a world where you’re nothing more than a pet? Because that is what is happening, mortal. You can feel it, can’t you? I feel you, and we have yet to even—”
Loki cuts himself off, frustrated, and you open your eyes and peer up at him. “Is that why I’m so angry?”

“I have no idea. It seems to be an insidious sort of influence; it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell where my own temper ends, and yours begins.”

“God,” you breathe, rolling onto your back. “That sucks.”

“If we resist temptation,” he says, “it will fade. I’m sure of it - I refuse to believe that such things are capable of dictating my fate.”

“Got any proof that it will?”

He doesn’t reply.

“I’m… I’m okay with it,” you tell him, resting your hand on his. Is the bond the reason his skin always seems to feel warmer now, too? “I know this whole place is messed up, and I hate that, but it isn’t like you’re forcing me to be your sex slave, or something.” Your cheeks are heating from the awkwardness of it all, but you force yourself to push through. “I genuinely… like you. Sometimes. Isn’t that what matters?”

He sighs. “You shouldn’t. That is what I keep trying to tell you.”

“But you aren’t willing to send me back?”

Loki looks away, and you see the muscles in his jaw tense. He looks back down at you. “No.”

You trail your fingertips along the back of his hand, watching as his eyes flutter closed. “But this isn’t working. So, what are you going to do, Loki?”

There’s a stirring of affection in your chest, and of dread, and you don’t know who it belongs to anymore; maybe it doesn’t even matter.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know.”

Loki ends up spending the next few hours curled up around you, his hand warm on your stomach. Neither of you say a word. What can you really say? You can’t ask him to give up his throne and run away to Earth with you - he’s basically Public Enemy Number One. You can’t ask him to risk losing everything by starting some sort of cultural upheaval, because you don’t think you can bear to hear him refuse. It’s better, you decide, to just enjoy this moment of peacefulness for as long as you can.

You can’t bring yourself to regret biting him, even if the mark and the bond are terrifying and inexplicable. You’re glad for it. He’s yours.

Does he like it? you wonder, suddenly suspicious. Is he the reason I feel so… possessive? Or is it the other way around?

Maybe that doesn’t matter, either.

“I have to go,” he says eventually, his lips against your hair. “I did not plan to linger for this long.”
“I’m that irresistible, huh?”

It’s a weak attempt at humor, but you manage to earn a soft huff of laughter. “Yes,” Loki concedes, pressing his nose against the back of your neck. “Yes, I suppose you are.”

He doesn’t make any grand concession of love, and he doesn’t actually kiss you again, but you’re pretty sure you’ve struck some sort of fatal blow to Loki’s icy composure, because as the week passes, he becomes increasingly attentive. You aren’t sure if it helps or hurts to come to the realization that he’s trying to be gentlemanly - in his own convoluted sort of way. It’s nice to know that he has some qualms when it comes to taking advantage of your position as his ‘pet’... but it also makes him seem even more appealing, somehow.

That’s what makes it so frustrating.

At night, he crawls into bed beside you, and in the morning, he tucks you in as he slips away; you don’t know if he realizes the you wake up every time he leaves, but you do.

It’s becoming harder and harder to imagine sleeping alone in your bed at home.

The twins visit, though they don’t stay for long. They’ll come to escort you to the bathroom, or to bring you more clothes or food, but even then, you can tell that their thoughts are elsewhere.

“How are things going out there?” you ask Greip one afternoon, nearly a week after you’ve returned to the palace. Loki hasn’t been super forthcoming about how the court’s reacted to him being confirmed as king, but you don’t know if it’s because he’s trying not to worry you, or if he just doesn’t feel like talking about it.

“Well enough,” she replies. “The king has been consulting with his court, preparing for the reconstruction of Utgard.”

“He’s rebuilding the city?”

“That is what he claims he will do.” Greip frowns, seemingly lost in thought. “He claims that he can return the Casket of Ancient Winters to Jotunheim. If he does, Utgard will be restored to its former glory.”

“And you don’t think that he can?”

“It was taken by the Asgardians, long ago. I cannot imagine how he intends to recapture it; he does not have enough support to launch a war against Odin.”

“What about things with the princes?”

“They are… tense. Prince Helblindi does not venture often into the throne room, unless the Queen Mother demands it. He is angry that the Norns have denied him a throne, and likely angry that his mother and brother did not stop it, as well. You should be careful of him, In-Unga.”

Seems like solid advice. “Do you think the king is ever going to let me out of here?” you ask, only half-joking. You’re starting to wonder if Loki’s solution to his problems is to just lock you away in a little private sanctuary, accessible only when and if he’s in the mood for you.
“I believe so. It is my understanding that you are here because of your condition, in fact. You would be subject to quite a bit of attention, if you were in the throne room. The king already very nearly came to blows with Prince Býleistr over his curiosity.”

“What?”

Her voice drops. “Perhaps I am not supposed to tell you,” she says, “but Gjálp was with the king in the archives when he summoned Prince Býleistr to him, and she said that he threatened to turn him into a serpent if he ever entered his chambers again uninvited.”

“But—”

“The prince knows better than to argue,” Greip continues. “It was undoubtedly foolish for him to enter the king’s chambers, and to threaten the king’s property. Still, I would agree that Loki Laufeyson has made the right choice in keeping you away from the others for a time. Things are very delicate.”

“Well, my condition is nearly over for now,” you tell her, still vaguely amused at the fact that they still don’t seem entirely convinced that you don’t have some sort of terrible wasting disease. “So, do you think he’ll let me out of here soon? I know it’s scary out there, but I’m going a little crazy in here.”

“Perhaps.”

“Hey, Greip? Is it… with the bite-mark stuff, is it normal to… well, to feel things? Like, feelings that aren’t necessarily yours?”

Her eyes dart immediately to your neck. “And you say that the king has not marked you?” she asks, a worryingly-forced mildness to her tone.

You rest your hand on your golden collar, suddenly self-conscious. “No, of course not.”

“What are these feelings?”

Your embarrassment grows. Maybe you shouldn’t have said anything. “Well, when he’s angry, I’m angry,” you say. “When he’s jealous, I’m jealous. Or maybe it’s the other way around? I can’t tell. I didn’t even realize it was happening.”

“This is most odd, In-Unga. I will admit, bonds such as these are rarely discussed in my clan; they are merely a practicality, you understand? It is known that you will find a connection with your spouse, to better meet their needs. A satisfactory marriage increases the prospect of prosperity and children. But as for the details…” She frowns. “These are the sorts of things that are discussed during the Coming-of-Age ceremony, which I’ve yet to have.”

Great. “Is there like… a book, or something?”

“Even if there is, I doubt that it would be applicable to your situation, mortal. Perhaps you should ask the king if he can remedy this with his magic?”

“Yeah,” you say, defeated. “Maybe I will.”
When Loki comes back to his bedroom that night, you’re wide-awake and waiting for him. He looks startled to find you awake; is it really that late? You push yourself up on your elbows, flooded with relief to be with him again. “Hey.”

“You are feeling better?” He strips off the leather vest that he’s taken to wearing, and you watch in fascination as his skin shifts. *He’s so—*

He says your name, and you realize that you’ve kind of zoned out. *Awkward.*

“Yeah, I’m feeling better.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

It’s kind of nice to see that Loki is capable of being awkward, too.

There’s conflict in his eyes, though, and as he hovers just inside the doorway, you realize that he must’ve been using the fact that you were feeling crappy to excuse coming back to sleep with you every night. And now that he can’t tell himself that it’s a *necessity...*

“I’m *really* cold,” you tell him. “So you should probably hurry up and get in bed, before I freeze.”

“Is that so?”

“Mhmm.” He’s wavering - you’re *sure* of it - and so you hold out your arms. “C’mon, Your Majesty. Even kings need to sleep, y’know.”

Loki sighs, but he climbs into the bed beside you, anyway. “You are a terrible pet,” he says. “Far too *bossy* for my tastes. Why could the Norns not send me an *obedient* woman, at the very least?”

You curl up against his chest. “I hope you realize that you aren’t very convincing.”

“I *was.* You’ve clearly ruined me.” He pets your hair for a minute, and then he seems to realize that you weren’t just kidding about being cold, because you feel his magic melt into your skin, warm and soothing. “We will be going on another journey,” he suddenly says, resuming his petting. “I think that you will like it.”

“Really?” Your stomach knots in anxiety, but Loki, oddly enough, seems pretty calm, and that’s somewhat soothing. “Where are we going?”

“To Asgard,” he says. “The Realm Eternal. The Allfather’s vaults contain something that now belongs to *me.*”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all realize how wonderful you are - the enthusiasm and the community around this little story really keep me going. Thank you all so much!
The cold winds of Jotunheim slice across your cheeks as the open sleigh zips along the frozen rock. If not for the king’s arm wrapped firmly around your waist, you’re pretty sure that you’d have been sent flying several times already; the massive hounds pulling the sleigh don’t really seem to mind if the ride is rough and wild, and neither do any of the giants.

You hadn’t seen much of Loki in the days leading up to the trip to Asgard, so you’re kind of thankful to be back in his arms again, even if it’s only because he’s dragged you back outside on some kind of crazy quest. Really, he hasn’t said much at all about what this particular quest entails, and it’s got you stressed. Peering up at him, you wonder if you should risk asking, but he doesn’t seem like he’s in a very conversational mood, so you just pull your hat down more firmly over your ears and lean back against his chest.

It’s not like it matters, anyway. Wherever he’s going, you’re going.

There are only two other small sleighs racing alongside yours; Gjálp and Greip are on one, and there are two women that you’ve seen sitting on the steps of the dais on the other. No one bothered to introduce you, but they have a look you’re starting to recognize as ‘Forest Giant,’ so you assume they’re also from Fárbauti’s clan.

*Hope they don’t decide to murder us,* you think. The fact that one of them is holding an extremely lengthy spear isn’t doing much good for your nerves.

Loki finally barks something out and yanks on the reins, and the hounds come to a halt, their claws scraping along the ice. You cringe - you still aren’t too sure how you feel about most of the animals on this planet. They tend to have too many claws. And teeth. You still see Mánagarmr’s teeth in your sleep, some nights.

You’re near a cluster of tall, misshapen rock columns, none of which look particularly sturdy, and you eye them suspiciously. The way your luck seems to run, they’ll probably all start collapsing as soon as you step in between them. *Not today, rocks,* you think, huddling in the sleigh as Loki leaps out and starts speaking to spear-lady.

A few minutes later, he returns, holding his hand out. “Come along, mortal,” he says, a hint of a smile in his eyes, like he knows what you’re thinking and has decided that it’s ridiculous.

You let him pull you down onto the frozen ground, but you’re frowning as you take in more of your surroundings… or rather, the lack of surroundings. Other than the pillars, there’s not much around. “Come along *where?*” you whisper. “There’s nothing here.”

“Nothing that you can see, or that they can see, but that does not necessarily mean that nothing is
Spear-lady and her friend are watching you closely, so you fight the urge to roll your eyes. *Whatever, Loki,* you think. *I guess it would kill you to actually answer a question, for once.*

He pulls a pack off of the back of the sleigh and drops it into your arms, and you struggle to get it onto your back; the thick, stiff layers of your coat don’t make it easy, and neither does its weight. “You won’t have to carry that for very long,” he says softly, bending to straighten one of the straps on your shoulder. “I will take it as soon as we’re out of sight.”

You blush, nodding. Okay, so *maybe* you could get used to Loki acting like a decent person from time to time.

“Come.” Hand on your shoulder, he steers you forward, making sure to keep between you and the hounds, who are all watching you with expressions that are *worryingly* hungry. “Move quickly; I have no desire to be out in the wind any longer than necessary.”

*Neither do I.*

“Wait, sire!” Greip calls out, hurrying after you. “May I give In-Unga something, sire?”

“I suppose,” he replies, surprise evident on his face. “Within reason.”

She nods, offering him a pendant dangling from a bright red string.

Loki takes it, his brow raised. “No enchantments, I assume?”

“No, sire.”

“Very well.” He drapes it over your neck, and you twist the diamond-shaped wooden pendant around to look at it, completely baffled. It looks a little bit like a maze, you guess, though you can’t imagine what the significance of that might be.

“Safest of travels, Your Majesty,” Greip says, her head slightly bowed; it’s a pretty interesting effect, considering that she’s still a good bit taller than Loki, even when she’s stooped over.

He actually smiles, though it seems like it’s mostly out of confusion. “Thank you, Greip. And you will keep an eye on that seiðberandi for me, won’t you?”

Her lavender blush flares to life, and you have to cough to hide your laugh. “Of course, sire,” she says, and then she hurries to tend to the hounds.

Snickering, Loki guides you off into the rocks. Once you’re pretty sure you’re far enough away that the wind will drown out anything you say, you whisper, “You *really* love making people uncomfortable, don’t you?”

“Perhaps they should do better to hide their secrets from me, then. A wise man uses what he knows.”

It sounds like he’s quoting someone, and you lean heavily into his side as your boots slip along the slick rock. “Who taught you that?”

There’s a small pause, and you glance up at him. Loki’s staring straight ahead, his eyes slightly narrowed. “The King of Asgard,” he finally replies, a sort of bitter, mocking twist to his words. “A very, very long time ago.”

*Oh. Probably best to let that topic go,* you decide. “So, I take it that this isn’t going to be an *official*
visit?"

“No,” Loki says, “of course not. I have no intention of letting Odin find out that I still live until the
Casket is in my possession, and we are safely returned to Jotunheim. Here, let me have that.” He
stops for a moment and pulls the pack off of your back, easily slinging it over his own shoulder like it
doesn’t weigh anything.

“We’re sneaking in?”

“Yes. I am very adept at stealth, you know. Besides, that is why I kept you, in the first place.”

“Wait, what?”

“I told you that the only reason I kept you alive was because I could make use of you, do you not
recall? Mortals are very mundane; they have little energy, for lack of a better term. I can displace my
power onto you, and it helps to mask my full strength.”

“I don’t… I don’t get how that works.”

Loki scoffs. “You don’t have to understand how it works, mortal. The point is that it does.”

You walk along in silence for a few minutes more, the spaces between the columns becoming
increasingly narrow.

“Imagine you have a sheet of cloth,” he suddenly says, spreading his hands out in front of him. A
glowing, semi-transparent golden square appears in front of you, and you jump in surprise. “This—”
he conjures up a glittering green ball of light “—is the weight of my life-force, my power.” He drops
the ball of light onto the square, and it ripples and dips. “Do you see this pressure? This strain on the
fabric?”

You nod, fascinated.

“This is a very distinct imprint; there are few sorcerers in the Nine with this much force, little mortal,
and I can assure you that Heimdall keeps a sharp eye out for each and every one of them.”

“This Heimdall guy… this is what he sees?”

“Well, it is the easiest way for me to illustrate it for you; you must remember that we are gods.
Things are not always exactly the same. We process the world in different ways.”


He waves a finger, and green ball of light splits in two and roll apart. “See? They are smaller, and the
pressure is lessened.”

“That kinda makes sense, I guess. Maybe.”

“One is me,” Loki tells you, pointing at the brighter of the two, “and one is you. But then, neither
match the total strength of my magic, and so neither of us should raise the alarms.”

“So… okay. So, there’s like a power-sensor shield, basically, and a single super-magical person like
you suddenly jumping through it will pretty much announce to Heimdall that you’re probably alive
and kicking?”

“Something like that.”
“Oh.” You try to poke the glowing little ball of light that represents you, but your finger passes straight through it. “Why can’t I feel your magic inside me, then, if I’m carrying so much of it?”

Loki’s lip quirks. “That isn’t exactly how it works. Besides, you can feel it, can’t you? You wouldn’t even be able to move without it, not in these conditions. My power is what feeds the charms that keep you from freezing to death.”

You turn back to him as he waves the illusion away, your mind spinning. “Do you mean that I’ve been carrying half of your magic ever since you found me?”

“Yes.” He grins. “Clever, isn’t it? I used to do this with Thor, when we snuck away to go hunting on other realms. Heimdall was always difficult to evade, but I’ve grown rather good at it over the centuries.” Taking your arm, he begins to guide you forward again. “Let us move on; you are beginning to tremble.”

He’s been using you as a cistern for his magical power… your heart falls just a bit. Well, that explains why he doesn’t want me to go back to Earth, you think. Not because he really wants me - it’s because it’s easier for him to sneak around without the Asgardian police catching him.

And, since he’s said that he doesn’t mind if the rest of the realms know that he’s alive once he has the Casket of Ancient Winters back on Jotunheim, does that mean that he won’t care whether or not you stick around after that, too? You should be excited by this realization; if he doesn’t actually need you around, maybe you can convince him to send you through the next portal bound for Earth.

But you don’t feel excited - you feel dread.

Maybe that’s why he’s being so nice. Suspicion trickles through your veins, sharp and biting. Maybe he’s being kind of sweet now, because he feels guilty that he’s planning to toss you aside and run off with Skaði as soon as you get back—

Loki’s grip tightens on your arm, cutting off your wildly-spiraling train of thought. “That is all you,” he whispers. “I can tell, this time. What is it that you are thinking of right now, girl?”

You’re flooded with embarrassment. “Nothing.”

“It is never ‘nothing.’”

“Do you really think that it will be okay leaving the queen in charge?” you ask, eager to change the subject. “Especially with Helblindi back in town?”

“Yes. The reward is worth the risk for Fárbauti and the rest of Jotunheim, if I am truly able to restore the Casket. She will keep her sons in line, and if she does not, I will hear of it. Your little Forest Twins will report any problems directly to me.”

“Why do you call them that? My twins?”

“Because, In-Unga,” Loki says, “I have no doubt that they are more loyal to you than they are to me, and I find it terribly amusing.”

“Hmm.” Honestly, knowing Loki, it’s kind of surprising that he finds that funny; you’d expect the idea of people liking a mortal more than him to piss him off. “Oh, what is this pendant for, by the way? All these lines… is it a maze?”

“No, it is a tree - Yggdrasil, in fact. It is a token to keep you safe on your travels through the Nine. Very touching.” His voice drips disdain. “Yet they mock true magics.”
“Oh.” You hold it in the palm of your hand, examining the brightly-colored threads that seem to be haphazardly woven through the branches of the tree. “And the thread?”

“Threads of fate.” Loki slides his arm around your waist as you slip and nearly topple over, and you feel an instant thrum of warmth, a desire to be closer... “You really should mind your feet, rather than your jewelry; I shall be extremely irritated with you if you manage to break your neck.”

“They actually like me, don’t they?” Even after the careful way they’ve looked out for you so far, it’s still a little overwhelming to think that they really care if you make it back in one piece; it makes you feel more important, more like a person.

Loki looks almost surprised. “Of course they do,” he says. “I would not leave you with them, if they did not. Here we are.” He squeezes into a narrow crevice between two of the columns, one that you’re surprised he’s even able to fit himself into, and then he drags you into the darkness behind him.

You expect something like the cave-tunnel that you’d wound up in when you first arrived on Jotunheim, endlessly winding and dark. You’ve braced yourself for a long, exhausting journey - but as soon as you’re fully inside the crevice, you realize that it’s really, really small.

*Claustrophobic.* Your chest starts to squeeze. “Loki?”

“It’s alright,” he soothes, and his hand drops from your arm, his fingers suddenly twining with yours. “Only a few steps here, and then you might feel something strange. Keep your eyes closed. I won’t let go.”

“How strange?” you start to ask, but then there’s suddenly nothing below your feet, and you silently scream as you plummet through space, the air torn from your lungs.

Your knees nearly buckle when they hit something solid again, though the landing is a lot more gentle than you might’ve expected. Loki doesn’t seem to mind that you’ve completely wrapped yourself around him, half-expecting the floor to disappear as soon as you take another step.

“Still in one piece, mortal?”

“More or less,” you wheeze. “I think I might’ve left my stomach behind, though.”

Loki laughs. “Only one more jump, and then we’ll be in Asgard. After that, it will only take a few hours to walk to the city, and I know a dozen different secret passages into the palace.”

“Another jump? Oh, God.” Your heart is racing; how can he stand falling like that all the time - it doesn’t seem like it bothered him at all. “Give me two seconds.”

Surprisingly, he nods.

A few deep breaths help to steady your spinning head, which you still have pressed firmly against his chest. “So, what are the odds that we’re gonna get caught sneaking into the palace and executed, or something?”

“If we were to be caught, you’ll be delighted to know that the only one at risk for execution is me; the Allfather would likely send you straight back to Midgard. He doesn’t think too highly of mortals traipsing about the Realm Eternal, I’m afraid.”

“Wait, really? If we get caught, I get to go home?”
Even in the dark, you can see his eyes glittering. “Yes,” he says. “That is the most likely outcome. But I will die a gruesome death, and so I trust that you will make no attempt to sabotage me.”

_He trusts me?_ You feel that increasingly-familiar warmth blooming in your chest, and your terror from the fall begins to melt away.

“Time for the next step,” Loki announces, and then you’re falling again; this time, you don’t have a chance to close your eyes, and you catch sight of random swirls of purple and pink light flashing by in the darkness. _Trippy._

It takes longer this time for your feet to connect with something solid again, and if you were able to take a breath, you’d probably be shrieking profanities into Loki’s tunic; maybe it’s for the best that you can’t take a breath, then, because that would probably get on his nerves.

You don’t really want to get on the nerves of the guy who’s teleporting you through secret tunnels in space.

The rocky cave that you land in is mostly dark, but Loki holds out a hand, and one of his glowing orbs of light appears and floats along in front of you, casting shadows along the cave wall. The rock, you note, is more brown than blue, and there’s water dripping along the rough walls… which means that it isn’t freezing.

You take a breath, finally, and pull back your hood. No, it isn’t freezing; in fact, it’s barely even chilly, especially with all of the layers you’re wearing. After so many weeks spent on Jotunheim, it’s kind of a shock to your system.

“Well, mortal,” Loki says, prying your arms from around his waist, “welcome to Asgard.”

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He leads you through the tunnels for some time, and eventually you emerge into some sort of densely-wooded forest, filled with strange-looking evergreen trees that aren’t quite exactly the same as anything you’ve ever encountered on Earth. For one thing, they’re _a lot_ bigger.

Loki has changed his face and his outfit, though you can still make out a lot of his facial features. He’s given himself a beard and curly, sandy-colored hair, and it’s extremely _weird._ “Your form is fine,” he tells you. “No one will recognize you, obviously, but we will have to do something about your clothing.”

A wave of his hand, and you’re in some sort of light-brown, long-sleeved gown. “This is really weird,” you tell him. “I can still feel all of my actual clothes.”

“It does take some getting used to, I’ll admit. We’ll get you something real to wear once we’re in the palace.”

You pluck at the fabric, trying to wrap your mind around the fact that it isn’t really there. _Maybe this is how people go crazy,_ you think. “Who are we supposed to be?”

“Servants,” he says, re-shouldering the pack and taking your hand once again. “No one ever pays any attention to the servants.”

Loki walks like a man with a purpose, and you have a hard time keeping up; you’re pretty sure that
he’s forcing himself to go a little slower than he’d like, because he seems pretty impatient, even though he’s keeping a pace that you can (barely) manage.

Eventually, the forest thins, and you stand and gawp at the shining, towering buildings of the capital city of Asgard, glinting golden in the afternoon light. From the low hill where you stand, you can make out the faintest edges of what appears to be water, and beyond that…

Beyond that, there are only stars.

“Loki,” you whisper, “it’s…”

He’s watching you from the corner of his eye, an odd sort of look on his face. “I thought that you would like it,” he says simply, and then he starts down the hill to the dirt road that curls towards the city walls.

You take a side path once you near the city, squeezing in a small, heavily-trafficked gate that’s watched over by a few tall men in gleaming armor. As soon as you see them, you feel a bubble of panic begin to rise, but Loki breezes past with only the slightest nod of acknowledgement.

“Act as though you know the business that you’re about,” he tells you, “and you’ll almost never be stopped and questioned. It is hesitancy that ruins a disguise. Remember that; always show confidence, mortal, no matter what you truly feel.”

The streets of Asgard are narrow and crowded, and you seem to be in some sort of working-class area, because everyone looks pretty preoccupied with getting to wherever they need to go. Your grip on Loki’s hand tightens; if you get swept off into the crowd, you don’t know if you’d be able to find him again.

Loki sees you taking it all in, your discomfort at the crowds. “The palace was attacked during the Convergence, the same event that led you to me. Workers have come from all over the realm, I’d expect, to assist with the repairs; it is far more hectic than usual, and it will make it easier for us to go unnoticed in the chaos.”

“Oh,” you whisper. “Okay.”

Your heart is in your throat when he simply waltzes in through one of the large open entryways situated underneath a large staircase on the outer edge of the palace walls; you assume it must be a servants’ entrance, because everyone else you see is wearing similarly-drab clothing. There are more soldiers lingering here, as well, but Loki simply nods at them, and they nod back.

It’s almost a shock when they don’t suddenly reach out and grab you, or start sounding some kind of alarm. And you’ve clearly lost it, part of your mind whispers to you, because you should be the one sounding the alarm. Remember Earth? Remember home?

But you don’t want to go home, if it means that Loki will be tortured and killed. The thought of something happening to him makes you feel ill, and you wonder if he feels the same way about you, now that you’ve got the partial-bond going on. Maybe. Maybe you’re just actually falling for him, crazy magical mate-marks aside.

That’s a terrifying option to consider.

At the pace he’s keeping, you don’t have much time to take it all in, but the best word you can think of to describe the palace of Asgard is ‘grand.’ The halls are wide and open to balconies and courtyards, there are torches along the walls, and polished gold decorates many of the doorways and columns. It’s beautiful, but a different sort of beauty from the palace of Utgard.
This is where he grew up, you think, marveling at yet-another massive tapestry hung along one of the walls. And then your eyes widen, because the next tapestry you spy actually has him in it, a gigantic eagle-looking thing on his arm. You turn to ask him about it, but he’s got his eyes fixed straight ahead, and the words die on your lips.

“Don’t gawp,” he hisses. “You work here, remember?”

“Sorry.”

A few turns later, and Loki suddenly ducks into what - at first glance - appears to be some sort of closet, pulling the door closed behind you. Dust stirs, and you try not to sneeze. “I like to think that this passageway was created by some prince, long ago, who wished to tryst with a chambermaid,” Loki says, pushing some broom handles aside and tapping on one of the stones behind them. “Or something else suitably scandalous.”

The shelf beside you shudders, then swings inward, and Loki drags you into the tunnel beyond it before you have time to really process the fact that you’re sneaking around in ancient passageways in an alien palace.

Your sneeze escapes.

There’s no light in the tunnel, and it seems like Loki doesn’t need one, so you just do your best to stumble along behind him, grateful that he’s still holding your hand. You aren’t a huge fan of the dusty, dark tunnels and falling through wormholes, but the handholding? That’s something you could get used to.

He comes to an abrupt halt, then holds out a hand, his fingers flickering with a golden light. He presses it against a wooden doorway where the tunnels ends, and there’s a faint whirring sound, then it slowly swings open, slightly groaning on its hinges.

Loki frowns. “I suppose it’s been some time since I used this,” he says. “Fortunately, my chambers are soundproofed and warded, even now. A shrine to better times, I suppose.”

The room is dark at first, save for the faint glow dancing on his open palm, and you squint into the shadows, wondering what sort of sharp, austere place Loki of Asgard once called home.

But then a fire lights in the hearth on the far wall, lending the room a gentle glow, and you find that it isn’t at all what you’d expected. There’s a lot of dark, polished wood, plush couches ringing the hearth and bookshelves that reach nearly to the ceiling. Thick, heavy curtains hang on either side of the fireplace; judging by their size, you can only assume that the windows behind them must be absolutely massive. There are doors on either side of the room, equally imposing, equally polished.

Really, you’re a little shocked by just how cozy it seems. “This is your room?”

“Yes.” His voice is quiet, and maybe even a little strained, and you feel a painful sort of longing twinge in your chest.

You squeeze his hand. “Gonna give me the grand tour, Your Majesty?”

That seems to break him from his trance, and he turns to survey the room. “I suppose,” he says. “This is my private sitting room, as you can see.” He points to the door on the left. “That leads to my audience chamber, where I meet with guests. Or met, I suppose. It’s all long-past, now. The other door leads to my bedchamber and bath.”

“Pretty roomy,” you remark. It’s a massive understatement, but the whole atmosphere is pretty damn
awkward, so you don’t really know what else to say.

“It looks completely undisturbed. I’d thought... Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m going to perform reconnaissance, and to gather some supplies. You’ll stay here; it won’t do to have you wandering the halls like some sort of little lost lamb.”

“Sounds good to me.” When you flop down on one of the couches, a cloud of dust erupts from the cushion, and you sneeze again. “How long has it been since you were in here?”

“Over two years.” Loki crouches in front of you, his finger pointed sternly at your face. “Cause me no trouble while I am gone, mortal, understood? You may venture into the bath, if you wish, but that is the limit to your freedom. Remember that these are the chambers of a sorcerer.”

“So, I shouldn’t pick up any cursed amulets off the shelves or anything. Got it.”

“You tease,” he says, “because you do not understand that it is a very real possibility.”

The blood drains from your face. “Really?”

“Yes.” He stands and heads for the door that apparently leads to his audience chamber. “I should not be gone long, but if something absurd happens and you are discovered, try wailing about being a poor, innocent mortal. That should work wonderfully.”

“Great,” you call after him, your voice dripping sarcasm, “thanks.”

“You are most welcome, mortal.”

You’re pretty sure you hear the door locking once he’s gone, and you huff in annoyance. Of course. He better not get caught, because the odds of someone finding you in here if Loki disappears seem pretty slim, and being entombed in his royal bedroom seems like a pretty grim way to go.

Curious about the passage, you go examine the bookshelf that you know conceals the doorway, but it’s firmly back in place, and you’re scared to try to touch it. It seemed like Loki had to use some kind of magic to open it, and besides that, it’s probably insanely heavy.

But then... Loki’s got his magic displaced onto you, right? And when he charms you, that’s the magic that feeds the spells, which means that it’s still accessible whenever he needs it; you wonder suddenly if there’s any way that you could harness it. It’s probably a crazy idea, but there’s no one around to laugh at you if it doesn’t work, so you hold out your hand just like he’d done. What are you supposed to focus on?

You think of all of the movies you’ve seen, the books you’ve read. Feel the Force, Luke, you tell yourself, and then you sigh, because you can’t feel much of anything other than a slight sense of anxiety. Your hand drops.

I guess I’ll do something reasonable instead, like taking a bath. Honestly, taking a solo bath sounds like a pretty incredible prospect, especially since you won’t have to worry about any giants randomly stopping by to have a chat with the king while you’re both naked.

There’s a tiny hallway that leads to his bedroom and bathroom, and you decide to leave the bedroom for later; it seems a little intrusive to just waltz in there and settle in, especially since the man himself hasn’t even been in there in years. When you step into the bathroom, you nearly sob, because it looks blessedly earthly. Fancier, maybe, but that toilet definitely looks more like a toilet than anything you’ve seen on Jotunheim, and there’s even a fairly regular-looking marble sink counter.
The door latches behind you, but you can’t figure out how to get it to lock, so you go ahead and start stripping down, staring at yourself in the mirror. There are mirrors in the palace of Utgard, sure, but it isn’t like you’ve really gotten to take a good look at your whole body since you’ve been there. For one thing, you’re pretty much always wearing at least three or four layers, except when you’re in the steam-baths.

You’ve lost some weight. It isn’t really shocking, and you haven’t been starving or anything, but you figure the strain from the climate must’ve been burning through more calories than you’d realized. ‘Try this one neat diet trick!’ you think, poking at your arms. ‘Scientists hate it!’

Loki didn’t say anything about not touching things in the bathroom, so you dig through his cabinets. You’re kind of afraid to uncork some of the glass bottles, but you figure they’re probably either some sort of soap or perfume, and after taking a couple of experimental whiffs, you think you identify one that’ll work okay on your hair. It smells kind of like flowers and summertime, and you’re a little surprised that he has it; it doesn’t exactly seem like his style.

After some more rummaging, you also find what appears to be some sort of razor, and you ponder a moment or two over that, because you can’t imagine why Loki would need it, either. Now that you think about it, you’ve never seen him with even the faintest hint of stubble; is that a giant thing? There’s an uncomfortable second where you consider the possibility that he’s had mistresses living in his rooms before, or something, and you feel your temper start to churn, even though you know it shouldn’t; you try to quell it immediately, in case he can feel it.

The guy has been fully-grown since the time of the Vikings, you tell yourself. Mulling over his previous relationships is probably not a path you wanna go down. But you do feel a sudden determination to impress him, either way, and so you decide that you’re just gonna have to make do with this slightly-intimidating straight razor and hope for the best.

I’m gonna get all silky-smooth and fresh, and even if Loki isn’t impressed, I’m going to sleep like a queen tonight.

His bathtub is unreasonably large and also made of marble, and you’re a little surprised by how easy it is to get the water flowing, though you have to spend a few minutes twisting different little knobs to figure out where the hot water is. You splash water around and rinse some of the dust away, then fill the tub, combing through your hair as you wait.

This is surreal.

Somehow, the idea that you’re in the palace of the Norse gods from ancient mythology is almost crazier than the fact that you’ve spent the past month as a pet on a planet full of giant ice-aliens. Like… this is where Odin is from. Thor. What if Thor is here right now, actually? He’d definitely take you back home, considering the fact that he seems really fond of humans… but then, there’s Loki to consider.

Weird as it may be, you want Loki to be King of Jotunheim. You think that he might even be good at it. And kingliness aside, you definitely don’t want to risk getting him thrown into prison, or worse.

No, you’re just going to accept the fact that your fate is tied to his now, until he decides he’s done with you and decides to send you away. Considering the fact that you’re pretty sure you’re starting to fall pretty hard for him, you kind of figure you might as well try to enjoy whatever time you have left with him.

Man, you think, my priorities are so messed up.
Shaving actually goes better than you expected; you nick yourself with the blade once or twice, but it’s honestly a pretty impressive job, all things considered. The flowery stuff lathers well in your hair, and you’re feeling pretty proud of yourself when there’s a tap on the door, and then Loki barges in without waiting for you to respond.

“Luxuriating, are we?”

You’re glad to see that his normal face is back; you weren’t a huge fan of the servant disguise. “Mhmm. How was your pilfering?”

“Extremely successful.” His eyes are very intently fixed on your face, and the fact that you can tell that he’s *trying* not to catch a glimpse of the rest of you below the water just serves to make you even more aware of it.

You cross your arms over your chest, flushing.

Loki tosses a heap of cloth onto the counter. “For you,” he says. “If you’d like to play at being a goddess for a night. Or you can stay in your clothing from Jotunheim, if you prefer; I assumed you might overheat.”

“Oh.” You sink a little lower into the water, because his gaze has dropped to your neck. “Thanks, Loki.”

“If I’d had any sense, I’d’ve bespelled that collar to shock you every time you fail to address me properly, wench.”

“Yeah, well if *I* was magic, I’d put a spell on you that shocks you every time you call me something besides my *actual name.*”

He laughs, and he seems a little startled by it. “Finish your bath,” he says, pulling the door closed. “Then, we will eat.”

You’d been halfway-expecting him to decide to join you, and you’re embarrassed to find that you’re almost a little disappointed that he didn’t. *Oh, well.* At least it’s more peaceful this way. Peacefulness is pretty wonderful.

Once you’ve emerged and toweled off, you discover that the heap of cloth Loki left on the counter is, in fact, a very thin, floor-length gown. It’s a pretty shade of rose-blush, and the sleeves are loose and flutter open at the shoulder. *Very dainty,* you decide, daring to twirl in front of the mirror, smiling at the way the skirt flourishes.

It’s also a little shapeless, but you don’t have a belt, and it seems like it was probably made for someone taller and more statuesque. Or maybe that’s just the Asgardian style? Either way, it’s nice to *not* be bundled up. You decide not to bother with a bra, either; might as well enjoy not needing every available scrap of cloth to stay warm, while you can.

*Here goes nothing,* you think, and then you push open the door and head off to join the king.

Loki is staring at your chest.
He’s not doing a very good job of hiding it, as dinner drags on, and you’re caught somewhere between mortified and extremely flattered. Still, it’s kind of making you feel powerful, and you subtly lean back in your seat, pretending you don’t notice.

You’re turning into a pretty good actress, after all.

“How long are we staying, again?”

He takes a bite of an apple - you’ve been very happy to discover that Asgard has plenty of fresh fruit - and his gaze flickers to the fire, then back to your face. “Only this night and the morning. Once I’ve stolen the Casket from Odin’s vaults, we’ll need to slip away to Jotunheim at once. The longer we are here, the more we risk discovery.”

“Makes sense. I wish we could stay here for longer, though. It’s definitely more comfortable.”

“That is more of a long-term goal,” he says. “You are enjoying yourself?”

“Mhmm. I mean, I’m kind of scared that things will go wrong, but no more than I have been the past month, you know? I guess I’m starting to get used to constant danger. Speaking of,” you say, drumming your fingers on the thin golden collar around your neck, “considering how there’s no one around to challenge your property rights, any chance of this coming off for the night?”

“No,” Loki replies, his voice slightly hoarse. “That stays where it is.”

There’s a funny feeling low in your stomach, and you bite your lip, suddenly self-conscious. “Okay. Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

“We will need to be up before daylight, and you will be coming with me to the vault. Norns help me, but I am going to use you to keep watch while I take the Casket; we must be prepared to flee immediately. Understood?”

You nod. “Are you going to give me like… a knife, or something? Show me how to take someone out, just in case?”

“The thought of you attempting to menace an Einherjar is laughable,” he says. “Absolutely not. And don’t pout; you’d be skewered in an instant.”

“That makes me feel a lot better, thanks.”

“You’ve been increasingly mouthy on this trip, pet. Be careful that the attitude does not accompany you back to Jotunheim.” His eyes seem like they’re getting a little bit darker; you wonder if it’s just a trick of the firelight.

“Sorry, sire.” Licking the remnants of some peach syrup from your fingers, you stand and stretch, yawning. “You wanna go to bed now, since we’ve got kingdoms to topple in the morning?”

Loki’s looking at the fire again, and you could swear you see a hint of red in his eyes. Your heart is pounding, and you wonder if his is, too, because you notice then that his fingers are curled around the armrests of his chair. “You go ahead. I’ll join you in a moment.”

Apprehensive, but not entirely certain why, you quietly pad off to the bedroom.
Well, glory be, you think as you stand just inside his bedroom door, slightly dumbfounded. Loki’s bed is a freaking longship. Or at least, it’s a stylized version of one; it’s also pretty massive and soft, a far cry from the piles of cushions and furs that you’ve gotten used to nesting down in over the past few weeks. You shake off the top blanket, but it isn’t terribly dusty, and when you clamber into the bed, you instantly decide that your little spa-session in the bathroom was an excellent idea; the sheets feel like silk against your skin.

You’re too tense to fall asleep, even though it’s extremely comfortable, and you start a little when the door finally opens and Loki makes his appearance. He’s about to climb into bed fully-clothed, and you look at him like he’s lost his mind. “You aren’t going to sleep in all of that, are you?”

If you didn’t know any better, you’d say that he seems almost embarrassed that you noticed, and he stiffly stands and peels off his jacket and tunic, then sits on the edge of the bed and takes off his socks. It’s kind of cute. You could get used to Loki looking like the awkward one, for a change.

In the dim light seeping through the cracks in the curtains, you can barely make out the mark on his neck, slightly shiny against his fair skin. Your mouth goes dry, and you roll on your side to face him as he slides under the covers. “This is a really cool bed,” you say, and then you cringe. Way to be seductive.

“Dreams are an ocean, and this ship was made especially for me - to carry me safely through them. At least, that is what my mother used to tell me, when I was very small.” He turns slightly towards you, his hands folded behind his head, and you notice that his eyes are just as dark as they’d been by the fire. “Nonsense, I suppose, but the sort of nonsense that mothers enjoy telling their children.”

“I think that it’s really sweet.”

Loki sighs; you guess that’s all the acknowledgement you’re going to get, but it still kind of feels like progress, considering the subject matter. “You really should sleep.”

“Okay,” you whisper, but you can’t stand the tension for a second longer, and he’s honestly kind of beautiful with the thin streaks of moonlight spilling across his frame, and so you push yourself up on your elbow and lean over to kiss him.

As soon as your lips touch his, he freezes, still as marble, and your heart feels like it’s about to beat through your chest. Then his fingers rake through your hair, and he’s pulling you back - but only slightly. When he says your name, his voice is so soft that, if you hadn’t been watching his mouth, you might’ve missed it.

“I cannot give you what you need,” he says with slightly more force, and there’s something like regret in his eyes. “I am not a caring sort of creature, and you shouldn’t think that I am.”

Your fingers find the bite mark, and as his eyes flutter closed, you are overcome with a sudden, powerful urge to sink your teeth into his skin again, to taste him, to burn…

“Whatever you are,” you manage to say, your voice rough, “I like it.”

Loki lets out a soft breath, one of resignation, and then he drags you back down to him, crushing his lips to yours; he’s every bit as rough as that very first time, and you like that, too. His hands run down your neck, your shoulders, your arms.... He grabs your waist and rolls you onto your back, and you only have a second to feel nervous about the fact that one of the shoulders of your gown has slipped before his mouth is there, too, his fingers bunching up the long, soft skirt of your gown, his palm sliding against your thigh.
He’s *everywhere*, and it’s still not enough, and the world feels like it’s spinning.

When he pulls away suddenly, you whine in disappointment. There’s a look of frustration on his face, and he’s practically panting. So are you, you realize. *Oops. Must’ve forgotten to breathe.*

“What’s wrong?” you ask, giving very serious consideration to the possibility of actually trying to *wrestle* him back into another kiss.

“I want…” He gestures down at you, his brow furrowing, like you’re somehow supposed to understand.

“What?” Impatient, you twine your fingers in his hair, trying to draw him closer.

“Everything,” he whispers, his hand cupping your breast. “I want everything.”

You weren’t expecting it, but it’s wonderful, and you arch against him, practically purring in delight as he lowers himself to your neck, kissing and sucking a path from just below your ear down to your collarbone.

He grinds against you, and your veins are burning. Your hand returns to his neck, and Loki groans. “Don’t,” he whispers against your skin. “I am trying—”

But something inside of you snaps, then, a flare of possessive lust churning through your blood, and you yank his hair, catching him off guard and baring his neck. *Mine,* you think, and your mouth closes over the mark that you shouldn’t have been able to put there in the first place.

And when Loki pushes you back down and snarls, a very animalistic, rough sort of sound that *should* terrify you, you’re flooded with smug satisfaction, instead. He jerks your underwear away, so hard that it tears, so hard that it hurts, and his fingers press between your thighs. *Finally,* some part of you rejoices, closing your eyes as an electric sort of pressure builds across your skin. *Finally.*

And when his teeth close on your neck, you see stars. Maybe you *are* a star; you feel like you’re on fire, burning bright and chaotic. There’s a part of you that dimly wonders if it’s supposed to feel like this, but then his fingers are inside of you, and the rest of your thoughts melt away.

“Loki,” you breathe, holding him closer, *closer* - any space between you is too much, and you’re almost *furious* at the fact that you’re still in your gown. His teeth tighten, his touch roughens, and you dig your fingers into his skin, so close to *something*—

And then it’s *overwhelming,* and as that elusive *something* builds and crests, your world sparks and goes white.

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Chapter End Notes

FrostbiteFridays!! <3 This is a long chapter, and I was too excited to post, so please forgive any mistakes. Your wonderful comments give me LIFE, thank you all so, SO very much!!
You’re pretty sure you’re dead, and the funny thing is, you don’t even mind that much.

Somewhere far, far away, you think you hear an angel calling your name. Your angel sounds kind of worried. *It’s Loki,* you realize, and you smile. *Maybe more like a demon, then.*

When you open your eyes, he’s right there in front of you, his irises a deep crimson. “Did you faint?” he asks, seemingly horrified.

“Hmm.” You twine your arms around his neck, wondering why in the world he seems so freaked out, while you feel like you’re floating. “If I did, it was worth it.”

Loki’s hand wraps around the base of your neck, and you shudder and curve against him, the need buzzing across your skin instantly flaring back to full force. He’s searching your face, and you’re struck with the sudden, sure realization that the emotion in his eyes is guilt.

“Forgive me,” he rasps. “Forgive me for what I have—”

Cutting him off with a kiss seems like a pretty solid idea in your current state of post-euphoric bliss, and so that’s what you do. His grip on your neck tightens, and if you were a little more aware, you might be embarrassed by the sound that you make in response.

*God, he tastes good.* That’s currently the only thing going on inside your head, occasionally interrupted by, *God, he feels good.*

You feel turmoil building inside of you, though, and since it sure as hell isn’t yours, it’s got to be his. This whole ‘noble’ thing is starting to wear your patience thin, and driven solely by the overwhelming need to make him feel just as desperate as you, you reach down and shamelessly grope him.

Loki hisses against your lips and jerks slightly, and it’s almost like it gives you some strange sort of confidence, this power over him, driving you onward. “Let me touch you,” you whisper, tugging at the waist of his pants; you can’t figure out how to unfasten them one-handed, and it’s painfully frustrating. You’re starting to feel almost vicious. “I’m *Loki’s woman,* remember?”

The noise that escapes his throat then is more akin to a *whine;* your blood burns, exultant.

“*Please, Loki.*”

He rolls onto his back with no further prompting, grabbing your hand and pressing it against himself. For a second, you almost hesitate. *What now?* some part of you wonders, but a much louder part screams for you to figure it out as you go.

Getting him out of his pants seems like a good start. Loki’s eyes are wild, and you run your fingers down his bare chest as you lean over him, watching in fascination as his muscles tense and ripple. *Beautiful,* you think. *Mine.*

Asgardian pants have *way* too many buttons, and by the time your trembling fingers manage to unfasten them, you’re pretty sure you’re both about to die of anticipation. He’s hot and heavy in your
hand, and his head falls back against his pillows, eyes wide.

“Kiss me,” he says, fisting his hand in your hair. “Just kiss me, please.”

With a king begging you, how could you possibly refuse?

His hand wraps around yours, guiding you; he groans again as your tongue delves into his mouth, and you hook your leg around his, desperate for more contact. “So warm,” he whispers, nipping your chin, your neck… Loki rolls his hips, his breathing becoming increasingly ragged, his brow furrowed in concentration.

You cry out when he does, so caught up in the excitement and the feeling of it that it takes a moment for you to realize what you’ve done, and Loki is peppering kisses down your cheek as he crushes you to his chest, muscles trembling.

“Was that… good?” you ask after a moment or two of breathless exhilaration, pushing yourself up onto your elbow. You don’t know why you feel so anxious, considering the extremely-satisfied, slightly-dazed look in Loki’s eyes. But, this is the farthest you’ve ever gone with someone before, and you aren’t entirely certain if your enthusiasm is enough to make up for your lack of experience.

Loki makes a strangled sort of laugh, his forearm resting over his eyes. “Could you not tell?”

“Well—”

“It was wonderful,” he interrupts, pulling you back down against his shoulder as he yawns. “You taste like fire, mortal.”

Oh. Flustered, you pull away slightly, even though curling up at his side and passing out is pretty damn tempting. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom, okay? I’ll be right back.”

He frowns, but his eyes are closed, and he only lets out an annoyed little hum when you push away the covers and scamper off to his bathroom, pulling the shoulder of your gown up as you go. Not that it really matters at this point, you think.

You lean over the marble countertop, twisting your head to try to get the best view of your neck; there’s a ring of reddened teeth-marks impressed into your skin, just below your collar. When you run your fingers over them, you shudder, but the sting of it isn’t exactly unpleasant - just strange. It doesn’t look like Loki’s, you fret. Will it? Or did it not work on me, because I’m not a Jötunn?

Somehow, the idea that you might not be permanently pair-bonded with your crazy sorcerer-king leaves you feeling a little crestfallen. You wash up a bit, but the bed is calling to you, and you’re soon crawling back under the sheets. Loki looks like he’s asleep, but he wraps his arm around your waist and drags you closer to him as soon as you’ve laid down, and your heart flutters.

This is it, you realize. This is what it feels like to fall in love.

There’s no expression whatsoever on Loki’s face the next morning, and the little bloom of hope that had begun to kindle in your chest during the night immediately wavers. He’s leaning over you, but he won’t meet your eyes, and he practically winces as he smooths his fingers across the tender skin of your neck.
“Does it hurt?” he asks.

“No.” You twine your fingers with his, hoping that it will somehow reassure him. “Does yours?”

“It would be much easier if it did.”

*Oh, no.* It’s easy to see where this is going. “Loki—”

“I do not blame you,” he says. “That is not… I do not want you to think that I am angry with you.”

Sighing, you pull his hand away from your neck. “But?”

“I don’t think that you’ve considered the ramifications of this entire… affair.” Loki gestures between the two of you helplessly, and you recoil a little at the fact that he calls it an ‘affair.’ He notices. “That is not what I—”

“Look,” you snap, “I’m kind of new to all of this, and you aren’t exactly helping. Besides, I feel like it’s a little late for regrets, isn’t it? Unless you know how to make this go away?”

His lips part as he stares at the mark on your neck, seemingly transfixed. *Longing.* He shakes his head.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Sorry, *sire,* but I guess you’re stuck with me.” *Crap,* you’re starting to tear up. Shoving the sheets aside, you try to scramble out of bed, the long gown twisting and tangling around your legs. Loki catches you and drags you backwards, his arms wrapped around your waist.

*Great,* you think, *just where I want to be right now: in this idiot’s lap.*

“What did you mean?” His mouth is right by your ear, his cheek pressed against your hair. “That you are *new to this*?”

You sigh. Really, if he’s trying to discourage you, holding you in his lap and whispering in your ear is probably the *worst* possible way to go about it. “We’ve already covered the fact that there’s no boyfriend on Midgard, remember? Like, we had that discussion *weeks* ago. And I’ve definitely never had some kind of *magical bond* with someone before.”

He’s getting turned on; you can feel it. He’s hard beneath you, and his grip has tightened, ever-so-slightly. At least he responds to possessiveness, if nothing else. “True, but I did not realize—”

“Either kiss me, or let me go.”

Your breath hitches in anticipation as you feel his lips move towards your neck… but then his grip slackens, and Loki leans away. “We haven’t the time to discuss this, now,” he says. “It will have to wait until we’ve returned to Utgard with the Casket.”

*Wonderful. More waiting. More avoiding the issue.*

“Yeah, well, you’ve got centuries to *wait,* Loki,” you say, pulling loose from his arms and making your way towards the bathroom. “I don’t.”

There’s an unsettling flicker of panic in your chest as you push open the door, but you try your best to ignore it; it isn’t yours.
An hour later, and you’re carrying a bucket and rags down the gilded palace hallways, wincing every time you manage to jostle water out onto the pristine stone floor.

“Norns,” Loki says, “was it too much to hope that you might make a convincing cleaning-girl, at the very least? You’re practically leaving a trail of puddles.”

“You could help,” you huff, resolving to smother him in his sleep the next chance you get. Who knew being an old-timey palace servant would require so much muscle?

“Oh, no; it would look very strange. I would not want to risk compromising our cover.”

Typical.

At least the anxiety that comes along with trying to rob the guy who’s known as King of the Gods distracts away from some of your messier feelings - and Loki’s too, because to say that his feelings are a ‘mess’ would be a massive understatement.

Loki keeps walking down the hallway after subtly directing you towards the ornately-engraved column you’re supposed to pretend to scrub. The halls are relatively busy, even here in the depths of the palace, so you guess you must not seem too out-of-place; the armored guards by the door don’t really seem like they even notice you.

God, you think, your stomach suddenly twisting, I hope Loki doesn’t kill them. You aren’t ready to become an accessory to murder - giant monster-wolves aside.

And that just reminds you, once again, that you’re pretty sure you’re falling in love with the guy who led an alien army to Earth, which doesn’t exactly help your nerves. I am so royally screwed.

Except, you aren’t royally screwed. That’s kind of part of the problem.

You dip your cloth into the bucket and wring out the excess water, your knees already aching from the hard stone floor. This job would totally suck, you think. Maybe being a royal pet isn’t such a bad gig, after all.

As it turns out, even godly palaces have dust, and that dust seems to really like to accumulate in the little nooks and crannies of the column’s engravings. If things go well, then your only job will be to stay put and make sure the entire Asgardian army isn’t rushing towards the vaults to skewer their wayward prince. If things go badly… well, there really isn’t much of a plan for that, except to grab Loki and run.

You nearly knock over the bucket in surprise when someone taps on your shoulder, and you twist around to find a tanned, fair-haired boy standing behind you, a broom in his hand.

Seems kind of young to be working, you think, but then you realize that he’s probably at least a couple of centuries older than you are.

“Pardon, miss,” he says, "but Angeyja says that we are all to gather in the meeting-hall by the kitchens; there is to be a feast when the prince arrives, and she will be assigning our duties, for those of us who are new to the palace.”

Prince? That has to be Thor… Thank God that this kid’s apparently new, too, or he might notice that you don’t exactly belong. “Um… thank you,” you reply, channeling your best high school Shakespeare vibes. You bob your head - are you supposed to bow? Curtsy? Does this kid outrank you?
He stands there, slightly perplexed. “Are you not coming?”

“I would like to finish this column,” you bluster, “as I am behind on my work.” That’s a decent excuse, right?

The boy nods. “Very well,” he says, “but you’d best hurry - Angeyja sounds to be in a mood.”

Your heart starts beating again as he turns and heads down the hall, his broom slung across his shoulder. Nice work, you congratulate yourself. That’s some good espionage, right there.

The hall empties out after a few minutes, save for you and the guards; Loki said that he’d timed it so that everyone would be heading to the main hall for the morning meal, but you’re honestly a little surprised that this whole crazy plan seems like it might actually have a chance of working.

You continue to scrub, your heart in your throat, and when a lone soldier strides down the hall towards you, you nearly faint - but then you realize that - despite the disguise he didn’t warn you about - you can still tell that it’s Loki.

Apparently, being mate-bonded with a shapeshifter has its perks. At least he’ll have a hard time sneaking up on you.

Don’t stare, you tell yourself. Don’t stare. It’ll look suspicious. Do I look suspicious? Oh, God.

From the corner of your eye, you watch as he approaches the guards and says something to them; he’s too far away for you to make out his words, but even his voice sounds different, and it’s super weird. One of the guards shrugs and says something back to him, and then they both head off down the hallway, passing right behind you.

You keep your eyes fixed on the column. Can Loki feel how terrified you are? You hope it isn’t too distracting.

A few minutes later, the guard returns alone - except, it isn’t the guard. It’s definitely Loki. You hope that the original guard isn’t dead in a closet somewhere, but knowing Loki…

When he reaches the vault door, he must make some sort of joke, because the other guard laughs loudly and claps him on the shoulder. Loki returns the gesture, and there’s a sudden cracking sound; you jump and turn to look, and the second soldier is frozen solid.

“What… is he dead?” you whisper, horrified.

“No,” he replies brusquely, shouldering one of the doors open. “Though I can’t imagine this feels pleasant. Help me with the door.”

Crap crap crap—

You scurry to his side, struggling to prop the door open as he drags the other guard inside the vault, carelessly propping him against the wall. The guard’s eyes are wide-open, and you try not to meet them - you really hope that he can’t actually see you.

You wonder if Loki’s feeling a little guilty, or if that’s just you.

“Go back to your post,” he hisses. “Keep watch for any soldiers. If anyone seems to notice that something is amiss, raise a commotion.”

“Okay.”
Great plan, Loki.

Hurrying back into the hall, you almost shriek when you pass through the golden image of one of the guards, which suddenly shimmers to life right in front of the door.

“Quickly,” Loki snaps, and then the door shuts behind you.

Deep breaths, you tell yourself. You’re just an innocent servant-girl, minding her own business. Act natural. This is totally normal. Nothing to see here, folks.

But your hand shakes as you retrieve the rag from your bucket, and you expect at any moment that someone is going to come charging down the hall, screaming ‘mortal.’

Mortal who is kind of in a weird relationship-thing with Loki Laufeyson, the supposedly-dead prince - can’t imagine that’d go over well.

You feel a sudden bloom of something, burning through your chest and down your arms, and you drop the rag in shock as your fingertips tingle. It’s almost like the air is knocked out of you, and you sag against the column, suddenly exhausted.

That doesn’t seem like a good sign.

Footsteps echo down the hall, and you heft your bucket and pretend that you’re moving on to the next column to work, edging closer to the door. The man that passes by has a thin mustache and a friendly smile, and you try to return it, adding in a tiny bow for good measure.

Crap, maybe that should’ve been a curtsy. If you’re lucky, maybe people will just assume you’re some kind of country bumpkin.

Whoever he is, the man disappears around the corner at the end of the hall, and the door to the vault cracks open only a moment later. Loki’s head peeks out, still disguised as one of the guards, and as he steps into the hallway, his form shimmers and shifts into the servant that he’d been when you first arrived at the palace.

The illusion-guards shift their weight, but otherwise remain motionless. It’s highly unsettling.

“Come,” Loki says, snagging your arm and dragging you away from your bucket, “we must move with all possible haste.”

“Did you get it?”

He better have it, after all of this stress, but you don’t see anything…

“Yes.” His voice is clipped, and you can feel his tension bubbling close to the surface. “It is stored away, for now. Heimdall will likely notice that it is gone soon, but he should not be able to use its power to track us.”

“In one of your magic-pockets? I thought they were hard to open—”

“They are, and the odds of no one noticing that sudden pulse of power are slim.” He pulls you into an alcove behind a silver-plated statue, raising a finger to his lips when you begin to ask him another question.

A conversation passes by somewhere around the corner, and Loki nods for you to continue. “Is that why it felt like somebody punched me in the gut?” you whisper, “because a warning might’ve been
nice, for future reference.”

He frowns. “It did? That is… unexpected.”

“Well, that’s just great—”

“Mind your tone, mortal. We’ll worry over that later; slipping out of the city unnoticed is the most precarious part of this entire operation.”

More things to worry about later. It’s really gonna suck when ‘later’ comes.

Moving more quietly than you’d think possible for a man his size, Loki slips around the far side of the statue and pulls you from the shadows, guiding you down a narrow staircase that looks like it isn’t used very often. At least you’re getting some more quality hand-holding in, so that’s something positive to focus on, instead of the fact that you could get caught and tossed into an alien prison at any second.

The two of you hurry down a mostly-empty hallway, and then you turn a corner and you’re suddenly in a very crowded courtyard, the spires and towers of the palace rising around it, caging you in. “This isn’t the way we came, is it?”

“No. Never leave the same way you came; there’s another lesson for you, girl.”

People here are tall - not relative to actual giants, maybe, but they’re still kind of impressive. They’re all pretty fit, too. Yet another planet where the average person could crush me like a grape.

There’s a loud boom just as you reach the gate to the street outside, and chaos erupts, people shrieking and running towards the palace. A lady with a basket nearly knocks you over, and you plaster yourself to Loki’s side.

“What the hell was that?”

“Diversion. This path is a bit more… noticeable. And we won’t have as much time to move at our leisure.”

Were we seriously moving at what you consider a ‘leisurely’ pace on the way here? you think, clutching his hand more tightly.

The street twists and narrows by a low stone wall, and after checking to make sure the coast is clear, Loki hoists you over it. “A public garden,” he informs you as he lands lightly on his feet on the other side. “The queen kept a doorway hidden here, leading to the pool where she did her scrying. I doubt that Odin knows that I know of it.”

“You know my brain can’t process any of this. Just get us back to Utgard in one piece; I’ll ask questions later.”

A smile flickers across his face, gone almost as soon as it appears. “Very well. I am only trying to alleviate your anxiety; I can feel it, you know.”

Oh, believe me, I know.

There’s a gigantic prickly bush towards the back of the garden, and by the time you reach it, Loki is practically running, dragging you along behind him. Hell no, you think. I am not climbing through that.
“No hesitation,” Loki declares, and then he shoves you forward. You yelp - and then you gasp, because after a brief fall through cold nothingness, you land in waist-deep water. There’s another splash as Loki lands next to you, and you flounder around in the darkness until you find him.

“You ass,” you cry, trying to clamber up onto his back. Who even knows what kind of God-awful snakes and toothy fish and parasites live in the water here…

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Loki says, but he helps you hoist yourself onto his back, anyway. “Besides, this path actually requires less magic to navigate, so you should find it easier to handle.”

Both of you apparently decide that it’s best not to mention the way he tenses when you wrap your arms around his neck, but you’re feeling a little bitter, and since you’re in a pool anyway… you let your thoughts drift to that one time he cornered you in the bath, the way he looked at you like he wanted to devour you on the spot...

This whole ‘bond’ thing is kind of vague and unpredictable, but maybe he’ll get the message.

His fingers dig into your thighs. “Wretched little thing,” he says, his voice rough. “Do not think to distract me.”

“I’m not doing anything—”

“Liar.”

Fine. You guess the ‘so what are we, actually?’ conversation can wait until you aren’t on the run from an army of gods.

Loki moves through the cave quickly; you wonder if the fact that he’s so freaking heavy helps him keep his footing as the water swirls around you. Bright light shines somewhere in the distance, and you get pretty excited about being out of the dark, but then he suddenly stops.

“Hold your breath,” he says, and you barely have a chance to comply before you’re completely underwater.

At first, you panic, but after everything that’s happened, drowning doesn’t seem quite as intimidating; you live with magical giants, after all, and you helped defeat a monster-wolf. There’s definitely a part of you that feels just a tiny bit invincible.

Maybe that’s how Loki feels.

The water is warm, until it isn’t, and you’re freezing by the time your head pops out. “Loki—”

“I know, I know; I did not remember how quickly the temperature changed. I will dry you, once we are out of the water.”

That sounds fine and dandy, until he actually climbs out of the water, because you’re definitely back on Jotunheim now, and you’re pretty sure you’re going to freeze to death. Your breath fogs in the air, and the thin Asgardian gown clings to your legs, sodden and cold.

“Are you attempting to choke me?” Loki asks, prying your arms from around his neck.

“You deserve it,” you wheeze as you slide to the ground, almost surprised that your legs don’t just freeze and shatter on impact. “Trying to kill me.”

“Hardly.” He takes your hand and hauls you back to your feet, and his magic burns as it chases the
chill away from your skin. “I’d be much more efficient about it, if I were.”

The travel satchel has miraculously remained waterproof during your underwater adventure, and as soon as the water leaves your skin, you’re digging out your layers and pulling on as much as you possibly can without completely stripping off your dress. *Goodbye, pretty outfit that makes Loki go crazy.* You’d probably freeze your butt off if you tried to wear it in his bedroom in Utgard.

Loki holds out a hand once you’ve shrugged on your coat, and as the blue bleeds across his skin, you’d swear that you almost catch a hint of *excitement* in his eyes. “I suppose this is it,” he says. “Let us hope that your twins are waiting to escort us back to the city, and that my subjects remain loyal.”

You take it, and your fingers entwine. “And if they aren’t?”

“If they aren’t,” he says, a sly smile on his face, “then I suppose we’ll just have to unleash our magic on them, won’t we?”

Chapter End Notes

FrostbiteFridays! <3

Please go check out acaprioglio's art on Tumblr for a glimpse into the Frostbite world! I'm absolutely IN LOVE
And because I'm blessed, im-too-many-fandoms also made this adorable rendition of In-Unga and Loki!

That's some real holiday magic, right there :D
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Would it be nice if everything was hunky-dory when you returned to Utgard? Yes.

Are the odds of that happening high? Nope.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In all of your wildest daydreams back on Earth, you never would’ve imagined that the sight of blue, seven-foot-tall giant twins rushing towards you would’ve filled you with such an overwhelming sense of relief.

Greip and Gjálp leap from their open sleigh as soon as you and Loki emerge from the cave, and you’re shocked - but more than a little pleased - when he doesn’t let go of your hand. The twins bow, and you peer about as the wind whips the snow from the rocky ground, wondering where the rest of the entourage is. Did no one else come to meet their king?

“Greip,” Loki says, nodding slightly. “Gjálp. Let us set out for Utgard quickly; it looks as if another storm is brewing, and I’ve no desire to be caught out in it.”

“Yes, sire.” Greip hesitates a moment, then raises slightly from her bow. “Though, if I may, I believe that there are things that would be better discussed outside of the palace walls.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, sire,” Gjálp says. “Well, it is a delicate matter, but—”

“Out with it. Come, mortal, before you freeze to death.” Loki drags you over to the sleigh and hefts you onto it, then leans against the railing. He looks relaxed, but you know that he isn’t. “Helblindi?” he asks. “Or has Býleistr finally found the nerve to act against me?”

The sisters exchange a look; you’re guessing that neither of them want to deal with bearing bad news to Loki Inn-Illi. Greip finally clears her throat and steps forward, her hands clasped behind her back. “Prince Helblindi has been holding frequent conversation with some of King Laufey’s other children, sire, as well as with some of his lesser wives. They are not usually on such familiar terms, and so we thought it noteworthy.”

“And what of the Queen Mother?”

“She has not outwardly expressed any displeasure with your rule.”

Loki frowns. “Which of Laufey’s children has Helblindi seemed particularly taken with, since his return to Utgard?” You’re shivering, now that the wind is picking up, and when you whimper in discomfort, he turns back to the sleigh immediately. “On second thought, tell me the rest on the road.”

They all join you in the sleigh; it’s standing-room only, as far as the giants are concerned, though
you’re able to hunker down in the back corner to escape some of the wind. Sometimes, you think, being tiny has its advantages.

Greip takes the reins, and the sleigh rockets off through the snow. “Laufey’s eldest daughters, sire,” she calls over the howling of the hounds and the wind, “Fenja and Menja. They are full-blooded Hrímþursar, and they have never cared much for Helblindi, as their cousin Angrboða has a feud with Lady Skaði.”

Angrboða. There’s a name you recognize, kinda. I have no stake in that feud, you think. Her and Skaði both seem pretty terrible. And they both want to marry Loki. And they both hate humans.

“I’ve met them only once,” Loki says. “But I was warned to keep a wary eye for Laufey’s sons, and nothing was said of daughters. You’d consider them a threat?”

“We can only speculate, but… well, their mother’s son Kári is very easily influenced, and I have no doubt that they would like to see him in a position of greater prominence.”

Too many names. Jotunheim really needs a Facebook, so that you can keep up with all of these people. Then, you can’t help but to imagine the twins with an Instagram, and you almost start laughing, despite the seriousness of the conversation; they’d be adorable.

“How many others?”

“Perhaps a half-dozen,” Gjálp says. “Though, you have only been gone for a very short time, sire, and many of Laufey’s sons do not care for Helblindi, to be perfectly frank. He did much to distance himself from then, when King Laufey still lived.”

“Very unwise of him,” Loki comments. “I’d imagine that he wishes he’d cultivated a more fervent group of advocates, now.”

“That may be, Your Majesty, but many support Prince Helblindi on his blood and his reputation alone; he is certainly strong and fearsome, and he was the heir to the throne for many centuries. If I may be so bold?”

“Speak.”

“I do not think that it would be wise to underestimate him. He does not like to lose.”

Loki laughs, a harsh, rough sort of sound. “Then, perhaps we are alike after all,” he says, “for neither do I.”

When you arrive in the palace courtyard, a host of guards and courtiers are waiting to greet Loki, and you’re honestly pretty impressed, because even if they don’t really like him… they’re pretty darn good at faking some degree of enthusiasm. You don’t really get to take in much of the scene before Greip hurries you off into the palace, though, and you feel a slight pang of loss as soon as Loki is out of sight.

Oh, great, you think. That’s probably not a good sign.

Loki’s chambers have some new additions, a large pile of trunks and half-unpacked baskets piled in
the main room. “What’s all this?” you ask, pulling back your hood.

“Oh! I had only just begun to sort through it all,” Greip replies. “You see, now that he is truly and undeniably king, all of the lords and ladies have begun to send him offerings. Now is the time to curry favor, you know, while his court is not yet settled.”

“Did your family send him things, too?” You tug off your gloves and stuff them into one of your pockets, running your fingers across a bolt of cloth that looks unlike anything you’ve seen anyone wearing on Jotunheim. Maybe it’s from off-world? Maybe it’s something only for kings?

“Yes, of course; Father and Mother sent quite a bit of paper, actually.”

Hmm, you think. Wonder if I could get my hands on some of that. You’ve been itching to practice your runes, and Jotunheim isn’t exactly blessed with an overabundance of spare office supplies. “I’m going to go change really quick, okay? The Asgardian clothes aren’t really great for Jotunheim, believe it or not.”

Laughing, Greip waves you away. “Go on,” she says. “Put on something sensible.”

In Loki’s bedroom, you take a moment or two to silently mourn the loss of your pretty Asgardian dress, which you carefully fold and stow away in the little wooden trunk that the twins have given you to store your quickly-accumulating wardrobe. You’re only moderately freezing, at the moment, so you pull on a loose, thick tunic and leggings, then tug on a furry vest. So vogue.

You really need to get Jotunheim on board with fashion magazines. You’re pretty sure it would be spectacular, considering all of the leather and metal and fur they seem to love. And the weapons. And the whole ‘bare-skin-is-cool’ mentality.

When you return to the main room, Greip has begun to unpack one of the large woven baskets. You’ve noticed that she seems to get a little antsy when she’s nervous, and you figure that she’s probably worried about whatever her sister and Loki are currently getting up to; you’re kind of worrying about the same thing. The fire is beckoning, and you head over to it, practically purring as you bask in the heat.

“Hey,” you say, “do you want your Yggdrasil travel-amulet back, now that we’ve made it back from Asgard?”

“You should keep it on,” Greip says, placing a stack of books on the desk, “for truly, you are a traveller even on Jotunheim, and—”

When she abruptly stops, you turn to find her staring, and that’s when you realize that your current tunic doesn’t have much of a collar. Well, damn.

Loki, his timing as perfect as always, chooses that moment to return to his chambers with Gjálp, and he freezes as soon as steps in the room, looking like he’d probably like to turn and run. “Geirröðardóttir,” he acknowledges, poised stiffly just inside the door.

“I… you…” Greip takes a step backwards, like she’s expecting you to spontaneously combust. “Your Majesty, what have you done?”

His eyes narrow. “What have I done?” he says, his words clipped. “Do you mean to suggest that I cannot do whatever I wish with my mortal, girl?”

“This is… this is cruel,” she cries, pointing accusingly at you. “Lady Skaði will not stand for this insult, she will demand her life—”
“Even if she dares to demand it, she will not have it.”

“Sister, tell him!”

Gjálp is staring at you now, too, her eyes wide. “Majesty,” she says, “forgive me, but my sister is right; this is not done. You’ve all but wedded her, now, and with your promise of a betrothal to Lady Skaði and her father… To anger them would be folly, especially with Prince Helblindi eager to stir dissent.”

His temper is building, and you edge towards him, slightly apprehensive. “And what if I have?” he says. “I am the king. I decide what is and is not done.”

Greip is on the verge of tears, and her hands clench at her sides. “You doom the mortal, and you doom Jotunheim, just like your father. I thought you had more wisdom in you, Loki Laufeyson.”

She turns and storms out of the chamber, and Gjálp looks after her, slightly aghast, unsure of what to do. “Majesty,” she ventures, “please do not blame her, for she is only—”

“Go after her.”

Gjálp bows and hurries out the door. It seals behind her, and you’re left standing there in awkward silence, bracing yourself against your own worry and the roiling boil of Loki’s possessive anger.

“Loki,” you say, hesitantly reaching for him, “you can’t be mad at her; she’s just afraid, and—”

“You started this,” he says. He closes his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply, and when he opens them again, his shoulders slump, defeated. “You started this, and I’ve continued it, and she is right—now we are both cursed.”

Your hand falls to your side. “Don’t… don’t be like that.”

“I need to go deal with my brother, and my father’s women. I cannot allow these whisperings to continue; if my reign begins with unrest, then it will crumble rapidly. I have no time to deal with this, mortal.”

“Are you just going to try to ignore it?” you cry. “Again? Loki—”

“There are bigger things at stake than your feelings, or even mine. You will stay here, and by Valhalla, you will ask those infernal twins of yours everything they know about these damned mate-marks.”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to talk about it.”

Loki glares at you. “Are you being smart with me, pet?”

“Maybe a little. But you did say—”

“It’s a little too late to exclude them from this mess of ours, isn’t it? You’d best hope that they can keep quiet; I’d hate to have to kill them.”

He moves towards the door, and you grab ahold of his sleeve. “How can you even say that?”

“Because I understand what it takes to survive, which is something you’d do well to learn quickly.” Loki carefully pries your fingers from his arm, refusing to meet your eyes. “Learn what you can, and try to avoid revealing anything that might be compromising. You are not to leave the room without an escort.”
“Why not just chain me to the bed then, sire?”

“Oh, don’t tempt me. Besides, this is no different than before; nothing has changed.”

Then he’s gone out the door, and you trudge over to the fire and collapse heavily onto one of the cushions, tears brimming in your eyes. *Everything has changed,* you think. *Everything.*

And Loki knows it, too.

Gjálp drags Greip back into the room not long after, and they’re clearly both pretty upset. Greip stalks over to the fire and crouches in front of you, but she doesn’t say anything, and your face heats as you wilt under her accusing stare.

“Are you going to yell at me?” you finally ask.

“You are *in love with him!*”

Your mouth falls open; that isn’t exactly what you were expecting. “What?”

“The only way sure for you to survive now is for you to convince the king to return you to Midgard, In-Unga, and you will not do it, because you are in love with him.”

“I didn’t *choose* to be here! I didn’t just *decide* one day to hop on over to some hostile alien planet where I’d be a human *pet.* This isn’t… he’s… he *cares* about me.”

“Calm, the both of you,” Gjálp says. “Mortal, I believe that what my sister is attempting to convey is that—”

“I am worried for you,” Greip interrupts, taking hold of your shoulders. “Neither you nor the king seem to realize how the court will react to this, and by *Hvergelmir,* when Lady Skaði finds out, she will certainly cause an uproar if he does not give her satisfaction.”

“He won’t… Greip, he won’t let her hurt me,” you tell her. “Besides, it isn’t like I’m an actual *threat* to her, or anything. I don’t see how this changes anything.”

It burns to say, but it’s true, isn’t it? No matter what you feel - no matter what *Loki* feels - you’re still just the human pet. If Skaði wants to become his queen, it isn’t like there’s anything you can do to stop her.

“But he has *wedded* you, in essence,” Gjálp says. “Do you understand? Lady Skaði will not stand to be seen a secondary wife to a *mortal,* even if he cannot elevate you in the court.”

You close your eyes, taking a deep, slow breath, trying to calm yourself. This is *too damn much* - it’s like you can’t even get a moment to collect your thoughts before the next disaster gets thrown in your face. “So, we don’t tell anyone, then. Everyone already thought he was sleeping with me, and *that* was apparently fine. And we *aren’t* married.”

Greip groans. “Do not pretend that this is the sort of thing that can be hidden forever. The both of you are *far* too tumultuous - your feelings are clear enough, and the king’s are only thinly-veiled.”

“What exactly am I supposed to do, then?”
Gjálp turns from the fire, chewing on her lip. “Perhaps,” she says, “it would be best for the king to make this public.”

“What?”

“Consider it, Sister - everyone already thinks Inn-Illi mad, and if he makes it clear that he has done this, then at least none will be able to say that he is a coward, or that he is attempting to hide his ways from Lady Skaði.”

“Gjálp,” you say carefully, “I don’t mean to sound rude, but that sounds absolutely insane. I mean, if the not-super-popular new king just walks in and starts flaunting the fact that he doesn’t care about all these ancient traditions and sacred rites and everything, then won’t everyone just rip him to shreds?”

“But think! If he truly has brought the Casket of Ancient Winters back with him, and if he makes it clear that he will make Lady Skaði his queen, then she will certainly stand with him - and if she acts as though she does not object to these indiscretions, then it will be difficult for anyone else in the court to use the subject against him.”

“But think! If he truly has brought the Casket of Ancient Winters back with him, and if he makes it clear that he will make Lady Skaði his queen, then she will certainly stand with him - and if she acts as though she does not object to these indiscretions, then it will be difficult for anyone else in the court to use the subject against him.”

“Or, maybe she’ll get one look at our necks and instantly skewer me, and honestly, from what I’ve seen so far, that seems more likely.”

“It would be terribly bad luck,” Gjálp replies. “For you see, In-Unga, it is the Mid-Winter this week, and ill deeds now will follow for ten seasons, they say.”

“It would be terribly bad luck,” Gjálp replies. “For you see, In-Unga, it is the Mid-Winter this week, and ill deeds now will follow for ten seasons, they say.”

“Skaði doesn’t exactly strike me as the superstitious type.”

“I am telling you,” she insists, “this may be the best way! Everyone will be so joyous about the return of the Casket that they can hardly express too much displeasure over what he’s done to you, mortal, and what you’ve been allowed to do to him. It will be brushed aside, you see? Just a royal indiscretion, but if Lady Skaði raises no complaint... In fact, if she stands to become the queen of Jotunheim’s second Golden Age, then she will likely want to please the king, and so she might even silence any gossiping herself.”

“You are being far too optimistic,” her sister tells her. “Sometimes, Sister, I think that you dwell with your head in the clouds—”

“Better than to keep it buried in the snow,” Gjálp retorts. “They are bonded, now, and that cannot be changed. It is up to us to shape what happens next. You cannot be so fatalistic.”

“You can’t say anything, though, unless the king says it’s okay. You do know that, right? He’ll lose his damned mind, and I don’t want you two getting caught in the crossfire of...” You gesture helplessly. “Well, in the middle of all of this.”

“Oh, I know.” She taps her finger to her chin for a moment, contemplative, then her eyes narrow in determination. “Very well,” she declares, “I suppose I’d best go speak with the king.”

“Sister—”

“You will not dissuade me; Loki Laufeyson trusts us more than any others on Jotunheim, else he would not leave her with us. He will consider my words - I’m certain of it.” And then, her sister still protesting, she hurries off, a fearsome glint in her eyes.

“Norns,” Greip mutters, dropping onto one of the cushions with a stricken look on her face. “The world is truly going mad. What next?”
I don’t know, you think. I really don’t know.

There’s a loud banging on the door, and she hauls herself to her feet and goes to answer it, looking like she’d much rather hide and pretend that no one is home. A servant steps into the room and nods slightly, ignoring you entirely. “Lady Greip,” she says, “your presence is requested in the court for the start of the Mid-Winter feasting tonight, along with the king’s pet.”

Greip frowns. “I had not planned to attend.”

“Apologies, my lady, but the queen has sent me specifically to summon you.”

Sighing, Greip dismisses her. “We will be there in due time,” she says. “I’ll have to find something for the mortal to wear.”

The servant scurries off, and when Greip turns back towards you, she looks like she’s almost on the verge of tears again. “It seems that Queen Fárbauti has begun to seek a match for me.” Her face crumples. “Oh, In-Unga… that damned Storm-Giant has told me that he cares for me, and I do not know what to do.”

She covers her face with her hands, then, her shoulders shaking as she silently sobs. “Hey, it’s… it’s okay,” you try to reassure her, hesitating as you begin to give her an awkward pat on the arm - that doesn’t seem comforting enough, and so you throw caution out the window and wrap your arms around her, hugging her tightly.

At first, she stiffens, but then she returns the embrace, nearly lifting you from your feet. “The Norns have brought you into my life,” she says, “and they have brought me him, and now, I fear that I will lose you both.”

You pat her back, realizing only then that her despair is a potent, almost-tangibly sour thing, though you don’t really understand quite how you can tell. You inhale deeply, suddenly a little concerned by the immediate increase in the sensation.

Oh my God, you realize, I think I’m smelling her feelings. Which you shouldn’t be able to do, because that’s a Jötunn thing...

“Hey, Greip?” Pulling away from her slightly, you try to keep a pleasantly-neutral expression on your face; you don’t want her to freak out even more than she already is. “Um, so this mate-bond thing… I really think we need to ask someone how it works.”

Chapter End Notes

A late FrostbiteFriday, but a FrostbiteFriday nonetheless! Thank you once again to everyone for your comments! They mean the world to me. This chapter’s mostly dialogue and drama BUT since I had requests for dancing and winter festivities... there’s gonna be dancing and winter festivities in Part 29! Part 29 will be out on January 18th - I’ll be skipping next Friday!
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

It’s really difficult to imagine Frost Giants dancing. Luckily, you’re about to get a front-row seat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You’ve spent the last ten minutes watching Greip rampage around her room, throwing open trunks and tossing clothes and jewelry onto her bed. “Ancestors help me,” she mutters. “These trials are neverending.”

“Um… Greip?” you ask, holding up the leather shirt she’s given you. “Isn’t this outfit like… super Asgardian?” Honestly, it looks almost like an exact, slightly-shrunken replica of the outfit Loki was wearing when you first encountered him in the cave. The inner liner is fur, though, which is a nice touch.

“Yes, the king seems to have absolutely no regard for subtlety. You might as well wear it; it is well-made and warm, and the collar will cover that accursed mark on your neck.”

You can’t exactly fault her for being snappy, considering the circumstances, so you shrug and begin to change, standing as close to the fireplace as humanly possible. Greip finally settles on a moss-green dress that appears to be little more than a sheath with straps, then sits cross-legged in front of her mirror to embellish her markings with the white makeup, radiating frustration the entire time.

“When you said that the queen’s started looking for a match for you, do you know who it is?” you ask hesitantly, settling onto the floor beside her. “Like, how does that work?”

“I can only assume that the most likely candidates are Skógr-Jötnar,” she says, “given my father’s feelings about the other tribes. I suppose that a Hrímpurs might be considered, if he was well-connected enough to merit it.”

“So you have zero idea who it might be?” You can’t help but sound a little horrified; based on the drama with Loki and his potential wives, you’d assumed these things were arranged more openly. “It could be anyone?”

“I could guess, based upon who I know in the court who is of age and seeking a wife, but beyond that, no. It is our way. The elder women in the tribe work with the men of the families to arrange these things.”

“But Skaði—”

“Lady Skaði is different,” Greip says sharply, her grip on the makeup-stick tightening slightly. “She has established power in her own right. Even so, she would not go against the wishes of Lord Þjazi, if he objected to her plans, nor would she dare to defy Queen Fárbauti.”

“Oh.”
Her head drops, and she sighs. “I do not mean to be so curt with you, In-Unga. It is only that I should not mind this, as it has always been in my future, but now… Now, I feel only distress. I will be expected to present myself in an appealing manner at the feast, and I am in no mood for it.”

You bite your lip, unsure of what you might be able to say to possibly comfort her. How does Gjálp feel about all of this? If the queen is starting to line up potential candidates for one of the twins, she’s bound to also be looking for someone for the other.

“I do not have the skill to replicate Inn-Illi’s markings with the same precision as my sister,” she says after a moment, forcing some cheerfulness into her voice, “but shall I make an attempt on your chin and cheeks, at least?”

_Not after the way he stormed out._ “Actually… would you mind using yours? I think it’d be kind of fun to match you and Gjálp, you know? We could be like, The Forest Triplets.”

At first, she looks confused, but then she smiles, placing a gentle hand on your cheek. “Of course. I think that I would be very happy to have you as a sister.”

When you enter the feasting-hall, you’re immediately overwhelmed by sensation. Have Jötunn voices always seemed so loud? Everyone is definitely more festive than usual, that’s for sure - other than the soldiers ringing the room, who look every bit as grim as always. As for most of the other giants, though, they’re looking pretty rowdy.

You’ve got a sneaking suspicion that the tree-sap wine has been making the rounds for a while now.

“Come, come.” Greip steers you through the throng, her hand on your shoulder. She’s surprisingly good at navigating without crashing you into anyone, which is a relief, because you aren’t in the mood the offend any tipsy giants.

_Wonder where they’ve been hiding all of the colorful clothes_, you think. Nothing is remarkably ostentatious, but there’s a lot more going on than usual. This is also the most jewelry you’ve ever seen, and you’re glad that you managed to convince Greip to keep her necklace on; it’s pretty subtle, relative to some of the looks you see in the crowd. You fidget with your collar, anxious. What happens when people notice that you’ve joined the party?

The dais is even more crowded than usual, and even though you know Loki occupies his throne, you can’t make him out, because the giants crowding around him are far too tall. You draw more and more notice as you wind through the room, and your throat is tight from nervous tension by the time you make it to a little bubble of space near one of the tables set up near the steps.

Greip pauses for a moment, leaning down to your ear. “See the women at Prince Helblindi’s side? They are Fenja and Menja - the two I spoke of before, some of his lesser siblings.”

_Lesser siblings. Ouch._ You might be more into scheming for power if that was your official designation in life, too. It’s probably not a good idea to hold a normal conversation with her in public, considering you’re still nothing more than a glorified lapdog in the eyes of the general public, so you just nod.

There’s a gap in the crowd around Loki’s throne for just a moment, and you catch him staring straight at you, his eyes narrowed. Gjálp is standing at his side, and he beckons her to bend down,
whispering something in her ear. She scurries down the steps and grabs her sister’s wrist, guiding the two of you to one side of the room.

“Sister,” she hisses, “what is In-Unga doing here?”

“Did the king not call for her?”

“He did not.”

Greip frowns. “I do not understand,” she says. “The servant said that I was to bring her along, and that the queen had summoned me.”

“Well, Queen Fárbauti did summon you - she would like for you to lead the wind-dance. But as for In-Unga, the king did not wish for her to be here; it is too chaotic.”

Groaning, Greip snatches a drink from a passing servant, immediately draining it. “I have no skill for the dance. Why would she not ask you—”

“You dance beautifully, Sister,” Gjálp reassures her. “You go, before the queen becomes cross. I will stay with In-Unga. It would look odd to send her away, now that she is here.”

She looks more mutinous than you’ve ever seen her before, but Greip nods, then weaves away through the crowd. Gjálp takes your hand. “You should see, mortal. My sister does not give herself the credit she deserves; she truly does dance beautifully.”

Eventually, you make it to a part of the room where the crowd thins a bit, and in the middle of the open space is a large, glowing ball of… something. It’s blue-white, pulsing and flickering like a flame, but there’s no heat coming from it. In fact, there’s a noticeable dip in temperature every time it flares.

An ice-bonfire, you decide. Weird.

Gjálp seems to notice your confusion. “The ice-heart,” she says. “It was the light that led the first of us to settle in Utgard, long ago. Or at least, that is what they say. It is kept below the palace.”

It’s pretty; you’re baffled as to what it might actually be made out of, but it’s definitely pretty.

Somewhere in the background, drums begin to beat, and the giants begin to quiet, pushing closer to the circle. Luckily, Gjálp keeps you planted directly in front of her, shielding you from any pushy onlookers who might block your view. Greip kneels down in front of the fire, her head bowed, her hands clasped over her heart. Silence falls.

Then, there’s another beat of the drum, and Greip gracefully rises to her feet, her head still slightly bowed. At the next beat of the drum, she spins to face the crowd, spreading her arms wide, and then the beat picks up, and she begins her dance. It’s a very stately, poised sort of thing, at first, which doesn’t really surprise you, given what you’ve seen of the giants so far. There’s a lot of carefully-placed footwork and hand gestures, and Gjálp smiles down at you, beaming with pride.

Greip spins, her skirt flaring, and then she stops suddenly with the beat of the drum. There’s a moment of absolute silence, and then she spins again, skipping to the side with a clap, and the giants around you begin to cheer and rush forward. Gjálp pulls you back so that you don’t get trampled, and you watch in fascination as eager giants ring the glowing light, joining in the dance. “You see?” Gjálp says. “She is magnificent.”

You catch sight of Hrossþjófr standing stock-still on the other side of the circle, his eyes almost appearing to glow in the flickering light, and you get the impression that he’s probably thinking the exact same thing.
Gjálp navigates back through the crowd carefully, returning you to a relatively-calm space near to the wall as more and more giants move to join the rings of dancers. “We’d best keep out of the way, In-Unga; Inn-Illi does not wish for you to attract attention.”

Nodding, you press yourself back against the wall, completely onboard with the ‘not attracting attention’ agenda; the curious and hostile looks you’ve already gotten are more than enough to last you for the rest of the night. On his throne, Loki sits brooding, deep into what seems to be some sort of heated conversation with the queen and a very burly-looking giant you don’t recognize. He certainly doesn’t seem as festive as everyone else. *That makes two of us,* you think.

At your side, Gjálp suddenly tenses; you turn to find Býleistr making his way down from the dais, and it definitely seems like he’s aiming towards you. *Well, crap,* you think. *Loki definitely isn’t going to like that, is he?*

Býleistr stops just in front of you, blocking your view, and Gjálp bows slightly. “A mortal at the Mid-Winter feasting,” he says. “How strange. Did you draw these marking on her face, Gjálp?”

“No, sire. That was my sister.” She sounds like she’s caught somewhere between pride and worry, and you wonder if maybe your ‘Forest Triplets’ idea was more risky than you might’ve imagined.

“Hmm.” He stands there studying you for a moment, and you can tell the exact second that Loki notices, because you feel a sudden flash of temper that you’re pretty sure doesn’t belong to you. “Is there dancing, on Midgard?”

“Yes, sire.”

It seems like a laugh is about to crack through his characteristically-flat expression, and you wonder if it’s because of your obvious reluctance. “And do you dance, In-Unga?”

“I…” You falter, noticing then that more and more eyes are turning your way. *Crap,* you think. *Crap, crap, crap.*

“She knows nothing of our dances, Prince Býleistr,” Gjálp helpfully interjects, clearly hoping that will send him on his way.

“Well,” Býleistr says, “let us see if she is a quick study.” And then, despite your frantic glances to Gjálp in protest, he takes hold of your arm and drags you back towards the light, giants parting to allow him through the rings of dancers. Your heart is in your throat, and you’re keenly aware of the looks that you’re receiving - and of Loki’s temper, quickly brewing and volatile.

When you reach the inner circle of space nearest to the light, he stops abruptly, an almost-eager look in his eyes. “This is where the children dance, within the circle, where they will not cause a collision if they make mistakes.”

He’s not wrong - there are some smaller giants nearer to the ice-heart, though small is, in this case, relative - you only spot one giant that might actually be shorter than you are. You can’t help but wonder, then, how often babies are actually born on Jotunheim. Do they just keep the little kids hidden away, or are they really that uncommon? Considering that you’ve been here for weeks, you feel like you should’ve seen more of them by now.

“You must be bold,” Býleistr tells you, and your heart races with the beating of the drum, because you don’t see any other friendly faces, the twins and Loki all completely obscured by the throng of dancers. “When you join the dance, you must jump in bravely, and leave all fears behind.” You just stare at him, and he huffs. “Speak, In-Unga.”
“I mean, I’m afraid.” *Oops, that’s probably too rude. “Sire.”*

“I know this,” he says. “I can tell. They can all tell. But you must drive your fears away like the wind, and they will see that, too.”

You don’t know what to say. It seems like he’s trying to be helpful, but his expression makes it kind of hard to tell. It’s a toss-up, really; either he’s trying to be nice, or he’s trying to piss Loki off. *Why not both?*

Hesitant, but seeing no real alternative, you nod. Býleistr grins, and the sudden resemblance to Loki is disturbingly uncanny. “You must learn by doing. You could watch for an age, and it would never teach you. Start with your left foot, facing outward. Step left-right-left, turn-and-clap. Now, you are facing the light, *and* right-and-step, turn-and-clap. Now for the left again.”

What he calls ‘steps’ look to you more like ‘leaps,’ and your eyes narrow; you’re pretty sure that you’re going to crash into someone and die, and it’ll be a really embarrassing way to go. “Are you prepared, mortal?” Býleistr asks, his eyes sparkling.

“The king—”

“How could he possibly object? My esteemed brother is the one who decided that you should learn our ways, isn’t he?” He taps the runes on your golden collar with one finger, and you flinch, because he’s getting *really* close to the mate-mark…

“Okay,” you squeak.

You feel like an idiot, but at least most of the giants seem pretty caught up in what they’re doing - or too inebriated - to notice the oddity that is their prince trying to teach a human pet how to dance in the middle of the hall. Being short probably helps, since you’re kind of hidden by the crowd. Still, you feel like you’re practically under a spotlight, and your first steps are hesitant.

“No, no. You clap *as* you turn, mortal.”

Býleistr isn’t a very patient teacher, and if circumstances were different, you’d probably lose your temper and snap at him. Still, it *is* kind of fun to get to move around a little, and soon, you’re so focused on getting the steps right with the beat of the drum that you’re able to drown out most of your other worries.

You’re *almost* starting to actually enjoy it when Býleistr grabs your wrist and pulls you into the innermost ring of dancers, and your heart nearly stops. “*Move, In-Unga,*” he shouts over the noise, and you hurry to comply, because it certainly doesn’t seem like any of the adolescent giants in the dancing-ring are going to slow down to accommodate you.

And as you spin and skip around the glowing brightness, your heart *does* seem to feel lighter; the rhythm is all you can hear, and your feet are the only things you can be bothered with worrying about; all of the rest of it is just a blur in the background.

You nearly collide with Býleistr when the drumming suddenly stops, and he laughs. “That is enough, for now. The next one is more complicated, and you’ll likely fall underfoot.” He ushers you back through the throng, and you try to catch your breath, the cold air stinging your lungs.

*That was… exhilarating. Terrifying, maybe, but also exhilarating.*

The exhilaration is quickly fading, though, and your awareness of the world around you kicks back in as soon as you step out of the final circle, *particularly* your awareness of the glowering god-king
on his throne. It’s a little surprising that he hasn’t stormed down and yanked you away, given the bubbling sort of frustration you feel in your chest, and you figure that he must be trying to put on a good show for Skaði and all of his other potential wives. The jealousy you feel is a sour, aching sort of thing, and it prompts you to smile up at Býleistr.

At least he isn’t ashamed of being seen acting friendly with you in public.

Gjálp rushes to your side, relief evident on her face; that must’ve gone better than she’d expected. “Sire!” she exclaims. “How… kind of you, to show the mortal how to dance. I will reclaim her from you, so that you may return to the festivities.”

“Nonsense, Gjálp. What could possibly be more entertaining than the only mortal on Jotunheim? I assure you that my brothers’ conversation could not possibly compare.”

You’re awkwardly trapped between them, craning your neck to try to read their expressions. Gjálp just looks stressed, while Býleistr seems like he’s enjoying himself. Maybe he didn’t take the ‘getting turned into a snake’ threat seriously, you think. Or maybe he’s just seeing how far he can push things before Loki snaps. Maybe it’s some kind of trick, to see if Loki will lose his temper over a human in front of everyone at the feast.

Gjálp shifts from foot to foot. “I should feed her soon, sire; she has not eaten in some time, and you know that mortals are fragile.”

“Of course, of course. I will accompany you.”

She nods, and Býleistr strolls off towards one of the tables heaped high with food, the two of you following behind him. If people weren’t watching before, they definitely are, now. He leans against the table, a large squishy-looking green fruit in his hand. “Your sister leads the dancing tonight, instead of you?”

“She is. I’m sure she’ll be swarmed by admirers.” He takes a bite of the fruit; it’s so sweet that you can smell it instantly, an almost-sickly sensation. “It is very interesting, I find, that In-Unga wears your markings.”

Gjálp hesitates, a bowl half-filled with various unidentified foods in her hands. “They suit her well, sire.”

“Hmm.”

She continues to fill the bowl, and Býleistr continues to stare at you. “There is something different about you,” he says eventually. “But I cannot rightly tell what it is.”

“Damn it, you think, your apprehension skyrocketing. The biting-thing isn’t detectable, is it?

Apparently, that spike of emotion is enough to get Loki to finally respond, because you see him suddenly rise from his throne out of the corner of your eye, brushing cortiers aside as he makes his way down the steps of the dais. Býleistr doesn’t look his way, but he must know, because there’s a smug sort of smirk on his face.

Dude likes playing with fire. Great.

“Býleistr,” Loki says, a blatantly-false smile on his face. “I’d thought you clever, yet here you stand,
in open defiance of your king."

“I would never defy Loki Laufeyson. Your valuable little mortal pet remains entirely undamaged. In fact,” he adds, leaning closer, “I think that she might’ve even enjoyed herself.”

And then, he puts his hand on your shoulder, his thumb pressing dangerously close to the mark that’s hidden beneath your clothes, and Loki’s eyes immediately narrow. “You should return to your mother’s side, boy.”

“Sire—” Gjálp begins.

Býleistr’s smile widens. “Why are you so very agitated, Brother? Surely you do not suppose that I would hurt—” He stops abruptly then, his smile dissipating as he looks down at you. His hand slides a bit closer to your neck, and he cocks his head, a puzzled look on his face. Before you have a chance to bolt away, he slips his fingers under the neck of your tunic, and you can tell by the look on his face as his fingertips brush across the raised mark on your skin that he knows what it is at once.

It feels like all of the air leaves the room.

“Býleistr,” Loki hisses, his fist clenching at his side. He’s going to kill him, you realize. He’s going to kill him, just to keep his secret. Your secret.

For once, Býleistr actually looks completely shocked, staring down at Loki like he’s seen some sort of ghost. His fingers are still cool against your skin, though you realize with an odd sort of detachment that they aren’t quite as cold as usual. Býleistr gathers himself, leaning forward, his voice hushed. “Does your skin bear the mark of a mortal’s bite, King of Jotunheim?”

“Leave it be, or prepare yourself to face the consequences.”

The hand on your neck drops away, but you’re still too terrified to breathe normally. “Look at yourself,” Býleistr says. “Mighty Inn-Illi, brought low by a woman, and a mortal woman, at that.”

Loki’s pulling on his magic; you can feel it buzzing in the air. No, you think. Don’t—

Because someone is going to get curious enough to edge close to the scene, soon, and they’ll be overheard; there’s no way that Loki is going to risk that. You don’t want Býleistr to die, and you certainly don’t want Loki to kill him - he’s got enough family issues, as it is.

And with that thought crowding towards the forefront of your mind, some part of you instinctively grasps out for the energy in the air. You don’t actually accomplish anything, from what you can tell, but it’s enough to catch Loki’s attention, and his dark eyes snap towards you.

“Another of your shameful secrets to keep,” Býleistr says, then he all but storms away, brushing through the crowd back towards the dais. Loki looks like he’s considering a knife to the back, and you tug on the edge of his cloak, trying to look beseeching - it isn’t like you can start screaming at him to calm down in the middle of the feast.

He glares down at you, and you glare right back, because if he’s trying to be subtle about this whole bond thing you’ve got going on, he really needs to get better about holding back his temper. “You were not meant to leave my chambers, mortal.”

“I didn’t have a choice, sire.”

“Yes, sire,” Gjálp hurriedly adds, putting herself partially in front of you. “Greip received a summons
from the queen to begin the dancing, and she was instructed to bring In-Unga along. Please—”

“Calm yourself, Geirröðardóttir. I do not hold your sister responsible, though the both of you would do well to be less trusting of your queen.” He turns slightly, glancing towards the dais. “And of your Lady Skaði.”

Skaði, you wonder, or Helblindi, who seems to have been far more attentive to the tension between his brothers than the conversation he’s currently holding with Fenja and Menja? But scheming to get Loki to lose his temper right when he’s returned to Utgard in triumph seems too intricate for Helblindi, who hasn’t exactly struck you as being the clever type. And there’s no way that either of them know about the mate-marks; you’re absolutely positive that they’d use that kind of information, if they did.

That means - you hope - that they’re just picking at the very-obvious weakness of Loki’s possessiveness towards you, hoping that he’ll do something unforgivable towards his younger, better-liked brother… which means that they’re willing to sacrifice Býleistr, doesn’t it?

Your stomach churns.

“I am taking my pet back to my chambers,” Loki says, “before she causes any more trouble.” Your first reaction is to be offended at that, but then you realize that he’d said it a bit more loudly, and you give him the benefit of the doubt that he’s just putting on a performance in case anyone can hear him over the racket in the hall. His next words are hushed. “Do not turn your eye from my brother,” he orders Gjálp. “If you think that he is going to reveal anything compromising, you will stop him. Won’t you?”

She looks a little queasy, too, and you wonder if she’s starting to regret this whole ‘life-debt’ thing. “Yes, sire. Of course.”

Loki turns without another word, and though he doesn’t even brush against you, you assume that you’re supposed to follow him. Giants move out of his way as he stalks towards the entrance to the hall, and you marvel once again over the fact that - despite his small stature - they genuinely seem intimidated by him. Oh, they might mock him and gossip behind his back, but there’s an increasing sort of anxious respect there, and you wonder how much of it has to do with slaying the wolf, and how much of it has to do with the fact that he’s got the Casket of Ancient Winters in his possession.

He makes it to his room without saying a single word, sending servants scurrying in the hallways just by the force of his glare, and you’re almost tempted to go running back to the feast - you never got to eat dinner, after all. Plus, if Býleistr does decide to announce that Loki’s bound himself to a human… you feel like Loki should probably be there to deal with the fallout. An angry mob busting down the king’s door seems like a very real possibility.

When the door closes behind you, the two of you stand there in silence for a moment, sizing each other up. He looks really pretty with the marks on his skin highlighted, you decide, though you have a flare of jealousy spike at the thought of someone drawing all over his face like that, because the odds that it was one of his future wives seems pretty high.

“Don’t you dare yell at me,” you finally begin, unable to bear the quiet tension for any longer. “I didn’t want to go to the damned feast in the first place, and you know what else? It’s kind of nice that Býleistr doesn’t act like I’ve got some kind of deadly contagion. Dancing was almost kind of fun, and I didn’t die. And I don’t think he’s going to tell, either.”

Loki takes a deep breath, and you can only assume that he was planning on yelling. “How can you possibly say that?” he asks. “Why, in all the Nine, would you decide to put your trust in that snake
“Because he’s already keeping your secrets!” you cry. “I don’t know why, but he is. He’s the one who made sure that nobody found out that I got involved in the wolf-hunt, because apparently that’s really bad, or something!”

He looks surprised, at first, but then a calculating sort of look appears in his eyes. “What is he after?”

“Maybe he’s like you, and he just likes screwing with people. God, Loki, I don’t know what you want. You can’t be mad if other people pay attention to me when you’re ignoring me. You get that, right?”

“I am trying—”

“Blah, blah, ‘doing what’s best,’ I know, I know.” You throw your hands up in frustration as you brush past him to sulk by the fire, suddenly wishing you had another mug of that tree-sap stuff. It might even be worth the resulting headache.

Loki follows. “You were very… you seemed very carefree, when you were dancing,” he says haltingly, standing just to the side of the fire, his face cast in shadow.

“Yeah. You should try it sometime.” It’s a little surprising that he’s letting you be this snide, so you’re thinking that maybe some of your words hit home. Maybe he realizes how ridiculous he’s being, trying to ignore—

“I was invited to join,” he says, something odd in his tone. “I declined.”

The ‘who invited him to join’ seems pretty obvious. “Oh.”

He continues to hover, and your heart pounds in anticipation - but you don’t know what it is you’re anticipating. Maybe he doesn’t, either. The fire crackles, and Loki holds out his hand. “Partnered dances are more common on Asgard. I only have a moment before I must return to the celebrations, but if you’d like for me to teach you the first steps of one…”

You’re stunned, and Loki looks extremely uncertain. Oh.

You take his hand. “I’d like that,” you tell him as he pulls you to your feet. “I’d like that very much.”

Chapter End Notes

Beautiful lovely readers, I absolutely adore you all! Just needed to get that out there.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Life on Jotunheim is... complicated. Yeah, ‘complicated.’ That’s one way of putting it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s late in the night when Loki returns to his room, and you’ve long since fallen asleep, curled up in his bed and carefully tucked under the blankets. You’d tried to stay up to wait for him, but exhaustion eventually won out, and you’re a little startled when the cold air suddenly brushes against your skin as he crawls into bed with you.

“Loki?” you whisper, rolling over and squinting in the darkness. “Everything okay?”

“No,” he mumbles, dragging you close, “but is it ever?”

You smell the sweet spice of drink on his breath, and your nose crinkles. “Are you drunk?”

“Possibly. Only a little.”

“Loki—”

“It is your own fault, mortal,” he says, his tone bordering on petulant. “You laid here pining for me for hours after I left. Wretched girl. It was nearly impossible to concentrate.”

Mortification seeps through you, because it might be true, if you’re being totally honest with yourself, that you’d been feeling a bit more friendly towards him after his little dance lesson - a feeling made much worse by the fact that he’d insisted on tucking you into bed afterwards. And sure, maybe you had daydreamed a little bit about how pretty and imposing he looked, all decked out with his Jötunn markings highlighted, and maybe - just maybe - you’d considered giving yourself some relief.

You hadn’t, because the thought of being suddenly interrupted was too terrifying, but you might’ve considered it.

“Sorry,” you whisper. “I didn’t mean—”

“So miserable,” Loki continues, and you freeze as his hand wraps loosely around your neck. His thumb caresses the hollow of your throat, but he doesn’t do anything else, and your heart pounds. “Some lord from the west was trying to convince me to marry his niece, and meanwhile all I could think of was you, here in my bed, wanting.”

Oops. “I didn’t realize you could… tell. From that far away, I mean.”

“Oh, I can. I can tell now, as well.”

Your racing heart seems to speed even more, anticipation building. You want to kiss him, but you don’t. You do, however, decide to run your fingers through his hair. “I’m glad you didn’t dance with
Skaði,” you whisper. It can’t hurt to admit; he probably won’t even remember it, when the morning comes.

“I am glad that I danced with you,” he replies, sighing sleepily as he nuzzles against your hair. “Very pretty.”

“You think so?”

He makes a soft hum of acknowledgement. “I’ll have to kill my brother. Too interested in you.”

_What lovely pillow talk._ “Um, I really don’t think that’s a problem, Loki. We’re like… irrevocably bonded already, remember?”

“Could still try to steal you away.” He yawns, then rolls onto his back, and you rest your head on his chest, listening to his slow, steady heartbeat. “And you are my mortal, you know.”

He sounds a little petulant, and if he wasn’t threatening to murder one of his siblings while half-asleep and tipsy, you’d almost be tempted to laugh. “Yeah?”

“My bondmate.” He yawns again, and when he speaks, his voice is barely audible. “I wish that things were different.”

“You do?”

But Loki doesn’t answer, and you snuggle closer against him and listen to his slow breathing, wondering what sort of things _could have been_, if only things were _different_.

~*~*~*~

You’re really surprised when Loki is still in bed with you when you wake up in the morning, flat on his stomach, his face buried in a pillow. He’s got you pinned under one of his arms, and if it wasn’t for the very light snoring, you’d be a little worried that he was dead, because he’s completely limp and heavy.

“Hey.” You wiggle your arm free and run your fingers through his hair. “Loki? You awake?”

“No.” His voice is muffled by the pillow, and he doesn’t budge.

“Headache?”

“Mmff.”

He seems to like when you scratch his scalp, so you keep doing it, and he turns his head towards you after a moment or two, his eyes narrowed to thin slits. “Can I help?” you ask.

“This is helping.” Loki closes his eyes and sighs, and a wistful sort of happiness bleeds through you; he looks peaceful. _Content_, almost. “You really have no desire for me to get rid of Býleistr?”

“No. Definitely not. Save that energy for the people who actually deserve it.”

“Interesting. I thought you’d tell me that I shouldn’t kill anyone at all.”
“I mean, that’s obviously preferable. If it comes down to life or death, though, I’d rather live. I guess all of these close misses have made me a little more pragmatic.”

“Pragmatic. If only.”

You wonder if he’d be mad if you kissed him. Probably. You wonder, too, if he remembers anything he said in bed last night. Probably not. “What’s on the agenda? Gonna avoid me again today?”

Loki grunts in annoyance, then rolls to his side, looking down his nose at you - he manages to pull off a surprisingly-regal look, considering he seems to be dying of a hangover. “What do you want from me?”

It’s uncharacteristically straightforward, and you’re slightly taken aback. “…I honestly don’t know.” A declaration of love. For you to sweep me off into the sunset. Happily-ever-after. An extended honeymoon on Earth. “A kiss would be nice.”

“A kiss—” He breaks off abruptly, dragging his hand down his face. “That is all you want - a kiss?”

“Well, no, but it would be a good start. Like, maybe you could tell me good morning - bonus points for using my actual name - and maybe a good-morning kiss. Doesn’t that sound… nice?”

Loki sighs in annoyance, and you’re slightly hurt, but then he does say good morning, and he does say your name, and then, very delicately, he leans forward and kisses you on the forehead. “Satisfied?”

He’s still only an inch or two away from you, and your breath catches in your throat. No, you think, but you’re shocked that you got that much out of Mr. Ice-King, so you just nod. Progress, maybe?

“I meant what I said before, mortal. I cannot be what you want me to be.” He rolls over to grab a cup of water from the table by the bed, and you realize as he moves that some of his skin is still blue, a faint trail of markings trailing down his lower back.

That’s interesting. “And what is it that I want?”

Based on his grimace, you’re assuming the cup held the same bitter potion he’d once given you. “A lover. A life-mate.”

“We kinda already are mates, though,” you point out, yanking down the neck of your tunic to show off the irrefutable evidence. “Written in blood. Or written in skin, I guess. So, I don’t see why we shouldn’t…”

“Shouldn’t what?”

Your face burns. “Maybe try to enjoy it?”

“No. I can already barely think with you around; I couldn’t bear to make it worse. Besides, what sort of life would that be? You cannot tell me that you would be happy as a mistress, considering how keenly I feel your hurt every single time my marriage to Skaði is mentioned—”

“So don’t marry her!”

Loki leans away. “Ah, see? There it is.”

“You don’t even like her.”
“Even on Asgard, even as Prince Loki Odinson, mortal, I never once assumed that I would wed someone that I had any sort of genuine feelings towards; that isn’t how things are done."

The admission kind of stuns you, because the idea of Loki not just doing whatever he wants seems more than a little strange. “But you aren’t a prince anymore,” you point out. “You’re a king.”

“And you are clever enough to know that what you are asking me will send this fragile peace I’ve managed to establish into chaos. Jotunheim needs stability, now, particularly if my plans are to succeed.”

You cross your arms, starting to feel a little irritated - partly because you know that he’s probably right. “Well, it isn’t like you’re old, or anything. Neither is Skaði. We could spend some time together, and then I’ll die and be out of the picture, right? Problem solved.”

He flinches slightly, and you can’t honestly say that you hadn’t meant for your words to sting, so you derive a tiny measure of satisfaction from it. “Don’t say things like that.”

“You call me ‘mortal’ more than you call me my own name, so excuse me for being super aware of the fact that I’m going to die eventually. You’ve got time to be indecisive - I don’t. I’ve decided. I like you, even when you’re being impossible, like right now. So yes, I do want you to put off marrying Skaði, or marrying anyone else. She’s been engaged to Helblindi for centuries, anyway, right? I imagine she can wait another few years before she gets her claws into you.”

Loki seems upset, but he does look a little thoughtful, too, and you decide that’s a promising sign. “A… temporary union?” he asks after a moment. “That is what you are proposing?”

“You call me ‘mortal’ more than you call me my own name, so excuse me for being super aware of the fact that I’m going to die eventually. You’ve got time to be indecisive - I don’t. I’ve decided. I like you, even when you’re being impossible, like right now. So yes, I do want you to put off marrying Skaði, or marrying anyone else. She’s been engaged to Helblindi for centuries, anyway, right? I imagine she can wait another few years before she gets her claws into you.”

“I mean, anything with me is gonna be ‘temporary’ by default, isn’t it?” Crap, here come the tears. You’d hoped that you were calm enough to manage this conversation without crying, but it turns out that discussing your eventual demise isn’t as easy as you might’ve hoped. “But there’s ‘you better send me home right now’ temporary, and then there’s ‘we try to enjoy the time we have’ temporary, y’know?”

“I will consider it.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yes, but I make no promises. We’ll have to discuss it later; I was speaking truthfully when I said that it was not a good time to deal with this problem of ours. We’ll be leaving tomorrow morning for the mountains in the east, and it will be a difficult journey.”

Your heart skips. “Wait, we’re leaving again? So soon?”

Wincing, Loki clamps a hand over your mouth. “Volume, mortal. Norns, my head is pounding. And yes, I have little choice; the mountain giants in the east are unsettled by my ascension, it would seem. They want a show of good faith; in this case, for me to leave my sanctuary and visit with my court, and likely to select one of their women to bring back with me. One of their lords spoke with me last night - Kaldgrani, he is called. From what I gather, he is not a great admirer of the Queen Mother, and he is eager to increase the influence of the mountain giants in the court.”

You pull his hand away from your face, and it doesn’t escape your notice that he lets you hold it in your lap. “The one who wants you to marry his niece?” you ask quietly.

“How do you know about that?” His eyes narrow.

“You told me, remember? Last night.”
He seems embarrassed. “Oh. Well, yes, he’s the one. I should warn you that the Bergrisar are different, more… rough.”

“Bergrisar?”

“The mountain giants. They will not understand why I am so careful with you, so permissive. Truly, I would almost be tempted to leave you behind here in the palace, but I’m not certain that even your twins could keep you safe in the long-term, and I fear that the distance might be taxing, given how often I have to renew the charms to keep you warm.”

“Worse than the Iron Forest?” you ask. “Worse than Skaði’s castle?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Great.” Squeezing his fingers, you attempt to force a reassuring smile. “Well, we’re hard to kill, right? I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

Though he returns your smile, there isn’t much confidence in it. “One can only hope.”

~*~*~*~

A servant brings something for Loki to eat before long, and he shares it with you, though you aren’t really feeling all that hungry, given the heaviness of the conversation. “I don’t know how you eat those biscuits,” you tell him, frowning over your mug of soup. “They taste like pure bitterness to me.”

Shrugging, he selects another green biscuit from the plate and dunks it in his own mug. “I’ve had much worse. I suppose it must be an acquired taste. Jotunheim’s resources are very unevenly distributed, you know. They don’t have any sort of large-scale grain production, from what I’ve seen. I would very much like to eat an entire loaf of perfectly-crusted Asgardian honey-bread.”

“Honey-bread sounds good,” you tell him. “Maybe you could introduce that. I, um, I noticed in this book I was looking at that things used to look kind of different. Like, there was a painting of what I guess is supposed to be some kind of royal feast, and there’s a lot more variety.”

“And what book would that be, mortal?”

“The one the Býleistr gave me, back weeks ago. Some kind of old magical king wrote it, but there are a lot of interesting things in it. There are drawings from all over Jotunheim.”

“Well, that is to be expected; from what I understand, there was a time when Jotunheim traded with some regularity with the other realms, and I suppose foodstuffs were likely high on their list of imports. That is also one reason that Laufey wished to colonize Midgard; they could make comfortable colonies for Jötunn occupation, using the Casket of Ancient Winters, but they would still be able to leave enough of the planet untouched to be able to fully exploit its resources.”

You try to sound casual as you ask, “That isn’t what you’re planning to do, is it?”

“No. Midgard bores me.”

Rude. But still, it’s nice to hear that he isn’t planning to sweep down with yet another alien army to
take over Earth. That would definitely cause even more complications in your already-shaky relationship. “Good.”

“Would you care to take a bath?” Loki asks. He doesn’t meet your eyes.

“Yes,” you reply, kicking yourself for sounding too eager. Maybe you should be glad for your awkwardness, though, because you think you see a hint of a smile on his lips.

“I have no idea what I am thinking,” he says, “but… I do not enjoy leaving you alone. It is more comfortable when you are close. It would likely seem odd if I hid you away, in any case, so it is likely for the best that I bring you with me when I hold court.”

Sure, sure, you think. Whatever excuse you need, buddy.

“As Gjálp hasn’t interrupted us to report the untimely death of my brother, I can only assume that he’s decided to keep our secret, for now.”

“Told you so.”

Loki glares. “I still do not trust him. If he continues to test me, I will be rid of him.”

“Big brother of the year. Maybe you should mentor him, or something. Take him under your wing. Y’know? Because I think one reason he bothers you so much is that he reminds you of yourself, Loki.”

“I’m insulted. He made it explicitly clear that he owes his allegiance to his brother, in any case.”

Shrugging, you get up to collect a change of clothes. “I think it would be worth a shot. You could use more allies, couldn’t you? You’re putting a lot of pressure on Greip and Gjálp, and they’ve got enough going on already.”

The trip to the steam-pools is a little awkward. You’d just been holding a perfectly-normal conversation with him, but you have no choice to act demure and servile in the halls, trailing just behind him, your clothes clasped in your arms and your head slightly bowed. Stupid Jotunheim. If you were queen— well, you probably shouldn’t think about that. You’ll just end up falling into stupid daydreams of things that are never going to happen - your brain is kind of masochistic in that way.

Both you and Loki just stand there in silence once you’re safely hidden away in the bathing room, and if it wasn’t so uncomfortable, you’d probably think that it was funny that he’s gone from teasing you whenever he gets the chance to acting so uncertain, now that you have actually admitted that you like him. Gotta take matters into my own hands, I guess.

He clears his throat. “I will get in,” he says. “You may follow at your leisure.” He turns to look at you over his shoulder, then, his eyes widening in shock when he finds you already half-undressed. “What are you doing?”

You finish pulling off your tunic, praying to whoever’s listening that you don’t have a very unflattering blush going on right now. “Just… y’know. Trying to seduce you.” When you begin to comb the tangles out of your hair, tilting back your head and putting your neck prominently on-display, Loki makes a strangled sort of sound in the back of his throat. It makes you feel powerful. The leggings you wore last night have a tricky clasp on the side, and you begin to struggle with it, frowning. Not the most seductive outfit, maybe. Notes for next time.

“Pet…” He was probably going for a warning tone, you imagine, but it comes out sounding more
pleading than anything else. Maybe you aren’t quite so terrible at this whole ‘seduction’ thing.

The clasp still isn’t unfastening. “Are you going to help me with this, or not?”

Loki licks his lips.

You never find out what he was planning to say, however, because someone begins banging on the heavy door so hard that it shakes, and you shriek in surprise and scramble for your shirt; based on what you’ve seen of the giants so far, you’re about to have company. “Sire,” a man’s voice calls from the other side of the door, “apologies, but the queen has requested your assistance at once - there has been an altercation in the throne room.”

Cursing, Loki pulls his own jacket back on, then helps you right your collar, the backs of his fingers just barely brushing against your skin, sending sparks racing through you. “Did you know that you are maddening?” he hisses, but you wrap your arms around his neck and drag him down for a kiss, and then your feet leave the ground as he hoists you up and pins you against the wall, his hands digging into your thighs.

“I will be there in a moment,” he calls, voice slightly hoarse, and then he bites your lip, taking control of the kiss. The footsteps recede in the hallway - though you barely notice. “Is this what you wanted?” he asks in a whisper, pressing against you.

Oh, God, the want - you’ve never wanted anything in your life more than you want him. You aren’t entirely certain if it would be possible to want anything more. “Yes.”

He kisses you soundly, then pulls away, dropping you on the cold stone floor. “Good,” he says, a snide little smirk on his face. “Then you can enjoy our feelings alongside me while I deal with ruling a kingdom.”

“I… what?” you splutter, your brain scrambling to catch up through the very lusty fog that’s consumed you.

“You are always very concerned with what is fair, isn’t that so? This is fairness - if you intend to torment me, then you can share my torment.” He holds out a hand, and you take it, allowing him to pull you to your feet, your legs slightly shaky. “You really should know by now that it isn’t wise to play games with me.”

“I wasn’t playing a game,” you begin to protest, but Loki places a quieting finger over your lips, shushing you.

“Oh, yes you were,” he replies. “And now you’ve lost. Enjoy the consequences, mortal.”

Damn it. You feel a little bit like you’re going to implode, and your skin is hot. “Wait, Loki—”

“Hurry and put on your cloak, we haven’t any time to lose. An ‘altercation’ could mean anything; I need to take care of it, and quickly.”

You’re flabbergasted. How can he just turn himself off like that? Only, he definitely isn’t actually turned off, because if the way you’re feeling is any indication of how he’s feeling, he’s about two breaths away from jumping you, and there’s a very obvious bulge in his pants. That masochistic ass, you think, your hands curling into fists at your sides. Getting us both going and then literally dropping me...

Though, to be fair, ‘an altercation in the throne room’ does seem like a pretty significant concern. You bite back your boiling frustration and wrap your cloak around your shoulders, shuddering as the
fur brushes against the too-sensitive skin of your neck.

Loki shoves the door open and storms out into the hallway, and you scramble to keep up, your legs still horribly wobbly. That did not work out as you’d hoped.

The throne room is loud and chaotic when you reach it, and Gjálp is by your side almost the second that you step in through the entryway, quickly ushering you over to the side. Giants fall to the side as Loki makes his way up to the dais, and you blink furiously as a golden glow sweeps over him - but there’s nothing wrong with your eyes. He’s changed his outfit with magic, it seems, a golden-horned helmet appearing on his head. Well, you think, that’s definitely familiar. It’s a look that was splashed all over the news, following the Battle of New York.

There’s a lump in your throat. You keep trying to ignore your nagging conscience about the whole ‘Battle of New York’ situation. But that Loki, the Loki you’d seen on TV… he doesn’t seem like the Loki you’ve come to know. Sure, he wants to rule the world, but he isn’t the crazed lunatic that you’d assumed when he launched a devastating attack on Earth; in fact, you can’t really imagine him doing something like that, now.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asks as he settles onto his throne, his voice only slightly raised, and the chatter immediately dies. “Who has dared to disturb the peace of Loki Laufeyson’s throne room?”

Fárbauti bows her head to him slightly, then turns back to the room. “Lord Kaldgrani has taken offence, my king, at the perceived slights he has received from my court.”

The giant standing at the foot of the dais looks absolutely terrifying, and your pulse quickens; he’s the guy you’re going to visit? No way. You’re pretty sure he’s got to be at least ten feet tall, as he towers over even most of the Forest Giants standing guard near the bottom of the steps. His skin is cracked and craggy, a mottled sort of dark grey.

“And what slights might those be, Lord Kaldgrani?”

“Queen Fárbauti likes to imagine that she and her tribe still rule Jotunheim, sire,” the giant rasps, his voice loud and grating. “And that she has the right to question my presence in Utgard, to prevent us from developing valuable alliances with the rest of the Jötnar.”

Loki frowns. “I think that he has made his reasons for coming to court perfectly clear, Fárbauti. I will be travelling to the mountains tomorrow, along with the court, and I will consider a marriage alliance with the Bergrisar.”

“And well you might,” she replies icily, “but I will not.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning,” Kaldgrani booms, “that I am also in need of another woman, and the queen refuses to negotiate with me.”

Damn, you think, he wants to marry Fárbauti? Then you notice how tightly Gjálp is clutching your shoulder, and you look up to find her face pale, her bottom lip pinched between her teeth.

“I did not refuse to negotiate,” Fárbauti retorts. “I only assured you that the girl’s father would not approve of her wedding a mountain giant, and particularly not you, Kaldgrani - you know well that Geirröðr would have no interest in uniting your houses.”

Oh, no. You frantically scan the crowd, realization hitting you like a freight train. Where’s Greip?
“That is the point of negotiations, is it not?”

“Nothing gives you the right to disrupt my court, Kaldgrani,” Loki says, drumming his fingers on the arm of his throne. You wonder if he’s figured out that the guy’s set his beady eyes on Greip. He probably has; Loki’s always pretty quick on the uptake. “Even your own search for marital bliss.” Some of the giants in the room laugh, but Kaldgrani just looks more pissed. The guy clearly has a temper.

Great, you think. Can’t wait to stay in his house. That’ll sure be fun. You risk giving Gjálp’s hand a reassuring little pat, and she squeezes your shoulder in acknowledgement. “I do not know where she is,” she whispers in your ear. “She heard him discussing her with some of his men and fled the room, before he approached Fárbaúti.”

“Queen Fárbaúti still holds sway over her own clan, of course,” Loki continues. “I will not interfere with such matters. I would suggest, however, that you show her the respect that she deserves as the Queen Mother, particularly as you seek to gain my favor.”

You catch Gjálp’s eyes and nod towards the doorway. ‘Come on,’ you mouth. ‘Let’s find her.’

She looks conflicted, but after a moment, she nods back, then pulls you carefully into the crowd, working your way towards the back of the room without drawing too much attention. Loki notices - you know he does, because you can feel a little prickle of worry, but you trust that he’ll assume that Gjálp is just removing you from a tense, potentially-dangerous situation.

As soon as you’re in the hallway, Gjálp takes your hand and practically sprints. “I do not know where my sister has gone,” she says, “but I could certainly make a guess.” She leads you down an unfamiliar hall, and you realize that you’re moving farther and farther away from the heart of the palace, where Loki keeps you; the temperature in the air drops, and the halls narrow. You pass a few giants, but most of them seem to be servants, and other than a few curious looks, they don’t pay you much mind.

Finally, she reaches a door and begins to pound on it with all of her might, her cheeks slightly flushed. It opens after a moment, and Hrosspjófr stands there half-dressed, his eyes wide and innocent. There are a few bags on the nest of furs that must be his bed in the corner, and it looks like he’s in the process of packing.

“Yes?” he says, leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed against his chest. “Can I help you?”

Chapter End Notes

Y’all know you’re amazing, right?? Because you’re amazing!! <3<3<3
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

It’s evident that no one on Jotunheim has ever read Romeo and Juliet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hrossþjófr’s brow lifts slightly as you and Gjálp stand staring at him. Her cheeks are flushed lavender, and you can tell that her mind is spinning in a million different directions.

“My sister.” Gjálp shoves past him into the room, and you scurry after her. “Is she—” She falters; the room is clearly empty, and you’re guessing that she’d be able to smell if Greip had been by recently. “You have not seen her?”

The vague amused look on his face immediately disappears, and Hrossþjófr follows you into the room, closing the door behind him. “What do you mean?” he hisses. “She is gone?”

Gjálp frowns. “I’d thought that perhaps she had come to speak with you. A Bergrisi lord was very taken with her dancing at the festival, and he expressed his interest to the queen earlier this morning… Sister left the assembly, and I have not seen her since.”

“Kaldgrani?”

“Yes!”

“He has a wife, hasn’t he?”

“He is seeking another, it seems.” Gjálp hesitates for a moment, worrying her lip between her teeth. “One that might have… have a better chance of producing children.”

“What?” you cry. “No way.”

“Well, the queen did rebuff him, but Greip did not hear their exchange. But the fact of the matter is, if the match was made, she would be expected to accept it.”

Hrossþjófr scoffs. “She would never accept a match to such a lumbering troll of a man.”

“I do not want her to, either,” Gjálp retorts, throwing up her hands. “But you do not know our father; he will not tolerate disobedience.”

“Oh, I know enough. Geirröðr is infamous among the Stormr-Jötnar, and besides that, I have witnessed his hospitality myself.”

“We don’t have time to argue over the whole arranged-marriage issue right now, guys,” you say. “We should find her, first, and make sure she knows she isn’t gonna have to marry Rocky.”

Gjálp gives you a strange look, but Hrossþjófr nods. “In-Unga is right,” he says. “I wouldn’t want my little ice-heart to run off without me.”
“Your what—” Gjálp begins, rounding on him.

“You heard me, iviðja. If your lovely sister decides to marry anyone, it is going to be me.” He smiles. “She is in love with me, you know.”

“But—”

“Gjálp,” you interrupt, “it can wait. Let’s go.”

“I am nearly certain that I know where to find her,” Hrossþjófr says. “She’ll likely be in the stables with her animals. I am not entirely sure that I remember how to find them, however.”

“I do.” Gjálp takes your hand. “We’ll have to tread carefully; Lady Skaði will be very displeased if she spies the three of us sneaking about the palace.”

If this entire Jotunheim adventure was a video game, you think, creeping through the hallways only a few minutes later, your heart in your throat, then this would be the needlessly-complicated side mission.

Gjálp and Hrossþjófr are both pretty good at sneaking around, and you can’t help but be a little jealous of the fact that they’re so damn graceful, despite being much larger than you. You manage to reach one of the courtyards without attracting much notice, and you soon find that the stables, like everything else on Jotunheim, are absolutely massive.

“Wait here a moment,” Hrossþjófr says, “and I will go to her.”

That idea seems completely objectionable to Gjálp, and her eyes narrow as she moves to block his path. “I am her sister.”

“And I have never disputed that.” He sidesteps around her, and Gjálp radiates frustration as he slams the stable door closed in her face.

You place a hand on her arm. “Give them a second, Gjálp. I think… I think they need it. I think they might need to have a conversation.”

“But—”

“Just trust me.” She relents, nodding, but you can practically taste the anxiety seeping from her - something else to worry about, you guess. “Gjálp,” you ask, “what are the mountain giants like?”

Her lips purse. Not a good sign. “They are… rougher,” she says after a moment. “It will not be the same as it has been for you in the court. Those who dwell in the mountains only reluctantly acknowledge the authority of the king in Utgard.”

“Jesus, does anyone get along on this planet?”

“Divisions are very difficult to overcome, In-Unga - you must consider that some of the lords have been feuding for centuries now, and so the bad blood remains fresh. I suppose it is easier to let old things die on Midgard—” She catches herself, flushing suddenly. “I am sorry; I did not mean to remind you of—”

“It’s okay,” you tell her, even though your smile feels kind of forced. “Humans get old and die. It’s just part of life. It doesn’t offend me, or anything.”

But it does sting, if you’re being totally honest with yourself. Mortality sucks, you think. Hanging
out with immortals all the time is gonna give me some kind of complex.

If anything, though, Gjálp seems more upset than you are. She chews on her lip, looking like she’s completely at a loss for words. You try to suppress a sigh. Great. Gotta comfort her for reminding us both that I’m gonna age and die. The fun never ends on Jotunheim.

“It’s okay, I promise. So, the mountain giants don’t like the royal court, basically?”

“No. That is to say, they preferred the court in olden days, before things became so… cosmopolitan.”

You stare at her. “This is considered ‘cosmopolitan?’”

“Well, yes. Relatively, I suppose, but in the old days, the Hrímfursar—”

“The Frost Giants, right?”

“Yes. The Hrímfursar kings did not intermarry with the other clans, in the old days, except occasionally with the Bergrisar warriors. The court was very stratified.”

“And Bergrisar are…?”

“Those from the mountains. I am sorry, In-Unga - you are very quick to pick these things up, and I sometimes forget that they are unfamiliar to you.”

“No worries.”

Gjálp appears confused. “But you are worried,” she says. “I can smell it.”

“Human expression,” you reply quickly, slightly embarrassed. It would be nice if you could at least pretend to be calm and collected.

“I see.” She pauses for another moment. “Well, in any case, they are not fond of all of the intermingling that King Laufey and his father entertained in the court, and I expect that they will be very displeased to see that most of Inn-Illi’s retinue is from the forests. Many of them have not visited Utgard at all since Laufey died and Queen Fárbauti began to shift the court to favor the lords of Járnviðr.”

This planet is more trouble than it’s worth, you think. Good grief. “So, we’re just going somewhere else everyone hates us, then. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

A puzzled little smile appears on her face. “I suppose that is true,” she says.

The stable door cracks open, and Hrossþjófr steps out into the courtyard, a very abashed-looking Greip trailing behind him. Greip sighs, her shoulders slightly hunched. “I did not mean to cause alarm,” she says. “It is only… I needed a moment to myself.”

Gjálpa launches forward to envelop her sister in a hug. “You should know that the Queen Mother would not simply allow some Bergrisi to cart you off, Sister - particularly one such as Kaldgrani.”

“I… it is not only that,” Greip replies.

“Then, what is it?”

She doesn’t say anything, and neither does Hrossþjófr. In fact, he simply turns and leaves the courtyard, his face uncharacteristically blank.
Oh, for the love of— These idiots, you think, way more irritated than you should be - especially considering the fact that you’re currently in the middle of a very messy not-relationship, yourself. “Did Hrossþjófr tell you he loves you, Greip?”

She nods, her face crumpling.

“And you didn’t say it back?”

She shakes her head.

“But you do, right? And you want to be with him?”

“Yes,” Griep whispers, and then she buries her face in her sister’s shoulder.

You’re on the verge of launching into a pep-talk when the twins both stiffen and release each other, and a few giants pass through the courtyard only seconds later. *Pep-talk will have to wait,* you decide. *This place is a little too public for an emotional tirade.*

“We do not have time for these things,” Greip says, wiping her eyes. “I am told that we are bound for the mountains, and we should begin to prepare. I suppose we should write to Father, as well, and inform him that we will be gone from Utgard for some time.”

“Sister—”

“I do not wish to speak of it, Gjálp.”

You’re a little surprised by the force in her voice, but you get it; you don’t particularly like discussing your miserable, convoluted love life, either - and you don’t even have some kind of ancient clan feud to worry about, on top of it all.

There’s an awkward tension in the air as the three of you make your way back to their room, but Gjálp doesn’t press the issue, and neither do you. You figure your best bet is to just convince Loki - in private - that it’s worth pissing off the Forest Giants to set up some kind of betrothal arrangement for Greip and Hrossþjófr. He *does* seem to love pissing people off, after all.

Yes, it’s best to just get Loki to deal with it, you decide, and you square your shoulders, a new spring in your step. A strategic kiss or two, and he can’t *possibly* say ‘no.’

~*~*~*~

“No”

“But, Loki—”

“No, mortal. This is none of my concern, and you would do well to distance yourself, before you’re caught up in some sort of ancient blood-feud.”

“You’re one to talk,” you retort, clambering into bed. *No more kisses for you, Loki.*

“Meaning?” His voice is icy, but you can tell it’s just a front; it’s been a long day for everyone, it seems, and the new journey looming overhead isn’t exactly soothing any tempers.
“Meaning that you never seem to have any problems stirring up trouble when it benefits you.”

“I am not the God of Forbidden Romance,” Loki huffs, “believe it or not. If they wish to run off together, then they will have to accept the consequences that may follow.” You throw a pillow at him, and he swats it away, depriving you of the satisfaction of seeing it smack into his perfect, infuriating face. “You should be more concerned with yourself. Don’t you want to know what this trip to the mountains will entail?”

“Not particularly.”

Loki seems surprised, and he pauses on the edge of the bed, his vest half-unbuttoned. “No?”

“No. It’s going to suck, like basically everything on this planet sucks. Why even bother worrying about it? Hakuna matata.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Anyway, I would really appreciate it if you’d like… at least suggest the idea that maybe marrying Storm Giants isn’t the end of the world.”

“That would require begging a favor of Skaði… and I thought that you did not want me to owe Skaði any favors.” His eyes glitter, like he thinks he’s got you in a check-mate.

“Talk to the queen, then.”

Sighing, Loki returns to unbuttoning his vest, which he carelessly discards at the foot of the bed before joining you under the blankets. “You have no intention of letting this be, do you? You are going to plague me with your moods until the end of days if I do not interfere, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

A tiny hint of something like pride flickers in your chest, and Loki drags you down beside him, curling around you like a very-enthusiastic vine. “I will see what I can do,” he says, his face pressed against your hair. “But it will have to wait until our return, and I make no promises.”

“Good,” you say, wiggling back against him to get comfortable. “Thank you, Loki.”

He tenses, and you freeze, realizing a little belatedly that maybe your wiggling was getting a little too enthusiastic. Still, the little voice in the back of your head keeps whispering, demanding more touching, so you do something that, in hindsight, seems embarrassingly needy.

You move his hand from where it’s lightly resting on your stomach, dragging it lower. It’s a good thing that he’s behind you, because you’re pretty sure your face is probably glowing red. Loki takes a sharp breath, but he doesn’t resist, and you’re almost certain that you’re feeling his heart race alongside your own.

Any further thoughts of seduction evade you, and you clear your throat, simply holding his hand, which you’re relieved he doesn’t jerk away. That’s a good sign, right? “We got interrupted earlier,” you mumble. “In the bath, I mean.”

“I remember.” His voice is quiet, and his thumb strokes lightly over the fabric of your leggings. The faint touch only makes things much, much worse. “We only have a few hours before we will have to leave the palace,” he says. “We should sleep.”

“I can sleep in the sleigh.”
“Ah,” he replies, and you can hear the smile in his voice, “but I cannot.”

You feel kind of guilty, then, because he’s right; your life here on Jotunheim might be stressful, but at least you get to just sit around and hide behind other people most of the time. He’s got to keep up with a million different people, and most of them hate him. “Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“You should be.” His thumb hooks the waistband of your leggings and drags them down slightly, and you think your heart might’ve completely stopped. “All of this chatter, when I want nothing more than to rest.” His voice drops to a whisper. “But I know how to quiet you.”

_That’s it, you think. I’m officially dead. His voice is too much. Oh, well. It was a good life._

Loki caresses you with an almost painful slowness, and your teeth dig into your lip as you valiantly attempt to fight back a groan. He’s doing it on purpose, you’re certain of it. “Loki—”

“Hush,” he tells you, but he says it gently, more of a soothing reassurance than a command.

You melt in his arms.

Distantly, you feel more than a little bit guilty that he’s taking care of you, considering the fact that you’ve intentionally been trying to turn him on any chance you get. You’re eager to return the favor - but the second you try to turn towards him, his other arm tightens around you, locking you in place as he shushes you again. He whispers your name and kisses your ear when you come, and mixed in with all of the lust and satisfaction, that sensation of pride is still flickering in your chest - it must be his, you realize.

“Sleep,” he says, and you do.

~*~*~*~

When you wake up, you’re exceptionally groggy. You’re also moving, and it takes your brain a second to process this, resulting in you smacking your head against the wooden wall that’s had the audacity to appear right beside you sometime during the night. Cursing, you flail in your tangle of blankets, wondering if you’ve just been kidnapped.

But no - Greip’s face appears in the flicker of lamplight only a few meters away, and you realize that you’re back in a sleigh that’s either the same one you took to the Iron Forest, or an uncanny replica. “Did that asshole put a spell on me?” you ask, your voice shrill.

“The king did not say,” she says, her eyes wide. “But you have been asleep for some time—”

“Oh, typical.” You finally manage to untangle yourself from the blankets, kicking them aside with more force than is necessarily required. “Where is he?”

“The king?” Greip moves closer. “He is in his sleigh, with Prince Býleistr and Lady Skaði. My sister is with them at the moment, as well.”

_Why is it so dark? Shouldn’t the sun have risen by now, if it’s been long enough for you to set out on some stupid cross-realm journey? Your temper flares. “What about Heiðr and Hrossþjófr?”_

“They stayed behind.”
Great. Fewer friendly faces around to make sure no one kills me. “How long have we been on the road?”

“Around a day.”

“A day? I’ve been asleep for a day and nobody was concerned?”

“Inn-Illi would never leave you here if something was wrong,” Greip protests. “And you mortals have strange little bodies - we thought that perhaps it was a normal occurrence.”

It actually feels like you’ve been asleep for a week; your head feels clearer than it has in a long time, and while your muscles are slightly achy, it’s a satisfying sort of ache, like the kind that follows a good workout. “Why would he do that?” you ask her as she settles down beside you. “Why would he keep me asleep?”

Greip rests her chin on her hand. “I can only hazard a guess,” she says, “but I assume it is to spare you some of the stress of travel in these harsh conditions, given how the king seems to dote upon you.”

“You think he dotes on me?”

“Of course. Do you not?” She taps her finger on her chin for a moment, lost in thought. “Do you know, In-Unga, that I have never once seen a man act this way?”

“What do you mean?”

“It is… it is normal for mate-bonded partners to be very attached, of course; even if they do not care for each other, the bond is a powerful thing. I have seen this with my own father and mother. But the king treasures you. It is not the bond - it is his feelings. Do you understand?”

You can’t seem to find any words.

“I think that he worries that you will hate him,” she continues. “I have been in the king's presence long enough to understand some of his… how would you say it? Nuances? When he takes an action that upsets you, he becomes upset.”

“That’s just the mate-thing—”

“No,” Greip insists, a little more forcefully. “The bond is not necessary, nor is it responsible. When you love someone—” She catches herself, seeming only then to realize how her fists have begun to curl in her lap. Her voice drops. “When you love another, it is possible to make decisions in the interest of their wellbeing, even if they do not understand it.”

“The giants in this party are not the ones you are familiar with, for the most part,” she continues. “My clan - those of us who attend the queen at court - are familiar with you, at least. You are no longer such a spectacle to them. But, because of our destination, we travel with many Frost Giants, as well as Lord Kaldgrani and his men… and the king had you tucked away safely before any of them came to join the caravan.”

“Hmm.”

We’re going to have a talk about magical boundaries, you decide. Or maybe, if you ever figure out how to actually do something with his magic, you can just try it out on him and see how he likes it. He probably doesn’t even think about what it’s like to be unsuspectingly bespelled, come to think of it; he’s been using magic for hundreds of years - it’s probably just an instinct, at this point.
Oh, man. I keep forgetting that he’s so old.

Your temper lessens a bit. Greip’s right; Loki does seem like he’s trying to keep you relatively content, especially lately. And you can’t think of any particular nefarious purpose he’d have for wanting you to sleep the trip away, aside from maybe wanting to avoid feeling your stress for the entire trip...

Yeah, we’re definitely going to have to have a talk.

“Hey, Greip?”

“Yes?”

“Wanna play that card game?”

She smiles, visibly relaxing now that you’ve decided to stop fussing over love and magic and Loki Inn-Illi. “I would love to,” she says.

~*~*~*~

By the fourth day on the road, you’ve started to decide that you actually wish Loki’d knocked you out for longer; the weather is even worse than it had been on the way to the forests, which means that you’re spending basically every second bundled up in the sleigh. It’s too cold for you to go outside when the caravan stops for the occasional break, unless Loki is available to come by and make sure you’ve got enough magic to keep you from getting frostbite.

There was one particularly mortifying moment when you had to demand that Gjálp go and fetch him from his camp-fire. “Look,” you’d told her, “I’ve held it for as long as I can, and I’m honestly prepared to freeze to death if I have to.”

She’d rushed away, clearly worried that you might actually do yourself in by seeking out a bathroom in the snow, and it was obvious that Loki had been laughing when he’d appeared at the door of the sleigh moments later. “The innumerable duties of the king,” he’d said, and you’d been sorely tempted to smack him.

He’s been pretty good about stopping by to check on you since then, but he never lingers long. You can tell that the mood outside of the sleigh is tense, and so you decide that you can wait until you’re back at home to scold him for the sleeping-spell stunt.

Home. Your stomach drops. Did you really just think of Utgard as home?

That’s probably not a good sign.

Chapter End Notes

I love every single one of you I’ve been missing these updates for around a month
now, and I honestly cannot properly convey to you all how insanely excited I am to be back to this story! And the amount of sweet messages I had checking up on me really mean so much! 😊

I’d hoped to make this one longer, but I realized that the odds of me getting too sleepy and brain-fogged to make the second half decent were high, so I decided to split it!

Anyways, I really hope you enjoy it! The next update should have more action and excitement (and I’m hoping that I’ll be able to post it next week and get back into my groove).
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

It would be really nice if you could get through at least ONE feast on Jotunheim without everything going to hell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip eastward to the mountains continues on at a brutal pace, and you’re exhausted, even though you aren’t doing anything other than laying around in the sleigh all day long. Poor Loki, out there in the snow. It’s difficult to stay irritated with him when you miss him so much.

At least you can feel that he’s drowning in longing, too. Perks of irreversible mate-bonding, I guess.

Gjálp seems to have taken it upon herself to serve as your personal informant, and she seems relieved to have very little news to relay; things are tense, she says, but the king is staying busy on the trip by discussing some of the plans for the restoration of Utgard with his brother. In your opinion, it’s just exciting that Loki and Býleistr have managed to survive this long cooped up together, particularly considering recent developments.

Or maybe Býleistr is on his best behavior because he realized how close Loki was to losing it after the dance.

You wonder if you should be more concerned about Býleistr now being in on the whole mate-mark secret, but for some reason, you can’t help but trust him. If he really wanted to cause a stir, he could’ve just announced it right there in the middle of the festival, and barring that, he could’ve gone straight to report to Fárbauti and Helblindi - but he hadn’t.

To be fair, you don’t trust him completely - he’s definitely got a vibe that you can’t read at all, and that’s enough to make you nervous - but you really don’t think that he’s going to do anything to deliberately sabotage Loki’s rule.

Maybe you’re just too trusting. You did fall in love with the blue, world-conquering alien who basically kidnapped you, after all.

Greip has been unusually irritable for the last day or so, and you mostly try to ignore it. You’d feel like a huge hypocrite for criticizing her for getting moody over a man, considering how you’ve been feeling lately. Besides, it’s probably just from being cooped up for so long; no matter how much you like someone, being stuck in a box with them for a week can be a little hard to handle.

Gjálp seems to be growing more and more fretful over her sister’s dismal mood, and somewhere near the end of trip, she asks Greip if she’d like to join her in the king’s sleigh.

“No,” Greip tells her. “I will stay here with In-Unga.”

“I’ll be okay,” you tell her. “You should go get some of that fresh, icy air.”

She sighs, reluctant. “Are you certain?”
“Absolutely. Being cooped up isn’t good for you - believe me, I’m pretty much an expert.”

“Fine,” she mutters, and you almost laugh, because the fact that the twins starting to pick up some of your lingo is pretty darn adorable.

“If something tries to eat me, I promise I’ll call.” You’d meant it as a joke, but the twins don’t seem to catch on. They exchange a look, and you’re pretty sure they’re both about to volunteer to stay with you in your fancy little prison. “I’m kidding,” you hurry to add. “I don’t plan on getting eaten.”

“That is good,” Gjálp replies, “for I’m not entirely certain what we would do without you.”

Aww.

They finally leave, and the wind that whips in through the door chills you to the bone. When I get back to Earth, you think, I might just spend a month or two at the beach. A warm, sunny beach. Bet Loki would die over me in a swimsuit.

That’s probably not a train of thought you should pursue at the moment… though, you wouldn’t exactly mind seeing Loki in a swimsuit, either.

Bad. There’s a blizzard outside. Stop imagining getting naked with the king. Think about innocent things - fuzzy blankets, hot chocolate, crackling fires.

Unfortunately, you find that all of your daydreams lead back to Loki.

~*~*~*~

The path outside gets incredibly rough and steep near the end of your journey, and there’s some part of you that wishes you weren’t too proud to ask Loki to knock you out again, because it isn’t doing great things for your nerves. He’s constructed a little seatbelt sort of thing for you in the back of the sleigh, after popping in during one particularly jarring section of trail and finding you glued to the wall. It’s really nothing more than a strip of leather, but at least it’s keeping you from going flying every time the sleigh jolts.

“How are we even moving at this angle?” you cry during one particularly logic-defying moment, and Greip laughs.

“Hornburi and Vámúli’s claws are meant for digging in the ice, In-Unga,” she says, and you’re left with the terrifying mental image of two massive wooly rhino-things scurrying up a cliff after you.

I miss Earth animals.

“So, you’re sure this is safe?”

“Of course,” she replies brightly, barely wavering at all when the sleigh suddenly lurches to the left. “In fact, there is a speedier route that is too narrow for the sleighs to pass through, but travelling on foot does allow for far less comforts.”

“Yeah, and also, I’d die. Probably in like five minutes.”

Gjálp nods. “There is also that.”

“What should we expect when we get there? Everyone just keeps saying that the giants up in the mountains are ‘rough,’ but my whole time here has been varying degrees of rough, so I feel like my
perception’s a little skewed.”

“You remember Kaldgrani, the lord from the festival?”

“Yeah, he sucked.”

Greip snorts. “Yes, well, we will not be staying with him, thanks to his display in court. But we will be in Rann Steinar, the fortress of Inn-Kyrri, who is a dear friend of his… and who is also Angrboða’s uncle. It is a tricky situation. Even Lady Skaði is apprehensive, I think, for our people have few friends in the mountains.”

“The Bergrisar and Hrímrursar are relatively intermingled,” Gjálp adds. “Particularly in the foothills, where we will be staying.”

“These are only the foothills?” you cry.

“Oh, yes. Even we would not venture up to the peaks, In-Unga.”

“Only the nomads live there,” Greip says, “and they are hospitable to no one at all.”

Is anyone ‘hospitable’ on Jotunheim in the first place? you wonder. Maybe eventually you’ll get introduced to a tribe that’s super friendly and totally loves human visitors, but it seems that the odds of that happening are slim. “Everything is going to be fine here, right? We’re going to make it home in one piece?”

They exchange another look, which you don’t take as a particularly promising sign. “Of course, dear friend,” Greip says, a reassuring smile plastered on her face. “Of course.”

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You’re exhausted but wide-awake when you finally reach your destination, your fingers aching from your death-grip on the sketchy ‘seatbelt’ Loki made for you. The twins left to help guide the animals probably an hour ago, so it’s not like you would’ve had anyone to warn you if something had gone horribly wrong.

God, you think, I can’t imagine what it will be like going back down that incline. Definitely gonna ask Loki to knock me out again.

The man himself appears only a few moments after the sleigh grinds to a halt, wrapped in an impressively-thick fur cloak. Snow whips in the door behind him, and you grimace. “Will there ever not be a snowstorm when we’re on one of your stupid adventures?”

“You are in the land of the Frost Giants, dear; I can’t imagine what else you expected.”

‘Dear?’ That knocks the metaphorical wind out of you, but Loki doesn’t act like he said anything out of the ordinary. Maybe he’s just being patronizing. Or maybe it was an accident.

With Loki, is anything really an accident?

“I’m guessing you came to escort me inside, right? Make sure I don’t freeze my butt off?”

The corner of his mouth twitches, though he successfully manages not to laugh. “It would be a
terrible loss,” he says, “and that is certainly part of the reason.”

“What’s the other part?”

“I missed your company.”

“Oh.” Flustered, you hurry to add, “I missed you, too.”

Loki doesn’t acknowledge that, but he does reveal a thick bundle of fur tucked under his arm, which he unrolls with a flourish and carefully wraps around your shoulders. “New cloak,” he says simply. “It has half a dozen enchantments on it, though I’m afraid none of them will make you impervious to harm. They should keep you warmer, however, and dampen your scent. I thought that you would prefer being slightly less conspicuous.”

“You thought right.”

*It smells like him,* you realize, burying your face in the fluffy collar. “This smells like you.”

“Does it?”

“Mhmm.”

“Interesting. I would like for us to put your senses to the test, once we’ve returned to Utgard. It seems—” He’s interrupted by a loud knocking on the sleigh door, and he sighs. “Never a moment’s peace.”

When the door opens, an unfamiliar giant man is standing outside. His skin is cracked and a shade of dark blue that reminds you of a deep, frozen lake, and his expression is so severe that you can’t imagine a smile ever crossing his face. Behind him, you see a few other curious faces peering through the snow, all equally unfamiliar and solemn.

*I guess this is the welcome committee.*

“Inn-Illi,” he says, “will you come to meet with the lords?”

“Yes,” Loki replies, “I will. Come along, mortal.”

*Yes, dear,* you think, mentally rolling your eyes.

Being blatantly stared at doesn’t really bother you that much anymore, but it would be nice if the staring was at least bordering on friendly. A couple of the giants accompanying your guide are actually glaring - though, to be perfectly fair, a good chunk of their loathing is most likely aimed at Loki.

Greip and Gjálp move through the crowd and fall in behind you as Loki heads off into the snow; you stick so close to him that you practically trip on his cloak a time or two, but he doesn’t seem to notice. There’s an eerie sense of quiet, save for the howl of the wind and the occasional whispering of the crowd. It’s particularly strange after all of the bustle and chatter in the court at Utgard, and the contrast only serves to make you more anxious.

“Ornstunga,” you hear someone hiss, but Loki doesn’t even seem to notice. You figure he probably considers ‘serpent-tongue’ to be more of a compliment than an insult, anyway.

But then someone hidden in the throng calls out something a bit more loudly, and you feel Loki bristle, even though his steps don’t falter.
You’ll have to ask the twins about that one.

~*_~*_~*_~

The fortress of Rann Steinar is carved deep into the mountainside, the face of the mountain covered with huge hexagonal windows that look like they’re made of ice, thick and bubbled. *Like a sharp, uninviting honeycomb,* you decide. You wonder how they came up with that as a design choice; you’ve become pretty partial to the architecture in Utgard, apparently, because everything here just looks so blocky.

It’s very easy to tell which giants ringing the great doors that lead into the fortress are locals, because in these conditions, even most of the giants that came along with Loki from Utgard are decently bundled up. When Loki reaches the doors, they grind open, but no one moves. *Awkward.* You glance to your right, were Greip is standing, her arms folded, hoping that you’ll be able to catch her attention, and maybe she’ll give you some kind of sign as to what to expect.

But Greip keeps her gaze fixed straight ahead, and after making eye contact with a pissed-off-looking Frost Giant, you decide to follow her lead, clutching the Yggdrasil charm beneath your cloak. ‘Safe travels’ *needed right now,* please.

The longer you stand outside, the more uncomfortable it gets - in both a social and a physical sense. *What are we waiting for?* you wonder, nearly ready to break whatever protocol seems to be going on here and rush inside, far from the wind. On top of it all, you can feel Loki’s annoyance teasing at your senses, which means there’s *got* to be something going on that you’re missing.

“I do not like to be kept waiting,” he finally says, and then he steps across the threshold and into the hall, leaving the gathered crowd of Frost Giants hissing in disapproval.

*Oh, damn,* you think, scrambling to keep up. *Getting off to a good start, it seems.*

“Angrboða.” Loki doesn’t turn, but his voice is firm and carries well in the hall, and the giantess hurries to his side.

“Yes, sire?”

“If your uncle means to insult me, then he will have to put in more effort than this.”

She flushes. “Inn-Kyrri—”

“I need no excuses; I simply hope that Inn-Kyrri is as impressive as he seems to believe.”

Angrboða nods, and it’s the first time you ever remember her looking genuinely concerned. *Must be some kind of giant hosting-tradition,* you decide. *Or maybe it’s a huge faux-pas to make the king of the planet come to you, instead of escorting him in with open arms.*

Whatever it is, Loki must be in the mood to play games, because he just keeps heading down the halls like he owns the place, a crowd of giants filling the hall behind him. By the time your original escort catches up, the strange procession has reached yet another set of doors; Loki barely flicks his wrist and they slam open, and there’s more hissing behind you.
Have fun storming the castle, you think.

The massive chamber you enter next is surprisingly bright, the ceiling supported by columns that are streaked with some sort of glowing white paint that reminds you of the orbs used for light in the palace at Utgard. *Pretty.*

It’s also disturbingly *empty.* Where you’d expected a host of giants and their nobles waiting, there’s simply an empty throne sitting on a platform at the end of the room. And of course, because Loki has absolutely *zero* chill, he proceeds right to it and plants his perfect, frozen butt right down on the throne, a dazzling smile on his face.

“I suppose this will do until my chambers are ready,” he announces.

“Inn-Illi,” the guide begins, clearly flustered, “you—”

“I suggest you go and fetch Inn-Kyrri now.”

*This is weird.* You edge up the steps to the platform as a few of the giants storm off - presumably to find out what they’re supposed to do with their clearly-unwelcome guest. You’ve only just made it up to Loki’s side when a few larger giants appear at the end of the hall, and the locals finally start chattering. Just from the tone alone, it sounds like they’re airing some grievances.

One of the new arrivals barks something out, and the silence falls again, the crowd parting to allow them through. “Inn-Illi,” he says, “we did not expect you so… soon.”

“No need for apologies,” Loki replies, leaning forward in his seat. “It has been some time since any king of Jotunheim bothered to visit Rann Steinar, I’d imagine. I am certain that your leige lord is simply out of *practice.*”

Near the foot of the stairs, you think you see Býleistr crack a tiny smile.

*Glad you’re finding this funny, B,* you think.

A giant out in the crowd yells something, and Loki frowns.

“You allow a mortal to walk freely in the halls of our ancestors,” the new guy rumbles. “They do not —”

“I do not need you to interpret.”

The giant bristles at the sharp dismissal. “Tradition—”

“If you cared for tradition, my lord, then perhaps I should’ve been properly greeted. *If* that had been the case, then I wouldn’t have had to cross the threshold of Rann Steinar uninvited, nor would I currently sit upon an uninhabited throne. But Inn-Kyrri does not seem to stand on custom, does he?”

Angrboða steps closer, looking very much like she’s realizing that her prospects of pitching her clan as the ideal in-laws are beginning to plummet rapidly. “Sire,” she says, “chambers are ready for you, if you would like to see them?”

“Very productive of you,” Loki commends, rising. His eyes scan the crowd, and the smile fades. “I do hope that you all realize who is now King in Utgard.” His voice is smooth as silk, sharp as a knife, and scowling faces litter the crowd. “It would serve you well to understand that Loki Laufeyson is the only hope that Jotunheim has of crawling out of obscurity - and if you choose to trifle with me, then I would be happy to leave you all to rot here in Rann Steinar as a monument to
your traditions.”

Well, damn.

No one says anything, and Loki slowly steps down from the platform. “Lead the way, Angrboða.”

You’re kind of expecting everyone to come to a collective consensus that now would be a really good time to riot and murder this upstart new king, but they don’t - though if looks could kill, you’d be out of luck. The crowd is dead silent as the giants from Utgard (and their one accompanying human) leave the hall, and it’s even creepier now than it was at the beginning.

Giants are supposed to be loud. Why aren’t they being loud?

The giant that Loki addressed as a lord comes along with Angrboða, and you crane your neck to examine him as you follow Loki down the halls; he’s got a whole bunch of scars all over the back of his shoulders and head, and you wonder what it took to do that kind of damage… and how the guy managed to survive it.

When you reach the end of one of the dim hallways, Angrboða bows slightly. “These are the best chambers in Rann Steinar, sire,” she says, “and I will see that the rest of our party is situated nearby.”

“See that you do.”

She leaves, but the mountain-guy stays behind, and when Loki practically shoves you inside the room, he makes an appalled sort of grunt. “You will keep the creature in your rooms?” he asks. “The smell—”

“The smell is the main reason I bother to keep her,” Loki replies, and then he slams the door in the giant’s face. He grins at you, but you’re too offended to appreciate the teasing.

“He’s offended by my smell?” you hiss. “When this whole place smells like garlic and wet dog? I’m about two seconds away from giving that asshat a piece of my mind—”

“I need you to cooperate with me,” he whispers. “Think of it however you will - consider it acting, or playing a game. The fact of the matter is that this is a very unfriendly territory, and if I ever needed to seem aloof, this is the time for it. Please, trust me.”

You try to tamp down your temper; you’re getting better and better at thinking on your feet, as time passes. Maybe all of this constant stress is rewiring your brain. “Maybe you can bribe me.”

“Is that so? Little minx. What is it that you want?”

It can’t be anything too big, or he won’t agree, and you don’t want to waste your favor on something you could probably get without some ridiculous bribe. “I want… I want you to spend a whole day with me, once we’re back in Utgard. Only me. We can… well, I was thinking that maybe it could be like when we were on Asgard.” He’s giving you a strange look, and your face heats. “I mean, just hanging out in your room. Together.”

“That is all?”

“Pretty much.”

Loki seems surprised, and you turn your head away, wondering if you’re coming off as too desperate - though, the king does seem to enjoy feeling like you need him, whether he’ll admit to it or not. “That is acceptable enough,” he says, toying with a strand of your hair, “though I daresay you
might’ve successfully bargained for more.”

“It’s the little things. And… well, if it’s dangerous for you and the twins to act normal here, then it’s a little easier to deal with if I know we’re going to go home and you’re going to be… you. You know?”

He’s silent for a moment, staring off somewhere into the distance. “I know.” When you let out a relieved little sigh, Loki smiles at you, though it’s a sad, wistful sort of thing. “You are not the only one who takes pleasure in the gentle moments, pet.”

“Yeah?” Your heart is fluttering; he can probably tell. You can’t even bring yourself to be embarrassed about it anymore.

“Yes. And when Asgard is mine again—”

The door groans, and Loki drops his hand and quickly steps away from you, folding his arms. By the time the mountain giants spill into the room, the gentle look in his eyes is gone, and you mourn the loss of it.

“Are your chambers acceptable, Inn-Illi?” another one of the mountain lords grates, his head nodding in a faint hint of a bow. “Inn-Kyrri wished for us to convey his apologies that he could not receive you when you arrived. He will be returned soon.” His gleaming eyes turn to you, then. “He looks forward to hearing of your… exploits. Particularly on Midgard.”

“But I’ll be right back—”

“Of course,” Loki replies. “Just as I am equally looking forward to sampling Inn-Kyrri’s overdue hospitality.”

*Should I retreat?* you wonder. *Go hide in the bedroom or something?* It’s a tempting idea, but something about scurrying off seems like it might send the wrong message; you might be playing along with the whole ‘subservient’ thing, but that doesn’t mean you want everyone to think that you’re terrified - even if you are.

Besides, Loki’s the only one who can boss you around.

Another of the lords says something in a rumbling, sharp sort of tongue that you aren’t familiar with, and you deduce that they’re being purposefully exclusionary. *Strike one for you guys if I’m ever in charge around here,* you think.

In fact, you’ve been thinking a lot about little tweaks you’d make to life on Jotunheim, if you ever really got the chance to lay down the law. *First, no more human pets. Actually, maybe just generally getting rid of the whole concept of thralls would be a good place to start. Make love-marriages and dating acceptable things.*

And they could really, really use some non-green bread.

You stare at the giants and pretend that you can understand what they’re saying; maybe it will psych them out if they think Loki’s mortal is in on the conversation. They don’t pay much attention to you, though, and you edge closer to the fire, deciding that comfort and warmth take priority.

Loki seems to have it under control, anyway.

One of them sends one long, lingering glance your way when they finally turn to leave, and you puff up slightly, then catch yourself and look away. You’re feeling awfully *combative* lately, now that you think about it. It wouldn’t be that big of an issue… if you actually had any chance of winning in a fight.
Once the door seals shut, you look up from the floor, huffing in irritation. “I’m honestly getting pretty tired of this, Loki.”

“I know you are,” he replies. “And actually, I have been reconsidering my position on sending you back to Midgard.”

“Wait, that’s not what I—”

“Not at once, of course, but this is… It is increasingly difficult to see you this way.”

You squint up at him; he won’t meet your eyes, which is enough to make you a little suspicious. “What way?”

“The lack of respect,” he finally says. “They act as if you are some sort of animal, easily discarded.”

“They? Um, have you forgotten that me being a human pet was your brilliant idea to begin with?”

“And I am sorry for it,” Loki says, sighing as he turns to poke at the fire. “Haven’t I already convinced you of that? It was wrong of me, and I regret it, but you also cannot argue that it hasn’t been an effective method of keeping you safe.”

He sounds convincing, and you really hope that he’s being sincere. “So, what about Midgard?”

“You belong there.” He stirs the coals of the fire again with the iron poker, and sparks fly.

“But Loki, you just told me that you want me with you. Right? You said—”

“I know what I said, and what I want has not changed, but for your sake, I am offering to make this sacrifice.”

But… I don’t want to go, some panicked part of your brain cries.

“It would only be for a time,” he continues. “Midgard is hardly the safest of realms, in the long run, but it would allow me the time to focus on solidifying power, building an infrastructure that allows me more freedoms—”

“But, I don’t want to go,” you blurt out. Idiot, you immediately berate yourself. Idiot, you should want to go home. Remember the plan to go home and forget about all of this? Remember that?

“I am only considering it. All of this is very… This is not what I had planned, when I first came to Jotunheim.”

“Well, I didn’t even plan on coming to Jotunheim, so I think I’ve got you beat.” His lip twitches, but he keeps poking at the fire in stoic silence for a few moments, and you start to get antsy. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Loki sighs. “I am always thinking a thousand different things at once. I need Jotunheim - just as I need the might of Asgard. There is something coming—” He breaks off, and the fire pops. “I cannot go to Midgard with you. There are limits to my ability to be in two places at once.”

This time, it’s his joke that falls flat. “So for now, I’ll stay here,” you insist. “That’s what we already decided, Loki. And then… and then when things get better, we can figure the rest out.”

“And if they become worse, before they get better?”

“Then at least we’ve got each other, right? And the magic.”
“And we’ve got this,” you add, and then you shove him to the floor and kiss him.

Making out on the floor of a guest room in a moderately-hostile fortress is exciting, but it doesn’t necessarily lend itself to moving things along, and so Loki eventually drags you away from his face by the collar of your cloak, his hair dishevelled. That’s hella cute, you think. This is absolutely my favorite way to win a conversation.

“Do I still taste like fire?” you whisper.

“Absolutely scalding.”

~*~*~*~

Another day, another giant feast, you muse, doing your best to seem as uninteresting as possible as you stand behind Loki’s seat at the low stone dinner-table. Another ocean of unfriendly faces. Well, mostly unfriendly - you do have the twins, and maybe even Býleistr, though you’ve yet to completely decide whether his friendliness is more welcome or nerve-wracking.

Inn-Kyrri is almost what you’d consider unnaturally muscular, even for the giants of Jotunheim. He’s also wearing a necklace of really sharp-looking teeth, which you assume must be from some ferocious snow-monster that he’s killed; it doesn’t look like he even bothered to clean them. Interesting fashion statement.

He apologizes profusely - but not very sincerely - for his absence, and Kaldgrani arrives not long after to try to smooth things over, as well. It almost seems like he’s impressed that Loki didn’t stand around waiting in the snow outside of Rann Steinar, though it’s a begrudging sort of thing; he probably wishes he was meeting with Helblindi as king, instead. Still, you can see a calculating sort of look in his eyes, and you figure that he’s probably trying to decide how to take advantage of the situation.

It isn’t long before he makes his interests clear.

“If Loki Laufeyson truly wishes to restore Jotunheim to its former glory,” he says, “then to which realm shall we turn next?” That seems to get everyone pretty amped up; fists and mugs are banged on the table, and for the first time, some of the giants in attendance seem a little less somber.

“Asgard?” Inn-Kyrri continues, looking around the table. His eyes fall on you, and then they narrow, a cruel smile on his lips. “Midgard?”

“Uncle speaks well,” Angrboða says, just a bit too eager. “Laufey as king sought to bring Midgard under Jötunn reign, and it would honor his memory to finish what he began.”

“It was I who killed Laufey,” Loki dryly remarks, “and as such, I have no particular interest in honoring his memory. In any case, there is a Titan currently bound for Midgard, and I have even less interest in wasting resources on a doomed realm.”

You choke on your bowl of soup, coughing. That has to be a lie, right?

“A Titan?” It’s the first you’ve heard Skaði speak since you arrived in the fortress, and for once, you’re on completely the same wavelength as her - what the hell is a Titan?
"The Mad Titan, Thanos."

That doesn’t go over very well, apparently. Voices are raised, and more mugs are banged on tables. A couple of people shove themselves to their feet and start arguing, Angrboða included. Maybe you’re the only one out of the loop, after all. Býleistr’s giving you a really weird look, something verging on pity. Well, that’s not a good sign.

"Is this true?" Kaldgrani demands. "It is a pretty excuse, Ormstunga, but perhaps it is that you fear that you will fail to take hold of Midgard yet again."

"Of course it is false," one of the Frost Giants calls from further down the table. "Even the foolhardy Æsir know better than to trust the Liesmith. Midgard should be ours, as should the rest of the Nine. Jotunheim has spent far too long in the shadows."

Angrboða grimaces. "Perhaps it is only that Loki Laufeyson is hesitant to risk the displeasure of his mortal pet—"

"Silence, Angrboða," Býleistr snaps, baring his teeth slightly. "You will mind your tongue if you wish to maintain your position in the court at Utgard."

She blinks in confusion, settling back down in her seat. "Surely, Prince Býleistr, you understand that your father wished to establish a Jötunn settlement on Midgard. The resources—"

"I cannot imagine how the resources would be worth the cost, if it is true that Midgard will soon be under siege from a Titan."

"You do not trust that the forces of Jotunheim could repel an invasion of our occupied territory?"

"No," Loki cuts in, his fingers drumming impatiently on the table. "No, it would be a massacre, and it is never effective to attempt to defend a world recently-conquered; its inhabitants would be eager to take advantage as soon as our forces were depleted."

Several of the giant lords grumble at that, and you slink further back into the shadows behind Loki’s seat, heart racing at the way everyone is just enthusiastically discussing invading Earth. Loki wouldn’t actually let them even if it seemed like a feasible idea, would he?

"And what of Asgard?" Inn-Kyrri asks, holding up a hand to calm the chattering. "What excuse shall you make to spare the Æsir the wrath of Jotunheim, Odinson?"

"One might say that there is far more to be learned from Odin Allfather on the subject of successful conquest than ever could be learned from Laufey, Inn-Kyrri. Or have you forgotten which realm it is that watches over all of Yggdrasil?"

Silence falls over the hall.

The giant next to Inn-Kyrri pushes himself up from his seat, an accusing finger pointed at the king. "One might say that Loki Inn-Illi is a coward, as well."

"The Völva—" Skaði begins, but the giant slams his hands against the table. "That witch does not speak for the Hrímfursar, Skaði, and neither does Fárbauti."

"Do you dare to defy the word of your queen, Hvalmagi?" Skaði hisses, and you feel your heart leap into your throat, because you can feel that things are taking a definite downward turn.
“If that queen allies herself with a weakling *runt*, then—”

“Loki Laufeyson is no weakling,” Gjálp interrupts, though she looks a bit embarrassed once she realizes what she’s done. Her cheeks darken. “The king slew Mánagarmr,” she says, “and he possesses great magics.”


Gjálp looks like she’s about to lose her temper, but Loki speaks before she has the chance, his voice icy and sharp. “Do you wish to challenge me, then?"

The giant stands, his chair clattering to the ground as he towers by the table, ice crystallizing along his arm, a narrow blade forming from his fist. Loki doesn’t move, and you can’t seem to find the ability to move, either.

“I do,” Inn-Kyrri replies, and nearly everyone is on their feet now, save for Loki. “But not with your cheating, Ormstunga.”

Loki smiles. That’s when you realize that the vibes you’re currently getting from him are more along the lines of ‘excited’ than ‘concerned.’

“Have no fear,” he says, “I have no need to cheat.”

Inn-Kyrri hisses and begins to lurch forward, but Loki twists his hands in the air, a blue box appearing out of nothing. His eyes glow, reflecting the bright flash that emanates when he grasps the box’s handles… and the Frost Giants howl with surprise as their lord is entirely encased in a solid block of ice.

*Oh,* you realize, shying away from the blistering cold, *that must be the Casket of Ancient Winters.*

The glow subsides, and Loki places the Casket on the table in front of him with a purposefully-loud thunk. Around the table, giants stare at him in wide-eyed shock, half of them already with their hands on their weapons.

“The Casket…” Angrboða whispers, something like reverence in her tone.

“If anyone else would care to challenge me,” Loki says, “I will gladly accept. Otherwise, I suggest you all return to your seats. Inn-Kyrri prepared such a generous feast, and it would be discourteous to waste it.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I haven't been super active lately, friends - things have just been impossibly busy with work and life. I miss you all, and I'm very happy that I had the chance to update this week, even if it's late. Hope that you enjoyed it! <3

Love,
MoA
There has been a new bar set for awkward dinners on Jotunheim.

You don’t really understand how Loki can just sit there and eat with the frozen statue of the guy who was just getting ready to try to gut him looming over his shoulder; it’s kind of spoiled your appetite. Whether Inn-Kyrri is dead or alive at this point is something of a mystery. Can Frost Giants freeze to death? Is he just in some kind of stasis?

And if you kick him with your boot, will he shatter?

*Woah,* you tell yourself. *Getting a little dark there, aren’t we?*

Loki rips the meat off of some kind of bone with his teeth; he’s being less table-manners-y than usual, and you wonder if it’s because he’s still buzzing from the rush of all of that *power.*

Because, despite the fact that you know very little about what it can actually do - other than freezing people - the Casket that currently lies dormant in the dinner table is *undoubtedly* powerful. In fact, it’s powerful enough that you’re still feeling a little giddy just from the secondhand effect of Loki harnessing it.

That’s pretty neat. It would’ve been *nice* to have a warning before he opened the pocket to whip it out, but you guess that probably would’ve given it away. It feels like you got the wind knocked out of you again, and you can’t help but wonder if *you* could use the Casket, since he’s clearly leeching his magic from you when *he* uses it…

No one else is eating yet.

“No, pet,” Loki says, and then he hooks his arm around your waist and hauls you into his lap. *Welp,* you think, *I guess freezing Inn-Kyrri killed the whole ‘aloof’ plan.* Loki’s definitely feeling cocky - and so you kind of are, too, though your cockiness is thoroughly entrenched in worry. It makes for an odd combo of emotions.

It’s also turning you on a little, if you’re being completely honest.

“You have the king’s *permission* to be seated,” Loki says as the giants continue to stare at him and their frozen lord in stunned silence. “Sit. All of you. The first one to unsheathe their blade will fall where they stand.”

“Do as the king says,” Angrboða snaps, and the rest of the giants reluctantly settle back into their seats. She’s handling the fact that her uncle just got turned into an ice cube pretty well. “Sire, is my uncle—”

“Inn-Kyrri lives, in my infinite mercy. Perhaps Loki Inn-Illi *has* gone soft.” He gestures with the bone in his hand towards the giant who’d yelled earlier about him being a coward. “What do you think?”

The giant gawks, and it’s almost a funny sight. His eyes dart to the Casket sitting on the table, then to Loki’s face, and then inexplicably to *you.* Maybe he’s wondering if the mortal on the king’s lap will get in the way, if it comes down to a fight.
Loki pushes his bowl away, leaning back in his seat. Sprawling, more like it. “I will not entertain any further discussion on the subject of war with the other realms,” he says. “Neither with Asgard, nor with Midgard. Now is the time for Jotunheim to look inward; the cities are in disrepair, trading has all but ceased, and the tribes are scattered.”

“And whose fault is that, Asgardian?” Kaldgrani asks.

Loki scoffs. “You do realize that I had seen Utgard before my own attack on the realm? Jotunheim’s care has been neglected since long before my time, Kaldgrani, and these petty feuds have kept the kingdom fractured for centuries. Or are you not familiar with your own history?”

Býleistr, you notice, has started eating again, apparently unconcerned about the very radical turn the evening has taken. He almost seems entertained.

“This is a new era for Jotunheim,” Loki continues. “This is my era, and we will have progress. Do you all understand?”

“Yes, sire,” Angrboða says with measured restraint. “We understand.”

~*~*~*~

It has to be sometime after midnight when you make it back to Loki’s rooms, and you’re relieved to escape the rowdiness of dinner, which - once the giants seemed to come to a consensus that breaking out the mead was the best way to handle this disturbing regime shift - was pretty damn rowdy.

You’d been under the impression that Loki had been keeping the pace with the rest of them, but once he staggers into his room and slams the door shut in the servants’ faces, he smooths his hair back and turns to you, a crafty look in his eye. “I am very curious to see if anyone attempts to off me during the night,” he says.

“I mean, you did leave their ruler frozen like the world’s most avant-garde coat stand in the middle of the dining hall, so…”

Loki shrugs. “Inn-Kyrri challenged me, not the other way around; he knew that his life and dignity were at stake, should he fail.”

He plops down on a wooden stool by the fire, and you follow him, your hands on your hips - though the stern pose is probably lost on him, considering how your cloak basically swallows you whole. “While we're on the subject of reckless behavior, can we maybe talk about the lap thing?”

“What do you mean?”

Damn him for how convincingly he pulls off an innocent face. “What were you thinking, Loki? You went on this whole spiel about how we needed to seem distant around the enemy, then you cuddle up with me at the head of the table right after you whip out the Casket and freeze a dude solid at the dinner table. Zero subtlety.”

Shrugging, Loki catches a fistful of your cloak and drags you towards him. “The fact that I was forced to bring out the Casket to deal with Inn-Kyrri altered my plans significantly. Besides,” he adds, sounding slightly sulky, “the effort involved in opening my pocket and using the Casket drained me, pet. You were weakened from it, as well. Tell me that you did not find the closeness
soothing."

"The snuggling is nice, but the ‘being totally on display for a hostile group of aliens’ is not-so-nice."

"Hmm. Well, we are not on display now," he replies, and then he hauls you back onto his lap. His lips brush against your hair, and your mouth goes dry.

"Y’know, you called me ‘darling’ earlier."

You shiver, and the fire flares brighter in response. Woah, you think, eyes wide. *Did he do that, or did I?*

"Did I? I’m sure it was unintentional."

Yeah, right. "I liked it."

He kisses your head again, absent-minded. "Hmm. Well, you are fairly dear to me. I suppose I shouldn’t tell you as much, though - you’re certain to take advantage."

It’s nice to just sit there for a little while, all wrapped up and safe, and you realize just how much you want that to become a regular thing. "Hey, do I still get my day with the king back in Utgard, even though the plan’s kind of changed?"

"You spend every day with the king," Loki retorts. "But I will be sure to set a day aside for you, as I promised, so long as you keep behaving."

"I always behave."

"You rushed into a fight with a monstrous wolf after I explicitly instructed you to stay away, so you’ll forgive me if I question your judgment."

"Rude."

"Am I wrong?"

"No," you admit after a moment. "I might’ve gotten a little carried away, once or twice."

"I cannot begin to tell you how outraged I would’ve been if you’d gotten yourself eaten," he says. "I might’ve even dragged you back from Hel myself, just to chastise you."

You gape up at him. "Is that… is that actually possible?"

He shrugs. "Anything is possible, mortal."

"Oh." That’s a fair enough answer, you guess, considering all of the crazy, unbelievable stuff you’ve seen since you fell through the Convergence-portal. "Hey, Loki? You wanna go to bed and talk about magic?"

Loki lets out a tired little huff. "Of course I do. Unfortunately, I wasn’t only teasing before; I do need to stay up tonight to ensure that no one comes calling."

He’s got a tiny crease between his brows, the beginnings of a worry-line, and you smooth it with your fingertip. "You really think they’re gonna mess with you, knowing you’ve got the Casket tucked away?"

"The clever ones will steer clear, at least for the time being. The foolish ones might decide to test me. 
But, I can put you to bed, if you’d like?” He takes your hand and pulls it away from his face, but then he doesn’t let go, so you’re left holding his hand and watching the fire flicker in his eyes.

“I’ll stay up with you. And don’t you even think about magicking me to sleep, buddy, because that’s not cool.”

“I didn’t magic you to sleep,” he protests, beginning to pet your hair. “You were already tired and sated, and I simply gave you a slight… push. A nudge in the right direction.”

“With magic?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then it still counts.”

“If you say so, darling,” Loki says, his hand cradling your head near his heart. He’s quiet for a moment, then he adds, “That one was also unintentional.”

~*~*~*~

No one comes to murder you both during the night. It’s a huge relief, because you dozed off a few times, and you would’ve felt pretty guilty if assassins had appeared while you were useless and snoring on Loki’s shoulder.

There’s no sunlight to indicate when morning comes, but Loki stretches and tugs on a lock of your hair. “You weren’t falling asleep, were you?”


He snorts. “You should’ve gone to bed. You’re going to be in a dreadful mood all day.”

“Probably.”

“Wonderful. What do you suppose I should do with Inn-Kyrri? That will be our first challenge of the day.”

“Leave him frozen. They’re really big on challenges and power, right? I feel like he’s a pretty good example of why you shouldn’t impulsively attack the king.”

“Oh?” Loki’s eyes narrow, and he continues to play with the lock of your hair. “That is an unexpectedly severe judgment, coming from you.”

“I can be pretty menacing.”

“I can see that. And who, dróttningarefni, would you leave ruling the mountains in his stead?”

What does that mean? you wonder suspiciously, but considering the mischievous look he’s got in his eyes, you’re betting that Loki wouldn’t tell you, even if you asked. And he’s actually asking me for advice. Kingdom-ruling advice. Can’t let this go to waste.

“How about Angrboða?” you suggest. “I mean, she’s related to him already, right? So you won’t be
snatching power away from their family or clan or whatever. Just putting someone in charge who’s a little more… eager to please.”

“Wise counsel. I also suspect that you are eager to leave one of your competitors behind in the mountains, when we return to Utgard.”

“Competitors? I’m not competing with Angrboða, Loki.” You feel a tiny flash of possessiveness, and you clamp your hand down on the juncture of his neck; your thumb presses against the mark, and Loki makes a startled little sound that’s suspiciously similar to a hiss. “I’m not competing with anybody. You’re already mine.”

“Am I?” he breathes.

There’s a booming knock on the door, and you both jolt. “You are,” you whisper into his ear. “And don’t you forget it.”

Loki stands abruptly, and you tumble onto the floor; you try not to laugh, because there’s a very faint blush on his cheeks. You can’t imagine why he bothers pretending; it’s not like you can’t feel how turned-on he is. Intriguing.

I really should get bossy more often, you decide. Am I into that? Sure seems like he is. Did he know he’s into that, before me?

From his palpable embarrassment, you’re guessing he didn’t.

It makes you feel kind of proud.

“Yes?” he snaps at whoever is outside the door. “I thought I’d said that I didn’t wish to be disturbed.”

“My apologies, sire.” It sounds like Gjálp, so you go to join them. She’s wringing her hands. “It is only… the warden of Rann Steinat is asking if you might… thaw out his master.”

“I won’t,” Loki replies. “We’ve decided to leave him iced, for the time being. Go and fetch Angrboða, won’t you? Skaði, as well, and I suppose you might as well include my brother.” He turns to look at you for a second, contemplative. “There are some important matters that need to be discussed.”

Chapter End Notes

A shorter chapter for today, my loves, but I really hope you still enjoy it!

<3

MoA
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Compromise is never easy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of the giants standing around the fire in Loki’s chamber, Býleistr is the only one who looks like he’s gotten any sleep at all. Angrboða looks frazzled - but you guess that seeing your uncle get frozen is liable to do that to anyone - and Skaði seems similarly on-edge.

Loki is the only one seated, and he’s got his arm wrapped around your waist, holding you close to his side. Awkward, you think. I’d rather be chilling in a corner or something right now.

You sneeze, and every giant in the room stares at you. “Sire,” Skaði says, her nose crinkled in distaste, “is your pet… ill?”

“Perhaps it is the climate,” he replies. “Or perhaps it is because we are staying in such a dusty old relic of a fortress. When was the last time Rann Steinar saw any sort of improvements, Angrboða?”

“It would be before Odin’s War, at least. The resources have not been readily available——”

“If they were made available, how long would it take to restore the fortress, and to make the mines below operational again?”

Mines? This is the first you’ve heard about any mines. What’s in the mines, Loki? Hopefully not a Balrog or something. Though, this place does kind of give me Lord of the Rings vibes...

Angrboða rubs her neck. “A few months, perhaps? Manpower would be the biggest concern. There hasn’t been enough food in the mountains to sustain a large population for some years; many have moved down into the valleys in the lower reaches.”

“Will they return, if properly motivated?”

Okay, now I really wanna know what’s in the mines.

“I believe so, sire, but——”

“Good,” Loki practically purrs. “Then you, Lady Angrboða, will remain here in Rann Steinar in your uncle’s stead. If I am pleased with your progress, then you may consider it a permanent position.”

Skaði’s cheeks are beginning to turn a faint shade of purple. You can only assume she’s taking this as a sign that Loki’s playing favorites, and she’d expected to be the favorite. “What about Kaldgrani, my king? He is an elder, and the mountain lords would likely select him, if given the choice.”

“Oh, but I am not giving them the choice, am I? Kaldgrani is old and boorish. He has already disrupted my court and insulted the Queen Mother, and I have no intention of rewarding that sort of
behavior. No, Rann Steinar will go to you, Angrboða… if you are up to the task?"

“I am, sire.”

Býleistr sits cross-legged on the floor, apparently decided that the cold stone is preferable to standing any longer. “Do you suppose Odin Allfather has noticed yet that his treasure has been stolen away, brother-mine?”

Annoyance flashes across Loki’s face. “I am certain that he has, but considering the current state of Asgard and Odin’s own power in the wake of the Dark Elf attack, there is very little that he can do to recover it. He would have to send an entire army to take the Casket from me, and the effort of transporting so many Einherjar without the Bifrost would finish him.”

“And what of Thor Odinson?”

Loki’s fingers dig into the fabric at your waist. “If my brother is sent to take me in hand,” he says, “then I will deal with him myself. Thor is likely already returned to his precious Midgard, in any case - his lover was nearly killed during the Convergence, and he wouldn’t want to waste any more time.”

“Oh, of course not,” Býleistr says. “After all, time with mortals is so precious, isn’t it?”

“My time is precious, Býleistr - I’d advise you not to waste it.”

Býleistr winks at you.

Great, you think. Hope nobody else noticed that.

“We will be returning to Utgard in the morning, Lady Skaði. See that preparations are made.”

“So soon?”

“I have business to attend to in Utgard. With the gracious Inn-Kyrri indisposed, there is no reason to linger here.”

Her lips thin. “If I may, returning to the palace so suddenly might make it seem as though you are fleeing Rann Steinar, my king. Would it not be better to adhere to our original schedule?”

Loki studies her for a moment, and you few a tiny flicker of something coming from him - curiosity, maybe? Suspicion? It’s gone in a heartbeat, and Loki smiles. “Plans are made to be altered, my lady.”

Skaði nods stiffly, and that’s the end of that.

~*~*~*~

“What does the name of this place mean?”

“Hmm?” Loki peers over the scroll in his hands, half-asleep.

“This place, Rann Steinar… what does that mean?”

“Oh.” He turns back to his reading. “Hall of Stones.’ The Jötnar are not known for their creativity.”
“Are you not planning to sleep tonight, either? That’s terrible for you, you know.”

“I can go without sleep for much longer than a human can, while remaining functional.”

“That doesn’t mean that it isn’t bad for you.”

Loki shrugs. “If you haven’t noticed, I tend to prioritize survival over comfort. There’s no need for you to stay awake with me; I have more than enough to keep me occupied.”

Sighing, you gather your cloak around your shoulders and move to one of the cushions closer to him. “Whatcha reading?”

“Nothing particularly exciting, pet.”

You lean over his arm. The scroll is covered with diagrams, with what appears to be a map in the center. “I know what that says,” you announce, pointing proudly at the runes in the center of the map. “That’s Utgard.”

“That it is.” A small smile appears on his lips, though his eyes remain tired. “You learn quickly.”

“For a mortal, right?”

“No,” Loki replies. He turns back to his scroll, and the smile deepens slightly. “No, I do not think the qualifier is necessary. You are clever - a bit stupid when it comes to survival, perhaps, but clever, all the same.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess.”

“You should. It was meant as one.”

“Hmm.” You fidget with a loose thread on the edge of the blanket for a moment or two. “What did you go meet with Skaði about, after lunch?”

Nice segue, you tell yourself. Touchy subject successfully introduced.

Loki looks back up, startled. “Why do you believe that I was with Skaði?”

“I can…” Your nose scrunches as you try to figure out how to describe the sensation. “I can smell her, I guess? I don’t really know what to call it. Not really a fan, though.”

He sets the scroll aside, a very unconvincingly-bland expression on his face. “Is that so?”

“Yeah,” you say, immediately suspicious. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t… you do realize that you shouldn’t be able to scent out other giants, don’t you? I was only mildly concerned when it applied to my scent, considering how thoroughly we’ve bonded, but this —”

“Stop avoiding the question, Loki.”

“I am not avoiding the question,” he replies, affronted. “I am concerned about your wellbeing.”

“I mean, there are worse ways to get super powers than being bitten by a sexy alien, I guess.”

You think that was pretty funny, but Loki doesn’t appear amused. “These changes in you must be monitored,” he says. “We do not know what to expect; there is hardly a precedent.”
“Agreed. Now, tell me what’s up with Skaði.”

He tilts your face up so that you’ll get the full effect of his *regal* disapproval, his finger under your chin. “Must you question *everything* I do?”

“Mhmm.”

Loki studies your face for a moment, then sighs. “Lady Skaði obviously still wants a crown on her head,” he says. “I had to reassure her that this favor I have granted Angrboða doesn’t mean that I am breaking my faith with her and the Skögar-Jötnar. It is… difficult, this game we are playing.”

“I thought you loved games.”

“I do, but your fragility makes the stakes considerably higher.”

“Yeah, and how did you reassure her, then?”

“I dangled the prospect of marriage, of course. It’s the best incentive I can offer the Forest Giants to keep them loyal, at least for now.” His thumb brushes across your chin, and his expression softens. “Please don’t be upset, pet.”

*He’s got the prettiest eyes in the world,* you decide, slightly smitten. *So unfair.* “I’m only a little upset. I get that things are tricky. I just… wish they weren’t the kind of tricky where you’re basically engaged to someone who seemed pretty enthusiastic about sacrificing me.”

“It’s for show,” he says. “I’ll find a way out of it; I promise. Once we begin rebuilding Utgard, I expect to win more favor with the people; if I can deliver on my promises of restored grandeur, I am certain that Fárbauti will deal with any upsets among her people.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Loki replies, solemn. “At the very least, I will put it off until…” He hesitates, and you feel his apprehension tugging at your heart.

You decide to say it for him, to spare him the bitterness of it. “Until I’m gone, I guess. Right?”

*Pretend it doesn’t bother you.*

He pulls you close, tucking your head into the crook of his neck. He doesn’t answer.

~*~*~*~

You don’t remember falling asleep, but you stir when Loki stands to carry you to bed, and you cling to him like a vine. “Bed,” you mutter. “Hold me.”

“I am already holding you.”

“But in bed.” You decide to play your trump card, adding in a plaintive little whine. “Cold.”

Loki squeezes you closer to his chest. “You’re lying.”

“You *like* it.”
“I do,” he concedes. “I will stay with you for a moment, but only a moment. There will be no luring me to sleep in your clutches tonight, huldra.”

“It’s so not fair for you to call me names that I don’t understand.”

“I suppose it is. You are a succubus, then,” he says, tucking you carefully under the covers. He stretches out beside you, his hands behind his head. “A siren. Is that more to your liking?”

“If I’m a succubus,” you reply, “then I must be really bad at it, because—”

Loki presses a finger to your lips, quieting you. “You are very good at it,” he soothes. “Better than you have any right to be. Weren’t you supposed to be sleeping, mortal?”

“Mhmm.” You wiggle around beneath the blankets and the furs, trying to get yourself situated. “I’m glad we’re leaving in the morning, Loki. I don’t like this place.”

“Nor do I.”

“I know, but… it’s something different. I can’t…” You sigh, frustrated, unsure of how to put the feeling into words.

“I feel it, too,” Loki says, and then he stretches one arm out and gives you an expectant look, waiting for you to snuggle against his side. You happily comply, and he absentmindedly pets your head. “It is a sense of foreboding, of dread.”

“More than usual.”

He hums in acknowledgement. “It is likely something about this place. Ghosts of the past, and all that nonsense.”

“If you can feel it, is it really nonsense?”

“Everything is nonsense,” Loki replies. “Life itself is nothing more than very complicated, dire nonsense.”

Your face scrunches. “That’s—”

Loki presses his lips to the top of your head. “Sleep, little temptress.”

Figuring that he’s probably going to go ahead and abandon you in the bed if you aren’t at least pretending to try to sleep, you roll and nuzzle against his neck, burying your face in his hair. “I’m sleeping, Your Majesty.”

“Temptress,” he says again, but there’s a warmth in his voice that makes you melt. He holds you close, and you’re soon fast asleep.

~*-~*-~*-~

The giants of Rann Steinar don’t seem too choked up about their new king’s early departure, nor do they appear to be very pleased with the fact that their liege lord has been left as the newest decorative element in the main hall.
Creepy, you think, casting a critical eye over him. Inn-Kyrri makes a very terrifying ice sculpture, in your humble opinion; some part of you fears that he might break free at any moment and come charging after you.

It’s also just plain awkward; no one seems to know how to approach the situation, and you watch as the mountain giants repeatedly glance In-Kyrri’s way, clearly uncomfortable. What’s the proper etiquette for this sort of scenario? Do they respectfully acknowledge the statue? Ignore his shame? Is he even aware, in any way, of what’s going on around him?

Angrboða, for her part, is obviously pleased by her sudden elevation in status, no matter how uncomfortable the circumstances might be. She sits at Loki’s right hand, a smug sort of look in her eyes. You’re almost inclined to believe that she’d make a grab for Loki’s hand, if that was a standard display of affection of Asgard.

Loki’s brilliant plan, from what you can deduce, is to string both Angrboða and Skaði along, letting them both imagine that they’re in the lead in the race to the throne. It’s too risky, in your opinion, but you don’t really have any alternatives to suggest, so what can you really say?

Better do some brainstorming on the way back.

Skaði is the more dangerous of the two. While Angrboða seems to be mostly after elevated status and influence, Skaði is set on being queen - and Loki is the only way she can accomplish that. You doubt that he’ll be able to put her off for as long as the others, especially since he’s leading her to believe that she’s the frontrunner out of all of his potential wives.

She looks fairly content at the moment, though, sitting next to Býleistr and chatting away. You do notice that she doesn’t seem to make any effort to converse with any of the local giants, nor do they seem willing to engage her. I don’t think she’d make a good queen, you decide, and then you mentally smack yourself, because since when do you know what it takes to make a good queen?

At least Fárbauti cares about the overall prosperity of Jotunheim - or at least, Loki seems to be betting a lot on her putting Jotunheim over her own personal interests. You hope he’s right.

Loki glances up at you once or twice as you stand at attention by his side, and even though he doesn’t actually smile, you can tell that he’s trying to be reassuring. You’ll be home in Utgard, soon enough, and then… and then, you’ll have your promised day of alone-time with the king.

You don’t plan on wasting it.

~*_*_~

After breakfast and a lot of pompous speeches by the new lady of Rann Steinar and her underlings, Loki ushers you to your awaiting sleigh himself, his tension bubbling and palpable. Time to get the hell outta Dodge. He fastens your seatbelt around your waist and tucks your enchanted cloak around your lap, surprising you with a small kiss on your forehead.

“The conditions are dreadful,” he says, “and as we are leaving such a large number of our convoy here in Rann Steinar to monitor Angrboða’s progress, I will need everyone available to help drive the sleighs. Will you be alright without the twins, dróttning?”

“Of course,” you reply, though the thought of being stuck in this box alone instantly sours your
mood. “I’m pretty tough, you know.”

“That you are,” Loki agrees. “I will come to check on you as soon as I can. The initial descent is the most treacherous, and seiðr might be required, so don’t be alarmed if you feel the pull of magic.” He pats you on the head one last time, then springs out into the snow, fastening the door shut behind him.

Alone again, naturally.

At least you have some lanterns, and there are books to keep you entertained… though you aren’t really in the mood for reading. The lack of sufficient sleep over the last few days soon catches up with you, and you manage to doze off before the convoy even sets into motion.

You don’t have any way to tell how much time has passed when you wake up again, though you assume it must have only been a short nap, since no one has come around to see how you’re doing. The lanterns are still burning just as brightly, and the sleigh - despite being at an alarmingly-steep angle - seems to be moving along fairly smoothly.

Something isn’t right. You still have that nagging feeling of dread, even though you can’t explain why. It’s almost like a current in the air, a frequency that you shouldn’t be hearing—

Then you do hear something, a dull whumpf, and the sleigh suddenly accelerates, the animals outside bellowing in alarm. “Avalanche!” someone cries, and then your world takes a very sharp shift. Gravity yanks you forward, but your safety belt catches you, knocking your breath away. There’s a moment of stillness… and then the sleigh begins to accelerate, slamming you back against the wall.

This isn’t how I wanna die.

You try to brace yourself, but there isn’t much to brace yourself with, because most of the cushions and blankets around you have gone flying. The sleigh scrapes against something, and one of its walls buckles, the lantern attached to it shattering in a bright burst of glass. You shriek and close your eyes, clinging to the seatbelt for dear life.

There’s a high-pitched whine ringing in your ears, and you realize you’re on the verge of passing out. Don’t, you order yourself. Don’t faint.

Your head smacks against the wall as your trajectory suddenly changes again, the sleigh skidding onto its side. If I don’t pass out, you think, then I’m definitely gonna puke.

The sleigh starts to slow, but it’s also tilting at a worrying angle, and your stomach drops. If it flips… But it doesn’t completely flip - it lands on its side, creaking and groaning, leaving you winded and bruised and dangling from your seatbelt, unable to reach what has now become the floor.

Groaning, you realize that you’ve bitten your tongue; your mouth is coppery and bloody. At least, you hope that the blood isn’t coming from anywhere more critical than that, because you doubt that whatever magic you’ve got stored inside of you can heal you without someone skilled to direct it.

The lights are all extinguished, so you’re alone in the dark; even though the cold is sleeping through the cracked sleigh walls, there’s no moonlight, which must mean that the storm has gotten worse.

Or maybe I’m buried under the snow, you think, your anxiety cranking up another notch. Will they even be able to find me?

You have to get down, you decide, but even if you manage to unfasten the belt, you can’t figure out any way to reach the ground without letting yourself fall. The distance is enough to make you worry
that you won’t have an easy landing. **But I can’t just hang here forever.**

The door is now above you, and you know that it’ll be far out of your reach, once you’re on the ground. **Worry about that later,** you tell yourself, fumbling with the strap that’s holding you to the wall. Your fingers are stiff and cold, and the belt isn’t giving up without a fight.

**Screw this,** you think. Your ribs are bruised, and with all of your weight suspended by your waist, the effect is excruciating. **Please let nothing be broken.**

Loki will find you soon, you tell yourself; you can’t have fallen **that** far, can you? And given how fiercely protective he’s become, you can’t imagine him just standing around while you’re potentially buried under an avalanche of snow. **He has** to be on the way.

You’re still hanging there in the dark when you hear a scraping sound up near the door, and your heart pounds. “Hey!” you cry, “I’m here! Down here!”

The scraping becomes more insistent, and so does the cold, little blasts of cold piercing through the cracks in the wooden walls. **They’re digging me out,** you realize. **I really was buried. A tomb of ice.** Somehow, that’s all it takes to finally push your stomach past its limits, and you vomit, bright spots of light bursting across your vision.

You hear the splintering of wood as the door is ripped off of the sleigh, and then the sound of heavy feet dropping into the snow. That feeling of dread grows into a louder and louder buzz as a torch alights in the middle of the sleigh, violet eyes glowing behind it.

It isn’t a giant you recognize.

It isn’t even a **variety** of giant you recognize. This one is wiry, a mottled grey-blue that blends in with the shadows around him, white paint or clay or **something** smeared on his skin. He leans closer, sniffing, his nose wrinkled in disgust. “I found it,” he calls out. “I found Odinson’s mortal.”

Another giant drops down beside him, taller, but just as wiry in build. “Ymir’s beard,” he says, “the **stench. I will never forgive you for offering us for this task, Hymir.**”

He comes closer and snaps the belt free from the wall, holding you up in front of his face. “It is sick,” he spits. “**Diseased.**”

You open your mouth to protest, but you end up vomiting again, instead, and the giant drops you on the floor, cursing. “**This is the thing that Loki values so greatly?**”

“He is mad as Hveðrungr, they say.”

The tall giant sighs. “Well, we had best get it out of here with haste, before he comes to retrieve it.”

Terrified and dizzy, you barely have a chance to process what he’s said before he hauls you up by the belt around your waist and tosses you out into the snow.

Chapter End Notes

_After a little bit of fluff, THE PLOT STRIKES BACK! ;D_
Love you all, and I hope you have a wonderful weekend!
<3,
MoA
Half-buried in snow, you fumble around in the darkness, trying to regain your footing. You wheeze for air, but instantly regret it - the cold burns your throat and lungs. Blood spatters onto the ground beneath you as you cough and heave. Oh God oh God oh God, you think, clutching your aching ribs, please let that just be from my tongue.

The giants have climbed out of the wreckage of the sleigh, and you try to make it to your feet to at least attempt to run, but your muscles don’t cooperate. They loom over you, their eyes narrowed in contemplation.

“Look at the condition of the thing.”

“I say we kill it. Kill it now, and spare ourselves some trouble.”

“Well, we cannot kill it yet,” the taller of the two giants says. “If he knows that his pet is dead already, Loki will surely be less likely to bargain.”

“I am called In-Unga,” you snap, doing your best impression of Fárbauti’s signature regal scowl, “and the king is gonna kill you for this, you know.”

The giants both stare at you like you’ve grown a second head. Yeah, assholes, you think, I can understand you.

“The Vangsfólk do not recognize the authority of the King in Utgard,” the taller giant rumbles.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure he’ll take that into consideration before he melts your heads off.”

Their faces contort with anger, and you realize that you probably went a bit too far with that last quip. Oops.

“Silence it!”

“And how should I? You silence it.”

The shorter giant frowns in thought, then rips a strip of fabric from the bottom of his vest. “What a nuisance,” he mutters, then he balls it up and shoves it into your mouth. “Keep quiet now, mortal.”

Gross, you think. Gross gross gross. The rag tastes like dirt and smells like mildew, which means there probably is mildew. It might be a dumb thing to get upset about, considering the circumstances, but somehow the total lack of care just makes you even more pissed-off. After all, if you’re going to steal the king of the entire planet’s most valuable possession, shouldn’t you at least be organized about it?
Without your enchanted cloak, things are looking pretty dire; it’s freezing as usual, and there’s nothing to stop the wind from slicing across the foothills and directly through your layers of clothes. *This is bad*, you think. *This is really, really bad. By the time Loki finds me, all that’s gonna be left is a human-sized popsicle.* You try to yell at your captors that they need to keep you warm if they aren’t planning to kill you, but your words are garbled and muffled.

_Damn it._

The short one loops a rope around your neck, yanking it until it’s tight - and it would probably be tighter, if not for the collar preventing it from digging directly into your skin. *Are you serious?* you think. _It figures._ *Freaking Loki and his freaking collar. He’d be so smug if he knew it ended up saving my neck._

“Walk,” the giant says, tugging on the leash again, and you mentally vow to strangle him with it the first chance you get, Princess Leia-style. But you do walk, because the longer you manage to stay up and moving and _alive_, the longer Loki and the others will have to recover you.

“It is too slow,” the taller one complains. “Carry it again, Hymir.”

“You carry it, Sífnir. I have no wish to walk into camp carrying a mortal. It is disgusting.”

_Screw you, Hymir._

“I will carry it, but you must carry the bags.”

The short one grunts. “Very well. At least I will not smell of mortal.”

The giant called Sífnir grabs you and hefts you under his arm like you’re some kind of awkwardly-shaped duffel bag. “You’d best not kick,” he warns, “or else I will snap your legs.”

_Good to know,_ you think, going limp. _Good to know._

You don’t have the energy left to kick him, anyway. It’s too cold, and even what’s left of Loki’s spells isn’t enough to handle the blistering wind and snow. It’s even colder when the giants start literally _sprinting_ down towards the flat plains in the distance, Sífnir crushing you under his arm.

At first, you’re baffled as to how they’re managing to move so quickly when the snow is so thickly carpeting the ground, but then you groggily realize that the snow is solidifying into ice every time their feet land, forming what you could only describe as temporary snow-shows.

_Neart trick,_ you think, and then you groan as the pain in your abdomen grows, biting down on the rag in your mouth as hard as you can. _Okay, my ribs are definitely not okay._

The giants are moving absurdly fast, and you’re so out of it that you can barely keep up with what’s happening. There’s no way that you could manage to find your way back to Loki and the others, even if you miraculously managed to escape from your kidnappers.

You can’t fight your dizziness any longer, and you black out for who knows how long; when you come to again, you’re flat on your back, some kind of smoking bundle of twigs held right in front of your face.

Giants surround you. They’re all the same pale, mottled blue-grey, and all of them have those piercing violet eyes. The one holding the twigs stands up as you begin to cough and hack from the smell of it, a perplexed look on her face. “Look at its _strange_ eyes,” she says. Her and lips teeth are stained black.
That’s new. New, and kind of scary.

“Have you never seen one before?”

“No.”

“You should rub it down with that,” another one tells her. “The smoke will not be enough to mask
the smell.”

Sírnir pokes at you with his foot. “Odd smell,” he adds. “Not like any mortal I have ever seen.”

“Jötunn,” the woman with the twigs says. “The mortal smells of Jötunn.”

“They say in Utgard that the king takes it to bed.”

“Truly?” She stares at you, incredulous. “How?”

“Never mind that, if he is following as they said he would, then we cannot waste time.” Hymir yanks
the bloody rag out of your mouth, holding it carefully between two fingers, like he thinks it might
infect him. “Leave this as a token; if we remove any limbs, the creature seems liable to perish.”

“What?” you rasp, willing yourself to wiggle away, but your muscles don’t cooperate.

“It speaks?”

“Apparently so, and loudly.” Hymir jams a long ice-spear into the ground only a few inches from
your head, and you barely have the energy left to even flinch. He ties the rag around the end of the
spear, a grim little makeshift flag. “Hold your tongue, mortal. Gufa, are the tunnels ready?”

Tunnels?

The woman scowls, squinting off into the distance. “You arrived earlier than expected,” she says.
“And farther north.”

“We had little choice. They should have stayed longer in Rann Steinar.”

She hisses in disapproval, and you can’t help but stare at her blackened teeth, which somehow make
her sharpened canines even more intimidating. “We must go underground, regardless; he will
overtake us too quickly on the plains.”

Plains? You lift your head as much as you’re able, and even though you can’t see much, everything
does seem pretty flat and empty. How far from the mountains are we? you wonder. How far behind
is Loki?

The woman - Gufa, you think - hauls you to your feet. “Hold it upright,” she tells one of the other
newcomers, and then she crumbles the charred twigs in her palm, then spits on the ashes. “And hold
it still, Fyrnir!”

Gross, you think, cringing away from her fingers, now coated with a paste that smells something like
rancid potpourri. Oh, gross. There’s not much you can do about it, though, so you try not to breathe
as she smears it on your forehead and cheeks.

You do, however, attempt to squirm away when her hand slides under your jaw, and Gufa grabs
your chin in a bruising grip. “Be still, mortal,” she snaps, but as she continues to roughly streak the
ash onto your neck, her hand brushes under the neck of your tunic.
She freezes, her eyes wide. So do you.

The neck of your tunic rips easily in her grip. “Look at this,” she says, hauling you up so that your toes barely brush the ground. “Look at it!”

The giant Fyrnir leans over her shoulder. “Mortals mate?”

“That is a Jötunn mark, fool.” She shakes you, and it feels like your teeth are about to rattle out of your skull. “Was that given to you by the King in Utgard, mortal? Was it?”

“Yes!” you cry, afraid that she might just end up shaking your head off of your shoulders.

Gufa looks around to the other giants, her shock slowly replaced by careful calculation. “It is a sign from Ginn Rúna. Chaos.”

“This can wait,” Sírnir replies, though he seems equally appalled. “We must go.”

That seems to be something that all of the giants can agree on, and Gufa passes you off to one of the others, wiping her hands on her thighs. You’re hauled along for a few meters, until the giant realizes that your legs aren’t very useful at the moment, at which point she mutters something unintelligible and slings you over her shoulders. Your ribs hurt so badly that you feel like sobbing, except you can’t manage to muster up the tears.

Then, they start jogging again, remarkably light on their feet. There can only be around a dozen of them, so if Loki catches up with you before they get wherever they’re going, he shouldn’t have any problems taking them out, right? Please hurry, Loki.

You try to force yourself to stay awake, in case you have the opportunity - and the desperation - to make a run for it, but it gets harder and harder the farther you go; it’s a little shocking that you aren’t already experiencing hypothermia, you note distantly. Or maybe you are, and you just haven’t actually realized it yet.

Your eyes are closed, so the sudden drop into a deep hole in the ground is unexpected and jarring. “Close it,” Gufa orders, and you crane your neck just in time to see the entrance to the tunnel collapse behind you, the faint light from above ground immediately extinguished. Oh, no, you think, squeezing your eyes closed again. No, no, no, no—

At least the wind is gone; that’s a positive, you tell yourself. Focus on the positives.

The tunnel seems endless, especially since you can’t see what’s coming. To add to the overall eeriness, the giants make very little noise as they hurry along, leaving your ears swimming with only the sound of your own heartbeat.

A sharp smack to your cheek forces you to open your eyes, and you blink groggily, urging your neck to move. It doesn’t, and you stare up at what looks to be the ceiling of some kind of cloth tent, trying to assess your situation. C’mon, toes, please move.

They don’t.

Adrenaline spills through your veins, sharp and bitter. Fight, flight, or freeze, and once again, you can’t fight or flee. At least try not to puke again, you tell yourself, for the love of all that is holy.

A new giant’s face looms over you; her teeth and lips are stained black, like Gufa’s. She swats your cheek again. “Speak, mortal; is that mark truly of Loki?”
“Yes,” you croak, afraid that if you don’t answer, the next smack might knock your head right off of your shoulders. “Yes.”

“I told you, Kolka.” Gufa appears next to her. “Do you believe the Queen in Utgard knows of this?”

“Surely not even Fárbauti would allow such a thing to go unpunished.”

“If Fárbauti had any sense of honor, she would not set her own sons aside for an Asgardian.”

“They say he has the Casket of Ancient Winters,” the giantess called Kolka says. “Do you believe this is possible?”

“It is,” you wheeze. “He has it.”

They both turn back to you, startled.

“He’ll find me,” you add.

Gufa bursts into laughter. “Not here, mortal; by the time your king reaches our camp, we will be back beneath the earth.”

“He will know who has you, but not where we are.”

“The paths below are endless.”

You close your eyes. There’s not much else you can do.

What’s their plan? If they wanted to murder you, they would’ve had no problem doing it already. They said something about bargaining, but if they’re planning on keeping you hidden, then how do they expect Loki to do any bargaining with them?

And… they left a rag covered with your blood staked out on the plains for him to find, didn’t they? The memory is a little foggy, but you’re pretty positive that happened. If your smell is really distinct as all of the giants claim, then he should find that before long… right?

Whatever they’ve got you coated in now absolutely reeks, though - your head feels like it’s about to shatter into a million tiny pieces, and you aren’t sure if you have the smell to thank for it, or if it’s a concussion.

“What do we do with the mark?” Kolka scrapes a sharp nail down your neck, and you try not to flinch.

“It cannot possibly have taken on a mortal. It is some mad experiment, no doubt. An abomination.”

Outraged and terrified, you swallow thickly as Kolka’s nail traces up your jugular. “The Æsir have bred with mortals, in bygone days. Perhaps this one reminds him of home.” There’s a cruel twist to her words. “See this? Lokakona. His weakness on display. Foolish boy.”

She smiles at you. “But you will make a very powerful sacrifice, mortal, once we have dealt with your master.”

They leave the tent, and you finally manage to roll to your side, though you regret it almost immediately as a sharp pain sears through your ribs. Crawl, you order yourself. Do… something. Don’t just lay down and die.

The tent is completely empty, from what you can see, save for a small metal brazier burning near the
entrance. Inch by inch, you drag yourself closer to it; the ground is hard-packed and frozen, so at least it’s a smooth surface, but you’re exhausted by the time you reach it.

*Maybe I should set the tent on fire. Maybe that would make me easier to find. Maybe—*

Several of the giants rush back into the tent, and one of the ones from earlier - *Hymir? Fyrnir?* - hauls you to your feet and drags you outside. It’s daytime, and with the blizzard stopped, you can tell now just how far you’ve come from Rann Steinar. The mountains aren’t even visible any longer; everything is flat and empty and lifeless.

The camp seems to be in the process of making a hasty retreat, and while the giants keep their voices hushed, they all appear to be in a terrible temper.

“If the witch-king returns to Utgard,” the one holding onto you hisses, “then must we keep this thing alive?”

*What?*

“He will not give up a rarity so easily,” Gufa replies, pulling a handful of long ice-spikes out of the snow and stuffing them into the quiver on her back. “And Farbauti’s baby boy is untested; if he falls into our hands now, then we will have one less princling to deal with when our time comes.”

*Býleistr? He sent Býleistr? Loki isn’t coming?*

That can’t possibly be true, can it?

They hurry you towards another tunnel entrance, abandoning the tents behind them. Your heart falls when the snow and ice crashes down to seal you underground, but then you hear a muffled roaring somewhere outside. It’s so faint that you almost question whether you actually heard it, but the giants around you are sharing looks that make you feel like you probably did.

“How?” Gufa hisses.

“They must have abandoned the sleighs,” Sírnir says, “But even then—”

She lets out a strangled cry of outrage. “*Move.*”

The speed that they race through the darkened tunnel reminds you of the world’s worst theme park ride. You decide that your nerves must have finally shorted out or something, because you can barely feel the pain any longer as you’re jostled along, tossed over Fyrnir’s shoulder.

Kolka holds up a hand and stops the giants in their tracks when you reach a split in the tunnel, frowning in confusion. “Do you hear that?” she asks. “The rushing…”

“The river,” Gufa says. “It must be the river.”

“The river is frozen solid,” Kolka replies slowly, pressing her hands against the wall of the tunnel, frowning. “It has to be, at this time of year. That is where—” Her eyes widen suddenly. “Surface! Quickly, to the surface!”

Panic breaks out, and your kidnappers scramble up the walls, collapsing the ceiling of the tunnel in a flurry of ice and snow as they climb out into open air. Not far in the distance, you can see a swarm of giants struggling near the banks of a truly massive river, but the flatland around you begins to cave and collapse into the maze of tunnels.
“Reinforcements,” Gufa says, pointing towards the river. “If we can reach them—”

“How did they find us so quickly?”

“Even if we reach it, how will we cross it? The tunnels beneath are gone, Gufa.”

Their bickering is cut short by a familiar bellowing, and you see Hornburi charging at you across the plains with Loki on his back, Vámúli not far behind him. “Run,” Kolka orders. “Their weight will collapse what remains of the tunnels, and with their sorcerer underground, the rest will fall.”

“What about the mortal?”

She grimaces. “If it seems that we will not escape, kill it. That was our agreement.”

They rush towards the river, apparently more afraid of Loki and his magic than they are of Býleistr and the rest of the Utgard giants waiting there to stop them. You cry out in alarm when both of the wooly rhinos fall beneath the ice, but Loki springs from Hornburi’s back and keeps racing after you.

The skirmish at the riverbank doesn’t seem to be going well for Kolka’s reinforcements, and she howls and rushes to join them. “Give the mortal to me,” Gufa demands, and you’re tossed to her as the others charge forward to attempt to fight their way out of the quickly closing circle.

When Loki is only a few paces away, Gufa holds a knife to your neck, backing up carefully. “Do not test me, Odinson.”

Loki thrusts his hand into the snow, and when he pulls it out, he’s holding a wickedly-thin blade of ice. “The king sends his regards,” he says, and then he lunges forward, excitement in his eyes.

Gufa shoves you away to defend herself, and your chin slams into the ground, stars exploding across your vision. You order yourself to move, and somehow, you push yourself to your feet and scramble for shelter, though there’s very little shelter to be found; the ground is still heaving and collapsing into the tunnels below, seemingly at random.

Not far from the riverbank, Býleistr and the twins are dispatching your kidnappers’ reinforcements with shocking efficiency, and once Hornburi manages to claw his way free from the pit, he barrels after them, bellowing in anger. Skaði stands alone on the far side of the riverbank, her bow in hand, dispassionately shooting down any giants who attempt to cross the river.

Maybe don’t run that way, you think, or I might end up with an ‘accidental’ arrow to the back.

Unfortunately, you make a very easy target, even amidst all of the chaos, and Sírnir grabs you before you’ve had a chance to risk Skaði’s arrows. He crushes you against his chest, his arm wrapped around your neck, and you gasp for air.

“Enough of this, Odinson,” he bellows, turning on Loki, who now stands over Gufa’s body. “A new bargain; the Casket of our ancestors, or the mortal’s neck.”

“Sírnir!” Kolka calls. “That is not—”

“Decide quickly, princeling.”

Your vision is blurry, but not so blurry that you miss the tiny flash of satisfaction in Loki’s eyes. The bloody ice-blade drops into the snow, and he holds up his hands. “Very well,” he says. “I suppose I
have no choice.” The blue glow of the Casket appears between his hands, and he carefully places it onto the snow, then steps back a few paces, his arms wide. “You will find it difficult to use, I should warn you.”

Sírnir approaches the Casket slowly, carefully. You can’t feel the thrum of its magic, or Loki’s, and you begin to despair; are you closer to dying than you’d realized?

He shoves you away from himself as he reaches down to grab the Casket, and you half-run, half-fall into Loki’s waiting arms. Loki’s looking at you oddly, a faint hint of a smile on his face. “I suppose I understand now the certain appeal of a mortal’s embrace,” he whispers conspiratorially, and you’re still gaping at him in confusion when the Casket shatters into thousands of tiny splinters of ice in Sírnir’s hands.

Loki twists to shield you with his body, but you see over his shoulder the rage in Sírnir’s eyes. “Cheat!” he cries, ice encasing his arm as a blade begins to form. He’s so fixated on you that he doesn’t notice Býleistr racing up behind him from the riverbank, weaponless.

Wait, you think, this doesn’t—

Loki tucks your head down, his hand cradling you to his chest. “My mother always said that the Vangsfólk were foolhardy,” he declares, “and I see now how right she was.”

There aren’t many giants left, aside from the few that are left near the riverbank. Kolka has disappeared from sight; you aren’t certain if one of the twins got her, or if she’s managed to slip down into the remains of the tunnels, but Sírnir seems to be the only one left fixated on you and the Casket.

Move, Loki, you think, your voice frozen in your throat. Why don’t you move?

And since when has Býleistr been so fast?

Sírnir’s charge forward ends abruptly as Býleistr leaps onto his back, burying a knife in his neck - a knife that you’re pretty sure he just pulled out of nowhere. Sírnir topples into the snow, and Býleistr lands gracefully on his feet, barely breaking stride as he rushes to where you and Loki are hunkered in the snow.

His hands flutter around your face and neck, his eyes wide with fear and anger. “Norns, I don’t know how she is alive. Take her to directly to camp, and once she is stable, to Utgard.” He takes your hand, and you blink up at him; his face is blurry. “Stop for nothing.”

Loki’s face is blurry, too, you realize, squinting up at him. You’re feeling warmer, though, and that’s nice, so you don’t fight the flush of magic that spreads across your skin as Býleistr presses his palm to your forehead.

“Go, Býleistr,” he snaps, and that’s confusing enough for you to force your eyes open. The two of them shimmer gold, and it’s Loki who is standing over you, then, a mad sort of gleam in his eyes. “I am going after the one who planned this.”

Chapter End Notes
IT'S FRIDAY I'M IN LOVE!! <3
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

At this point, you don’t even know what ‘normal’ means anymore. Left in Býleistr’s care, you can only hope for the best... and hope that Loki comes back in one piece.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You poke Býleistr’s cheek as he holds you close to his chest, hunkered down on Vámúli’s back as he races across the plains. Your throat burns, and you have to swallow a few times before you’re able to muster any words. “Not Loki.”

He snorts. “I should hope not,” he says. “I am far handsomer.”

“How? Why?”

“As intimidating as I am, In-Unga, the king seemed to think that the Vangsfólk would attempt to retreat out over the plains, if not given a strong incentive to continue on towards the river. A mad sorcerer charging after you is apparently a strong incentive.”

“Head,” you tell him, hoping to convey just how much everything hurts. “Ribs.”

“Yes, you look like an awful mess. Bloody and bruised. You really shouldn’t try to talk.”

“Bý?”

He looks confused. “Yes?”

You pat his cheek. It takes a lot more energy than it should. “Thanks.”

Býleistr’s eyes widen slightly, then he looks back to the path ahead. “I am only doing my duty, mortal,” he replies. “Nothing more.”

You don’t open your eyes again until you’re being carried into a sleigh, and you nearly weep at the familiar sight. Býleistr seems unwilling to put you down, and a couple of Forest Giants gather around him.

“Do not take her directly to the fire,” one of them says. “Warm her slowly.”

“I am taking her on to Utgard,” he says, crouching down beside a lit brazier. “The king will meet us there, as soon as he takes care of the Vangsfólk.”

“Vangsfólk?” another giant asks. “What drew them from the flatlands?”

“Her, it would seem.”

A half-dozen pairs of red eyes peer down at you. “How did he find her so quickly? The Vangsfólk are nigh impossible to trace, once they’ve taken to ground.”
Býleistr shys away when one of giants reaches for your collar, wrapping his cloak more snugly around your shoulders and neck. “A spell, most likely.”

“Her skin looks burned.”

“From the ice,” he says. “And the bruising…”

“Warm water and salve, once you reach the palace,” one of the older giants says. He taps your nose. “Feel that, mortal?”

“Yes,” you whisper, wrapping your arms more firmly around Býleistr’s chest.

“How she isn’t frozen stiff is beyond me,” the giant continues, tapping your knee next. “Very strange. Lucky for Inn-Illi, I suppose.”

You’re soon encapsulated in toasty blankets, and Býleistr sends the others away, though they seem reluctant to leave. You’re guessing that they aren’t used to seeing their prince take this active of a role in medical care.

“Here is the situation, In-Unga,” he says, settling you down on the floor near the brazier. “You are disgusting. You smell of blood and sick and whatever it is they painted you down with—”

“Hey,” you begin, “that—”

“And as much as it pains me to deal with something so menial, at the moment, I am the only one in camp who knows your little secret.”

You flush, but the heat doesn’t quite make it to your cheeks. “Oh.”

He sighs. “I will do this as quickly as possible, then. This will likely be uncomfortable. I think that your condition is worse than you realize.”

Delicately, he peels away the top of the blanket, then stops, perplexed. “Are you wearing anything under this?”

“Undershirt.”

You can’t tell if he’s relieved or disappointed. “Good.” He fusses with the neck of your tunic for a moment or two. “It is done for,” he says, “and you seem as if you will fall faint if I move you enough to wrestle you free from it.”

“Rip it,” you tell him, touched that he’d bother to give you the opportunity to argue.

Býleistr finishes tearing open the sleeve that’s already partially ruined, then makes quick work of the other. The mangled mess of cloth and fur sticks to your skin, and you howl as he tears it free. He hisses in sympathy. “That seems painful.”

“It is, you ass,” you sob. “Oh my God, you—”

“Shh, shh. The others are only just outside, and they might not tolerate your disrespect as graciously as I do.” He retrieves a cloth soaking in a bowl over the brazier, hesitating again. “I have never done this before,” he says. “I’ve only ever tended to injured animals.”

“It’s okay. It’s okay, just… You’re doing great.” You try to pat his hand, but you miss, so you pretend that you hadn’t tried at all to save yourself some embarrassment. “I need to get to Loki soon, Býleistr. I don’t… I don’t think everything is okay. On the inside, I mean.”
“You should not worry,” he says, rubbing at your face with the cloth that is way too sodden. Water runs down your cheeks and neck. “Loki would not have gone off after the stragglers if he thought you would die soon.”

“Not reassured.”

Smirking, Býleistr scrubs at your chin. “I would hazard to say that you are the first thrall, let alone mortal, that a prince of Jotunheim has ever bothered reassuring.”

“Fair.”

“Mother won’t be happy about this.” His lip curls slightly as he quickly wipes off your neck, but you pretend that you don’t notice. “About Rann Steinar, about the Vangsfólk… none of it.”

“Helblindi?”

He leans back, his eyes hooded. He studies you for a moment or two, then rinses out the cloth. “Brother Helblindi would enjoy anything that causes Loki pain. He will likely be disappointed to learn that the king was not left buried somewhere beneath the mountains.”

“And you?”

“I have said from the beginning where my loyalties lie, In-Unga. Nothing has changed.”

Once the worst of the mess is washed away, Býleistr helps you into a tunic that’s much too large; he isn’t gentle, but you can tell that he’s not being intentionally rough, either, so you grit your teeth and make the best of it.

The other giants come back in to hover over you once you’re bundled up and your mate mark is hidden from view again, and the older man immediately starts smearing something on your face that feels an awful lot like grease. Býleistr doesn’t seem alarmed, though, and you trust that he wouldn’t waste the effort of helping you wash off and change by letting somebody murder you immediately afterwards.

A little bottle is held in front of your mouth, then, and you’re a bit more hesitant to accept it without question.

“To numb the pain,” the old man tells Býleistr, looking to him for assistance. “The mortal will need it, once her senses start to return.”

Býleistr nods. “Take it, In-Unga,” he says. “And if it will make you feel any better, rest assured that my brother has sworn to kill us all if anything tragic befalls you.”

That actually does make me feel better, thanks, you think. You down the bottle in one swig, and then everything slips away into darkness.

~*~*~*~

“Are you now a nursemaid, Býleistr?”

“No, I am not. But, you know that I have always enjoyed collecting oddities, Brother.”
“Mother, If Loki is out on the flatlands, exhausted and nearly alone—”

“Guards, leave us.”

“Mother—”

“Enough, Helblindi. He has the Casket. I would rather you live as a prince than die for the crown.”

“You do not believe that he can be bested?”

“I have given the king my oath.”

“Oath? What use is an oath to Loki Liesmith? And you! You would agree with me, too, Brother, if not for your fascination with that thing.”

“Thanos is coming.”

“What?”

“The Mad Titan Thanos. He comes for Yggdrasil, for Midgard.”

“More of Loki’s lies.”

“Is this true, Býleistr?”

“Why would he lie about such a thing, Mother? If destruction comes to the Nine—”

“He murdered our father!”

“Do not pretend that you shed a tear over Father’s death, Helblindi.”

“Calm, the both of you. This is not the time. The king will be returned soon— Wait, Helblindi!”

“I will take my leave, as well, Mother. The mortal needs to be dealt with.”

“Go, Býleistr. Son?”

“Yes?”

“You should not grow too attached.”

“Yes. I know.”

~*~*~*~

“You are awake, aren’t you?”

You burrow your face deeper into the furs bundled around you, but something doesn’t smell quite right. “Hmph.”

“In-Unga, open your eyes.”

Býleistr is peering down at you, bright colors exploding behind him. You blink again, and that’s
when you realize that you’re in the palace archives, the mosaic of Loki’s mother directly behind his head. “Not my room,” you mumble, hoping that he’ll let you go back to sleep.

“Your ever-wise king has his rooms sealed off, mortal; until he arrives, this seemed like a suitable place to keep you. No one comes here often, these days.” He props you against the stone hearth, dusting off his hands. “Can you still feel everything?”

“Yes.” You wiggle your toes in your boots, then roll your shoulders. “I feel a little better.”

“Really? I thought that mortals were incredibly slow to heal.”

“They are. I mean, we are.” Your head lolls back against the stone. “Magic, I guess.” Býleistr’s eyes widen. Oops, you think. Is that supposed to be a secret? “Maybe the bond thing—”

“Mate-bonds do not work that way,” he interrupts. “So, then, you really have marked him, as well.”

Double oops. You nod.

“Ah. You are incredibly stupid, the both of you.”

You glare at him. “Hey—”

“Shh. We are back in civilized company, mortal; you’d best watch your mouth. There is always someone listening.”

Good point.

The two of you just sit in silence for a few minutes. He’s staring again. No surprises there.

“So, Your Highness, do you think I could maybe take a bath now?”

“That might be tricky. Even though you seem fairly alert at the moment, I’m inclined to worry that you’ll slip under the water and drown if I leave you in the baths unattended. There is also the possibility that some of the residents of Utgard might be tempted to allow you to drown, which would not reflect well on me.”

“But I feel gross. And I smell bad, sire.”

“Yes, you certainly do. The healer did recommend warm water to bring you back to temperature… I suppose I could give that excuse, if the king decides to throw a fit over your drowning.”

You can’t decide if he’s trying to tease you or not, but you’re so desperate to sink into a bath that you can’t bring yourself to care. Your clothes are clinging to your skin, and you feel raw and aching and bruised - a soak sounds nice. A heated blanket sounds nice.

A toasty warm god snuggling you up and taking care of you sounds nicer, but Loki apparently decided that hunting down kidnappers is more important. Gonna give him hell about that when he gets back, you think. Sending me off all alone. Idiot.

Loki’s got a temper; that’s nothing new, but this whole kidnapper-escapade kind of takes it to a new level. While it’s extremely satisfying to know that you nearly getting killed by angry dissidents is enough to send him on an all-out rampage, you’re also worried that certain members of the court will see it as a weakness, yet another sign of his instability. Mad King Loki.

“Well,” Býleistr continues, “I suppose we could risk it. Perhaps it will earn me some credit, if I have you cleaned up and on the mend by the time my brother returns.”
You smile, and that seems to be enough motivation for him. He scoops you back up and heads for the door. “I am going to be bearing the shame of this for centuries, you know, carrying you around like this.”

“Mhmm.”

Býleistr huffs, but he doesn’t say anything else once he’s in the hall, and he stoically stares down any of the passing servants who give him strange looks. He deposits you at an unfamiliar door, gripping your elbow when you start to sway on your feet. “These are relatively shallow,” he says, “though I suppose I could call for one of the women to tend to you.”

It doesn’t look like anyone is close enough to hear you, but you only shake your head, just in case.

He shoves the door open and holds it while you stagger inside, trying to look tough enough that he won’t bother sending some strange giantess down to bathe you. You’ve got enough to deal with already, without some stranger seeing you naked.

“You danced well,” he says suddenly. “I hope that he allows you to dance again, mortal.”

The door is closed behind him before you have a chance to think up a reasonable response to that odd little comment. What’s Býleistr’s deal? If he wanted to do something horrible to you, or to hand you over to Helblindi, now would be the time for it - hell, all he really had to do was sit back and let you die.

You’re able to get your outer layers off without too much trouble, but you give up once you get to your under-tunic. It’s too much trouble to peel it off, as banged up as you are - and besides, you don’t necessarily want to end up totally naked, just in case some giant decides to pop in unexpectedly.

This room is brighter than the one where you usually bathe, and there are several separate pools. Most look relatively small and shallow, but you find that you can get up to neck-deep in the one you’re in, and you groan in satisfaction as the heat sinks into your battered muscles.

You close your eyes. It’s hard to keep your head up; maybe it is a little too soon for you to be left alone. Wouldn’t that be just your luck, to survive giant wolf attacks and avalanches and kidnappings, only to be taken out by a glorified bathtub?

C’mon, you got this.

There’s no soap or anything like that, as far as you can see. You could really use some soap. In fact, you could really use the entire fancy-ass bathroom back in Loki’s old chambers in Asgard. Loki said you’d go back someday, didn’t he?

There are more actual cuts and scrapes on your skin than you’d realized, and you try to scrub away any of the left-over dirt and blood with your hands. Ouch, you think. Maybe it was better not being able to feel my skin.

How long will Býleistr leave you to soak in peace? If you’re being completely honest with yourself, you’re a little surprised that he left at all, given his professed ‘curiosity’ in humans. ‘Fascination with that thing.’ You frown; where have you heard that before? It can’t have popped in your head from nowhere, can it?

You remember that you have a lot of questions to ask about your kidnappers, once Loki and the twins are back, but you’re too tired to entirely remember what those questions are. Something about why they had black teeth, probably. You’re going to be seeing that in your nightmares for a while.
Muffled shouting makes its way down the hall. Panicking, you sink down lower into the water, wondering if you’ll be able to hide if someone comes looking. Probably not, you tell yourself. Be ready to fight.

Fighting might be difficult, though, considering you’re having to cling to the edge of the pool just to keep your balance. Maybe you’d be better off playing dead.

You’re tucked into the far corner, water up to your nose, when Loki barges into the room. He’s got a knife in one of his hands, and he looks like an absolute mess, prominent purple circles under his eyes. The knife vanishes as soon as he spots you, and his hands drop to his sides. Behind him, you see giants hovering in the hall, fretful and confused.

“Back about your business,” Loki orders, his eyes never leaving your face for even an instant. “All of you, out of my sight.”

Most of them rush away, though a few take an extra second or two to peep in at the spectacle of the naked human in the tub; you’re extremely thankful that you’re as deep as you are in the pool, or your mate-bond would’ve just had a very unfortunate reveal.

Loki barely waits until they’re out of sight to advance on you, dropping to his knees by the edge of the pool and hauling you out of the water before you can blink. “Clothes!” you squeak; it isn’t how you’d imagined greeting him when he returned, but you’re cold and wet and mostly-naked, and he never bothered to close the door to the baths.

He doesn’t say anything, but he pulls off his cloak and bundles you up in it, which would feel a lot better if your tunic wasn’t soaked through. Maybe he realizes that, too, because you suddenly feel a burst of heat as he takes off down the hall, and just like that, you’re dried off and warm.

The halls are empty - word must have travelled quickly that the king is in no mood to be bothered, and considering all of the giants he’s taken down in the past few days, you guess that most of the court has decided to consider his temper as a credible danger.

Loki kicks the door to his chambers open, and it slams behind him with an intensity that suggests magic might’ve been involved. “Loki!” you gasp, but he storms towards the bed, his grip on you only tightening.

“I nearly lost you.”

“You didn’t, though!” He drops you onto the pile of blankets, and you squeak in surprise as he kneels on the bed beside you, already peeling off his tunic. “What—”

“I should’ve bedded you the first time you batted your pretty little lashes at me,” he snaps. His fingers are fumbling with his belt, and you realize that his hands are shaking. “I shouldn’t have wasted any time—“

You take his hands in yours. Tears blur the edges of your vision - and you realize that his eyes are beginning to well, too. “It’s okay,” you soothe. “It’s okay. I’m still here.”

Loki blinks furiously. “What if you weren’t?” he asks, his voice rough. “What if I’d lost you?” He settles over you, feathering kisses along your cheek, your forehead. “You were so alone. I felt it. You might’ve died, without ever knowing that I—”

He freezes, wide-eyed.

“I know,” you tell him. “I know, and I love you, too.”
When he kisses you, it’s so desperate and deep that it makes you feel like he’s a man drowning, and you’re his last little breath of oxygen. You reach between your bodies and yank his belt free of the buckle, your hands not much steadier than his. His pants don’t come off very easily - the leather is snug - but once you’ve got them past his hips, you figure that’s good enough and abandon the endeavor, wrapping your arms around him to hold him close.

It really doesn’t feel like he can be too close, now.

“Wait,” he says. “Wait, darling; I want to see you.”

He sits back for a moment, just long enough to pull you up and tug your tunic over your head, then he carefully presses you back down against the bed. Your skin burns - you don’t remember ever feeling so entirely exposed, and his gaze is piercing. Memorizing me, you think.

“Do you truly believe that you love me?” His hands smooth over your belly, your breasts - and when you whimper, he rocks his hips, just barely pressing against you. “That you want me?”

“I do,” you tell him, cupping his face in your hands. “Yes, Loki, I do.”

Loki lets out a shaky little breath, his eyes fixed on yours as his hand moves between your thighs, his long fingers gently stroking. You’re still exhausted and aching from the kidnapping, and he looks the worse for wear, too, but he’s so beautiful that it practically hurts, and you think you might actually combust if he changes his mind and leaves you wanting.

You’re warm, you realize as you lie beneath him - warmer than you have any right to be, even in his heated chambers. It’s his magic - your magic - settling back into your skin, sinking into your bones, and you sigh in relief as he leans down and kisses the mark on your neck, because you hadn’t entirely understood how much you needed it until it was gone.

“I want you,” you tell him. You run your fingers through his hair, down his back… feeling emboldened, you dig your nails into his ass, and Loki grunts in surprise as you attempt to pull him closer. “Please?”

He’s trying so hard to be gentle and slow and soft - and you appreciate it, you really do, but it isn’t what you need right now, and it isn’t what he’s craving, either, based on the tightness of his jaw and the fire in his eyes.

The two of you have devolved into nothing more than a messy tangle of limbs and lust, and you barely even remember that you just got rescued from a near-death experience. Or, maybe it’s the fact that you did just have a near-death experience that’s got you feeling so desperate to hold him close and never let him go.

You let out a needy whine when he moves his hand away, but the feeling is drowned out immediately by shock when he carefully licks his fingers clean, his eyes still locked on yours. He reaches between your bodies, and you’re hopeful that he’s about to touch you again, but he strokes himself, instead.

He’s trying to kill you. That’s the only logical explanation. Desperate, you hook one of your legs around his, pressing your hands against the small of his back.

It’s when you bite down on his neck that you finally taste victory; he grunts again, and then you feel him sliding against your entrance, though he’s still being almost excruciatingly careful to do nothing more than tease.

You bite harder, and his hips jerk as he thrusts inside of you. It’s probably good that you’ve got him
to bite down on, because it isn’t comfortable at all at first; even as slick and excited as you are, Loki is still big, and it takes a moment or two for you to adjust to the difference between his fingers and this.

Your head falls back against the pillow as you start to relax again, and Loki brushes your hair away from your forehead, doing an impressive job of holding the rest of his body relatively still. “Tell me when you’re ready,” he says, and then he kisses you languidly, his hand moving from your hair to your neck.

“I’m ready,” you reply breathlessly when he breaks away for a moment. He grips your thigh and angles your hips slightly as he begins to move, slowly at first, but with quickly-building force.

“Beautiful.” Loki’s uncharacteristic lack of eloquence is incredibly flattering, as is the way his eyes flutter when you arch against him when he moves a certain way that feels absolutely perfect.

Every little brush of his skin against yours feels exquisite. He clasps one of your hands, pressing it to the bed beside your head. Pretty, pretty red eyes, you think, watching in fascination as his nostrils flare, that beautiful, sculpted jaw of his tightening as he tries to focus.

You can feel it, too - neither of you are going to last very long. “Look at me.” You open your eyes; you hadn’t even realized that you’d closed them. “Come for me,” Loki says, almost pleadingly. Time stops as the overwhelming need crests and bursts, your nerves electrified. You think you might’ve cried out his name in the heat of your climax - he’d certainly groaned yours - but you’re too far gone to be sure, so you say it again, just for good measure.

“Loki.” You cling to him, warm and aching and satisfied, and he kisses you again, squeezing your interlaced fingers tightly, like he’s afraid that you’ll vanish if he lets go.

“I won’t allow anything to happen to you.” It’s a solemn vow, and you truly believe that he means it. “I will never lose you again, dröttning.”

He’s heavy on top of you, but it’s comforting, and you’re almost disappointed when he rolls to his side, stretching gloriously nude on the bed beside you.

“... I think I need another bath,” you say after a moment. “I’m kind of… sticky.”

Loki groans. “Don’t say things like that, woman; I’ll have to take you again.”

Your cheeks burn, which you feel is a pretty dumb reaction for your body to have, considering how he was just inside you. “Again already?”

“Again already,” Loki replies. “Do you have any idea how wonderful you feel?” He pushes himself up on one elbow, trailing his fingertips down your stomach. “How beautiful you are?”

The cold begins to rear its head, and you fumble around for a blanket. Loki pulls you into his arms and bundles to two of you under a heavy fur, and you decide that the executive decision has been made that the two of you are just going to stay sticky. “I think you’re pretty beautiful,” you mumble against his chest. “But you know that already, don’t you?”

He laughs and pets your hair. “I am worn down to the bone,” he tells you. “I might’ve gone a bit overboard, in the heat of the chase, and I haven’t slept since Rann Steinar.”

“Overboard how?”

“We can discuss it later. Sleep; the rest of the travel party will be arriving soon, and I will have a
dreadful time sorting everything out when they do.” He kisses the top of your head. “I haven’t hurt you, have I?”

“Of course not.” Yawning, you wrap your arms around his waist. You give his butt a little squeeze, too, just to cheer him up in case he’s veering towards melancholy. “Best I’ve felt ever, probably.”

“I believe I can safely say the same,” Loki replies, and then he yawns, too, and soon, you’re both sound asleep.

~*~*~*~

“Oh my God,” you groan when you wake up some time later, attempting to roll onto your side, only to find that everything hurts, “I feel like I got run over by a truck.”

“Well, you were in an avalanche, pet.” Loki is already up and half-dressed, pulling on his boots as he sits at the foot of the bed. “And you were also kidnapped, recovered, and thoroughly bedded. An ache or two is to be expected. Though, I’m truly a bit shocked that you aren’t in worse condition. Býleistr told me that you were recovering quickly, but I assumed that he was attempting to drown you in the bath under the guise of innocent carelessness.”

“Is that why you ran into the bath like a maniac, looking like you were about to cut someone’s face off?”

“Of course it is. You were half-dead when I left after the remainder of the Vangsfólk.”

“Speaking of… what did you do to them?”

Loki’s smile falls. “They are all dead,” he replies, a tiny bit of vicious pleasure in his eyes. “You needn’t worry about them any longer.”

“But—”

“Now is not the time.” He stands and holds out his hand. “We must get you freshened up before the twins come to fawn over you, as I’m certain they’re eager to do.”

He leads you to the fireside, still bundled up in the massive fur blanket, and he’s already got a wash basin of steaming water sitting on the hearth. “What’s this?” you ask.

“I thought that you’d prefer to stay in our chambers, for the time being. The palace is bustling, after everything that has happened, and to be frank, darling, it is very obvious from the smell of you that we’ve just enjoyed each other.”

You blanch. “Is it really?”

“From the smell of the both of us,” he amends. “Though it isn’t as if that would be particularly shocking to anyone, considering our situation.”

Loki’s teasing mood returns at your embarrassment, and he carefully pries the wet sponge from your fingers after watching you for a minute or two, after which he washes you off, paying a suspicious amount of attention to your breasts. “I think that’s good, thanks,” you remark dryly, and he grins up from where he’s kneeling by your feet.
“Are you absolutely certain?”

“Pretty certain. Plus, the water’s starting to get cold.”

“Shame,” Loki sighs, but he drops the sponge back in the basin and wraps you back up in your furs. “Go and get dressed, then; before I hand you over to your admirers, there is something that I would like to show you.”

You have a hard time pulling on all of your layers; your muscles are practically screaming in protest, and you’re seriously considering spending the rest of the day soaking in the steam-pools. *I wish I had my magic cloak,* you think, wondering whatever happened to the wreckage of your sleigh. *And what happened to the books, too?*

When you reemerge, Loki is already waiting by the door. “What are we going to see?” you ask.

“You’ll see.”

The guards stand at attention when he sweeps out of his chamber, steering you along with his hand on your arm. He takes a few unfamiliar hallways, and you’re halfway tempted to insist that he carry you when you start heading up a very spindly set of stairs, but when you reach the top, you decide that the view is probably worth it.

Utgard is laid out before you, gleaming in the strange blue-grey morning light of Jotunheim. There are actually giants moving about in the streets, hauling small sleighs of ice and rock. “The construction efforts have begun,” Loki says. “I will make it rival Asgard, someday. A prosperous new age.” There’s no one to see you on the high tower balcony, and he dares to take your hand.

“I’ve never seen it like this. It’s so… different, from way up here.”

“They say that it was beautiful, once,” he tells you. “Long ago, long before Laufey, or even his father before him.”

You squeeze his hand. “You’ll make it beautiful again.”

“Yes.” Loki smiles at you, and despite the bruises, despite how utterly exhausted he is, there’s a tinge of earnest excitement in his eyes, too. “Yes, we will.”

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy loves, I hope you enjoy this one <3 It's been a long time coming!
Chapter Summary

In which Loki deals with the tedious side of kingship, and you get a better seat at the dinner table.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gjálp and Greip stay glued to your side for the entire morning, even though Loki seems reluctant to allow you out of his sight. They’re already waiting in the hall when the two of you make it down from the high tower, and they’re both pretty scuffed-up, just like Loki. He rolls his eyes when they envelop you in a hug, then orders them to keep you out of trouble and sends the three of you on your way.

“I’m so glad you guys are okay,” you cry, once you’re in the privacy of their room. “I can’t believe any of that even happened, and the avalanche—”

“There should not have been an avalanche,” Gjálp says. She’s sporting a few scratches near her eyes that look like they might be claw-marks, and you can’t imagine how deep they must’ve been, if they still haven’t healed over. “That path is stable, or relatively so; that is why it is used for caravans.”

You frown. “They did know we were coming. The Vangsfolk, I mean.”

“They should not have known. They do not bother with the goings-on of the rest of the kingdom. In fact, they spend much of their time burrowing below the ice.”

“Why do they have the whole… you know… mouth thing?”

“Mouth?”

“The black teeth and lips.”

“Ah. Those were devotees of Ginn Rúna.”

“Cultists, you mean,” Greip says, her lip curled.

That sounds familiar. “One of them mentioned that. Ginn Rúna. Something about me being a sign of chaos, or something?”

“The Vangsfolk worship the personified Ginnungagap, the Void.”

“But why they bothered with you, In-Unga, we’ve yet to uncover.”

“Loki didn’t find out?”

The twins exchange a look. “The king did not restrain himself,” Gjálp delicately replies, “and in his rage… there was no one left to bring to Utgard to face questioning.”

“Jesus,” you whisper. “All of them?”
"All that were involved in taking you, yes. They did not beg clemency, and the king did not offer it."

*Take a deep breath,* you tell yourself, a little bothered to realize that the fact that you don’t know exactly what the kidnappers’ plan was is more upsetting to you than the fact that Loki killed them all. *Am I really becoming that cold?*

“What did they do with you?” Greip asks. “You looked so dreadful when we found you by the river, even from a distance. We were afraid that you would succumb to your injuries.”

“Well, I don’t think they exactly cared about me freezing, or getting crushed by the sleigh wrecking. It sounded like they were planning to kill me and use me for blood magic, no matter what Loki did.”

Your rub your neck. “And they found the mate-mark, too. Seemed pretty upset about it.”

Gjálp takes a sharp breath. “Well, we must all be grateful that the king has silenced the lot of them, then; the trouble that such a thing would cause is immeasurable.”

“But Býleistr knows, and he apparently hasn’t told anybody yet.”

“Prince Býleistr is honorable, and if he has said that he will keep the king’s secrets—”

“The both of you put too much faith in Prince Býleistr,” Greip says. “In our entire lives, Sister, have you ever known him to defy Queen Fárbauti? If she asks him to turn on the king, then he will do so without regrets.”

“But the Queen Mother would not do something so foolish,” Gjálp protests. “What could she possibly gain? Jotunheim in ruins, and the chance to lose her sons and her honor?”

“Even so, it is a secret that should be kept closely guarded.”

“That,” you say, “is something that we can completely agree on. I’ve already got enough people out to get me, without adding any more fuel to the fire.”

“Do you need medicine?” Gjálp asks, noticing how you grimace when you settle down by the fire. “Something to kill the pain?”

“It’s kind of hard to get over the fear that anything strong enough to kill a giant’s pain might also be strong enough to kill *me.***

“Not to worry, In-Unga.” She uncorks a tiny vial produced from the pouch at her waist, grinning. “It is diluted to the potency used for very small children.”

You take it, gagging over the smell. “You guys really need to start making your potions taste better, holy hell. That’s even worse than the hangover drink.”

“Consider it an added incentive to avoid injury and intoxication,” Greip says. “I certainly do.”

“Yeah? You look like you both got clawed up pretty bad.”

“Ah, yes. Hand-to-hand combat can be quite… overwhelming. Lady Skaði was smart to keep to her bow and shoot them down from a distance. The Vangsólk are very dishonorable fighters.”

“Was that your first fight? Your first real battle, I mean?”

They both nod.

“Hmm. Well, I probably wouldn’t stick to being honorable, either, in a life or death situation.”
“But you are of Midgard, In-Unga,” Greip says patiently, “and we are of Jotunheim.”

_I don’t think everyone on Jotunheim practices what they preach, when it comes to being ‘honorable,’_ you think, but you keep that thought to yourself. They’re young. They’re learn - you’re pretty sure they’re already starting to realize that almost no one in the court plays fair.

You realize that Gjálp is watching you carefully, her eyes slightly narrowed. “There is something slightly different about you, In-Unga, though I cannot place it.”

_Keep your cool, there’s no possible way that she can tell that you and Loki finally consummated your bizarre mate-bond, _you tell yourself. _Is there? _You hold up the vial. “Maybe it’s the drugs,” you joke, forcing a laugh.

She frowns. “No,” she says, “there is something—”

“Did Loki— I mean, did the king tell you what the plan is for the day? He made it sound like he had a lot to deal with, but he tends to be vague.”

“Well… the Vangsfólk have no true allies in the court of Utgard, but that does not mean that all of the lords are happy about the king taking such definitive measures. There were casualties in the king’s forces, as well, and the idea that Jötunn lives were lost on account of a mortal…”

“Don’t worry, Greip,” you say. “I get it. I’m not gonna get mad at you for telling me the truth.”

“On a positive note, then, the king’s bloody retaliation can be blamed on the fact that his entire royal caravan was attacked, presuming the Vangsfólk were responsible for the avalanche. I believe that is a safe assumption to make.”

“Oh!” you exclaim. “Speaking of the avalanche, was any of the wreckage recovered? My stuff? Your stuff?”

“Not yet, as far as I know,” Gjálp says. “But you should ask the king; I would not be surprised if he has already sent someone after the sleighs that were lost.”

“That’s good.” You stretch; your aches and pains are starting to fade a little, but it still isn’t particularly comfortable. “I’d like my cloak back, and all the books.”

Greip seems amused. “The king can have another cloak made for you, and there are many more books that you’ve yet to read.”

“But I like the one Býleistr gave me,” you reply. “The one about Jotunheim and the Nine Realms.”

You blink slowly. “Is that medicine supposed to make me feel like I’m underwater?”

“It is a normal effect, yes,” she says. “It might make you feel very tired, but that should only last for a few hours, at most.”

“I don’t wanna sleep.” Your voice is a little more petulant than you’d meant for it to be. “All I’ve done this week is sleep and get tossed around by giants.”

Gjálp exchanges a look with her sister. “I suppose we _could_ bring you to court,” she hesitantly suggests. “Inn-Illi only said to keep you out of trouble; he did not specify where. Considering all that has happened, I imagine it will be exciting enough to keep you awake.”

“Great!” You clap your hands together. “That’s decided, then. Woah, did the room just get brighter?”
Greip tilts your face up, her finger under your chin. “The pupils of your eyes are massive,” she says. “Are you certain that you would not prefer to sleep?”

“No way. *Carpe diem.* Seize the day.”

“Norns, we are going to be in so much trouble.”

“Are we ever not?”

~*~*~*~

The halls are busy, but it’s a more productive sort of busyness than what you’re used to; none of the giants rushing around seem to pay you much mind, aside from a few curious glances. Maybe the novelty is starting to wear off, at least for those who have been around you in the palace for weeks.

*Weeks.* Tiny alarm bells begin to ring in your head. You tug on Gjálp’s tunic. “Hey,” you whisper, “how long has it been since we came back from the Iron Wood?”

“Weeks,” she whispers back.

“Yeah, but like… how many weeks?”

“Over three, I believe? Perhaps almost a month…” Her eyes widen slightly. “Oh.” She pulls you into a small alcove by one of the large ice-windows, and Greip follows. “Do you feel unwell? Your month-time is approaching?”

“I mean, I feel awful, but I kind of figured it was just from everything else, you know? Lost track of time.”

“It is very lucky that you arrived back in Utgard when you did, then.”

“Yeah.” You crack a smile. “I’ve got all kinds of luck.”

“I do not imagine that the king will set out traveling again so soon,” Greip says. A passing servant shows a little too much interest, and she sends him off with a potent glare. “The both of you will need to rest and recover, and I must confess that I am very weary from all of this journeying, as well.”

“Thank God.”

Gjálp cocks her head. “Which one? Inn-Illi?”

“Well… I meant it more as an expression of relief. Like how you guys say, *Thank the Norns.* You know?”

“Interesting.”

“If we stay here for a while, maybe I’ll finally get to see more of Utgard, too. I haven’t even seen much of the palace yet.”

“Perhaps,” Greip says, “but only if the king deems it safe. Come, we should not linger in the hallways.”
Like anyone is gonna bother messing with me right after Loki went postal on an entire tribe, you think. Then again, there’s always the chance of retaliation, and I’m probably the most-breakable target in the entire palace...

The hallways are brighter than before; you can’t tell if more lighting has been added, if you’re adjusting to the darkness that is so common in the palaces of Jotunheim, or if it’s just a side-effect of the painkiller that the twins gave you. Either way, you feel like you’re seeing the palace with a new sort of clarity, noticing for the first time how the designs carved into the floors and walls seem to change patterns at random. You mentally add that to your list of questions; your list is getting ridiculously long.

People actually move out of the way when you reach the throne room, much to your surprise, and the twins guide you to an unobtrusive spot by one of the columns near the back of the room. There’s a hulking, older-looking giant currently addressing Loki, and most of the others in the hall are watching attentively - another surprise, considering the way they often chatter anytime Loki makes an appearance.

“How many were there?” Loki asks.

“Half a dozen, sire,” the giant replies. “My hounds chased them off, but not before the thieves made away with twenty barrels of milk.”

“Lord Skrymir is overseeing the reformation of the cityguard,” Fárbauti says. “He will see that the culprits are apprehended, and your debt repaid.”

“Thank you, my king.” The giant bows. “Queen Mother.”

Loki turns to discuss something with Fárbauti, and in the lull, the court grows louder. You poke Greip in the arm, and she leans down so that you can whisper in her ear. “There are a lot of strange faces here today,” you say.

She nods. “Many arrived when we were gone to the mountains. A whole pack of Storm Giants, and no small number from the cliffs and flatlands beyond the forests, as well.”

Loki’s gaze falls on you, and he beckons you forward. The hall grows quiet as you make your way up to the throne, where you stand awkwardly by his side. He places his hand on your shoulder.

“Everyone in Utgard knows of my mortal,” he says. “My prize mortal, the only human to see Jotunheim in hundreds of years. On the way back from Rann Steinar, the royal caravan was attacked by cowardly bandits, and my mortal was stolen from me and nearly killed.”

A lump forms in your throat; every eye in the room is trained on you, and not all of them are particularly friendly. There are, however, a few friendly faces, and you choose to focus on them. Hrossþjófr winks at you from across the room. Be strong, you tell yourself. Show them that you aren’t afraid.

“When they were found,” Loki continues, looking around the hall, “they chose not to kneel. They chose to refuse to submit. They chose to attack not only their rightful king, but your prince, as well.” He stands, his hand still on your shoulder. “They received the justice that these choices had earned them.”

His hand drops, and he moves down a few steps on the dais. “I do not expect you to love me. I do expect the courtesy of being challenged face-to-face, however. You may bring your concerns to me, your king, or you may keep them to yourselves, but I will not continue to tolerate underhanded scheming. In case any Jötunn here has forgotten, I am the God of Tricks. I hear your whispers. I see
the deceit in your eyes.”

He takes another step, low enough now that his head is level with the tallest of the giants standing in the hall. “If anyone wishes to speak plainly on the subject of the Vangsfólk, now is the time.”

The crowd of Storm Giants near Heiðr and Hrossþjófr stirs, and a giantess steps forward, a good head shorter than all of the giant around her, which has hidden until now her striking red hair. “May I speak, sire?”

“You may.”

She shoulders her way through the crowd. Her eyes, you are surprised to note, are an unusual shade, almost pink. “Hafalda, sire,” she says with a bow.

Loki gestures for her to rise. “Go on.”

“The Vangsfólk have tormented our borders for decades, sire, while no one holed up in Utgard bothered to do a thing to stop them. I am glad to see them dealt a heavy blow.” She turns to the crowd behind her. “Perhaps they will finally learn some manners.”

There are a few laughs.

“The Stormr-Jötnar lords have already pledged themselves to you, but we common folk - though we are, of course, as loyal as any - continue to be less… enthusiastic. The Bergrisar from the mountains now follow you because you defeated their High Lord.” Turning back to Loki, she grins. “We sea-folk would settle for a royal visit.”

You can feel his annoyance, but he’s also a little entertained - though you’re certain he’d never admit it. “I see,” he says, “and I thank you, and your kin, for travelling so far to visit the court. An expedition of that sort will require discussion with the coastal lords, and I will take it into consideration.”

The giantess bows and returns to her spot, playfully elbowing Hrossþjófr in the side as she passes him. You sneak a glance at Greip; she looks tense - but then, these days, she always looks tense. Someday, you decide, I’m going to take the twins on a well-deserved vacation.

Loki dismisses the court, but the Storm Giants stay, and so do the queen and the princes, along with Skaði and ten or so other giants who you can only assume are somewhat important. Servants bring in a single, long table, and you continue to hover beside the throne as they set out a miniature feast.

Your head is still a little heavy and fogy from the medicine, and you blink slowly, wondering if maybe you should’ve stayed in bed, after all. Small dinners mean that there will be less to distract attention away from you, and you’ve already had more than enough attention for one afternoon.

While the servants are bustling about, Heiðr approaches the throne with her brother and the rest of their companions. “My king,” she says, “may I make introductions?”

“Of course, Speaker.”

She steps to the first giant, an older man with a bald head and scarred, cracked skin. “Lord Brimjór, son of þongull.” The next giant in line is younger, and also slightly taller than the rest. “Dynfari, son of Lord Unnr, who still presides over the fortress of Hringarfold. Vindflot, cousin to Undsveiti, Lord of Jötundreyri. Hafalda, who you already know.”

“Well met,” Loki says, gesturing to the table, now laden with enough food to probably feed twice as many giants as are present. “Let us eat.”
I guess the rest of these guys aren’t important enough to merit a formal introduction, you think, examining their faces from your spot at the top of the dais. None of them look particularly hostile, which is good, but neither do they all look as genial as Hrossþjófr. Loki beckons for you to come to him, and you hurry down the steps; there’s no familiar nest of furs by his feet, so you don’t know what you’re supposed to do, but then a little wooden stool is brought out and placed just to the side of his seat. He gives you a look when you just stand there staring at it suspiciously, and you immediately plop down.

It doesn’t bring you up to a reasonable height, relative to the rest of the seats at the table, but it’s something. Something is better than nothing. Look at me, moving on up in the world.

The conversation at the table is pleasant, as giant dinners go. There’s some teasing, and the queen and the older sea-lord in particular seem to be ready to have words with one another, but it’s peaceful enough that you’re able to dig into your bowl of salty potato-seaweed-mush without too much worry over a fight breaking out.

“How is the king enjoying the running of a kingdom?” the one called Dynfari asks. “Is it everything you’d hoped it might be, Loki Laufeyson?”

Loki smiles. “I will admit that I would prefer to spend less time entertaining complaints about seal-milk bandits, Lord Dynfari, but I suppose that is part of the burden of the throne.”

“Dynfari will do, sire,” he replies, “for your mother and my father were cousins, and I have never cared much for titles in friendly conversation.”

Hold up, you think, nearly spitting out your soup, did he say ‘seal-milk?’

“Young King should visit the home of his mother,” Brimjór says. “Have you no desire to see the Sea of Undbára, sire? It is truly magnificent. No Storm Giant should go without visiting the lands of his ancestors at least once in his life.”

“And to visit the tomb of your revered mother,” an older giantess adds. “Queen Gunnlöð would be proud to see her son on the throne.”

“Tomb?” Loki asks, a bit pale. You wonder if anyone else notices. “On Asgard, it is fire that sends the soul to Valhalla.”

Skaði laughs. “And why, my king, would a Jötunn soul wish to sit beside Asgard’s honored dead for an eternity? Jötnar are meant to be on Jotunheim. The realm is a part of us.”

“Return to the ice,” Hafalda says, and the giants around her murmur the same thing. “Return to the ice. You wonder if Lord Inn-Kyrri would be satisfied with his end, then, considering how very literally he was returned to the ice. Spending an eternity frozen sounds like the worst thing you can possibly imagine, but to each his own.

“I am needed in Utgard,” Loki says, “especially now that construction efforts are fully underway. Any repairs that require the use of the Casket of Ancient Winters will need my oversight.”

“The Casket will be needed for foundational construction, Brother, but I hardly imagine that the artisans will need you to preside over the details.” Býleistr looks almost excited. “Mother can direct them, while we are away.”

“We?” Loki asks icily. “I do not recall hearing any mention made of you, Býleistr.”

“We would, of course, be honored to have Prince Býleistr stay with us in Márfjall, sire,” Hafalda
saying, flipping her bright red braid over her shoulder. “The royal family is always welcome.”

“You should remain here, my son,” Fárbauti chimes in, “whether or not the king journeys to the coast of Undbára.” She smiles politely as she nods to Hafalda, though it’s clearly forced. “We do thank you for offering your hospitality, Lady Hafalda.”

“I am not noble by blood, Queen Mother, but I do appreciate the sentiment.”

Loki sets his goblet down on the table with unnecessary force. “I have not said that I will be leaving Utgard, in case you have all somehow missed that important detail. I have been away from the capital enough, as it is. A king should know his realm, that is true, but I cannot be constantly wandering the wilds of Jotunheim. It is a waste of time and resources.”

“A king has not visited Márfjall since your mother died, sire,” Brimjór says. “It would be good for the clans who have pledged to support you to see you, as Hafalda has said. Besides, if it is resources that worry you, the lands controlled by the Stormr-Jötnar are some of the richest in the realm. We would be happy to contribute, to ease the strain on Utgard.” He smiles thinly at Fárbauti. “The poor condition of Utgard’s storerooms is well-known.”

“Are you suggesting, Brimjór, that I have mismanaged the wealth of Utgard?” the queen asks sharply. “I would be remiss if I did not remind you that your people have offered the throne no support since long before I reigned as Queen Regent.”

“Since you wed Laufey, you mean,” Dynfari says. His red eyes are hooded, and he looks careless, but you can practically taste the building tension in the room. “Since Queen Gunnlöð was killed in battle, so tragically young.”

Fárbauti’s eyes narrow, but Loki holds up a hand. “The past is the past. Let it die, lest we all die with it. I will accept your invitation and your hospitality, Lord Brimjór, though it will be several weeks before I am prepared to do so. Is this acceptable?”

The old lord nods. “Of course, my king,” he replies. “The journey is a difficult one, but I promise that you will not regret it.”

*Oh, God, you think. Here we go again.*

Chapter End Notes

It’s always Frostbite Friday in our hearts, right??

Sorry for the delay, friends! I can’t keep up with the weekly updates like I used to, but Frostbite (and you guys) are always on my mind! <3
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Another bout of isolation in the palace of Utgard leaves you pondering your fate, along with your position on Jotunheim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first few days back in Utgard are rough, but you tell yourself that they could be much worse. Your impending period puts a damper on your mood; even if Loki doesn’t make you hide away in his chambers, you figure it’s the best thing to do, given how nosy all the palace giants are. The prospect of being cooped up again makes you incredibly antsy. To compensate, you demand that Loki allows you to go outside of the palace with the twins to explore, but he refuses.

“You aren’t going outside of these walls unless I am accompanying you,” he tells you, not even looking up from the papers on his desk, “and I am far too busy to take you on a stroll.”

You huff, but you eventually give up. Loki’s tired, you’re tired, and at the end of the day, you probably should be resting, even if you’re about to lose your mind from boredom. He leaves you alone in your chambers for hours at a time, attending various council meetings that are apparently small enough that you’ll be out-of-place. It isn’t that you necessarily want to sit around listening to dusty old giant lords argue about taxes and construction materials or anything, but you still miss him terribly whenever he’s gone.

When he does come back, he usually looks exhausted, and you usually content yourself with wrapping him in your arms and playing with his hair until he can fall asleep. It’s not the most glamorous job in the world, but it’s one you’re starting to enjoy.

Over a week passes, and Loki barely spends any waking hours with you, outside of a few meals, where you sit balanced on your little stool by his side. The castle remains busy, but the court seems thinned; you ask him about it one evening, and he distractedly replies that he’s sent off many of the lords and ladies to take account of their holdings.

“I am sending representatives from Utgard with them, as well,” he tells you, “to see that they aren’t cheating the crown. Fárbauti doesn’t seem to have bothered with any sort of tax collection since Laufey died. It is no wonder that the city remains in such a state of disrepair.”

You scratch your nails against his scalp, and he sighs in satisfaction, resting his head on your chest. That he enjoys being held so much is… interesting. It makes you feel strong and important, to have a god come to you for comfort. “Loki?”

“Yes?”

It probably isn’t the best time to ask, but you can’t help yourself. “The Casket… why hasn’t Asgard attacked us yet? They have to suspect Jotunheim, at the very least. Who else would even want it?”

“Without the Bifrost Bridge repaired, there is very little that Odin can do, fortunately. We aren’t
ready to fend off any sort of large-scale attack yet, though I hope that will soon change.”

“What do you mean?” you ask, your apprehension stirring. Anything involving ‘large-scale attacks’ sounds pretty bad.

“All in good time,” Loki replies. He nuzzles against your collarbone, then yawns. “I would like to rest.” You relent; you can see how exhausted he is, and you don’t want to give him any more reason to stress.

“Your hair is getting really long,” you remark, twisting a silky strand of it around your finger.

“Is it?”

“It’s fun to play with. I kinda want to braid it.”

He yawns again. “You can,” he says, “in the morning. I won’t mind.”

Smiling, you kiss the top of his head, holding him a bit closer. For a long time after that, you just lie there and listen to his breathing, enjoying the peacefulness for as long as you can.

You know it won’t last.

~*~*~*~

Loki spends a great deal of time outside of the palace, though he refuses to take you with him; he claims that he’s too busy to keep an eye on you, and that all of the craftsmen coming and going through the city streets pose too much of a threat to your safety. You pout and plead, but it doesn’t do any good, so you take to sulking in the archives.

The Annals of Hveðrungr has been restored to you, along with your cloak. Loki presented them to you himself, likely hoping that it would win your forgiveness after so many days of neglect. Unfortunately for him, you’re every bit as stubborn as he is, and so you continue to sulk.

While the worst of your injuries seemed to have healed unnaturally quickly, the aches and pains and less impressive bruises and scratches seem to be taking their time. You hypothesize that the healing magic chose to primarily target the more dangerous injuries, which is all well and good, but you’re really tired of feeling so worn-down. Why couldn’t the magic take care of that, too?

And then there’s your period, which still hasn’t started - you know that stress and the environment and even nutrition can cause delays, and it’s really too soon to worry… but what if? What if you have incredibly terrible luck, and your first time has left you pregnant with a demigod baby on a hostile planet that’s constantly trying to kill you?

Though, while you haven’t given a lot of thought to the idea of having kids, the mental image of a little Loka-baby makes your heart swell. Don’t even imagine it, you quickly order yourself. Loki would lose his mind if you put his long-term marriage prospects in jeopardy that way, and there’s no way he’d accept anything as permanent as a half-mortal child resulting from a short-term fling with a human woman.

Even if he loves you, and you’re pretty sure he does, he’d never forgive you for that.
You don’t mention it to him, or to anyone else, but you notice that he’s extra attentive when he comes back to his rooms at night, and you wonder if it’s because he can sense your stress.

Isolation doesn’t suit you well, and with everyone in the palace busy, your mood rapidly plummets, even with your books to keep you company. When Greip and Gjálp stop by and sneak you away to spend some time in their room, you nearly cry in relief. “I thought I was going to die of boredom,” you tell them, and they laugh.

“One cannot die of boredom,” Gjálp replies, “or I would be long-dead after all these days spent listening to the Forest Lords complaining about taxes.”

“So it isn’t going well, then? All of the redevelopment and stuff?”

“It is going relatively well, all things considered,” Greip says. “As much as they might moan about the royal court having a peek inside of their coffers, a vast majority of the lords and landholders are also eager for the prosperity that the king has promised.”

“Even so,” Gjálp adds, “lords do love to complain, no matter the reason. You should not worry over it, In-Unga. The king seems to enjoy dealing with them, believe it or not.”

“Oh, I can definitely believe it. I think he’d get bored if people weren’t arguing with him, honestly.”

“The Queen Mother actually seems to be genuinely supportive,” Greip tells you, “and that carries quite a bit of weight in the court.”

“But what about Helblindi?” you ask. “He can’t be too happy about this, even if his mother is going along with it. Is he still acting sketchy? They both look baffled, so you try again. “I mean, is he acting suspicious? Gossiping with Laufey’s other kids, and all that?”

“Oh! Well, yes,” she replies, “I would say that Prince Helblindi has been acting suspiciously, wouldn’t you, Sister?”

“He is often absent from court, and he is constantly making snide comments when he does make an appearance. He spends more time with Laufey’s Lesser Children now than his own full-blooded brother.”

“And Loki’s not doing anything about it?”

They exchange a look. “If he is, In-Unga,” Gjálp says, “then you would likely know of it before we do.”

“You are his greatest confidante, after all,” Greip adds. “Isn’t that so?”

“Yeah,” you say, a bit startled to realize that’s probably true, “I guess I am.”

The king’s greatest confidante. That sounds pretty important. Loki’s Woman. In-Unga. There’s a whole new side of your identity, now, a side that’s inextricably intertwined with his. You pull out the woven Yggdrasil pendant, running your fingertips along the threads that make up its branches. Is it fate? you wonder.

Do I really believe in fate?

“Are you guys getting to hang out with the Storm Giants any?” you ask. “I figured the king might have you playing host for them, since you two kind of get along better with them than almost everyone else in Utgard.”
“Sister is keeping her distance,” Gjálp replies cheerily, “as Hrossþjófr Hrimnirsson continues his attempts to woo her.”

“Gjálp!” Greip cries. “That is not true.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Her voice drops to a stage-whisper as she leans towards your ear. “I have heard that a white hound has been seen lingering around the stables, particularly when my sister is there tending to Hornburi and Vámuli. I don’t recall seeing any white hounds in the palace kennels in recent years.”

“Ooh, Greip,” you tease, “so scandalous.”

Her eyes widen to a comical degree. “Not at all! I… I have noticed no white hounds.”

“How about white foxes? Seen any wandering melrakki around the palace, Gjálp?”

Gjálp taps her chin in mock thoughtfulness. “As it happens,” she says, “I do believe I’ve seen a fox or two in the courtyard of late—”

“Gjálp!” Greip buries her face in her hands, likely trying to hide the flush rapidly spreading across her cheeks. “Do not tease me so. You know that Father would never allow the seiðberandi to court me, anyhow.”

“Father has absolutely no power whatsoever in the coastlands,” Gjálp retorts. “Have Inn-Illi send you there, and you can frolic with Hrossþjófr to your heart’s content.”

“By the Norns, I have no desire to frolic—”

“But, we are going to the coast soon,” you say. “Aren’t we? And if something were to happen while we’re there… I mean, it might be the best opportunity you have to spend time with Hross, if you do want to spend time with him.”

“Forgive me, In-Unga,” Greip replies, “but I do not think it particularly wise to take your advice on these sorts of matters. Mortals are a bit… impulsive.” She taps her neck for emphasis, and now it’s your turn to be embarrassed.

“Hey, don’t bring my neck into this, Greip.”

“She does have a point,” Gjálp concedes. “This situation between you and the king… well, we all know how dangerous it is. A little less luck, and you’d be dead.”

“Yeah, but that’s an entirely different situation.” You tuck the woven pendant back into your tunic. “I’m human, and Loki is the Asgardian-raised prodigal son who tried to destroy the planet. You know?”

“I suppose,” Greip says, but she doesn’t look convinced. “In any case, I would not be surprised if Father refuses to allow us to travel with the court to Márfjall. It is within his rights to deny it, if he wishes.”

“I’ll talk to the king,” you tell her. “Besides, your parents can’t possibly want to mess up your position as the king’s personal guard, right? That’s a big honor, and it would be insulting to pull you away from your duty just because they don’t get along with the Storm Giants.”

She peers through her fingers, looking hopeful, but hesitant. “I would not want you to upset the king on my behalf…”
“Don’t worry about that, Greip. Besides, I want you guys to come. It won’t be nearly as fun without you.”

“Really?”

“Of course,” you reply. “Absolutely. It’ll be a fun trip; it has to be, relative to the last one.”

When Loki comes to bed that night, you’re extra attentive, rubbing his back and scratching his scalp, just like you know he likes. “How’s life treating you, handsome?”

He snorts, but captures your hand in his and kisses it, just like a prince in a fairytale. “It is frustrating, but I suppose being frustrated is better than being dead.”

“There are alternatives to being either a king or dead, you know,” you tell him, tugging on a particularly wayward strand of his hair. “Those aren’t the only two options in life.”

“They are for me,” Loki replies. His eyes close, and he makes a tiny soft little purr-like hum as he nuzzles against your breast. “Born to be king, or to die. My glorious birthright.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic.”

“Me? Never.” As he yawns, the blue fades from his skin, and you trace the smooth flesh where his markings were evident just moments before, every bit as fascinated as the first time you’d seen him change forms. “I am sorry,” Loki continues after a moment.

“What for?”

“I’m sure it seems that I’ve been neglecting you, and I don’t mean to give the impression that I’ve stolen your virtue and tossed you aside.”

“I don’t think that,” you retort. “Especially considering the fact that I was the one who was super enthusiastic to get you out of your pants.”

“Oh?” One eye cracks open, still a vibrant crimson. “Did I not seem enthusiastic enough for you, mortal?”

You yank on the strand of his hair, a little harder this time. “Don’t get smart with me, sire. You know what I mean. But don’t worry about neglecting me. I mean, don’t actually neglect me, but it’s okay for you to be busy and exhausted. You’re only… well, not ‘only human,’ I guess…”

“‘Only a god’ doesn’t have quite the same ring to it, does it?” Loki says, smiling faintly. “I enjoy the fact I can be tired with you, actually. You are very soothing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I haven’t been able to rest in a very long time.” His voice is sleepy, and you go back to petting his hair, feeling a bit guilty for keeping him awake. “In the next few days, things should be more as they were before the journey to Rann Steinar. I’ll be back in the palace for most of the day, and I’ll be able to keep you by my side, where you ought to be.”

“Good.” You kiss his forehead. “Loki?”

“Hmm?”

“Will you make sure that the twins get to come to the coast with us?”
"I will," he says. "Now, let me sleep."

For a long time after that, you lie there awake, stroking his hair and his back and listening to his slow, steady breathing. If you’re still, you can feel his heart beating, and something about the realization that this powerful, immortal being is clinging to you like you’re the most important thing in the world brings tears to your eyes.

Home is so, so far away, and you miss it, you do, but… something about Loki is beginning to feel like home.

_How much time do we have?_ you think, holding him more tightly. _How much more time?_

That night, you dream that you’re lying flat on your back amidst the wreckage of the sleigh. Loki stands at the top of the cliff, distant and small. You try to reach for him, but your arms won’t move. You try to call out to him, but your voice doesn’t work. He turns and walks away, and the snow covers you.

~*_~*_~*~

You have to remind yourself that it really hasn’t been that long since you suffered a catastrophic trauma, and that resting is definitely in your best interests, because you’re about to go stir-crazy after so many days of relative inactivity. Loki has to rush off before morning comes to deal with some new problem - you hear the servant whisper something about the Vangsfólk, but you can’t make out the details - and you’re left to fret. What if the remaining Vangsfólk have decided to come all the way to Utgard to retaliate? Would the city fight back, or would they hand you and Loki over to them?

The cramps come out of nowhere, sometime around midmorning, and you’re convinced that the delay has made them worse. Mother Nature must be trying to make up for lost time, you decide. Or maybe you’re having weird side-effects from your body’s attempts to heal you with magic, or from the potion that the old giant gave you back at the travel camp… either way, you’re miserable.

It makes you almost glad for your recent seclusion, because at least you don’t have to deal with weird looks from a bunch of giants with super-keen senses. The downside is that you have to deal with Gjálp, who still seems caught somewhere between concern and horror at the concept of a week spent bleeding every single month.

_Me, too, Gjálp,_ you think. _Me, too._

“How much time do we have?” you finally ask her around lunchtime, ready to be alone again so that you can bury yourself in Loki’s bed. “I swear I’m not dying.”

She looks up from her place by the fireside, where she’s been attentively polishing a new knife. “I do need to pack,” she says, “but I hate to leave you in such a terrible condition.”

“Hey, I’m used to it. You’re packing for the trip to the coast? Has your dad decided to let you and Greip go?”

A tiny hint of a satisfied smirk twists her lips. “Father and Mother have no choice,” she replies. “The king announced first thing this morning that we will be in the travel party, and Queen Fárbauti gave Father a very stern look to keep him silent about it. Father might be willing to upset one royal, but not
two.”

She stands and approaches you, offering you the handle of the brightly-polished little knife. “Here you are, In-Unga.”

“Wait, it’s for me?” The knife is lighter than you expected, but you’re terrified that you’re going to drop it and cut off your toes, or something equally embarrassing. “I thought the general consensus was that I shouldn’t get a weapon.”

“You do not look very intimidating,” she says, stepping back to size you up, “so you should not brandish it in an attempt to intimidate. It wouldn’t work. However, in close quarters, as a last resort… well, it is better than your bare hands.”

“Agreed,” you reply, experimentally jabbing the knife in the air. “But will Loki be okay with this?”

Gjálp laughs. “It was on his order that I found it for you, of course. ‘Get my mortal the smallest blade you can find,’ he said.”

“This doesn’t seem that small.” It’s about the size of a dinner knife, and it looks like it’s capable of doing some very serious damage. Impulsively, you turn and hurl it with all of your might towards the far wall… but it falls short, clunking onto the hard floor. “Oops.”

“What in the Nine—”

“I thought maybe I’d be good at throwing it!” you cry, hurrying to retrieve it. “I threw a rock at Moon-Eater-Wolf, and I was decent at that.”

“Mánagarmr,” she corrects, “and a rock and a throwing-knife are very different things, In-Unga. And, as I said, that little blade is for close-quarters, last-defense measures. Though, you might be able to convince the king to teach you some of his tricks; he is particularly adept with small blades.”

“I’ll ask him.” She hands you a small, decorated leather sheath, and you tuck the knife into it. “Thanks, Gjálp.”

“You are most welcome,” she says, patting you on the head. “Get some rest. I will come to check on you soon.”

You move around for a good chunk of the day, reading or sleeping or playing with the knife - but you decide that’s probably a bad idea, after you’ve nicked your finger testing its sharpness. Food is brought to Loki’s chambers by a very young, relatively unintimidating giantess late in the afternoon, but you don’t have much of an appetite. There’s more of the yogurt-like drink, which tastes good… but you can’t help but think about the fact that a good bit of the milk on Jotunheim apparently comes from seals.

You still haven’t decided how you feel about that particular fun fact.

When it gets late, and there’s still no Loki around to cuddle you and make you forget your discomfort, you start poking around his chambers to distract yourself. You pick up a small scroll from his desk, squinting at it by the light of the fire. Your skill with the runes is getting noticeably better; it only takes you a few minutes of scanning the ink to pick out Loki’s name, and you find Skaði’s name not long after. Great, you think, tossing the paper back down, probably Þjazi, talking about marriage plans.

His rooms have started to look a little more lived-in, lately, which you consider a massive improvement relative to the the barrenness when you’d first arrived. There are even quite a few
knickknacks now that you’d really consider yours - a few books and stacks of precious paper for you to practice your reading and writing, a pretty stone trunk that holds all of your clothes, a few polished rocks that the twins have brought you. There’s a cushion near the fire that’s started to have a little indentation from where you always curl up on it, and there’s a little table beside it with a neat stack of playing cards left for you by Greip.

I just need to get some pictures up on the walls, you muse, and then you giggle at the mental of the King of Jotunheim’s royal bedchambers decorated with all of your junk from back home on Earth. Your laughter dies abruptly as it suddenly occurs to you that you might never see all of your junk from back home on Earth again. Sobered, you return to bed and curl up on your side. Everyone has to think that I’m dead by now. Who knows if anything is like I left it? It’s been months. In some ways, it feels much longer.

You’ve managed to doze for a little while by the time Loki barges into the bedroom, lacking some of his usual grace. When he doesn’t immediately crawl into bed and warm you properly like you’re expecting, you sit up to try to get a better look at him, rubbing the sleep from your eyes. “Something wrong?”

“No,” he says, leaning on the doorframe, the dying firelight flickering behind him. “One of the Laufey’s lesser wives offered to welcome me into her bed tonight. They are all worried that I will be sending them off back to their families as I build my court anew, I expect.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to say to that,” you reply, wondering why you’re so irritated. “Unless you want me to congratulate you for being such a hot commodity?”

Loki sighs, then comes to the bed and sits heavily beside you. “All I could think of was that you were here, waiting for me. How badly I wanted to return to you. Is it supposed to be this way?”

You poke his shoulder accusingly. “Been in the tree-sap wine tonight, Loki?”

“Only a little. You have not answered me.”

“What’s the question, again?”

He takes your hands, his face incredibly solemn, despite your weak attempts at teasing. “I feel that you have become permanently entrenched in my mind,” he says, rubbing the back of your hand with his thumb. “Is it supposed to be that way?”

“I… I don’t think there are rules for this kind of thing,” you tell him, a little baffled by this entire thread of conversation. “But, it’s not bad to want to be around someone you love, you know. It’s not bad to love someone, or to enjoy spending time with them. To need them.”

“Isn’t it?” he says, and then he leans forward and kisses you, gently at first, then with increasing urgency. His hands begin to wander, and one soon finds its way beneath your tunic.

Your brain shorts out for a second at the unexpected contact, but you quickly remember that you’re tired and bloated and crampy. Cursing your terrible luck and human biology, you break away from his kiss. “Loki, um… now isn’t really a good time.”

“Why not?” he asks, withdrawing his hand. “You’ve missed my touch, haven’t you? I have missed yours.”

“Of course I have,” you reply. “Of course. But, I mean, you know that I’ve got all this going on right now.” You tap your belly, wondering why it’s still so embarrassing to talk about this, considering that the man has literally been inside you. “Monthly stuff.”
“Ah.” His face reminds you of a deer in the headlights. “That does not mean that we cannot—”

“No!” you exclaim. “That’s to say… I appreciate that you’d do that, really, but I don’t think we’re there yet, you know? I’m self-conscious enough already, and I’ll be too embarrassed to stay in the mood. And I’m not feeling great.”

“I see.”

He seems shockingly okay with the idea of going at it while I’m having my period, you think, frowning. Must have a lot of experience. Don’t think about that, stupid; of course he has experience. He’s centuries old. You’ve always known that he has experience.

“You are feeling jealous, darling,” he says, “and now seems to me to be a particularly strange time for you to feel jealousy.”

Sighing, you bury your face in a pillow. “I’m sorry. I was just thinking about how, like, you’re so comfortable with everything intimate, and I’m not, and how it’s because you’ve been with like a million other people—”

Loki pulls the pillow away. His lip quirks. “A million is a bit high, I believe.”

“Sorry,” you mumble again, wishing that he couldn’t sense your feelings, because it really isn’t fair —

“I think that you have some misconceptions about me,” Loki says. He stretches out on the bed beside you, pulling you down into the crook of his arm. His hand rests on your stomach, warm and soothing. “I’ve never had any particularly long affairs, certainly nothing like this. Nothing at all like this, not once in my life.”

You let out a little hum of acknowledgment, enjoying the warmth and security of his embrace. “I’m sorry I’m not up for anything tonight, Loki. Really, I want to, but—”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he interrupts. “Certainly not for something like this.”

“Well,” you say, trying for some levity, “at least we know I’m not pregnant.”

He shifts suddenly behind you, and you feel a little bit of an ache, which you blame entirely on your hormones. “No,” he replies, his voice strange. “Thank the Norns for that.”

Chapter End Notes

Frostbite Friday is here again! <3
Love you all, & I hope you have a fantastic weekend!
MoA
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Loki’s acting distant... again, and you’re starting to feel a little too confident with the rest of the giants in Utgard.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The morning is early, and you’re still half-asleep, but you valiantly try to sort your clothes into neat piles in preparation for the trip to Márfjall. Loki has given you the task of packing and coming up with a list of new things that you’ll need for such a long journey, and you’re determined to have it done by lunchtime. You’re even more determined to write the list out in runes just to impress him, but that’s another matter entirely.

Your clothing collection has grown slightly, and there are things now that actually kind of fit you, but it’s still pretty sparse. The climate near the coast is bound to be different than what you’ve experienced so far, but given how the entire planet seems to have it out for you... you can’t decide if a different climate is something to look forward to, or to dread. The magical cloak is a definite keeper, you decide, tossing it into a huge basket near the foot of Loki’s bed. No matter what the weather is like, you’re not going to risk leaving that behind. You’ve also got a new pair of boots that feel like some kind of oily leather, a mottled grey-white. It’s probably best not to mull over what sort of creature they’re made out of, though you can’t help but think of some of the beasts you’ve seen in your books.

You’re feeling a bit lonely and fretful, but you can’t figure out why that might be; Loki was perfectly sweet this morning, if perhaps a bit distant, and you’ve been promised that you’ll be back in the throne room for dinner. As bored as you’ve been lately, even the prospect of giants staring at you and wondering why you smell like blood isn’t as bad as the thought of another dinner alone by the fire.

And, truth be told, you’re already feeling significantly better - you’ll have to tell Loki that his cuddling helped. He’ll like that, you know; he’s always so obviously satisfied with himself when he does something to take care of you, even when he’s trying to act tough.

The trip to the castle of Márfjall is two weeks, from what you’ve been told, and you’re doing your best to think of it as sort of an extended vacation. Put positive energy into the world, you tell yourself. Speak it into existence. The Storm Giants seem to have a fairly positive opinion on having Loki as king, so it should be a much better trip than the ones you’ve been on so far.

Theoretically.

With both the Forest Twins and the Storm Twins along for the journey, you’ll also have plenty of time to pester them with more questions about Jotunheim. That’s something to look forward to, along with the bountiful sleightime cuddle sessions you’re hoping to have with the king.

The fireplace beckons, and you settle down in front of it, running your thumb along the embroidery and beading on your dagger-sheath. After looking at more carefully, you’ve noticed that it has a
design very similar to the Yggdrasil pendant, which makes you suspect that it was custom-made just for you.

*I never thought I’d be all choked up about getting a weapon for a gift,* you muse. *How the tables turn.*

Greip comes to escort you to the hall before you’ve had time to resume your packing. “Goodness,” she remarks, “you certainly look mightily fearsome, In-Unga, brooding away over your knife.”

Laughing, you tuck it away inside your vest. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, Greip. I’ll have to whip it out next time someone says something about me being a useless mortal.”

“Please, don’t. I would prefer to avoid battles over dinner, if at all possible.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Greip helps you practice your writing, laughing over some of your messier attempts at forming actual words from what you can remember of the Jotunheim court runes. “What in Ymir’s name is *that* supposed to be?” she asks incredulously, pointing to the most recent addition on your list of necessities.

You clear your throat, slightly chagrined. “Honey? It’s kind of an… an inside joke, for the king.”

“That is not how you write ‘honey,’ In-Unga.” She studies you for a few seconds, and you can see the wheels in her mind turning. “Oh,” she says, “is this a reference to the incident where you became intoxicated and sat in Inn-Illi’s lap and—”

“Yeah,” you hurriedly interrupt. “That’s the one. Let’s just… forget about that one, okay?”

“No need,” she says, leaning over your shoulder and crossing out the runes in question, then correcting them in her neat, blocky handwriting. “I am sure that the king could use something sweet to brighten his day.”

“Are you *teasing* me, Greip?”

“I would never.” A tiny smile curls at the corner of her mouth, and you laugh, your embarrassment subsiding.

“Are you excited to see where Hrossþjófr comes from?” you ask her. “You think his family will be nice?”

“I cannot imagine that they would be any worse than Inn-Kyrri,” Greip says, “or any worse than that dreadful old lord from Ymir’s Teeth, or Lord Gangr. Though, I should not speak ill of Lord Gangr, as he is one of the most powerful members of the Skögr-Jötinar.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to like him. Someone can be related to you and still be terrible, y’know? Like, look at Loki—I mean, look at the king’s family. They don’t all get along, do they?”

Greip shakes her head. “You might as well call him by his name when you are speaking with me, In-Unga. You do not do a very good job of pretending that you are not overly familiar with the king.”

You push the list aside, exasperated. “So, I don’t get how it’s okay for everyone to think I’m his *pet* - and basically some kind of sex-slave - but I’m also not supposed to be too *familiar* with him,” you tell her. “I mean, that’s pretty nonsensical, right? I just don’t understand what my position in court is even *supposed* to be, at this point.”
“Your position in court?” Greip asks, giving you a very pointed look.

“I didn’t mean—”

She ruffles your hair. “No, no need to explain. Yours is a confusing life, mortal. It is only natural that you would crave more than what you’ve been given here. Never repeat this to anyone, but I do believe that the king would have a crown on your head, if he could.”

“You really think so?” Against your better judgment, you picture yourself sprawled regally on a throne, throngs of giants kneeling before you, seeking your favor, speaking to you with real respect… It’s a tempting picture - impossible, but painfully tempting.

“It is not possible,” she says, “but… yes, I truly believe that he would. And on that note, I cannot help but wonder what you plan to do when he takes Lady Skaði as his queen, In-Unga. Mate-bond or no, my sister and I will take you with us to Jarnviðr to avoid her ire, if we must.”

The momentary happiness from picturing yourself as Loki’s equal fades. “What do you mean?”

Greip steps back, her expression suggesting that maybe she regrets saying anything. For a moment, she struggles for words. “He will want to keep you in Utgard; even for a mate-bonded pair, the two of you are... close,” she finally says. “I will give you the example of my own parents; my father and mother have a successful union, by all accounts. They have an expansive territory, they maintain the alliance between two very old, powerful Skögr-Jötnar families, and they have produced children. The bond encourages these things, but it is not… it is not what you would call love. Am I making sense?”

“Maybe?”

She twists her braid around one of her fingers, frowning. “I wish that I knew how to explain. In any case, it is common for high lords and kings to have multiple mate-bonds. In theory, a king who had a mate who caused infighting and resentment among the other women might send her away to another castle and visit her only occasionally to produce children. King Laufey did this, and so, I am told, did his father. Hrímnir, father of Heiðr and Hrossþjófr, is rumored to have secret wives on several of the islands surrounding the Sea of Undbára. So, you see, if Inn-Ilí insists on keeping you here in Utgard with him after Skaði becomes queen, it will be very strange.”

“Are you really telling me that Skaði and Angrboða wouldn’t be at each other’s throats if Loki really ends up marrying both of them?” you ask. “Especially if Skaði gets to be the queen?”

“I am positive that they will be,” Greip replies, “but you will note that the king has already given Lady Angrboða a position far from court. Rann Steinar is essentially an appeasement, so that she will accept being second-place to Lady Skaði.”

You feel like slamming your head into the desk. Trying to figure out the unfamiliar system of Jötunn marital hierarchy is going to make you go cross-eyed. “So, what about the normal people, then? The ones who aren’t taking a dozen different wives and concubines to keep alliances going and have ridiculous amounts of kids? How do things work for them?”

“They find a potential spouse that seems most suitable, and if their elders agree, that is the end of that. They bond, and they remain bonded for life.”

“Huh,” you say. “I guess I’d be better off if Loki was a commoner, then.”

“Everything happens the way it happens for a reason, In-Unga.”
“I guess.” You stand, retrieving a long leather jacket from where you’ve left it to warm by the hearth. “I don’t think I trust the Norns, though, Greip.”

She follows you to the door, and you leave Loki’s chambers with a bit of a determined swagger; somehow, all this talk about the competition and how you’ll never be Loki’s wife and queen has you feeling extra-salty, and when one of the guards in the hall flares at you, you glare right back. Go ahead and try to mess with me, you think. I’ve got bigger things on my mind than some petty, random giant. It’s probably a dangerous attitude to have, but you can’t help it.

Loki is starting to rub off on me.

The hallway outside of the entrance to the throne room is unusually crowded, a varied assortment of familiar and unfamiliar giants milling about and chatting. A woman catches sight of you and steps away from the group that she’s with, slightly blocking the doors. You stare up at her, irritated. There’s technically room to go around her, but…

“Princess Menja,” Greip acknowledges, inclining her head.

The giantess leans down. You recognize her from the court and you recognize the name, too, but you’ve never really paid any attention to her. Her dark hair is cropped close, with several stripes completely shaved away, and her skin is a deep indigo. “Lokakona,” she says, her eyes on the collar around your neck.

“In-Unga,” you reply, too bold for your own good. “I go by In-Unga.”

Menja’s eyes widen in surprise, then narrow. She stands to her full height, a good head above Greip, and your inner voice warns that you might’ve allowed your pissy mood a little too much free reign over your behavior. Picking a fight with a giant probably isn’t a good way to convince Loki that you’ll be fine wandering around Utgard without his supervision, after all.

“Some might say that you should be held responsible for the deaths of so many Jötnar at your master’s hands, mortal.”

Greip grabs your shoulder to caution you, but she’s too late; your temper bubbles to the surface, and you actually have the nerve to smile. “I think they guaranteed their own fates the minute they defied the King of Jotunheim.”

She doesn’t seem to know how to respond to that, but you have a feeling that she’d probably haul back and smack you if there weren’t so many witnesses. Sorry, Greip, you think. I did say that I would avoid starting any fights. You figure you might as well enjoy this intoxicating mixture of fear and bravado while you can, so you add a very condescending bow and walk around her, Greip hurrying after you.

“You should not have done that,” she hisses. “Fenja and Menja are already causing the king trouble, and you do not need to make yourself even more of a target.”

“You should not have done that,” you whisper back, and by then, you’re far enough into the crowded throne room that she doesn’t respond. You weave your way through the court, your mood volatile. Calm down, you tell yourself, but you can’t seem to dispel the pent-up frustration that’s seething through you. You weren’t feeling this way earlier, were you, or had you just not noticed it?

Loki is on his throne, stone-faced, and you come to a sudden halt at the bottom of the dais. He looks tired, and not particularly thrilled to see you, but he gestures to a little wooden chair that’s been placed near the throne, and you hurry up the steps to it. You do receive a distracted pat on the head,
but that’s about it, and your sense of malaise increases as the minutes pass.

To distract yourself, you listen intently to the petitioners who come forward to address the king. There are several messengers from some of the lords that reside far from Utgard, bringing word about their resources and when their tributes to the throne can be expected. A young-looking boy approaches at one point, visibly terrified, to tell Loki that his master is displeased by the royal demands. “Lord Aurvandil says that it has been many years since the King in Utgard bothered to send men to rid him of the thieves that plague his lands.”

It’s quiet - you imagine everyone is half-expecting Loki to whip out the Casket of Ancient Winters and freeze the kid where he stands. Loki’s fingers curl around the arms of his throne as he deliberates. “Go to the kitchens,” he finally says, “and get something to eat. Then, you will return to Lord Aurvandil and inform him that Lady Skaði will be travelling to pay him a visit.”

Skaði’s reaction to the announcement is almost comical, her head snapping around to stare at Loki like he’s just sprouted horns. “Sire?” she says.

“I trust that Lady Skaði will be able to remind Lord Aurvandil of the importance of his contributions to the realm.” Loki turns to her. “You will select a group of your archers to station at his fortress to deal with these raiders of his as a gesture of my good faith. If he continues to be belligerent, you may assure him that his king will be the next guest he receives from Utgard, and the circumstances will be considerably more unpleasant.”

“Yes, my king,” Skaði replies, bowing. She seems more pleased by the assignment than you would’ve expected, though the rest of the court appears puzzled. The boy leaves the hall, and when no one else steps forward to address the king, the normal court chatter resumes.

You try to catch Loki’s eye so that you can give him an encouraging smile - you’re proud that he’s being diplomatic and not just terrorizing people - but he doesn’t look at you, and you’re picking up some sort of strange, conflicted vibe from him. Maybe it’s from having to make so many life-altering decisions, you think. Maybe a good ruler is always a little conflicted.

Once dinner is in full swing, Loki finally leans over and places his hand on your shoulder. “You are feeling well?” he asks softly, and you nod. He goes right back to talking to some of the Storm Giant visitors, but you’re at least a little satisfied that he doesn’t seem upset with you. No, whatever the reason for the king’s angst, you’re pretty sure that it isn’t anything you’ve done, because Loki has never been very good at hiding when he’s irritated with you.

There’s some kind of salted ribs on the menu tonight, and either they’re better than the usual Jotunheim fare, or you’re starting to like the taste of weird alien food. A full stomach makes you feel a little more calm and content, and by the time dinner begins to wind down, you’re starting to become drowsy. Loki notices, and he gets up from the table, announcing that he’ll be retiring for the night. You hurry through the halls after him as he returns to his chambers, wishing that he’d just carry you.

When you do arrive back in his room, you’re half-expecting him to sweep you off your feet and kiss you senseless, but instead, he heads directly to his desk, settling heavily into his seat. He picks up the list you’ve left there, and for the first time all day, you see a flicker of actual, genuine amusement on his face. “What’s this?” he asks.

You follow him, leaning against the desk with what you hope is an air of nonchalance. “My list of demands for the trip to the coast,” you reply.

“Your runes are very good.” He scans the list for a moment, and as you watch his face, you can
identify the exact second when he reads the word ‘honey,’ but disappointingly enough, he chooses not to mention it. “I am going to give you a book of High Asgardian, next. You seem to learn quickly.”

The unanticipated praise leaves you preening. “Really?”

“Yes, and I do not say that as baseless flattery; your ability to adapt to life on Jotunheim is almost bizarre, to be perfectly frank. I never would’ve expected it of a human.”

“Humans do tend to be pretty adaptable,” you say. “But maybe it’s just because I’m particularly amazing.” Loki doesn’t take you up on your attempts at flirtatious banter; he only nods distractedly, and you get another wave of… something. It’s a feeling you can’t entirely place. *He’s just tired and stressed,* you tell yourself, and so you decide that maybe it will help if you give him some much-deserved praise, too. “I was impressed with you in court today.”

“Were you?” Loki folds your list and tucks it into his vest, a half-smile on his lips. “I think that the general population was hoping for more carnage. What is the point of attending the court of the evil king Loki Laufeyson, after all, if you do not get to experience the full extent of his wickedness?”

“I don’t think that a lot of them think that you’re totally evil anymore. I think they’re unsure, and they think that you’re super weird, but not totally evil. Especially when you consider the giants who have been around you since the beginning, you know? I know for a fact that Greip and Gjálp genuinely like you… even though they definitely like me more.”

You say it teasingly, but Loki’s expression is entirely serious when he nods in agreement. “I don’t think that you understand how truly impressive that is,” he says. “That you have, in so short a time, convinced multiple immortal beings to commit themselves to your defense, is truly astonishing. If you can convince the lady Skaði to swear her fealty to you, then I will be convinced that you are some sort of goddess of loyalty, and not a mortal at all.”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous, Loki. Skaði would be way more likely to throw me off a cliff than to suddenly start liking me. I actually figured that was why you picked her to send off on your allegiance-building mission, to reduce the chances of her ‘accidentally’ putting an arrow through my back.”

He leans back in his seat, drumming his fingers on the desk. “That was a factor in my choice,” he admits, “but it was not the only one. I would like to see how Helblindi behaves in her absence, and to see how Skaði will represent my interests when I am not there to supervise her. It will also be easier to travel to the lands of the Storm Giants without her, given her rather… vocal dislike of them.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to leave Helblindi and his mom here to rule Utgard while you’re gone for over a month? Because I personally find Fárbauti’s whole *for the good of Jotunheim* angle to be a little suspicious.”

Loki smiles and grabs hold of your tunic, pulling you into his lap. “Such scheming,” he says. “So much distrust.”

“You only like that because it reminds you of yourself,” you mutter, but you’re too happy about being in his lap and in his arms to sound appropriately stern. *Now if he would just kiss me,* you think.

“If the esteemed Queen Mother and Helblindi decide to cause trouble in my absence,” Loki continues, “then I will have Býleistr with me in Márfjall as a guarantee.”
“A hostage, you mean.”

“Yes,” he replies, “as a hostage, and Fárbauti knows it. Sending Skaði and a portion of her fighters away tips the travel party in favor of our Storm Giant hosts. If I am betrayed in Utgard, then I will have her favorite son trapped in a land that has a very long history of animosity towards her and a very strong familial incentive to be loyal to me. Fárbauti isn’t stupid; she won’t risk Býleistr’s life.”

“Hmm.”

“If you disapprove, consider the fact that Býleistr seems absolutely thrilled at the prospect of travelling to the coastal lands, and was the one who originally invited himself along for the journey.”

“Yeah,” you say, “but that doesn’t make using your little brother as a political hostage okay—”

“That is only if Helblindi causes trouble,” Loki interrupts. “You know that it is a reasonable tactic, even if you feel obligated to take some sort of moral high ground. If you didn’t have this foolish fondness for Býleistr—”

“He’s been nice! Okay, relatively nice,” you amend. “But relative niceness is better than no niceness at all.”

“Wise words,” Loki says, rolling his eyes. “I am absolutely certain that will become a proverb for the ages—”

You clap your hand over his mouth. “Hey, don’t get sassy with me, Your Majesty. I bite back.”

He pulls your hand away, clearing his throat, and you’re a little embarrassed that your attempts at flirtation continue to fail. “I have more work to do,” he says. “Would you like for me to carry you to bed?”

“I… I guess.” Hesitantly, you lean in to kiss him, and while he doesn’t pull away, he also doesn’t reciprocate with more than a chaste peck on the lips.

Scooping you up in his arms, he carries you to the bedroom and tucks you under the covers with careful precision, layering you in furs and blankets until you’re snug and warm. “I will have some new books sent to you in the morning,” he says, stroking your cheek. There’s a wistful sort of look in his eyes, and the odd feeling of unease lingers. “I’ll see that the twins help you to finish preparing for the trip.”

“Is everything okay, Loki?”

“Of course it is,” he tells you. He kisses your cheek, and then he stands to leave. “Of course it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Frostbite Saturyayyy! <3
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

In which you find out a little more about Æsir-Jötunn relations, almost win at a card game, and continue to worry over Loki’s standoffishness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s a reasonably mild morning when the journey to Márfjall begins, and you step out into the courtyard of the palace with your little giant entourage, breathing in the crisp, fresh air. Truth be told, you’re almost starting to enjoy it. “Okay, people,” you say, “let’s get this show on the road.”

Hrossþjófr spins around mid-step, kicking up snow and laughing. “You are remarkably eager to leave the palace, considering your habit of nearly dying every time you do so.”

“I mean, you nearly died that time in Ymir’s Teeth, so I don’t think it’s really fair to call me out,” you retort. You heft your large knapsack onto your shoulder. “Anyway, where’s our sleigh? And it better have a seatbelt, because that’s the only thing that kept me from getting squashed flat during the whole Rann Steinar avalanche incident.”

“There.” Gjálp points to a dark, polished wooden boat-looking thing with metal runners holding it several feet off of the ground. The front of it slopes up and narrows like a ship’s bow, and there aren’t any windows - or any doors, from what you can see.

“Well,” you remark, “that’s… different.”

“Störmr-Jötnar design,” Heiðr says. “They are better for fording creeks and rivers, and while they are not suited for open water, they can theoretically survive a short voyage.”

You rub the lacquered wood. It’s so shiny that you can see your reflection, and it’s got a bit of a sweet, spicy scent. “What’s this made out of?”

“Tree sap.”

“The same tree sap that’s in that one drink?” you ask, your eyes narrowing. “Did Loki seriously let me drink varnish?”

“It has many uses,” Greip begins, but you hold up a hand to stop her.

“If one of the uses is waterproofing giant sleigh-boats, then it doesn’t seem like it’s probably meant for human consumption.”

“Well, no,” she agrees, “but the king has already said that you’re to have no more of it. It is very potent.”

“Too potent.” You knock on the side of the sleigh, trying to figure out if there’s some kind of hidden door. “How do we get in this thing, anyway?”
Hrossþjófr points up. “The roof,” he says. “The only opening is in the roof, in case of flooding.”

You squint up at the edge of the sleigh roof for a minute, then turn back to the others, exasperated. “That’s gotta be several meters high, at least.”

“How high can you jump, mortal?” he teases, and then he snickers when Greip shoves his shoulder.

“Help her up, seiðberandi,” she says, “before I change my mind and stay behind in Utgard.”

“See?” Hrossþjófr leans down to your ear, but his stage whisper is loud enough that everyone can hear him. “The lady admits that I am the true reason she is journeying across the realm.”

“I am journeying across the realm because my king asks it of me,” Greip responds, “and that is the only reason.”

Hrossþjófr wraps an arm around your waist and hoists you into the air, and your stomach lurches as he leaps directly onto the roof of the sleigh without giving you any kind of warning. “Oh my God,” you wheeze, “why would you do that?”

“Perhaps this will inspire you to practice your jumping, In-Unga.”

“She cannot jump so far, you fool!” Greip cries from the ground below. “Have you seen how tiny her legs are?”

“I think a ladder might be a good investment.”

“You are so entertaining,” Hrossþjófr tells you. “I cannot wait to see my homeland through your eyes.”

He sets you on your feet and pats you on the head, then goes to open up a barely-noticeable door that’s in the exact center of the roof. You’re terrified to move, and so you stay frozen in place; you really doubt that you’ll manage to regain your footing if you happen to slip, and while there aren’t many other giants in the courtyard yet, it would still be pretty humiliating.

“Go ahead and get inside, In-Unga,” Gjálp says. “We will join you in a moment.”

“I will have to get Hornburi and Vámuli used to these harnesses,” Greip adds. “They are different from the ones I typically use.”

“By ‘different,’” Hrossþjófr tells you, “she means that they are better.”

“I heard that, seiðberandi.”

He grins, offering you his hand, and you take a deep breath and spring forward to take it, a little elated when you manage to keep your footing. There is a ladder that leads down into the sleigh, and you manage to make your way down the widely-spaced rungs without falling on your face. It’s much warmer in the cabin, and your cheeks burn from the sudden change in temperature.

“You coming down, Hross?” you ask, blinking slowly as your eyes adjust to the darkness. The inner walls are curved and covered with an absurd amount of furs and woven blankets, and the only lantern fixtures you see hang from the ceiling, far above your reach.

He lands gracefully beside you, his eyes glowing a little as the light from above catches them. It’s funny, you think, how glowing red eyes aren’t nearly as terrifying as they used to be. “Is it warm enough for your pitiful human skin?” he asks. “The servants had braziers burning all night.”
“It’s fine. Not too hot for you, is it? I’d hate to see you melt.”

Laughing, Hrossþjófr reaches up and fiddles with one of the lanterns above your head, and a dim glow soon illuminates the interior of the sleigh. You can make out the shimmer of glass above your head, but it’s dark and boarded over; the shutters must be on the roof. Maybe if you’re sneaky about it, you’ll be able to convince the twins to let you sit up on the roof during part of the trip. Loki obviously wouldn’t approve, but given the fact that Loki has elected to have his own sleigh for this journey, you can’t really bring yourself to worry about his disapproval.

“How long until the first stop?” you ask.

“Only a day, if not less.” Heiðr’s head appears in the open hatch above, the light making her fair hair look almost like a halo. “There is no need to rush across the continent; it is an opportunity for the king to meet his people.”

“But we’re always rushing everywhere.”

“This is different, more of a royal progress.” She smiles down at you. “More of a friendly endeavor, I would hope.”

“As long as no one ends up going over a cliff this time,” you say, “then I’m down for anything.”

“Bold words, mortal,” Hrossþjófr tells you, then he cranes his neck to peer up at his sister. “And will the revered Speaker for the Völva be joining us in our humble sleigh?”

Heiðr hops down, landing with cat-like grace that you can’t help but envy. “It is our family’s sleigh,” she replies, “and you require a chaperone, besides.”

“A chaperone? Me? I should take offence, dearest sister-mine.”

“Take all the offence you’d like, Brother, but you will not be causing any trouble with Lord Geirröðr’s daughter. The king has given me express instructions to keep a wary eye on you.”

“Loki Laufeyson has some nerve to worry over keeping others out of trouble, doesn’t he?”

You reach up and tug his ear. “Hey,” you say, “maybe he’s speaking from experience, you ever think about that? Plus, Greip wouldn’t even be coming on this trip if he hadn’t gotten involved. Show some respect.”

“So defensive the mortal becomes.” When your grip on his ear tightens, Hrossþjófr sighs and relents. “Yes, little lady,” he says, “I will be on my best behavior, if you will only release me. Stooping to your level is mightily uncomfortable.”

You let him go, but you do so with a stern look. “I mean it, Hross; I’m trying to help you out, and so is Loki. Geirröðr and his entourage are scary, and you don’t want to give them an excuse to cause more problems. Got it?”

“Listen to In-Unga,” his sister adds. “You will need the king’s favor, for Father will surely never give you permission to court a woman from Járnvíðr.”

A delicate cough sounds out from above, and the three of you look up to find Gjálp peering in the open hatch, a slightly awkward expression on her face. “Sister says that her beasts are ready,” she says. “Once the other sleighs are loaded and ready, we will be on our way.”

Heiðr shoulders him. “Did you hear that? Help to finish loading the supplies, and leave poor In-Unga
These jokers better be putting a ladder in here, you think, squinting up at the hatch after they jump directly out onto the roof as if it’s no problem at all. I swear to God, I’ll build one myself, if I have to. For the meantime, you decide to take advantage of the fact that there isn’t really much that you can do to help load up the sleigh, and you choose a corner to claim as your own, plopping down on a pile of blankets and rummaging through your travel bag. Your fingers close on the dagger you’ve been given, and you pull it out of its sheath, examining it for the dozenth time since you’ve gotten it.

If anyone tries to kill me on this trip…

If anyone tries to kill you on this trip, your best bet is probably to hope that some friendly giants are around to keep you alive, realistically. Still, it’s nice to imagine that you could do something to defend yourself, if it came down to yet another life or death situation.

The twins keep dropping all sorts of bundles and boxes into the sleigh, and you make a game of guessing who tosses in which one by how carelessly it’s dropped. Hrossþjófr has many positive attributes, but patience doesn’t seem to be one of them, and you’re guessing that the packages that hit the floor of the sleigh with particular force are most likely his.

All four of them soon join you in the sleigh, and Greip pulls the door closed behind her. “We will see how the weather holds once we are on the road,” she says brusquely, looking around for more lamps to light, “and if all goes well, perhaps we can open the window-shutters.”

“Everyone’s loaded up?”

“Yes.” She hesitates. “Our sleigh will be directly behind the king’s, in case of any sort of calamity, and Prince Býleistr will be in the one following us. We are the core of the caravan and should be relatively well-protected.”

At least Loki’s travelling alone, you tell yourself. At least he hasn’t picked someone else over you, he’s just picked… nobody. Nobody, when he could’ve had his mate beside him every night—

“In-Unga,” Gjálp says, “is that a new book?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. It’s some Asgardian history book, and it’s got this script that Loki wants me to practice…” You trail off, noticing their expressions. “What?”

“Asgardians?” Greip asks. “Why would the king wish to have you learn anything about them? They stole him from his dying mother’s arms and raised him to do battle with his own kind.”

“I… what was that about him being stolen?”

“When Queen Gunnlöð was slain in the war with the Æsir, she was said to have been carrying her infant to the Temple of Jötna-Rómr for sanctuary. Some say that it was Odin himself who killed her as she fled from battle.”

Heiðr scoffs. “Is that what your Queen Fárbauti has told you? Gunnlöð was a warrior, and a powerful enchantress moreover; she would never have fled from battle, even carrying her child.”

Greip flushes. “Go on, then. What is it that is said of Queen Gunnlöð’s death on the coasts?”

“Nothing that you would enjoy hearing, íviðja.”

Clearly, this conversation has struck a nerve; you’ve never seen Heiðr particularly testy before, but
you suppose it makes sense that a figure like Gunnlöð is one that she’d idolize. Should you try to jump in and diffuse the situation? The problem is that you know basically nothing about any of this…

The sleigh jolts into motion, startling all of you. Hrossþjófr laughs uncomfortably.

“Sing the song for her, Brother,” Heiðr says after a few moments of tense silence.

“I prefer singing more pleasant songs,” he replies, “particularly at the start of a journey. It seems inauspicious.”

“I can sing a song from Earth,” you tell them. “Teach you guys something from my world. What do you think?”

Heiðr sits back, forcing a smile. “That sounds quite nice, actually. Go ahead, In-Unga.”

I should’ve thought this through, you think. What songs do you teach giants? Something repetitive is probably best. “Okay,” you say, your mind racing through your options - except you’ve suddenly forgotten pretty much every song you know. “I’ve got one. Do this. Stomp, stomp, then clap.”

Mystified, they do as you say, and you have a sudden flash of worry that the sleigh might not hold up to repeated giant stomping. Oh, well, you decide. It’s too late to go back now. They look excited, and you don’t want to disappoint them.

And that’s how We Will Rock You becomes the first Midgardian song heard on Jotunheim in hundreds of years.

“We will freeze you,” Hrossþjófr declares, pretending to menace you with iced-over fingers. Greip giggles.

“How do you do that?” you ask him, musical interludes quickly forgotten. “Forming the ice from nothing like that?”

“It isn’t from nothing,” he says. He offers you his hand, and you trace your fingers along the sharp ice-gauntlets frozen to his skin. “Ice is always around us, waiting to be given form.”

“You mean water in the air? So you just… draw it to your skin and freeze it?”

“Something like that.”

“But, can every Jötunn do it? I haven’t seen everyone make ice, and if I could, I’d be doing it all the time.”

“Most of us can.” Gjálp holds out her own hand, and tiny crystals form along the lines on her palm. “But it is not easy for all of us. It is a dominant trait among the Hrímrursar, and their primary form of weaponry is ice.”

“Which is foolish,” Hrossþjófr says, “as the ice is strongest on Jotunheim. Imagine trying to conquer the Nine Realms when your primary weapon is easily shattered.”

“The ice doesn’t work the same everywhere?”

“No. That is one of the reasons that Midgard proved so difficult to conquer; Jötnar draw strength from Jotunheim. We are weaker on other realms, even if the effect is only marginal.”

“That is why the Casket of Ancient Winters is so crucial,” Heiðr says. “It carries the power of
Jotunheim with it.”

“So… let’s just say you wanted to win a fight with a Frost Giant… heat would be a good way to go?”

“I suppose.” Hrossþjófr grins. “I would not recommend chasing after any hostile Jötnar with a torch, however. It isn’t quite that easy.”

“You’d best not give her any ideas,” Greip tells him, “for the king has already seen fit to equip her with a dagger.”

“Is that so? Well, you must show us, In-Unga.”

“Okay,” you say, and you crawl across the sleigh floor on your hands and knees; standing would be more dignified, sure, but standing also carries the risk of falling over on your face the next time the sleigh hits a bump in the road. You plop down next to your bag and pull out the knife, holding it up proudly. “All mine,” you say. “I’m gonna be a force to reckon with, once I practice.”

“Very tiny,” he remarks, holding out his hand. “May I?”

You make your way back over to them, the sheathed blade tucked carefully into your belt. “Here you go,” you say, offering it to him. “Isn’t it pretty?”

He unsheathes it, some sort of inexplicable delight sparking in his eyes. “A first-morning gift?” he asks pleasantly, and Greip claps a hand over his mouth.

“Hrossþjófr,” she hisses, “that is not appropriate.”

You’re lost. “What?”

He pulls Greip’s hand away from his mouth - but he holds onto it, you can’t help but notice. “It isn’t particularly uncommon for ladies to receive gifts to commemorate eventful moments, such as the birth of a child, the consummation of a union—”

“Oh!” Your face warms as realization strikes. “Oh. I mean… I don’t think… I’m not some fancy lady, so I don’t think…” Trailing off helplessly, you focus on your hands, fidgeting with the soft fabric that lines your cloak. “We aren’t married, I mean. We can’t.”

“It does not matter,” he says. “I imagine that it is a custom on Asgard, as well. Ask him.”

“Or, it’s because I’m always almost getting murdered, so it’s just practical.”

“You are so terribly meddlesome,” Heiðr tells him. “Always poking your nose where it does not belong. Leave the poor girl alone.”

“I’m only trying to help.”

“Are there a lot of customs that are common on Asgard and on Jotunheim?” you ask, trying to steer the conversation into more comfortable territory.

“More than you might expect.”

“Odin himself comes from Ymir’s line,” Heiðr adds. “Jötunn blood is in his veins, whether or not he would admit to it.”

That’s news. “Really? But you guys look so different. And the height thing, too.”
“The Jötnar were more elemental in the beginning-days. They mingled more freely with the gods - or so the old songs say.”

Greip and Gjálp both look a little skeptical, so you can only assume that these are opinions that the Forest Giants don’t share. Not that that’s surprising, really.

“Do you know any giants who’ve ever been to Asgard?” you ask. “Besides Loki, I mean.”

“Many of the giants of King Laufey’s generation had visited in their younger days, I believe, but that was long before our time, or before even King Loki was born,” Heiðr says. “And as you’ve heard, King Hveðrungr was well-known to travel throughout the Nine Realms, many centuries before that.”

“Oh.” You picture the gleaming, golden spires of Asgard’s capital, and the beautiful gods and goddesses you’d only caught glimpses of as you’d crept through the halls on the quest to retake the Casket of Ancient Winters. “Do you think I’ll ever meet Odin?”


~*~*~*~

The first stop along the way comes sooner than you’d expected, and you’re a little irritated that you have to set aside the card game that you’re currently winning against Gjálp and Heiðr. The sleigh screeches to a sudden and sharp stop, and the door above pops open, Greip dangling halfway through the opening. “We have arrived!” she declares. “We will have real beds for the night, my friends, and Hornburi and Vámuli will be very pleased for the respite.”

“As am I,” Gjálp says. “I would very much like a bath.”

“Please don’t let Hross haul me around like a sack of potatoes this time.” You tuck your cards away in their box, feeling like you were cheated out of a definitive victory. “I’d like a ladder, please.”

His head appears beside Greip’s. “Ask, fair maiden,” he says, “and ye shall receive.”

A sturdy rope ladder tumbles down, almost landing directly on top of you. You stand and give it a hard yank or two, a little suspicious that he hasn’t got it fastened at the top, but it seems... moderately sturdy. Not ideal, but not the worst, either. “If I fall,” you tell them, “it doesn’t leave this sleigh. Understood?”

“You will not fall, In-Unga.” Greip holds out a hand. “Just climb towards me, and I will help you onto the roof, and you will be on solid ground before you know it.”

Sure. Just think of solid ground.

You’re surprised to find that your balance is better than you’d expected, even with the slight swaying of the ladder, and while Greip does have to haul you up onto the roof of the sleigh, you find your footing on your own. Arms spread wide, you take in the view, ready to throw yourself at her if you begin to slip. “Woah,” you say.

“A clear sky is a good omen.” Heiðr climbs out behind you, craning her neck to peer up at the stars. “I am glad that you were able to see this. Nights like these are not common, particularly at this time
of the year.”

The five of you stand together on top of the sleigh, your breath fogging the air, admiring the dense expanse of bright stars scattered like diamonds across the inky blue Jotunheim sky. The sounds of the caravan are easily ignored, and for a moment, all you can think about is how very, very small you are - all of you, human and giant and even the gods of Asgard.

“Lady Greip,” someone calls from down below, “should I untether Hornburi and Vámuli for you?”

“Yes, do. We’d best go down to join the others,” she adds, turning back to you, “before the cold becomes too much for you to bear.”

*It actually isn’t all that bad, considering how it’s been in the past,* you think, but you bite your tongue; these changes aren’t something you want to draw attention to, and really, it could just be Loki’s spells and the enchanted cloak. It isn’t necessarily that your bond with him is causing some sort of unpredictable, permanent changes to your physical makeup.

Is it?

They help you down, and you’re pleased to note that your new boots are very well-insulated against the slushy mess of snow and ice that the sleighs have churned up along the path. “Is that where we’re going?” you ask, pointing at some huge snow-covered hills nearby, knowing by now that the telltale wisps of smoke likely mean that they aren’t really hills at all.

“It is.” Gjálp catches you as you start to wander off and turns you around, back towards the rest of the sleighs. “However, you will not be going with us, In-Unga. The king calls for you.”

“But—” you begin, but she steers you forward towards a large group of gathered giants. *What the hell is Menja doing in this group?* you wonder briefly, but you don’t really get the chance to glare at her before you’re passed off to Loki.

You feel his relief smooth across your skin like a sigh when his hand wraps around your arm, and you can’t help but think back to those months ago, back to your first days in Utgard - how utterly ludicrous the idea of him holding your hand had seemed then! Now, you can practically taste how badly he yearns for the contact.

But he doesn’t smile, and he doesn’t meet your eyes.

*Great. This again.*

“Carouse if you must, but we leave at first light,” he tells his gathered entourage.

It doesn’t take long for you to gather that this particular stop is more of a village than any sort of noble holding, and it seems to be strategically positioned to attract travellers from the road. The snow-domes are far deeper than the hills would lead you to believe, and they all seem to be connected underground through brightly-lit, stone-paved halls. If Loki wasn’t keeping you by his side, you’d be sorely tempted to stop and gawk at all of the goods on display in the main underground courtyard. It’s much less austere than what you’ve seen of Utgard, and you wonder if any of that has to do with Utgard nearly being destroyed by the Bifrost Bridge.

You try to pay attention as the local whatever-he-is welcomes Loki and company, bowing and scraping and very likely hoping that he doesn’t piss his new king off like the Vangsfólk did. Villagers crowd in to see this mysterious new king of theirs and his pet mortal, and you tune out their whispers, most of which you can barely understand. Eventually, the royal party is brought into a room that seems to serve as a communal feasting-hall, and Loki is offered the seat at the high table -
which he accepts, pulling you down on the bench next to him.

Well, okay then, you think, observing the frozen confusion in dozens of pairs of red eyes surrounding you. I guess we’re making a political statement today. A little warning might’ve been nice.

But Býleistr sits down on Loki’s other side, and that seems to break the awkward spell your presence holds over the gathered crowd - not that you don’t notice all of the odd glances you’re receiving, the curious, sometimes appalled looks from the village elders.

A human at the dinner table? Madness. You imagine the chaos you’d cause if you whipped down the neck of your tunic to reveal the mate-mark. Probably shouldn’t do that, though.

The conversation at the table mostly seems to revolve around the weather, though the accents of the local giants are a little challenging for you to make out, a little more grating than what you’re used to from your time in court. Your ears perk up when mention is made of a river to the west, one the village chief refers to as Lokavreiði.

Screw protocol, you decide, tugging on Loki’s sleeve. He almost looks startled to see that you’re there, but he leans down so that you can whisper in his ear. “Lokavreiði?”

Apparently, you don’t whisper as quietly as you’d like to believe, because Býleistr leans around Loki’s other shoulder. “Loki’s Wrath,” he says, “or something close to that.” He smirks. “Such a promising king, to already have a landmark renamed in your honor.”

Menja, who is unfortunately seated close enough to hear him, decides to butt in on the conversation. “The remainder of the Vangsfolk will not appreciate that,” she says.

“They can call it whatever they’d like, Sister,” Býleistr replies, “but that does not change the fact that the rest of Jotunheim will remember the way their new sorcerer-king called upon the river to devour them.”

Loki looks uncomfortable. It isn’t exactly guilt that you’re picking up on, but something… Disappointment, maybe? And there’s a little bit of satisfaction there, as well; it’s an interesting cocktail of emotions, and you wonder if maybe you’re reading them wrong. He guides the conversation back to roads and travel and taxes, and you aren’t terribly surprised when he announces that he will be retiring for the night, though you are a bit surprised that he takes you with him as he goes.

Ignoring me during the day, then cuddling up with me at night. Great, this isn’t painfully familiar at all.

The king is graced with an entire little snow-dome of his own to occupy for the night, the bedchamber located directly in the middle, within a spiral of smaller rooms and narrow halls. You fling yourself onto the bed, spreading your arms wide. “Finally,” you enthuse, “some privacy.”

“Yes,” Loki replies, hovering just inside the doorway, “it will be good to have some peace and quiet, won’t it?”

Not exactly the response I was hoping for, you think, rolling over and propping yourself on your elbows. “Weren’t you alone during the ride?”

“I spend most of the day outside, with a group of the Storm Lords. They seem very eager to integrate me into their clan.”

“I mean, that makes sense, right? I imagine that some of them knew your birth-mom really well,
and... well, just from that mosaic in the library, Loki, you do look a lot like her.”

He sighs. “Perhaps,” he says, raking his fingers through his hair. He looks terribly tense, which makes you doubt your plans to shamelessly seduce him. “We’d best sleep. It will be a longer stretch before we are able to stop again, once we set out on the road.”

You clear your throat. *Come on, turn on the charm.* “I’m not super tired yet, though. I could stay up a little longer, if you want.”

If he’s catching on to your painful attempts at suggestiveness, then he has an excellent poker face. “No,” Loki replies, “the sun will rise before long, and we should take advantage of the accommodations while we still are able.”

Flummoxed, you settle yourself under the furs and wait for him to join you in bed; he makes sure that you’re securely tucked in, but he leaves a very noticeable gap between your bodies. You can’t help but feel a little mortified; did something happen? Did he realize that somehow, after all of this, you aren’t really his type? Is your desire to get him naked again so strong that it’s off-putting?

You stare at the back of his head, wondering what you’ve done wrong. How are you supposed to sleep like this, with the man you love so obviously avoiding you? Why wouldn’t he just leave you with the twins, if it’s so terrible to have you there—

Loki fumbles under the covers and wraps his arm around you, pulling you up against his back. Still every bit as confused - but grateful for the contact - you curl up around him, your face pressed between his shoulder blades. *Tension and guilt. Tension and guilt and somehow, with all of that, there’s relief, too.*

}*Maybe he’ll talk to me in the morning*, you think, and you don’t sleep much that night.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your continued support - it means the world, especially when life is crazy and hectic! <3
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

In which things come to a head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jotunheim needs couples’ counseling, you’ve decided. Or just counseling in general. Or just the vaguest notion that talking about complicated emotions is an acceptable thing for tough, fearsome god-kings to do. Or for anyone to do.

Loki continues to be kind, but distant, and it’s driving you nuts; you’d almost rather him be snarky, because seeing him so somber and not being able to figure out why is absolute torture. Damned mate-bond, you think, rubbing your neck as you glare at him over the breakfast table. Though, maybe the mate-bond isn’t to blame at all. Maybe worrying over him is just a side-effect of loving him.

You look down bench beside you, where both sets of twins are sitting, laughing and chatting and much more carefree than you’ve seen them in a long time. You worry about them, too - and you realize it’s because you love them, even if it’s a different kind of love than what you and Loki share. Might as well just adopt them, at this point.

It would make for a pretty over-the-top reality TV show, if nothing else.

When you woke up, Loki was still curled tightly on his side, with you wrapped around him. As soon as you stirred, he’d climbed out of bed and out of your embrace, giving some vague excuse about how he had some business to take care of before breakfast.

You’d let him go. Why start a confrontation first thing in the morning, right? There’s no point in causing even more tension before you head back out on the road, and at least he isn’t completely banishing himself from your side. So that’s something.

But now, sitting on the other side of Býleistr and watching as Loki barely picks away at the food on his plate, you’re wondering if maybe you should’ve barred the door until he’d decided to talk. It sounds like it will be a while before the two of you get any more privacy, unless he decides to invite you to join his sleigh.

Maybe he’ll decide that me spooning him at night is more important than whatever is going on in his head right now, you think.

Not far down the table, the giantess Hafalda is regaling the twins with a story about a hunt she recently went on, where she apparently nearly lost an eye to the antlers of a creature she refers to as a ‘long-toothed elk,’ a name that brings all sorts of terrifying images to mind. With her striking red hair and her loud voice, Hafalda is impossible to ignore, and half of the table seems to hang on her every word.

It’s an interesting assortment at breakfast this morning, and it makes you happy to see how
comfortable Greip and Gjálp seem to be eating at a table full of Storm Giants. Not all of Loki’s entourage seems so relaxed, particularly Menja and her attendants, who you gather are vexed that they’re having to sit so far away from the king. You, similarly, are vexed that she’s even there at all; is there just some rule for Jotunheim road trips that says you have to have a certain quota of enemies along for the ride?

Breakfast is something with the consistency and general flavor of scrambled eggs, so you choose to imagine that this random Jotunheim village just happens to have a steady supply of Midgardian chickens to provide eggs. It’s easier for your appetite. You think there might be some mushroom bits in there, too… hopefully nothing that’s going to send you on a wild psychedelic trip, or just kill you outright. Stop complaining, you tell yourself. At least there isn’t a carved-up sea-serpent on the table. Appreciate the relative normalcy of the food here.

When Loki rises to signal the end of the meal, so do the other giants; it makes you a little proud, how they seem to be beginning to give him the respect he deserves. Maybe when he doesn’t have to worry about winning over all of his people all of the time, you’ll get to see more of the teasing, playful side of him that you’ve grown to love. Who knows? Maybe there will be actual, lasting peace throughout Jotunheim, and Loki will get to be happy… But then you catch sight of some of the Frost Giants from Utgard, sulking near the end of the table, and your optimism fades. They aren’t going to be placated by some kind of goodwill tour. They’d probably be happier if he was marching out to the coast to wipe all the Storm Giants out.

The twins spirit you away as soon as breakfast is over, lead by a very enthusiastic Hrossþjófr. You go with the flow, even though part of you wants to keep an eye on Loki. You can’t very well spend every second of every day fixated on him, can you, and especially when he’s the one who doesn’t want to communicate?

You end up in a low-ceilinged, impressively wide room; you’d be inclined to call it a town square, if it wasn’t entirely underground. There are booths and stalls and all sorts of giants milling about, and it hits you that this is some kind of marketplace. Greip tugs on your sleeve. “Do you see anything you’d like?” she asks. “We mustn’t take too long, but we have time to take a quick look.”

It’s been a long, long time since you’ve gone on a shopping spree. The colors and smells are a little overwhelming, and more giants are staring at you here - you guess they must be commoners, giants who’ve only heard rumors of Loki Inn-Illi’s pet human. You decide to imagine that this is what it’s like being a celebrity browsing some small-town shopping center, and you steel your nerves and start exploring.

Gjálp waves a little parcel in her sister’s face. “For Márfjall, Sister? If there are any feasts?”

“You suppose,” Greip replies, and when she sees your confusion, she leans down. “Cosmetics,” she tells you, “the white for the lining of our markings.” You’re too timid to get close to any of the market stalls, but the twins buy you some little glass beads, which they declare they can braid into your hair. At least they seem to think that the general mood in Márfjall will be festive.

Most of the sleighs are loaded up by the time you’re ready to leave, and you sigh in resignation. You’d hoped that Loki might’ve lingered outside to see you off, but he hasn’t. But maybe that’s a good thing, isn’t it? It means he trusts the twins - and trusts you - enough to let you do your own thing once in a while. You’d asked for more freedom, hadn’t you?

It would be different if he wasn’t acting so distant, though.

Your friends seem to notice that you’ve got worries weighing on your shoulders, and they regale you with some of the most outlandish Jötnar fables they can think of as the hours pass along the road.
There’s one in particular that you enjoy, about a melrakki that traded his fox-form forever to win a bet with a god of Asgard, all because he needed thumbs to complete the task.

“That’s a weird one, Hross,” you say. “Kind of a drastic measure to win a bet, don’t you think?”

He shrugs. “Melrakki are cunning creatures, and they take their games very seriously. That is why I learned their form so early.” Grinning, he sprawls back against the cushions. “They are excellent role models.”

“Well, Snowball was much more pleasant of a companion than you,” Greip says.

“Have you changed into Snowball since the near-death experience?” you ask. “Or have you shapeshifted much at all?”

“That is no longer a form I can take with complete anonymity. Half the court saw me shift - and now they’ll be anxiously hiding their secrets from any melrakki they see, I’d expect. Besides, the overall atmosphere in Utgard is not friendly towards those of us with magical inclinations.”

“That’s true.”

The conversation eventually dies down as everyone grows tired, the swaying of the sleigh and the dim, hypnotic lantern-light lulling everyone to sleep. Greip climbs out of the hatch once or twice to check on the animals, the cold air creeping in and momentarily waking you, but you fall back to sleep easily enough.

It’s a very predictable, rather comfortable cycle, for the next few days. You hang out with your twin-squad in the sleigh, you sit beside Loki in silence for meals on the rare occasions that the entourage makes a stop at a travel outpost, and you try to tell yourself that everything is going to work out, once you have the time and privacy to sit down and have a real conversation with him.

Rinse and repeat.

The weather, which had been mild when you’d started the journey, deteriorates day by day. Everyone seems to get tired and more restless, and the occasional stops to rest and refuel are at barely-there outposts that look like they haven’t seen much use in years. The only thing that can motivate you to leave the sleigh at all in such poor conditions is the desire for something resembling an actual bathroom, and even then, you’re starting to wish that you could just hold it until you make it to an actual village. The giants out here in the middle of nowhere stare a lot more, too, and they point and talk about you in dialects that you can’t understand; it takes you back to the beginning of it all, when you were nothing more than some bizarre human pet.

Though, technically, you guess you are still just a bizarre human pet, at least in the eyes of the Jötnar.

You’re overwhelmed with relief when Greip hops down into the sleigh one afternoon to announce that not only is the weather clearing, but she thinks that you’ll soon be arriving at a place she calls Ymisundir. Whatever it is, she seems excited enough about it that you can’t help but feel excited, too, and you beg to join the others on top of the sleigh.

“Well,” she says, “I suppose it should be safe enough, as soon as the winds die down… but you must promise me that you won’t tell the king. I cannot imagine that he would approve.”

“He isn’t here to stop me,” you retort. “Besides, I’m pretty sure that between the four of you, you can keep even me from managing to fall off.”
Your sass earns a smile, and Greip offers you her hand. “When you put it like that,” she says, “then how can I refuse?”

The others seem delighted to have you join them outside, and the overall mood of anticipation makes it worth the awkward scramble to gain purchase on the slippery, polished sleigh roof. At the speed the sleigh is travelling across the ice, the first blast of wind nearly chokes you. You wrap a scarf around your mouth and nose, squinting and wishing you’d managed to fall onto Jotunheim with some ski goggles. Gjálp twines an arm around your waist and hunkers down with you near the front of the sleigh, raising her hand to point into the distance, where you can vaguely make out cracks of darkness across the bluish-white of the snowy flatlands.

“You see?” she shouts over the wind. “Ymisundir.”

“What is it?” you shout back, your voice muffled by your scarf. “River?”

Her eyes sparkle with delight, and it occurs to you that this must be something that she’s never seen either. “Better,” she replies. “The canyon-kingdom.”

_Canyon-kingdom?

“How deep beneath the surface of a world have you been, In-Unga?” Heiðr calls from behind you. Her hair whips in the wind - she looks like some kind of storm-goddess, and it suits her.

“Not far. I think?” What even counts as ‘deep beneath the surface’ on a planet where you’re underground half the time?

“This will be _very_ exciting, then.”

You still don’t get what the big deal is as the sleighs race closer to the windy darkness; from what you can see, it almost looks like a system of narrow, dark rivers. You’d expect something called a ‘canyon-kingdom’ to look more like the canyons on the way to Járnviðr, sprawling and impressive. The sky is beautiful, though; as the evening draws close, the sky takes on a beautiful, deep-purple hue, and you can make out stars as far as the eye can see.

They help you down quickly when the travel party comes to a halt, most likely to try to hide the fact that you’ve been chilling on top of the sleigh for the last leg of the trip. It’s only then that you realize that you’re at the entrance of a long, steep road that seems to trail off into sheer darkness. Now that you’re on the ground, you can barely even make out the rest of the canyons, aside from that; the piles of snow and huge boulders of ice scattered across the flatland make it appear even more like you’ve just stumbled across some riverlands.

“So… we’re going down that?” you ask, pointing to road, which looks more like a slide than anything resembling an actual _road_.

“Yes,” Hross tells you. “It is the fastest way, and the Jötnar down there are a sight to behold, mortal.”

“In a good way, or a bad way?”

He laughs. “We’ll have to find out, won’t we?”

_Great._

Loki seems surprised to find you already outside when he emerges from his sleigh, and he waves you over to him, resting his hand on your shoulder as he gives directions to the sleigh-drivers. You wonder if there’s a reason for that, some message he’s trying to send, or if he’s just craving human
contact. It’s hard to feel sorry for him when he could’ve had you with him the entire time, though, so
as much as it soothes you to be near him again, your relief is tinged with bitterness.

“It will be dangerous to descend after nightfall, sire,” one of the giants tells him. “The sleighs must be
anchored, else they gain too much speed, and if we do not find any of the canyon-dwellers to guide
us, then we will have a very long way to go with no direction at all.”

“Your caution is noted,” Loki replies, “and I thank you for it, but I would not want to halt out in the
open like this, even if it will be a strenuous journey down below.” He hesitates. “I will use my spells,
if necessary, to ease our descent.”

The giant appears to be torn - uncomfortable at the king’s potential use of significant magic, you’d
guess, but pleased that Loki didn’t scold him for providing his input. “As you say, sire.”

“This will be only a short pause,” Loki tells the rest. “Gather yourselves and enjoy what’s left of the
daylight while you can.”

Expecting him to send you right back to the twins, you don’t now how to react when he guides you
back towards his sleigh, instead. You look at him questioningly, and he stops at the foot of the rope
ladder that hangs over the side of his sleigh. “I trust your little army to keep you safe and sound in
normal conditions,” he says. “These will not be normal travel conditions.”

You don’t say anything, but your brow raises, as if to say, ‘Really, Loki? That’s what it takes for you
to want me next to you?’

He sighs. “I am not willing to risk another Rann Steinar. Perhaps I am being paranoid, but I would
greatly appreciate it if you’d join me without a fuss.”

That gives you pause; why does he seem to think you wouldn’t want to ride with him? And that
same feeling permeates the bond, a sort of tired, resigned sadness. Oh, Loki, you think. What’s going
on in that beautiful, complicated head of yours?

You climb up the ladder yourself, but he stays right behind you, presumably ready to snatch you out
of the air if you take a sudden tumble. It’s embarrassing to admit, even to yourself, but part of you
had been hoping that he would just pick you up and haul you into the sleigh… and in those same
imaginings, he’d proceed to toss you down in the privacy of his sleigh and ravish you, preferably
with some sort of declaration about how he couldn’t believe he’d resisted your allure for so long.

Instead, Loki carefully helps you down into the sleigh, then leaves again almost immediately to go
give more orders, or whatever it is kings do. Frustrated, you groan and throw yourself face-down on
some of the cushions near the back. Get it together, you tell yourself. This isn’t a romantic retreat.
You’re being stupid.

“Everything alright?”

Rolling onto your back, you find Loki crouched over you, a quizzical look on his face - and maybe
the tiniest hint of a smile. “Jesus,” you exclaim, “how’d you get back in here without me noticing?”

“I don’t make a habit of stomping around like some people,” Loki replies. “That is a very good way
to get killed, especially when you tend to go places you oughtn’t, as I do.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind.” The sleigh jolts into motion, and Loki finally does scoop you up,
though it seems like his only intention is to hold you in his lap like some kind of next-level seatbelt.
“What are you doing?”
“I’m making sure that you don’t crack your skull open if we begin to accelerate, or if we careen off-course,” he says. “Are you really going to complain?”

“Not about that, but I’ve got a list of other complaints I’d like to lodge—”

“Don’t you always?”

He keeps one arm around your waist, and he holds onto a loop attached to the wall with his other hand. The sleigh starts to drastically tilt, and if everything wasn’t strapped to the walls, you imagine it would be rapidly accumulating at the front. Loki’s head rests against yours, his mouth near your ear. It stirs feelings, and you clear your throat, wondering if he notices.

The sleigh accelerates to a breakneck speed out of nowhere, and you cling to him for dear life. “What the hell,” you cry, “what—”

“It is designed this way,” he says. “No need to worry.”

He doesn’t protest when you twist around so that you can wrap your arms around him. He holds you even closer, if anything. That has to be a good sign, you decide. Confusing, but good. At least you can keep telling yourself that he isn’t just completely repulsed by you.

You’re wondering if you’re starting to get sleigh-sick or something, because the longer the sleigh speeds down the path, the more your stomach churns. How deep can it possibly be? At the angle you seem to be travelling at, you’ve got to be impossibly deep beneath the surface, by now.

“It’s alright,” Loki soothes. You must be more noticeably terrified than you’d meant to be, because he even kisses your head. “I won’t let anything happen.”

“I know.”

It seems like Loki is in a mood that might be conducive to talking… but you’re also so nauseous that you’re afraid to open your mouth, so you press your face against his chest and focus on blocking out the knowledge that you’re careening down beneath the ground. *Down into the darkness, where you won’t see daylight.* Your mind suddenly supplies you with the unwanted memory of the Vangsfölk tunnels.

*But Loki wasn’t there, then, you remind yourself, and he is here, now.*

“Brace yourself,” Loki warns suddenly, as if you aren’t already as braced as you can possibly be. You’re thankful for the heads-up a second later, though, because the sleigh suddenly jerks and begins to slow, the wood creaking and groaning as it does. *Did they really throw out anchors to drag this thing to a stop?* you wonder, dazed. *Good God, Jötunn transportation needs a major overhaul.*

“Alright, dröttning?”

“Mhmm,” you mumble, your face still smashed against his chest. You can feel him trying to stifle his laughter. “You?”

“Better now that we will have accommodations for the night,” he replies. The sleigh grinds to a halt at last, and he stands; you’re wrapped around him so doggedly that you rise with him. “You will want to stay here, until we determine that our hosts are as eager to have us as I’ve been led to believe.”

“Nope.”
“No?”

“I want to come with you.”

Loki seems hesitant. “It is warmer inside—”

“I really feel like you’re being intentionally obtuse right now, Loki.”

“And you are being stubborn,” he replies, “even though you’re on the verge of vomiting, aren’t you?” You press your lips together, sulking. He isn’t necessarily wrong, but you’ll be damned if you admit it. “I am, being a generous king, willing to make a compromise,” he finally says. “Will that do?”

“Depends.”

“You can come outside, but I will be handing you off to your minions. What do you say to those terms?”

You nod. The lightheadedness isn’t helped by your nodding, so you square your shoulders and try to maintain a stern expression; there’s no way you’re going to give up a chance for fresh air and sightseeing over a little dizziness.

Dread and awe are the first sensations that hit you when you emerge from the sleigh. You’d known you were deep… but this truly defies mortal comprehension - you being the mortal in question. Comprehension totally defied, you think, staring straight up at the barely-visible crack of sky far, far above your head, where night is quickly falling. It would be pitch black down on the road through the canyon, if not for the torches and lanterns held high by the giants welcoming you. Man, these guys are not what I expected.

The giants who live deep in the cracks of the planet seem to be fairer in complexion than their counterparts, some of them reaching shades of pale blue and grey. They’re lanky - taller than the Forest and Storm tribes, from what you can see, but thin and wiry. You know they aren’t lacking in strength, though, because one of them hops down from a doorway cut straight into the face of the rock more than five meters above you and lands on his feet like it’s nothing.

It’s the eyes, you decide, that are the strangest. Almost none of them have the dark red eyes that you’ve grown so used to seeing; instead, they’re mostly shades of purple, with a few nearly reaching light-blue. Is it odd, you wonder, that you’ve grown so used to red eyes that almost-blue eyes seem so strange?

“Honored King in Utgard,” one of the canyon-dwellers says, spreading his hands wide as he bows, “I, Audawiniz, do most gladly welcome you to our home.”

The crazy thing is that it actually kind of seems like he means it. The giants behind him don’t seem exactly overwhelmed with joy, but neither do they appear hostile. That’s good, at least.

Beyond the few illuminated doorways and windows carved into the sheer rock face, the road trails off into the darkness. Is the snow even able to reach down this far? Do they ever get any real sunlight? You can’t imagine that they do.

Loki passes you off to the twins, just as he’d said he would; you’re so preoccupied with taking in the strangeness of it all that you can’t even be bothered with it. Gjálp appears silently at his side, and he whispers something to her, and then she ushers you away. Your group enters the dark, tunnel-like passages within the cliff, and even with the torch of the servant guiding you, you can barely see what lies ahead. You take Gjálp’s hand, and she gives yours a reassuring squeeze and a smile.
The red-haired giantess Hafalda is with your group, too, and she loudly asks where you’re all being taken. “I hope that it is to the kitchens,” she declares, “for I could eat an entire linnormr with no trouble at all.”

The servant turns without pausing. “We have no food-hall here large enough for your entire party, lady,” he says, “but we will take you young ones to a lesser hall, so that the king may meet with our lords in peace.”

“Lesser hall?”

You look behind you, nearly stumbling, and spy Býleistr. We’re getting sent to the kids’ table, you realize, incredulous. As if Loki’s even that much older, relatively. Privileges of being a king, I guess.

“Lesser in size, Prince Býleistr,” the servant amends. “Not in quality.”

“Feed me well enough,” Hafalda says, “and you can put me in the stables, if you’d like.”

Several of the giants in the group laugh, and the overall mood is cheerful when your group finally reaches the end of the long hallway and spills into a small, cozy dining-room. It seems like most of the younger giants in Loki’s party have been exiled back here, and you’re pleased to see that they even those from different clans seem to be getting along rather well. You’re even more pleased when you’re seated at one of the low stone tables with the rest of them, like you’re not strange at all.

Maybe things will start getting better.

Food in the deep canyons seems to consist of a lot of meat and mushrooms; you wait until Greip gives you the go-ahead before you dig in, just in case anything is unsafe for human consumption. The mushrooms are actually delicious, though, and you eat faster than you probably should, listening as the twins tease and bicker with each other.

Býleistr sits quietly until Hafalda catches notice, and then she begins to needle and prod to bring him into their conversation. “How does it feel, Prince of Utgard, to dine among lowly peasants?”

“You are hardly a lowly peasant.”

“No? I cannot imagine that your mother the queen would be happy to see you dining with all of us.” She gestures broadly around the room, which is occupied mostly by rowdy young Storm Giants. “Such bad company for the little prince.”

He rolls his eyes - it’s suspiciously Loki-like, and you wonder if he realizes he’s starting to pick up his brother’s habits. “You are bad company, perhaps, but it has little to do with either your blood or your birth. You would think that a lord’s daughter would have a little more decorum.”

“Lord’s daughter?” you ask, tired of pretending that you aren’t dying to join in the conversation. “I thought you said at court that you aren’t a lady.”

“Oh, well-remembered, mortal! I am a bastard,” Hafalda declares cheerfully, spearing a sausage on the end of her knife. “Hrímnir’s bastard.” You gape, wondering how you’re supposed to respond to that, and she leans her elbows on the table, watching you as she chews. “Do you know that word, girl-from-Midgard? I am natural-born. Not legitimate.”

“I know what it means,” you reply. “I just didn’t realize—”

“I have their white hair,” she continues, gesturing to Heiðr and Hrossþjófr with her knife, “but none of the powers that come associated with it. And look at these eyes.” She leans closer to you, her pink
eyes round. “I never had a chance of being unnoticeable, and so I decided to embrace it. Dyed my hair. ‘Hafalda Bloodmane,’ they call me.”

“I like it.” You look beseechingly at the twins. Help me out here, please. Awkward conversation alert.

“What do they call you, girl-from-Midgard?”

“In-Unga.”

“Were you a queen, In-Unga-from-Midgard?”

“No,” you reply. “I was just a normal person.”

“Well, you are not very normal now, are you?”

“No, I guess I’m not.”

Hafalda snorts. “No reason to look so glum about it. Great lords and ladies go to even greater lengths to escape being normal.”

“She is glum because she is far from her home, Hafalda,” Gjálp says. “And also because she has faced many hardships here, and many cruelties.”

“And now she holds the heart of the King in Utgard.” Her eyes sparkle, and your heart speeds. “Is that not so?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” you say, your gaze dropping to the bowl in front of you. You’re getting better at lying, after all this time on Jotunheim, but when it comes to your feelings for Loki… it’s hard to hide the truth.

“Loki Laufeyson is not as clever as he imagines, if he believes that he can hide such a thing,” Hafalda says. “It is in the way he looks at you, the way he moves.” Knife still in hand, she gestures to Hrossþjófr. “This one hasn’t sung you any of the songs?”

“Songs?” you ask weakly, practically melting into your seat. If Loki comes along and hears this conversation…

“Well, In-Unga,” Hrossþjófr says, “you must realize that your tale of woe makes for a very interesting ballad—”

“Hey, don’t call it a ‘tale of woe!’ That’s so… grim.”

Hafalda shrugs. “Call it what you will, mortal. It is a good story.”

“I thought that giants didn’t like ballads, anyway.”

Heiðr places her hand on yours. “Some of us are what those in Utgard might consider fanciful. If my brother has not already convinced you of that, I am certain that your time in Márfjall will provide you with proof aplenty.”

“Yes,” Hafalda adds, “there are many there who believe themselves blessed with a golden voice.” She rolls her eyes, tearing another huge bite from the meat on her knife. “Now, what of the king, who some call Ornstunga? Is his voice truly so silvered?”

“Loki?” you ask. “I mean, you’ve heard his voice.”
And it is beautiful, obviously, you want to add.

“His kingly voice, I have heard, and it is well enough. But that is not the same as a voice used with a lover.” As you gape, she lowers her voice, conspiratorial. “Does he sing, In-Unga?”

“I don’t—”

“What an odd interrogation.” Your head whips around at the sound of Loki’s voice, and you find him standing just inside the doorway, cloaked almost entirely in shadow. “No, Hafalda Bloodmane, your king does not sing.”

“Well, sire,” she says boldly, “would you like for me to teach you a verse or two? ‘The golden-horned, the serpent-tongued, the God of Tricks and Lies; a son of ice, on Asgard raised - on Jotunheim, he dies—’”

“I cannot say that I particularly care for this song of yours,” Loki interrupts. He looks more amused than angry, and as he saunters into the room, all other conversation dies.

“You do not plan to die on Jotunheim, my king?” Heiðr asks. “It seems only natural, as this is now your realm.”

“I cannot say that I intend to die at all, truth be told.”

“I have a better song for you, then,” Hafalda declares, “about an immortal god who falls in love with a mortal. Does that suit your tastes, sire? ‘Stígandr went out from the palace of gold, and sailed over starry water, to wander through Midgard’s forests so green—’”

“I know this ballad,” Loki interrupts, puzzled. “It’s sung on Asgard, as well.”

“So it is. A very pretty soldier-boy taught it to me, a little spy of the Allfather’s that Lord Hrímnir caught skulking about the coastlands in the days before the war.”

Greip seems stunned. “An Einherji of Asgard taught you a love song?”

“He had precious little else to do, sitting in the cells below Márfjall. The golden hair, the sunny skin… I was fascinated, as any child would be when confronted with such a legendary enemy.”

“What happened to him?” you ask without thinking, flinching when every eye in the room turns to you. Getting used to actually being able to speak up at giant gatherings is taking some time, and you can’t help but feel as if you’re treading on thin ice.

“I have no idea, mortal,” Hafalda replies. Her playful smile remains, but less of it reaches her eyes. “King Laufey called for the lords to send their Asgardian prisoners to Utgard, and I never saw him again. Likely ransomed or executed, I expect. I no longer remember all of the song, but he had a sweet voice.”

“‘Death is not bested by steel or by words,’” Loki says, and her eyes flicker back up to him.

“That’s the one,” she says. She takes a drink from her mug, then smacks it back down on the table. “Will you regale us with your rendition, my king?”

“No, but I admire your persistence. Come along, In-Unga.” Loki beckons, and you scramble from your seat, snagging one last handful of the honey-roasted nuts. “Be ready to leave as soon as the morning comes,” he tells the others. “I have no desire to linger here for any longer than necessary.”
“How will you even know when morning comes?” you ask him in the hall, your voice hushed. “It’s so freaking dark here.”

Loki boldly allows his hand to rest on the small of your back, despite the fact that he’s running the risk of being overseen. “Candles,” he says.

“Candles?”

“I will show you, once we are in our chamber.”

“Our chamber?

The snarkiness in your voice doesn’t escape him, and he leans against the chamber door after he’s securely fastened it, his arms folded as if he’s waiting for an explanation.

“Look, don’t pretend that you haven’t been avoiding me—”

“Avoiding you? I have brought you along with me on this journey, you sit by my side when I hold court—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, Loki, and you know it.” You scowl, crossing your own arms to match him, but Loki retreats to the bed by the fireside. “You haven’t touched me since we left Utgard! Do you have any idea how badly that kind of rejection hurts?”

“I never intend to hurt you,” Loki says. “Nothing I do is meant to hurt you.”

“Then why?”

“You are going to die,” he cries, and you’re too shocked by the tears welling in his eyes to really process his words. “Do you understand that? It has been months - less than a year - and already time is passing too quickly! I will have a century, if I am lucky, the blink of an eye, and then you will be gone, and I will be alone—”

He catches himself, his head dropping into his hands, and sighs. “It was foolish of me to strengthen the bond. Besides, a future with me is not in your best interests, and I cannot avoid the reality of that forever.”

Your heart begins to race, a sense of dread creeping through you. “What do you mean?”

Loki doesn’t answer for a minute, watching the fire flame and crackle. He takes a swig from the flask in his hand. “When I heard the relief in your voice that you were not carrying my child,” he finally says, “I realized that I cannot pretend. I am not human, and you are not… whatever I am.” Another swig from his flask, and his eyes close. “Monster. The Evil One. Loki Laufeyson.”

You stand there, dumbfounded. “Are you serious?” you finally cry. “You think I don’t want a future with you because I’m glad I’m not pregnant? Do you think this is a great time to start a family, Loki?”

“Of course not.”

“Then—”

“I want it,” he says sharply. He doesn’t open his eyes, but you can see the tension in his jaw. “I want you to bear my children. I want them to look like you. I want—” He stops abruptly, opening his eyes and turning back to face you at last. “I want a great many things.”
You let out a sharp breath; that’s a lot to process. “We can talk about those things, though. It isn’t some kind of decision that has to be made right this second. And the mortality… well, I’ve always known that was a factor. It isn’t exactly news that I’m human.”

“There isn’t anything to talk about, is there? Even if we could - and I’m not certain that such a thing is even possible - it could very well kill you. Your child would look like this.” He gestures loosely towards his face, his red eyes solemn. “You would both be in constant danger from half of the Nine Realms, merely by association to me. No, dröttning, that is no life for you.”

“You love me,” you say. It isn’t a question, not anymore.

“Yes,” Loki replies. “I love you. That is why I have to keep you safe from everyone, including me, until you can be returned to Earth.”

Squaring your shoulders, you march over to his side. “I am not getting shipped off to Earth. No way. And anyways, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly human now, either.”

He flinches, and his gaze drops to your neck. “I am sorry,” he says. “I do not expect you to forgive me.”

“Look at me,” you demand. When he doesn’t, you reach out and tilt up his chin, as he’s done to you so many countless times before. “I’m not blaming you. We’re in this together, because we both want to be together. I’ve told you that a million times.”

His eyes remain stubbornly downcast.

“I’m telling you again, I’m in this for the long haul. And… well, I’m definitely not opposed to discussing the potential of a baby version of you, someday. Maybe once everyone stops trying to kill us.”

“There is no need for you to say these things.”

“You know that I’m not lying! You can tell when I lie, I know you can. Stop being morose.”

“Even if you aren’t lying, I won’t risk it. People who are young and in love are careless and stupid. I’ve been careless and stupid, and that ends now.”

“But… does that mean no more sex?” you ask, your cheeks heating. “Because I think we’re good at it, and I don’t really want to stop.”

Loki seems startled, maybe even a little smug, and he doesn’t do a good job of hiding it. “Is that really your biggest concern at the moment?”

“Kinda, yeah.” Now you’re the one who can’t meet his eyes, and you lean into his hand when he cups your cheek, telling yourself that there’s no reason to be so embarrassed. “You don’t think we’re good at it?”

“Oh, I think that we are very good at it,” Loki replies, “but—”

You launch yourself forward and kiss him, so clumsy in your haste that you nearly topple him off of the end of the bed. He clearly wasn’t expecting this to be your move, and while he does manage to find his balance, he also seems a bit too stunned to escape your clutches. Taking advantage, you scramble into his lap, running your fingers through his hair as you straddle him. You can be embarrassed later, you tell yourself, but right now, focus on showing him what he’s been missing out on.
“Loki,” you whisper in his ear, “there are other things we can do, you know?” With that, you reach down and begin stroking him through his pants. Loki grunts and presses himself against your hand, and that’s enough encouragement for you to start kissing him again, tugging on his lip with your teeth as you break away to catch your breath. “Do you like that? It feels like you like that.”

“I like it,” he hisses, grasping your hips. “If you’d been paying any attention, you’d realize that is exactly the problem.”

“It’s only a problem if you make it a problem.” Having a serious conversation while you’re trying to unlace his pants probably isn’t the best idea, but you figure you might as well take advantage of having him trapped while you can. “I’m serious, Loki; no more going in circles. I love you, and you love me. That’s it. You better learn to accept it.”

“You little—” he begins accusingly, but he gasps and closes his eyes when you finally manage to get your hand in his pants.

“Accept it,” you demand. When you begin to stroke him, he shivers, and you revel in the feeling of power, of having such a beautiful, powerful being at your mercy. “You’re mine.”

You climb off of his lap and drop to your knees in front of him; if you’d planned this out, you might’ve waited to try this somewhere other than on a stone floor, but in the heat of the moment, you’re more than prepared to handle the discomfort. “Stay blue for this,” you tell him, tracing a fingertip along one of the slightly-raised markings that trails down his abdomen and towards his thigh. “Okay?”

“What are you doing?” Loki asks desperately, his face scrunching up as soon as you begin stroking him with a bit more rhythm.

“Having my wicked way with my king,” you reply. “What does it look like?”

His hand wraps around yours, stilling your movements, and you brace yourself to give up on the seduction and just cuddle him into oblivion, instead. There are still traces of tears on his cheeks. Guilt washes over you; what are you thinking, prioritizing physical intimacy over all of his self-doubt?

“You do love me,” Loki says softly, “don’t you?”

“Of course I do, Loki. Of course. With all of my heart.” You try to smile to reassure him, but it’s a little watery; seeing him cry makes it nearly impossible for you not to cry, too. “Even when you’re being insufferable, it doesn’t change that.”

Loki lets out a short, sharp laugh, then hauls you off of your knees and onto his lap, kissing away you until you can barely breathe… or maybe it’s just the exhilaration. He loves me, you think, tangling your fingers in his hair. He loves me enough to admit that he loves me.

The kisses become more languid, and the tone shifts; what began as an urgent search for reassurance is now tinged with excitement. You break away, smoothing your hands down his chest. “Loki,” you whisper, “just so you know… I mean, in the spirit of clear communication…”

“Tell me.”

Yeah, you think. Just say it. Steeling yourself, you look him in the eye. “I was on my knees for a reason.”

Loki’s shock quickly morphs into something else entirely, and his eyes narrow as he cups your face in his hands. “Were you?” he purrs. “And what reason might that be?”
“You’ll see,” you reply with as much bravado as you can muster. He doesn’t stop you when you return to floor; he seems almost afraid to move at all, as if he might break the spell you’re both under. “Remember, stay blue, okay?”

His eyes squeeze shut when you hesitantly taste him, but he nods. You run your tongue from base to tip, proud of the gutteral sound that escapes Loki’s throat when you do. It isn’t nearly as intimidating as you’d expected, now that you’re in the moment. In fact, you feel like you’re the one in control of him, and you hope that your inexperience won’t let the both of you down.

“Loki?”

“Yes?”

“You have to tell me what feels good.”

He looks down at you, then, his eyes dark with lust... but there’s a contradictory sort of softness there, too. “Everything.”

He tastes good. You shouldn’t be too surprised, considering that he’s pretty much physically perfect for you in every way, but it’s still a wonderful discovery. It takes a little while to work up the courage to take him completely into your mouth, but Loki certainly doesn’t seem to mind the wait. The little sighs and groans he’s making have you feeling impatiently turned-on, if anything.

“Yes,” he breathes, and it’s the first coherent thing he’s managed to say since you began. You see his arm move, like he wants to touch you, but he grips the blankets on the bed instead.


His hand rests on your head; it isn’t forceful, simply there, stroking your hair and, as you become a little more aggressive in your rhythm, guiding you. You find that you like it; you’d never really seen the appeal of going down on a guy, but this feels good.

And it seems like you’re pretty good at it, too, whispers the smug little voice in your head that urges carnality.

He tries to warn you when he’s about to come, to pull you away, and while you appreciate the thoughtfulness, you’re determined to see things through to the end. You think you’d be willing to kill to hear him moan your name every night like the way he does when he finishes in your mouth, you decide. Totally worth it.

Loki pulls you up onto the bed beside him, then falls onto his back with a dramatic groan. “You’ve slain me. I am in Valhalla.” He kisses you, snuggling you close against his side. “Give me a moment.”

“Hmm?” You’re busy tracing a fingertip along the pattern of lines that descends below his navel, basking in pride and a heady sort of shared afterglow, courtesy of the bond.

“I need a moment to recover before I take my turn pleasuring you,” he says. The muscles of his stomach tense, and he gently swats your hand away.

“Now I just want to tickle you more,” you solemnly inform him. “You’ve shown your weakness, and now I’ve gotta exploit it.”

“You know all of my weaknesses already, sweetheart. You are one.”
“Should I be happy about that, or upset?”

Loki’s smile falters, but he recovers so quickly that you nearly miss it. “I truly don’t know. It is what it is, I suppose.”

You lean over his chest. “Hey,” you say, “I don’t want to keep doing this. I won’t. I need you to understand that.”

“Doing what?”

“You know.” Your thumb smooths across his bottom lip; it’s hard to resist the urge to kiss him, but there are more important things on the table right now. “The whole isolation-confrontation-sex cycle.”

“Isolation-confrontation-consummation?” You don’t laugh, and his eyes grow a little more solemn. “Everything is cyclical,” he says. “Time itself is nothing more than a cycle, darling.”

“Then I’ll settle for one spiral into self-doubt per decade, each. How about that?”

Maybe you shouldn’t have mentioned decades.

Maybe it just reminds him that his time with you is limited.

Maybe it’s what he needs to hear.

“One each?” he asks, a tiny attempt at a smile curling his lip. He captures your hand and twines his fingers with yours. “I suppose I’ll manage…”

“Promise me?”

“I promise you,” Loki says. “As your king and your mate, and as a man who loves you very, very much, I swear it.”

Tears blur your vision. There isn’t anything you can think of to say, and you don’t want to ruin a perfect moment, anyway. You tuck yourself back into the crook of his arm, wanting nothing more in the entire world than to fall asleep in his arms.

And so, when Loki rolls on top of you after only a moment of cuddling, trapping you between his arms, you let out a little surprised squeak. “Oh, no,” he says, his voice low and filled with promise. “You aren’t allowed to sleep until I’m finished with you.”

Chapter End Notes

Frostbite Friday! It seemed like the general consensus was to go for the behemoth chapter, so I do hope you all enjoy it!
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

In which you visit the Tower of Stories, and Býleistr offers some words of advice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When you wake up the following morning - or what you assume is morning - Loki’s face is nuzzled into the crook of your neck, and you’re both stark naked under the heavy fur pelt that covers the bed. You twirl a strand of his hair around your finger, blinking sleepily. You feel… you feel good. Happy, even.

His breath tickles your neck, and you shiver, remembering the way his lips had brushed against your skin the night before, skimming along your belly, teasingly tracing up your thighs. True to his word, Loki had taken his time wringing ever ounce of pleasure that he could out of you, his head buried between your thighs until you were completely, entirely spent. How many times? Three? Four?

You’re pretty sure you’d screamed his name at least a few times, by the end. You’re also pretty sure that it was probably loud enough to be heard down the hall. You can't bring yourself to care.

A kiss on your neck signals that he’s waking, and you smile. If every morning could only be like this...

Loki rolls onto his back, sighing in contentment. There’s a teasing little smile on his face. “I can still taste you,” he begins, but you clap your hand over his mouth, some of your sense of decency returning as sleep leaves you. He licks your palm, and the look in his eyes is suggestive.

“Isn’t it morning? Don’t we have more important things to do, King of Jotunheim? Hmm?”

When you move your hand, Loki is practically pouting. “I would much rather stay in bed.”

“So would I, obviously. I don’t think that’s an option, though.”

“I am king,” Loki says. “Everything is an option.”

“Not a smart option.”

He sighs again, a bit more theatrically. “True, my darling.” You can see the wheels in his head spinning as he stares at the ceiling, and his tone becomes more serious. “When we return to the road, I would like for you to continue travelling with your twins. I’ve spent hardly any time inside my own sleigh, and you will have nothing to entertain you. When we stop to make camp, however, I would be delighted if you would join me.” He turns and strokes your cheek. “An acceptable compromise, I hope?”

“Mhmm. It isn’t like I don’t enjoy spending time with the twins, you know. I just don’t like… well, it was brutal not knowing what you were thinking. Loki. Whether you’d ever want me back or not. We don’t have to be together every second. I just want to know that you’re looking forward to this, to curling up in bed with me at the end of a long day with me. You know?”
“I know.”

Loki sits up, and the covers pool around his waist. It lets in a draft of cold air, and you hiss in disapproval. “How about you find my clothes and warm them up, while you’re at it?”

Laughing, he slips out of bed, showing off his nakedness. “Of course.” He gathers your clothes from where they’ve been flung across the room, bundling them up in his hands and breathing on them, causing them to glow golden. When he hands them back to you, they’re toasty, almost like they’ve just come out of the dryer.

“That’s a neat trick,” you tell him. “Think I could do it, someday?”

He looks thoughtful as he wiggles into his tight leather trousers. “Well, you’ve been hosting my power with more ease than I would’ve expected. It doesn’t seem impossible that you would be able to manage to channel it with some efficacy, with practice. This is all very theoretical, considering the bond we share…”

“I’ll take theoretically possible over impossible.”

“We will see what we can do, once we’re back in Utgard,” he says, “when things have settled into more of a predictable routine.” You silently cheer, throwing a victorious fist-pump into the air, and Loki shakes his head in mock exasperation.

“Hey, don’t give me that look. You’d be over the moon if you had Jotunheim’s only magical mortal.”

“It would be interesting,” he admits, “especially from an academic standpoint. The magics that mortals occasionally possess are so very different from mine… it would be fascinating to see how you adapt.”

“I should probably be offended at the idea of being your personal lab rat,” you tease, “but I think being able to heat things with magic would be totally worth it.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re nothing like a rat.”

“It’s… never mind.” You can never be sure if he’s really ignorant of Midgardian phrases, or if he’s just being purposefully obtuse. “How long are we staying here in the canyons?”

“A few days. They seem fairly open to my unexpected ascension as king, and they have resources that are difficult to come by. It would serve us well to have them in our pockets.” His eyes light up. “Speaking of time, I did say that I would show you the candles, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

Loki wrenches a candleholder from the wall as you fumble around under the furs, trying to get dressed without actually exposing yourself to the chilly air. He stifles a laugh as he helps you yank your tunic over your head, the holds the candle out where you can get a better look. “See the notches? It burns at an even rate; one candle lasts ten hours.”

“That’s really neat,” you reply, taking the candle from his hands. It’s almost entirely melted, so the two of you must’ve spent more time in bed than you’d thought. “But why is this bottom section red?”

“That is the alarm. There is a tiny bit of powder that will cause a loud pop when it ignites.”
You quickly blow the candle out, your eyes wide.

Loki rolls his eyes. “It isn’t \textit{that} explosive, silly creature. Do you really believe I’d risk blowing your fingers off?”

“My fingers are more delicate than yours, though.”

He plucks the candle from your hand and captures your fingers in his, raising your hand to his lips for a kiss. “I am well aware.”

“Hey.”

“Hey,” he teases.

Your throat feels a little tight. “You aren’t going to go cold on me again, are you? You’ll still want to kiss me and hold me next time we’re alone together, right? You promised.”

“I did promise, and I will make every effort to assuage your doubts.” He pauses. “I cannot completely upend everything, though. Not yet.”

You smile, hoping to reassure him. “I don’t expect you to destroy Jotunheim social conventions overnight. This… being together like this when we’re alone is a good start. And someday, maybe things will be different. Easier.”

“They will be.” Loki kisses your forehead, then heads for the door. “You may take a few more moments to make yourself presentable, if you’d like. I should go join the canyon elders, but I will send your troupe of troublemakers along to collect you.”

\textit{They aren’t troublemakers}, you start to argue, but then you picture Hrossþjófr’s sneaky grin and decide it’s a point not worth debating. Plus, he’d probably just remind you that you tend to make trouble, too - which is also true.

You finish dressing quickly, once he’s gone, and your magic cloak envelops you in a nice warm shield. There isn’t much to see in the bedchamber, aside from some unfamiliar runic carvings and geometric patterns on the walls, so you sit on the edge of the bed and twiddle your thumbs. Loki’s probably right; you would be bored out of your mind stuck alone in a sleigh all day, especially now that a lot of your fear of Jotunheim has been replaced by burning curiosity.

Much to your surprise, it’s Býleistr who finally opens the door, with Gjálp hovering just behind him in the hallway. His nose crinkles. “Come along quickly, In-Unga,” he says, “unless you’d like to be left here for the day.”

You spring from the bed, but Býleistr’s already halfway down the hall by the time you make it to the door. Gjálp catches you before you can run to catch up. “A moment,” she says. “It is just… well, your hair is absurd.”

“Oh,” you mumble, a bit embarrassed. She combs her fingers through your hair. \textit{Maybe the noticeable sex-hair explains why Býleistr acted so annoyed.} It’s almost surprising that he didn’t say anything, though; without Loki hanging around, it would be the perfect opportunity for him to say something snide without having to worry about retribution. \textit{Maybe he’s learning to accept things, you think. That would be nice.}

“You are looking very pretty today,” Gjálp tells you as the two of you trail after Býleistr. “Your eyes, they seem happier. Are you happier?” It’s a delicate question, like she’s afraid she might be overstepping.
“Things could always be better,” you reply, “but… yes. I think I am pretty happy right now. What about you, Gjálp?”

“I am glad to be on this trip,” she says. “I am glad that the king has been so well-received, and that you seem to be having a better time on this trip than the others.”

“But?”

“But, I am worried over my sister’s attachment to Hrossþjófr, truth be told. I want for her to find happiness, but if she angers Father… Our father is not an understanding man, In-Unga.”

“Greip is smart. I don’t think she’d do anything risky.”

She makes an unconvincing hum of agreement. It looks like she’s going to say something else, but Býleistr’s steps have slowed, and Gjálp doesn’t seem to want him to hear it, whatever it is.

The hall widens and splits off into several smaller passageways, and Býleistr waves down one of the strange-looking local giants. “Direct us to the dining-hall,” he says. “And once we have eaten, I would like to see whatever sort of archives you have.”

The pale giant bows. “Yes, Býleistr of Utgard,” she says. Býleistr follows her, and you and Gjálp follow Býleistr; you doubt anyone will try any funny business with him, and you’ve seen him fight. He seems like a pretty safe person to stick with, just in case things go south. You reach the same small dining-hall from last night without incident, though, and the rest of your friends are already there, surrounded by heaping trays of food. Hafalda waves at you, liquid sloshing out of the stone bowl in her hand and splattering all over Hrossþjófr. He shoves her, and Greip begins to berate them both - you can tell from her posture, even though you’re too far away to hear.

_Siblings_, you muse. You weren’t expecting it, but it kind of helps to explain why Hafalda doesn’t seem to worry much over the social norms of the court; she exists outside of them. She doesn’t have to live up to all the expectations placed on the legitimate heirs, but she’s also important enough that she can’t be pushed around without some fear of repercussions. _Hafalda’s a good person to get on my side_, you decide. _On Loki’s side._

You’ve been operating this entire time under the assumption that there isn’t much you can do to help Loki maintain his claim to the throne. After all, you’re only human, right? But lately… Lately, you’ve begun to wonder if that’s really the case. Your “troublemakers,” as Loki calls them, are collectively the heirs to some of the richest, most powerful families in Jotunheim, from what you’ve been able to see. If you count Býleistr in that group, then he’s building a pretty powerful court. Sure, Loki probably _wouldn’t_ count Býleistr, but if he can be trusted…

As you cram yourself in between Greip and Gjálp and wait for your food to be passed to you, you look around at all of the faces in the room. All are young, most less serious than the stuffy old nobles you see arguing with Loki in Utgard, and all are willingly sitting in a room eating their dinner while a human sits at the table alongside them. Loki isn’t even there to cow them into submission, but aside from some derisive glances and blatantly-curious stares, it doesn’t seem like you’re causing all that much outrage.

_Interesting_. You don’t even know most of their names, but given that some of the Storm Lords who came to Utgard sounded important, you’d venture to guess that some of these giants are their children. In fact, all of these younger giants are likely to be the children or relations of important figures in the aristocracy; otherwise, why would they even be given the honor of accompanying the king on a royal progress?
Your satchel with your books and writing materials is still in the sleigh. You wonder if you’d be able to ask someone to retrieve it for you.

You’ve got work to do.

~*~*~*~

The library in the House of Audawiniz, which is what all of the native giants call the subterranean palace you’re in now, is nothing at all like the one in Utgard. Býleistr seems utterly baffled by the layout, so you guess he’s never seen anything like it, either. While he circles the chamber, questioning the servant who’s been sent along as a guide, you curl up by the hearth that sits opposite the door, dragging your satchel into your lap.

If you didn’t know any better, you’d think you were at the bottom of some breathtakingly tall tower; the circular chamber extends upwards for as far as you can see, with only an occasional light scattered here and there on the walls to give any sort of reference to how far up it truly extends. How high did they have to carve the chimney for the smoke to be able to escape? you wonder.

There are stone pegs driven into the walls, almost like some kind of odd vertical stepping-stones leading to the rows upon rows of shelving carved into the stone. Any inch of stone that isn’t carved into shelving is absolutely covered with runic carvings and intricate, life-sized portraits of giants.

Once you’ve retrieved a pen and a little bound bundle of paper that Loki’s given you to practice your runes, you leave the fireside and trail behind Býleistr; no one has said that mortals aren’t allowed in the library yet, but you figure it’s best to be as inconspicuous as possible. You do dare to reach out and touch one of the portraits on the wall, when no one else is looking; the carved lines are filled with some kind of colorful glaze, and it feels cold to the touch. Ice, maybe?

“Darō, mortal.”

You spin on your heel, guiltily hiding your hands back under your cloak. The servant is watching you with wide eyes, almost like he’d forgotten that you were there, but he doesn’t seem angry. Should you speak? It seems like a good opportunity to directly interact with a giant without Loki’s hovering, and you are on a mission to improve giant-mortal relations. “I apologize,” you say, your throat a little tight from uncertainty. “If I’m not supposed to touch…”

The giant cocks his head. Behind him, you see Býleistr rolling his eyes. He steps closer to you and places his palm on the carving, and the colors glow a bit more vibrantly. “You may touch,” he says. The portrait’s eyes shine purple, casting a faint glow on all of the runes around it. “Darō, a warrior from long, long ago. Before even the wounds were as deep. She was wed to a king in Utgard.” His lip quirks. “She slew a king in Utgard.”

Býleistr snorts. “Meaning that she murdered her husband and king.”

The giant shrugs. “Darō did not want a husband, Prince Býleistr. Or a king. But, as I said, that was long ago. No one demands tribute of the canyons any longer. Perhaps that is why.”

“What was your name again?” Býleistr asks, his interest clearly piqued.

“Arbaz,” he replies. His palm slides down the carving, and the glow fades.
You can see Býleistr’s surprise at being spoken to so bluntly. *Different kingdom, different rules,* you think. “How do you get to the books?” you ask.

“Climb,” Arbaz says. He smiles. “Or send someone to climb for you.”

“The organization seems to be completely nonsensical.” Býleistr pulls down a book from a shelf near his head - only it doesn’t really look like a book at all, now that the light is hitting it; it gleams like metal. “How do you manage to find any records at all?”

Arbaz shakes his head. “It is the year of creation,” he says, “from bottom to top. See the tarnish forming? That was etched before your father’s father five times over was born, Prince Býleistr.”

*It is metal,* you realize, and since you’ve been given permission to touch things, you stretch on your tiptoes to drag another book off of the shelf above Darō’s head. It would’ve been better to ask for help, you realize a moment too late, when the unexpected weight of the book almost causes you to drop it on your head. You carefully settle it onto the floor and crouch down to examine it, fascinated. Each ‘page’ is a thin sheet of something similar to copper - maybe it is copper - engraved with neatly-lined columns of runes. Some kind of ink or stain has been rubbed into the engravings to make them stand out. The entire thing is held together with rings along the spine. It wouldn’t be practical to carry around in a backpack, but you’ll be damned if it doesn’t look cool.

Býleistr cranes his neck, looking at all of the shelves that spiral around the walls for hundreds and hundreds of feet above your heads. “Anything recent, then, is only to be found up there?”

“The records grow every year,” Arbaz says. “Someday, perhaps we will break the surface.”

You wonder if Býleistr can read anything here, or if he’s just as lost as you are. Still, if he’s been raised as a prince of the realm, he’s probably been instructed in a variety of obscure, immortal languages, right? Maybe he can find a book that you can decipher a little, too… but then there’s Loki to consider. Loki already won’t be happy that you’re hanging out with Býleistr while the twins are off doing their own thing. Sighing, Býleistr climbs up onto the first in a series of stone steps. *They’re more like rock-climbing handholds than steps,* though, you think. *There’s no way I’d make it past the first one before I fell and broke something.* He jumps to the next, then the next, occasionally pausing to peer at the shelves. “Anything of the other realms?” he calls down. “Of Asgard, or Midgard?”

Arbaz looks up. “An interesting interest, Prince of Utgard,” he says. “I will see what I can find.”

The way he scrambles up the wall is a little unnerving; it’s too fluid, even relative to Býleistr, who’s already inhumanly graceful when he climbs. You have a brief mental image of an army of canyon giants descending on any unwelcome trespassers in their kingdom, and you shiver. *I’m glad they seem to like Loki,* you think. *Really, really glad.*

You’ve learned that it’s best not to take any time for granted, because there’s always a chance that you’ll be summoned to Loki, or the twins will appear and take you somewhere ‘safer,’ or that a less-welcoming giant than Arbaz will happen by and demand that you be removed from the library. With that in mind, you flatten one of the pages from your notebook over the first page in the copper book, then go retrieve a dark wax stick from your bag. You’re pretty sure Gjálp had given it to you to be used as some sort of makeup, but you’ve decided that it’s much more practical as a crayon.

You make a careful wax rubbing of the page, then hold it up to the light to make sure it’s still legible. Of course, ‘legible’ is kind of a loose term, considering you can’t read any of it, but it’ll make a good souvenir. It’s also easier than sneaking an entire metal book into your bag and hoping that no one
notices.

Býleistr lands on his feet a little ways away from you, his arms full of shining copper books. “Anything else, Prince Býleistr?” Arbaz calls down, so far up now that he’s practically a speck.

“No,” Býleistr replies. “I think I have enough to keep me occupied for the time that we are here. Come, In-Unga.”

He sits cross-legged on the ground by the fire, placing his stack in a neat pile by his side, and you pick yours up and haul it over to join him. Bossy, you think, fighting the urge to roll your eyes when he points to the spot beside him on the stone floor, but you keep your mouth shut. You’re extremely curious about his selection of books. Why other realms, and why Asgard and Midgard, specifically?

“What is this?” he asks, tapping a finger on your makeshift notebook.

“Oh. It’s for learning runes. And just… observations, things that I want to remember.” You offer it to him; it’s all innocuous, and maybe if you’re friendly and open, he will be, too.

“Interesting,” Býleistr remarks dryly, his eyes flickering along the scribbles on one of the first pages. “That is my name.”

Your cheeks burn. “I started off by practicing everyone’s names,” you tell him. “I didn’t know many people here yet. Sire.”

“There is no point in pretending to have any sort of reverence for my station, mortal. Adding ‘sire’ as an afterthought is almost more insulting than foregoing titles altogether.” He hands your notebook back. “I would urge you, however, to remember your place when you are in front of the court; you are too comfortable.”

“Too comfortable? I’m not—”

“Imagine for a moment the first days you spent on Jotunheim,” Býleistr interrupts. “There were comments made, suggestions to sacrifice you. To eat you. Do you remember?”

Underneath your cloak, your hand balls into a fist. “I remember,” you whisper fiercely. “Of course I remember.” But he’s right; with all that has happened, despite all of your near-death experiences... you’ve gotten used to the security that Loki provides, that your ‘troublemakers’ provide. That Býleistr provides, you realize, thinking about the way he aided in your rescue from the Vangsfólk.

His eyes are hooded, and while he appears almost lazy as he rests his chin on his hand, there’s a sharpness to his expression that gives him away. “You believe that you are invincible, I fear; it is understandable. You have survived many things that should have killed you.” When he glances up, you follow his gaze; Arbaz is still far above, out of earshot. “Some might say that the Norns have blessed you with good fortune, In-Unga.”

“But not you, I’m guessing?”

“One should never trust the Norns.”

Your throat is tight, and you try to swallow down your budding apprehension. “Why are you telling me this, Býleistr?”

He blinks. Maybe it’s weird for him to hear you say his name like that, like you’re friends. “I know that you traded words with my sister Menja. I know this because she spoke of it to my brother Helblindi, before we set out from Utgard. Loki’s mortal woman, grown so bold. It has not gone
unnnoticed that you carry yourself differently, now.”

“And why is that a bad thing?” you ask, your voice hushed. “Why is it bad for me to act like a person? I am a person.”

Býleistr’s hand is around your neck, then, faster than you can blink, faster than you can duck away. His expression doesn’t change, and your heart races as he squeezes lightly. “You are,” he acknowledges, “but you are not Jötunn. Imagine that I am my brother, or my sister, or Skaði, or any of the hundreds at court that would not bat an eye at your death. Your king is not here to save you; avenge, perhaps, but what good will that do you?” His grip tightens fractionally. “You are already dead.”

His releases you, and you nervously tug at the neck of your tunic, making sure that your mark is still covered. “I get it,” you reply bitterly. “I get it. I’m human, I’m weak, and I should remember my place.”

“You should,” Býleistr says. “You should, but you will not, because you are astoundingly stubborn. But, at the very least, you should find a way to defend yourself before you begin causing trouble at court.” He pulls one of the copper books from the stack and drops it in your lap; the stupid thing is so heavy that the corners are probably going to leave bruises on your thighs. “Read that,” he says, “and stay away from Laufey’s children.”

Jotunheim Court-Runes. The cover is scratched and could use a good polish, but you can make out most of the runes. “Even you?” you ask.

Býleistr smirks. “That, you will have to decide for yourself.”

Arbaz returns to the ground not long after, and his gaze keeps shifting between you and Býleistr, a new sort of uncertainty hanging on his features. You’re assuming that he caught a glimpse of Býleistr seemingly threatening to strangle you, even if he couldn’t make out the conversation… and he’s perplexed that you’re sitting there trying to read like nothing happened. You wonder if he feels honor-bound to run off to tell Loki, or if he’d even mind at all if you died; you’re just a strange pet owned by a strange visiting king, after all.

He hovers, and after a moment, he kneels down beside you, frowning in confusion. “A mortal can read?”

“A mortal can read,” you reply. “Well, not the languages here on Jotunheim, but I’m learning.”

“Fascinating,” he says, glancing over at Býleistr. “We did not know that mortals still remained.”

“You are graced with the presence of the only mortal on Jotunheim,” Býleistr says. “In all of her… splendor.” You’d pinch him for the obvious sarcasm, if there weren’t any witnesses. Instead, you settle for a glare. “I would like something to drink.”

Arbaz hesitates, then nods and leaves the library. The fire crackles behind you. “He just left me here,” you say. “He definitely thought you were about to kill me, and he left me.”

Býleistr flips a page. “And?”

“And he seemed kind of nice! What if he comes back and finds me dead?”

“I imagine he’ll be very concerned over whether or not his master holds him responsible, and whether or not he will face Loki’s wrath. I am sure that they heard the story of the Vangsfólk, given how your sorcerer-friend likes to talk.” He flips another page. “Does that prove my point?”
“Trusting nobody is a terrible way to live.”

“Perhaps,” he says, “but the key bit is that you do live.”

Scowling, you try to focus on the book he’s placed in your lap. It’s almost like he’s read your mind, like he knows that you’re trying to work out which giants in the court can be trusted to support Loki. And what, you’re just supposed to… give up? Be paranoid forever? Not a chance.

You run your finger over the runes. Maybe… maybe you can bring a book with you. You’re going to come back through the canyons, right? Maybe you can borrow it and spend some time deciphering it on the way to the coast. If they care enough about starting a friendly relationship with Loki to host him and the entire travel party, then it seems like a book wouldn’t be too much to ask.

“Hey, Býleistr? Are these copper?”

“So it seems. Why do you ask?”

You shrug. “Copper is just a pretty useful metal on Earth. Midgard, I mean. It’s strange to see so much of it, and for it to be used as books.”

He hums in acknowledgment. “I doubt any of them have ever seen a tree,” he says.

“Are you going to tell me what this book is even about?”

“No.”

Ten minutes later, you work out one of the words on the cover. It’s a word you recognize, too.

Seiðr.

He’s handed you a book about magic.

~*~*~*~

By the time dinner rolls around, you’re positively dying to talk to Loki. The vocabulary in the copper-book is far too advanced, and since Býleistr apparently has no interest in being helpful, its contents are still a mystery. You’d given up after the first few hours poring over it in the library, choosing instead to focus on your initial project - taking notes on all of the giants you’ve encountered so far, what their resources are like, and whether or not you’d expect them to take Loki’s side in a fight. For such a sensitive project, you choose to forgo runes, hoping that seeing your language written down will be just as confusing to the giants as theirs is for you.

There’s a very noticeable lack of anything resembling fresh produce at dinner, but you’re surprised with a platter of some white prawn-looking things that are actually pretty delicious. They probably came from some creepy underground lake, or something, but they’re tasty, so that’s a definite point in the canyon-kingdom’s favor.

You’re quiet at dinner, focusing less on the twins’ conversation, and more on the rest of the chatter in the room. As much as it pains you to admit it, Býleistr does have a point. Your circle is a small one, and Loki tends to keep you shielded as much as possible from any of the giants who might be especially cruel and dangerous. If you’re going to start trying to help Loki work on his alliances, then you need to be careful. Sneaky.
More like Loki.

Behind you, one of the young Forest Giants from court is regaling some of the locals with the tale of your dramatic rescue; you don’t know how to feel about the claim that ‘the river ran red,’ but it does seem like they’re more impressed than appalled by the supposed brutality. You’re barely mentioned in the narrative, and when you are, you’re surprised to hear that you’re referred to as ‘In-Unga.’

You’ve graduated from being Loki’s nameless mortal pet, even outside of the small circle of giants who’ve known you the longest. That’s something positive, isn’t it?

When dinner is finished, you ask Greip if she’d mind walking you back to Loki’s room, telling her that you’re tired. Truthfully, you aren’t sure how much longer you can haul the copper-book you’ve stolen from the library around in your bag without someone noticing. It’s incredibly heavy, and someone’s bound to get curious as to why the mortal is suddenly struggling to lift her bag. You aren’t sure if you’d get in trouble if they knew you’d taken it, but you decide that it’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Loki finds you a few hours later, squinting at the etched pages of the book as if you’ll somehow manage to intimidate them into revealing their secrets. “What have you got there?” he asks, sitting down beside you and ruffling your hair.

“A book I borrowed from the library,” you reply, and when he gives you a knowing look, you amend, “that I stole, I mean. That place is crazy. Have you seen it?”

“No,” Loki says, “but Audawiniz calls it his Tower of Stories, and he is very proud of it.” He leans down to kiss your neck, then frowns. “I would ask how you managed to end up in the library, of all places, but given that you smell of Býleistr—”

“We had a good conversation, actually. And I talked to one of the local servant-guys and seemed to make a decent impression, so I think I’m doing a great job at being part of a royal entourage.”

His frown deepens, and he runs his thumb along the sensitive skin just above your collar. “You know that I don’t want you to be alone with him.”

“That lost some credibility when you sent me back to Utgard with him, didn’t it? I know you’re worried about my safety, but you’re letting that mix with the possessiveness.” You press your hand to your chest. “I feel it. You can only worry about so many things at once, Loki, or it’ll drive you crazy.”

“Yes, well, you had your own moments of worry today, didn’t you? I felt those, too, and now that I know the company you were keeping all day, I can only imagine why.”

“Býleistr just pointed out that I need to be careful about pissing off any giants who might not mind killing me,” you say, “which is true, and honestly sounds like something you’d say, too.”

“It does,” Loki admits, “but—”

“I’ve got actual things I want to talk about, anyway. Did you know the entire library here is made out of copper?”

Loki can’t resist the full force of your unbridled enthusiasm, and his frown disappears, despite his best efforts to remain stern. “I did not. They do have quite a lot of copper implements, however, now that I think of it. There must be extensive mining somewhere in the canyons.”

“Yeah! And I was thinking, on Earth, copper is valuable because it has so many uses, you know? It
conducts heat, electricity—”

“I know, I know,” he interrupts, waving dismissively. “We imported it on Asgard…” He blinks, realizing what you’re getting at. “Oh.”

“You’re surveying for resources, trying to get Jotunheim back to being a significant player in the Nine Realms, right? And these guys have an insane amount of copper, and I bet there’s a lot of other things down here, too, this far into the planet’s crust.”

He looks thoughtful. “It is primarily used for decoration here, though. That is why it lacks value. It isn’t strong enough for weaponry—”

“Okay, so on that note… you know how it’s a great conductor?” You hesitate, because maybe this next part is stupid, but you won’t be satisfied unless you ask. “You think it could work that way with magic, too?”

Loki stares at you.

“Like, theoretically, since I can kind of store your magic but not really do anything with it, do you think it could help us… I don’t know. Get it out, I guess? Like a weapon, if things got really bad and it came down to a fight. Having knives is nice, but I’d honestly be surprised if I could break a giant’s skin. I’m not exactly super strong.”

He doesn’t reply immediately, but the fact that he seems to be mulling over your words is a huge relief. He takes me seriously! you internally cheer. My ideas are valuable!

“It sounds theoretically possible,” Loki finally says. “Your reasoning is sound.” Grinning, he pulls you into his lap, letting your book fall to the floor with a clatter. “And I would feel better if I knew you could slip a knife through Býleistr’s ribs, if the circumstances called for it.”

“Hey!”

“Quiet,” he orders, cupping your face in his hands. “I am trying to kiss you.”
Neither of you wake up before the candle-alarm goes off the following morning, and the resounding pop of it sends you scrambling from Loki’s arms in a panic. He pulls you back down, yawning. “Not yet,” he mumbles. “Not yet.”

“We have to get up,” you tell him. “Besides, I don’t think my heart is going to slow down anytime soon. Jotunheim alarms suck. If I still had my phone… You know what those are, right?”

Loki squints up at you. “I did spend enough time on your world to plan a very technically-detailed takeover, so yes, I am familiar with cellular phones.”

“Don’t look so offended. We’re literally staying in a place that has explosive wax for clocks, okay? It’s a reasonable question. Anyway, if I had mine, we could have a nice alarm to wake us up, like a song or something. And I could take pictures, too… that would be nice.” Unexpectedly, you find yourself furiously blinking back tears. “I had so many memories on it—”

“I will commission a painter to follow you everywhere and document every moment you deem memorable,” Loki grandly offers, wiping a stray tear away with his thumb. “Will that suffice?”

Smiling, you lean into his palm. “It might.”

You like it when he looks like this, all peaceful and open. He looks younger, his eyes more vulnerable, no hint of a frown marring his brow. “I do understand,” he says suddenly. “Losing your possessions, your home, everyone… everyone you’ve known. We have that in common, you and I.”

“Two travellers,” you say. “Two travellers, a chance meeting, battles, magic—”

“Romance.” Loki cracks a smile. “It would make for a good ballad, wouldn’t it?”

“Don’t tell Hross.”

He plays with your hair, then runs his knuckles along your cheek and throat, admiring the softness of your skin. “I am not sure that I know how to be,” he says after a long moment of quiet.

“How to be…?”

“How to be this way, to rest. I have had nightmares every night, for years—” Loki catches himself as his voice begins to waver. “When you never stop, darling, when you never give your body or your mind the opportunity to simply be, it becomes much easier to avoid unpleasant memories. But it also… it takes away the ability to rest. To be.”

You take his hand and twine your fingers with his. “Do you still have them. The nightmares, I
mean?"

“Less often, and the contents aren’t always the same as they were. New worries, new nightmares, I suppose. It does help when you are here, beside me. I become very tired when you are not beside me.”

“I help?”

He nods.

“I’m glad. I rest better with you, too. You’re actually extremely cuddleable, did you know that?”

His lip quirks. “I had to drag you into bed with me, in the beginning.”

“You were an absolute dick in the beginning,” you retort. “You threatened to let me die, repeatedly.”

“You were troublesome.”

“Like you aren’t trouble, God of Mischief?”

“Well, I cannot deny that,” he replies. “Fortunately, I am handsome enough to make up for it, not to mention my prowess in bed—“

“Okay,” you interrupt, “I think that officially signals the end of our sappy morning pillowtalk. What’s on the agenda for today?”

Loki stretches. “My agenda will involve discussing the mining operations in the canyons with Audawiniz, for one. If there are riches here, I want them; I can’t seem to find out what they want. It is perplexing. Everyone wants something.”

“They really like being independent.”

He gives you a funny look. “Are you suggesting that I threaten to occupy the canyons?”

“No! But, they have this weird relationship with Utgard, specifically. Like, when we were in the Tower of Stories, Arbaz - the guy who was helping us, I mean - he showed me a portrait of a woman. Darō, I think? She was sent to be a concubine or something as a tribute, and she killed the king. They kinda seem to be proud of that.”

“At least I shouldn’t have to fend off any marriage prospects,” Loki says. “What a relief that will be.”

“Maybe… maybe you could go the opposite route?”

“Meaning?”

“Send someone here to marry one of Audawiniz’s kids, or something? I’m assuming he has kids, or at least heirs.”

“Twenty-two.”

“What?”

“Audawiniz has exactly twenty-two children at the moment, most of whom are scattered throughout the canyons, overseeing their own designated territories. He is very proud of this fact.”

“How many moms?”
“One, believe it or not. They have been together for a very, very long time.” Loki smiles. “Old Audawiniz strikes me as something of a romantic.”

“Damn,” you reply. “I mean, that’s sweet, I guess, but… that’s a lot of babies to have.”

“You mean that you wouldn’t want to have twenty-two children?” Loki teases, and he laughs when you grimace at the thought of it. “You do seem well-practiced at handling large broods of Jötnunn youth; that is a very useful skill, don’t you think?”

“Being friends with young adults is way different than raising babies to young adulthood, though.”

“A fair point,” Loki replies, but he’s clearly mulling something over. He gets out of bed, stretching once more for good measure; you’re pretty sure he just likes putting on a show for you whenever he has the chance to get naked. “Who should I marry off to the canyons, then? I doubt that many of the lords in Utgard would want to send their children to the canyons, unless they have no other prospects.”

He bends over slowly to tuck his pants into his boots - suspiciously slowly. Definitely enjoys putting on a show, you decide, not that you mind. If your butt looked like that, you would, too. “What if you make it optional?” you suggest. “Maybe it could be a position, like an ambassador? And then, maybe whoever you send just happens to click with one of Audawiniz’s kids—”

“That doesn’t sound very tyrannical,” Loki replies. As he pulls his tunic over his head, you see the pale scarring on his stomach stretch, the skin still tight and shiny. “I am Loki Inn-Illi, remember? I do have a reputation to maintain.”

You follow him out of bed, hopping around on the cold stone floor until you find your socks; you should probably stop taking them off when you get in bed, but they cut back on your ability to maximize skin-to-skin contact. “I think it would work,” you tell him. “The west seems to be your safe zone, since the Storm Giants are out this way… and you’ve got a moderately good setup with the Forest Giants, so that covers some of the south. Having the canyons would kind of tie the whole region together.”

“Since when have you been a strategist, dróttning?”

“I do have a crazy amount of time to just sit around and think, you know? And I watch people; I don’t think you realize that you have subjects who actually like you. You’re actually doing king-stuff, going around and meeting your people. When was the last time anyone did that here? I think you’re good at being a king, and they’re going to see that, sooner or later.”

Loki stands frozen, like he’s shocked by the compliment.

“Do you think Fárbauti took the time to listen to people complain about seal-milk bandits?” you press. “Or that Helblindi would have jumped off of a cliff to save Greip and Hross? I bet a lot of the giants expected you to straight-up murder your siblings when you took over, too, but you didn’t—”

“What makes a good king?” Loki interrupts. “A worthy king? You have to realize that what you consider admirable qualities aren’t necessarily important to all of the Jötnar, and mercy is one of them. I likely won more admiration for wiping out your abductors than I did for saving any lives.”

Why won’t he accept that he’s good at being heroic? It’s starting to grate on your nerves. “Yes, but the kind of loyalty you get from saving someone from a horrific death is a lot better than the kind you get through fear, isn’t it?”

Loki shrugs. “That is why loyalty is such a dangerous thing to rely upon,” he says. “But, I do think
that there is some merit to the idea of an ambassadorship to the canyons. They have functioned as an independent kingdom for centuries, and making an attempt to subjugate them would be a waste of time and resources, if we can gain their cooperation in other ways.”

*Look at me,* you think, beaming with pride as Loki sits on the edge of the bed beside you. *Playing in the big leagues, now.* “Whatcha doing?” you ask him as he begins twisting tiny braids into your hair.

“I don’t know,” he replies. “Finding ways to avoid responsibility, I suppose. Touching you. This suits you, and your hair is always a mess in the morning.”

“Hey, you get half of the blame for that.” There’s something so incredibly soothing about having him play with your hair, and you close your eyes and daydream about having this kind of morning every day for the rest of your life. “Will you be gone all day again?”

“No. Audawiniz intends to have a going-away feast in my honor tonight, and we should be together then.”

“I thought they didn’t have a room big enough for everybody,” you say. “Isn’t that why we’ve been separated this whole time?”

“Apparently, if the demand is great enough, they have some sort of alternative accommodations planned. I can’t imagine what they might be, considering our location, but it will be a pleasant break from all of the business.” He kisses the top of your head as he stands. “And, on the subject of business, I really shouldn’t delay any longer. You can come with me, if you like, and I will have someone take you to your twins.”

“That sounds nice,” you reply. You start to put your hat on, but then you change your mind; you kind of want to show off your braids, even if no one but you knows that Loki made them. “Sitting around waiting for people to come pick me up makes me feel kind of useless.”

Loki hooks a finger under your chin, tilting your head up to face him. His face is completely serious, but you can tell by the look in his eyes that he’s about to say something stupid. “Don’t be silly, mortal. I can think of at least three good uses for you. Four, if I am being particularly generous—”

“I can think of one or two for you, too,” you interrupt, and then you very-unsubtly reach around and grab his butt; he looks so startled that you can’t help but laugh, and you head for the door. “Come on, Your Majesty. Don’t you have work to do?”

~*~*~*~

The giant Arbaz seems to have taken very eagerly to the position of tour guide, and he spends a good portion of the day showing you and your squad around the House of Audawiniz. It’s more crowded now than when you first arrived, so you assume that giants are all gathering to see the new King of Jotunheim. It also means that you get a lot more strange looks and weird comments, but no one is intentionally mean or aggressive, so you decide that the canyon giants are pretty okay, in your book.

He shows you the outside of one of the treasure-vaults, and you’re dying to take a peek inside, but you doubt that ‘mortal pet’ is very high on the priority list of people who get to gawk over Audawiniz’ treasure. They do seem to wear more jewelry down here, so you imagine it’s pretty spectacular. How cool would it be if they had a dragon to guard it, too? This does seem like the kind of place dragons would like…
The highlight of the day, by far, is a bizarre, underground ‘garden.’ It’s not all that different from the Tower of Stories, though it is smaller and less grand, illuminated with glowing orbs like the ones used in the palace in Utgard. The room is hot and humid, with water trickling down the walls, which are positively covered with mushrooms and lichens. There’s also some kind of twisting, off-white vine that meanders around the walls, twisting around pegs that seemed to be placed at-random in the stone. Hanging from it are clusters of what seem to be some sort of squishy, coconut-sized melons.

“How do they grow?” you ask, fascinated. “There’s no sunlight.”

“How they needed sunlight, mortal,” Arbaz replies sagely, “then they would not grow.”

Very helpful, Arbaz.

You learn, too, that you’re very fortunate to have a private room with Loki; you pass by a chamber filled with rows upon rows of beds carved into the walls, which Arbaz explains are the servants’ quarters. You can’t imagine having to climb several stories up a sheer rock wall just to go to bed every night, but you guess that maybe it helps them stay in such good shape.

The day passes quickly, and you’re almost surprised when another servant comes to tell you all that you should come join the feast. She leads you towards the front entrance, and you see your own confusion mirrored on the faces of the twins. The door where you first entered the House of Audawiniz is wide-open, giants streaming in and out, and you hang on to Greip’s arm as the servant ushers you into the crowd.

Outside, you stop in your tracks and stare; platforms have been erected on the outer face of the canyon wall, some with rope-bridges stretching all the way across. There are lights and fires burning in the stone doorways all up the side of the canyon, with giants climbing to and fro from platform to platform as if they aren’t suspended terrifyingly high in the air. It’s like a feast flipped vertically, and your head swims at the thought of being dragged up to one of the high platforms, where it looks like a lot of the younger giants are dancing.

Luckily, you spot Loki sitting at a large table in the middle of what is normally the road, and you release Greip and hurry to his side, slipping and sliding on the icy stone; you’re almost certain that Greip is going to end up getting convinced to dance up in the air with Hross, and that’s one adventure that you sure as hell aren’t interested in joining. Loki practically has to catch you as you step on a particularly slick patch of ice and lose your footing, but he smoothly pulls you into his lap as he does, which makes it a little less obvious that you were about to land face-first on the dinner table.

“Eternally struggling with the elements, aren’t you?” he whispers in your ear.

Beside him, Audawiniz laughs. “This is truly a sight, Loki Laufeyson,” he says. “I cannot say that I have seen such a bright-eyed mortal in all of my days.”

You stare at him, wondering if you’re supposed to respond to that.

“All it takes is a little care,” Loki replies. “Mortals are fragile physically, true, but they adapt well to new challenges, from what I have seen.”

“Ah, yes. I have heard of your exploits on Midgard.” Turning in his seat, Audawiniz waves over a servant. “Uzdawulfaz! Come over here.” A scarred, stern-faced giant leaves his table and heads towards you, and Audawiniz smiles. “My daughter would like to see your mortal,” he tells Loki. “She was born after they were all gone from Jotunheim.”
Loki looks down at you, and you give him a tiny nod; you’re all about spreading goodwill, right? And the giants here are more open and friendly with you than most, so you really doubt that Audawiniz’s daughter is going to be some kind of mortal-hating lunatic. Still, Loki seems reluctant to release you, and you can feel his eyes on your back as the servant Uzdawulfaz.

You’re brought over to a smaller gathering near one of the doorway-fires along the road, where a lot of younger-looking giants are sitting on cushions and playing some kind of dice game. When you approach, the giantess in the middle looks up and laughs in delighted surprise, waving for you to come closer. “Nahts, eighteenth child of Audawiniz,” the servant announces as you awkwardly step into the middle of the circle. He gestures towards you. “In-Unga of Midgard.”

“Oh, lovely,” she says. Her eyes are a light violet, her hair dark and straight, flowing almost down to her hips. You try not to stare at her belly - you’ve never seen a pregnant Jötunn before, and considering how much of the realm you’ve seen, it’s kind of shocking. She wears the same white-makeup on her markings as many of the other giants at the feast, but her stomach is covered with runes, instead; you wish you could read them.

“It’s nice to meet you,” you say, deciding that it’s a good time to be bold.

Her smile grows brighter. “You are so small!” she declares. “And Arbaz has told me that you study runes? This is all very exciting. Isn’t it, Straumaz?” Nahts turns to the giant sitting behind her; they aren’t quite touching, but he looks like he wishes they were, and there’s a tense, serious sort of look on his face. Worried, you think, your nose wrinkling.

Nahts turns back to you, her hand resting on the swell of her belly. “Do not mind my husband, In-Unga of Midgard,” she says teasingly. “This is our first child, and Straumaz can barely stand to let me out of our chambers.”

Ah. You wonder if Loki would be that way… except, you’re pretty sure Loki would just hold you and screw social convention, which is what it looks like the poor guy wants to do. Your eyes fall on the mate-marks on both of their shoulders, highlighted in white along with the rest of their markings. At least we aren’t the only couple that feels clingy, you think. Crazy Jötunn mate-bonds.

“Arbaz has also informed me that you seemed curious about Darō,” Nahts says. She stretches towards an enamelled box on the table nearby, huffing in frustration when she can’t quite reach it. Uzdawulfaz places it in her hand, still expressionless, earning another one of her blinding smiles. “Thank you, Wulf.”

He nods.

Nahts opens the little box. “I always admired Darō, as well, little one. She travelled so far, and faced so many horrors, but she never lost her courage. I thought to myself, ‘If Loki’s mortal companion is travelling all over Jotunheim and the Nine Realms, then surely she could use Darō’s protection,’ and so I found this.” She pulls out a tiny ring, triumphant. “I wore this as a child,” she says, “but I think that it will fit you.”

The ring is - unsurprisingly - made of copper; it reminds you of old royal signet rings, with a round green stone in the middle carved with the impression of an eye. People keep giving you things that are supposed to protect you on your journeys, and you aren’t dead yet, so maybe it’s working.

“Thank you,” you tell her. “It’s beautiful.”

“The Eye of Darō is a very good charm to keep.” Nahts leans forward, her voice lowered. “She favors the bold, In-Unga, and those who need bravery while far from home.”
You slide the ring onto your index finger, internally laughing over the fact that a child’s ring fits you perfectly. “I can use all the help I can get, my lady,” you tell her. “I tend to have bad luck.” Struck with sudden inspiration, you dig around in your bag, pulling out a bundle of the makeup-sticks that Gjálp got you at the last trading-post. “Can I give you these?”

“Of course,” Nahts replies, and some of the giantesses around her smile and coo over the gift; you imagine traders must not make it down here very often, and the runes drawn on her stomach are clearly significant in some way. “You are very sweet. Though,” she adds, glancing over your shoulder, “I suppose I must release you back to your king; he is staring our way very fearsomely.”

Maybe that explains why Straumaz is so stressed; he’s got a murdery king staring at his extremely-pregnant wife. You wonder if Loki even realizes the effect that he’s having; you’re pretty sure he’d be just as protective, if not more, over you. When you reach Loki’s side, you tug on his tunic as discreetly as you can. “You’re making an expecting dad very nervous,” you whisper. “Have a little empathy.”

He looks surprised. “What?”

“You were glaring.”

“Oh,” he replies. “It wasn’t intentional.”

*Of course it wasn’t.*

Loki sits you back on his lap, and you tuck into the bowl of roasted mushroom bits he offers you; it tastes more like Earth-food than a lot of what you’ve had on Jotunheim, and you’re kind of dreading the coast in that regard, because you have a sneaking suspicion that you’ll be right back to fish-broth and sea-serpents for every meal. He takes your hand when he notices the ring, twisting it around so that he can examine it. “Very pretty,” he says, his voice hushed. “How have you managed to earn gifts from strange princesses, hmm?”

“I happen to be extremely likable,” you tell him. “And… she said it’s for protection. Safe travels, and things like that. ‘The Eye of Darō,’ she called it.”

Loki shakes his head, apparently puzzled by the notion that random giants would care about protecting you. “Fascinating.”

The feast lasts for much of the night, and you eat until you’re stuffed, then relax in Loki’s arms, tired and languid. Loki seems more relaxed than you’ve seen him in a long time, maybe ever, turning on the charm when Audawiniz introduces his wife - whose name you don’t manage to catch. It doesn’t help that the names here aren’t like the ones you’ve gotten used to the rest of Jotunheim using. Not all of the canyon giants seem chatty, but it must be a family trait, because Audawiniz ends up introducing Loki to a good third of his children, and they’re all just as enthusiastic as Nahts.

Maybe it’s just the excitement of having visitors.

You’re half-asleep when you’re literally handed off to Greip to begin loading up for the next leg of the trip. Part of you wants to protest, but Loki said that it would only be temporary - had *promised* it - and you believe him. *Things are going to be different now,* you think. *He promised.*
Just a little frosty niceness for this #FrostbiteFriday while our hero and heroine are somewhere happy and safe! <3
I hope everyone has a lovely weekend!
Chapter Summary

In which you finally see the sea.

Chapter Notes

It takes longer than expected to load up for the Grand Royal Roadtrip, since all of the sleighs have been moved down the canyon-road to allow room for the party. Greip deposits you on top of a basket of supplies by your sleigh and then goes off to find Hornburi and Vámúli, and all of the hustle and bustle around you starts to wake you up. You feel a little cranky; you were hoping to get some sleep in while you could still imagine you were in Loki’s arms.

Hrossþjófr comes over and drops another basket by your feet, accompanied by Býleistr and one of the locals. You’re pretty sure he’s one of Audawiniz’s kids, but you met so many of them that you can’t actually remember which one. “Rekwaz will be accompanying us, In-Unga,” Hross tells you, dusting off his hands. “The king is sending one of the sleighs back to Utgard with gifts Lord Audawiniz’s gracious gifts, and he will be riding with us.”

“As will I,” Býleistr adds.

From his expression, you can’t tell if he’s pleased, or disappointed. Probably disappointed, you decide. You wonder if Loki got rid of his sleigh just to annoy him. It seems like something he’d do…but you’re also surprised that he’d have near-strangers riding with you. Maybe it’s a test. Maybe he’s giving you a chance to see if the guy seems trustworthy.

But God help us all, you think. Six giants and a human, all stuck together in one sleigh.

Rekwaz looks similar to Nahts, and you imagine if he took down his bun, his black hair would be almost as long as hers. Gotta get Loki to put his hair in a bun, you muse.

You’re torn as to whether or not you should speak; you did just spend yet another evening in Loki’s lap, and you were given gifts by the canyon-equivalent of a princess, but Býleistr was right when he told you that you needed to be careful. Still… if you’re going to test someone’s character, it seems like now is a good time to do it, when the majority of the people standing around you would most likely take your side in a fight.

“You’re the son of Audawiniz?” you ask.

He seems startled. “Yes,” he replies. “I am the seventeenth child. And you are In-Unga of Midgard, the only mortal in the realm.”

You nod.

“I have never been to the surface,” he says. “Not once.”

“You might have the right idea, there,” Hrossþjófr remarks, “especially with how sharply the winds blow across the flatlands. It is almost cozy here in the canyons, isn’t it? I would not mind a longer
stay.” His eyes are on Greip as she returns to the sligh, and you’re pretty sure that something scandalous - like some illicit hand-holding - might’ve occurred during the night.

“Load up, everyone,” Greip says. “It seems that the animals are being kept at a lower point in the canyon, and we will have to harness them there.”

“How will we reach them?” Gjálp asks. “The ground is level here; we cannot careen downhill with no effort, as we did before.”

“My father will have his men tow us there, lady. The road is kept iced and polished. It takes very little force, even for such bulky contraptions.”

Býleistr sighs. “Can we be on our way, then? I am tired.”

“Of course, Prince Býleistr.” Gjálp hefts one of the baskets. “If you would like to wait inside—”

He takes the basket from her. “No need,” he says brusquely. “There is no reason for you to carry my things.” He leaps onto the roof of the sleigh and disappears inside, and you and Gjálp exchange a look.

“Well,” she says, “you must get inside, In-Unga. There is no reason for you to stay out in the cold. Would you like my help?”

“Sure,” you reply. “And full disclosure, I’m going to sleep. It’s way past my bedtime.”

Rekwaz stares at you; maybe he can’t tell that you’re kidding. You still haven’t completely figured out the humor here on Jotunheim. It’s gonna be a real trip watching him interact with Býleistr and Hross, you think. That’ll be an interesting trio.

You’re true to your word, though, and by the time your head hits the pillow in your cushion-bundle of a bed, you’re already half-asleep. It helps that you still smell like Loki, and that you know you’ll get to sleep with him soon. Heck, it might even be like a nice little vacation, once you reach the coast. He’ll have his own room, which you’ll obviously be sharing… All of your friends are bickering over their sleeping-spots, but it’s just background noise, and soon, you’re asleep.

You don’t wake up when the sleighs are moved, or when the animals are hitched to them to begin the long, winding journey through the canyons. When you do come to, you’re shocked to find that the cabin of the sleigh is filled with gentle snores; every single one of your travel buddies is asleep, too. That must mean that the trip is going well.

Sitting up, you try to make them all out in the darkness. There’s only one lantern swinging overhead, but it gives off enough light for you to see that Býleistr is at the exact opposite end of the sleigh, as far from everyone else as possible, a blanket pulled over his head. Hrosspjófr is sprawled directly in the middle of the floor, and his sister isn’t far from him. Greip and Gjálp are nearest to you, and Rekwaz is curled up in a tiny ball amidst some of the baskets. You weren’t expecting him to sleep so easily crammed in a sleigh with a bunch of strangers, but then you consider that he’s one of twenty-two kids, so he’s probably used to sharing a room.

You’re assuming Audawiniz has grandchildren, too, if one of his younger kids is just about to have her first baby. He practically has a whole army just counting his extended family, not to mention all of the other giants that apparently live throughout the canyons. You twist the ring on your finger, contemplating. The Eye of Darō. It almost sounded like she’s sort of a religious figure… but she was also a real person. Maybe she’s like a lot of the heroes in Earthly mythology, becoming almost-deified after her death.
You’ll have to ask Rekwaz.

The stone of the ring reminds you of jade, but it’s darker. It occurs to you that it’s probably ancient, old enough to be some kind of significant historical treasure on Earth. The giants live for thousands and thousands of years, and Nahts said she had it as a child. What if it had been made before places like Rome were built? Before the pyramids? Trying to conceptualize such a long life makes your head pound.

Loki must be resting relatively well, because you don’t feel any of that familiar aching through the bond. You can’t believe that the two of you actually managed to talk things through, but he listened. He listened, and he told you his worries, and the two of you are stronger for it. You curl back up, smiling to yourself as you rub your cheek against the fabric of your cloak, which smells like him.

The next thing you know, Gjálp is jostling you awake. “Wake, sunshine,” she sing-songs, poking your cheek when you try to burrow away from the thin beam of light streaming through the open roof-hatch.

“Look at you and your Earth- phrases.” Yawning, you sit up and stretch. “Are we about to stop or something?”

“No, but there is a very pretty view, and Rekwaz has been pointing out some interesting landmarks. The path is smooth enough that we feel that you’ll be safe on the roof.” She holds up a leather strap. “Provided, of course, that you wear this.”

“And what exactly is that?”

“It is a harness! Greip was inspired by the belt that the king made to hold you in place in your sleigh, as it reminded her of Hornburi and Vámuli’s harnesses, and so we have made you this.”

You take it from her, trying to look as excited as she is, despite the fact that she’s basically handed you a belt on a rope. Your mind instantly conjures up an image of you being dragged behind the sleigh as it careens down yet another ice-slide… but your desire to see the sights trumps your fear. “Sounds great,” you tell her. “Let’s hit the roof.”

The many layers of clothes you wear already make climbing awkward, and the thick leather belt cinched around your waist doesn’t help, but Heiðr helps Gjálp haul you up onto the roof. The others are sitting on the edge, their legs dangling over the side as Rekwaz points to tiny caves far on the other side of the canyon. You decide to stay by the hatch, where you can at least cling to the door-handle for a little extra support.

“You do not want to come closer, mortal?” Býleistr asks.

“No, thank you,” you reply. “I think I’m good where I am.”

Rekwaz still looks just as startled by your voice as he did last night, but he recovers quickly and resumes his tour-guiding. “My sister Duskaz rules over that village. Seventh child of Audawiniz. Her territory encompasses a vast underground lake. It is quite beautiful.”

“It is a shame that we cannot stop to see it,” Heiðr says. “I have heard that all sorts of natural wonders lie beneath the surface. We Stormr-Jötnar tend to build upwards, towards the sky.”

“Or outwards,” Hrossþjófr adds, “towards the sea. The fortress of Jötundreyri juts out into the waves; foreigners tend to find it absolutely terrifying.”

Gjálp looks vaguely squeamish. “Truly?”
“It cannot possibly be *that* impressive,” Býleistr says, tossing a little chunk of ice off into the canyon and leaning over the edge to watch it fall. “Do not needlessly frighten them, Hrossþjófr.”

Hrossþjófr leans closer to Greip, though he doesn’t bother lowering his voice. “You can see leviathans from the windows below the surface, when the water is clear.”

Her lips part in amazement. “Leviathans?”

“There is a jawbone in Jötundreyri, full of teeth. I can show it to you, if you’d like? They are sharp enough to crush right through metal ship-hulls.” He bares his teeth.

“Yes, please,” Greip says, her voice a little more breathy than normal. “I would like that very much.”

*That’s a weird way to flirt,* you think, *but whatever works for them, I guess. I’ve got no right to judge.*

It’s cold, but the canyon is so beautiful that you’re content to suck it up and deal. Besides, it’s always cold, so there’s no point in complaining, is there? The road you’re on now is narrow and flat, almost as smooth as a paved road back home on Earth. You’re still deep beneath the surface, but the canyon is wider, so more light reaches down, though the drop-off beside the road is lost in darkness. You can faintly make out the sound of water rushing far below, and you assume it must be the river that carves through the canyon.

It gives you terrible flashbacks to Ymir’s Teeth and almost losing Loki, Greip, and Hross, but you try to remind yourself that the odds of yet another catastrophic accident have to be slim. *Unless you’re just bad luck,* your inner voice whispers. *You did tell Nahts that you’re bad luck.*

But, when you think about it, everything has always worked out in the end, hasn’t it? They were all safe even after the cliff-diving, when all of the other giants were sure they’d be dead. And you were with Loki when he stole the Casket of Ancient Winters from Asgard, and *that* was a huge success. Maybe you’re bad luck *and* good luck, all rolled into one compact bundle.

Something shiny and round catches your eye, scrabbling along one of the ledges on the far side of the canyon. “The hell is that?” you ask, pointing.

Rekwaz squints. “Silver-crawler. You are lucky to see one so far down; they usually hunt closer to the surface.”

“We call them leggja-unnr,” Greip says. “Wave-of-legs. They are… what is it, Sister?”

“Centipedes, in Common-Speak.”

“There’s no way that’s a centipede,” you reply. “That thing has to be the size of a bus.”

They all look at you oddly.

“Centipedes on Earth, on Midgard, are like… *this* big.” You hold your fingers up to demonstrate. “That thing looks like it could take out one of these sleighs.”

“They are scavengers,” Rekwaz reassures. “They raid nests, things of that nature. You would only need to fear them if you were injured and alone, near death.”

“In-Unga has a penchant for ending up near-death,” Býleistr says, “so perhaps her fears are valid.”

You glare at the back of his head, but he’s too busy peering down into the canyon to notice.
“I did not expect the journey to go this quickly,” Greip says a few moments later. “The path is so smooth, and without the blizzards, the animals seem to be tiring far less easily. With any luck, we will be out of the canyons soon, and if the weather holds out, we will make it to the coast in no time at all.”

Heiðr smiles. “The sooner we arrive, the more time we can spend there. There are several smaller fortresses along the way that are very impressive, and I am hopeful that the king will decide to visit them. Of course, I am sure that the Storm Lords are all trying to convince him that he should stay in their homes; it will be a contest to see who can be the most hospitable.”

“The answer, obviously, is that we will be the best hosts,” Hross declares. “Márfjall is the shining jewel overlooking Undbára, and every other castle pales in comparison.”

“So humble,” Býleistr says, and the conversation on the roof quickly devolves into an argument as to whether sand can ever be more impressive than a forest. You’ve got no stake in this fight, so you tune them out and lay flat on your back, your arm hooked through the handle on the door to keep you secure. From this angle, the crack of sky far above you almost looks like some kind of strange river. You twist the ring on your finger, awed by just how incredibly small and insignificant you are in the grand scheme of things.

The temperature drops as night comes, and everyone retreats inside; they claim it’s because they have to keep your ‘fragile mortal skin’ safe, but you’re pretty sure that they aren’t enjoying the slicing winds, either, even if none of them want to admit it. Rekwaz doesn’t chime in very often during conversation, you’ve noticed, but he’s always watching, like he’s just trying to absorb the strangeness of it all.

Býleistr, meanwhile, seems less and less aloof with each passing day. True, it’s because of the constant bickering with Hrossþjófr, but considering the tension between their clans and the difference in social status, you feel like it’s a sign of progress. His mother would probably be appalled by the company he’s keeping on this trip, but you can’t help but think that may be why he’s enjoying it so much.

Stops are infrequent and short, but Loki does stop by to check on you every single time, even though it’s only for a moment - a pat on the head, a smile, a thumb on your cheek, brushing away a stray snowflake… It isn’t much, but it’s enough for you to get by, because the moments themselves are just a reminder of the promise he’s made to stay by your side, always.

As beautiful as the canyons are, you’re relieved when he tells you one afternoon that you’re nearly at the point where the path will begin to climb towards the surface. “Would you like to ride with me?” he asks, and you nod. Like you even have to ask.

Loki manages to act very kingly and stoic while he oversees preparations for the ascent, but you can feel his impatience growing with every passing minute, and once he’s alone with you in his sleigh, he doesn’t give you even a second of warning before he pins you to the wall and kisses you. About time, you think, practically purring in satisfaction as he discards your furry little hat on the floor and runs his fingers through your hair. He breaks away after one final peck on the cheek. “I cannot begin to tell you how lovely it’s been to know I had this waiting for me at the end of the canyon,” he says. “You’re a very delicious source of motivation; we made it through nearly two days faster than predicted, with the help of a touch of magic here and there.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Loki replies, “now come quickly, before we’re both knocked from our feet.”
He bundles you into the corner, and you stifle a giggle as his face settles into the crook of your neck. “Is it even possible for you to get knocked off of your feet? Aren’t you a god?”

“Even gods can be knocked down, darling; it is how quickly they get up again that makes the difference.”

The sleigh lurches, the wooly rhinos outside bellowing to each other as they dig their claws into the ice and rock and begin to climb. It’s a bumpy, unpleasant ride, and you’re glad that you saw what seemed to be some sort of rope-pulleys set up while you were outside; it seems like the giants at this end of the canyon already have systems in place to get people to and from the canyon road. The seatbelt is a wonderful addition, too, and you pat yourself on the back for introducing Jotunheim to vehicular safety. You imagine all of your friends in their sleigh, gravity forcing them to cram together in the back as the incline grows steeper. Quality bonding time.

“Loki, is this safe? Because I have it on good authority that there are freakin’ massive centipede-monsters that wouldn’t mind eating us if we get smashed at the bottom of the canyon.”

You feel him huff in amusement. “I won’t allow any monsters to get you,” Loki replies, his voice dropping. He pulls your cloak and collar to the side and nips at your neck, and you wiggle in his arms. “Shh, stay still. We have very little room to move, strapped to the wall this way.”

He’s not wrong. The seatbelt and the steep angle of the sleigh floor have you pinned in his lap, completely at his mercy. Right where you want to be, really. “Do we have time?” you whisper. “Before we reach the top?”

“There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” His tongue slides across the mate-mark. “If I could only be inside of you, I’d make quick work of the both of us.”

“Loki—” Your breath hitches; even with all of the layers between you, he’s still got you melting in his hands. “There has to be something we can do.”

His attack on your neck pauses. “What do you mean?”

“There’s gotta be some kind of birth control here, right?” If they can have babies, then surely—

“What do you mean?”

—maybe not. “Something to prevent pregnancy. Is that not… a thing?”

You wish you hadn’t said anything, because he’s abandoned your neck. You’ve probably stirred some kind of scientific curiosity, knowing him, and you’d really rather spend your alone time making out, instead of discussing the finer points of prophylactics. “I sincerely doubt it,” Loki says. “Perhaps on Asgard… but you already know that conception is infrequent among giants.”

“Well, it would be good to have something like that, don’t you think? Then we could still…” You clear your throat. Why is this embarrassing? “We could still do everything, that way, without you worrying about getting me pregnant.”

Loki sighs. “If we were on Asgard, I could ask Eir… but if something like what you describe exists, I’ve never encountered it. There are witches in the Stormlands who might be able to help, but we would also run the risk of finding a solution that would not work well with your physiology.”

“That’s better than nothing, right? It would be nice if we were at least not at a ‘are-we-at-risk-today’ point in life before we start thinking about making babies—”
“We will always be at risk,” Loki interrupts. “That being said, I agree with you. If there isn’t a spell, I suppose I can attempt one of my own. But, for now…” He twists your head around so that he can kiss you. “For now, this will suffice.”

You can’t really argue with that.

There are a few terrifying moments where it feels like the sleigh is probably dangling off of the sheer cliff-face, but you close your eyes and hold Loki tighter and try not to imagine it. Almost to the top, you tell yourself. If it’s this steep, we have to be getting close to the top. It helps to imagine that the bellowing of the rhinos outside is actually them voicing workplace complaints. Horbunri in a little tie would be quite the site to see.

The wood creaks and groans when it swings onto flat ground again, and you’re about ready to crawl outside and kiss the snow; heights are still apparently not your thing. Loki unfastens your seatbelt and stands to stretch, while you crumple in an ungainly heap on the ground. “Hey!”

“I thought you’d stand, too,” he protests. “I cannot hold you all day, lazy little thing.”

“Maybe a warning?”

“Here, I’ll let you take a look.” He helps you onto the ladder, and when you poke your head through the hatch, everything is flat - ridiculously, unnervingly flat. The sleigh is still sliding along, and you can make out the darkness of the canyons behind you, already receding into the distance.

“Do you mind?” he asks, impatient. “I have things to do, you know.”

“Oops.”

You hop off of the ladder halfway down, testing your agility; you stick the landing, but Loki doesn’t look very pleased. “Are you trying to break an ankle, mortal?”

“Don’t ‘mortal’ me, handsome.”

“Don’t ‘handsome’ me, pet,” he replies, his eyes narrowing playfully.

“Don’t ‘pet’ me—”

“Alright,” Loki interrupts, “I won’t.” He’s up the ladder before you can respond, his laughter muffled by the wind as he disappears from sight.

Damn him, you think, but there’s a smile playing on your lips. Always has to have the last word.

~*~*~*~

Loki doesn’t evict you from his sleigh, even though he’s out riding on rhino-back with some of his lords for most of the day, and you decide to enjoy the alone time. With the strange assortment of giants now riding with Greip and Gjálp, it doesn’t hurt to have a little room to breathe. Besides, you’re sure you smell very overwhelmingly Loki-like, and that might ruffle a few feathers.

On the other hand, it would give you the chance to ask some other girls about the birth control question, not that you’re expecting Greip and Gjálp to know anything about it. You’d be surprised if they’d even considered the possibility of you having kids with Loki. Come to think of it, it’s kind of
weird that no one seems to have considered the possibility of you having Loki’s half-royal-half-human babies. Centuries and centuries of keeping humans as slaves and pets, and what, that never happened? Not once?

_Or maybe they just killed them. Mortal gets pregnant and sickly, and it’s no longer with the effort to keep her._ It’s a horrifying thought, but given the way you were spoken to when you first arrived, would it really be that surprising?

You spend time poring over your copper magic-book, eager to find something in it that you can understand. Names are easiest to pick out, since you don’t have to actually translate them, and it doesn’t take you long to spot a familiar string of letters.

_Yggdrasil._

You transcribe the whole passage into your notebook, and you even do your best to replicate the drawing of the World Tree which dominates the page. There are only a few words you can translate - _white, green, well_ - and you’re disappointed. _Loki will help,_ you tell yourself, _and if not Loki, then maybe I can convince Býleistr to do some translating for me._

Flexing your fingers, you place your palm flat on the cover of the book, closing your eyes. _Think magical thoughts._ Nothing happens. You don’t even know what you’re trying to make happen, so you guess you shouldn’t feel so disappointed. It’s not the kind of thing that you can learn overnight, you suppose.

When Loki gets back, he brings you into the roof with him, his arms wrapped around you to keep you snug and secure. “I want you to be here when we first spot the sea on the horizon,” he whispers. “It should be just before night falls.”

You settle back against his chest. Through the thick clouds overhead, you can make out a few bright stars beginning to peek through the twilight. It’s incredibly beautiful, this harsh, unforgiving landscape that’s nearly managed to kill you on more than one occasion. “Hey, Loki?”

“Yes?”

“Is it bad that I feel less homesick now? I mean, I still miss everyone, and I want to go back to Earth someday, but… I feel like part of me belongs here. Does that make sense?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “It does,” he says. “There is some part of me that yearns for the life that I used to have, for the home that I used to have, even though it was all a lie. I used to wish that I could take it all back, that I’d never known the truth. But now, with you, with _this_… It doesn’t feel like a home, not yet, but it is a start.”

The glint of waves in the distance appears just before the last of the daylight fades. Rocky spires protrude from the shore, standing like sentinels where the road turns to follow the coastline. “See?” Loki whispers, his breath tickling your ear as he leans over your shoulder and points towards the sea. “I have seen the oceans of Jotunheim before; they are massive, primeval things. Deadly, too.”

“You sound excited.”

“I am. The raw power of nature is truly spectacular, don’t you think?”

You agree, but you silently wonder if some of his nervous energy is actually due to the fact that he’s drawing nearer and nearer to the home of his birth-mother. It can’t be easy; it wouldn’t be easy under any circumstances, and Loki’s family history is more twisted than most. It’s best to let it go, you decide. He’ll talk to you about it when he’s ready.
When the sun rises the following morning, it’s grey and hazy, though it isn’t nearly as cold as you’d been expecting. You’ve rejoined the twins and the rest of your friends, and you’ve all chosen to walk outside of the sleigh as it trundles along just inland of the rocky seashore. Even the giants seem happy to spend time outside when the temperature is slightly more mild, though it’s still a bit chilly for your tastes. You get excited when a massive rock formation appears, running closer to the shoreline to hop onto the uneven stone columns as the twins scramble to catch up. Each of the interlocking stone columns is hexagonal and nearly as wide around as your waist, and once you’ve managed to scramble on top of them, you see that they’re worn down to an even height in the middle, probably from years of being used as a walking path.

“We have these on Earth!” you exclaim. “They’re volcanic, and there’s a famous place made of them called the Giant’s Causeway. Isn’t that funny?”

“I won’t be amused if you fall into the ocean,” Greip says. “Please, In-Unga—”

“I’m not that close to the edge. Come on, you have to get up here, Greip. You can actually see a good bit of the ocean from here. Please?”

She climbs up beside you, crouching on one of the taller columns. “It is an interesting landscape,” she says. The wind teases her hair from her braid, and she looks more than a little majestic. “It is much bigger than I could’ve imagined, I have to admit. Overwhelming, in a way.”

“The ocean on Earth is like that, too. Not quite as dark and terrifying, I mean, but it’s got that immense vastness. You look out at the horizon and realize how small you are. Or, I do, anyway.”

“I understand what you mean, In-Unga. I wonder how long it would take to reach the other side. Can you even imagine it?”

The waves are rough and tall, the sea churning with foam. “Nope,” you reply. “I don’t think I’d want to cross that. Now, if we ever visit an Earth ocean—”

“Do you think that we will?” she asks, her eyes lighting up. “Do you imagine that the king will conquer Midgard, someday?”

“No. He better not, at least, but we could still visit. Didn’t immortals used to travel all over the Nine Realms, back in the old days? Who’s to say it won’t happen again?”

“As long as Odin Allfather rules over Asgard,” Greip says, “we will never have access to the Bifrost Bridge. The king would have to start a war with the gods, and I do not know if it is a war we could win.”

“Maybe we can work something out.”

The two of you stay up there for a few minutes, watching the waves crash and breathing in the salt spray. It’s almost mesmerizing, especially after so many days cooped up inside, and you’re startled when Gjálp hops onto the rock beside you. “Sister,” she says, “Hornburi refuses to move, and all of the other sleighs are passing us by.”

“What? Did you offer him a treat?”
“I did, and he ate it, and then he sat down on the path.” Gjálp looks frazzled. “Please, will you help? Prince Býleistr is irritated, and if the king notices that we’ve fallen so far behind, he’ll be furious.”

When the three of you make it back to the path, all of the other sleighs are diverting around yours, their drivers sending some choice words Hornburi’s way. He doesn’t seem to mind at all, chewing away on some kind of bone as he sits like some sort of oversized dog. He lets out a low bellow when Greip appears, and she rushes up to ruffle his fur. “Were you worried that the ocean would take me?” she coos. “Come along, Hornburi, there’s a good boy.”

By the time she gets him on his feet and trundling along again, your group has fallen towards the back of the caravan. Loki probably wouldn’t approve, but you imagine he’s somewhere with the Storm Lords near the front, and you’re supposed to reach one of their fortresses before nightfall, so you figure it won’t be too big of a deal. Jötundréyri, you think Hross said, but you can’t remember. You need to work on a map to add to your notebook, because this is all a bit much to handle using mere mortal memory alone.

The afternoon wears on, and Býleistr and Rekwaz take to riding on top of the sleigh. According to Býleistr, princes aren’t meant to ‘traipse around on foot all day,’ and you’re pretty sure Rekwaz just wanted to escape Hrossþjófr’s constant teasing. Rekwaz seems like a pretty reserved dude, and Hross is, by giant standards, incredibly extroverted.

He’s also given up on any attempts to be subtle with his flirting, and you’re currently trying to stifle your laughter as he trails after Greip, singing his heart out. At least he’s got a good voice.

“Maiden fair, pearls in her hair; eyes as scarlet as the sands of the strand—”


“I know that you love my singing. Besides, your eyes are as vibrantly red as the sands of Undbára—”

“That may be, but I certainly do not have pearls in my hair—”

“Then I must be sure to get some for you, once we have reached my keep.”

“Your keep?” you ask. “You have a castle, Hross?”

Heiðr snorts. “Our father has a castle. Hrossþjófr has nothing.”

“It might as well be ours,” he says. “Father is always gone exploring. He is at sea more than he is on land. Can a man be lord of a castle where he never even visits?”

“I can’t really believe that he goes out on that sea,” you say. “It looks way too rough.”

“Oh, In-Unga, what you have seen pales in comparison to the true ocean! We are only at a small bay; Father journeys on the open sea.”

“Where does he go?”

“Wherever he wants,” Heiðr replies. “Our mother Hyrja is the responsible one, the one that our vassals rely upon, and Father has always been a wanderer. Hafalda’s mother likely came from one of the lands beyond Undbára.”

You wonder how long it would take to sail to these ‘lands beyond Undbára.’ It seems like a crazy,
dangerous trip to make with an infant, and you can’t imagine why their dad would’ve brought Hafalda back to his wife’s lands. Hyrja must be a very patient giantess. You’re also increasingly amused by the way some of the giant families seem to keep their names tied together. If you and Loki had a family, would the status quo be to give them all names that start with an ‘L?’ Names that rhyme? *It’s too soon to think about that,* you quickly tell yourself. *Way too soon.*

“Is the sand really red?” you ask instead. “Like in the song?”

“It is,” Hrossþjófr says. “It makes the waves red near to the coast. That is how Undbára was named, and it is said that the oceans were born of Ymir’s blood.”

“What does Undbára mean?”

“‘Wound-wave,’” Greip says.

“Grim.”

Heiðr laughs. “Yes, well, Jötundreyri, where we will be sleeping tonight, is named for giants’ blood. There were many gruesome battles here, long ago. Back even before the days of Hveðrungr, many died on these shores. That is yet another reason inlanders stay away.”

She doesn’t seem to take it very seriously, but Greip’s hand tightens on Hornburi’s harness. “The ocean is cursed,” she says. “All of the magic, bad blood. That is what Father always said.”

“Father says a lot of things,” Gjálp counters, “and many of those things you’ve chosen to ignore. I do not believe in such curses. It is all silliness, old stories twisted through the years. It isn’t as if travellers never come to Undbára.”

*Neither do I,* you think. *Places can’t be cursed.*

*I hope.*

Chapter End Notes

Have a lovely weekend, everyone! <3

Also, if you haven't had a chance yet, check out the [Frostbite Masterpost](http://www.tumblr.com) on Tumblr to see some really awesome Frostbite-inspired art!
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

In which you have your fortune told

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun rises over the oceanside fortress of Jötundreyri, almost entirely obscured by clouds and mist. You stand with your nose pressed to the thick, circular glass panes of the windows that jut out over the water, trying to make out the churning waves below. The twins were right; the red sand and the frothing of the sea lends a distinctively bloody note to the scene.

You hadn’t slept particularly well.

Jötundreyri itself is a fantastical feat of architecture, half-immersed in the Sea of Undbára. You don’t entirely understand how the whole thing hasn’t washed into the ocean over the millennia, what with the constant beating of the waves against the stone; the fact that the fortress still stands makes you suspect that there’s some sort of protective enchantments involved.

Undsveiti, Lord of Jötundreyri, had been waiting to greet the caravan with open arms. An old, craggy-looking giant, Undsveiti nevertheless seemed profoundly moved when he was introduced to Loki, going so far as to embrace him. Loki hadn’t seemed to know how to respond, and neither had the other giants in his retinue; you imagine that it must’ve looked shockingly sentimental to them, even though you’d found it very sweet.

From what you’ve managed to gather, Undsveiti is related to Loki, somehow. He mentioned throughout the night how much Loki resembles Gunnlöð, but between his heavy accent and his tendency to speak with the other Storm Giants in their local dialect, you spent most of the evening completely lost in the conversation. It was enough to know that they were being friendly towards Loki. You figured you could ask for clarification later.

When later came, though, and you were escorted by a pretty young giantess to the expansive guest chambers, Loki had seemed so exhausted that you’d decided not to press. It has to be overwhelming for him, meeting a bunch of long-lost distant relatives that he hadn’t even known that he had. He hadn’t even known that he was a Frost Giant until a few years ago… which is nearly impossible for you to conceptualize, given how well he’s seemed to adapt.

He’s still asleep, curled up where you’ve left him in the circular bed that sits in the middle of the chamber. Slipping from his embrace hadn’t been particularly easy, but you’d managed it without waking him up, a feat that you’re rather proud of. Loki deserves the chance to rest peacefully.

You like to think that you’re becoming much more self-sufficient, and when some time passes and Loki remains asleep, you strum up the courage to stick your head outside the door and ask the servant standing at attention for something for the king to eat. She seems startled to see you, but apparently the fact that you’re sleeping in the king’s chamber lends you enough authority to boss other servants around. She returns with an overladen tray - far too much for two people, even if one of them is a giant - and leaves you with an uncertain, half-hearted bow.
“Loki,” you sing, plopping down on the bed beside him, the tray in your hands. “Lokes, loverboy.”

He blinks, squinting blearily, his mouth already curled into a frown.

“I’ve got breakfast,” you tell him. “I was imperious about it, too. I even got bowed at.”

“What?”

“One of the palace servants bowed to me and brought me breakfast. I think the power is starting to go to my head, Your Majesty.”

“Oh.” He moves to pull you back down beside him, then realizes that the tray is in the way, huffing in irritation. “When you are done being mad with power, will you please come back to bed?”

“It’s morning, and I know you want to get on the road, so up and at ‘em. Plus, I want to see more of the fortress before we leave. Hross was going to give Greip a tour, and I should probably tag along to chaperone, don’t you think?”

“Please don’t make me start my morning by thinking of that fool boy’s attempts to–”

“Hey,” you interrupt, “I think it’s sweet, and we can’t really be judgy about sneaky relationships, can we? And by the way, while we’re on the subject… have you considered trying to work out a marriage alliance between their families?”

Loki sits up, the blankets pooling around his waist. “It isn’t exactly a top priority.”

“Now is the perfect time, though, isn’t it? Just send word to Geirröðr that the Storm Lords think that Greip’s a credit to her clan and all that stuff, and that they’d be delighted to combine their bloodlines, blah, blah, whatever it is that you say when you’re negotiating betrothals here.”

“So eloquent, my darling.”

“Being eloquent is your job, Loki; I’m the brains behind the operation.”

He cracks a smile. With his messy bed-head and still-sleepy eyes, it makes for an adorable picture. “Is that so? Would you like to take over at court for me, then? I can lend you my crown, and you can deal with the drudgery all day long, while I lounge in peace.”

“I mean, I would, if it wouldn’t cause a riot.”

“Fair point.” Stifling a yawn, he plucks a strip of some kind of jerky from the tray. “I could make you look like me,” he muses, “though I’m afraid you sound nothing like me. Completely unrefined.”

“Hey!”

“My little Midgardian street urchin.”

“You’re absolutely ridiculous,” you say, though that mischievous smirk of his makes it nearly impossible to actually be offended. “Do you want to come on the tour with me? I hear there are leviathan jawbones on display beneath the fortress, or something crazy like that. Have you ever seen a leviathan?”

“Never on Jotunheim; I’m assuming that they are different than the creatures I encountered on Midgard by the same name, in ancient times. I have business to attend to, I’m afraid.”

“You always have business to attend to, though.”
Loki laughs. “Yes, well, that is what you get for mating with a king, isn’t it? We tend to stay busy.”

He’s got a point. “Fine,” you tell him, leaning over to kiss the tip of his nose. “But I’m planning a long vacation for us, once things calm down. Preferably somewhere warm.”

“I look forward to it.”

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You’re back on the road, throwing pebbles off of the low-lying cliffs and into the waves below, trying to envision what sort of creatures are lurking beneath the surface. When Hrossþjófr showed you the leviathan jaw, it had made you realize - yet again - just how different this world is; its gaping maw could’ve easily encompassed an entire bus. How are any giants crazy enough to go out on open water with creatures like that swimming around in the sea below them?

“I do wish that you’d stay away from the edge, In-Unga,” Greip says. “It is almost as if you’ve entirely forgotten the bad luck you have with heights.”

“I’ve decided to view it as good luck,” you reply, kicking another rock off the edge. “I’m still alive, and I probably shouldn’t be, so I figure that’s gotta count for something.”

“Norns help me,” she mumbles, her eyes upturned towards the heavens, but she leaves you be.

The cliffs eventually begin to steepen, and the caravan of sleighs takes a lower path a bit inland. You don’t put up too much of a fuss, but you find the endless rocky path much less exciting than the expansive views of Undbára. When Loki’s retinue stops to make camp, you convince Greip to climb back up with you. You’re proud to note that you’re in better shape now than you were when the Convergence first dropped you off in Jotunheim; climbing around like a mountain goat and keeping up with the strides of giant teenagers is apparently an excellent workout routine.

The two of you sit side-by-side, the ruddy waves crashing beneath you while the wind whips through your hair. There are tiny, delicate red flowers growing in the cracks of the rock, and you pluck one free and stick it in her braid. “I can’t believe flowers manage to grow here,” you tell her. “The environment is so harsh.”

“Life finds a way,” she says, and when you laugh, she frowns, puzzled. “Did I say something odd?”

“No, no. It’s just… there’s a movie with that quote. It’s pretty well-known.”

“Movie?”

How do you go about explaining Jurassic Park to someone who doesn’t know what movies are? “I’ll show you one, someday, when we visit Earth.”

A bird whizzes past you and circles over the cliffs; you haven’t seen any other birds yet, so you figure it’s safe to assume that it’s only Hrossþjófr. Greip seems to have arrived at the same conclusion, and she shakes her head. “He should not be skin-shifting without the king to watch over him,” she says. “He lacks instruction.”

“Maybe he’s hoping this will get Loki’s attention, convince him to train him. What is he, anyway?”
“Stonecrow,” Greip replies. “According to the stories, their talons are so sharp that they shred through the cliffstone. That is where the sands of the beaches originate, if you believe the stories.”

“Do you?”

She cocks her head, considering. “I am not certain. But, I certainly would not wish to test their talons, all the same.”

Hrossþjófr the stonecrow shrieks and dives down the cliff, skimming along the water. The mottled white-grey of his plumage against the red of the waves is striking; you wish for a camera to capture the moment.

“Looks like he’s enjoying himself,” you observe.

“Yes. I am sure that he is. Can you imagine the freedom of flight? Though, I doubt that he will be able to move at all, come morning. Battling those winds is no small feat.”

“I think he’s showing off for you.” As if on cue, Hrossþjófr spirals in the air, then plunges beneath the waves. “Trying to impress you.”

Greip doesn’t reply, though she flushes, and the two of you sit on the cliffside and listen to the crashing of the waves as you wait for him to re-emerge. Moments pass, and Greip begins to frown, leaning over the edge. “I will be significantly less impressed if I have to rescue him from the sea.”

A piercing shriek sounds in the air above you, and the both of you look up just in time to spot the huge, slimy eel that Hrossþjófr drops down on you. You’re almost certain that he’s doing the bird version of a cackle as he chirps and flies away, Greip chasing after him and cursing to the high heavens. Beside you, the miserable, terrifyingly toothy eel wriggles on the wet stone. *I bet that’s going to be on the menu tonight,* you think, your appetite instantly lost.

By the time Greip drags a no-longer-skinchanged Hrossþjófr back by his ear, the eel has expired, much to your relief; its fangs were really starting to worry you, but attempting to push it over the edge seemed a little too risky, so you’d just sat there and kept a wary eye.

“You will apologize to In-Unga for your wretched misbehavior,” she demands, giving his ear another yank. “What if she’d been injured by that horrid thing?”

Hrossþjófr sighs, his neck craned at an odd angle in his attempts to reduce the strain of Greip’s grip. “I apologize, In-Unga, for my wretched misbehavior.”

“It’s okay,” you tell him, stifling a laugh. “No harm, no foul.”

“This is a mortal expression?” Greip asks. “It seems to condone irresponsibility.”

“I guess I’ve never thought about it that way.”

“Would you mind releasing my ear, little heart?” Hrossþjófr smiles, then winces when her hold on him tightens. “No harm, no foul, as the mortal says.”

“Do you suppose the king would see it that way? Besides, I am not little—”

“But you do not deny that you are my heart?”

She immediately releases him, then stalks away. “Come along, In-Unga,” she says. “Let us leave him to carry home his prize.”
“Okay.” You grin back at him as you scurry after her. “See you at dinner, Snowball.”

He lets out a short bark of laughter, then waves farewell.

That night, curled up with Loki in his sleigh with a belly full of a surprisingly tasty stew that you like to imagine wasn’t made out of Hrossþjófr’s catch, you decide to meddle. “Hey, Lokes?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Are you going to help Hrossþjófr with his magic? He turned into a crow today, and it was pretty impressive, but I know he isn’t as experienced as you—”

“I don’t have the time,” Loki says. “I can advise him here and there, but there aren’t many truly practiced, formidable sorcerers left in Jotunheim, and he needs structure if he’s ever going to reach his potential.”

You lean back to study his face. “Sounds like you’ve been giving this some thought.”

“I have. My mother… Queen Frigga provided the bulk of my instruction, and she was mercifully patient. I lack that sort of patience. I’d strangle him before we made it past his first lesson.”

“I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit. You can deal with people arguing over stupid stuff in court, and you like magic. You’d be a good teacher.”

“I did say that I would offer assistance,” he says, “and perhaps, in a few years, I will be able to send him to Vanaheim.”

“Vanaheim?”

“All of the most accomplished seiðr-masters train on Vanaheim.”

“Did you?”

“I did,” Loki replies, “but only for a short time. Odin Allfather did not particularly approve.”

You rest your head on his chest. “Look at you,” you say, “making all of these long-term, inter-realm plans. Looking out for our friends. I’m proud of you.”

“I don’t believe I said anything about friends—”

“I’m still proud of you, even if you’re stubborn.”

He kisses the top of your head. “Go to sleep, dröttning.”

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The next stop is at a place ominously named ‘Blóthörgr,’ which you’re told means ‘sacrificial altar.’ There isn’t any true fortress, just a large village of stone huts, all surrounding a single wide, hexagonal pillar of basalt, which you assume is the namesake of the village. It seems to be something of a sacred artifact, decorated with garlands of shells and deeply-carved runes.

All of the Storm Giants in Loki’s party trace their skin-markings in white when you arrive in
Blóthögr, and the rest of the entourage quickly follows suit. You’re impatient to see the village, and you barely manage to sit still long enough for Gjálp to recreate Loki’s markings on your face. It looks almost like an ancient human village, so different than the many imposing fortresses you’ve stayed at during your travels across Jotunheim, and you wonder what the reason could be for the difference in styles.

“Sit still, for the love of Hvergelmir,” she says, exasperated. “Do you want your face to look like it was painted by a child, In-Unga? This is an important village to the Stormr-Jötnar; they say it is Viðolfr’s home, from whom every Völva is descended. You’ll want to make a good impression.”

“I doubt they care what I look like, Gjálp.”

“It will reflect well on the king.”

You sigh. “Fine, fine.”

“Besides,” she adds, “Sister says that the king is similarity impatient, so you may consider your suffering as an act of solidarity.”

“Greip is the one doing Loki’s makeup?” you ask, stifling a laugh. “I’d love to see that.”

“I believe she is terribly nervous about it. Inn-Illi is very intimidating.”

He’s not that intimidating when you see him with bed-head every morning, you think. “I don’t think she has anything to worry about. He probably asked her to do it because he likes her better than the rest of his entourage.”

The Storm Giants of Blóthögr seem to enjoy decorating more than many of the other giants you’ve encountered. The vast majority of their huts are covered in designs in different shades of blue and green, and there are seashell wind-chimes hanging in many of the doorways and windows.

They also seem to be less proficient in the All-Speak, or they just don’t care enough to bother. Whatever their local dialect is, it has a sing-song quality that you enjoy, even though they could be hurling insults at you, for all you can tell. At least you aren’t the only one having a hard time; many of the giants from Utgard seem similarly out-of-place, and you can’t help but feel that it serves them right for being so rude to the Völva’s retinue for all these months.

Turnabout is fair play.

A ring of bonfires surrounds the altar-stone, and Heiðr and Hrossþjófr beckon for you to join them as a local boy comes around bearing a basket. He’s just a child, not quite your height, and it occurs to you that you’ve almost forgotten what it feels like to not be the shortest person in the crowd. Hrossþjófr is rummaging through the basket when you reach the fireside. “Come,” he says, “the Mothers of Blóthögr enjoy giving gifts; you may choose which one suits you best.”

The basket is filled with beaded necklaces, some made of seaglass, some of carved shells, some of stone. He holds up one that has an alternating pattern of pale red coral and green glass. “It isn’t pearls,” he says, wrapping it around his wrist, “but it will have to do.”

My jewelry collection is starting to grow, you muse, selecting a strand of simple blue stone beads that remind you of the shade of Loki’s skin. It’s kind of nice to have so many physical mementos from your journeys.

When Greip joins you, slightly frazzled, Hrossþjófr carefully drapes the necklace around her neck, and she leans to whisper something in his ear. His eyes widen, and he nods; you’d kill to know what
she’d said, but you tell yourself you shouldn’t be so nosy. Instead, you turn to Býleistr and Rekwaz, both of whom seem equally reluctant to join in the singing and dancing that’s starting up around the fires.

“What do you think, Prince Býleistr?” you ask.

“Of the accommodations, mortal, or the company?” He winces when Hrossþjófr pulls Greip to her feet and begins to make an attempt to teach her the song the rest of the Storm Giants are singing. “Or the seiðberandi’s wailing?”

You shrug. “Any of those.”

“I will be sleeping in the sleigh,” he says simply.

If you had a little more social leeway, you’d be inclined to call him a buzzkill. “What about you, my lord?” you ask Rekwaz. “Is it what you’d hoped?”

He twists one of the rings on his finger. “The ocean is more tremendous than expected,” he says. “It is all so… open.”

“If you are impressed by the ocean,” Býleistr says, “then you will surely swoon at the sight of the forests in the south.”

“Forgive me, my prince,” Heiðr interjects, “but to suggest that mere trees can outweigh the might of Undbára—”

You wander away, leaving them to their bickering. Knowing Býleistr, he won’t give up the argument without a fight, and you don’t have that strong of an opinion in the whole ‘water versus wood’ debate. Loki is sitting at a nearby bonfire; the markings on his face are perfectly traced, just like you knew they would be. Greip probably wouldn’t have let him step out in public if her work wasn’t absolutely perfect.

He hooks a finger on your new stone necklace and draws you close, the firelight flickering in his eyes. “You’ll soon be so bedecked and adorned that you’ll no longer be able to walk, mortal.”

“Only the best for Loki’s woman, sire,” you reply.

One of the local women laughs; you hadn’t realized that they were close enough to hear, but you keep forgetting just how sensitive Jötunn hearing is. *Embarrassing,* you think.

The woman leans over and says something to Loki, and he smiles. “She is,” he tells her, raising his voice over the sound of the music and chatter, “but I’m afraid I’m quite set on keeping her.” She shakes her head in mock disappointment and goes to rejoin her friends on her side of the fire, and Loki winks at you. “You’re valuable goods, it seems.”

“Am I?”

“You’d be surprised by the number of offers I’ve had to sell you,” Loki says. “I did say that you were a treasure, didn’t I? I wasn’t simply waxing poetic.”

You frown. “I’m not sure if I should be flattered by that or not.” The stone altar looms over you, casting you in shadow, and you lean back, trying to make out the runes near the top. “What kind of sacrifices were made here?”

“Given that you were recommended as a sacrifice to mark my ascension to the throne, I’m sure you
can imagine. Jotunheim is a brutal place; you should not let the singing and friendliness mislead you.”

*Right*, you tell yourself. *He’s right. Stay wary.*

“I do have some news for you,” he adds. He leans closer, his voice lowered, and you can feel his uncertainty. “The… spell we discussed. There is such a thing. I sought the advice of one of the older witches here, one that is more familiar with… these things.”

“Wait, which things?”

“Bearing children.”

“Well… that’s good, right? That there’s a spell?”

Talking about these things seems to cause him so much anxiety; you wish you could hold his hand. “It is,” he says, “and it is one that I can use on myself, not you. I don’t want to risk any complications by using untested medical spells on a mortal body. These things tend to be crafted in a very precise manner.”

You lean close so that you can whisper in his ear; if anyone manages to overhear, well, that’s their problem. “I’m very excited to get you alone tonight, then, sire.”

Loki clears his throat. “Go and enjoy your minions,” he says, “before I decide to cut our evening short, as I am increasingly tempted to do.”

When you make it back to the fire with your friends, you’re practically glowing from the sheer smugness that comes from being able to feel exactly how eager Loki is to cart you off to his hut for the night like some kind of caveman. *Or Viking*, you think. *He pretty much is a Viking, to begin with.* And you’re equally excited, too; it isn’t that you don’t love his fingers and his tongue, but you’ve yet to feel anything quite so satisfying as the time he was inside of you, and the way he’d trembled in your arms… *Addictive. He’s addictive.*

Heiðr approaches you after some time spent speaking with the older village women. “In-Unga,” she says, “there is a seiðkona here, a very ancient seeress, and she has asked to see you.”

All of the women are watching you intently, and you stand and smooth your tunic, suddenly feeling a bit uncertain. Magic is all well and good, but considering the blood-altar and the supposedly-cursed coastline, you aren’t sure if you’re really in the mood to have private appointments with any ancient seeresses. “Just me?”

“She should stay here,” Greip says. “Apologies, Heiðr, but I do not think that In-Unga should venture far from our company.”

“IT’s okay,” you say. “We’ll all go. What’s the harm?”

Both sets of twins accompany you; Býleistr professes to be completely disinterested in anything involving ‘ridiculous superstitions,’ and Rekwaz is busy attempting to make conversation with some of the locals. The hut that Heiðr guides you to isn’t brightly-painted like the rest, and it’s half-sunken into the ground, as if it’s been there for generations longer than all the others. When you open the door and step inside, the room is filled with smoky darkness.

Squinting, you make out a wizened old giantess sitting near a low-burning fire in the middle of the room. Her hair is short and thin, and she’s all skin and bones; if the Völva is ancient, you can’t even begin to guess at how old this lady must be. She beckons you forward, and you kneel across the fire
from her, your heart in your throat. The air is spicy, and there’s a sense of solemn apprehension in
the air, though you can’t quite put your finger on the source of it.

She says something unintelligible, and you fidget with your ring, wondering if you’re supposed to try
to respond. “I’m sorry,” you tell her, “but I don’t understand.”

“I had hoped to meet you, little one,” she says. “I heard a voice from Urðr’s Well, and do you know
what it sang?”

Your hackles are raised. “No,” you reply, “I don’t.”

The old woman leans forward, the firelight throwing strange shadows over her features. “Will you?”

“In-Unga,” Greip begins, but you shake your head at her.

“I will,” you say.

“Come,” the old woman says. “Come close.” You scoot around the fire to her side, and she grasps
your hands in hers, closing her eyes.

“Frá Miðgarði,
dróttningarefni;
Vif Loka,
In-Unga.”

“Well, I understood like half of that,” you say, glancing over your shoulder to the twins. “In-Unga is
an obvious one, and Loki, and Vif… she’s the woman in the book Býleistr gave me. The human.
But what—”

The old woman laughs, patting your cheek. She says something else to the twins, but it’s in the
flowy local dialect, so you can’t really make any of it out.

“What did she say?” you ask. “Vif—”

“Vif!” the old woman cries. “Ah, no, child. Her name was Almilón.”

Frowning, you begin to dig in your satchel for the book, wondering if maybe you’ve
misremembered. “But—”

“‘Vif’ was her relation to Hveðrungr, In-Unga,” Hrossþjófr says. “Wife. He wedded her.”

“But…” A little dazed, you rock back on your heels. “But she was human.”

The old woman clicks her tongue. “She was.”

“What happened to her?” Your throat feels a little tight. You haven’t seen any magically-immortal
humans wandering around on Jötunheim, and you know Hveðrungr died centuries ago… “To his
wife?”

“She died. Whether she was killed, or whether time took her, who can remember? It broke him.
Hveðrungr, the Mad King at Márfjall.” Her grin is sharp. “And now, here is another mortal, and
another king.”
Heat creeps up your neck. “Are you… are you suggesting that history is going to repeat itself?”

“History always repeats, In-Unga,” Heiðr replies, her voice soft. “The Norns love to weave patterns."

“That’s not going to happen with us. I’ll—”

“Does the girl mean to suggest that she can cheat death?” the old woman interrupts. She sucks her teeth, turning to poke around in a bowl of crushed shells that sits near the fire. “The boy will bring Ragnarök. Will it be in his grief that the girl has died, or in his efforts to prevent it?”

Your skin feels cold and clammy, your nerves bristling. Heiðr’s hand on your arm nearly makes you jump. “She often speaks things that no one living understands.”

“I need some air,” you say, pushing past the twins and out into the sunlight. Ragnarök. Even on Earth, there are stories of Ragnarök. The end of the world.

Greip follows you outside of the hut. “I did not think that it was wise to bring you here to see the witch,” she says. “I am sorry, In-Unga. You should not worry over what she’s said to you.”

“Greip, what does dróttningarefni mean?”

You’ve heard that word before, too.

She hesitates.

“Tell me,” you say.

“It means the-one-who-will-be-queen,” she says. “‘From Midgard is the future queen, wife of Loki; In-Unga.’ That is what the witch said.”

“That’s not possible, though.” Your fist clenches around your Yggdrasil pendant. “I can’t be a queen on Jotunheim. I can’t be his wife.”

“No.” She says it gently, but the word still strikes your heart. “No, you cannot.”

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“You’ve been calling me dröttning for weeks now,” you tell him that night, exhilarated and panting and still pinned beneath him after you’ve made love on top of the pile of furs that serves as your bed.

Loki’s already-flushed cheeks turn a bit more purple. “What of it?” he asks brusquely, and then he kisses you in a very clear attempt to distract you.

“You’ve been calling me ‘queen’ for a long time, Loki.” You tug on his hair when he tries to start kissing you again, pulling him back. “Care to explain?”

“You are my queen,” he says. He looks a little petulant, like you’ve offended him by forcing him to say it out loud. It’s pretty cute, in your opinion. “Even if you are not Jotunheim’s queen… you will always be mine.”
“Yeah?”

He buries his face in the crook of your neck. “Queen of my heart,” he mumbles. “Always.”

The urge to tease him vanishes, and a lump forms in your throat. “Always?” you ask, your voice weak.

“I swear it.” Loki pulls away from your neck, and there’s a new sort of determination in his eyes. “I will show you.”

“What? How?”

“Marry me,” he says, and your heart nearly stops. “No matter what happens… you will know, and I will know, and isn’t that what matters?”

“But… but, Loki—”

“The boy can perform the rites,” he says quickly, cupping your face in his hands. “And we’ve already been mate-bonded; there is no reason we shouldn’t—”

“Loki, remember what you said about being in love and stupid? Because this sounds super impulsive —”

“It isn’t.” His thumbs caress your cheeks, and he gives you a faint, slightly anxious smile. “I have given it more thought than I’d care to admit. I want to marry the one that I love. I want to declare you as mine by the roots of Yggdrasil - I want to make you my wife, dröttning.”

You don’t know what to say.

“Please,” he says. “I know it isn’t ideal, and I know that you deserve more, but—”

“Yes,” you whisper, and your heart floods with sudden elation, almost as if some dam has broken. It’s him, you realize, looking into his eyes. His elation, his relief, his joy—

“You’re certain?” he asks.

“I am,” you tell him, wrapping your arms around him and drawing him closer to your heart. “You and me, until the end. I’ve never been so sure of anything else in my life.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m probably biased, but I really had fun with this chapter, and I hope you did, too!

<3 MoA

End Notes
Original post here!

Works inspired by this one: *Rise of the Phoenix* by Lone_Wolf_Fanfics, *Red Stones* by Dragonstones

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