A harrowing encounter on your familiar road home leads you down a path you’d never dreamed you’d follow. But when your fate becomes entwined with that of the Prince, you must learn to stand together or risk everything falling apart.
A Single Step

Chapter Summary

In which you fear for your life, eat a terrible supper, and are briefly flirted with

Chapter Notes

- Very brief mention of sexual assault (although nothing major happens)
- Reader has a name but it’s not used frequently and isn’t the focus of the story. It’s a pun more than anything (minor spoiler, if you look it up)

You halt where you stand and listen. Around you, the wind stills, and the trees cease their creaking, as if the forest itself is holding its breath. Vigilant. You look behind you, and see nothing save the brambly tangles of underbrush, the pale branches of birches and pines, blown silver in the moonlight. The familiar winding pathway, the earth of it trodden smooth by innumerable feet, looks different at night. You wet your lips and turn forward once more, eager to be free of the strange, twilit shadows, of the fear you cannot shake.

Your scream splits the air for a mere second, the only sound in the quiet glade, before a hand slips around your throat and presses against your windpipe, another yanking your hair at its roots until you stumble back into something cold and unyielding, the leather clad shoulder of a man much taller than you.

You began to struggle, wrapping your hands around his broad wrist, and tugging with all your might and scratching at the densely muscled forearm. He holds you tightly, and though you can feel his chest move with every breath he takes, feel the air of it on your face, he doesn’t speak. He seems to make no sound at all, but his hand tightens on your neck, until you can scarcely breathe. You stop moving, heart throbbing, and shut your eyes. The hand doesn’t loosen. A threat. You think of that hand constricting further, squeezing and squeezing until there’s no air left, until there’s nothing of you left. It would be easy. And the man knows it. But he has not killed you yet.

Gathering your courage, you manage a single jerky nod. You hate it, with every fiber of your being you hate it. Surrendering yourself to the inclinations of a strange man, to obedience. But what choice do you have?

The man releases your neck entirely, and you gulp air, swallowing back tears. He takes your wrists
in one massive hand and binds them tightly with the other, rough cord biting into your soft inner arms. He turns you around, pushing you to walk in front of him. As you move, guided by the ever-present hand on your shoulder, dread and loathing well up inside you, and you think *I should have chosen to die.*

For a long while you walk, winding an unknown route among the trees, their impassive trunks offering you no comfort. You shiver, wondering what the end of your peregrination will bring, what sick amusement the man has planned that he needed to bring you alive instead of just ravishing you where you stood.

When your feet begin to ache with fatigue, you make out a soft glow ahead of you, and in spite of yourself you walk a bit faster toward it, longing for the warmth and comfort of a fire.

As you approach what must be his camp, the man’s grip on you tightens, and you grit your teeth against the pain. At once, you realize you can hear voices, and your legs falter. Any hope you may have had of squirming away from the man’s hold, of running somehow faster and farther than him, withers to nothing. You cannot outrun all of them.

“No,” you whisper.

You can’t do this.

But it does not matter what you can or cannot do, for the man simply hauls you forward, careless of your heels digging into the ground or the lead that has settled somewhere deep in your gut. You try to use your bound hands to strike him, but the blows are soft, barely felt beneath the thick layers of cloth and hide. Weak.

All eyes turn to you as you stagger into the clearing, eyes wild and pale as death. There’s a moment of stillness, an undercurrent of surprise, before the voices are renewed with fervor as those gathered begin discussing your arrival.

You cast a furtive glance around and you realize there aren’t quite as many people here as you initially thought. Only about five men are sitting together on a felled log near the edge of the site, stoups of mead in hand. There’s a large, blazing fire in a pit toward the center. A girl crouches beside it, depositing smoldering coals in a wooden pot, which begins to steam. She does not look up, but you can tell she is watching you from the corner of her eye. One of the men, bewhiskered and paunchy, sets aside his drink and walks forward, while the others continue talking and pointing at you.
“What’ve you got there, Stórr?” the bearded man asks your captor. His gait is wobbly, and his voice over loud, and you suspect he might be inebriated. You flinch as he gestures toward you.

“It’s a girl, Hrienn,” calls one of the men still seated. He is very young, hardly more than a boy, you think, and he rolls his eyes from behind a curtain of flaxen hair. “I know the ale has flowed freely from your cup, but you should be able to tell as much even while drunk.”

Hrienn, already ruddy in the face, flushes further beneath his beard. He clears his throat, recovering himself.

“I just meant, what did you bring her here for?” His question is directed at Stórr, but he’s peering at you intently with too-bright eyes, in a way that makes your skin crawl. “Quite pretty, though, she is,” he says as he reaches out a hand and touches your cheek. You want to scream, but you’re frozen. Stórr jerks you back, away from Hreinn’s vile fingers.

“Sverrir,” Stórr says, ignoring Hreinn and addressing the boy. “Tell Einvald his presence is requested. I have something for him that he will no doubt find quite satisfactory.” His voice is soft and chilling and far more unnerving than his silence.

Sverrir stands to obey, looking a bit subdued, and crosses the clearing to slip into one of the rugged shelters, but not before giving you a swift, approving once over.

The girl by the fire pit glares at you with open hostility, and you start, wondering that she would be jealous over something that made you feel so debased.

You study her, mostly to avoid looking at Hrienn or thinking about who Einvald is or just what exactly might please him. She’s dressed simply in a patchy wool dress, with unadorned brown hair that falls over her shoulders and down her back. She’s small and slight, but her face is shrewd, and you wonder if she’s older than you initially presumed.

Sverrir returns, following meekly at the heels of a man who can only be Einvald. Despite his thinning, cropped hair and crooked nose, his mere presence is impressive. While the others wear plain kirtles and creased, dirty trousers, Einvald’s fine, red linen tunic and well-fitted breeches
display his authority among the group. A long scabbard hangs horizontally from his belt. His eyes rove over you, betraying nothing as his fingers skim along the hilt of the seax. He raises a dark brow in question at Stôrr behind you.


*Noble birth? You’re the daughter of a farmer, you’re not even particularly wealthy. You’re certainly not nobility, although you know better than to tell them as much. And what is this about a royal announcement? You haven’t yet heard of it. News is always slower to spread to your quiet home on the outskirts of the woods than it is closer to the palace. Normally you enjoy the respite from gossip and idle chatter, but now you feel distinctly lost.*

Einvald strides toward you and captures your chin between his finger and thumb. You hold your breath as he tilts your head from side to side, studying you with detached curiosity. He circles you, assessing you from all angles, and stops in front of you, far too near. He reaches a hand up to pull at the neck of your dress and peeks down your chest. You yelp and try to cover yourself, hands straining against their binds.

But Einvald just grins, teeth gleaming in the firelight.

“Well done,” he tells Stôrr, who is still a faceless shadow at your back. “With any luck, the prince shall be quite taken with her.” His words hold a weight to them that you do not understand the significance of, but the men seem to grow smug with greedy anticipation.

None of this is adding up. The prince? Which one, Thor? What could he possibly want with you? What could they want with him?

Einvald looks at you again, eyes glinting.

“What is your name, girl?” he asks.

You don’t answer. You can’t speak.

“I asked you a question,” he says softly, and his fingers once more find their way to his seax.
“Áslaug,” you say, hating the way your voice trembles.

Einvald nods and unsheathes the knife. He slides the long blade along the leather cord on your wrists, and your arms swing free. You rub at the abraded skin and he puts the blade away.

“Have a seat, Áslaug.” His voice is not warm, but there is something of cordiality in it. He steers you toward the log, and with a look from Einvald, the men there obligingly shift to allow you space to sit.

“Pínaluk!” he snaps, losing all trace of affability, however superficial it had been. The girl jumps to her feet, dipping her head dutifully, but her eyes bore into the ground. “Get our guest some food, and serve the rest of the men while you’re at it,” he says dismissively, and retreats to the other end of the clearing by himself where he remains, watchful.

Pínaluk hurries to obey, and she begins to ladle thick stew into bowls. She hands one to you with a scowl so hateful, you shrink from it, wondering what you could have possibly done to offend her.

You look at your food. It’s grey and porridge-like, with stringy bits of dried meat and lumps of what may have once been bread. Your stomach turns, but you put a spoonful in your mouth anyway. It’s salty, and flavorless, and you swallow without chewing.

A shadow falls over you, and you jerk your head up to see a very tall man clad in leather. Stórr, you realize, though his face is softer than you’d have imagined, with clear blue eyes and a short golden beard. You remember the way his hands felt around your neck, and you shiver. But Stórr simply holds out a mug to you, and you take it, not caring to find out what would happen if you refused.

You’re desperately thirsty, but you hesitate to drink the mead. You need to keep your senses sharp. But when you tear your gaze from Stórr and glance into the mug, you see that it holds nothing but clear water. You nod your thanks and drink deeply, and Stórr walks away, silent as always despite his mass, and slips into one of the tents.

You manage a few more spoonfuls of your meal before your stomach, still in knots from fear that has yet to abate, gives a surge that has you dangerously close to retching. You swallow back the bile and push the stew around with your spoon.

Sverrir slides into the space next to you as he eats, and you try not to notice.
“Maybe if I ignore him, he’ll go away.”

But he is undeterred.

“You shake your head, and he laughs.

“Píñaluk’s cooking will take anyone’s appetite away,” he says, as if he has not been shoveling food into his mouth at a rate that’s frankly alarming. “Áslaug, is it? I’m Sverrir.” He grins at you in a way you’re sure he thinks is charming.

You manage a slight quirk of your lips in return, but you say nothing, watching him warily.

Sverrir licks the last of the stew, if it can even be called that, from his spoon and sets his bowl aside as he turns to you. He reaches a hand out, but halts before it touches your hair.

“May I?” he asks, obviously going for suave and achieving something much more arrogant. It irritates you, but his flirting seems harmless enough.

“You hate to admit it, but it does relax you a little. You’ve always found it soothing to have your hair done, and Sverrir clearly knows what he is doing. Still, you know better than to let your guard down.
“Your hair looks lovely in the firelight,” he murmurs as he ties up the lose ends. He sounds a bit shy, and sincere, and you wonder if he actually means it, or if it’s just part of the usual ploy to make girls fall for him. “It’s very soft.” He lets the braid hang down your back as his hands retreat.

You’re not sure how to respond. You don’t want to give him the wrong idea, that his... advances are wanted, but neither do you feel it fair to be mean to him, when he, of everyone here, has done you no wrong.

“Thank you,” you say simply, reaching up to inspect his work. You cannot see it, but you can tell by the feel of it that it is beautiful. You smile, just a bit.

Footsteps approach, cutting off anything further Sverrir would have said, and you look up at Einvald, feeling the tension rush back into your body all at once.

He gives Sverrir a look that you cannot decipher before addressing you.

“He gives Sverrir a look that you cannot decipher before addressing you.

“Come, Áslaug,” he bids, and you have no choice but to go with him.

He escorts you across the clearing, guiding you with a hand on your back. He must feel the tautness there, because he gives a short, cold laugh.

“No need to fear, girl. No harm will come to you in my company.”

You do not trust his words whatsoever, but you say nothing, and follow him into his tent. He draws the fabric closed behind you and ties it shut, and you try to keep your breathing even, try not to betray your rising anxiety.

Inside the tent is a single bed, or more of a raised platform really, off to one side. On the other is a pile of furs strewn on the wooden floor of the tent, and Einvald directs you to it. You uneasily lower yourself down into the furs, wrapping them around you, wanting to hide among them. Einvald slides into his own bed and puts out the oil lamp.

The night is silent save for Einvald’s breathing. There are no cracks for the faint light of the fire to slip through. You have only your furs covering you, the cold ground beneath you, and your fear surrounding you. You do not close your eyes.
And there you wait, in the darkness, until morning.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first story I’ve written in a long time, so feedback and constructive criticism is more than welcome! The beginning is a bit intense, but this is overall meant to be a pretty fun, adventure-y fic, and I hope it’s as enjoyable to read as it is to write :)}
A Little Knowledge

Chapter Summary

In which you only break down twice, and you also have a bath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The creaking of wood and the sound of soft footsteps register as if from a distance, and you clutch tighter at the soft blanket around you. Light hits your face, along with cool, fresh air, and you open your eyes at once, startling awake from a sleep you hadn’t meant to have. You slowly look around, although you do not move more than your eyes.

Einvald is standing at the tent entrance, silhouetted against the early morning light outside. He ducks out and lets the flap fall shut without a backward glance, leaving you alone for the first time since last evening, when all this began.

You stretch cautiously, unsure how long you have before Einvald returns, or someone else comes to fetch you.

You realize that a bowl of clean water has been left beside your pile of furs, and you wash your hands in it before splashing the cold water on your cheeks and drying them on one of the pelts. Your braid had come loose in the night, so you unplait it the rest of the way, leaving your hair in waves around your face. Unbidden, you feel a twinge of loss. It was a rather pretty braid. But it’s hardly worth dwelling on, not when you have so much else to think about. You still do not know what plan this strange group of people have in mind for you, nor do you have any means of formulating an escape.

Besides, you miss your family with jolt of pain that’s unexpectedly fierce. They’re bound to be worried sick about you, fretful minds dreaming up what awful fate must have befallen you to keep you from coming home. *Maybe they think I am dead.* And that thought feels heavy in your chest, settling there like a stone, pressing down, aching under the weight of it.

What you wouldn’t give for your mother’s warmth and kind advice, Father’s steadfast presence, or the long, pensive conversations you could have with your brother, and the laughs shared between you all. You even miss Búrakki, the fluffy black dog that runs about the farm, always jumping up on you and muddying up your dresses with his paws. You hadn’t meant to be out so late. If you had only started back sooner, if you hadn’t been so leisurely in your pace, perhaps this never would have happened. Perhaps this is all your fault.
Hot tears run down your cheeks, and you quickly splash more water on your face to wash them away. You don’t want the others to know you’ve been crying. You’re already vulnerable enough, no need to give them further proof of your weakness. You steel yourself. No, you did nothing wrong. You weren’t the one kidnapping people as they were minding their own business, you weren’t taking daughters from their families in the night. If anyone is at fault, it is Stórr, and Einvald, and his men.

You stand and make your way to the entrance of the tent, though you hesitate, unsure if you’re expected to leave yourself, or wait to be escorted. You frown at that thought, a surge of indignation rising as you mourn the freedom to act of your own volition. Mind made up, you push your way out of the tent.

The crispness of dew hits your nose as you blink in the soft light. It’s early, and the camp is quiet save for the warbling of a few nearby birds and the ever-present hum of insects. Einvald is sitting on the log, saying something to Pínaluk, who is coaxing a new fire to life in the ashes of the pit. His voice is too low for you to make out, but he stops talking when he sees you. He motions for you to approach.

You cross the wet grass of the camp and stand before him. While last night you felt afraid, this morning has replaced the fear with resentment, and you will the bitterness out of your face. It wouldn’t do to have Einvald believe you were defying him. He might tie up your hands again, or worse. You shiver a bit as you remember the blade at his belt. Perhaps the fear has not gone entirely.

“Pínaluk will take you to the stream to bathe,” he tells you, not sparing a moment for a greeting or acknowledgement of your presence, not that you want one. Still, his curtness rankles, and you loathe him all the more for it. He flicks his gaze over you and adds, “Wash your dress as well. It’s filthy at the hem.”

It’s clear that you are dismissed, and you look at Pínaluk with a measure of trepidation. She brushes her sooty hands on her dress front, as if that will clean them, and sighs, looking at you with a put-upon expression, as if it was your fault you were imposing. You had been kidnapped for Ymir’s sake!

She walks off into the forest without a backward glance, and you hurry to keep up with her brisk pace. As you walk, you wonder what the point of all this even is. Why the bath? Sure, you are a bit dirty, a bit sweaty, but who wouldn’t be after being forced to traipse through the woods all night? And why bother with washing the dress? It isn’t like any of the men, or even Pínaluk, are particularly clean. It doesn’t make sense. Nothing seems to.

Pínaluk leads you to a small runnel where she stands off to the side, back propped against a tree
trunk, with her arms folded across her chest.

The water is barely three paces wide, and looks quite shallow. You look around, nervously. The area feels so exposed, and while you’re reasonable certain that Hreinn and the others are still in camp, asleep, you don’t know. You swallow. You look at Píñaluk, but she just looks impatient. Disinterested. No use stalling, you decide.

You unfasten your belt and pull the dress over your head and set it aside on a rock. You slide out of your underthings, unlace your boots, and yank them off, placing them next to the dress. Then you shuffle your bare feet to the water’s edge and take a deep breath before stepping into it.

It’s freezing cold this early, without long for the sun to warm it, and you don’t quite manage to stifle your gasp. Still, you grit your teeth as you wade in further until the water is nearly up to your knees, and you are as deep as it goes. You lean forward to dip your hands in it and feel them grow numb as their heat is swept away by the current running through them. Cupping water in your hands, you scrub your body as well and as quickly as you can. You absolutely are not going to attempt to wash your hair in the frigid stream, so when you finish, you all but run back to the shore.

Twigs and leaves crunch beneath your steps, but you cannot feel them, so frozen are your feet. Your teeth chatter a bit as you try to sweep the clinging water off your limbs and redress in your underclothes. You’re profoundly grateful that the trees are dense here and block out the worst of the wind.

Píñaluk tosses you simple white shift. You hadn’t seen her carrying it, but when you look again you notice that she is holding a sheepskin sack, and you suppose it must have been in it.

“Thank you, Píñaluk,” you say, but she doesn’t reply, she just gives you the same sour frown as always. What is her issue?

You dismiss the thought with a shake of your head, and pull the shift on over your undergarments. It’s wool, and deliciously warm, but the fibers of it rub against your body and make you itch. You shove your feet back into the lissome oxhide of your boots, fumbling to pull the laces tight and knot them.

You pick up your dress and hang it over a branch so you can knock the dried mud from the hem before you take it and hold it under the stream, letting the water run over it and wash the dirt downstream. Some spots are particularly grimy, and these you ply and work at until they loosen and fade. Once it’s as clean as you can get it, and your fingers are stiff with cold, you wring it out and drape it over your arm, looking at Píñaluk so she knows you’re ready to go back to camp.
She leads you back with the same too-fast pace as before, but she doesn’t let you out of her sight, so you can’t slip away. You wonder how fast she can run, if she’d be able to catch up to you if you took off through the forest. But surely Einvald and his men know these trees better than you do. Even if you could outrun Pínaluk, there would be no nook, no crevice you could hide yourself that they would not find you, and you could not run forever.

The fire is burning bright and tall when you arrive back at camp, and smoke rises from it in plumes. Several of the men are up and wandering around the camp, and more emerge from their tents as you cross the clearing. A few of them glance your way and a chill runs down your back as your eyes meet Hreinn’s, and you look away immediately. You’re suddenly very aware of how the shift clings to your body, how short it is. Your stomach churns.

You hang up your dress near to the fire, close enough to let it lend its heat to dry the pale blue fabric, but out of the trail of smoke. You feel overly aware of every move you make, as if you’re on display, and you try to tell yourself that you’re not the focus of everybody, but you know that they must at least be curious about you, if not worse.

You scuttle over to the log and perch on the end of it nearest the fire, ostensibly staring into the flames. Through the corners of your eyes, you glance around camp. Hreinn is nowhere to be found, and several other men are gone as well. You wonder if perhaps they have gone to bathe after all.

You catch a glimpse of pale hair and you look up at Sverrir. While his hair was loose last night, he now wears intricate, tasteful braids at his temples. He smiles at you, but he keeps his distance. This confuses you as much as it relieves you. He had seemed so smitten with you last night, so determined to impress you. What had changed? Then you remember the way Einvald had looked at him, as if in warning. Had he told Sverrir to leave you alone? If so, why? Had he said the same to the other men, the Hreinn? And what did any of this have to do with the prince?

You think about the bath, the dress, the way Einvald sized you up. Stórr’s “untouched” comment. Surely they weren’t planning on presenting you to the prince, were they? To be what? His courtesan? His whore? You’re fairly sure Prince Thor wouldn’t be interested in anything like that. He has Lady Sif, after all, and from what you know, he’s been courting her with every intent to marry.

But, you realize, Thor is not the only prince. The younger prince is much more of an unknown to you. You have no idea what Prince Loki would or wouldn’t be interested in. A pit opens up in your stomach. Just what was this royal announcement about?

Your chest feels tight and you’re dangerously close to panicking. You focus on breathing through
your nose, in deeply, letting it catch in your chest, and out slowly. A few minutes later, you feel a bit more rational, but you’re still on edge. You lower your head into your hands, gripping at your hair.

Someone calls your name and you jerk your head up, startled. It’s a man who you haven’t met, swarthy and lithe, and he looks amused by your reaction. You glare at him, but he merely tosses you a small bag, never losing his toothy grin. It’s a bit attractive, actually, much as it galls you to admit. You pick up the little leather pouch deliberately and open it.

There are dried berries, a few pieces of smoked meat, and some bits of bread inside. You pick up a strip of the meat and gnaw at it. It’s tough, like leather cord, but once it softens up as you chew, it’s not too bad, and you hope some food will soothe your stomach and not further upset it. The bread is stale, probably days old, and completely unappetizing, but the berries are actually delicious. You wolf down several handfuls, and save the rest in case you get hungry later.

The hours pass slowly, and you spend them sitting mostly alone on the log, split between watching the men as they go about their camp, disregarding those who sit next to you, and staring at the trees, lost in thought. Any plan you start to form about escaping falls away unfinished. You cannot fight them, and neither can you talk your way out. These men have a vested interest in taking you to the prince. Likely money. Judging by the looks of them, and the pitiful food, these are not wealthy people, there probably is little they wouldn’t do out of desperation or greed, or, you suspect of some of them, simply because Einvald commanded it. But there has to be some other way, hasn’t there? You think of Stórr’s conviction, of how certain Einvald was that the prince would be pleased.

No. You will not let these men sell you as some whore to be used, by either prince. You will find another way. You have to.

Eventually, when you go to check the dress, it is dry beneath your touch, and you sigh in relief. Now you can put it on and have a sliver of your modesty back. While Hreinn has not tried to touch you like he had last night, you notice his eyes, along with those of some of the other men, lingering on the low cut neck of your borrowed shift, on your bare legs. You’ll be glad to be back in your familiar, comfortable, soft dress, with its long skirt, full sleeves, and the pretty embroidery that your mother stitched herself. You shake out the stiffness and carry it to Einvald’s tent to change.

You hesitate at the entrance. You’re sure Einvald is inside, and you’re not sure you want to announce your presence. He’s been relatively accommodating, but you don’t know if he’ll appreciate you intruding on him just for a place to change without exposing yourself. Perhaps you should find Píñaluk, and ask her to show you to a secluded copse of trees.

In the end, Einvald makes the choice for you.
“Come in, if you’re going to. Don’t just stand there,” he says through the tent flap, and you start.

You duck into the tent, feeling heat rise to your face. You fiddle with the dress in your arms as you gather your courage.

“Sorry, sir.” You force the words out. “I was just, I was hoping to be able to change here,” you say far too quickly.

“You wish for privacy,” he says from the bed.

“Yes, sir,” you nod, and hold your breath, waiting for his response.

He frowns, but rises.

“So be it.” He walks to the entrance. “But you’d do well not to get used to it.”

He looks at you a long moment, and you are reminded once more of what he plans to do with you. No, you’d have no privacy at all as a concubine. You look away. Your gaze falls on the seax at his belt and your eyes widen.

“Yes, sir,” you say again, somewhat distractedly.

He leaves and you hurriedly strip off the shift and throw the dress over your head. As you adjust it around you, you realize that you have no more reason to stall, and Einvald will probably want to waste as little time as possible to meet the prince and make his transaction. The thought worries you, but already you can feel the beginnings of a plan forming in your mind.

Chapter End Notes

What could you be planning... Any guesses?

No Loki just yet! But I promise, we will meet him in the next chapter :)

If you’re curious, Búrakki means ‘farm dog’ pretty literally, and I imagine him to be similar to a Swedish lapphund.
Questions and comments are welcome!
Chapter Summary

In which you do something very brave, and very foolish; Loki has a trying day

Chapter Notes

• mild blood and injury warning
• POV Loki (3rd person) for part of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The light footfalls on the hard earth are a dull, enduring rhythm. You recognize the trees here, the branches of ashes and elms swaying softly as if in welcome, the gentle whisper of the rustling leaves bringing you both respite and apprehension. You hold your skirt aloft, able to do so now, with unbound hands, as you march ever further toward the city, toward the palace, toward the prince. You don’t want to think about that, though, and grit your teeth in grim determination.

The morning has faded into balmy afternoon, the air of it thick and green amidst the forest’s shade. A slight breeze brings with it the subtle sweetness of wildflowers in bloom and keeps the day from verging on unpleasantly hot, and you wonder how many more days like this, of sleepy late summer warmth, are left, thoughts turning to your father’s golden fields of oats. It will be time for the harvest any day now. Only, you’re not sure whether you’ll be there for it or not.

A pang of hunger gurgles through your belly, and you wonder if Einvald would be generous enough to let you stop and rest a moment while you finished the leftovers from your breakfast. You don’t ask, though, and try to ignore the empty, squirming feeling, focusing instead on moving each foot forward, on keeping your hem from trailing in the dirt. You don’t think Einvald would be pleased if you had to wash the dress again.

Voices from farther down the trail drift to your ears, and you suck in a breath, feeling your heart leap a bit. The closer you draw to the palace, the more people you pass along the trail. As the faces come into view, you long, once again, to call out to them, to plead for their aid, to tell them that this is all wrong, that you’re not supposed to be here. But you can’t. These are common people, simple traveling companions, not soldiers. They cannot fight for you.

Einvald drapes his arm over your shoulder with ease, smiling down at you benignly, looking for all the world like a father taking a walk with his daughter as the idyllic passersby meander ever closer.
But the hilt of his seax grinds against your ribs from where his side is pressed to yours, and you can feel the warning in the way his fingers dig into your shoulder, and you choke on the words, revolted. With yourself, with Einvald, with the other nameless men who accompany you. With the fucking prince who would allow, even desire, such a thing. He, perhaps most of all, deserves your contempt.

Einvald pulls you aside with mock gentleness until you are perched on a large rock, Einvald still uncomfortably near you, his iron grip never leaving your shoulder. It hurts a bit, and you almost want to laugh. No, this does not hurt. This is nothing. You steady yourself, and set your face to one of careful neutrality, nearly serene.

Einvald greets the three traveling youths with courtesy that you know is rehearsed, but it is flawless none the less. They smile at him as he asks after their comings and goings, and you duck your head, forcing yourself to swallow down the dry chunks of bread you’d saved, the berries, once sweet on your tongue, now thick as ashes in your throat. You can’t look at them, can’t be part of this lie. It’s all you can do to keep from blurting everything anyway, even though you know doing so will get these innocent people hurt.

They continue on their way, leaving you in a dizzying mix of relief on their behalf, and regret and despair on your own.

Einvald does not get up for a long while, does not move except to shift his arm away from your shoulders to settle somewhere behind you on the rock, near enough that you know better than to let your guard down. Still, you breathe just that little bit easier now that he is not touching you. He sits beside you in silence, the other men standing on either side, subtle sentinels keeping watch over both directions of the pathway. He allows you to finish your food, waits while you drink deeply from your water skin, washing the dryness from your mouth.

For a moment longer, he still does not move, and you force yourself to breath evenly, to betray nothing of your bounding heart, the rush of blood throbbing in your ears. You lower the water skin from your face, hoping the movement will distract from the way your other hand is slowly inching beside you. Your fingers find the polished-smooth horn hilt of the seax, and carefully, so carefully, you hold onto it, trying not to jostle anything, not to give away any sign. Einvald shifts at your side, and for one sick moment, you’re sure he knows, and you wait for a shout, a blow. Nothing happens. Your hand starts to sweat, the handle slick in your palm, and you tighten your grip.

Einvald stands, and the seax does not go with him. You have a second to stare at it unsheathed, stunned as you feel the weight of it in your hand. It’s patterned with interlocking scrolls incised down the center of the blade, the spine of it tapering to a point as it meets the cutting edge. The dappled sunlight catches on the surface for a moment, giving it a faintly orange glow. And then Einvald is turning, and you hurriedly shove it into the sleeve of your dress, hoping against hope that the loose fabric will cover its shape. The steel is cold and sharp against your skin, and nearly as long as your
forearm, but you’re lightheaded and giddy and you don’t care. Einvald pulls you to rise as well and you stand shakily, stumbling a bit as your knees wobble, and you clutch the pommel as hard as you can, trying to keep it from falling out or sliding around and slicing you.

It takes a bit of concentration to retie your water skin and pouch to your belt with just the one hand, but Einvald and his men are paying you no mind. You can scarcely believe it. You hadn’t expected that to work at all, let alone be so simple. But getting the knife was the easy part. Your lips tighten, and you take a moment to squeeze your eyes shut and inhale a lungful of air. Then you open them, gather your skirt as best you can, and walk onward with courage you don’t feel.

***

Purposeful strides carry Loki farther and farther from the stables. He rakes his hand through his hair, trying to push it out of his face, where it is clinging to the damp skin. It is not a “lovely day for a hunt,” as his brother had enthusiastically declared it. It is not a lovely day at all. It had taken far too long to beg off joining Thor and his friends in their ridiculous gallivanting. Worse, they’d all laughed at his insistence that remaining out in the sun would do no favors to his sensitive skin, but would burn it red and painful.

Volstagg had claimed heartily that being in the light and fresh air was vital to one’s health.

“Sure looks like he could use it,” Sif had muttered.

Fandral clapped him on the back, told him that if he stayed out long enough instead of crawling back to the castle to hide in the library, his skin would surely darken to the same golden shade as Thor’s. No matter that he’d been over it with them for years that his skin simply would not tan. No matter that he didn’t particularly want it to, didn’t think the complexion would suit him the way it did Thor’s fair coloring.

Thor grabbed him by his slim wrist and held it aside his own broad, well-built arm, at least three shades darker than Loki’s, to marvel at the contrast.

“Look, Loki!” he pointed. “Your dainty skin does nothing to hide the blood vessels beneath,” he said as he trailed a finger down Loki’s forearm all the way to his inner elbow, following the vermicular, bluish-greenish veins that were easily viewable, illuminated as they were by the sun.
Loki tried to pull his arm away, offended, but Thor held tight and squinted as he peered, rapt with curiosity, at Loki’s wrist. He turned it slightly one way, and then the other, and then laughed merrily at the way the light seemed to reflect off a particularly pale area.

“It’s like polished marble!” he exclaimed. “His skin shines in the light!” He was no longer talking to Loki, but to his friends, who were crowding around with looks of wicked delight.

“Perhaps then he should not come with us on our hunt,” Fandral teased, silver eyes bright and impish. “Why, with skin as radiant as he has,” his lip twitched in poorly suppressed amusement, “he’ll be like a beacon, and all the creatures in the forest will see us coming from many arrow shots away!”

Loki pressed his lips together as he finally tugged himself free of his stupid brother’s grasp and stood stiffly.

“Yes,” he said drolly, though in truth the ribbing was beginning to wear on him. But Fandral had given him an out, and he was going to take it. “I would hate to spoil any chance at your quarry before the fun even began.”

Thor mounted his horse and drew up his reigns. “Go back to your books, then, brother. We’ll just have all the fun in your absence,” he said leadingly.

Loki didn’t take the bait.

“It would be a shame for you to miss out. Are you sure you won’t join us?” Sif asked as she sidled her own sorrel mare next to Thor.

“Quite,” he chirped pleasantly, and gave her a small smile. Just go already.

She shrugged, and finally, with a last backward glance from Thor, the group departed and Loki was free to find an escape from the heat.

Worse still is the telltale stinging along his forehead and cheekbones as he scowls in remembrance, and he knows that even the brief time he has been outside is too long. He’ll have to remember to ask
his father if he would give him some task to occupy him so he can have a ready excuse for when his brother next tries to cajole him into some adventure or other, at least until the weather cools into something less suffocating. How anyone could *enjoy* this heat is unfathomable. As it is, he is sweaty beneath his glamour, irritated, and smells vaguely of horse, and would like nothing more than a moment, alone, to bathe, and perhaps to ask Mother if she could show him a way to prevent sunburn using his *seidr*.

Unfortunately, it is not to be so, for as soon as he turns down a narrow trail, no more than a footpath, and quiet, seldom used, a shortcut to the palace through the shadowy canopy of the trees that edge the forest, he is stopped by the voice of a man calling out to him. Lamenting once more the obligations that come alongside the freedoms of being part of the royal family, he turns to face the one who accosted him.

“**My prince,**” the man greets with an awkward dip of his balding head.

It’s clear from his bearing, if not his appearance, that he is unused to being subservient, as he carries himself with a self importance that Loki begins to think is out of place as he lets his gaze sweep over him. To an untrained eye, his lightweight linen shirt, carefully brushed suede leggings and soft, worsted jerkin might designate him as a man of minor wealth and stature — certainly the decoratively embossed scabbard at his belt is meant to impress, although perhaps it would better accomplish its desired effect if it were not empty — but Loki, used to the supplest leathers, smoothest silks, and most luxurious furs, metals and other such finery, is not so easily swayed by the man’s showy appearance. This is a poor pretender, little more than a peasant playing dress up.

“A moment of your time?” the man implores, with a fair bit less respect than Loki is accustomed to receiving.

“**Very well...**” Loki says, and if the words come out a bit more curt than intended, well, that’s merely turnabout. He trails off and gestures toward the man, waiting for a name to be provided.

“Einvald,” the man supplies with another graceless half-bow-half-head-lean.

“**Very well, Einvald,**” Loki repeats. Only a terse breath, quickly in then out, betrays his impatience. An unseen drop of sweat rolls down his temple and his lip is sticky with it. “**You may speak.**”

His voice is unwavering in courtliness, his expression mild, and Einvald is not the only one putting on an act. It’s a performance he’s well familiar with as a prince, a diplomat to his people, and one he’s grown to be quite competent in. The wind, mercifully, picks up in a small breeze against his heated skin, and owing to this, it is with relative ease that he stretches his thin patience to deal with
However, as Einvald goes on to mention the royal announcement, his confusion and frustration begin flaking away at his veneer. Loki has to press his lips together to quell the urge frown. Yes, his father had decided he was to be married. What of it? It wasn’t as if he had any say in the matter, and it certainly is no concern of the commoners, not beyond the inevitable rumormongering, and perhaps a celebration on the actual wedding day, despite the fact that there is precious little about it to celebrate, the way he sees it. It is a political alliance more than anything. Yet this man before him has a crafty look about him, a devious little glint in his eye that Loki is immediately suspicious of. This is not a man simply looking for gossip fodder, this man has some plot.

“I have, shall we say, a proposal. For a price, mind you,” Einvald starts, with a smug smile playing about his lips that sets Loki’s teeth on edge. Clearly he is so assured of himself that he presumes Loki will take him up on whatever his offer is, will pay whatever sum he asks. The irritation it brings is nearly enough for Loki to miss the conclusion of the sentence. “A girl, a nobleman’s daughter, unspoiled, and quite beautiful.”

What? Loki’s jaw drops a bit despite himself, so great is his surprise. Einvald is offering him what, a bride? To buy? Where did he even get a girl to, to sell? Before he can get a word out in protest of the abhorrent, and frankly offensive, idea, before he can even fully process the extent of it, Einvald is calling to someone behind him, and through the trees two men come, sure enough escorting a young woman. Her face is resolutely turned away from him, from Einvald, covered by waves of her hair, as Einvald takes her by the shoulder and pulls her to stand beside him, in front of Loki.

Einvald, oblivious to Loki’s shock and derision, is focused on the girl, frowning down at her with clear displeasure.

“Look up, girl, and let your prince make his consideration.”

And she does, slowly dragging her head up to pin Loki with the most baleful glare he has perhaps ever received. But what’s more shocking, and disturbing, is the blood running freely down her face and neck from a gash across her cheek, the stream of it slowly seeping into the collar of her once-pretty dress, staining the soft blue fabric deep crimson.

Horrified, Loki rounds on Einvald, scathing words ready on his tongue, but they die out when he sees the equally appalled look on the man’s face. Even the men who brought the girl forward exchange a glance, aghast.

Then the girl staggers, and something drops from her grasp and clatters on the ground as she reaches
up to clamp both hands against her wounded face. Loki looks down, and sees the metallic gleam of a
long blade, now slick with gore, in the grass. It is likely the one missing from Einvald’s sheath.

Einvald must realize this as well, because he recovers then, enough to grab the girl by the shoulders
and demand, in a voice gone very cold indeed, “What have you done?”

Chapter End Notes

The Loki I’m imagining in this story is quite young, like newly an adult, as is reader,
and he’s a little more... carefree, I suppose, than he is in Thor.

As always, comments are beyond appreciated!
The Devil You Know

Chapter Summary

In which exsanguination is one hell of a drug

Chapter Notes

What’s this? An early update? This chapter was so fun to write, and I hope all of you love it as much as I do! And a big thank you to everyone for commenting, subscribing, and giving kudos <3

• Warning for blood and injury

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What have you done?”

He repeats the words, icy tone thawing into rolling fervor.

She gives no answer. Though her mouth is silent, her lips are pursed as if she might spit. Blood trickles through her clutching fingers, and her eyes, blazing with pain, with hate, dare to meet Einvald’s as he shakes her in frenzied pique.

“He will not want you like this!” He yells, bared teeth inches from her face. “No prince would be willing to pay for a woman with such blemish, no man at all would desire a scarred, ugly little wife!”

And Loki knows, with a wrest in his gut, that this is the heart of it. So greatly does she not want to marry him, so disturbing the mere thought, that she would sooner mutilate herself than be with him. Here is a girl he has not once met before, yet whom he has somehow terrified unto desperation. Is he truly that much of a monster, that one look at him would cause an innocent girl to draw a blade against her own flesh, to carve up her face in her defiance, just to get away from his clutches?

Uncharitable bitterness wells up like bile behind his teeth, wringing his face into a frown.
You’re shocked. Einvald is shaking you, hard, your whole body swaying on unsteady legs. His face is so near to you, so angry, that tears spring to your eyes, and it hurts, it hurts, the whole side of your face burning like an iron brand, like your cheek is pressed against the red, fulgent coals of a freshly killed fire. And the blood. There’s so much of it, slippery and hot, flowing out of your body even as you try to stanch it. But the words he says tear through the fear and agony and lodge like an arrow in your chest, stopping your breathing as you go limp, numb. Or rather, one word in particular.


“No man at all would desire a scarred, ugly little wife.”

The word rolls around your mind and you frantically try to concentrate on it. How could... But that wasn’t... Hadn’t Einvald told you... but perhaps he hadn’t. He had never told you anything. You had been the one to connect the dots, you realize, feeling utterly lost and confused. But then... but why... Why would Prince Loki want you as a bride? You try to grasp at that, try to focus, but your upright body feels like it’s falling, and Einvald is still barraging on about how you’d ruined everything, how he’d never get what was due to him because of your failure, and your vision narrows and dims, and any moment now your body will give one final lurch and then-

“Leave me,” a different voice says in a low hiss.

Einvald stills as if only now remembering he has an audience, and your eyes, which had drifted closed, flicker open as you both, captor and hostage, look at the source.

Loki — stood taut and stately in a loose, silken tunic of patterned silver, and black, close-cut leather leggings, hair neatly combed back from his face — looks both ferocious and imperious, all over a prince, anger roiling behind soft green eyes. At you or at Einvald, you are uncertain.

“Your Highness,” Einvald says in a way that’s meant to be pacifying, turning to the prince with a nervous grin, and it’s jarring to hear him speak so obsequiously after seeing him snap and order around his men and Pínaluk.
Prince Loki doesn’t let him finish.

“You asked a moment of my time, Sir Einvald,” he says crisply, fixing the man with the full brunt of his hard stare. “You stood before me, striving to sell me lies, and offered me this woman, this girl. A noblewoman you said, yet she is nothing of the sort. Do you really believe that, because she doesn’t dress in the rags of peasants, she must have political standing? Or would you attempt to so deceive me, to line your own pockets in my foolishness, and laugh once my back is turned? Know well, Einvald, that I am no fool. Nor do I have want of a bride, much less a frightened little runaway presented to me like wares that can be bargained and purchased!” His voice, while still quiet and restrained, has risen in severity, his fury a low hum waiting to be unleashed. Palpable. He stalks forward nimbly until he is glaring down at Einvald, who has gone pale in the wake of it. “Your moment is over. Now leave me.” The words are bitten out and leave Einvald no room for argument, for smarmy placations or endeavors to wriggle out of the corner he’s been backed into.

You watch with a distant sort of fascination at seeing Einvald so cowed by the prince’s words, subdued like a dog brought to heel by its master. It satisfies some execrable part of you, a dark little recess in your heart that is storehouse to your spite and rancor for the man who stole you and would pawn you off for his own avaricious benefit.

Einvald takes you by the upper arm as he wordlessly tries to flee, and all the halfway-there thoughts of revenge scatter like startled, flighty birds in your head.

Prince Loki holds up a hand in a halting motion.

“No,” he states simply. “She stays.”

Einvald gapes, likes he’s about to protest, to claim he has been somehow cheated, but evidently thinks better of it, and after stopping just long enough to retrieve his fallen seax and wipe it clean in the grass, departs with his men back along the path from where you had come.

Prince Loki approaches you, and you look up at him in question. His countenance has not lessened, and uneasiness laps at your tentative consciousness.

He wraps his fingers around your wrists and pulls your hands from your face. They come away horribly stained, a smeary mess of dark red. You wonder for a passing moment how you’ll ever get all of the blood off your skin. The wound has stopped spewing, and now viscous cruor gurgles to the surface indolently.
“Hold still.”

Loki bends down slightly as he inspects the damage you wrought on yourself, and his dark head bobs in front of you. It makes you feel a bit dizzy.

He pries strands of your hair, clumped and tacky with drying blood, out of the wound and turns your head to better observe it. His hands are firm but not harsh, and his manner has the detached brevity of one who is accustomed to tending to impersonal injuries.

This is news, you observe as your eyes droop. You hadn’t heard any talk of the prince’s healing abilities, though you hadn’t heard much talk of him at all, come to think of it.

You’d heard lots about Prince Thor, though. Of his ardent pluck in his many battles, of his might, which made him something of a hero in the eyes of little boys everywhere — as well as many a grown man — as they played at being warriors with their imaginary hammers. Of his boisterous ale-talk, the hearty and captivating tales he told of the adventures of he and his companions when he was in a drinking mood. Of the sweetness he bestowed on Lady Sif without measure, the kind of lingering glances and soft touches that were the envy of the young women who would giggle as they spoke of them, carefree in their yearning for their prince’s affections. You’d heard it been said that a simple smile from Prince Thor was enough to charm even the most callous of people into his good graces.

Yes, Prince Thor was a very popular conversation topic, for everyone loved their future king. It had never occurred to you before to wonder if there was a reason no one gossiped so casually about Prince Loki like that. You frown.

You’re pulled from your slurred thoughts as the prince prods an investigatory finger too close to the raw, open flesh of your cheek, and you cry out and wrench you face away from him, snarling defensively as your eyes water.

“That hurts!” you hiss indignantly, before you can think better of it, before your eyes regain focus and you remember who you’re talking to, and that it would beseem you to show respect for your prince.

“And who, exactly, is to blame for that?” he grits out, more cross than he had been. You say nothing, trying to blink away the last of your tears. “I thought I told you to hold still.”
You set your teeth and brace yourself as he returns to his work.

He leans in further, so close you can smell his hair — and isn't that just plain weird to notice. You wonder if he can smell anything other than the acrid tang of your blood — with a frown of concentration, of irritation, of both, tugging his mouth in a lopsided line.

His fingers once more touch the laceration, and they feel cold over your hot, inflamed skin. It still stings savagely, but the chill numbs the worst of it and you let your eyes fall shut as they’ve been longing to do for a while now. As he drags his fingers along the length of it, it slowly starts to ease, and a curious, tingly sensation spreads, like the rent flesh is being put back together, mended.

Prince Loki pulls his hand away and mutters a curse and you force your eyes open. He’s staring at the place the wound had been in mild alarm, and you feel suddenly cold.

He waves his hand over the spot, trying something else, and a feeling like a warm wind stirs over your face for a second before choking off abruptly, and then he leans back, dumbfounded.

You reach up and find a long line of a scar beneath your fingertips, and the sensation is dull on your face, the rigid, raised flesh hardly seeming like part of your skin, part of you.

Then Loki is shouting.

“You stupid, witless, cowardly little girl!” he seethes, sneering with unchecked malice. “You’ll bear that scar as long as you live,” he says, and there’s something triumphant in the way his eyes gleam, something ugly and gratified, like he knows you deserve it. “That blade must have had an enchantment on it. Elf magic, if my guess is any good, which, if you didn’t know, is notoriously impervious to being tampered with, to being... undone. If my magic cannot heal that wound, nothing in the Nine will.”

Outrage flares in your chest at his demeanor, at the repugnant medley of smug superiority and sheer glee. But his words prick you like nettles, and the sting of them is what smothers the spark of anger. He’s right, and that’s the worst part. This is what you wanted, is it not? It was the plan all along. Although, it never would have been if you had only known ahead that you were never meant to be sold into the prince’s bed. But that hardly matters now, in the aftermath. As the dust settles, what matters is the cold, dead tissue under your fingers, and though the wound no longer pains you physically, there will always be the sharp ache of desperation, of helpless fear in the memory.
You don’t give Prince Loki an answer. You don’t have one to offer even if you deemed him worthy of one. Instead of glowering at him, as you’d very much like to do, you contain yourself, barely, and fix your eyes firmly on the ground, at the spattered drops of blood soaking into the grass. *So much blood*, you think absently. On your hands. On the earth. Drying to a stiff crust on the front of your dress. All outside of your body. *But blood is supposed to be inside*. How much of it, of you, did you lose? How much is still left? *Is it enough?* you wonder woozily, and the thought that it might not be scares you.

You think you hear a voice nearby. It sounds familiar. It sounds... anxious. Maybe it’s your own voice, worried about your lack of blood. But there are footsteps, and surely those aren’t yours. You’re not walking. At least you don’t think so. You glance at your feet, and the slight movement sends the earth reeling beneath you. As you swoon, arms close around your shoulders and you know those aren’t yours. And that’s the last thing you know as you fade into full oblivion.

***

Loki grunts as the slack body of the woman crashes into him, and he grabs at her before she can collapse on the ground, supporting her sprawled weight on one knee he’d hurriedly jut out to brace her with his arms clutching at her shoulders. He shifts his limbs so he can haul her up properly, and it’s a little bit awkward, trying to maneuver a good grip without letting her drop, but he manages it eventually. He stands and carries her, her arms and legs limp, hanging weight and her head rolling toward his bicep. He presses her bloodily clothed body closer and mourns a bit at the inevitable blood besmirching a favored tunic of his, but doesn’t dwell on it overmuch as he sets off, again, for the palace.

He walks steadily through the long, echoing halls, the sound of his boot heels on the stone thrumming unduly loud against his eardrums. Servants pass him on occasion, and he pays little mind to their curious eyes and rumor-ready mouths, not daring to think of the nonsense they’ll no doubt spew up to contextualize his cradling of a half-dead looking woman as he traverses the palace corridors and makes his way to the healing wing.

He deposits the woman there in one of the many empty beds, not bothering to turn down the cover as he simply drops her on top of the floral and cream quilt and turns to find Eir. It’s the matter of but a moment, since the goddess of medicine is never far from her halls, even when there are no sick and injured to tend. Her eyes land on his bloody fingers and smudged tunic, and the next moment finds her coming closer, hands instinctually lifting toward him as if to check him over for injuries. Her immutable concern for him is touching, if unnecessary, and he pushes back his lingering acrimony and sore confidence, for the time being, as he addresses her.
“It’s not mine,” he says quietly, before she gets a chance to fret over him in earnest. “I’ve merely been the unwitting sumpter of your newest patient.”

That causes her to pause and frown in confusion, and perhaps a fair amount of skepticism, before setting in on him with a slew of analytic questions.

He answers her inquiries best he can, which isn’t much, but it’s enough to satisfy her until the woman wakes and can answer for herself.

And so Loki returns to his own rooms, to finally have that bath after all, now that he really needs it, all blood and sweat and simmering irritation from head to toe.

And as he scrubs the refuse of the day from his skin, water long gone tepid, his mind lingers on thoughts of the scared but unrepentant eyes of the girl, of her too-pale lips gone nearly white from the pain, from the loss of blood. Of her grim determination, to do that to herself, to pull the blade across the soft, tender skin of her face. He winces as if he is in pain, just thinking about it. It’s a potent image.

He had called her cowardly. And perhaps, in a way it is true. Fear of the unknown, of him, had been her motivation. He knows this, just as he knows that the venom that burns in his heart like acid that the thought brings will never truly be silent. But, he realizes uncomfortably, with a twist of his stomach that is dangerously close to something admiring, it was a brave thing to do as well.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, you didn’t think Loki was going to play NICE, did you?

And what does Loki’s hair smell like, you ask? Apples? Gasoline? Something “uniquely him,” which is probably sweat, at this point.

As always, comments are cherished!
As Good as a Mile

Chapter Summary

In which you meet Eir, write a letter, and hear some unexpected news

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the love and support! it truly warms my little heart that people enjoy this little brain child of mine <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Your legs are hopelessly tangled in your bedsheets when you wake, sore all over and flushed with sleep-sweat in the warm room. Something soft brushes against your skin as you stir, and you look down and see unfamiliar sleeves covering your arms. In fact, your whole body seems to be dressed in a cozy nightgown in a dusky shade of lavender, and your eyebrows furrow. That isn’t right. Before, what you had been wearing was blue. Blue and bloody.

Your hand flies to your face, recollection coming to you in in whelming waves as the embossed line of the scar burns like a brand against your palm. A door swings open to your left, and you sit up against the headboard and cast about the unfamiliar room, still covering the mar with your hand, both to conceal the reminder of your foolishness and to alleviate the spot of remembered pain.

The room is large and open, with high ceilings and arches of a dark, glossy wood carved into whorls of leaves and branches, and there are many beds stretched along the walls, neatly made up with snugly tucked quilts and fluffed pillows exactly like your own. The farthest wall to your right is dominated by a wide, domed window covered in a gauzy white curtain to tame the brightness of the sun that shines through. Light footfalls echo in the stillness and you turn your head, letting your hand fall aside as a figure approaches your bed.

The first thought that crosses your mind is that she is by far the prettiest woman you have ever seen, willowy and almost delicate with auburn hair braided down one side of her neck and a few golden freckles on her cheeks. Her eyes are kind and a shade of hazel brought out by her mossy green and brown dress, and she smiles as she looks down at you.

“Ah, you’re awake. Prince Loki will be glad to hear it. How are you feeling?”
Compunctious. The derision of the thought is untempered with even the slightest bit of humor. But you know she’s not asking after your mental composure, or lack thereof, so you turn your consideration to your physical state: groggy and dry-mouthed, the pulsing behind your temples a doubtless prelude to a heavy headache.

“Better,” you tell her truthfully, though you frown internally. You really hesitate to believe that Loki was worried over you like this... healer seems to think. Then again, you don’t remember coming here. He probably brought you in. Reluctantly, a trickle of gratitude seeps into your heart, even if you can’t understand why he would bring you to what has to be one of the healing wings of the palace.

“You look better too,” she says, and you realize you must be some sight, clammy and mussed as you are, but the amused curve of her lips is good-natured. “More color in your face, and less unconscious.” She reaches a slender hand forward and indicates your cheek. “May I?”

You nod. She tucks a strand of hair behind your ear with an almost motherly sort of tenderness as she perches on the edge of your bed, facing you. She strokes her thumb over your scar. While Prince Loki’s clinical, impartial taction was wholly pragmatic, this touch is meant to soothe, and combined with her soft tone and sympathetic look, it’s almost too much. She is treating you like you’re a victim and not like someone who’d injured herself so grievously. You don’t deserve it, but you appreciate it nonetheless. You close your eyes, suddenly finding it a bit hard to swallow.

“I’m afraid this is permanent. I’m sorry,” she murmurs, and she sounds like she means it. “I can have the Allmother come take a look, but that scar was made with strong magic; it’s unlikely even she can dispel it.”

You nod. You knew as much already, and it is surely the rightful merit of your actions.

“Perhaps she will be able to change the appearance of it to look like smooth skin once more. Prince Loki attempted to do as much, but I fear he is a bit... impatient with these sorts of things. The Queen is far less hasty to admit defeat in such pursuits she sets her mind on. I make no promises on her behalf, however. As I said, the magic at play is strong, and not so easily understood by Aesir or Vanir methods. Only time and further study will tell.

“But blood loss is easy enough to fix. Well, up to a point, anyway.” She laughs lightly and you smile back, a bit shyly, and a bit wonderingly at the somewhat morbid sense of humor mingled with her calming voice and sweet-looking face. “Mostly, you’ll just need lots of rest to recover, but you’ve already made a good start on that.” She is teasing again, but she adds, as if surmising the question that had leapt to the forefront of your mind, “You’ve been under for just over a day. It’s early evening now.”
A whole day. You’ve been asleep, or unconscious, for a full day, and the time is lost to you now. A day and a scar, the penance for a fool’s victory.

“You also will need to have lots of fluids. I’ll start you with a bowl of broth, and if you keep that down, I’ll have the kitchens send something more substantial. If all goes well, and I think it will, we’ll see about getting you out of here by tomorrow, how’s that sound?”

You nod, still taking it all in, and she pats your hand with another smile and starts to rise. She’s almost halfway to the large, double doors when you remember something important.

“Wait!” you call, and only then do you realize you don’t know her name. “Miss...” you let the rest hang, raising your eyebrows in silent question, trying to fight back a sheepish blush as she turns her full attention on you once more.

“Eir, dear,” she says, gentle concern on her face. “What is it you need?”

“It’s just,” you swallow. “I... My parents. They’ll be wondering where I am. I really ought to...” Oh Norns. So much had happened since you’d last seen them. Your face... There’s no way they wouldn’t see it, no way they wouldn’t know. As much as you long to go to them, to embrace your mother and cry into her shoulder, to hold your father’s hand and just tell them everything, the thought of them knowing brings an almost unbearable apprehension and the cold taste of reluctance to your throat. Maybe you’re not ready to see them just yet. Maybe you’ll never be. But still, “I really ought to see them. They need to know I’m...” You don’t quite manage to say alright. You can’t make your mouth form the word, can’t make your tongue shape the sound. Can’t force the lie through your lips.

But Eir seems, somehow, by some intrinsic virtue, to understand, and she nods.

“I’ll bring you some parchment, and you can write a letter to them while I fetch that broth. I’ll have it sent out to them right away. And when you’ve finished eating, there are some questions I’d like to ask you, and we’ll discuss what needs to be arranged going forward.”

You’re not too thrilled about answering questions. You don’t particularly want to talk about anything that happened, and you have no idea what report Prince Loki may have already given Eir; the uncertainty makes you feel somewhat anxious. But the end of the sentence is what really makes you feel outright alarm.
“Going forward?” you repeat once you find your voice. You know you sound hesitant and scared, and you wish you had it in you to force your words to come out confident and assured, but you can’t worry about the little things like that when you suddenly feel as though you’re about to experience the floor falling out from under you.

“Ah,” she says, seeming somehow disapproving and fond and exasperated all at once. “So he didn’t tell you.”

And that certainly doesn’t help. You want to demand that she tell you who didn’t tell you what, but Eir is still talking.

“Never was one to reveal a plot of his before its proper time to play out.” It’s almost as if she’s speaking to herself, but you start to get the feeling that you might know who ‘he’ is. It’s not particularly comforting. “I believe Loki intended for you to remain at the palace.”

***

You stare at the still blank page of parchment. You’re supposed to be writing, supposed to be putting to ease the worries of your family while Eir fixes the promised bowl of broth, but you can’t seem to still your thoughts long enough to get even a single word down. You set your quill aside before it can drip onto the paper and lean back against your propped up pillows, sighing deeply.

*Remain at the palace.*

You thought this was going to be the end of your troubles. You just want to go home, to smell the freshly cut oat groats and eat your mother’s homemade blackberry jam and bury your hands in Búrakki’s soft, warm fur. You want to sleep in your own bed and wear your own clothes and lightheartedly squabble with your brother. You just want to be done.

But everything’s just been uprooted — again — by a few simple words. Or, perhaps, they're not so simple in meaning. You feel sideways, like you just can’t seem to get your feet under you to right yourself, like the foundation itself is shifting and tilted.

*Remain at the palace.* You cannot *remain at the palace.* The idea is absurd; you would no sooner abandon your family than you would go rushing back to Einvald’s camp. Prince Loki cannot possible make you *remain at the palace* against your will.
But he can, you remind yourself, and you all too vividly recall just how tactless and mouthy you had been to the man, who certainly had not seemed the type to take such insult lightly. You shiver as you picture the gloating look in his eyes, the way his lips quirked _just so_, like knew he had fortune on his side and you had played right into his hand.

And you also remember _something_ else. The phantom feel of steadying hands on your shoulders, the almost-concern of a voice calling to you. If that was Loki — and truly, there is little to doubt — then perhaps he simply wants the same as Eir: answers to his questions. It would not be unreasonable for him to want more information about Einvald’s crooked men and his ploy to swindle the prince. And who better to ask than you, who had ostensibly been audience to it all, who had been an inadvertent participant. Not that you actually know much; as it turns out, you had known in fact less than you had believed you knew, and what a dangerous thing that had been.

And you will make no more assumptions, will take no more _risks_, without having all the pertinent information, and you will not know anything until Loki deigns to speak with you, and thinking about him and his intentions will not hasten his appearance — _and a small mercy that is_, you think with a touch of disdain, and your mouth twitches amusedly — nor will they change his trajectory.

But a letter, a simple letter to your family. That... you can probably manage that. You exhale shakily through your nose and pick up the pen once more, gripping it tightly to keep your hand stable and your mind grounded.

_Dear Father, Dear Mother, Dear Brother._ You even include little Búrakkí in the greeting. It’s not so hard as you feared now that you’ve started. And so you write. The words fly from your pen to the page, tumbling out of the ink strokes and your heart and you write it all down, even when it’s messy and possibly illegible, when it hurts to write about, hurts to even think about, and it scares you still, so much so that your hand shakes despite your iron-tight grasp. You tell them everything. Stórr’s hand on your throat, Einvald’s foul, greed-bright smile, and Pínaluk’s baseless hatred. You write all about the seax and the horrible, choking stench of blood that you can’t quite escape even presently, and about Mother’s pretty embroidery and how it’s ruined now, and about the storm behind Loki’s eyes and the cold indifference of his touch. The scar is the hardest part to tell. Eir comes back with the broth while you’re racking up the nerves to get the words down, but she doesn’t interrupt. She simply sets the bowl and it’s tray beside you on the bed, carefully so it doesn’t spill, and lets you have your space, lets you breathe until you can find the courage and your quill moves once more. But most of all, you tell them about how alive you are, because you _are_, despite it all, you’re alive and you’ll be alright, at some point, and that’s... that’s really what matters. When you’re done, you’ve filled several sheets of streaked, inky parchment — and if there’s a tear stain or two soaked into the paper, well, you know your loved ones will never think poorly of you for it — and it will be a thick, hefty letter indeed that is delivered to them.

But it is easier like this, in some ways, because they can know what to expect, can have time to prepare themselves, and you don’t have to see the looks on their faces as they take in yours, not just yet. Prince Loki may have been right about you being a coward, but no matter how hard you _try_, you cannot, even in your own imaginings, bear the thought of their pity and their hurt for you and
perhaps even their disappointment. So you’ll be a coward, comforted and complacent in the security of just a little longer, just a tiny moment to delay the inevitable, but a moment you need desperately.

And when you’re ready, and you know she has been waiting so patiently, so compassionately until then, Eir delicately prompts you to fill her in on what happened as you take small sips of the comfortingly warm broth. Mostly, she asks about the physical aspects, what’s medically relevant — how much blood would you say you lost (too much), do you think you were in shock (without a doubt), does your story match Loki’s (so it would seem, for the most part) did the men hurt you in other ways (no) — but you know that she cares beyond that, cares about the other ways the situation scarred you, and you are so overwhelmingly grateful to her for such a small thing, but it feels enormous to you, that she’s not just doing her job, that she cares about you. You hold tightly to your empty bowl and soak it up with eyes that seem to be permanently damp as of late, but when all is said and done and there’s nothing more to discuss, Eir takes it gently from your hands and gives your fingers a soft squeeze. When she does leave the room with your long letter, you know she has not gone far, and you know that if you need anything, you can call for her, and you find yourself trusting that, and it reassures you more than mollifying words possibly could.

You slump in exhaustion, eyes burning, headache in full force, but at least now you can swallow without your throat feeling sticky and your heart feels lighter, too. By now, the sun has sunk deep in the sky and the light that filters though the curtain is a soft rosy glow where it lands on the foot of your quilt.

For a long while, you just breathe in the solitude, calmly and steadily, because it’s all you have to do just now. You don’t sleep, even though you’re tired, because you’re waiting.

It’s nearly nightfall in earnest by the time Prince Loki makes his entrance, and you know it’s him even before you turn your head to see him, because the thud of his feet on the wood beats with a cadence that falls into familiarity even as you struggle to place just why that is so.

Chapter End Notes

Oh ho ho, yes I am leaving this at a slight cliffhanger and you can trust that next chapter’s news will certainly be quite... exciting, shall we say.

Comments and feedback put a smile on my face :)
The morning finds Loki being woken up bright and early by his least favorite servant, Therna, to be hassled into a set of his best clothing and have his hair scraped and combed until it is tangle free and glossy, the topmost layer of it pulled back and held out of his eyes by a lustrous gold clip that matches the polished shoulder clasps of his cloak and his vambraces. He manages to persuade the handsy old woman that he can, in fact, dress himself shortly before she can try to put his boots on his feet for him, and she stands behind him, wringing her hands to keep from brushing imaginary dirt from his shoulders or straightening the already tidy collar of his tunic yet again as he tightens his laces and stands, letting the lightweight fabric of his cloak flow about him like deep green waves.

He strikes an impressive image in his chambers’ mirror, even to his own perspective, accustomed as he is to seeing himself ornamented in finery and glitter. Although his appearance, customarily a point of much pride, brings him no measure of satisfaction nor delectation on this day. Instead, he smooths the indignation from his brow and softens the set of his mouth into something approaching pleasant, even if he can’t quite manage to force the sentiment to reach his eyes.

He wants to be like Therna and tuck and retuck every last stray hair into proper order, wants to fiddle with his cloak until the very idea of a wrinkle in it is laughable, wants to stall. But his hair is perfect and his clothes are immaculate, so he folds his hands behind his back, rolls his shoulders out, and struts from his rooms with a gait just elegant and swift enough to make his cloak flick out and stream behind him, but without seeming rushed or undignified.
As usual, the servants in the palace part as he makes his way to the entrance halls, but there is a poorly concealed undercurrent of excitement amongst them, buzzing ever loud just beneath the surface, and some greet him with smiles and head bows and congratulatory words that resound with a sincerity scarcely bestowed upon him. Any other day, he might even have found pleasure in their regard, gratified to be treated the way Thor ever was, like the people, his people, actually liked and respected him, but the knowledge of why they have suddenly elected to defer to him sits in his stomach like bad ale; he’s not deluded enough to believe that they would ever truly express favor on his behalf, and in fact, it is not him in and of himself they are pleased with, but the mere happenstance he has been moved through like a piece on a game board.

Indeed, it is hard for Loki not to despise the good will when given as little more than a token in exchange for his steadily dwindling freedom and conation. Few things does Loki value more than the aptitude to follow after the enticement and lure of his ever capricious desires, and losing that feels like a cage, gilded as the bars may seem to any other.

Most of all, his resentment is borne of being foisted eternally upon some woman he has never spoken to, who has never been one of said desires in any capacity — mutually so, he would imagine — regardless of his own voice and opinion on the matter, his soul-deep protests falling on the deaf ears of his father and king. The way his king sees it, the duties of being a prince take priority over the privileges the role allows. The way his father sees it, he is being willful and obstinate, acting like a stubborn child having the silver spoon taken from his mouth and kicking up a tantrum in retaliation. But with only one good eye, it is no wonder the Allfather all too rarely sees true where his second son is concerned.

It is no matter so simple as rebellion that drops like lead to his soles and weighs him down, and makes it hard not to drag his feet to the execution of his former life. It’s being condemned to be sealed away in a loveless marriage, it’s not being able to choose. He is not ruled by whimsy — he knows how to set aside his wants and how to be responsible, he is responsible — but he courts chaos by his very nature, and expecting him to relinquish that is like expecting him to never breathe again.

It is too much to ask of him to give up his heart’s blood.

But there is always too much to ask and never enough insight and with Loki trapped in the middle of it, there is nothing for him to do besides plaster on some charming smile, stand undaunted aside his royal family as he receives his to-be bride, and be what he always has been — the masterful weaver of clever illusions, mischief coursing through his veins, with a trick hidden behind his back, and his true self hidden behind his words and the dull shine of his eyes.

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It’s a long moment before he speaks. He stills as he looks at you, seeing you awake, and you watch him warily. You don’t want his anger directed at you again. You want to turn away. You want to apologize, to thank him for healing you, you want to insist he tell you what is going on all in one breath. You don’t do any of it.

His dress is much more formal tonight than it had been when he’d saved you and cursed you in one fell swoop, all leather and gold from head to toe, befitting of his stature, and his bearing suggests far too much authority and confidence for this to be mistaken for a friendly visit, and you did not expect such. Yet his hair hangs to his chin in messy black waves, pieces of it loose from where it was gathered at the top, and his cloak is draped over one arm rather than worn properly across his shoulders. Still, despite the somewhat weary appearance, he does not seem angry. There’s a light in his eyes that worries you far more, that something brewing beneath the surface.

You wait for him to speak. You don’t know the rules of the game he is playing, and you have to pick your way forward with care, wrong-footed as it makes you feel, and it falls to him to make the first move.

“This take it you’ve been expecting my company?” he says casually, too casually, words as light as air. It’s not a question, really. Of course you have, and he knows it as well. He tosses his discarded cloak on top of one of the nearby quilts and moves further into the room, swooping nearer to your bed, and pins you with his gaze. He seems almost amused, almost entertained as you nod in reply to his not-query, like you’re some exhibit to replete his curiosity and nothing more.

“Excellent!” he says, with a very intentional cheerfulness in his voice. It’s portentous of nothing good. “I’ve always been one to appreciate a captive audience.”

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Ülle is beautiful. The thick rings of hair hanging down her back are adorned with glass beads and faceted crystals that catch the sunlight like prisms, forming tiny rainbows that dance in the dark
tresses, her dress the deep, lush color of sweet plums, cut in a characteristic Vanir fashion from a fabric so soft and supple that it moves like wine swirled in a goblet as she walks, her lips painted a matching shade, her bare arms decorated with silver circlets.

She looks like a princess already, Loki thinks, certainly dressed for the title soon to be bestowed upon her. *His* princess, *his* wife. He thrusts down the panic of that thought with fury that drowns along with it, buried far inside.

He takes her warm hand in his, brings it to his lips and kisses it like he knows he’s supposed to, but it’s like he isn’t doing it, like someone else is. She smiles at him with her pretty mouth, and he meets her eyes and sees that they are a sober amber color and he wonders, not for the first time, if she feels just as lost and sick as he does, just as crushed. But as he watches, the honeyed depths suffuse with delight that makes them glow, and he drops her hand faster than he means to, resisting the urge to take a step back.

Loki isn’t entirely sure what has him feeling so rattled as he escorts Ülle through the halls and gardens, showing her around her new home, showing her the finest of Asgard. He has always been drawn to beautiful things and has always imagined he’d find love with one who could take joy in his presence, as Ülle had. Yet he cannot shake the impression that her mirthful visage had not been a consequence of his company, not a moment shared between them, but rather a secret that he wasn’t privy to. All he knows for certain is that this is not what he imagined. This is not what he wants.

***

It’s nearly evening before he catches a moment to himself, feet trekking almost mindlessly toward the quiet shelter of Eir’s infirmary. The solitude soothes him, and he lets his shoulders loosen, lets himself breathe deeply.

Ülle had been... exhausting, to put it mildly, and Loki is making a valiant effort to give her some benefit, although he is beginning to suspect there isn’t much doubt. She talked a lot for one thing, which itself didn’t have to be bad, but she did not appear to be one for meaningful discussion, nor did she carry on about anything and everything in mindless chatter like some did — a bit annoying, perhaps, but not *bad*. She, however, would use her voice to express her distaste at just about everything. She seemed to like the palace alright, seemed to genuinely enjoy the gold and marble and luxury of it. But there was always something that needed to be done, according to her, always something that didn’t meet her standards, always something lacking. She was perfectly polite to him, but her tone dripped with disdain as she found fault with just about every servant that had attempted to oblige her, turning to him as if she expected him to join her in her haughtiness.

A hand clasps his arm and he tenses, nearly startled, and turns, but it is only Thor, and he lets himself relax a little.
His brother looks him over, never letting go of his arm, before he speaks. Loki huffs under the scrutiny and glares up at Thor impatiently. If this is another lecture, an unnecessary spiel about treating his woman with respect and tenderness, or however it is Thor phrases it, he’ll probably lose the fragile remaining strands of his long-suffering restraint entirely. He’s also halfway expecting a joke, the blithe jeering at his expense that only a sibling could get away with unscathed, for he knows Thor is fond of such, and is never one to miss an opportunity to tease his younger brother.

“You should have come with us yesterday,” he says instead, surprising Loki not only by the words but by the tone in which he says them. It is serious, and nearly kind, and Loki lets the exasperation seep out of his face. “You could have used something to relax you.” He squeezes Loki’s arm emphatically. “You’re taut as a bowstring. I’m worried your back might snap”

And there it is. The compassion and jest rolled into one, how his brother has always been. Loki doesn’t know whether to laugh or shove him.

“I don’t think I’d have been good company,” he admits quietly, stepping out of Thor’s reach and pulling his arm free. He gives his brother a half smile over his shoulder as he continues on his way, and Thor just shakes his head at him and lets him go.

***

You freeze at the words, trying not to find a threat in them and failing. Eir had told you Prince Loki was one for plots. And here... this was one sliding into place before you, it had to be.

You try to sit up as straight as you can, not liking the way the prince towers over you from your perch on the bed. It makes you feel small, but you don’t think now is a good time to be intimidated.

He clasps his hands behind his back, a small smile on his face.

“Oh I believe Eir has informed you that you’ll be staying here awhile,” he says, tilting his head to look
down at you.

“Yes, she has. I’d like to know why, if I may?”

There. Easy enough. You *can* manage to speak with a polite, even tone when you try

Prince Loki tips his head, and squints a little.

“Why she told you? Because I asked her to, of course.” His voice is soft, playful, and not the least bit funny to you.

“Why- why I’ll be staying here, I meant.” You falter a bit, less due to nervousness, although you’ve certainly got plenty of that, and more because of the spike of annoyance you’re feeling. “My prince,” you add, just in case you hadn’t masked your tone so well as you hoped.

He laughs lightly, a breathy, mocking thing, and turns to step toward the window, drawing back the curtain and staring out at the hazy purple sky. You stare at his back, watching the slight rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathes, watching him pry his hands apart and bring them to the front of his body.

“It has come to my attention that there is a role I have neglected to fill. It shouldn’t be beyond your... capabilities, I don’t imagine,” he says, rather aloof, and he glances back at your bedridden form.

“Well,” he amends, “once you’re back on your feet, I should hope it isn’t.”

You have no theories on where he is going with this, what task, what role he thinks should be given to you, and your uncertainty wars with your rising temper. You didn’t ask for a job, and you didn’t ask for his scorn. You appreciate neither.

“And what role would you have me fill?” You make yourself ask it, even though you would rather not know the answer.
He talks with Eir longer than he had anticipated, but it’s a distraction he warmly welcomes. He has long known that his fascination and dedication to learning her craft had endeared him to her, and that the healer has a soft little corner of her very large heart saved for him, one that he repays with respect that is as genuine and fresh as a vernal breeze. It helps, too, that she takes no offense at his harmless wit and occasionally returns a sharp remark of her own, to both of their amusement. Somewhere along the way, the goddess had become his friend, and her company is not one that requires pretense on his part. Even when the topic at hand is serious, he can be at ease around her, and he is grateful.

Now, he is the one asking her questions, and she tells him about the young woman in the next room, the one with the scar on her face. The one who thinks of him as a villain.

*Kidnapped.* That certainly does have a ring of truth to it. It makes sense, it fits. It erases any lingering doubt he may have had about her overall involvement in the scheme. He had called her a runaway, to Einvald, because that is what had slipped out of his mouth at the moment, but he hadn’t had time to fully consider the matter. If he had, he might have come to the correct conclusion on his own, and finding out he had been wrong makes a muscle in his cheek twitch.

It would seem, also, that he has been negligent in another matter. Caught up as he had been in his ire, he had let it slip his mind that he had not doled out punishment. He had done little to Einvald and his men but shoo them off, dismissing them as scoundrels. But kidnapping is a much more weighty issue, and they had tried to sell a *person* to him. They deserve to face the retribution of their obscenity. The streets would not be safe until they are no longer on the loose, and Loki himself would see to it that they are hunted down and forced to face his wrath. And the girl, well, *she* needn’t fear being his wife — that post was already occupied — but perhaps, he thinks with derision, there is something he can do after all.

And with that in mind, he dismisses himself from Eir’s station and steps lightly into the hall.

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The girl — Ásleif? Áslaug? it had passed from his mind shortly after Eir had spoken it— looks at him with eyes as cagey and fearful as those of the elk Thor and his friends favor hunting when such a creature is downed and waiting for the final strike of the knife to its throat. It makes Loki nauseated to see it aimed at him, especially when he is not the one who had wielded the blade. He smiles, letting the nasty thing that it is take form on his face, certain that its reflection in the window can be seen from the bedside.
“As you may know,” he starts in a quiet voice, “I’ll be married shortly.”

He doesn’t answer her question, not quite yet. He turns back to her in time to see the full effect of his words sink in. She’s trying hard not to look vulnerable, not to be scared, and her determination is betrayed by her crossed arms, layered over her chest as if to protect herself from him. She knows he has the upper hand as she awaits his pronouncement, knows he pulls the strings that determine how this whole scene will play out. This scene he has power over. And he revels in it.

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“And now that my darling bride has come to Asgard,” the prince says in his rich, rolling voice, the slight note of irony coloring the words, “I realize that the servants in the palace will not be adequate to meet her needs, busy as they are with their many other tasks. And any would-be wife of mine surely deserves to be waited on hand and foot.”

And he wants you to be the one to do that. He doesn’t say it. He doesn’t have to. The implication is there, and there’s no other way about it.

It is a punishment, you realize, even if Loki is not explicitly presenting it as such. It certainly is not a privilege, as the prince would have no reason to bestow such on you even if being a maid, a lady-in-waiting, could be considered perquisite. But it is harsh, and plainly undeserved. You can’t wrap your head around it. You had been a bit rude, there was no denying it, and you were willing to make amends for that, but it is by no means incentive for the prince to requite this severely. You can think of no reason for it.

Unless Prince Loki is just an utter bastard. The thought passes through your head before you can clamp down on it, and it’s unkind, but, well, it is a reason.

And you have to ask, you have to know.
“What about-” my family, you are trying to say my family, but the prince cuts you off.

“Oh, do relax. You’ll be well paid, it’s hardly as if you’d be a slave.”

Hardly. You want to laugh, but you don’t. You refuse to let any sound come out of your mouth at the moment for fear of the fury that might result. Oh, yes, you’ve decided, an utter bastard indeed. A condescending, callous, appalling bastard.

Prince Loki gives you one last humored glance, like he’s having fun, and strides to pick up his emerald cloak. He pauses at the doorway.

“Do consider my offer, won’t you?” he says before pushing the doors open and slipping out without waiting for an answer he doesn’t need. It is not an offer at all, and there is nothing to consider, as you know you cannot refuse.

Chapter End Notes

Ooooh I do love writing Loki because he’s such a delightful mix of sweetness and sheer assholery. Do you guys like seeing things from his perspective? Some of it is certainly necessary to the story, but I’m curious :)

Also, I’d LOVE to know what all of your theories are for where this will go next...

And just as a gauge for further (much further) down the line, I’d like to see if there’d be any interest in upping the rating, if you know what I mean. I’m not promising anything super explicit, but perhaps a little more on the mature side ;)}
Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

In which you finally catch a break

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not terribly eventful (sorry!) but it is necessary to tie some loose ends and sew a few seeds... but for now, enjoy the splendor of Asgard and the joy of a few simple things too :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eir, as good as her word, returns with a bowl of some sort of food and a mug, both of them steaming, a short while after the prince had made his exit. She hands you the mug and sets the bowl aside, and seems to contemplate something as she looks at you. For your part, you simply bring the mug to your face and take small sips, letting the scalding tea distract you with its burn. It’s not overly helpful, but it keeps your hands from clenching into fists, keeps your mouth from yelling or screaming or sobbing.

Eir settles down onto the adjacent bed and waits. Her silent company is soothing, so much so that you wonder if it is simply the type of person she is, the underlying personality that makes her so well-suited to her trade, or if there is more to it than that. You don’t know very much about magic, but you realize that she, like Loki and the Queen, is adept at the art. If there are spells for healing, perhaps there are also spells that affect one’s mood. As much as you don’t like the thought of your head being tampered with — not that you genuinely are convinced Eir is deliberately influencing your emotions — the calmness you feel allows you to eat a little of the food from the bowl without much fear of upsetting your stomach. It’s a kind of soup, still mostly liquid, but with hearty chunks of vegetables and some strange, savory meat, so tender that your teeth slide right through it. It’s good, in fact, and you’re suddenly reminded of just how long it’s been since you’ve had a proper meal, and, despite the recent emotional upheaval Asgard’s second prince had put you through, you are hungry, and you find yourself eating at a rate that’s probably impolite. But if Eir was one for judgement, she’d have doled any manner of it out by now.

Once you’ve eaten, Eir invites you to try standing, to test the parameters of your recovering body. She holds your elbow in a loose grip, and helps you navigate the room. It’s dizzying, at first, being upright after so long lying, but the dark cast of your vision clears and your head stops swimming soon enough. Besides a bit of lingering soreness in your limbs, and the weariness of receding epinephrine, you feel relatively well overall. Physically, anyway. You’re not entirely sure how you feel emotionally, other than overwhelmed and yet strangely numb, like you’ve used up all your stores and just can’t find it in you to push at it. The fight inside you has slumped over in exhaustion.
Still, it feels good to stretch your legs, and as you gain stability, Eir lets go of you entirely, and lets you amble around the hall. You make a detour to the adjacent washroom — a spacious, vaulted room with a basin meant for bathing built into the floor and a strangely echoey quality — when the broth you had earlier makes its presence known. You spend some time letting the warm water from the faucet run over your hands and splashing it on your face, unused to such luxury, and relishing the chance to wash away all the accumulated stress and sweat from the day.

There’s a full, clear mirror above the sink, and you examine your still-wet face in it, the water making your eyelashes clump together and the hair on your forehead stick. You look at your disheveled hair, the sleeping gown that doesn’t favor your complexion, the scar. It’s even worse than you’d imagined, thick and long and raised, the shiny redness of it standing out starkly. But it’s a clean line, a straight cut, and not as hideously mangled as you’d feared both from your fingers’ tactile examination of it and from Prince Loki’s horrified expression when he’d seen it. Somehow, seeing it, actually forcing yourself to look and see it in all its glory helps you breathe easier, the dread of doing so over with. It’s not pleasant by any means, ghastly thing that it is, but... it’s not as bad as it could be, it’s not the worst possible outcome. You tear your gaze away and dry your face on a towel more fluffy and soft than the down of a newborn lamb.

When you step back into the hall, Eir greets you with a smile that suggests good news.

“You seem to be recovering swiftly, as I thought you might,” she says with a wink. “You should be set to go by midday tomorrow at that latest. I do want to try to get a few more meals into you to keep you hydrated and help replenish the blood you lost. But for now, I’ll let you sleep, because you certainly need it.”

Her words are not unkind, despite being rather blunt. Instead, they have something of a conspiratorial lilt to them, like Eir knows first hand what dealing with Prince Loki is like. And you suppose she does, considering how she’d spoken of him earlier, the insight to his character she’d been aware of. That amuses you, even as you consider the undertones of affection therein. She seems to like the prince, for reasons beyond your fathoming.

Eir bids you goodnight, and as the doors snick closed behind her, you let yourself flop down onto the wonderfully plump and cushy pillows, letting them and the warm quilt surround and cradle you as you stop struggling against the urge to drift off and away.

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When you wake, to a breeze stirring your hair and sunlight hitting your face, you think for a heart-stopping moment that you are back in the forest again, back in Einvald’s tent among the furs, alone,
afraid, and at the uncertain mercy of an ignoble man. But you can smell something warm and sweet and there’s a pillow under your head and you’re clutching the edge of a quilt — a quilt! not a fur! — in your fists and you open your eyes. It all comes back to the present when you see the gauzy curtain billowing out slightly as it catches in the air from the window, open wide to let the early morning seep into the room, and there’s a wooden tray beside your bed holding thick slabs of soft, white bread slathered in honey and butter and another steaming mug of tea. Beside it is a pile of fresh clothing, folded up and stacked neatly.

You feel boneless with relief. Eir, you remember. She had promised to bring food for you, here, in one of the healing halls of the palace. No tent. No bound arms, no hand at your throat. Just the bed, the wide window, and your breakfast. You pull the tray into your lap and begin to eat. The bread is lighter and milder than the malty barley loaves you would often bake with your mother at home, but the honey is fresh, and sweeter than any jam, and the rich, melty butter that soaks into all the crevices is simply divine. You close your eyes in sheer bliss, feeling a bit spoiled and grateful to Eir, and let yourself enjoy a last little moment of freedom before you become a full-fledged servant of the palace, and to the future princess, no less.

Once you’ve drained the last of your tea and there is nothing but crumbs left of the marvelous bread, Eir comes back in to check on you. She has you walk around some more, eyes carefully examining you, and asks a few questions about your wellbeing. She nods, satisfied, when you tell her than you’re feeling nearly back to normal, thanks to her, and as she directs you to sit back in bed, she leans down close to you.

“You have a visitor who should be arriving any moment now,” she says, and there’s mirth in her eyes, like she’s holding back a secret. It dawns on you that perhaps this is why she cares for Loki, this hint of mischief she shares, but it’s got nothing of the Prince’s sort of malice. “Hurry up and get dressed,” she says and pats the stack of clothes. “I’ll send him in when he gets here.”

And soon, you’re alone again, scooping up the clothes and, once you’re sure you’re out of view of the open window, yanking the nightgown over your head quickly, because the last thing you want is for him to come in while you’re half dressed. Not that you have any idea who is about to walk through those doors. You did more or less leave Loki’s question unanswered — or the pretense of such, at any rate — but you certainly hope it is not to be him. You certainly hope Eir wouldn’t be so smug if it were the case, too. At this point, you’d welcome a visit from Prince Thor, or even the Allfather, awkward and mortifying as that would be, respectively, just to not have to see the younger prince again, not so soon. You imagine avoiding him altogether will be nigh impossible, if you’re to be working for his bride, but still.

You shake your head at yourself and your silly dreams and shove your legs into the simple cloth leggings and wrestle the tunic until your arms are coming out the right holes and you can pull it over your head. It falls to your knees and fits you loosely, by no means uncomfortable, but not very shapely or flattering, although the slate grey color is rather tasteful. You think, perhaps, as you’re sliding on a pair of plain slippers, that this is how most of the servants of the palace dress, but you haven’t seen any to confirm that surmise.
You’re shaking your hair free from the high collar of the tunic when there’s a knock at the door that reverberates through the hall and sounds doubly loud. Definitely not the prince, then.

“Come in,” you call, loudly enough to be heard but without shouting, as you comb your fingers through the ends of your hair to try to tame the worst of the tangles.

A man walks in, tall, with his black hair tied up behind his head, boots clicking on the floor. Your eyes widen in disbelief, as he steps closer to you, mouth falling open. No, you wouldn’t have thought-

He stops in front of you, and grins.

And then you laugh, bright and clear and delighted. Without another thought, you run forward and throw your arms about your brother, still laughing and smiling as he catches you and hugs you back.

“You’ve no idea how good it is to see you,” you mumble into his shoulder and then pull away, looking up at him.

“I do actually,” he tells you quietly, uncharacteristically serious, but still smiling. “You scared us all pretty badly,” he says and you can only assume that’s something of an understatement. “But I’m glad you’re alright. I think you might have gotten the worse end of things.”

You swallow thickly, nodding, in that instant reminded of the scar on your cheek that he has no doubt seen by now. But he isn’t staring, isn’t even looking at it, and you try to pretend that that doesn’t relieve you as much as it does.

“Yeah. I’m... I’m glad that’s over,” is all you can really manage to say. And you mean it. By Yggdrasil, you mean it.

“Mother and Father would have come too, wanted to come and cry over you and all that, but they’ve been tied up with getting the oats harvested, and Suvituuli’s just had her foal, and there’s not many hands to be spared. And, of course, Búrakki’s decided now’s the time to start harassing Ukko’s geese again.” You share a knowing, fond smile at that last, because, like he said, of course.

“Honestly, they couldn’t really even spare me to come, but they insisted, and, well, I didn’t fight them too much.”
And it’s the closest you’re going to get to him saying he wanted to check on you and that he missed you, but the words warm you no less for their appearance of superficiality. You can translate.

“I guess you’ll have to suffice,” you tease back, because he can translate too.

He snorts in mock offense, and afterwards, there’s a momentary silence as you both let everything sink in. Then your brother unceremoniously plunks himself down on your bed, pulling his feet up and everything, and turns to you with an eyebrow raised.

“So... I hear you’ll be wiping the soon-to-be princess’s ass from now on.”

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Talking to your brother is... nice. Unexpectedly nice. It’s second nature to fall back into the familiar flow between you, back and forth in meter, a seamless mix of easy chatter and the deeper, more unspoken understanding you share. You feel lighter for it, like you don’t have anything to hide or be ashamed of, like it’s okay, because no matter what you do or are, you’ll still have a friend who will stick by you with acceptance and a sly retort on the ready.

A wave of pure affection washes over you, and for a moment, you can almost forget that anything was ever wrong, that anything bad ever happened, that anything would happen. But all too soon, you find yourself waving your brother goodbye after a last hug and a promise to write as often as possible, and being escorted through the palace to the chambers of the woman Prince Loki intends to marry.

The corridors are vast and there are many turns that you’ll no doubt forget entirely, and it’s almost overwhelming, but the sheer magnificence of the place distracts you well enough and you wonder at all the polished marble and gold everywhere, the precisely chiseled statues and finely woven tapestries on display, the paintings so detailed they’re virtually lifelike. Even the windows are grand, some with colorful glass that stains the light spilling through a myriad of bright blues and vivid reds and soft amber tones, all arranged in breathtaking mosaics of orchards and gardens and forests.

You almost lose your guide as you stare for too long at a full-sized sculpture of a very handsome, but strangely eight-legged horse. Or at least, you think it is a sculpture. The artist clearly has spared no details, for the stallion’s eyes look dewy and soft as any horse’s, with long lashes and a silky mane, and the rippling muscles and hide look so true to life, you’re almost sure that if you reached out, you’d be able to feel the warmth of the flesh beneath your hand, feel the feathery twitch of his
nostrils as you stroked his nose. It’s only the sound of fading footsteps that drags you out of your musings, and you snatch your hand away and hurry after the servant boy who’s been leading you silently through the halls.

Eventually, your wide-eyed tour through the grandeur of Asgard comes to a halt at the door of your new mistress, and the boy scurries off, leaving you alone and daunted. Still, you determinedly raise your hand and deliver what you hope is a sharp, strong knock.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, I promise, will be pretty significant. I won’t say more than that, though, so stay tuned!

And yes, the statue is Sleipnir, but he is not Loki’s son, and that’s not going to play into the story. Loki is not a dad here!

Does anyone think Brother should have a name? Any suggestions?

Also: Suvituuli means ‘summer wind’ in Finnish, and I thought I was a nice name for a mare. Ukko more or less means ‘old man’ and I imagine is just what the siblings call their cranky old neighbor, not his actual name :)}
A Crown’s No Cure

Chapter Summary

In which Loki hunts, and you listen. Thunder rumbles from a distance

Chapter Notes

As promised, herein lies a thickening plot...

This chapter turned into an absolute monster, but I loved writing it, so enjoy this loooong chapter! You all deserve it <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week. Loki has a week until he’s meant to be married. And yet here he is, in the middle of a self-appointed task, a task that he sees the necessity of even if there were a fair many other things he’d envisioned himself spending this time doing. It seems he has elected to take a hunting trip after all — and wouldn’t Thor be quite chagrined that he had gone off without his brother or their companions — but rather than terrorizing some poor beast of the forest and bringing its head back as a trophy, he follows the cold trail of another wretched creature, seeking blood not for sport, but to satiate the burn for vengeance on a more personal matter.

He urges Fóthradr into a trot with a gentle prod of his heels into the palfrey’s dappled flanks, and ducks beneath the lowest hanging branches of a small alder as he scans the ground for any slight clue. The air is cool as it streams against his face, bringing with it the damp wash of a brewing storm and the scent of upturned leaves.

The trail is already faded and nearly imperceptible. A heavy downpour would sweep away any chance of following it altogether as barely-there spoors became slicks of mud and patches of faintly crumpled grass, telling of a stray footstep here and there, were whipped flat by the squall. But subtlety is Loki’s art, and it is not raining yet.

His eyes find traces where most others would not. A broken twig here, the smashed cap of a mushroom there. A winding track a hairsbreadth too wide to be used simply by deer. The trick, Loki has found, is not to come at it head on, for one often misses even the most obvious of signs when they are right in front of one’s face. Instead, he knows that it’s far better to approach things of this nature sideways, seeing without seeing, and he glances around from the corners of his eyes. Underlooking to avoid overlooking, catching the tiny details in a most delicate manner. And...
Ah. There.

In his left periphery, Loki can just barely make out the hazy glimmer of a dew trail, a slender pathway through the grass where the droplets have been wiped away by shuffling boots. Loki smiles. Thor may be the stronger hunter between them, able to take down large prey by sheer force, and Fandral the better shot with an arrow, but when it comes to tracking, to uncovering hidden passages and noticing the unnoticeable, it is Loki who is best.

He slings his leg over the bare back of his mount and drops gracefully to the forest floor, and goes to take the bit out of Fóthradr’s mouth and slides a halter over his nose, tying the rope to a sturdy branch and leaving plenty of slack for his horse to graze. He pats him twice on his freckled cheek and turns his oblique attention once more to the moisture-ridden earth, slipping through the forest on foot as he pursues his ravin.

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When the door swings open with no warning, you have to jump back a bit to avoid being smacked with the heavy wood, and once you recover, you’re met with the frowning face of a woman who is decidedly not pleased with either you or your response to nearly being knocked unconscious.

“Ah. You must be the little servant brat Loki mentioned,” she says coolly, as if you’re some insignificant child and not nearly of an age with her. You notice there is a slight accent to her discourteous tone that you vaguely recall is Vanir. Then she sneers, and somehow manages to look down at you even from the scant inch she has on your own height. “It certainly took you long enough, but I suppose if this was the best Asgard had to offer, I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Her eyes flick to your scar and you suddenly wish she had hit you with the door. You feel cold, and your hand itches to cover your cheek, but you stand there, lips pressed together so hard they’ve lost color, trying not to feel so humiliated and waiting for some instruction. You hate this, you realizes with fervor, especially since Loki’s betrothed is every bit as awful as the prince himself, but you’d hate it as much even if she was as kind as Eir, because taking orders and being expected to comply to every demand of another is degrading, and when compared to your simple life on the farm, where all there was to worry about was plucking the worms off the cabbage plants and gathering fatwood for the winter and chopping apples so they could be dried and stored for the rest of the year, not even the ethereal glory of the palace is enough of a counterbalance.
“Well?” she says, brimful of impatience, after a long moment, still standing in the doorway

Oh. Evidently she expects you to enter, despite not inviting you forth, so you gently step around her into the room and she pulls the door shut with a snap behind you.

The room, or rather the suite of rooms that makes up her chambers, is larger than your whole home, with towering shelves crammed with tomes of all sorts, a bed big enough for four people stacked high with pillows and silk sheets, desks and wardrobes of carved wood inlaid with brushed silver and deep perse garnets, and curtains draped elegantly over floor length windows. It all makes you feel very small and paltry.

The woman moves across the floor to stand in front of a set of ornate mirrors bordered with floral designs in wrought brass, and you’re not sure what you’re supposed to do. You get the impression that she doesn’t particularly wish to have you speak to her, but should you ask? Perhaps you’re just expected to know, only you’ve never done anything like this before, and you have no idea what duties a servant of a princess is meant to oversee. You run your hands down the sides of your tunic, trying to get them to stop sweating as you continue to hesitate in the corner of the room. Her bright yellow eyes find yours through the glass of the mirror, leaving you exposed under the second-hand scrutiny.

“Are you going to help me get dressed or not? I don’t have all day.”

Right. Of course. You’re only just now realizing that she’s clothed only in a slip and there’s a splendid golden gown spread out before her, seeming to shimmer in the light, and yes, perhaps she would need an extra set of hands to manage getting it on properly. Right. You nod, and step forward to do just that. It couldn’t be that hard, could it?

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It’s almost too easy, Loki thinks as he spots the rising smoke above the trees and treks on silent feet to the campsite. Several old, patchy tents dot the clearing centered around a felled tree and a shoddy fire pit. It’s pitiable, almost, or would be if Loki were inclined to feel such things for these lowliest of
people who would disgrace themselves as they had.

Loki watches for a moment, unseen amongst the trunks, as a handful of men and a young woman drift back and forth across the site, idly chatting, the men carrying buckets and roughly hewn hide packs, the woman mending the torn outsole of a boot with neat little stitches. They seem harmless enough, simple-minded, dirty peasants concentrated on survival, but Loki is a sensible man, and he puts no stock in depthless suppositions.

He steps forward and reveals himself.

Impressively, no one screams, but they do take off running. Mead and wash-water slosh everywhere as buckets are overturned, needle and thread and leather flying as they scramble like panicked deer in all directions.

“No, no. I don’t think so,” he chides, and all seven or eight of them freeze. He smirks. “You’ll be coming with me. You see, some of you”—he recognizes two of the men from their part in delivering the girl to him on that cur Einvald’s behest—“seem to have blood on your hands, and will be punished for it, have no doubt, and the rest of you... well, you’ve been privy to such crimes and yet you’ve deliberately held your silence, so it would appear to me that you are guilty in equal measure. But your fate is not for me to decide, and so, an extemporaneous jaunt to the palace’s prison cells is in order. Come along, now, let’s not waste any more time.”

It’s hard not to feel smug as they all march like ducklings after him, but he knows he’s missing one, and it does put a damper on the taste of victory. It seems Einvald may be more wily than he’d first thought, slipping away from him like a weasel slinking a falcon’s claws. But he will be back for the man, to ensure he is repaid tenfold for his insults. And, in spite of the imminent storm, Loki can hardly wait.

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It can be that hard, you find out. Maybe if it weren’t the strange, Vanaheim style of dress with so many straps meant to be tied just so, and maybe if the one you were attempting to dress wasn’t so irascible and fidgety, and maybe if you had the first clue about any of this it wouldn’t be so bad. But
You don’t, and by the time you’ve finally managed to get all the parts of the dress situated properly — and you have to admit it does look rather nice — your mistress is practically frothing as she grits her teeth, flared nostrils visible in the mirror as she lets out a furious breath. Clearly, your incompetence is a cause of great irritation to her, a fact that she lets you know in no uncertain — nor, really, construable polite — terms.

In fact, everything you do over the next few days is met with much the same reaction. It’s a steady stream of “What are you doing? No, not like that!” and “I said braid my hair, not turn it into a tangled wreck! Ouch, stop pulling!” and “Why isn’t my bath ready yet? The water’s too hot! Ugh, now it’s too cold!” and “Élivágar and Ginnungagap, girl! Can’t you do anything right?” without you being able to get a word in edgewise. It’s enough to give you a headache, and make you think that Prince Loki may actually deserve her.

You’ve been kept busy making the ridiculously lavish and comfortable bed in Ülle’s chambers, stoking the fire in the hearth to maintain the perfect temperature, drawing baths in the largest tub you have ever seen — complete with wonderfully fragrant and, you imagine, expensive oils and soaps — dressing Ülle, brushing and plaiting her hair — which is slippery and fine, and resists being done up in even the simplest of styles — picking up and putting away all the assorted things she leaves strewn about, retrieving this and that and the other thing from who even knows where, all on top of being expected to follow Ülle around wherever she goes as her personal attendant, which leaves precious little time to do all the other tasks, but you still have plenty of time to get yelled at, of course.

On the positive side, you’ve just about figured out all the turns to get to the kitchen and back, having made the trip several times a day to bring Ülle her breakfast and whatever else she requests, and you no longer fear getting lost in the palace. The bad news is the other servants don’t seem inclined to be friendly toward you, not that you go out of your way to encourage any interactions. You know they whisper about you when they think you can’t hear. Mostly they talk about your scar, predictably. No one seems to know how you got it, and there are several trails of gossip going around, some more wild than others.

But you do learn some things from their tales. Apparently you had been so limp and covered in blood when Prince Loki carried you in that you had looked dead, and the prince was so bloody and disheveled, with a somewhat frightening look on his face, that some had thought he had killed you. But since you are obviously still alive, that idea had been proven wrong, though most seem to think that Loki had, at least, given you the scar, and at most actually tried to kill you, and that you perhaps have other scars elsewhere on your body hidden beneath your clothing (which does in fact match that of the other servants). Still, there’s a theory that Loki hadn’t been the one to hurt you, but that he had rescued you in some daring fight against those who had hurt you and rushed you back to the palace to save your life. A bit closer, but still nowhere near the truth of it. On the tail end of that one was a particularly absurd rumor that you were the prince’s secret lover, although how that gained any credence you shudder to wonder.

Despite the high stress of it all, and the work you know you’ll have to make up later, the most
interesting parts of your days are when you do accompany Ülle when she leaves her chambers, following at her heels like a trained dog and fetching whatever she demands, often loaded down and carrying assorted chattel that she couldn’t possibly be expected to carry herself as she strolls the palace gardens — extravagant, interwoven pathways with shady bowers covered in bright pink, orange, and blue-violet blooms, and creeping clusters of tiny white and yellow flowers that grow on trellis archways and smell wonderfully sweet, and thick, verdant grasses and shallow pools and clinging vines cascading from berry laden rowans and stooped, feathery willows as far as the eye can see — or the library — central to the palace, massive enough to get lost in, with low lighting provided by lanterns and warmed by cozy little fires lit in corners meant for reading comfortably, with wooden tables and long chairs upholstered in velvet, the scent of thousands of books’ worth of parchment and leather permeating every crevice — or several other various and grand locations throughout the residence of the Allfather and his progeny.

Strangely, you haven’t seen Loki at all in the time you’ve spent around his intended. It’s not a fact that you resent in the slightest, but you’d prepared yourself mentally for having to spend time uncomfortably in his presence when Ülle wished to be with her groom, and yet you’ve seen no trace of the man since he’d left you in Eir’s halls without so much as a backward glance. It’s somewhat conspicuous, the lack of the young prince, at least to you, although Ülle seems to pay it no mind, for if she’s even noticed his absence, she’s unbothered by it. Which in and of itself is weird, since Ülle is an inherently bothered person, best you can tell.

What’s even more interesting is this one such excursion you’re on, scurrying after the tails of Ülle’s dress, when the prospective princess stops in some quiet corridor to talk to a man you don’t recognize, but must be some sort of guard or warrior judging by his substantial size and metal-plated armor. She smiles at him when she greets him, and you stare, momentarily struck by how delighted she seems, and how much different she looks because of it.

The man grins back, looking a tad confused but no less polite as he raises her hand to deliver a kiss to her knuckles.

“My Lady.” His voice is a soft, deep rumble, and he dips his head to her, red-golden hair swaying aside his bearded face.

She giggles — actually giggles! — looking quite charmed as his whiskered lips brush against her fingers, and tips her head back to blink demurely up at the man, who you won’t deny is quite handsome in a rugged sort of way. But still, you’re not sure which is more shocking, Ülle blushing, or the fact that she’s flirting with someone who isn’t the man she’s promised to.

“You know,” she says, sounding thoughtful and a bit too pleased, as she pointedly looks the man up and down, eyes lingering a beat too long on his muscular chest and exposed, sinewy arms, “You look nothing like your brother.”
And you stiffen where you stand as the words click into place, and you realize abruptly who your mistress is talking too. Then you make yourself scarce, slipping away unnoticed to wait behind a pillar.

In hindsight, it should have been obvious, because he does indeed look very much the way the rumors describe him, from the generous span of his shoulders to his lopsided smile, which looks far too endearing on someone so imposing in stature.

Prince Thor, for his part, begins to look slightly awkward, like he isn’t entirely sure what to do, and he laughs in a way that sounds kind of forced to your ears, but seems not to affect Ülle in the slightest, other than causing her face to light up, if possible, even more.

“We get that a lot,” he says, rocking back on his heels and fidgeting with a leather strap on his arm.

Ülle continues coquetting the crown prince for several long minutes, making his strained small talk seem tremendously funny and engaging, occasionally touching his arm or his hair, despite his increasingly clear discomfort.

You’re not really sure what to do. You could find some way to interrupt, to put an end to what is sure to be the biggest scandal Asgard’s had since Bor married a Jotun, but you’re acutely aware that it’s not exactly your place to do so, both because you’re little more than a glorified errand girl, and because Prince Thor is certainly capable of excusing himself, and yet has chosen to stay his feet. But do you... do you tell someone? You’re not just meant to ignore it, are you?

Caught up in your fretting, you don’t notice when Ülle leaves, but you jerk your head up at the sound of approaching footfalls and realize she is gone just as Prince Loki strides into view.

He doesn’t seem to see you, fixated as he is on Thor, and you duck further behind the marble column, hoping the loud thudding of your steadily climbing heart rate doesn’t give you away.

“Loki! There you are! Where have you been these past days?” Prince Thor all but yells as he catches sight of his brother, moving forward to intercept him and blocking your sight somewhat. You have to lean out to peer around his shoulders to see Loki’s face, and you hold your breath and mentally ask the Norns for both forgiveness and their blessing.

Loki halts, and frowns for a second, like he’d been cut off from what he was about to say, but he
humors Prince Thor anyway.

“I was overseeing a personal matter,” he says smoothly, a note of finality in his voice as he opens his mouth to no doubt change the subject. But Prince Thor, sounding unimpressed, cuts him off again.

“And what matter would this be?”

Prince Loki actually rolls his eyes in a decidedly unprincely manner, irritation coming off of him in waves.

“Did I not just say it was personal?” He huffs. “If you must know, Thor, I was busy finding new homes for some rather unsavory people I’ve recently made the acquaintance of. I do hope they find the dungeons suitably hospitable.”

Prince Thor takes a step backwards, turns slightly and you can see the surprise and worry clear on his face.

“You were dealing with criminals? By yourself? Are you alright? Have they hurt you?” he asks all at once, comically looking his brother over, grabbing his shoulder then removing his hand just as fast as if he might have accidentally jarred a wound and letting it hang uselessly by his side.

Prince Loki puts up with it with a look of long-suffering.

“I’m here aren’t I?” he asks facetiously, “Alive? In one piece?” He cocks his head to the side. “I certainly feel alright, but perhaps I should double check.”

Prince Thor shifts again, and you can’t see his reaction, but you can perfectly well imagine the look of mingled fondness and exasperation.

“And what of you?” Loki asks suddenly, his posture straightening and his tone bleeding into cool amusement. “What business did you have here in this secluded corridor with my lovely future wife?”

“Loki,” Prince Thor begins warily, taking another step back and running his fingers once more along the band of leather on his wrist. “It wasn’t what it looked like.”
And yeah, that is the truth, and you know Prince Thor did nothing untoward moreso than letting himself be pawed at, but he’s not exactly helping himself out by projecting an air of guilt so loudly.

Prince Loki frowns in an exaggeratedly confused way.

“And what did it look like, exactly? I didn’t see. But I did hear a few things that one would be hard-pressed to interpret as anything other than dallying. Are you next going to tell me it wasn’t what it sounded like either?”

“Brother,” Prince Thor tries again, putting his hands up to show his innocence, or perhaps to hold Loki back if necessary. “If you’re worried that I’ll sleep with her-“

“Of course I’m not,” Loki interjects smoothly, a sharpness underneath. “Sif would never forgive you if she found out.”

Surprisingly, Prince Thor snorts, inelegantly, at this, not at all as if reacting to the threat those words sure sounded like. Instead, he shakes his head like they’re sharing a joke. When he speaks, though, he is unquestionably sincere.

“I wouldn’t do that regardless of my devotion to her.”

Loki meets his eyes.

“I don’t doubt that,” he murmurs.

“Good,” says Prince Thor, just as quietly.

“Not that I’d particularly care either way, but I’d prefer to save myself the trouble of that inevitable fallout.”

*Wait. He can’t mean-*
“What do you mean, Loki?” Prince Thor asks, sounding far more keen than he’d been as of yet.

“You don’t think I’d willing bind myself to that woman if I had a choice, do you?”

*Oh. That is what he means.*

Prince Thor tugs at one of his braids.

“I’m sure Father-“

“Oh, I’m sure, too,” Loki cuts in tonelessly, a strangely burning look in his eyes. “You’re lucky, Thor.”

And he walks away, leaving Prince Thor staring after his retreating back and the sound of his boots filling the space he left behind.

Then Prince Thor is turning, and your eyes go wide as you scramble back behind the pillar, but you know it’s too late. He stalks over to your erstwhile hiding place and crosses his arms as he glares down at you.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demands, and you falter under his looming presence and loud voice, unable to meet his eyes as shame sinks in.

“I- I- I-“ you stutter, failing to come up with anything to say in your defense. “I’m sorry, my prince, so sorry! It won’t happen again, I swear it!”

You fold your fingers around your sleeve ends to stop them trembling, and then wrap your arms around yourself when that doesn’t work.

Prince Thor is silent for so long, you look up anxiously, hoping doing so isn’t the wrong decision, but needing to have some idea what he’s thinking.

And he does appear to be thinking, if the bemused crease in his brow is anything to go by. Then his
startlingly blue eyes land on your scar and something like recognition passes through them, and he relaxes his stance a bit.

“See to it that it doesn’t,” he says, more curt than angry now, and he too leaves, taking the hallway opposite the one Loki had gone down.

And then you’re alone, completely alone, in an unfamiliar corridor of the palace, with no idea which way to go, every fear you had of being lost here rushing back with a vengeance, and additionally, you’re in for a thorough dressing down from Ülle, one you’ve actually earned, on top of the scolding you’d already received from Prince Thor. And you’re still reeling from all that you’ve heard.

But, at least, you don’t have to make any decisions just yet, since it seems Prince Loki knows about his betrothed’s would-be infidelity.

And as you take the hallway to the right, that’s another decision taken care of.

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You’ve been wandering the halls long enough for true alarm to set in, still without the faintest idea where you are in the palace to even have a frame of reference as to which direction to go in next. The only clue that you might be on the right track that you’ve found so far is the statue of the eight-legged horse, only you’re pretty sure it had been facing the window and down on all fours (eights?) when you’d seen it before, and now it’s the other way around and rearing, and you’re not certain if it’s a different statue altogether or if it somehow moved, because it looks like the same recess as before and-

You breathe, forcing away the panic. You turn around and continue your thus far fruitless search.

You pass several doors that are starting to look a bit familiar, and then one opens and someone lurches out and grabs you.

“There you are!” Ülle hisses out before you can scream, and well, it’s not exactly a relief to see her, but at least things can stop getting worse now. Her nails dig into your shoulder as she hauls you into the room with her and all but throws you forward as she hastily pulls the door shut.

You freeze, seeing unfamiliar faces staring at you from inside this unfamiliar room. You stare back.
Your brain has not yet caught up enough to process what exactly is happening, but it appears these people are discussing something severely important, looking as they do as if they’ve been interrupted and eyeing you with clear mistrust. You don’t have long to ponder it before Ülle is shoving you again toward a cart with a jug of some sweet smelling wine and ordering you to serve everyone.

You comply wordlessly, and uneasy conversation trickles back up, sotto voce, as you fill each of the strangers’ goblets with the scarlet liquid. When you finish, you move to stand behind Ülle, hands folded and awaiting further instructions.

“What have you found out about the elder prince, Ülle?” asks a man with hair an almost preternaturally pale grey despite his semblant youth as he leans forward in his seat toward the woman in question.

Another woman, old enough for wrinkles to touch the corners of her eyes, holds up a veiny hand to stave off an answer.

“What of the girl?”

She turns suspicious eyes upon you, and you keep your head down, trying to be inconspicuous.

Ülle laughs and waves a hand.

“Her? She is mute, she does not speak. She will not be a problem,” she says dismissively, and you can’t believe it.

It’s fortunate that your face is downcast, because surely the raw shock on it would have given you away. Mute! As often as your tongue has gotten you into trouble, the idea would be almost laughable if you didn’t astutely know that you were about to hear something critical.

The old woman scrutinizes you for a long moment. You can feel her gaze burning into you, and you let your thoughts and hidden face go blank, just in case.

“What well. Ülle?”
“Thor is easy,” she says confidently, leaning back and taking a sip of her drink. “He does not feel attracted to me, but he is honor-bound and dutiful to a fault. He will marry me if his father tells him to.”

“And a child?” the man who had spoken before questions.

Ülle grins, all teeth and no real humor.

“Like I said: easy. And what about you, Bǫlverkr? Have you procured a befitting gift for my dear husband?” The poison that drips from those last words indicates that there is no love lost between her and the prince. You wonder what this suddenly terrifying woman would consider befitting. The way she says it makes you fear it could be actual poison.

A different man tosses her a small pouch in reply, and her smile sharpens even more.

“You can deliver it to him without drawing attention or his notice?” the old woman asks Bǫlverkr.

Bǫlverkr nods, looking coolly unconcerned as he twists the stem of his chalice between his fingers, churning the wine within.

“Yep,” he drawls. “The idiot has been searching the forest for something these last few days. Alone. It is no trouble to overpower him and bestow it upon him.”

The first man who had spoken, the one with the ashen hair, raises his eyebrows, disquieted by his fellow caballer’s apparent carelessness.

“Loki is crafty in manner and speech,” he warns. “You would do well not to underestimate him.”

Ülle laughs again at this, a harsh and wholly unpleasant sound.

“The snake only hisses!” she cries, mockingly shrill. “I saw it in his eyes when I first arrived. A fool’s hope, the yearning of a child. His naivety blinds him. He believes himself the only one capable of laying a trap; he will not suspect a trick from without.”
They seem to mull this over, taking sips of their wine and measuring the weight of Ülle’s assurances. Acceptance wins out over doubt, and the old woman turns to Bölverkr once more.

“And when the time comes, you will be prepared to make the loss of the golden prince seem like a tragedy?”

“You know me, Siánialik.”

You blanch, and search desperately for something to do with your hands, something to make you look busy and uninterested and not at all scared. You begin clearing up the used goblets and piling them on the cart, biting at the inside of your lip to distract you and help you focus on not giving yourself away.

But you’re lightheaded in the wake of this conspiracy, this treason. Oh, fuck. That’s exactly what this is. You’re now an accomplice to proposed treason. You, now more than ever, don’t know what to do, and you think you’re entitled to be freaking out about it but you can’t right this second since you’re pretending to be an unimportant little dumb servant.

“Very good,” the old woman, Siánialik, pronounces. “Vanaheim will have the throne.”

And that seems to be everyone’s cue to rise and make their way from the room, and you begin wiping the table with a rag, trying to move at a normal, unperturbed pace, and Ülle approaches you.

“When you’re finished with that, bring the cart back to the kitchen. I trust you know the way? You won’t get lost again?” she says distractedly, and you shake your head even though you’re not sure she’ll even see it, but you can’t slip up and give a verbal answer now.

As soon as she’s out the door, you let your head sink into your hands, gasping in deep breaths. You give it ten seconds. Fifteen. Twenty. And then you bolt from the room and fly in the direction you’d been lost before, hoping that you’ll run into Prince Thor or Loki or anyone at all who can deliver a warning.

Chapter End Notes
Uh oh, Loki. Watch out!

I know Marvel made Thor blond, but in myth, he’s frequently depicted as having red hair and beard, and I just really like the idea of him having “strawberry” hair

Also he’s such a good brother and I love him

Fóthraðr is a sort of anglicized spelling of Fóthraðr (I went with d instead of the more phonetically correct th because it looked nicer imo) and loosely means ‘quick-footed’

And the million dollar question: what’s in the pouch? Leave your guesses below!

Comments are the cornerstone of this story :)

Any Port

Chapter Summary

In which you search, and Loki watches. The storm breaks

Chapter Notes

Apparently I’ve just been in the mood to write long chapters. Not sure how long I’ll keep that up, but for now, here’s another big one!

A huge thank you to everyone who’s taken the time to show some love for this story! It means the world to me <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flecks of water flash in front of Loki’s discerning eyes, silver and hazy as they catch the dreary half-light of the cloud-choked sun. He takes a long breath, the air cool and thick in his lungs, fresh from the rain and carrying the clean, damp-sharpened scents of the forest, resin and lichen and piquant wood sorrel. As he exhales, the vapor of his breath fans out in a pale cloud, drifting like the mist that curls around the roots and shrubbery at the base of the tree trunks.

The silence of the weald is broken by the rapidly waxing patter of the rain and the wet squelching of Fóthradr’s hooves. The storm had broken out in earnest a short time ago, and already Loki is soaked to the bone, hair dripping into his eyes, tunic and breeches waterlogged and heavy and clinging to skin that has gone chilled and clammy, mud lathered over his calves and the sides of his horse from Fóthradr’s sloshing gait.

It’s miserable, and Loki pats Fóthradr’s neck, consolation and apology in one, as he eases him to a standstill. Yet the trees have a composure to them that is calming, upstanding and enduring, the severity of the weather nothing more than a passing disturbance to their steadfast patience and dignity. He eyes a tall, mature linden tree, older perhaps than himself, with its wide, full crown bearing the weight of the wind with scarcely more than a ripple passing through the leaves. He sits straighter on his horse’s back, leaning slightly forward over his withers.

Loki watches the forest like Heimdall All-Seer watches the realms, not the smallest detail slipping his quiet notice. He keeps his horse, too, well in his attention, trusting Fóthradr’s senses as much as his own, and more besides, knowing the stallion can hear better than he, distinguish fainter smells, feel the shift in the earth caused by a mere fallen leaf.
It is because of this that he notices immediately when the flank muscles under his thighs tighten and bunch up, when the mottled ears begin flicking cautiously back and forth. He hears nothing but the wind, sees nothing but the rain, but he knows it’s only a matter of time before he finds what Fóthradr has already perceived. It could be nothing more than some daring animal scampering about, careless of the water lashing down from the sky, or it could be the precise reason Loki is back again in this forlorn place, defying the storm.

Fóthradr clamps the bit between his teeth and takes a step backwards, snorting loudly.

“Easy,” Loki tells him in a soft voice, adjusting his hands on the reins. He squeezes with his legs, asking him to walk forward, but instead, Fóthradr starts to tremble, truly spooked. Loki’s body shakes as well with the force of it, and he absently runs his fingers through the tangles of the horse’s wet mane as he casts his gaze around again, far less comfortable than he was moments ago. Still, he sees nothing. But he knows something is there.

He draws forth a small knife, the blade of it no longer than his finger, but still wickedly sharp on both sides, and clasps it tightly in one hand, holding on with the other to both the leather strap of the reins and the hairs on the base of Fóthradr’s neck, preparing to lean forward and swing off his back.

Before he manages to do so, Fóthradr bolts, running from the unseen threat in a way he hasn’t done since he was saddle broken. Loki jolts, thrown off balance, and grits his teeth in irritation and slight fear. He struggles to maintain his hold on the slippery horse and keep the knife from lodging into either himself or Fóthradr, gripping as hard as he can with his knees and reaching for the reins that had slid loose during the sudden take off. His fingers brush them for a split second before something collides with his chest, and he flies off Fóthradr altogether.

He lands with a dull thud, the softened ground taking the bulk of the impact, but still hard enough to knock the wind out of his likely bruised ribs, and the knife skitters out of his grasp. He heaves his body out of the sucking mud, and thrusts his feet under himself, heels gouging the crumbly moss, gasping breath back into his lungs. His hair swings about his face wildly, clumped in waves that obscure his vision as he looks around for his horse, for his knife, for whatever the fuck knocked him down. He bares his teeth in a snarl, breathing heavily through his mouth, feral and filthy, and he once again comes up short.

He hears a twig snap and whirs in the direction of the sound, weaponless, but with arms braced to strike out. He has just enough time to glimpse something coming toward his head before it hits with a crack. Pain flashes white and hot before being overtaken by the black backdrop of nothingness.
Now is a bad time for the corridors to be deserted, you think, dizzy and out of breath from running so hard, from the urgency that lends your feet speed and strength. The stiff slippers you’d been given to wear are rubbing angry blisters into the tender skin of your ankles, and you spare a panic-addled thought for your soft leather boots, missing them for a second before shaking your head of your ridiculous sidetracking.

You careen around a corner wildly, smooth, gripless soles gliding on the polished floor, and throw your arms out for balance. Huge, engraved doors loom over you, meeting in an arch so high you tip your head back to look at the top, breath sawing through your dry throat. *The throne room*, you think, *it has to be*. They’re the largest doors you’ve seen so far, heavy wood trimmed in gold, and you can think of no other reason for such an ornamental threshold.

*The King, the Allfather will be inside.* The thought gives you pause, for surely he would be gravely insulted to have a measly little servant girl clamber before him uninvited. Then you throw open the doors, leaning into their weight, because it’s exigent, his son, both of his sons-

You step forward into a torrent of rain and a darkening sky. Stunned, you let the doors clang shut behind you, staring open-mouthed at the grounds around the palace. Outside. That is... unexpected, and the rain plasters your hair against your neck as you stand in a momentary daze, running unchallenged down your skin in rivulets.

You turn to your left, but there is no one, so you try the right. No guards, no sentries stand at attention at the entrance, and your face falls. *Shouldn’t there be... Isn’t there supposed to...* And you realize you don’t *know*, because you haven’t seen this place before, hadn’t been awake when you came in, and all you do know is that you can’t seem to find anyone at all, and there probably should be at least *some* people around, but where they’ve gone or why they’re missing when you need them so badly is an ill-timed mystery.

Should you go back in, and try harder, shout louder, search more thoroughly? *Get lost again and waste even more time?* a dark voice whispers. You try to ignore it, reaching for the handle on the doors, because you had *seen* Prince Thor, knew he couldn’t be that far, you should be able to find him and Loki-

You stop short. Prince Loki had been spending a lot of time in the forest, according to Bǫlverkr, doing something so cryptic he wouldn’t let loose the secret even to confide in his brother. Would he
be there now, even in the midst of the storm? It’s not impossible, if his undertaking is so very important, and from your limited estimation, you’d reason that he doesn’t seem the type to shirk from some duty just because it is unpleasant. The stories of his clothes covered in blood, your blood, so vivid you can almost picture what it was like, remind you of that.

You give the palace doors one lingering, worried glance and take off at a run down the steps and the broad pathway, feet slapping against wet stone and the occasional puddle, heading in a straight course for the bordering Greenwood.

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Unaccountably, you find yourself following the trail that you know well enough to recognize even through the fog and mire. Each step you take, slowed with circumspection and the pain of raw, oozing skin, brings you deeper into the forest. You really miss your boots now. You shiver as the wind snatches the heat from your drenched body. You can’t recall ever being so wet, half-drowned by the storm that hasn’t let up in the slightest.

The forest is vast, towering above you and stretching around in all directions for farther than you could hope to walk. It feels an impossible task, like searching an entire river for a single pebble, but if the prince is here you have to find him. He had likely saved your life, you realize, thinking not for the first time about what might have become of you had Einvald had his way in dragging you off when his offer was rejected, once you were useless to him and nothing more than just some stray farmhand with no purpose. At best, you might have ended up like Píñaluk, bitter and envious and forced to work for an abhorrent master. You understand it now, why she resented your existence, your freedom, your favor. At worst... You think of Hreinn and the lecherous gazes of the men at the camp and you shut your eyes to force the images from your brain. Einvald might not have killed you, but you know there are things worse than death. You at least owe it to Prince Loki to try.

So you sweep your matted hair up, tie it back and out of the way, and trudge through the slick sludge the earth has become, ignoring your hurting feet and the goosebumps and the horrible sticky feeling of saturated linen all over your body as you look between each trunk and brier thicket, just in case.

Lightning bursts overhead and lights the sky blue for an instant, and something small and shiny catches the flare up ahead. You pick your way to it, leaving the trail and climbing unsteadily over rocks and roots and scraggly little bushes that snag on your clothes and leave tiny scrapes on your skin. You crouch down to look, and in the dimness, you make out the shape of a dagger, half buried in the mud. You pick it up, slinging off the muck and examining it more closely. It’s carefully whetted to a needle-sharp point, the edges thin and fine enough to flay. There are pellucid green stones embedded in the handle, decorative more than functional. Emeralds, you realize, costly and valuable. Befitting a prince. It’s a slim chance, but maybe...
You scan the ground, hoping, and find shallow dips in the mud, semicircular and fading fast as the rain washes them smooth. You follow the hoof prints as fast as you can, coming across a ragged span of scuffed up moss, looking remarkably like a body had skidded, or perhaps been dragged, across it. It doesn’t bode well.

There are impressions made distinctively by boots leading away from it, deep ones, diverging from the horse tracks and much fresher. You swallow. Too late. You’re too late. Bǫlverkr got here first and found Loki, and hauled him off somewhere, maybe to kill him if he hadn’t already. It’s an awful thought, imagining the prince’s body bloody for a different reason. Even if you hated him, it was still a terrible fate, killed without contrition in cold blood, with no chance to honor himself in a fair fight.

But the tracks are recent, enough so that you convince yourself to stop fearing the worst, and with a twinge of sympathy for the horse, you let them guide you, walking as quietly as you can, in pursuit of the prince.

***

The wayward prince sags beneath his own weight, crumpling to the ground in a heap. Face slackened, marred with blood and dirt, he doesn’t look nearly so intimidating, and Bǫlverkr allows himself a flinty smile as he nudges a limp arm with the toe of his boot. Unresponsive, motionless save the thready swells and contractions of his chest as he breathes, pathetic. Perfect.

He lowers himself to his knee over the prince, heedless of the mud and water, and lifts the inert body enough to yank the hands behind the back and tie them, as a precaution.

With that accomplished, he lifts the prince into his arms, sinking further into the earth. He carries the body a short distance to the spot he’d decided on prior, far enough from the main path to be unnoticed, yet recognizable to anyone who knows of its existence. Loki’s lolling head jerks back and forth with the movement, and Bǫlverkr lets it. No doubt his neck will be sore later, he thinks, with a small flicker of amusement.

When he reaches the glade, deep in the center of a ravine and ringed by a copice of pines, he drops Prince Loki and pushes him upright against the gritty trunk of one of the trees. He unties the tough,
unyielding thong of leather to reposition Loki’s arms, wrapping them backwards around the tree’s
girth. He cinches the strap doubly tight, enough to ache. When he steps back, the prince’s body shifts
forward, pulling involuntarily against the binds. No doubt his arms will be sore, too. Bǫlverkr smirks
inwardly.

He walks around the tree until he is in front of it, squatting down before the ensnared prince. He rolls
Loki’s head further forward, letting it rest on his shoulder in a caricature of gentleness as he runs his
fingers through the prince’s dark hair, parting the knotted strands at the back of his neck. He slips his
other hand into the front pocket of his satchel, drawing out a small velvet pouch. He pushes his
fingers into the top, opening it one-handed, until his fingertips brush the bead within.

It’s tiny, no larger than a linseed, and Bǫlverkr holds it carefully as he brings it to Loki’s nape, fixing
it to the fine, short hairs there. He ruffles the prince’s hair, letting it fall back into some semblance of
order and then stands, walking the perimeter of the clearing until he is beneath the canopy of an
overhanging bough, and there he waits.

***

The storm stops with a suddenness that is nearly alarming, leaving a resounding silence hanging in
the air. You hold your breath, creeping along the highest, driest parts of the forest floor to keep your
steps from loudly splashing through the accumulated pools of water. You think you’re going the
right way, the way the footprints had been leading, but they had rapidly been scoured by the
pounding rain, and the encroaching shade of twilight is no aid.

The earthy smell of moist bark and churned litterfall is overwhelmed as smoke wafts over your face,
stinging your nose and eyes. The lightning... it hadn’t struck, had it? You spin around in a circle,
head swiveling for a glance at a fiery red wall, closing in to devour you, but there is nothing. The
trees are watchful, suspicious, but not burning. You look behind you and you can almost see the
direction the billowed stream of it is coming from. You don’t imagine there are many people who
would be starting a fire right about now, and you know it has to be Bǫlverkr. What he’s doing with a
fire you don’t know, don’t want to know. But you can’t turn back now, not when you’re all but
certain Prince Loki is with him, in danger. And so it’s no choice really, you follow it, covering your
mouth with your wet tunic and coughing despite it, eyes blurring from the thick white smoke.

When you come to a crest of a hill, you’re left staring down into a gully of evergreens, and Bǫlverkr
and the grey-haired man are sitting, apparently at ease, aside the flames, huddled into the warmth to
dry their clothes and hair. The grey-haired man occasionally lifts a mug to his lips as they talk
quietly, the utter picture of nonchalance. You scan the expanse, looking for a familiar head of black
hair or a flash of green, and you find him, almost hidden in shadow, behind the trunk he leans
against, chin against his chest, obviously unconscious even from the distance. But not dead.

There’s no way for you to climb down the sheer sides of the gully unnoticed. As it is, all it would
take is one of the men to look up and spot you crouching atop the ridge, with nothing but the falling
darkness to hide behind. Even if you were to shimmy along the edge until you were behind them, the
slope is too precarious to try and navigate noiselessly, sightlessly, the ground too loose and rocky for
any measure of surreptitiousness. No, you can’t sneak your way in, but perhaps... perhaps you don’t
have to.

You step back, out of sight, and gently tuck the dagger into the band of your leggings, letting your
tunic fall over it and conceal the evidence. Then, heart stuttering, you carefully walk down the least
steep part of bank, in full view of Bólverkr and the other man.

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When he opens his eyes, it is nothing at all like waking from a dream.

There’s a painful pressure in his head, behind his eyes, and something throbs along his temple.
Fóthradr, he thinks muzzily. He remembers falling off the horse. Must’ve hit my head. He goes to
reach a hand up to probe at his forehead, and tenses in dismay as he realizes he cannot. His arms are
immobile, twisted and pinned behind him, all at once sore and chaffed where they meet the bark of
the tree his back is against. Something is very wrong, something had happened. The hairs on his
neck tingle uncomfortably, and there’s a hollowness in his stomach that can’t be explained by his
rising gorge. Panic forces its way into his throat, but he doesn’t let it take hold, doesn’t let it further
cloud his head.

Quickly, Loki drops his chin back to his chest, ignoring the rolling pang caused by the movement,
and closes his eyes almost all the way. From the sliver of light still remaining, he looks around,
otherwise appearing to be in the same state of sleep or unconscious he had been moments prior.
He’s in a clearing of some sort, nestled in a deep ravine filled with fallen needles and stinking of pitch and hot ash, still uncomfortably dank in his sodden clothing. A fire burns against the darkening sky, and beside it sit two men. Loki’s assailants, he presumes. One of them is rather nondescript, with drab clothes and light brown curls and beard that wouldn’t look out of place on any Asgardian. But the other is unmistakably one of the Álfar, having comely features and argent, free-flowing hair draping over his mantle-clad shoulders, deliberately uncut, for the Elves believe their hair to be a source of power. Both of them seem uninterested in him, engaged in mild conversation, but that prickle of worry crawls back up. The presence of the Elf makes this seem far less likely to be a ransom attempt, and Loki begins to entertain the idea that his life may be the stake of this design.

And then he hears the muffled crunch of wet gravel underfoot, the creak of pulpy twigs too swollen with moisture to crack. Someone else is approaching from the ingress of the ravine. He can’t quite see from his position, can’t roll his head far enough to look, even with his eyes fully open, but by the sound, the unhurried lightness of step, unintentionally so, the person is not particularly large or heavy — perhaps female — and confident in their carriage.

The strange new arrival comes nearer, eventually into his field of vision, and backlit as they are by the fire flickering in the dusk, all he can make out is a straight-backed figure with long hair pulled up into a tail.

Sif, Loki thinks at first, and for a moment, his mind blanks with relief he’d never expected to feel at the sight of her, not since they were children, carefree and guileless in their youth, not since before things had gotten so complicated and muddled. But as his head clears, he starts to notice the subtle differences. For one, Sif is taller, nearly his own height, and her clangy warrior armor would not have allowed her such a soft tread. It is not his compeer on a rescue mission. Despondency stings in his chest, more sharply than he’d care to admit, as that flutter of hope withers as quickly as it had sprung. Even his horse is gone, and though he takes some solace knowing that Fóthradr is clever enough to find a way home, Loki is alone. The woman who now stands in the midst of the clearing is simply dressed in a loose tunic and leggings, with no weapons or mail, but he cannot see her face, and knows not who she is or for what purpose she has come.

Apparently, the men do not know either, for the Elf jumps to his feet and the Asgardian, though still seated, picks up a short stave — probably what he had used to knock him off Fóthradr, Loki thinks with a wince at the memory — and holds it ready.

“Who goes there?” one of them, Loki isn’t sure which, calls out, and the woman says nothing, but draws closer to the fire, near enough for the men to see her face in the glow, though her back is still to Loki.

The Elf laughs, ease returning to his bearing.
“Put down the staff, Bǫlverkr,” he says, settling back down. “It’s just the girl. I do hope you’ve brought us more of that lovely wine, little servant.” He sounds vaguely indulgent, like he’s talking to a pet or a toddler, not at all concerned.

Bǫlverkr, as the other man is called, seems more wary, and does not lose his hold of his weapon.

“She is not here to get us drunk, Lyngvir,” he snaps at his companion before turning to the woman. “Why are you here, girl? Who sent you?”

She shakes her head rapidly, still not speaking, and Loki can see just enough to notice her shift so her hands are clasped behind her body.

“No one sent you?” Bǫlverkr asks, seeking a confirmation.

She shakes her head again, and Loki starts to realize that perhaps she cannot speak.

“Why are you here?” the man repeats, short in patience and temper.

She hesitates, but eventually turns to point straight at Loki.

Loki freezes, a deer caught in a trap, hoping they haven’t seen the gleam of his open eyes, hoping he’s misinterpreted what he’s seeing. But surely there is no mistaking the evidence on her face.

Bǫlverkr scoffs, stalking over to stand right before the woman, yanking her chin up so they’re eye to eye.

“If you try and save the day, little servant,” he threatens, mimicking Lyngvir’s appellation in an undertone, “You will be lucky to make it out with just a scar.”

She jerks her head side to side, shaking him loose and frantically denying that allegation simultaneously.

She puts her hands out, asking for a chance to explain, although why she doesn’t speak, Loki isn’t
sure, because he now knows that she is capable. But all the same, he’s not sure he wants to hear what she’d say, not sure what she’s playing at but willing to wager that it favors him ill.

She had been with Einvald. It’s the one thing he does know for certain. He’d thought her fear and pain to be genuine, but if it hadn’t been, if it had all been a ruse... After all, someone had seen fit to attack him, tie him up, and wait, for something he can only imagine will be even worse. It’s not unlikely that someone along the line would want revenge for the detrimental aftermath of his subversion, be it Einvald, for greed, for imprisoning his subordinates, or the girl, for forcing her into servanthood. He knows resentment for him burns within her, burns like its reciprocal within him, knows it from the strained look in her eyes as he told her of her appointed position, the clipped tone to her voice. Would she retaliate when his life hangs in the balance for his crime that was no crime at all?

Bólverkr steps back, raising his eyebrows in silent exasperation and granting her a moment.

Then she does something Loki could never have expected, and it makes him feel giddy and sick and strangely betrayed.

She reaches a hand up to drag it across her scarred cheek in a slow, deliberate cutting motion, and then aims her finger at Loki once more.

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You point at the prince, hoping to get across your meaning, the lie, hoping you look angry, indignant, and that the men cannot tell that your knees are shaking and your stomach has gone tight and queasy.

Understanding dawns in Bólverkr’s eyes, along with something more sinister, his dark eyes throwing back the firelight in a dangerous dance.

“You’re here to settle the score.” He acknowledges it with an almost approving tip of the head. You nod, putting every scrap of affectation you have into the gesture. “I’d give you a knife if I had one.”
He shrugs, then offers, “But if you want to go over there and kick him in his royal treasury, I won’t stop you. Daresay he won’t either,” he adds wryly before his face becomes shrewd. “Why don’t you speak?”

You raise a hand to your throat, clutching. *I can’t, I can’t,* you try to convey, floundering a bit because the question has caught you off guard. You’re saved from Bǫlverkr’s calculating gaze when Lyngvir laughs, loud and piercing in the quiet glade.

“How’s she supposed to answer that? Do you expect her to pantomime that she’s unable?” he says incredulously.

Bǫlverkr turns to him with a glower, clearly cross at being mocked for the senseless question.

“What I am attempting to inquire,” he rectifies through his teeth, “is whether she was born mute, or if something had happened to cause it in her.”

Lyngvir hums lightly, face scrunching as he mulls the idea over.

“Perhaps it was Prince Scarmonger here” he suggests, with something akin to sympathy curling through his amusement. “Scared the wit right out of her tongue, poor wretch.”

“Yes, perhaps,” Bǫlverkr says thoughtfully, looking at you with that unnerving glint once more. You let some of your fear suffuse your countenance, counting on him to mistake its source. “You don’t have to worry though, girl.” His eyes flick to where Loki is slumped. “He’ll be gone any moment now.”

A chill runs down your spine that you’re powerless to stop, and you step closer to the fire, playing it off as a shiver from the evening air, the cold, wet clothes, the memory you don’t have of Loki butchering your face. You had thought... surely if they meant to kill him, they’d have done it by now. You’d thought maybe there was some other plan, something else they were waiting on. But... *Gone.* The ring of finality, the surety of the word suggested something permanent, something fatal. But the brief look at the prince. *Did* they mean dead? Or just... gone? Was someone, something coming to take him? *Any moment,* you wonder.

And now that Bǫlverkr has said it, it seems he and Lyngvir *are* anticipating something, standing and occasionally casting expectant gazes on the prince.
You lick your lips, thinking, worrying. Maybe your guess at poison was right. Maybe they’d forced some toxic draught down his throat, maybe he is already in the process of dying.

You turn your head to Loki and nearly startle, rooted to the spot, finding bright eyes open and looking back at you. They stare, owlish in the filmy darkness, betraying nothing though you know he’s heard every word, seen every action. Prince Loki looks away, breaking the connection that seemed to bore through you. And then, able to move again, you take your chance.

Leaping forward, you dash like mad across the clearing, sliding to a stop on your knees behind the tree trunk, by some stroke of luck avoiding being cut by the jostling of the blade at your waist. Your hands find the tie, working half blind to loosen the sap-sticky leather faster than the men can catch up, already hearing their confused mumbling behind you, gritting your teeth as you yank and pry at it.

Loki grunts in pain when his arms swing free, pushing up on his palms to find purchase, scrabbling backwards against the mud and detritus. You reach your hand down, an offer of help, and he, with a measuring look on his blood-streaked face, stares up at you for so long, you’re sure you’ll feel the blow from Bǫlverkr’s staff any second.

“Come on!” you shout, abandoning any pretense of muteness as you scowl down at the prince. There’s an an outraged gasp from Lyngvir, Bǫlverkr, you don’t care which, horrifically close. You don’t have time for this, for him to make some kind of second-guessed assessment. You shake your hand in vehement impatience. With a jerk of a nod, Prince Loki takes it.

And the world around you goes black.

Chapter End Notes

It’s just cliffhanger central here at IYKWtL isn’t it? So many questions. What will happen to our dear little reader and her enigmatic prince? What does the bead do? Thoughts? Predictions? Let me know! Hearing from you guys is the highlight of my week :)
Chapter Summary

In which culture shock is more like culture pleasant surprise. You return something, eat something you shouldn’t, and put on a grand show. Loki makes (up) a friend.

Chapter Notes

This chapter.... might actually be my favorite so far. But that’s all I’ll say :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suddenly, there is nothing. Nothing exists. And nothing exists everywhere. Where once stood a heavy-trunked spruce waving bristly, fragrant arms over your head, over Loki’s, where shifting nettlefall and rain-slicked loam were once scattered underfoot, where the prince’s grey-green eyes, burnished and unfathomable in the emberlight, once met yours like the edge of a river trembling over a precipice, there is now oblivion. Emptiness is all that’s extant, freezing the breath in your lungs, your fingers now clasping at naught, this blink of nonexistence surging with a tremendous weightlessness, veiling your senses like a pellicle of gossamer threads.

And then, just as suddenly, there is ground beneath your feet again, beneath your knees as you choke and stumble, cold weight in your hand falling away as you reach up to fist the cloth over your heart, chest heaving, and fight through the sudden bleariness of tears and the tightness of your throat.

It’s bright, you notice as you shift your weight to sit properly, still idly stroking the sleek fabric of your shirt, because it’s there, because you can feel it. Bright and dry and crisp, and not the kind of transient coolness brought about by the wet breath of rain, but the sharpness and tenacity of a true chill. Curiosity settles over the remnants of panic in your mind like ashes over defunct coals, and though you’re still shivery and willing back the impulse to retch, you look around.

Blanched, sweet-smelling grass up to your shins waves in a breeze like ripples of pale yellow water along rolling hillocks, upland of a grove of dapple-leaved fruit trees in neat rows. The sky shows no trace of storm, nor any cloud at all in its milky, muted blueness. Your renewed breathing stutters again as the strangeness, the jarring otherworldliness of the place catches up. This is nothing you recognize. This is... this is not Asgard.

You turn, remembering, to your companion, a desperate question on your tongue, but the prince seems unperturbed by whatever Norns-unwilling thing had just happened, and is regarding your
surroundings with what could pass as a sedate sort of interest. He looks wrecked: tangles of dripping black hair curling under his ears, clothes spattered with mud and moss and flecks of forest dross, wrists going purple beneath the abraded skin. As he stirs, feeling your gaze and returning it, you see that the whole left side of his face is a mess of drying blood trickling down from where it’s clumped up at his temple. As his eyes meet yours, you realize you have no idea what you want to say.

“Midgard.” He manages an even sort of curtness, though his voice is rougher than you remember.

You blink, thrown for a second at the intensity of his gaze, and then the meaning of the word sinks in. You chew your lip as you consider the entailment of that. Nearly alone on a whole other realm. Thousands of miles from your home. You’re not sure how that even happened.

Loki is still looking at you, or toward you, anyway, uncharacteristically lacking in blithe haughtiness, lashes stuck together and damp brows drawn, frowning like he’s reached some conclusion he doesn’t care for. The remoteness of his stare is almost as unsettling as whatever vacuum or unreality you’d passed through had been. You wrap your arms around your bent legs, trying to avoid the worst of the cold.

“You-“ he starts, then hesitates, eyes flicking to your feet in the grass, taking in the grime-caked shoes, the bloody remnants of blisters on your heels, the snags and little rips in the woven threads of your leggings. No doubt you’re in as sorry a state as he, you think, and the hair that’s clinging to the back of your neck starts to tickle. You want to duck away, to somehow hide from his sight, but there is nowhere to go, not really, so you settle for a deeply unimpressed glare.

He sighs, and starts again.

“Why did you help me?”

_Why did I-_  

The unbelieving half-formed thought dissipates with the dregs of your benignity as another shifts into your remembrance, this one speaking in that disdainful, polished-steel voice that you recall.

_Stupid, witless, cowardly._

Ah. And there it is, the reason for the poor prince’s confusion. Wondering how someone so
described could have done such a deed that wasn’t stupid, that might even be considered brave. A deed that he knows cost you something. No gratitude, no appreciation, just the bemusement of one regarding pieces of a puzzle that don’t add up. You turn your head away, eyes trained resolutely on the grass, on the long, swaying blades, focusing on that and not the straining of your clenched fists, the heat in your face, the further fraying of your already fragile nerves.

“I believe,” you say, once you can speak in a calm, numb tone. “That I owed you a favor. You seem the type to collect on your debts. I thought it might be in my best interest to settle the score.” You fling the words at him like arrows, no less sharp for their lack of inflection. It’s no coincidence that you let Bǫlvǫrkr’s words slide past your teeth.

It’s quiet for several heartbeats, nothing more than the rush of wind in your ears and brittle grass swishing in time.

“I see.”

And Loki is as blank as you’ve ever seen him as he rises to his feet, no indication of what he may be thinking infiltrating his facade. You don’t imagine for a moment that you’ve managed to actually hurt him, but the careful vacancy makes you suspect that your answer was somehow not what he was hoping for.

He walks away from you, and you watch, impassive and vaguely amused. He rolls his shoulders, his neck, combs through his hair like he has a hope of fixing it. His fingers pass through the back of it several times before he lets his hand drop. He doesn’t go far, not really, just roves up the gentle slope of the hillside until you can no longer hear the rustle of his steps or see the tension he carries in his back. Until you can breathe a little easier.

He lifts his face to the sky and stands still, though what he’s looking at, looking for, you’re not sure. There is nothing there but the washed out sun at its noontide peak.

His mouth moves like he’s saying something, and you tip your head inquisitively, but you can’t make it out, the words lost to the wind and distance. Loki waits, and nothing happens.

“Heimdall!” he shouts, and this time you can hear him call for the gatekeeper, hear the irritation in his demand. He crosses his arms.

There is no roar, no flash of light, no sign of the Bifrost whatsoever. Heimdall cannot hear him, or
perhaps is refusing to listen. You wonder, idly, how many people Prince Loki has managed to piss off.

He stalks back over to you, scowling as you simply sit in the grass feigning disinterest. Like it’s your fault he and Heimdall aren’t on speaking terms. Like he expects you to do something about it.

“Get up,” Loki hisses, impatient and strung, though he does graciously offer his hand. You eye it for a second, but take it, cold against your own, and he pulls you to your feet.

“Well?” He’s thrumming with something internally, you can feel it from where you stand far too near, coming off of him and filling the air like the smell of him, soot and pineblood and, well, real blood.

You step back, hiding a wince as the rim of your slipper, course with drying dirt, digs into your heel, and regard the prince coolly. You consider for a moment the borders of your spite, whether you’ll make him confess to his failure. Admit that he needs help, make him feel the weight of it. But no. You are not cruel. You are not like him.

You tip your head, letting your back face Loki along with all of your indifference. It’s cold, standing at this elevation, with the updraft buffeting you, feeling every point of contact with your drying clothes like ice on your skin. Still, as your hair flicks about your shoulders and loosens from its tie, you resolutely suppress a shiver and instead address the empty sky above.

“All-Seer,” you acknowledge meekly, Loki’s opposite in that regard, the virtue of being polite still intact from a lifetime of not being cosseted by riches beyond count. “Would you send the rainbow bridge for myself and,” your mouth quirks with the taste of requisite courtesy, “my prince?”

You wait, eyes searching, willing the sun’s weak rays to warm you.
His anger warms him. Midgard is colder than Asgard. It is not summer here. It suits Loki well, never one to take issue with the cold, not when it hides the uncertain tremble of his fingers as the sky stays discouragingly still and blank.

He runs his hands through his hair again, fingers sliding on instinct to the back of his neck, lingering there nearly mindlessly. He scratches lightly, as if to soothe an itch, but the feeling remains, like it’s buried beneath the skin. Loki frowns as his fingertips scrape over something on his neck, some bit of dirt or bark tangled in the strands. He reaches for it, touches it, and lets his hand fall away. He blinks, confusion clearing, and watches the sky once more.

A bird wheels overhead, a dark red-brown shape against the pallid backdrop, wingbeats slow and superfluous as it glides on the breeze. His eyes trace it for a long moment, the sole motion from above.

“Heimdall?” her voice calls again, tentative. She rubs at her arms, and when she turns to him again, a response not forthcoming, her eyes are wide and confused and just as scared as he is beginning to feel. Just as scared as he’s felt for a while now.

His mind, which had been welling up with suspicion, is now a flood of uneasy confirmation. Somehow, Heimdall’s omniscient gaze has, impossibly, found its limit at the very earth he stands on. Only ever has he been hidden from the Watcher’s view when he willed it, when he erected shields to hide behind as he slipped through the cracks and crevices and tight little corners that were known to him alone. But he is not shielding now, nor is the girl, and unless Heimdall is dead without replacement — which Loki knows is more improbable than even being lost to his reaches — there should be no reason for the calls to go unheeded. Heimdall, no matter how much he misliked and mistrusted Loki, at least would never leave the innocent girl stranded. He cannot see them. And they both know it.

Loki fights the unexpected urge to laugh, a wholly inappropriate thing with the situation being as unfunny as it is. But it’s all so much, and he craves some sort of release, and she’s looking at him like she thinks he can save her, so different from the scorching glower of earlier. Now she’s willing to play nice, now that she’s been leveled with reliance. And the most mockingly ironic part of it all, he thinks sardonically, is that he has nothing to offer.

Loki makes a show of pivoting on his heel and descending the hill. He shuffles his feet, following the cant of the earth and feeling for any loose rocks or burrowed holes filled with snakes or small rodents that might be hiding under all the grass and heath flowers growing in clumps.

He makes his way to the orchard, until he is walking among the small, lovely trees with leaves flashing silver as they’re moved by the wind. Each tree bears clusters of shiny pink fruits like ornaments, and up close, Loki can now make out that they are apples. Curiously, he plucks one and
admires its strange blushing shade, so unlike the green and gold apples of Asgard. He hears footsteps behind him and, with carefully even breathing, he turns, biting into the flesh of the fruit with a satisfying snap as he goes, and directs a questioning expression at his not fully welcome company.

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You watch Prince Loki crunch his way through his apple, eyebrow raised in challenge. When you don’t reply, don’t take the bait, he merely picks another fruit and tosses it your way. He’s obviously going for unaffected, and snarkily so, but you’d seen him freeze, seen the half second of uncertainty at the prolonged expectant silence skyward. Or perhaps, it was certainty after all. Heimdall would not, could not answer. But it had been there, wavering on his face with a strange sort of openness, unhidden for the smallest moment.

Truthfully, it was an echo of how you’d been feeling. Vulnerable. Exposed among the barren stretch of hills, though walking amongst the rows of apple trees eases that some. Bitterness recedes to a reluctant dribble of compassion as your eyes roam the crusted over, scabbing trail of blood marring his cheek, the dark bloom of a bruise seeping under his eyebrow. It is not, you exhale jaggedly, his fault. The cloying fear, the exhaustion, the raw volatility are all the residual fallout of something so far beyond either of your control, and until you can figure out another way home, it’s probably best not to poke at the sensitive bits that Loki is keeping determinedly guarded.

Instead, you delicately bite at the apple while contemplating a peace offering of your own.

“You’re hurt,” you say, somewhat lamely after you swallow a sweet mouthful.

Loki blinks, like he’d forgotten what must have been at least a significant amount of pain.

“Not terribly.” He shrugs and raises a hand to wave it over his temple, much like he’d done before when healing your gashed cheek.

Somehow the knowledge of his magic had lapsed your mind. Somehow it had lapsed his. And it was so obvious, too. Loki, if nothing else, is one tricky bastard. Of course he’d be able to wriggle out of
this whole mess with his sorcery. Another reason antagonizing him is a stupid idea.

But, also like before, the wound does not disappear. Only this time, it doesn’t even begin to close, does not change at all. Loki touches the spot, examines his now bloody fingers, and tries again. He tries to heal his wrists next when that doesn’t work, and it’s clear by the frustration on his face, the jerky manner his movements have adapted, that he is unable to do so much as stop the bleeding with his magic. Doesn’t seem to be able to do anything with magic whatsoever.

The thought thuds in your chest like your rapid heartbeat, the annoyance and concentration on the prince’s face freezing into something much more helpless and wary. Because now, undeniably, you’re trapped, the open hills and empty sky as your cage. The last vestiges of any means of escape have utterly crumbled, and you have nothing but the ragged clothes on your back, a very limited knowledge of Midgard, the ambivalence of the comity between yourself and the prince, and the sores on your ankles.

And then, before you can fully comprehend any of it, someone is shouting.

“Hey!”

You recoil, and Loki moves out of sight behind the tree, dropping the remainder of his apple.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the voice shouts again, steadily closer and lilting in a very foreign cadence.

And then you remember the one other thing you do have, even if it is not your own. You pull the tiny knife from its inapt sheath, where it has somehow not bitten into your skin. You hesitate for a moment, bejeweled handle pressing into your palm. Then you flip the blade and hold it out, offering the haft to Loki.

His eyes flick between it and your face, no small amount of surprise on his own, and maybe he’s even a bit impressed. He takes it, fingers wrapping around it like the gesture brings him comfort, and he nods once and steps between you and the approaching figure, who you now can see is a small, fizzle-haired man with pieces of glass fixed over his eyes and a beard longer than the Allfather’s.

“You can’t just eat those without paying! I don’t know why you kids these days think you can just—Hey, easy! There’s no need to be waving that things around, mister!”
He stops, hands on his hips as he glares up at Prince Loki’s face, brashly unintimidated by the dagger held out toward his middle.

The dumbfounded look on Loki’s face would have been comical any other time, but you’re just as confounded. The man is laughably unthreatening, old and short and mortal as his is, yet still undaunted, and he’s certainly not attacking. Loki lets the arm holding the knife drop, then he puts it away entirely and grimaces apologetically.

“I’m sorry, sir. I ask you forgive my impudence. It’s just, my friend and I,” he indicates you with a flick of his hand — and you’ve really got to commend his acting skills, because his bashful contrition and entreat ing tone are flawless, only given away as insincere by the stark contrast to anything else you’ve seen from him — “We seem to be lost, and perhaps unduly suspicious.” He licks his lips, projecting a mien of anxiety that melts the indignant hardness from the man’s face. “We were attacked,” he admits, and the mingling of truth in the tale lends credence and the old man’s sympathy is tangible. “We had not meant to steal from you.”

“You’re not from around here, are you?” he asks softly, and for once, you’re actually grateful for your unkempt appearance, because he takes it in as a reason to be kind to you. And maybe you should feel guilty for taking advantage of that, but... well, strictly speaking, Loki had not lied.

“We... we aren’t entirely sure where here is, truth be told, sir,” you say, following Loki’s lead with a wide-eyed, frightened expression, coming forward to stand beside the prince. “Is there anything we can do to repay you for taking what belongs to you?”

The man swats the air as if batting away the question.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just a couple of apples. You kids have obviously been through a lot, by the looks of you. Come with me, and I’ll fix you up a couple of hot ciders and you can tell me about it,” he offers, indicating with a tilt of his head that you should follow as he begins picking his way through the patches of flat, sandy ground between the rows of trees. You do follow, Prince Loki right behind, and the man continues. “We’re in northeastern Connecticut, by the way.”

“Ah,” you say, even though that means nothing to you.

“Name’s Charlie. Rude of me not to introduce myself to begin with,” he tells you, and after exchanging a brief glance, you and Loki do the same. “Where are you from, then?” he asks, and it occurs to you that your name and accent are likely just as unusual to his ear as his are to yours.
“Asgard,” Loki replies.

“‘Fraid I’ve never heard of it,” Charlie says, seeming chipper now that he’s not held at knifepoint. “Scandinavian?”

“...Yes,” says Loki haltingly, and you let him. You’ve no idea what or where Scandinavia is, but Loki at least knows enough about this realm to recognize it.

“Thought as much.”

Charlie leads you to a small cabin of unvarnished wood, flanked by round orange gourds in crates and on rows of hay bales and pots of yellow flowers scattered about. There’s a sign that says Apple Shack on the slanted roof, and as you walk through the door, you’re greeted by warmth that swells in your bones, a sweetly spicy scent, and baskets of apples in every shade imaginable set out on display. Shelves of goods line the walls, full of jars of jams and relishes, bottles of syrups, sauces, and honeys, and jugs of all sorts of apple themed beverages. Up front, where Charlie directs you, is a glass case of pastries, some domed and studded with dried fruits and nuts, others ring shaped and dusted with sugar, and some swirled golden and brown and sliced like bread.

Charlie hands you each a very strange soft white cup that squeaks as you sip from it, filled with warm amber liquid that is simply divine. He also offers you one of the ring shaped pastries, a doughnut, he calls it, because there’s “nothin’ finer to enjoy with cider.” He’s right, of course, and can’t seem to help his pleased smile as both you and Loki eat with gusto.

As you savor the apple nectar, letting its heat soak into you and chase away the chill from within, you tell him what happened, as best you can, omitting details here and there that probably are best left unsaid. Your humble charade would be dashed if Loki were to proclaim himself prince, after all. And while you and Loki relate a mostly veracious story of being in the woods, getting kidnapped and tied up — you had, after all. The exact timing of it wasn’t pertinent, was it? — and a momentary blackness that you pass off as unconsciousness — because if you don’t truly know what it was, then this mortal man must not have the words either — before waking up in the field near the Shack, Charlie procures a cloth and a bag filled with ice for Loki’s black eye and some gauze bandages for your ankles.

My friend, you contemplate as you watch Loki dab the blood from his temple. It was certainly an interesting choice of pretext. For as well as you collaborate your story, weaving little pieces together seamlessly, without the fumbling you’d expect from a fabrication being spun, he has not once looked your way through the duration of the it, in a manner that feels deliberate and far from friendly, his back rigid as he stands beside you, stiff and uncomfortable and telling of the travesty.
You notice, with a jolt, that Charlie is also paying attention to Loki with what can only be described as a knowing look on his face. You hold your breath, waiting for him to call you out, to withdraw his hospitality. But... he doesn’t seem angry. A bit frustrated, perhaps, but not unkindly so. Almost as if he thinks Loki is being ridiculous about something. You have a second to be very perplexed by that — and isn’t *that* a first — before Charlie sighs.

“Where does it hurt?” he asks Loki, eyes going stern as he folds his arms over his chest.

You turn your head at that, nonplussed, and Loki’s shoulders rise the slightest bit more before he assumes a confused expression, forehead bunching in the center.

“I... what?” Loki raises the ice to his head meaningfully, a rather polite way of pointing out the obvious.

Charlie, unswayed, looks at you and rolls his eyes in solidarity that goes over your head.

“Men,” he says, shaking his head in exasperation and giving you a wink that makes you crack a smile, regardless of your bewilderment. “Always with the ego.” To Loki he adds, “The lady isn’t gonna think less of you for being in pain. So what is it? Back? Ribs? Side? Where does it hurt?”

Loki manages to look both indignant and sheepish, opening his mouth as if to argue before relenting with a huff. For your part, you frown at him and hope the expression comes off as concerned and disapproving. Truly, you had no idea that he was hurt beyond what you had seen. But it does distract from the fact that if it weren’t for the whole escape attempt turned realm traveling escapade, you and the prince wouldn’t even be on speaking terms with each other.

“I have some bruising on my ribs. It’s nothing major and there’s not much to be done about it.”

*Tetchy,* you think as you raise your eyebrows. And just to solidify the illusory friendship, you decide to pick at it. No other reason, of course.

“Nothing major, Loki?” And don’t you just lay it on thick with the *I can’t believe you were hiding this from me* eyes and the *cut the bullshit* tone. “Last time you said that, you had three broken fingers.” He scowls, ostensibly sullen at not getting away with the attempt to negate the severity of his injuries, but his eyes are dark in a way that tells you he’s wise to your scheme and won’t thank you for it. “Well?” you prompt, not for a second letting your gaze fall from the prince’s as you stoke the flames a bit more. “Show me.” And *oh,* if looks could kill...
“I don’t think that’s necessary,” he hedges. He takes a step back and he looks distressed, enough so that you feel just the slightest twinge of guilt. But, now that you’re really paying it attention, his breathing is shallower than it should be, and his free hand is flexing like he wants to reach up and clutch at his middle. He turns to Charlie, probably imploring him to let the issue drop, but if anything, Charlie just seems more persistent.

“You heard the lady. If it’s as fine as you say it is, it shouldn’t be an issue, and if it’s worse...” He lets the rest hang.

“But,” he protests, flicking his eyes to the windows of the shop and wetting his lips, “couldn’t anyone come in?”

And yeah, there is that. You’d pretty much demanded he take off his shirt, and you can see why he might be reluctant to have just anyone walk in on that, even if you hadn’t pegged him as a particularly shy type. Clearly, he’s not even comfortable with just you and Charlie, which, also, is fair.

“One moment,” Charlie says and walks to the door, flipping around a hanging sign so it declares the place closed to the outside, and then he makes his rounds of the windows, pulling on cords that make some very clever sort of curtains made of suspended, flat rungs that obscure the view but still let light in drop over the panes of glass. “Not anymore.” He returns and offers Loki a shrug that’s understanding, but inflexible, because he knows he’s just trampled Loki’s last excuse.

If there is a way to undo buttons resentfully, Loki does it, keeping his eyes on the floor and pressing his lips together as he works to open the front of his tunic. He slides his arm out of his left sleeve, letting that half of the tunic fall behind his body, but he keeps the other side as is on the uninjured part of his chest, retaining a sliver of modesty.

As it turns out, you were right to question the sincerity of “nothing major,” because Loki’s ribs are patchy pink and red, with two very dark parallel lines of bruising at the base of his rib cage on either side of a raised stripe of swollen, yellowy flesh. Your eyes widen in realization. Those bastards had actually hit him with the staff, and pretty damn hard by the looks of it. It’s enough to make you grimace in sympathy.

“Are they broken?” Charlie asks, sounding strained.

“Yes,” you say at the same time Loki says “No.”
He glares at you, and you glare back, unapologetic.

“What makes you think I’ve never seen broken ribs before? I’ve \textit{had} broken ribs before.”

“I don’t believe the bones are fractured. Just the surrounding tissue is damaged,” he grits out. “I’ve broken ribs before as well.”

You frown in thought at that, considering the injury again to try to determine the extent of the damage. But, it seems, just a quick glance isn’t enough evidence. Nothing for it.

You step up to Loki and raise a hand to give an experimental tap to one of the less busted up looking areas. He jerks away with a staggered breath that ends in painful sounding cough. For a second, he looks furious, and you wonder if he’d actually lash out at you.

“That hurts?” you ask. If even that slight a touch was so painful...

“Of course it does! What do you expect?”

You gently press on another spot instead of answering. You ignore the tiny flinches and contractions of muscle under your fingertips as you repeat the process across his chest, although you give a wide berth around the welt.

“Do you feel any grinding, anything like the bones are moving in a way they shouldn’t be?” you ask.

“I do actually know how to do this myself,” Loki snaps.

You sigh, about to repeat the question and ensure you get a definite answer, but Charlie is quicker.

“Then why haven’t you?” he challenges, and Loki stares hard at the floor again.
“It may be worse than I first thought,” he admits, and really, he makes it seem more painful than the bruising.

‘It may be’, you think sarcastically, but charitably don’t voice aloud. You sigh again and snatch the ice pack from the counter where Loki had set it aside to undress and hold it against the strike mark.

“Do you have any more of those gauze bandages?” you ask Charlie without turning toward him.

“Actually, I’ve got something better,” he says and he goes to retrieve whatever it is, footsteps fading into the room in the back of the building.

Once he’s gone, you level Loki a look with as much patience as you can manage, which isn’t a lot, since frustration may as well be running through your veins, but you suspect half of the prince’s crabiness is due to pain, which you know from experience is no small amount.

“Are they broken?” Your tone warns him not to lie.

He hesitates, nostrils flaring and still sour-faced as ever. But he does say, eventually, more quietly than you’d expect, “I don’t think so.”

You nod, believing him, and keep the ice pack pressed against him as Charlie returns and hands you a roll of a long, elastic band of material.

“Lift your arms,” you instruct, waiting for him to comply before removing the ice to focus on unrolling the wrap. “Deep breath in, and hold it.”

Loki tries, really, but it’s clear that it causes him a lot of pain, and each time after he draws in a bit of air, he keeps coughing it back out involuntarily.

“A little at a time. Work your way up,” Charlie advises, and he tries that, arms shaking as he holds them out.

As soon as Loki manages to fill his lungs all the way, or nearly so, you set to work wrapping his chest, passing the stretchy bandage around his back and under the hanging, still damp tunic, around
and around, feeling awkward as you work, and keeping your attention steadily on the bandage, and not on the surprisingly warm skin your hands brush against from time to time. Eventually, you fix the end of the wrap with the little claw-like hooks it came with to part of the strip, and step back in relief.

Loki lets out the breath he was holding, followed by prolonged coughing, which he tries to stifle.

“Don’t. Coughing is good. It keeps your lungs clear.”

“Hurts,” Loki manages through his truly awful sounding hacking.

“Which is why I brought these,” Charlie tosses a bottle at him that rattles when he catches it. “Take two.”

Loki puzzles out the cap and eventually tips two of the tablets from the bottle into his palm and swallows them dry.

You pick the ice back up and hand it to Loki once he’s done setting his tunic back to rights.

“Thank you, Charlie, for the generosity you’ve bestowed on us and the aid you’ve given. We will not impose on your goodwill any further, but if you could point us in the direction of the nearest inn, we’d be much obliged.” Loki dip his head deeply to the old man and his impeccable manners and respect are far less simulate than they had been at first.

You, too, bow lightly to Charlie and thank him, and he returns your warm smile.

“No need for all that, you two. I’m just glad I can help. There’s an inn just up the road, in fact, within walking distance, even for you,” he nods at Loki.

He points you in the right direction, and slips you each an apple “for the road” and with a last farewell, you head out toward the inn.

Chapter End Notes
Please note that wrapping up broken or bruised ribs is actually NOT recommended, because it constricts breathing, which can lead to pneumonia and other complications. But as a plot device...

If you have never experienced autumn in New England, you are truly missing out on one of life’s great joys.

The Apple Shack is based on a real place by a slightly different name, and there is actually an inn up the road.

Not that it’s relevant to the story, but I like to imagine Charlie has sort of a Boston accent.
Chapter Summary

In which Loki makes a few audacious remarks and gives you a “cute” nickname. You come to a few realizations and give Loki some information.

Chapter Notes

One week until Endgame. Who else is ready? Trick question, I’m not!

Anyway, this chapter was another example of Loki being very fun to write, so enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Loki’s thumb traces the blunt corners and smooth facets of the emeralds overspreading the interlaced silver handle of his knife. There are black streaks of tarnish forming on the metal. Loki knows this because he is looking at it with the sort of over-attentiveness that comes to him when his thoughts are too numbered and turbulent to efficaciously sort through, tossed about his head like water in an upset bucket.

The stretchy wrapping around his chest presses against his ribs as he breathes, confining him to quick, shallow pants and the trifling, quietly smoldering anxiety that comes with not enough air. But when he tries for deeper, soothing lungfuls, his chest clenches up and aches and all the air is expelled in a rush of coughing so ragged it leaves him lightheaded and his whole side burns with the movement of it. It’s... it’s scary, in a way he doesn’t want to admit to, not even to himself, because it should not be so. Sure, he’d had his fair share and then some of injuries severe enough to merit a visit to Eir to have the healer patch him up — more often than not involving Thor somehow — but that was for head injuries and blood loss, and that one unfortunate time with the aurochs, never something so petty as bruises.

But his ribs are much worse than they have any right to be, and the sense of dread that’s been creeping like frost across his nerves now freezes solid, makes him tense against the need to shiver.

He scratches at a clump of dirt dried in a crevice with the side of his nail, watches it break apart and fall into the wind.

Whatever had happened to him, to his magic, is making him weak and vulnerable. His sole defense lies in his hand, the meager blade of one small dagger. Perhaps it is all he needs. Perhaps he won’t
need even so much. But uncertainty casts a much bigger shadow with the knowledge that it may not be enough.

His other hand holds the bag that Charlie had given him, now mostly water, to the worst of the bruising, the cold of it dulling the pain and, with any luck, reducing the swelling also. With any luck, the analgesics the man had given him will take effect soon. Loki hates that in particular, that he can’t just grit his teeth like he wants to, just push through. He hates it nearly as much as having his authority, by both title and autonomy, challenged.

He feels eyes on him, and he turns his head without slowing his not quick but staunch, trudging pace, the black pavement of the road crackling with each step.

“What?” Loki’s voice is hoarse and comes out closer to a bark than anything. He covers it up with a glare, not feeling particularly magnanimous.

She blinks, surprised. Caught, more like. He sneers at her for good measure, and she looks away, her scarred cheek prominent in her profile. He lets his eyes trace the length of it, feeling something squirm in his gut, something he does not recognize.

Her mouth presses into a thin, frustrated line.

“Nothing,” she bites back.

Loki raises his eyebrows.

“I beg your pardon?”

Her head snaps toward him at that, hair loose and swirling, mouth slightly gaped. Her eyes flick over his face like she’s trying to figure him out. He looks back at his knife. Clearly, she has not figured out what it is she’s done.

If he cannot command respect, then perhaps he can tease it out of her by impressing the need for it.

“Is that any manner to talk to a prince? Or have you forgotten already to whom you speak?”
The metal is warm under his palm, cold where his hand does not touch, and as he wraps and rewraps his fingers around it, shifting his hold in increments, the contrast is a sharp and pleasant distraction. But he notices, nonetheless, when the second set of scuffing feet have ceased their movement, and he stops as well, listening to the silence.

“My apologies, my prince.”

It’s terse and barbed and dismal all at once, but she does start walking again. He has gotten under her skin, it would seem. He tries not to feel too pleased. Which isn’t hard, he realizes as the sunlight glints off the shiny hilt, worn smooth from years of use, because he does not feel pleased at all.

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The inn is small, the old yet picturesque building tucked away in a corner between a dress shop and a teahouse, paneled in light blue with darker shutters and brick chimneys. A sign is posted by the front, wooden and weathered, with the words *The Primitive Raven Inn* in chipped black paint.

Loki stares at it, stares at the painted silhouettes of a pair of ravens that look hauntingly, impossibly familiar, identical in shape to two such birds he had known intimately. The beady eyes of Huginn and Muninn — for who else could they be? — seem to follow his movement, watching him, and he wonders, trepid, hopeful, if his father can see him here, if the Midgard ravens would return from their long absence, fly back to Odin’s shoulders and whisper in his ears of his lost son.

But then Loki blinks, and the figures on the sign are just two birds.

***

Prince Loki hesitates at the entrance, one foot on a rickety stair and his attention toward the sudden point of focus he’s found, inexplicably, in the denominative sign. A brief moment later, he’s shaken off whatever distracted wariness had taken hold, and you pretend not to notice, and merely wait for
him to continue on his way with a slight bow that feels petty even as you’re coming up from it. But it’s the respectful thing to do, ostensibly, even if there’s nothing respectful about your motives.

The inside of the building is a mishmash of richly colored rugs, patterned walls with framed paintings and shelves of vases and baubles, floral curtains and striped couches, and a winding staircase with polished wooden railing in the center. It’s dizzying, and walks the line between garish and quaint, but it smells like blueberries and it’s out of the wind, and there’s a cheery fire in a hearth. Before long a woman comes out of a kitchen area with a smile on her face to greet you and Loki.

“Hello there!” She takes in the sight of you with easy grace, hardly seeming bothered before saying, in a bubbly way that’s genuine enough, “I guess you’re looking for a room for a night or two. Do you have a reservation?”

Loki steps toward her, a grin of his own on his face and his dagger nowhere in sight.

“I’m afraid we do not. I hope that isn’t a problem?”

He sounds sorry enough, polite enough, but the confident expression, the head cocked just so, the pleasant upturn of his lips all register as roguish, in a way distinctly and — to you — uncomfortably charming.

And the woman, the poor woman, drinks it in.

“No worries,” she rushes to assure him, leaving you to sink into the background of blurry afterthought, as she directs her words almost solely to Loki. “We’re not completely booked. You came just in time; we’ve still got a room open.” And she does look at you then, as if upon sudden consideration, and it registers that there is only one room available. “It’s one with two full-sized beds, not a queen or a king. Is that alright with you and your,” she pauses, obviously trying not to sound presumptuous, “lady friend?”

As if that’s the only issue there could possibly be. Not that she would know just how unpleasant a night sharing a room with Loki would be, for both of you, apparently, since the prince seems to treat everyone he meets with more courtesy than he’s ever directed at you, since he seems determined to disparage you at every turn, and you don’t understand why. A perfect stranger gets his good graces and you get his claws, even though you’re stuck here together and you’d saved his life and helped patch him up. A rough night indeed, you think bitterly.
“What, no prince-sized beds?” Prince Loki quips, and the woman laughs, tossing her head back, even though that can’t have made sense to her, damn her.

“Unfortunately, all those rooms were booked,” she returns easily.

Loki flashes his teeth at her, a reward for the banter, before he turns to you. And then he winks, at you, whatever weird mood he’d fallen into earlier completely and bafflingly absent. You have a stretched second to catch on, enough time to think No, but not enough to intervene.

“Well, it’s not ideal, I admit, but it shall suffice.” Damn him. It shall do no such thing! “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride, and all that,” Loki sighs, and looks at you again, seeming wistful but for the sparkle in his eyes. “I suppose we could always push the two beds together.”

It’s all you can do to hold something approximating a neutral face, or perhaps just one that’s not caught between ire, mortification, and disbelief. It’s a good thing you gave the dagger back to him, or who knows what you’d be tempted to do for that unnecessary insinuation.

“There’s always that,” the woman agrees cheerfully, not at all deterred from her enchanting chat with Loki, who, if anything, seems to soak up her attention just as much. It’s... you’re not entirely sure what it is, but you don’t like it. It just... feels off. “Can I get a name?” she asks.

“For business or for pleasure?” Loki offers immediately, though it’s clearly meant as a joke, because he follows, just as quickly, with “Odinson. Loki Odinson.”

At that the woman does let her smile drop, just fractionally, her eyes drifting to the side in thought. “Loki...” she says like the name has caught her memory and she’s trying to place it. “Like the god?” she asks conversationally, as she puts down his surname in a little booklet of papers bound together, presumably for record keeping.

Loki leans toward her, grin impossibly wide.

“Yes, exactly. Loki, the god.” He holds out his hand, positively buzzing with magnetism. “May I have yours?”

She eyes him a moment, as if aware of the undercurrent of mischief, and says, “You can call me Kathy,” as she takes his hand. If she was expecting a shake, she shouldn’t have been, because Loki,
Prince Loki, presses a kiss to her knuckles, the gesture both genteel and evocative, and how he manages that you may never know.

Kathy blushes at that, utterly delighted, but she seems to rein it in, with a quick glance at you.

“How many nights are you planning on staying, Mr. Odinson?” There is no less enjoyment in her demeanor and tone, but she does take a step back and insert some professionalism, which you feel is long overdue.

And that presents another issue. You have no money to offer, no way to pay for even one night. And unless Prince Loki thinks he can charm his way into a free room — and you really, really, hope that’s not the angle he’s going for — one of you is going to have to come up with something, quickly.

And instead of answering Kathy, and consequently answering your unspoken worry, Loki pulls out his dagger and, with reluctance obvious despite his attempts to smother it, wedges a nail under one of the gems and pries it up. He holds it out to Kathy, bright green and as large as his thumbnail.

“How many nights will this cover?” And his eyes, bright green and narrowed in smug satisfaction watch as Kathy openly gasps in amazement, reaching out and then pulling her hand back as if she dare not touch the emerald, before snatching it up and holding it to the light.

“Is... is this real?” she marvels, turning it this way and that and finding no fault with it.

“It is.”

“I... You... Stay as long as you’d like!” Kathy gushes, looking between the emerald and Loki like she’s hoping she won’t wake from a dream. “Make yourselves at home, Mr. Odinson and Ms...” she trails off, because you have not given your name. You open your mouth to provide it, but Loki answers first.

“In-Hvassa.” The lie rolls easily off his tongue, so smooth you can not determine if it’s meant as an insult to you — or, as unlikely as it sounds, a compliment — some strange attempt at humor, or if you’d simply misheard.

Kathy doesn’t bat an eye, doesn’t understand, doesn’t recognize it as anything other than a surname,
even as you fail to make sense of it.

“It’s the second room on the left, room 202” she tells you, somewhat distractedly. “Breakfast is at 7 am, and dinner will be at 5, so you’ve still got a few hours until then, but you can feel free to the leftovers from this morning if you’re hungry in the meantime. And there are several little dive-type restaurants nearby in the Quiet Corner, if that’s your thing.” She looks up, at both of you, with a heartfelt smile, holding up the emerald with a little wave. “And, thank you.”

You do take her up on the offer of food, filling a couple of plates with thin slices of cured salmon, some soft white cheese, hard cooked eggs, and various greens, and grabbing the uneaten end of a loaf of crusty, oat-strewn brown bread. You carry most of it, and Loki doesn’t fight you over it.

You follow him up the stairs, the curve of them leaving you slightly off balance, with soft carpet muffling your feet. He opens a door with a plaque engraved with 202 on it, and you step into a room that’s far more subdued and comfortable looking than the downstairs areas. Aside from the beds, that is, side by side with only a scant arm’s length and a tiny table between them, which are too close for comfort. If anything, you want to move them farther apart.

The walls are pale green with textured ferns and leaves. There’s a large mirror on one wall, above a black desk, and there are several lamps, paintings, and windows around the room, and even an armchair in one corner. The wood floor creaks beneath you, but it’s an almost pleasant sound, and it reminds you of your home.

You flop down gracelessly on the bed farthest from the door and hand Loki a plate of the food without a word, breaking the piece of bread and handing him one half. He perches against the iron headboard of his bed and absently peels the shell off an egg. When he had zoned out before, he’d been sulky and miffed, but now he just seems... tired, perhaps. Not entirely in a bad way. Whatever perkiness he’d been injecting into his badinage with Kathy had probably been forced.

When you’ve finished your food, you set your plate on the intermediate table and turn toward the prince, who is picking at his food more than eating it, even though he must be hungry.

“Are you alright?” You ask it softly, neither pitying nor pushing.

Unexpectedly, Loki doesn’t seem bothered by the question. He merely looks up at you briefly, before picking up a chunk of bread topped with the salmon.
“I’m feeling better than I was,” he answers before taking another bite. “Thank you.”

And just like that, you’re yet again feeling like you don’t know at all this man before you, who is ever changing and continues to surprise you at every turn with his artful pretending and scarcely perceptible maneuvering. The prince with the sideways, shifting nature of a serpent and the grin of a wolf, at once brave and skittish, vicious and affable in turn. But somehow, that quiet response did not seem like a mask.

“Would you like to bathe first?” you offer, the hard set of your heart strangely thawed. You’re beyond tired as well, apparently, too tired for idle pettiness. And, well, he had said thank you. “I’ll help you with the bandage when you’re done. If you’d like,” you hurry to add, “my prince."

Loki sets his plate aside and nods. He rises to his feet slowly and carefully and makes his way to the washroom, and as he shuts the door behind him, you feel a flicker of genuine anxiety, because you know Loki is the proud sort, and if he’s not able to muster up a little strength to try to hide the limp in his step, then things must be considerably worse than a normal case of contused ribs. You wonder what exactly Bǫlverkr and Lyngvir did to him to increase his pain exponentially. And, well, the blow from the staff probably didn’t help, you think with a wince.

The distant sound of running water fills the room with a backdrop of steady noise, like a calm rain on a roof, and you might have been inclined to nod off if you weren’t so distracted by a storm of thoughts crashing through your mind like thunder.

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Loki lets the bandage fall to the tile floor with a sigh of relief and inhales blissfully warm and steamy air, feeling his chest loosen. The pain has been blunted by the medication he’d taken, and he takes advantage of the opportunity to just breathe.

He stands in front of the mirror, running his fingers over the swelling and bruises, and watching his reflection start to fog. It does look dreadful, he realizes, worse than he’d been able to determine from the glimpse he’d caught earlier. But, truly, the bones don’t feel broken, and he supposes he will heal, eventually.
As he lets the warm water cascade over his head and body, lets it wash him and lull him into a calm, sleepy haze, the redolent scent of the shampoo wafting over him, he realizes he does know what’s wrong after all. His assailants hadn’t prevented him from using his magic. They had, somehow, taken it away, or else suppressed it to the point where he was effectively mortal.

Eventually, he is clean, and immensely refreshed for it, and he wraps himself up in a fluffy, towel-like robe, tying it loosely around his waist. After hanging his cloak up and stacking his dirty clothing on a wire rack to deal with later, he exits the bathroom and steps into the cooler, dryer air of the main bedroom, bandage in hand.

The girl, In-Hvassa, he had aptly called her, he recalls with no small trace of amusement, sits with her arms around her knees on the armchair, legs pulled up in a way that doesn’t look entirely comfortable, but when she looks up and sees him, she stands and steps toward him, reaching for the bandage.

“Not yet,” he tells her, sounding a bit too much like a command he hadn’t meant it as. “It won’t hurt to leave it off a little bit longer. You may bathe first.”

She dips her head with a murmured, “Yes, sir,” and ducks into the bathroom. It makes Loki grit his teeth, the propriety. It doesn’t suit her at all, especially not on Midgard of all places, where he truly is not a prince. But it’s better than that miserable, hateful look she keeps giving him, that one that echoes the first of such looks, the one that hurt more than it should have, the accusation of monster implicit. An accusation that he can only go so far in denying. What reason has he given her to believe otherwise?

She returns before much time has passed, quicker than he had been yet still longer than an average shower would be, plenty of time undoubtedly spent scrubbing every inch and basking in how good it feels to not be dirty and chilled. She also is swathed in a white robe identical to his, toweling at the ends of her hair. She sits facing him on the edge of his bed, drapes the towel over her shoulders, and silently picks up the bandage. Loki wriggles out of the top part of his robe to give her better access and holds as still as he can.

She’s not one for undue scrutiny, and Loki is grateful, not liking having a bit of cloth over his lap as his only clothing at the moment, not liking the exposure, the lack of even such a flimsy protection. Her hands are soft and gentle and methodical, and she does not poke around this time as she rewraps the bandage about his chest.

“What exactly happened?” Her voice is quiet despite her nearness. “How we got here, I mean. What was that? Do you know?”
Loki is not sure he does, not entirely. It was some form of transit that spans realms, some second-hand teleportation obviously meant for Loki that she had gotten in the crosshairs of. Loki tells her as much, but as for the how of it, the way Bólnverkr or Lyngvir or someone had managed to do so, he cannot say. Especially without them touching him whilst doing so.

“They said you’d be ‘gone.’ I didn’t realize they meant it so literally,” she says, a touch of wry humor returning as she clasps the end of the bandage. She scoots back, leaving him room to wrestle his arms back in his sleeves, but she stays sitting on the bed.

“I suppose what remains to be answered is why they’d want me gone.”

Loki turns to her, expectant.

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_He knows_. You’re not sure how, but there is no mistaking that keen gaze. He wants you to provide that answer, and he knows that you _can_. That’s... awfully astute of him, actually.

You’re not sure where to begin. Ülle, treason, Prince Thor... _oh Ymir, Prince Thor_. He is in danger. Distantly so, you hope severely. Ülle had mentioned a baby. That would take at least some amount of time. And surely the Allfather wouldn’t marry Prince Thor off the second Loki went missing. There would be more time on that for searching, for mourning. And that’s a bleak thought, because they’d have no choice but to presume the prince dead, and you as well, if anyone even noticed you were missing. Your family would eventually, you suppose. There is no telling how long any of that would take, how long before time is up and Thor is the second prince dead to Asgard. How long before you’d figure out a way back, if it would be soon enough or... or not. You don’t want to think about the not.

“There’s a conspiracy,” you say matter-of-factly once you’ve sorted through your thoughts well enough to begin. “To supplant an illegitimate ruler on the Allfather’s throne.” You gauge his reaction, waiting for some subtle sign in his watchful, intense eyes. “A Vanir ruler.”
“Ülle.” It is no question. He knows it just as easily as you’d meant him to. “How are you sure of this?”

“I heard her, as well as the ones called Bǫlverkr and Lyngvir and one other, an older woman, discussing it. They thought nothing of my presence. For whatever reason, Ülle thought me to be incapable of speech, and they seemed eager to dismiss a mute servant, believing I’d be unable to tell anyone about it even if I’d wanted to. They planned to get rid of you somehow. Ülle said something about bestowing you a gift. I... I don’t know what she meant by that.” You frown, because Bǫlverkr had that pouch, and he must have done something with whatever was inside it, and it must somehow be connected to all this. Loki clears his throat, prompting you to continue — or perhaps stifling a cough — but you do nonetheless, shaking off the trepidation for the moment. “She plans to marry Prince Thor, with you out of the way. Have his baby and stick him on the throne. ‘Vanaheim will have the throne’ is what the woman said. Then,” you pause to take a steadying breath, “then they mean to kill Prince Thor.”

Loki is unable to stop a small flinch at that, just a flicker of his eyes pinching shut for a moment, but it’s there, earning a twist of sympathy from your chest. As much as you like and venerate the crown prince, and don’t want to see anything terrible happen to him, Loki is his brother, and, well, you can imagine how difficult it would be to hear of a plan to have your brother killed.

Then Loki’s black eyebrows furrow with a sudden, confused thought, and he blinks at you.

“How did you know where to find me?”

You don’t quite manage to stop a sudden laugh at that, because it so is not what you were expecting, and it would be hard to explain, if that were the case. Most people wouldn’t have even known to begin looking in the forest for him, let alone the exact location within. You certainly hadn’t. However your feet had managed to wander on the right tracks, whatever had led you to the smoke trail and the ravine had been too faultless to be mere serendipity. Perhaps fate, the Norns, whatever higher power there may or may not be, had pushed you in the direction you were meant to go.

“I didn’t.” He jerks his head up with a sharp look at you, and you hold up a finger, asking him not to interrupt while you explain. He closes his mouth and nods for you to speak, which is the second sort of respectful thing he’s done in the last hour, and you... appreciate it. “I looked everywhere in the palace first, or at least it felt like everywhere. I wouldn’t know, exactly, I suppose, I’m not all that familiar with the layout.” You tuck a damp lock of hair behind your ear. That was as close to admitting that you had been completely lost in the halls as you are going to get, even though you don’t doubt Loki’s ability to see right through it. “But I... I couldn’t find anyone, not a single person. I had... I had seen Prince Thor earlier;” and you try not to flush at that, or let on just how much else you’d seen — or heard — then. If he doesn’t know you had eavesdropped, you certainly aren’t
going to tell him. “I thought he should have been around somewhere, but he wasn’t, and no one was.” You look at Loki, remembered distress on your face and in your voice. “There should have been someone, shouldn’t there?”

“Yes. There should have been any number of guards and servants about. Unless, of course, someone were to, say, cause a distraction.”

“Right.” You nod a little, and bite at the inside corner of your lip, eyes loosing focus around the edges as you revisit your memory. “I ended up outside, and I remembered something Bǫlverkr had said, that you’d been spending a lot of time in the forest, so I thought, maybe…” You let the rest hang, and pull your legs up under yourself, fiddling with the ties of your robe, the fabric thick and fuzzy beneath your thumbs. “I guess it didn’t really make any difference, in the end.” Oh, the bitter reality of that sinks deep. “You still ended up here anyway.” And so did I.

Loki sighs, a deep, soul-weary sound that might as well have been pulled from your lungs, so similar is it to your own feelings.

“And that, of course, leads back to more unanswerable questions.”

Indeed. Indeed it does.

“What now?” The question is barely whispered, so full of uncertainty that’s reflected in green eyes, just for a moment before they close and turn away.

“I don’t know,” Loki says, just as softly, just as lost. “I don’t know.”

Chapter End Notes

What’s this? Are the kids actually (kind of) getting along?

In Hvassa is (my best guess at) the feminine form of the byname (a type of nickname) Inn Hvassi, which means “the sharp one,” hvass meaning both sharp like a blade and sharp as in harsh. I’ve taken a little creative liberty to include sharp as in quick-witted or perceptive in the definition as well.

An aurochs was a type of (now extinct) primitive predecessor of modern cattle, and there’s definitely a story there. Aurochs were huge and had sets of very impressive horns. Loki’s helmet always seemed familiar to me, and I thought, there’s some
resemblance there. Probably not something I'll expand upon in the story, because it’s not particularly relevant, but... I’m not saying Loki got skewered by an aurochs at some point, bested the beast in question, lived to tell about it, and got a symbolic helmet in commemoration, but well, I’m not saying that isn’t exactly what happened. Also, it would add context to why Thor teases Loki by saying the horns “look like a cow” in the first film.

The bit about Huginn and Muninn is inspired by a passage spoken by Odin from the Eddic poem Grímnismál which is translated by Henry Adams Bellows as:

O'er Mithgarth
Hugin and Munin both
Each day set forth to fly;
For Hugin I fear lest he come not home,
But for Munin my care is more

which, when considering that Huginn and Muninn mean ‘thought’ and ‘memory’ or ‘mind’ respectively, is pretty funny. So in the context of this story I’m imagining that this worry has come to pass and the ravens did not come back from one such flight.
The room is quiet aside from the slow, sleep-steady cadence of Loki’s breathing, and a curious clicking noise that has begun to emanate from one side of the room. In the faint orange glow of the one lamp you’ve left on, you can see a set of pipes just under the window which seems to be the source of the sound.

It’s that noise that woke you, perhaps. The sun is down now, and you’ve missed dinner, but you needed the sleep. Loki shifts, and his bed creaks as he turns over. You both needed the sleep. A quick glance at the strange clock with the glowing red numbers on its rectangular face reveals that it’s still early in the night, barely even evening, yet the sky behind the pale pink curtains is black as full night. Perhaps Midgard has shorter days than Asgard. The realm also seems to be less bright overall.

The clicking continues and you face it, squinting at the metal pipes. What do they do? What’s so important that they interrupt your sleep? Not that you mind terribly. Even the few short hours you had slept had done wonders, and after the food, and that interesting but very lovely bath with the water falling down on you from above, like warm, sweet rain, you’re feeling very cozy and refreshed.

You swing carefully out of the bed and shuffle across the rug to peer at the pipes. The room is warmer, much warmer, over here, and as you hold out a hand, you can tell that this is the source of the heat. You tip your head, looking at it. That’s... neat. Iron and... steam, possibly? That’s certainly a very creative way to heat a room, and along with some of the other fascinating bits of Midgardian engineering you’ve seen so far, you can guess that the Midgard people are quite bright, and impressive in their own way.

Steam...
That gives you an idea. The iron pipes are hot, hot enough to radiate throughout the room into even the chilliest corners. They’ve also got to be hot enough to, say, dry clothing after it has been washed?

With that in mind, you make your way, quietly as you can, to the washroom and gather up the pile of dirty clothing. Most of it is dry by now, so you shake off the crusted mud, brushing at the clinging pine needles and bracken, and rinse out the tub of the mess. Then you fiddle with the stopper and set to filling the basin with warm water, adding in a drop or two of the liquid soap in a colorful bottle, which smells a bit like clover and warm grass. The water foams and you set your tunic and leggings in to soak, and Loki’s tunic as well. His breeches have large sections of leather on them, so you grab a cloth, wet it and wring it out, and wipe at the leather until it’s smooth and shiny again, and gently dab the dirt off the fabric portions.

You do the same with his boots, but when it comes to your own shoes, those horrible, painful slippers, you pause. You’d rather not have to put them on ever again. Just thinking about it makes your ankles twinge in protest. But you’re sort of starved for opinions, so you rinse them as well and hope the water loosens them and softens them up. Then you squeeze the excess water from the tunics and your leggings until they’re just damp, and you drain the tub of the now brackish water. You set everything out to dry by the heater, with a towel laid out underneath, and as you tiptoe your way back to your bed, exhaustion creeping back in, you catch a glimpse of Loki in the dim light, still sound asleep. He’s sprawled out on top of the covers in a way that seems uncomfortable, propped on his side with a pillow cushioning his ribs. The front of his robe is pushed open, and you can see the slope of his chest, his shallow breathing, the line of the wrapped bandage. You look away and swallow. Suddenly, your ankles don’t seem so bad.

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In the morning, you find that the clothes are dry and still toasty warm to the touch, even though the heater has stopped its clicking. Loki stirs, and you toss him his clothing.

“You... washed these?” he asks, voice thick with sleep.

And truly, you think, he must have slept really well if he’s asking such a stupid question. But you suppose what he really meant was-

“Why?”
“Because they were dirty, and we don’t have much else to wear.”

And he might not be bothered by traipsing about in nothing but the robe — or maybe he would be, come to think of it — but you certainly feel much more comfortable dressed in something that comes down past your knees and doesn’t cling uncomfortably in all the wrong places.

“No, I meant—” Loki blinks at you. His hair is a mess. “Never mind.” He picks up the bundle of his tunic and pants and hold them to his chest as he stands. “I’ll just go get dressed in the bathroom. You can change in here, or wait until I’m finished, whichever you’d prefer,” he says, making his way toward the door.

“Yes, your highness,” you mumble, in a moment of temerity letting it come out more facetious than respectful.

Loki pauses with a slight frown and you brace yourself, but he says nothing, and just steps into the washroom and closes the door behind him.

You do change in the bedroom, because it’s private enough, and you know Loki’s going to take longer than you, with his buttons and hurt ribs slowing him down. And, you think, amused, *he’ll have his work cut out for him fixing that hair.* He, unlike you, had not thought to put it in a braid before sleeping, and it had dried every which way as he slept. Your hair is perhaps a bit frizzier than normal, but the tresses are relatively neat and wavy. Even so, you slide on your leggings under the robe, and turn your back to the door as you let it drop and throw on your tunic.

When Loki emerges some minutes later, his face is freshly washed and dewy, and his hair is, miraculously, tamed, and pulled back sleekly into a tail.

“You hair looks nice,” you say, and you give him a half smile as an apology for your earlier fit of impertinence. And because, well, it *does* look good. Really good, actually, if you’re being honest.

Loki jerks his head up, and you fight a blush. That frown is back, but it seems more confused than anything. Eventually, he nods, and on anyone else, it might almost have seemed awkward.

“Yours does as well,” he says, not quite meeting your eyes, and then he turns toward the door to the hallway. “It’s almost time for breakfast. Are you coming?” he calls over his shoulder.
And you take it back, because that definitely was awkward.

***

Breakfast is a chatty affair, with several of the other travelers all gathered around a big oak table set with embroidered placemats and napkins in buttery yellow with white dots all over and piled high with all manner of breads, baked pastries, fruits, eggs, porridge, sliced meats and cheeses, and spreads. There’s even a pot of what you’re pretty sure is soup, and several varieties of juices, teas, and some bitter smelling Midgardian drink labeled *Colombian Brew.*

You serve yourself some of the porridge, which looks so much like what your mother would make that you can’t help but crave a bit of home, even when there’s all this new and exciting food around, and top it with blueberries and a touch of honey. You look around, hoping to find some more cider, but there doesn’t seem to be any, although there’s an orange-colored beverage that’s sweet and tart and pleasing all the same.

You take the seat next to Loki, because he’s at least a familiar face. He scoots his chair over a bit to give you room. Or to get away from you, but he was the one pretending that you and he were lovers or something, so he should have thought that one through. He sips at a mug of the Colombian brew like he hasn’t a care in the world, though, and you can’t tell if he’s pretending or not. But of *course* he would go for the bitterest drink there. It’s fitting.

You take a bite of your porridge and *oh. Wow.* You didn’t know porridge could be this good. Familiar, comforting, homey, yes, but this porridge is creamy and rich and has a wonderful sweetness to it that not even your mother’s cooking can compare to. *Well, when you pay with jewels...*

As you savor your breakfast, your thoughts turn to the previous night. It hadn’t at all been what you were expecting. It was surprisingly peaceable, although far from *peaceful,* with quiet conversation and shared disquiet. Loki, for all his faults, does seem willing to work along side you, and not against you, at least in this. It’s... well, maybe not quite *reassuring,* because at this stage, nothing short of a way home would be, but it’s something, and it’s one less thing you have to be anxious about. *At least... at least Loki is smart.*

A heavyset man with a friendly smile sits across from you and Loki and introduces himself as Brian.

“And who are you supposed to be?”
Loki swallows his mouthful of seasoned... potatoes, you’re pretty sure, and primly wipes his mouth before answering.

“I’m Loki, of Asgard,” he says, eyebrows drawn together and looking very serious.

Brian nods easily.

“You’re headed for the Renaissance faire, then? I didn’t realize there was one in town. Or- I know! You’re doing that, oh what is it the kids called it. Cosplaying, I think it was,” he says all at once, the speed and unfamiliarity of half the words leaving you a bit dizzy. Fortunately, Brain doesn’t seem to need a response, just continues talking. “And who might you be, my lady?”

You introduce yourself, and Brain beams at you. Loki shovels more food in his mouth, eyeing him warily. You’re pretty sure he’s doing it more to avoid conversation than because he’s just that hungry. You decide you like Brian, and smile back, striking up an impersonal but pleasant conversation between bites of food.

Somewhere along the line, Loki’s arm finds its way along the back of your chair, resting casually, and you must have been more invested in what Brain was saying — even though you can’t understand a majority of it — than you’d thought, because you hadn’t noticed him move. But, you find it doesn’t bother you as much as you might have thought it would. He’s finished eating, and is sitting back watching you talk and occasionally lifting his mug to his lips. When your eyes meet, he lifts a sleek brow at you and you smile sheepishly.

“It was nice meeting you, Brian” you say politely, and offer him your hand as you make your excuses to leave. He bows over it grandly, and raises it to his lips with a flourish, an overdone but sincere imitation of a prince or lord. And really, it is rather charming.

“The pleasure’s all mine, my lady.”

“Are you ready?” You turn to Loki, still with a slight grin on your face. He nods, but frowns, and you let the smile fall, mystified. Is he mad at you, or not?

Loki stands and lets his arm remain on your shoulders until you’re back up the stairs, out of sight. You’re not really sure what to think, other than that you prefer the warm weight of it to his cold indifference or outright acrimony.
Loki frowns for what feels like the hundredth time that morning, yet still, he remains confused. In-Hvassa seems in a much better mood since... since some time last night. Is she just making that much of an effort to keep the amity, or... Then again, he had all but told her to show deference. He hadn’t expected her to actually comply, especially not to the degree she had. He would not have asked her to do his laundry. She is... not relaxed, exactly, but far less dicey, less short-tempered. And she had been. Since he’d been nearly polite to her. And that... that makes the least sense of all.

It is tremulous, that is true, not a real show of trust, but she is... giving him the benefit of the doubt, and he isn’t sure what to make of it. She shouldn’t. And not because he doesn’t deserve it, even though he knows he doesn’t, but because it wasn’t good enough reason to. A few words spoken without rancor should not change much of anything, except to avert a worsening of their predicament. But she had smiled at him, or nearly so, and he had... well, he’d liked it and felt guilty in equal measure. He never had been very good at apologizing.

In the bedroom, he slides on his boots — also brushed free of dirt — and gathers his knife from its spot on the bedside table. The place where the emerald had been is conspicuous and jarringly empty under his thumb as he runs it over the center of the handle. It looks, wrong, and Loki feels a pang if loss at it. It’s stupid. It’s just one little gem, and Loki likes this knife, yes, but he has — or had — countless others. Valuable, but not too much to part with, not superficially. But he can’t help but feel like some part of his life has been chipped away and left behind here on this quiet, lonely little planet. Certainly, he feels a bit empty, too.

Thor had been right. It wasn’t a thought Loki was used to having, but his brother had spoken truly. He should have gone with him, with their friends when he could have. Now he doesn’t know when he’ll next have a chance to waste a day in good spirits and company, with no goal in mind but the uncomplicated joy of it. Not when things have gotten so complicated, so quickly, not when he’s still unable to access his magic, not when Heimdall still can’t see him. He’d tried, again, and again. But his ribs still hurt and there was still no answer and they were still stuck for the foreseeable future. Loki doesn’t like not knowing what to do at the best of times, and this does not qualify as one of those times.

“There’s a dress shop the next door over, and I’m sure there are more like it in the central square,” Loki says, still pathetically unable to look away from the hole in his dagger. “We’re drawing too much attention to ourselves dressed as we are, like Asgardians.” Honestly, Loki isn’t sure what precisely is meant by Renaissance faire, but it certainly has a ring of mockery to it, like a game of
pretend. “It would be in our best interest to rectify the situation.” Carefully, it is not phrased as an order of any kind.

“So you intend to pay with that? Or did you have something else in mind?”

Loki lets a grin fill his face as he flips the dagger around to tuck it away out of sight. He turns to face her.

“I have a plan.”

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Whatever Loki’s plan was, it involved meandering about the courtyard between shops, among a sprinkling of other people about their business, strolling the cobblestone walkways or sitting on benches beneath trees in gradient shades of green, orange, and gold. The air is chilly, and you wish you had one of those knitted scarves like some of the pedestrians are wearing to wrap around your neck, or maybe a pair of gloves. Loki seems unbothered by it, the breeze doing scarcely more than ruffle the ends of his tied hair behind his head.

He’s watching for something, casting his eyes around with an intent look on his face. He looks like some kind of guardian, or a statue, silent and vigilant and still, save for those flickering green eyes and the dark hair trailing in the wind. And then he stiffens. Whatever he was looking for, he has found, and you follow his gaze, figuring it would be more helpful than staring at him. Still, you can’t find the point of his focus, and you’ve no idea what to be looking for in the first place.

Loki moves nearer to you, and leans down a bit to speak close to your ear.

“That man with the red hat and long grey coat. By the tree there.” He cants his chin to indicate the direction. “Do you see him?” he says lowly. You can feel the movement of his breath as he speaks, a warm contrast to the cold air.

You nod, then realize Loki might not see it.
“Yes. What about him?”

“I need you to go talk to him.”

“What?” you ask, puzzled. “Why would I- oh. No. No! You don’t mean to-“ You jerk your head toward him and the truth is right there on his face, unhidden and unmissable. “You do.”

Really, it’s not that much of a surprise, or it shouldn’t have been. You should have known that smirk had meant nothing but trouble. But you are surprised, or horrified, or something, because the blood is loud in your ears just now, and, and stealing is wrong.

Loki, of course, is unrepentant.

“Unless you’d like to kindly ask him to give you his money, we don’t have many other options.”

“You still have the dagger, and the-“

“And how many times would you guess that we’d be able to successfully pull that trick? Not everyone will be so willing to accept that it is a real stone, not everyone will accept payment that isn’t the currency they expect.”

You take a step back from the quarrel and press your lips together. Loki is right, but you don’t like it. Maybe if he was as reluctant as you are, this would be easier. Maybe if he didn’t seem so eager about it. But it is Loki, and he seems to delight in misbehaving every bit as much as Búrákki, the scamp. And here you’ll be, following him down into mischief.

“What am I even supposed to say to him?”

Loki blinks, perhaps not expecting you to agree so easily. Perhaps you shouldn’t have.

“Anything. It doesn’t matter. Ask him for directions or talk about the weather. Just distract him for a moment.”
You nod shakily, and walk toward the man, trying to make it seem like coincidence, not at all intentional. Loki must be somewhere nearby, but you can’t hear him move, and you’re not sure if that’s a relief or if it just makes you that much more nervous. Because you are nervous. Very nervous. So nervous you want to call it off, to back out, to tell Loki to figure out how to do it himself. Instead, you focus on the man from the side of your eye, try to piece out what had made Loki think he was an... easy target. That thought doesn’t help at all, just makes you feel that much more guilty, and you swallow back the lump in your throat.

“E-Excuse me,” you say, tucking a stray strand of hair behind your ear to calm your shaking fingers. “Excuse me, mister. I don’t mean to bother you, but I was just wondering if you could point me in the direction of,” you come up short for a second, not knowing what to ask for, eyes slipping as they search around the man for a familiar figure you’re hoping will make this quick. But there is nothing. Where is Loki? “In the direction of... the Apple Shack,” you blurt, because it’s the only name you know.

Recognition flashes on the man’s face.

“The orchard? Why, it’s just up the road.” He points somewhere vaguely to your left. “Thataway. Big white sign, on the right. You can’t miss it.”

And when you turn back from looking where he had pointed, you do see Loki, crouched on the ground like he’s picking something up.

“Excuse me, sir,” he cuts in, standing and proffering whatever he had to the man. “You seem to have dropped this.” It’s a wallet. Why is he handing the man back his wallet?

Then you notice Loki’s other hand, tucked behind him, between the man and you, holding a wad of paper money. He shakes it, and you take it and quickly slip it into your sleeve.

“Well thank you, young man!” the man exclaims, beaming at Loki and shaking his hand.

“I appreciate the directions, mister,” you say quickly, before you start trembling too much to do so. Your skin is tingly all over, the bundle in your sleeve practically burning against your arm, blood all in a rush.

“Not a problem! You have a nice day, now,” he says, and you smile, and it’s all you can do to keep
from running in the opposite direction.

Behind you, the man thanks Loki profusely, and Loki graciously accepts it. He doesn’t deserve it. But, you think giddily, his plan had worked.

You sit on an empty bench, feeling the opposite of discrete, feeling like everyone is paying attention to you. They aren’t, of course. Loki sits next to you a heartbeat later, and he looks at you, and you look at him.

And then he grins, all teeth and dancing eyes, and you feel something bubbling up in your chest. And then you’re laughing, no, giggle, and Loki is laughing too, somewhat hysterical and overwhelmed, because it had worked and it was wild and you’d gotten away with it.

“Did that, did that actually happen?” you ask once you’ve calmed enough to speak, still not quite believing it. You’d really stolen something. Or helped, anyway.

“Yep. Without a hitch.” His smile also fades. “Good job.”

“There wasn’t really anything good about it, though, was there?” you argue, because again. Stealing. It’s wrong.

“Nope,” Loki agrees easily, and another little laugh slips out of you. Because... because as ridiculous, as awful, as bad as it was... it was kind of fun as well.

Chapter End Notes

Well, as they say, if you can’t beat em, steal wallets with em. Great bonding activity, no?
Little Acorns

Chapter Summary

In which you find something in an unexpected place

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry this chapter is a little bit late. I didn’t want to keep you guys waiting, but I haven’t had much time for writing this week. But better late than never, right? Here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The clothing shop is small and warm out of the wind, and a bell rings as Loki pushes the glass door open. As they make their way inside, In-Hvassa hands him back the green paper money and he runs his fingers over the folded edge of the wad. He isn’t entirely sure how much they’ll need, how much the clothing and whatever else they’ll require will cost. As much as he had enjoyed the petty crime of acquiring it, as much as In-Hvassa had as well — and wasn’t that a surprising turn of events — he doesn’t want to make a habit of stealing for funds. More chances of being caught. He had taken as much as he had thought he could get away with, but he didn’t want to leave the man penniless either. Even when he turned out to be as wealthy as Loki had suspected. But for now, they have enough for a few changes of clothes, and a pair or two of shoes.

They’re greeted by the shopkeeper and soft music. The place is crowded with shirts and jackets hanging in neat rows and stacks of pants on shelves. On the far side to the left, there are dresses and scarves and colorful clothing under a sign that says Ladies. To the right is the men’s clothing, and with a nod at Loki, she leaves him to browse the myriad of fabrics in grays and blacks and neutral blues while she makes her way to the clothes for women.

Loki isn’t impressed with the Midgardian attire, isn’t overly fond of the too-saturated blacks and somber colors, the flimsy fabrics and coarse textures. But he finds these things do not bother him overmuch at the moment, far too pleased is he, still caught in the undertow of adrenaline and the giddiness of success. He glances at where In-Hvass is stroking the fabric of a strange, short dress with a pattern of small flowers. For all her complaining, all her reluctance at first, she had shaped up to be quite adept at her distraction, the truth of her aim hidden beneath the polite words and innocently inquiring appearance. She has claws. Delicate and retractable as a cat’s, but just as needle sharp as well. And that Loki is impressed with.
Loki steps out of the washroom wearing the new clothing he’d picked out and holding the wrap bandage in his hand loosely. The front of his shirt — a dark blue shade that doesn’t particularly suit him, you think but do not say. It makes him look quite pale, like he’s been rinsed free of the color in his face — is unbuttoned and hangs open. As you look up at him from your spot in the armchair, already dressed and comfortable, he catches your eye and beckons you over with a shake of the bandage. You set aside the book you had been trying to read, which hadn’t been very good in the first place, and join him in sitting on the side of his bed.

“This might be a bit easier if you take the shirt all the way off,” you tell him, and then fight back a blush at how audacious you’d sounded. “My prince.”

You fidget with the bandage in your hands as Loki shimmies out of the shirt, carefully not looking at him in some semblance of privacy.

“You don’t have to do that,” he says quietly, prompting you to turn to him, a confused frown on your face.

“Do what?” You look between him — well, his face — and the bandage, wondering what in the world you had been doing that he wants you to refrain from.

“My prince,” he mimics, even though his imitation of your tone is probably laced with far more respect than yours has ever had.

“You told me to,” you say hesitantly, not really wanting to contradict him, but, well, he had.

“I shouldn’t have,” he admits with a tiny, sheepish smile. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Pardon?”

He tips his head at you, eyes narrowed likes he’s studying you, searching for something. Whatever it
is, you can only hope you measure up. It makes you feel a bit awkward, the scrutiny, and you’re still just holding the bandage uselessly and trying not to look away from the bright green of his eyes.

“You have never once meant it,” he decides, although it is said with no heat. You don’t know what to make of that, don’t know what he’s thinking, or what to do about it.

Because he’s right. It’s not that you’ve meant any overt disrespect, or to discount his rightful title, but you do find it a challenging habit to form when he does not, in short, act like a prince. He is persistent, yes, and used to a fair amount of things being the way he insists, but then, so is a willful horse. But he does not measure up to the tales you’ve heard of Asgard’s other prince, the ones that exemplify such a word, your reference point, all chivalry and brazen ferocity. No coward is he, but where Thor shines, Loki... Loki embodies the shadows, subtle and obscure, hard to define around the edges. It is hard to muster up respect when you don’t even know what it is you are respecting. But you think maybe you are starting to see.

“Apologies,” you mumble, and you do let your eyes fall then.

Loki huffs a breath, and you see it as well as hear it, see his chest expand and deflate with the movement of it. But Loki doesn’t sound angry. He sounds... amused? Resigned? You do not know.

“They look better,” you say, just to say something, to change the topic, to make an excuse for staring at Loki’s chest, which is exactly what you realize you had been doing, unintentionally. “The bruises.” And it makes you feel better too, more confident and less like you’re going to unravel, to direct your focus to one specific goal, one uncomplicated, easy target. You look back up at Loki, who seems more relaxed, looser at the shoulders, and still hasn’t lost his grin, although there’s a spark in his eyes that makes you think he knows exactly what you’re doing. You swallow. “Do they feel better also?”

Loki nods his head, still pining you with that uninterpretable look.

“Much better, actually. Thank you.”

And it’s the second time he’s thanked you, and while you don’t doubt he meant it the first, this time rings with a certain sincerity that the other had not had. It occurs to you, like a sudden dousing of cold water, that Loki is trying to test the waters, to befriend you, you would imagine, actually trying to be kind and, and honest, too, which you don’t imagine is something he’d do for just anyone. You must have gained something major then, just by being his cohort in thievery, just by laughing with him, to make the resentment bleed out of him like that. Because it has. You think he doesn’t hate you still.
“You’re welcome,” you say softly, and mean it.

You lean over to start wrapping his chest with the bandage, and it’s becoming easier with each repetition, your hands finding a rhythm at the familiar movements. You hadn’t lied. The bruising does look much better. The swelling has gone down a lot, and the bright purple has toned down to a healing greenish tint.

When you finish, you let your hands drop and slide back across the mattress to give Loki space, but you don’t get up. He doesn’t move, though, just sits there, leant back and propped up on his wrists, caught up in some thought.

“Do you have any idea how this happened?” you ask, tentative, because it feels sort of like poking at a nest of bees. “What Bǫlverkr and Lyngvir did to suppress your magic?”

Loki shrugs, which must mean that he truly is feeling a bit better, since he’s able to, and sighs.

“I do not. I was... not conscious for a majority of the time I was in their charming company.”

The sarcasm is familiar, and something of a comfort. It reminds you of your brother, that underhanded way of stating something, saying it without saying it, and it warms you to Loki as much as it sets an ache in your heart. You miss him, vehemently. You wonder if Loki misses Prince Thor, if they were as close as you and your brother. From what you’d seen, they seemed to get on relatively well, have some care and regard for each other. Loki has always appeared so strong and self-sufficient, it’s hard to think of him as being lonely, as longing for his own family as you long for yours. But you’d seen first hand that he is not quite so untouchable, that he can bruise and bleed as easy as anyone, and you’ve long known that he’s pretentious and proud, and fills in the cracks as soon as they appear. You hope that whatever this sudden ease is that’s settled over you like a warm blanket, it’s the truth, and you find yourself wanting it to last. You could use a friend.

“Yeah. Right,” you say, and gesture toward his temple, where he’d been struck, where the injury is hidden in his hairline. You’d nearly forgotten.

Loki looks away, but nods. He seems... embarrassed. Ashamed. Like him being taken off guard was his fault, like he shouldn’t have let it happen to him. Which is ridiculous. There are much more deserving shoulders to rest that blame on.
"I didn't run away, you know," you tell him, belatedly realizing that the connection from one topic to the next had taken place entirely in your mind, and Loki would have no way of following that trail of thought. But still, Loki is willing to try to be nicer to you. You can try as well. "When you found me, I mean." Loki turns to you listening, actually listening, face soft and without that defensive snappishness ready to rise on his tongue. He looks almost friendly, and it’s... you could get used to that look. It gives you the courage to continue your tale. "I didn’t run away, I was... I was on my way home. I, I shouldn’t have been alone, I guess, that was, perhaps, a bit foolish of me. I..." It is hard to talk about regardless. You look away, and fold your hands in your lap, hoping to keep them still, to hide your restless nerves. "He was so big. So much bigger than me. Bigger than Prince Thor, even.” And you risk a glance up and give a half-hearted chuckle at the joke. “Stórr. That was his name. He grabbed me. Caught me by surprise. That’s how I ended up with Einvald. I... I couldn’t fight back.”

Unexpectedly, Loki leans closer, wraps his fingers around your wrist and just lets them rest there, gentle.

"It wasn’t your fault," he says, voice low and earnest.

You look him in the eyes, fierce and determined and willing him to understand.

“I know.”

Loki doesn’t blink, but there is something in his face that you know has heard you, has recognized the truth for what it is, and his throat works. He squeezes your wrist and lets his hand fall away.

“Do you...” you start, the beginnings of a sudden, crazy idea forming in your mind, borne out of the desperate need to change the topic before it gets even more awkward for both of you. “That is, it is just you that they did... whatever it is they did to, right? They didn’t do anything to me. I should still be able to use magic, shouldn’t I?”

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t be able to. You know how?” He sounds surprised.

You shake your head.

“I have never practiced before. But maybe... maybe you could show me? Or explain it, anyway. I could... I could at least try. It wouldn’t hurt to try.” And hope has lit a blaze in your chest, warm and wild, and maybe, just maybe, there’s something you can do.
Loki opens his mouth, and shuts it again, a dark cloud befalling his countenance.

“Heimdall,” he whispers, sounding for the life of him like that one word is a puzzle he cannot solve. “There’s no reason he should not have answered you.”

And no. No there isn’t. The flame in your heart withers, but the ember won’t go out.

“He must not have seen.” But it doesn’t change anything, because by all rights he should have seen. “You don’t think something has happened to him, do you? If Ülle diverted the attention of the servants and guards, she might have done something to him too. She didn’t say anything about it, I swear, if I knew she was planning to harm him I would have done...” what would you have done? “Something.”

“She could not have done so without my father’s notice. Heimdall is fine, I’m sure, but you are hidden here. And that I’m not sure of.”

It’s a long moment of silence that follows, a long moment spent contemplating, chewing up and spitting out half-formed ideas that hold no water, that have flaws as quickly realized as the thought had come. Loki puts his shirt back on. You trace a path over the rug, back and forth, the steady creak of the floorboards sounding in time. There has to be something you are overlooking. At the very least, you have to try, and keep on trying, as many times as it takes until you can grasp the answer in your hands and know that you are going home. For Prince Thor. For your brother. You glance at Loki. For him, too, and yourself. Home. It’s a goal to orient yourself toward, to aim for, fixed in flight like a moth to a flame.

“Are you certain that he cannot see us?” The thought comes out of nowhere, as haunting as it is sound. It makes sense. It makes a bit too much sense. “What if... what if he’s just not responding?”

“While the gatekeeper and I often do not see eye to eye,” Loki says, with enough rancor embedded under the words that you recognize this as an understatement, “Heimdall is not one for neglecting his duties. He would not leave an innocent person stranded on another realm.” And Loki would know Heimdall better than you, and he speaks with absolute confidence. Unfortunately, it does nothing to tamp down the worry that’s starting to grow and writhe.

“But what if I’m not?” It bursts out of you more forcefully than you had meant, and it’s probably not fair to Loki to make him bear the brunt of it, but now that the thought has caught hold, has wriggled little roots in your mind, you can’t dislodge it, and it has the shape of truth, cold truth, and you shiver.
Loki hesitates, unsure, confused, frowning. You clarify, “I mean, if he thinks I’m not. If he thinks I did this,” you whisper, and you wish the thought didn’t sting so much, but it does. Oh it does. Because it’s just so unfair, so opposite to who you are, what you would do. And this... you would never do this, not to Loki, not to anyone. But you had unwittingly played right into Ülle’s hand, hadn’t you?

Loki steps forward, giving you another one of those long looks. It’s clear he doesn’t know what to say, and that’s because there isn’t much to say.

“You know how this has to look, don’t you?” You stare out the window, at nothing in particular, arms coming up to wrap around yourself. “I was there. I was right there. Wrong place, wrong time, and there’s no one to say that I was only trying to help! I even all but said that I was there to hurt you, and they wouldn’t even have to lie to let the blame fall to me. I showed up, claimed to be about vengeance, and we both disappeared right as I touched you! It couldn’t look more like my doing it I tried. I’ve given them exactly what they needed, haven’t I?” The last is said through a sudden thickness in your throat, and you cover your eyes, because you really don’t want to be crying right now, but it’s all so much, and it’s so frustrating, and you can do nothing about it because it just is. One big mess, all because you were trying to do something nice.

There’s a light touch on your shoulder, a steadying hand laid there.

“Hey,” Loki says, gentle for the second time today. “Are you alright?”

You look up at him, a bit dewy eyed and shaky.

“Yes. No.” You laugh, a bit too wet for real levity, but it’s funny, how not funny it is. “Is any of this alright?” Loki smiles crookedly in answer. His hand has not left your shoulder. “Remind me,” you say, clinging to wry wit to keep you afloat as you drift through the whole whelming imbroglio. “Next time there’s some huge, treasonous plot astir, to find someone apt at doing something about it, instead of trying to fix it on my own?”

Loki laughs, a startled sound, wrung out of him by the absurdity of there being a next time, of the absurdity of this time.

“You’re assuming there is someone apt at such a task,” he says, and he sounds so serious too, but there’s that gleam of wickedness in his eyes, for once not aimed at you, but shared. If you’re not careful, you might end up liking him, you think, as you press your lips together to fight a smile.
“Loki?” you say, the name sounding a bit precarious on your tongue, but somehow more sincere than ‘my prince’ had been. He looks at you. “Thank you.”

And you mean it.

Chapter End Notes

Look at that. Loki being all cute and sweet. Maybe there’s a real prince in there after all
Shadows Fall Behind

Chapter Summary

In which you don’t have to fear for your life, have a pleasant supper, and are briefly flirted with

Chapter Notes

You guys like banter, right? Also, it’s my birthday Monday, so in celebration, here’s an adorable little chapter for you all :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki lets his gaze rest on In-Hvassa, as it’s been doing so often as of late. His earlier confusion has mellowed into a temperate sort of curiosity, the uncertainty, the worry trickling away like a purulent sore that has been lanced and allowed to drain. Granted, there is still much he does not understand, so many facets to her, fickle and shifting like a reflection caught in a ripple of water. She is scared, he knows she is, but she is upright in the wake of it, trying to be brave as much as Loki himself is trying. But she is not scared of him.

He watches, unknown to her, as she sits in the chair she has established her claim on, hair tied back and up out of her face save for a few messy and loose stands, bare feet pulled up under her as she squints at the text of a book in the lamp light. He watches her hand creep up, almost unconsciously, frowning as her fingertips gently slide against her face, against the prominent scar there, feeling along the length of it. He looks away, his own hands clenching against the book he himself holds.

It isn’t the first time he’s seen her do that. Often, when she was deep in thought, distracted, or upset, her fingers would find the mar and rub at it like it was a smudge of dirt she could wipe away, or like it hurt and she was trying to soothe it, always with that frown, until she seemed to realize what she was doing and pull her hand back down like she’d been burnt. This time is no different.

Loki can’t quite swallow down the sharp taste of guilt each time she does it. And it is guilt he hasn’t earned. He realizes as much, rationally. But he cannot stop the feeling that he is to blame for it, that though he did not force her hand, he is at fault for the pain and the necessity of it. It is easier to rue the one tangible reminder than it is to reconcile an entire list of misdeeds. Cruelty is a trait as intrinsic in his very self as the blood in his veins, and while it has its place, is beneficial for some things, for his dealing with those who would harm him, would harm others, those like Einvald and Bölverkr, it is not something she had ever truly deserved from him. He had given it regardless.
And yet she has laid her life neither at his feet, for him to take sole responsibility for, nor firmly out of his hands, untrusting and reclusive, but at his side, steadfastly working with him to figure this out, to navigate the world they are in and balance on the line they walk. An ally. A voice to break through his thoughts and offer ideas, suggestions, things he would not have thought of on his own. A bolstering presence as dedicated to getting the fuck out of here as Loki is, relieving in the very fact that she shares this with him — not that he wants her to, not that he wants anyone to, but, he thinks privately, selfishly, it is better than being alone. More and more lately, a friend even.

She throws the book onto the windowsill with a clatter that pulls Loki from his musings, and lets out a miffed sigh, glaring at it like she could make it give her the answers she is looking by the heat of her gaze alone.

“Any luck?” he asks, just because he knows she’s had none.

She turns that glare at him, aware that he’s being a nuisance on purpose. He grins back, a bit toothily, and she relents with another huff of breath.

“No,” she says accusingly toward the useless book, and then glances at the rest of the stack she’s set aside to search through, looking weary. There are still so many, but there are fewer books in that stack than in the ‘hopelessly uninformative’ pile she’d already been through. “Please tell me you’ve found something?”

“Sorry.” Loki shrugs, because he hasn’t, in part because he’s not been paying full attention to his reading. “There just doesn’t seem much to find.”

“No. Midgard is not a very good repository for magical knowledge, is it? All I’m finding is card tricks and guides to dream interpretation, and a few of what seem to be children’s books.” She picks up another book with clear reluctance, and turns it so she can see the spine. “A Thrifty Wiccan’s Guide to Frugal and Benevolent Witchcraft,” she reads aloud, the color of distaste in her tone. “By Lyrica Nightshade. Do I even have to look at this one? I’m not even sure this is a real book.”

She rubs at her temples, looking about as miserable with the task as Loki feels.

“There’s only a few minutes until dinner time. It’s not worth it to get started on another book just yet. Let’s just get ready to go downstairs.”

Loki swings his legs over the side of the bed and stands and stretches out his back, carefully, mindful
of his ribs. It still hurts when Loki moves the wrong way, when he stretches too far or makes any
sudden shifts in his body, but now he can breathe in nearly all the way without choking on the pain,
and he’s stopped needing to wear the bandage. It’s a relief to be rid of it, to be able to move his chest
freely, without it chaffing and constricting and collecting sweat and dirt.

Oddly, though, he finds himself missing having In-Hvassa help him with it. He hadn’t thought he
actually liked her fussing over him until she’d stopped needing to, and realized he’d sort of gotten
used to the quiet care and concern for him. It was nice. She didn’t have to do it, but she did, and Loki
is grateful, because he must have done something right to be rewarded by her genuine compassion.
Somehow, somewhere along the way, she’d decided that he was worth being kind to, and much as
he couldn’t wrap his head around it, couldn’t seem to fathom why, when she’d at first been so
determined to lash out with icy words that stung as much as she’d meant them to, it gives him a new
light to look at her in, and, he thinks, it’s a rather warm light.

He rolls the tension out of his shoulders, tips his neck side to side. Several popping noises ensue, and
In-Hvassa looks up at him, brows furrowed.

“Maybe you should take the chair next time,” she offers. Then she adds, “you sound like an old
man.”

Loki snorts.

“And you sound like my mother,” he returns good-naturedly. Funny, how he had demanded her
respect when her flippancy is much more entertaining.

She purses her lips in a way that Loki knows means she can’t find a response to say to that, and he
relishes the victory.

He makes his way to the door, where he’d set aside his boots upon entering and slides his feet into
the familiar and comfortable black leather, stooping gingerly to do up his laces.

“Come get your shoes,” he calls, catching her eye over his shoulder. She still hasn’t gotten up from
the chair.

“Oh you sound like my mother,” she mocks under her breath, loud enough for Loki to hear, not quite
able to keep her mouth from twitching with a dawning smile. She heaves herself to her feet anyway,
though.
Loki begins picking up the discarded books and placing them carefully into his shoulder bag, a sturdy thing of some stiff grey-green fabric with leather accents that Loki is actually quite fond of. The plasticky coatings on the books crackle as they shift and settle when he hefts the bag over his arm, and by the time he’s finished, In-Hvassa has done up the buckles on her own pair of boots, still new and crisp and obviously much preferable to the slippers she’d had before, if her lack of limping is any sign.

“Ready?”

She nods, and he follows her out the door and down the winding stairs, to the colorful and chaotic dinning room filled with mismatched bric-a-brac and an eclectic, changing assortment of people ever in transit.

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You feel kind of bad for making Loki carry the whole mass of books when he is, still, injured, but he had insisted on it. The one time you’d offered to carry them for him, he’d told you no in no uncertain terms, with a stare so hard you hadn’t been particularly inclined to try again. You weren’t sure if it was pride or some misguided attempt at courtesy, the vestiges of his princeliness still in full force. But he seems to be handling it well, so you doubt the bandage will be making its return any time soon.

You sit next to Loki at the table, even though you’re among the first to arrive and there are many empty chairs. Loki has been, well, nice to you in the last few days, and being able to relax a bit in his company is something you’re glad of. You’re not adverse to all the strangers, all the people staying for various points of time and communing at the table, but you’re starting to know Loki in a way that all the changing faces don’t match up to. It’s become sort of a habit to have him around, and, well, that’s nice too.

All the food at this inn is typically served in big pots and platters filled up with an assortment of dishes, with each guest able to serve themselves what they desired from the feast. While the foods would vary from day to day, some things were staples of the evening meal, like baskets of fresh baked bread rolls, bowls of tossed greens, a mixture of vegetables cooked in butter, and some pale
purple iced drink in a pitcher that seems to be a famous *Primitive Raven* special. You like it. It’s fruity and floral, and it has a bubbly sweetness that you can’t quite place. Loki refuses to touch it though, which you really think is his loss.

Today there are plates of some type of poultry that has been glazed and roasted, potatoes that have been mashed smooth with lots of cream and garlic, and long skinny green pods of beans in a tangy sauce. You fill your plate as the other guests start trickling in, solitary, or in groups of twos, or in one case, a family of five.

As you eat, you try to recollect anything helpful you might have read in the past few days, any trace of something that could be of aid, of transportation charms or cursed objects. There had been pitifully few even remotely helpful bits, and most of what seemed like it could have turned up something useful inevitably fell flat. You and Loki had checked his clothes for any talismans or inscribed runes that might have been drawn or stuck on there by Bǫlverkr, checked your own too, just in case, but every inch had been examined and re-examined with nothing to show for it. Which meant that it was probably a spell of some sort, and that may have been where Lyngvir came into the picture. Loki had mentioned before that Álfar magic was a tricky sort, one not understood well even by Aesir mages. Which meant that Midgard didn’t stand much chance at all, in hindsight, since there seems to be almost nothing even approaching true magic on this planet. Of all the realms you could have ended up on, it had to be the one that would be hardest to get back from. Well, at least it’s not Svartálfheim.

You push a bite of potatoes around the plate with your fork, distractedly wondering how long it would take to comb through the entire library’s worth of books, because, tempting as it is to give up and just let the assumption that the endeavor is doomed dictate your actions, to start afresh and come up with some new avenue to venture down and hope to come up with something, you can’t rule out even the slightest chance of there being some lead amongst the shelves of Midgardian literature. Even if you’d rather walk a mile in your old, terrible shoes than read another word.

Beside you, Loki sets his fork down and shifts his chair ever so slightly closer to yours, and you look up at him in question. He tips his head down so his mouth is level with your ear. It’s hardly the best approximation of privacy, but he whispers softly enough that you’re confident no one else has heard.

“The man three seats down on the other side of the table has been staring at you this entire time.” It’s a warning tone, concern and mistrust therein.

You smile, laugh a little bit, like Loki has said something delightful to you. Discreetly, you tilt your eyes to where, sure enough, a man who must be the one Loki means is in fact watching you with something that goes beyond curiosity. You’re not sure what it is, but you don’t like it one bit.
“What? I don’t have something on my face, do I?” you whisper back, trying to impart a little bit of humor to keep from letting that unsettled feeling take hold. But then the amusement falters and dies, because you remember that, yes, you do have something on your face. You very much do.

Your hand instinctively rises, intent on touching the scar, to hide it, even as useless as that would be at this point. Loki catches it in his own, fast as a blink, before you can lift it beyond chest height, stopping you from doing what would be something quite stupid indeed. Then he freezes, seems to realize that grabbing you like that, just on this side of violently, though you know that he had not meant it as such, could not possibly look good, would look, actually, quite appalling. Instead, he shifts his fingers around your own until he is simply holding your hand, a resemblance of tenderness.

You turn toward him, without letting your smile fall, because you don’t want anyone to think that he is actually hurting you when, you recognize, he is trying to do the opposite, trying, in his way, to protect you. And since you are facing him, you clearly see the impish idea light up his eyes as it fills his head, and you have but a moment to anticipate his next move, whether with dread or with eagerness, you don’t know.

Before you can decide if you should pull your hand back or not, he lifts it to his quirking mouth, the traces of a smile of his own, at his own mischief, lingering as he kisses your knuckles just like Brian had, just like you’d seen Loki do to Kathy, and Thor to Úlle. It’s almost sweet, somehow, the light brush of his lips on your skin, the little puff of air as Loki tries not to laugh, and you don’t even have to pretend to blush, just a little, and you’re sure that, to any outside perspective, you must truly look like a smitten couple quite taken with each other. And Loki must be having a bad influence on you, because you sort of enjoy the little performance, the illusion you’re creating, a bit of a lie, a bit of convivial wickedness.

Another secret glance reveals that the man is still watching you, still raptly studying the game you and Loki play, with an intensity that burns and a glare that’s even hotter.

Loki maintains his hold of your hand even as he lets it lower, lets it fall beneath the table. You don’t pull it away as you go back to eating, even though no one can see it, even though it’s not necessary for the act. His hand is cool, and surprisingly soft, in your own, and it’s... reassuring. It makes you feel less alone. You’ve got someone literally looking out for you, and you’ve seen just how formidable Loki can be. You still can recall in vivid detail — a marvel, considering your state at the time — Einvald’s face as the prince laid into him, the vicious, satiated feeling of watching the vile man stutter and cower, drained of blood and gall something that will likely stay with you all your life. You’d also been target of Loki’s rancor, though you’ve still not been able to figure out what had put you in that place to begin with, what had made you the object of his venom. But now... now he is not spitting at you or laying some web to entangle you.

Something warm presses against your palm, something smooth in parts and edgy in others, and after
a moment, you recognize the feel of the little dagger, *Loki’s* little dagger, as he slides it into your grasp. You take it, wondering, hardly sure what to say.

Loki leans close to you again, close enough for his hair to tickle your face, for his urgency to be felt like a physical presence.

“Keep it with you, at least until that man isn’t staying here any longer.”

You nod, strangely earnest. You clutch the handle tightly as you swallow around the sudden gratitude warming your chest.

“I will,” you say out loud, because no one would know of what you spoke anyway.

“If he, or anyone, tries to hurt you,” Loki says, merciless, and you can almost feel the sharpness of his grim smile, “stick them with it.” He pauses, then, with a ghost of a laugh, adds, “*In-Hvassa.*”

You frown at that. You don’t like the name, don’t like not knowing what he means by it. It feels like an insult, like a reminder, and it makes shame squirm in your insides.

But he had sounded almost fond, and you finish your dinner knowing that, whatever else Loki had been in the past, you sit side by side with a friend.

Chapter End Notes

Looook at them! Anyone else yelling?
Every Cloud

Chapter Summary

In which Loki finally catches a break

Chapter Notes

My apologies for missing last week’s update. I’ve been out of state with my family, and I’ve had sooo much going on. All good things, but unfortunately not a lot of writing time. So I thank you all for being patient, and present you with this next installment. (Also, over 50000 words? that’s crazy to me. the longest thing I’ve written by far!)

Btw, I sort of imagine the background song mentioned to be Two of Us by the Beatles, which is a little bit fitting, imo, but feel free to think of it as any acoustic, feel good sort of song that you’d like :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki runs his fingers over the row of books on the grey metal shelf, reading the spines with a tipped head and passing over almost all of them. Every now and again, one will seem like it has the smallest chance of potential, and with hope as tenacious as a frayed thread, he adds it to the pile he and In-Hvassa have got going on a small round table in a corner nearby, where the girl sits in a very uncomfortable looking, boxy, chair with ratty blue fabric stretched over a pitiful cushion. Roughly every minute or two, Loki can hear the creak of the wooden frame as she shifts, trying and failing to keep a comfortable position in her spine. He’s not sure if it’s better or worse than his crouched form trying to glimpse the bottom-shelf books, shifting sideways over the length of the aisle, his knees beginning to feel stiff.

They’ve been in and out of the library so many times this past week that the librarian, an elderly woman called Edith, greets them by name when they enter — although she keeps mistakenly calling him Luke — and lets them browse as long as they need, take home mountains of books even though, technically, they’re only supposed to be able to check out six each at a time. She’d been all too happy to help them get a head start on their “school project,” even if it turned out to be a slow and tedious, miserable process for them.

There’s a quiet snick as a page turns, another restless groan of rickety wood, an actual groan, albeit a very low-volumed one.

Loki stands up, ignoring the clicking of his kneecaps and one hip as he makes his way back down the aisle to the table to deposit one lonely little book.
“Switch?” In-Hvassa asks, hopeful, and Loki finds himself nodding.

She rises and gives him a tired nod of thanks as she passes him to search anew down the next aisle.

Loki opens the book and begins skimming it, fighting back a yawn. It’s late. It’s been a long day. Soon, the library will close and they’ll have to bring the books back to the inn and do their research there, but while it is still business hours, they might as well take advantage of the opportunity to look for books and read through them simultaneously. Unfortunately, the only take away Loki has yet to find from all of this is simply that Midgardians are dreadful writers.

It takes several chapters for Loki to even notice that he’d picked a book that is complete fiction, not at all based in any helpful reality, and he shuts it with a snap louder than perhaps necessary and leans as far back in the chair as he can, which isn’t far with its too straight back and his long legs. If he stretches them out too far, he’ll probably tip the damn thing over.

He glances at the book In-Hvassa had been reading, still open where she’d left off, and he picks it up and begins reading it too. It’s a compendium to what must pass as magic on this realm, and unlike the other gimmicky guides and handbooks for shoddy tricks and illusions, it seems to contain information that may indeed be practical. There’s a two page spread on runes, and a whole, albeit abridged, chapter dedicated to plants and their many uses as healing agents, spell enhancers, or even poisons. Unfortunately, he cannot find anything relating to transport spells or elf magic, or charms that hide and mask one’s presence.

That sense of hopeless despair, which is becoming far too familiar as of late, is creeping back up, sweeping across his tired mind like mist over a field, and he squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes as if that might help in fighting it back.

There’s a soft patter on the table and the crackle of the plastic coating Midgardians seem to favor for their books. Before Loki can manage to drag his head out of his hands, In-Hvassa shifts closer to him and, with a hand both cautious and compassionate, pats his lightly on the back.

He smiles at her, a bit sheepish, all he can manage in his weariness, and she has a similar, crooked and wretched look on her face. It’s a bleak solidarity, but there’s not much to be done about it besides plod onward, as thrice-damned as it feels.

“I promise I’m not falling asleep here,” Loki says, sotto voce. “The minuscule text and massive volume of words is, however, beginning to strain my eyes.”
It’s not entirely a lie, not really, although his head’s been hurting for the better part of the last hour, and he’d read a thousand books with even smaller lettering if only they’d be useful to him. To them both.

She leans down next to him, and scoops the books back up into her arms. She even snatches the one he’s reading out from under him, but he doesn’t protest. He just gathers his bag and follows her to the check-out counter, where Edith scans their books and tells them the date they’re due to be returned. In-Hvassa adds the books to his bag and they make their way out into the chilly air, smoky and blue in the early night. Loki thinks it’s quite lovely, and the passing breeze over his face is refreshing, the cool tang of autumn in his nose and lungs easing some of the tension from his body and waking him up. But In-Hvassa tucks her scarf tighter around her neck and shoves her hands into her pockets to keep her fingers out of the worst of it.

He turns to head back to the inn, but she catches his arm.

“I... I don’t want to go back there just yet,” she says quietly, breath swirling white in the low light of the Midgardian streets. She doesn’t quite meet his eyes, doesn’t quite keep the slight tremor out of her voice. *She’s scared.*

She still has the knife, and Loki knows she knows how to use it, but the man who keeps watching her is still in residence at the inn, still unwilling to do much other than regard her with a worryingly hard to interpret look, too interested, too blank. He has not said anything. He has not approached either her or Loki himself, but the ever-present stare of his — neither stopped nor incited by Loki glaring in retaliation, nor In-Hvassa catching the man in the act — leaves a sour taste in Loki’s throat, a frustrating, persistent suspicion and a perturbation that clings like a burr. It sets his teeth on edge, not knowing what to expect, what to guard against, only the slowly mounting certainty that something is not quite right.

He does not blame her for being afraid. *His* hackles are raised enough as is, knowing he’d be remiss if he were not wary, were lax in his duty as a prince to protect the one other from his realm, one of his own, who is only here because of him in the first place. And, too, he does not want to see her get hurt.

He remembers. Even now, as the yellow glow of Midgard’s street lamps catches on her face, he recalls the rivulets of blood that had been so conspicuously flowing out of that same face, staining her dress, her hands, his hands as he’d healed her. The memory does some funny things to his gut, like someone is wringing his insides out like a wet towel. It had been bad enough then, the cold dread and horror of knowing why she’d done it like a blade itself, only one that did not leave so distinct a trail. And he had hated her, hated her because she’d hated him, lashed out because her fear had stung him fiercely, like fingers prodding too close to an open wound. Even then, he had not
wanted her to suffer, not like that, anyway. Now... now he remembers her little pained whimper, the terror welling in her eyes as she’d stared at her own blood-slicked hands, and it tugs at something in his chest.

“Did you have somewhere else in mind?” he asks, eyes drifting to where her fingers are still clutching too tight at the dark sleeve of his jacket, unnoticed in her anxiousness, and doubtless because of it. He finds, though, that he does not mind terribly.

“No,” she looks away, lip bitten between her teeth as she looks around at the shops and restaurants in the corner of this town, with their colorfully lit signs and wide glass windows spilling soft light across the walkways in front of them. “Just... somewhere else.”

“Alright,” he says, not very loudly. Truth be told, he doesn’t want to go back to the inn just yet either, despite his tiredness. He doesn’t think he’d sleep anyway, and trying to read one more book seems about as appealing as a good clip in the head from Mjölnir.

Somehow, they find their way to a sparsely inhabited Café, where the scent of warm coffee hits Loki’s nose, along with some sweeter undertones, and the red brick interior with dim lights and wooden tabletops feels cozy. He’s still got a few small bills and a handful of coins in his pocket, money that they had not yet spent, that he was halfway holding onto just in case they needed it for something. Perhaps this is it, he muses, a reward for their diligence and a distraction all in one.

He asks the worker behind the counter for something hot and sweet, and the young woman smiles pleasantly and suggests hot chocolate, which is certainly not a beverage served in Asgard. He smiles back, too tired for real mischief, but on a whim, he orders two, hoping her recommendation is worth anything. She asks if he’d like whipped cream on them, which is strange. He is used to eating cream with berries, or made into butter to spread on loaves of bread, but never served on top of a drink. He glances at In-Hvassa, who just shrugs, and decides to indulge his curiosity. Even if it turns out terrible, it still could not be as bad as more tedious book-searching, or the trepidation of being watched like prey waiting for the falcon to strike.

He pays the girl, and she busies herself making their hot chocolates, grabbing paper cups and filling them up under machines that make soft humming noises. She shoves plastic lids on top and hands the drinks over the counter with another smile that seems completely genuine, shining from her freckled face.

Loki, not for the first time, is warmed by the kindness of strangers on this strange planet, warmed that these mortal little people would impart that easy amiability on him, who they do not see as a prince or a sorcerer or a warrior, or any such golden and formidable title that would hold sway and prestige in Asgard. He does not have to be any of these things here, because here, where he is just another passing body, as insignificant as all the rest, he is still worthy of such courtesy and grace. He can be,
just as such, without the strain of pretense and obligation and the bitter resignation of duty hanging over his head, without the measuring stick of his brother’s shadow to constantly fall short of. True, Midgardians are simple people, but that same simplicity is freeing in its own way.

They take their cups to a table in a back corner, secluded but not cut off entirely, and Loki takes the lid off of his to let it cool; the steam from the machines behind the counter leave him with no doubt about the scalding nature of the hot chocolate. But he does cautiously bring it to his lips, just enough to sip at the fluffy white whipped cream at the top. It’s good. Airy, rich, and quite sweet.

In-Hvassa sighs, but not in a bad way, hands curled around her drink like she’s soaking up the warmth from it, eyes flickering shut as she holds the cup to her nose and inhales the scent. She takes a sip and her face lights up like the sun breaching a storm cloud, eyes going wide in surprised delight.

“Oh!” she says. “I like this.” She looks at him expectantly.

He rolls his eyes but brings the cup to his lips anyway. The hot chocolate is... not great. Sweet, for sure, almost cloyingly so, and bitter underneath, in an astringent, earthy way that sort of reminds him of honeyed dirt.

“It’s good,” he lies, with a straight face and as even a voice as he can manage.

But she laughs, some long-held tension melting from her shoulders like dew in summer.

“You hate it,” she accuses with no heat, that light still in her eyes.

“I do not.” But his cheeks twitch at the corners, betraying his words.

“Don’t lie to me, Loki,” she says, a gentle tease that causes him to wince nonetheless.

He doesn’t reply. He takes another sip, swallowing back the off-putting liquid and an equally biting retort. He glances around at the few other patrons, sitting and chatting amicably, or quietly reading.

“Sorry,” she says, sincere despite the hesitation, like she’s not even sure where she’d tread wrong.
The words are just loud enough to not be lost in the soft swell of music playing, pleasing plucked strings and vocals imparting an easy sort of merriment. It’s buoying, and Loki cannot find it in him to truly be upset. He nods, still a bit too thick in the throat to speak.

They’re quiet for a long time, just drinking, and despite the foul taste of what passes for a delicacy on Midgard, it’s... not wholly unpleasant. The weight of everything, of figuring out this impossible fucking task, of searching endlessly for something that doesn’t exist to figure out a situation beyond fathom, feels like it’s been set aside for the time, like he doesn’t have to carry it while they’re sitting out of the wind in the corner of the little shop and this nowhere town. He lets his eyes fall shut, just enjoying it like a withered plant soaks up the first rain after an extended bought of dryness, content to let it rest just for now. He’ll pick it back up when he has to, but one moment to soothe his spirit isn’t too much to ask.

“Did you ever expect... anything like this?” In-Hvassa asks.

Her voice eases him out of his musings, and he opens his eyes to give her a very sober half-smile.

“Never,” he says mildly.

“Yeah,” she agrees, eyes drifting as her thoughts wander as well. There’s something sardonic, and something conspiratorial, in the sharp grin she fixes on him. “Present company is the biggest surprise, actually.”

Loki raises an eyebrow, feigning eminence. It is no hardship for him to assume the role of lofty royalty.

“You should be honored.”

“Who says I’m not?” she challenges back, very serious.

“Are you?” he asks as if it is of no consequence.

She can’t quite keep her face set, eyes crinkling at the corners tellingly.
“Perhaps,” she says into her cup, drinking from it to hide the blooming smile.

Loki hums, drumming his fingers on the table to the rhythm of the beats of the song in the background, the picture of indifference. It’s an obvious bluff, even for him, but, well, he’s still better at this than she is, clearly. He smirks.

“Pithy and vague.” He allows a note of approval to color his words. “If not myself and my admittedly charming company,” he says, droll sarcasm at odds with the wink he sends her, “who would you pick to join your misadventure on this misbegotten planet?”

“Oh, it’s not Midgard’s fault Bǫlverkr is a prick,” she says, and Loki almost lets loose a surprised laugh at her jaded frankness. “This realm is cute, and you know it.” He offers no denial. In-Hvassa leans back, considering. “My brother,” she answers finally. “We always did get ourselves up to the knees in trouble we couldn’t handle. But we handled it.”

“You have a brother?” Loki asks, conversationally. “I would’ve pinned you as an only child.”

She shrugs. “You’d be wrong. One brother, same as you.” Then she tips her head, squinting at him a little. “You remind me of him, actually.”

Both his eyebrows go up. That was... very nearly a compliment, by extrapolation.

“You should be honored,” she says, the counterstroke accompanied by an almost viciously satisfied smile.

He tips his still mostly full cup at her in acknowledgment.

“You’re nothing like my brother.” He snorts. *Nothing at all.*

“Indeed?”

“Do take it as a compliment. It was meant to be one.” he says at her uncertain expression, like she
doesn’t know what to make of it. He’d thought it was obvious.

“What’s wrong with Prince Thor?” she asks, brows drawn in contemplation. *Prince Thor,* he internally mocks, more amused than vexed. His brother’s shining reputation always did precede him, and there are traces of awe in her voice even through the level tone. “He seemed nice when I spoke with him.”

He looks up sharply.

“You’ve spoken to him?”

*Something* flashes across her face, a brief widening of her eyes that’s gone quickly. Too quickly. Anyone besides Loki wouldn’t have been able to place it, but as it is, he does know a thing or two about lies.

“Just once,” she says, radiating innocence. “It was a short conversation, I suppose, not really anything meaningful.”

“I see,” says Loki, deciding to accept what he has just been so generously offered. He folds his hands together over the table and crosses his ankles with that selfsame casualness. “And what did you and he have to discuss, I wonder?”

“I’m sure it’s not of any interest to you,” she says a shade too quickly. Interestingly, she’s a good liar. She meets his eyes steadily, doesn’t fidget or shift or cough uncomfortably. If this wasn’t so fun, he’d let her out of the snare, just on principle. But, oh, it is fun.

“Try me,” he presses, laying enough intensity in it so she *knows* that he’s not fooled in the slightest.

She does look away then, mouth curling sullenly. And once that fades, the guilty swallow, the too-tight grip on her cup follow.

“Fine,” she says, annoyance masking sheepishness. “I overheard a conversation of his, and he, ah, admonished me.”
“You mean you were eavesdropping.”

And how fortunate for him that she has that particular tendency, he muses.

“Yes,” she grits out, almost angry.

That is... unexpected. *He* certainly had not been rebuking her. But there’s a tightness of her face, something anxious in the way she licks her lips and stubbornly stares at a discolored mark on the tabletop. And he sees then that she *is* worried, because she does not want him to be angry with her. It is quite unwarranted. He is nothing of the sort.

“And that made you think Thor is nice?” He is careful to keep anything but pure, idle curiosity out of his voice.

She looks up warily, searching his face for something she won’t find, still expecting him to lash out at her. Which is not unwarranted. But that particular inclination of his is dormant with no signs of waking.

“Well,” she starts, and then frowns, bemusedly. “He was not mean to me, but I suppose that is not why, precisely. It was more... how he spoke to-” and again, she’s revealing too much by trying not to reveal it. But this time she realizes it, and relents, “-you, actually.” She chews at her lip. “And I suppose you know what conversation that was.”

He does. There’s only one point it could have been, when he’d spoken to his brother and she could have feasibly been in the vicinity.

“And mother-henning is, what, endearing to you?” And he honestly cannot wrap his head around that one. Thor could truly be overbearing at the best of times and supercilious at the rest.

“Of course not. Nobody enjoys being condescended to.” That spark in her seems to be back, no longer doused by the undercurrent of dread. “But he means well, does he not?” It’s rhetorical, daring him to object, because she, without a doubt’s shadow, knows what she’s talking about.

“He does,” Loki concedes, because that’s one thing that he has ever been certain of, and one thing he cannot resent. “Your brother is also older.”
In-Hvassa nods, even though he didn’t need the confirmation.

“Older, unduly protective, harasses me relentlessly,” she says, and then smiles fondly. “But I wouldn’t trade him for the world.”

No, Loki thinks with a pang, he would not trade Thor, not even for his life. He actually misses the stupid oaf, arrogance and all.

Then Loki lets a smile fill his face, quite smug.

“Well. I suppose I am honored,” he remarks far more lightly than his expression would suggest, “if I am so much like him.”

He watches raptly as her countenance doubles back, doing an absolutely fascinating dance of confusion, realization, embarrassment, denial, and then amusement.

“I take it back,” she quips, lips quirking. “You don’t remind me of him, you remind me of my dog.”

“Now that,” Loki says, “is impertinent.”

“Is it?” She raises her eyebrows. “Even if he’s a good boy?”

“Is he?” he asks, fighting a laugh.

“Not at all.”

Loki does laugh then, because, well, he cannot deny that.

Chapter End Notes
So... that was pretty much just a date, right? No big deal, or anything.

Anyone notice how Loki has a “bad” (but tremendously fun) influence on In-Hvassa, but she inspires him to be a bit kinder, a bit nobler? This is what we call a match made in Midgard.

As a side note, the word “lofty” comes from the Old Norse word “lopt,” meaning air or sky, which is also a byname of Loki (sometimes spelled Loptr), so he is, literally, lofty. So that’s my own little Loki pun, for your enjoyment :)

A Knife by the Handle

Chapter Summary

In which you do something very brave, to someone very foolish

Chapter Notes

With any luck, I'll return to a regular update schedule soon, so fingers crossed. I've been super busy lately, but I'm finished with all of that for now, so I'll have more writing time if all goes well.

Anyway, here's a small but important chapter in the meantime :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The night air is cold and nips at your cheeks, but it can't steal away the touch of warmth that has unfurled in your chest, the pleased, wide-awake sort of contentment that lingers long after leaving the Café. The night was fun, in a way you had never realized could be possible considering where you are and who you're with. But as you sneak a glance at Loki, taking in the relaxed slope of his shoulders and the ease in his face, it doesn't seem quite so impossible any longer.

Loki is... different here. Maybe it's something about the Midgardian air, but he's... actually good company. And it's not just that you are willing to tolerate his presence because there is no other option here where strangers abound and he's the only trace of familiarity available to you. The fact is, a marvel in and of itself, Loki, like this, is someone you'd have liked to get to know before all these things happened. If a thousand other paths had been taken, if fate had had a different forecast. If he weren't a prince, if you'd never met Einvald, if you hadn't cut yourself, if he'd never been meant to marry Ülle, if he'd never made you her servant...

If he hadn't, you realize suddenly, struck by the thought, if he hadn't, you wouldn't be here. You would be tucked away in your cozy farmhouse, grinding sweet-smelling oats or chopping leeks and mutton for stew, or doing the wash up and trying to keep Búrakki from chewing at your sleeves. You'd be home, happy and complacent and only vaguely aware that anything had happened to Asgard's youngest prince.

And Loki... Loki would still be here. You'd thought, at first, that all your effort to try to save him hadn't made a difference but... that is not precisely true. Because Loki would be here regardless of what became of you. At least, though, with you here, he is not alone. It is a small solace, certainly, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth something. It has to be worth something. It can't just all be coincidence, can it? When it all leads back to here? Even so, even if there is nothing you're meant to
do, even if there is nothing you can do, it isn’t meaningless. Not to Loki.

You can hardly imagine being by yourself in a place you don’t understand, how crushingly despondent it would be to have no way of knowing where to go or how to get back and no one to turn to. Without even knowing why you were there in the first place. And Loki is trying, beyond trying, to be... good to you, to talk to you and buy you hot chocolate and laugh with you, even when he does not have to by any obligation, and you can only conclude that he is grateful to not be completely alone. Maybe he even likes your company.

The light of the moon is reflected by his eyes as he catches your gaze, silver glinting on green, and he smiles at you. It’s a real smile, untarnished with arrogance and scorn and without the underpinnings of mischief at its foundation, full and unguarded and toothy.

Yeah. Maybe he does.

You smile back at him, taking a step closer until the sound of both your footsteps walking side by side blurs into one continuous rhythm.

“Nice night,” says Loki, words white against the darkness around him. He seems ever unbothered by the chill, like it cannot reach him. Enjoys it even. But now, there’s a slight tremor to his voice, repressed amusement he can’t quite hide entirely. A bluff.

“It’s freezing!” you protest, despite knowing that you’re feeding right into his game. Or maybe because of it.

“Oh, it’s not so bad as all that.” His voice is far too mild. It is and he knows it, even if he happens to like the cold. “No need to complain about it.”

“And yet, I seem to have noticed that you’re wearing a jacket. Interesting, considering that it’s positively balmy.”

“Well...” Loki hedges, “Clearly, the purpose of this,” he gestures to the rather nice wool coat, black with lighter grey buttons down both sides of the front, “is not for warmth, but to look dapper. Which it is fulfilling, is it not?”

You snort, not deigning to answer that. It’s transparent, painfully so, the lack of denial, but you can’t
quite bring yourself to lie, and, more to the point, you don’t want to encourage Loki’s equally obvious bullshit. Or, at least, you don’t want to overtly encourage it. Subtly, perhaps. As long as you can pretend you don’t enjoy it.

“Besides, that’s not what I meant.” You look up at Loki, but he’s looking at something to the left.

“Better than going blind from reading so much useless information?”

“Much better.” He turns to you sharply with a grin.

“Even the hot chocolate?” you say, brimful of innocence. You still cannot understand what was so awful about it to him. But then, Loki’s food preferences are always hard to account for.

His face goes sour, just for a second, even though he manages to wipe the look away and give you a very good impression of benign confusion.

“What do you mean? The hot chocolate was the best part.”

You nudge him with your elbow.

“You hated it.”

He shakes his head.

“I did not. I quite enjoyed it, in fact.” You’d almost believe him, so good is his lie. But you’d seen the grimace on his face when he’d taken a sip, and there was no real way for him to deny it.

You giggle, and his seriousness cracks, slowly but steadily, until he is laughing as well.

You quiet down as you open the door to the inn and creep up the stairs, avoiding the most creaky ones and trying to muffle the rest so you don’t wake the other guests. You turn the corner to your room, Loki a half step behind, and come to an abrupt halt. The man is there, the one who watches you at every turn and makes you wary and ill at ease. He’s leaning against the wall by the door,
conveniently between yourself and the relative safety of the room. There is no reason for him to be there. You aren’t sure where his room actually is, but it is not on this side of the inn, this much you are certain of. Of course you are. You’ve been paying as much careful attention to him as he has you, as has Loki, out of necessity. Because something is very wrong.

Behind you, you can hear Loki draw in a quick, alarmed breath. There’s a split second where nothing happens, the stillness absolute, and then he wraps his arm around your shoulders, pulling you towards himself defensively.

“The knife,” he whispers urgently in your ear.

Then he pushes his way in front of you, his body a barrier between the other man and yourself. But you are frozen, rooted to the spot like a tree beside a riverbank, unable to move. Your hands don’t want to cooperate, even though your mind is screaming at you to do as Loki said, to arm yourself. Even a tiny blade can cut deep. But you can’t, somehow you can’t, and all you can do is stand and watch in mute, stagnant panic.

But the man is not watching you now. He’s not even looking at you. His dark, chary gaze is on Loki, and there’s no mistaking the malice so open in its depths.

“May I help you?” Loki asks, a facsimile of politeness even though there’s not point in acting when both of them have revealed themselves as they have. But while his voice is blithe and mannered, his hands are clenched and there’s tension so easily evident in the rigidity of his back.

The man does not answer. He sizes Loki up, pure hatred on his face, and it’s strange, so strange and so foreboding. He cannot possible have cause for hating Loki. Loki, who has done nothing to him whatsoever, has not said a single word to him until this very moment. Loki, who has not done anything wrong at all, not in a long time.

He is taller than Loki, which makes him very tall indeed, and broader at the shoulders. His eyes cut to you for an instant, and then he must have figured he could take Loki in a fight, because the next thing you know, he’s shoving Loki, hard, against the wall, and there’s a terrible thud as his head collides with the doorframe.

Loki snarls, vicious as a wolverine, even as he blinks rapidly, eyes loosing focus with pain. He grapples against the man’s hold on his jacket collar, arms clashing and as he moves, you can see that there’s blood on the paint, bright red smudged where Loki’s skull had just been, and you pant, horrified.
“The knife! Get the knife!” Loki says through gritted teeth. He manages to loose the man’s hands, slipping under his arm, but the man is not deterred.

But at his words, you shake yourself free of the grip of your fear and you nod frantically as you fumble the knife into your shaky-handed grip.

The man tries to lunge at Loki again, but, swift as a shrike descending on a field mouse, you step in front of him, blade drawn out and aimed toward him, and he stops short of impaling himself on it.

He looks at it in shock, then at you, then at Loki in rapid succession, and you jerk the dagger upward in warning, holding it high despite it all, right in his face.

“No,” you say, decisive and ruthless. Somehow, you take a step forward and he is forced to step back.

The man holds his hands up, like he’s trying to calm a growling dog, and looks down at you.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he say in a tone so condescendingly placating that does nothing but make your fury catch fire. “Be careful with a thing like that. You don’t want someone to get hurt.”

Someone to get hurt, you think, disgusted. As if he hasn’t hurt Loki already, for reasons you cannot ascertain, as if he would not hurt you as well given the chance. This poor mortal has no idea.

“Don’t I?”

For all that the words are lowly spoken, gentle almost, they are steel underneath. Cold, unrepentant steel, a threat and a warning and a challenge. Because the tiny blade is enough. The man is afraid of it. It could harm him badly, and he knows it, and you know that you have the upper hand. Suddenly, the dagger is a welcome weight, warm in your palm and heartening, and you sneer in a way that would make Loki proud.

And speaking of-
“Trust me, you don’t want to find out if she means it.”

Loki stands behind you, and you can imagine the look of him, equal parts regal and deadly and calm, still waters hiding the riptide, and the man hesitates, fear flashing in his face like lightning, caught against his odds.

He glances around, and only then do you notice the open doors, the other guests peering out or standing in the hall to determine the source of the commotion, to watch it all play out. You must look insane, baring your teeth like some feral creature and brandishing a weapon, the man a victim of you to their eyes. You realize as the dagger starts swaying that you are shaking, your whole body caught up in the fright-filled rush.

He turns toward the stairs, tensed to run, pushing his advantage as you falter. A bystander grabs him by the bicep, in a grip far from friendly and quite tight.

“You’re staying right where you are,” he growls at the man, and backs up his words by holding him in place.

They... they’d seen it, then, all of it. They knew the man had hurt Loki, and you were acting defensively. You feel lighter, awash with relief, but whatever desperation had set you in motion trickles away like meltwater. You put the strangely blurry knife away, and wipe at your eyes, surprised to find your face wet with tears.

A woman looks between you and Loki, taking in his bleeding head and your hiccuping breathing, and her face softens in sympathy.

“Why don’t you two head on into your room and sit down for a bit? We’ll give our reports to the officer, and make sure this guy can’t hurt anyone else, you just take it easy and get cleaned up. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

You’re not sure if she means you, or Loki, or both, but you nod hazily, and Loki fiddles with the key until the door opens, and you’re stepping into what’s become the closet thing to a home that you’ve known since being here, and it hits you then that it’s over.

Loki pulls the door shut behind him and leans on it, clutching the back of his head and grimacing. You’re dread rises back up full force.
“Are you alright?” you ask, slightly high-pitched because it looks like no, he’s not. He blinks a few times, confused, and when he looks at you, it takes a second for him to respond.

“Yes, I’m fine. The mortal did not seriously hurt me.” You bite at your lip, not quite certain, and he frowns at your worry. “Head wounds always bleed a lot. It’s much worse than it looks.”

But his fingers find their way back into his hair, and his reassuring tone does little in the face of it.

“Sit down,” you say softly, still badly shaken, and you’re sure Loki is much more so than he’s letting on, if he’s not genuinely concussed.

He does so, scooting back until he’s against the headboard on one side. He gestures to the empty space beside him, and you sink down on the soft quilt with a sigh.

“I am fine,” Loki says again, a half-smile pulling at his lips.

There’s truth in his eyes, and if nothing else, he really believes it. He probably is. But you’ve never seen anything but clear-eyed focus, good or bad, from him, and the momentary fogginess doesn’t set well. But that could just as easily be shock.

You nod, but you don’t really know what to say.

Silence enfolds you for a long, blissful moment, and you lean back against the pillows, letting your eyes shut and the remnants of your fear slip away like water from a leaky bucket.

Then Loki lets out a laugh.

“I wouldn’t have been nearly so merciful,” he murmurs, and for a moment you think he’s being derisive. But his eyes are closed when you look at him, and he seems tired more than anything.

“I didn’t stick him with it,” you agree, with as much regret in your voice as you can impart. Truly, you’re not sure how to feel. You hadn’t hurt him back, but... you could have. It would have been easy. Satisfying, maybe. But... he was mortal. Killing him wouldn’t have been a fair price for what may be only a minor injury, and stabbing him could well have been fatal.
“Here,” you say, holding the dagger out to Loki once he opens his eyes. “Maybe you had better hold onto this, now that he’ll be gone.”

He glances at it, but doesn’t take it right away.

“And deprive me of the opportunity to watch you defend me so ardently?” He raises his eyebrows, and then grins. “You looked like a valkyrie.”

You laugh at that, at how preposterous that is.

“A stoat, possibly. Perhaps one with a toothache,” you say, amused.

But Loki is quiet as he gently takes the knife from your hand. You look at him, and he still has that smile, something quite serious therein. You think, maybe, he wasn’t joking.

Chapter End Notes

And so they tiptoe ever closer
Chapter Summary

In which you make a surprising discovery, and Loki makes a surprising offer.

Chapter Notes

Every time I say I’ll have more time for writing, I end up being proved wrong, so I’ll stop saying it and just write what I can when I can and hope that I’ll get a chapter out sooner rather than later. Thanks for all the patience, and the lovely comments <3

This chapter was originally gonna be a little longer than this, and have a little more happen, but... this seemed like a good, natural place to end it, so next one will follow right up where this leaves off.

That being said, I have a funny feeling you guys will like this one...

You sink against the down-filled pillow at your back, the sheets and quilt under you a comfort, silky beneath your fingertips as you run your hands back and forth over the fabric. It’s grounding, in a way, something so simple and mindless, the calm nothingness after the shock of being attacked, watching Loki being attacked. The breathing next to you is rhythmic, blending into the soothing repetition like ripples against the shore of a lake. It’s almost too even, too shallow.

That thought is what makes you wade out of the torpor, and you see that Loki has his eyes shut again, lured by the soft call of sleep and the warmth of the room and bed. It’s late, and has been an exhausting day, and he has every reason to be tired. But... he’d also just hit his head. You don’t know much about concussions, or how to treat them, but you think... maybe he shouldn’t sleep.

“Loki?” you whisper, not truly having the heart to wake him if he is asleep.

He hums in reply, but does not open his eyes. Resting, then.

“Why you?”

“What about me?” He peeks one eye open, brow bunching in the center.
“I mean, why did he attack you? You didn’t do anything to him. What reason would he have to do that?”

Loki lets out a long breath, shifting to sit up more fully and turn toward you, hands folding together in his lap in a somewhat apprehensive manner.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “Sometimes,” he swallows. “Sometimes people are just unpredictable. Violent. Some don’t need a reason to harm others, some have reasons that only make sense in their own minds.” He’s quiet for a pensive moment. “Perhaps he saw me as a threat to having you for himself.” His lip curls, the words bitter and disgusted.

And it is certainly a repulsive image, as if you were an object that the man could have. As if you would ever want to be with a man like that. Even thinking about it makes your skin crawl, and you’re glad, at least, that you’ve never had to feel unsafe like that around Loki.

But still, there are a few reasons that idea wouldn’t quite make sense, although perhaps making sense of the situation is foolishness in and of itself, because Loki is right that there are people whose minds are so crooked and perverse that trying to untangle them is a futile pursuit. However, you cannot imagine that you are some trophy to be fought over, that the man, or any man, would desire you, much less to the extent Loki is implying.

To Loki, you say, dryer than Muspelheim in midsummer, “A terrible way to try to earn my affection.”

“You’re not flattered, I take it?”

“Of course not!” Because how could you be? The fact is, this wasn’t a courtship attempt, wasn’t some means of winning you over. There has to be something deeper, something more motivating than the urge to, to claim you like a sparring hart during the rut. But then you realize Loki is being facetious, so you add, facetious in your own right, “He didn’t even win.” Loki snorts, pretending to be offended. “Honestly,” you say, not at all joking now, “I’m appalled that he did that.” You gesture to a bit of blood that Loki has gotten on his pillow, residue from the injury that seems to be, as he said, minor.

Loki grimaces a bit as he looks at the stained pillowcase, but he can’t entirely keep the slight smile from tugging at the corners of his mouth, dimpling his cheeks.
“Perhaps I ought to be flattered.”

You smile too, something fond making itself known to you, because, as much as he says it like a jest, you know that he is truly gratified.

A sudden thought resurfaces, and you bite at your lip.

“Maybe...” you hesitate, because you’re not sure you want to voice it aloud, not sure you want to burden Loki with it. But he’s watching you, curious and hopeful, like he wants an answer just as much as you do. “Maybe he thought that you were,” you lower your eyes, “hurting me.”

Loki’s face falls. For a moment he seems like he wants to deny it, because he had not, truly he had never done such a thing, and the very idea is distressing. But then his gaze roves over your cheek, alighting on the scar there. His lips form a silent ‘oh’ of understanding.

You hold your breath, resisting the urge to squeeze your eyes shut, to turn away, to hide. Besides trying to heal you, and taking hold of your hand that one time, Loki had not seemed to pay much attention at all to that part of your face. You hadn’t realized how relieving that had been until this sudden scrutiny, and it feels all the worse for it. Acknowledging it seems excruciatingly raw, like it’s still open and bleeding, and you already hate it enough. You don’t want Loki to hate it too.

“Ah. He would not know how this,” he says, and before you can blink away the shaky feeling enough to realize what he’s doing, he reaches his fingers out to tap over the scar, “came to be.”

And the strangest thing is, stranger even than the casual, unflinching way Loki has just touched you, is that you can feel it. The skin that had been so numb and dull before now sparks with sensation for the brief moment his hand presses against it, and you can’t quite clamp your teeth over a tiny gasp.

“Did that hurt?” Loki asks, pulling his hand away immediately and looking you over, bemused.

“N- No,” you manage, not entirely sure what had happened. It hadn’t hurt, not at all. Not that it should have. It had stopped hurting, physically, the moment Loki’s magic had closed it up. But it had been like dead skin, and by all reason, it shouldn’t have felt the butterfly wing flutter of Loki’s fingers either.
You shake your head, because Loki’s doesn’t look like he quite believes you, still searching your face with a shrewdness that would have been touching, if it were for any other reason. It’s the same worry you held about his head injury, and you know that if you were to say yes, yes he had caused you pain, he would apologize, and mean it. But right now, you just want to change the topic.

“If he thought you were to blame, he doesn’t any longer.”

“No,” Loki agrees, amusement overspreading the lingering uncertainty. “You’ve doubtless absolved him of that notion. If anything, he now fears for my safety.”

And like that, the tension vanishes, replaced by a well-timed joke and the sound of your surprised laughter, a gleam in Loki’s eyes that is quite pleased indeed.

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Loki brings his mug of bitter coffee to his lips, sipping at it even though it’s too hot to be enjoyable. Still, it keeps his hands busy, makes the restless motion of them seem purposeful and not merely a corollary of nervous energy. Over the rim of it, he watches the room, warily eying each new person that approaches the table. He’s sure that the man is somewhere far from here, likely imprisoned for his actions, but until he can know for certain, he can’t let that tension drop.

In-Hvassa is next to him, close by his side. Much closer than she normally sits, and he knows she is rattled as well. He takes another swallow of his coffee and feels the heat of it wash all the way down to his stomach, residing there as bracing and allaying as the knowledge that she trusts him, finds security in his presence. He is glad of it, and more besides. He similarly feels much more at ease, that tight, constricted feeling loosened by knowing she is near, safe and well.

But there, too, is a sweetness to it, something that settles soft as a feather in the very depths of himself, as if filling a hole he hadn’t known existed. She does not need him to protect her. She’s clever, and bold, and she can fend for herself. He knows. He’s seen it often enough. Yet she would trust him to do so regardless of necessity, because she has realized a truth both simple and substantial. He will not hurt her. Petty malice aside, he had never truly wanted to. After all this, though, he thinks, he would go a long way to make sure nothing else would either.
She shifts, and her arm brushes against his elbow. He doesn’t mind it. In a strange way, it’s almost comforting.

In-Hvassa stifles a yawn as she picks at the food on her plate. An already long night had stretched even further, and neither of them had managed sleep until the sky grew pale with dawn and the first fingers of light were reaching through the curtained windows. And what they had gotten was more fitful dozing than true sleep, one nodding off, still upright and not much willing to move from Loki’s bed, while the other kept quiet watch, interspersed with moments of conversation that kept them both from sinking too deep into fretfulness.

Loki hasn’t much appetite either, favoring the strong black beverage and the fluttery, invigorating energy it gives. Even so, she has not taken more than a mouthful or two, and Loki himself had at least eaten a piece of bland toasted bread and a bit of tart jam that seemed to be made out of the rind of some sort of fruit and lots of sugar. He’s not sure why she’s taking this as hard as she is. It was frightening, even Loki would admit to feeling such, but... she had not been hurt. Loki had not been hurt badly, and yet, she clearly is not well. So it had to be something else, something separate, and yet not.

A pair of men walk into the room, and Loki’s eyes trace them as they find seats together farther down the table. He doesn’t recognize them, and they’d had nothing to do with last night, or the other man, and yet he still watches the... brothers? for a moment, just to give that persistent nag of suspicion a chance to rest. The taller of them leans near his companion, brushes his hand along his forearm with a lazy sort of smile. Loki’s eyebrows shoot up. Definitely not brothers. The other one chooses that moment to glance Loki’s way, and before he can pretend he wasn’t looking, he winks, and Loki swallows his coffee wrong, unsuccessfully fighting the heat rising in his face as he turns away. That was... unexpected, he thinks as he coughs a bit, trying to set his breathing to rights.

And yet, In-Hvassa has scarcely noticed, not the coughing, not the silver-platter opportunity to needle Loki for blushing like some kind of maiden, none of it. She yawns again, and maybe that’s part of it, that blurry-eyed sleepiness that clings like lichen on wet rock. She refuses to even try the coffee, even though it would certainly help on that front. But that is not the only part of it.

She’d said she was fine earlier, that her scar didn’t hurt, but she’d been... well, Loki wasn’t sure what she’d been, only that it hadn’t been quite right. But if it was the scar... Loki frowns. Maybe... maybe holding a knife in her hand once more reminded her too much of the day she had gotten the scar. It’s not inconceivable. Being threatened by a stranger probably hadn’t helped either. Not the exact situation, but similar enough. Too similar for someone who has lived through something with such a capacity to leave mental scars as well. She had frozen up for a moment, and it wasn’t just the initial fear of the situation. It was panic, irrational as it was powerful, the same sort of blinding, whelming sensation Loki gets when he comes too close to a bull aurochs, and he can feel the burning pain in his abdomen, taste the blood in his mouth.
But she... she has not said anything, and so Loki has no certainty in his conjecture. He wishes she would. He turns to look at her, and she’s just sort of staring at her plate, vacant and lost. He leans toward her, no hard task since she is right there.

“You should eat something,” he says, and then realizes how imperious that had sounded.

But she doesn’t seem put off by it, instead just smiles at him, a bit sheepish for being caught with her head in the clouds.

“You’re right,” she agrees, and takes a bite. “Sorry. I was just thinking about the books we still have to read, and I don’t know how much progress we’re going to make today, because I’m exhausted, you’re exhausted, neither of us slept much, and there’s still so many of them!” The words come out all in a rush, and she looks close to tears from sheer frustration and worry.

Truthfully, Loki has forgotten all about the books, which no longer seemed like such a priority, not when safety had to take precedence and, well, his focus had been on her and not the increasingly useless task.

“Hey.” He puts his hand on her back lightly, hoping that it’s some sort of comfort. “Forget about the books. I think it’s time we try a different tactic anyway.”

Her shoulders sag in relief, and when she looks up at him, her eyes, though still tired and weary, have lost that heavy appearance.

“Good idea,” she laughs. “What did you have in mind?”

And this, Loki is a little bit hesitant about, because it’s possibly going to be an even more hopeless task, at least from his perspective. But they have to try something, and Loki, too, would just as soon burn the books as read them.

“I could, perhaps,” he begins, scowling only half-heartedly, “make an attempt to teach you to use magic.”

And it’s not likely to go too far beyond just that: an attempt. It would be hard when he didn’t even
have the benefit of being able to show her what he was describing. The visual component of learning
had been the biggest aid when he was starting out, and it was one he could not provide. It rankles,
badly, because the longer he goes without being able to access his magic, the more it feels like he’s
lost it permanently, as distressing and crippling as losing a limb. But the most pressing matter is that
Loki is not Frigga or Eir. Loki had never been a patient teacher, at least not when trying to get Thor’s
big head to wrap around even the most basic aspects of sorcery, and he simply does not possess the
gentleness and capacity to soothe away frustration and disappointment that those who had taught him
had bestowed on him.

But In-Hvassa does not seem to share his concerns.

“Would you?”

She’s grinning, bright as a summer afternoon, and the excitement glowing in her eyes is enough to
make him think that maybe it wouldn’t be so terrible to try.

Chapter End Notes

I did warn you that Loki can be sweet, did I not?

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