A Cuckoo in the Nest

by **bassetfan**

Summary

A cuckoo in the nest - *someone in a group who is seen as different and ostracized by their peers; an unwelcome intruder in a place or situation.*

AU. A story about Loki's life, from the day Odin found him.

Notes

This as an AU. This is my first time writing for this fandom, and I do so with a certain degree of trepidation. Although I’ve watched the ‘Thor’ films many times, there are a number of Avengers films I haven’t seen or have only seen once. I have no knowledge of the comics except for the information I’ve found online and I know only a little about the myths (thanks mainly to Wikipedia and Neil Gaiman). So, apologies if any of the characters are OOC or if I’ve made any glaring errors - although if I have, please let me know (nicely, please!). If anyone with greater knowledge of the fandom would be so kind as to offer their services as a beta reader, it would be greatly appreciated! This is my first time posting on AO3, so please let me know if I’ve missed any tags. Many thanks, sorry to blather on - on to the story.

I always thought there must have been a little more complexity to the relationship between Frigga and Loki. He obviously spent his whole life feeling under-valued and he repudiated her as his mother. At the same time, they were obviously close. I also wondered how it came about that Odin and Frigga were able to adopt Loki without anyone knowing. After all, they
are royal and people tend to notice things like royal pregnancies...

**WARNING!** - This chapter describes a miscarriage and may be upsetting for some people. Also, Frigga isn’t her usual self in this chapter. She’s younger and she's just suffered through a heart-breaking ordeal; she’s unhappy and angry.
The Child That Was Wanted And The Child That Wasn't

Queen Frigga of Asgard pushed and moaned, while a servant wiped a cool cloth across her brow. She tried to grit her teeth against the pain.

She remembered, with surprising clarity, her first labor - all those long years ago. It had been equally painful, but had been worth it; it had given her Thor, her beautiful son.

She pulled her mind away from thoughts of those other times; those long, hard labors that ended in nothing but misery and heartbreak. She would have a strong, healthy child this time, she was convinced it would be so. She had done everything within her power to ensure it.

She had taken such care to eat everything the healers recommended - liver, green vegetables, plenty of fruit. She had taken moderate exercise every day - enough to keep her body in shape, but not so much that the child in her womb might suffer. She tried to stay calm and happy, despite the fact that war was raging throughout the realms and she had to be hidden away, in case she should be seized as a spoil of war. What a prize for an enemy that would be - the pregnant wife of Odin, unable to defend herself while her belly was so large!

That was why she was giving birth, not in the beautiful palace of Asgard, but hidden away in a fortified castle with a small but trusted skeleton staff.

Her women rushed back and forth with towels and hot water, sharing concerned glances, while her good friend, Eir, did everything she could to ensure the queen would produce a healthy child.

But Frigga recognized the feeling in the room, the heavy weight of words unsaid. Tears began to run down her cheeks and she cried, "Eir?"

Eir didn't respond. Instead, Frigga heard the healer call to the other women. "Leave us now. Tell the cook to prepare your supper. I'll come and get you when you're needed again."

Frigga heard the sound of footsteps and the door closing. At Eir's urging, she pushed once again, and this time she felt the release as the baby left her body.

There was no cry. There was no sound at all.

She saw Eir move away and fuss for a few minutes before the healer turned back to her. The pity in Eir's eyes was enough.

Frigga began to cry. "What was it?"

Eir sighed. "My lady…"

Frigga gritted her teeth. "WHAT WAS IT?"

"A boy, my lady."

"Let me see him."

Eir began to shake her head. "I don't think…"

"Now!"

Eir turned away and lifted the small, lifeless bundle. Frigga reached out and Eir reluctantly handed it
to her.

He was beautiful.

She ran her hands over his tiny fingers and toes, noticing the perfection of them. He had long, dark eyelashes and a small shock of dark hair. She ran her fingers over it; it was silky soft to her touch. Again, she thought of Thor; he had been born with dark hair, but it had soon lightened to blond. She wondered if it would have been so with this child.

She began to sob. Eir leaned forward and took the baby from her. She returned quickly and pulled Frigga close, running her hands over the queen's hair in a soothing gesture.

"Hush now… it's going to be alright. Everything will be alright." It didn't seem strange. They had been friends long before they were queen and subject, and in this moment they were friends again.

"W..what if I..I… n..never have a..n..other?" Frigga stuttered out between her sobs.

"Then you have the satisfaction of knowing that you have a fine, strong boy in Thor - a boy that would make any mother proud!"

Frigga wiped her eyes and tried to calm herself. She knew that Eir was right, that she still had her darling, golden Thor; but she had wanted another child so desperately - not just for Odin and the throne, but for herself. She longed to hold a baby in her arms again, to nurse it and love it. Thor was growing older, he didn't need her as much anymore. These days, he spent more time with his father than with her. She missed him.

There was a knock at the door, and they exchanged surprised glances. Eir had sent the other women away - who would dare to interrupt them in defiance of her orders?

Eir marched angrily to the door and wrenched it open, prepared to give the intruder a piece of her mind.

The words died on her lips and she stepped back, lowering her head. "My King!"

Frigga stared at her husband in shock. "Odin? What are you doing here?" She twisted on the bed to see him better and her hand flew to her mouth. "Your eye! What happened? Are you alright? Eir, help him!"

At her words, Eir raised her head and saw the large bandage covering the king's eye. She stepped forward, but he waved her aside and pulled a chair close to his wife.

"It was done by sorcery, you cannot repair it. Laufey's mate, Faubarti, was a sorcerer of some skill, although it didn't save her in the end. She paid highly for her trickery."

Frigga gently lifted the field dressing and ran her hand across his empty socket. "She is dead?"

"Yes. I did not deliver a killing blow, but I have heard since that Laufey blames me for her death." As he spoke, his eyes took in the scene before him and his expression changed to one of sadness. He quickly guessed what had happened; it was a familiar scene.

Frigga saw the understanding in his eyes and looked away. "I am sorry, my lord. He was born dead."

He - it had been a boy. Odin's heart twisted, but he tried not to show his disappointment. "You have nothing to apologize for, it was nothing you could have helped. Perhaps I should apologize to you.
Giving birth under these circumstances could not have been easy."

She fought back more tears as she thought of all the other unsuccessful births. "I don't think it made much of a difference, do you?"

He didn't reply. Instead, he looked at Eir and seemed to come to a decision. "My dear, I have something to ask of you and I fear it is not a little thing."

Eir moved towards the door but he held up a hand to her. "No, wait. If my queen agrees, we will need your help."

Glancing curiously at her friend, Eir returned to the bedside.

"We won the battle."

"That is wonderful news." Despite the words, Frigga's tone was flat. The world seemed very far away and all she could think about was her own grief.

Odin didn't seem to notice. "Yes, Laufey has been forced to submit and Asgard has taken the Casket of Ancient Winters as part of their forfeit."

This got Frigga's attention. "But without the casket, Jotenheim will surely perish. Is it not the source of their power?"

"Yes, indeed. They may survive for another thousand years - perhaps even two - but the loss of the casket ensures their eventual destruction."

Frigga tried to rise, only to feel Eir's hand on her shoulder. "Be still, my lady. You need to rest."

Frigga lay back. "Husband, you cannot cause the destruction of one of the realms under your care. Certainly, Jotenheim has erred, but the loss of the casket is a death sentence. We cannot be responsible for the destruction of one of the nine realms."

"I know. I will have to return it before that happens. But to return it to Laufey - after he has spent centuries brooding over his wrongs - would be equally foolish. I could return it only under the protection of someone I could trust. Someone who would use it wisely, for the benefit of Asgard."

Frigga gave an uncharacteristic snort. "And where in Jotenheim would you find such a paragon as that?"

Odin reached for her hand. "And thus we come to the favor I would beg of you. When I went to the temple to retrieve the casket, I found something I was not expecting. A newborn baby - a runt, by all appearances, left to die in the cold and the ice."

Frigga made a small sound and Eir moved closer and put a hand on her shoulder. It was too soon to speak of a child dying.

"When I went to examine him, I saw that his markings were familiar to me. They showed him to be the child of Laufey and Faubarti. This, then, was their heir - third in line to the throne of Jotenheim. As I laid hands on the infant, his appearance shifted to that of an Asgardian."

He didn't tell her that he had been thinking of Hela, his beautiful but crazed daughter - the child he had failed so badly and been forced to send away. He believed the baby had gleaned something of his thoughts, and had taken on the form that would be most pleasing to the finder.
"Instinctive magic such as that is rare; it speaks of a potential for great power. When he left him there, Laufey could not have known what gifts his heir possessed; but if he survived through the night and his powers were discovered, the boy would soon become a formidable enemy to Asgard. I could not risk it. I decided to bring him here."

He watched her as he spoke. Her usually open and loving countenance was replaced by a face as cold and hard as granite.

"In this boy, we have a prize as valuable as the casket. With your consent, we will raise him as our own, until such time that we can tell him of his true history. When he comes of age, we will return him to Jotenheim, to serve us as a prince of both realms - a Jotun and an Asgardian! If the Norns favor us, he may even become their king - a king we could trust and advise. A king that will be, for all intents and purposes, one of us - an Aesir in thought and deed."

While he had been speaking, Frigga found herself staring at him with a mixture of incredulity and horror. Her mind whirled. "Raise him as our own? A frost giant?!

"But a runt. If we are lucky, he may not grow to be substantially larger than Thor. And I can modify his own spell to make sure that his form stays in it’s Aesir aspect. Not even he will have any idea that he is different until we tell him so. In every real sense, he will be as any other Asgardian."

He wanted her to treat this... creature as her own, to raise him with their own beautiful boy! The thought made her afraid.

"Husband, surely you do not mean that we will raise him side by side with Thor? As a brother? He is a frost giant! Thor would never be safe! A frost giant’s touch alone will burn an Aesir, but a frost giant with seidr - it does not bear thinking about!"

"Do not distress yourself. The boy will be carefully watched, and I am hopeful that under our influence he will learn to reject his baser Joten impulses. Away from that environment, I'm sure we can teach him to be a credit to us. And I will, of course, ensure that Thor will be safe. I intend to limit the child’s seidr - he will not be able to access enough of his magic to hurt any of us or do any real harm."

"But how would we even raise him? We know nothing about Jotuns, much less their infants! Do they even have the same physiology? Would he even survive the heat of an Asgardian summer?"

"You are right, my dear, of course. There is much we do not know. We would simply have to do as many other parents have done in the past and figure it out as we go along."

She suddenly thought back to his words. “Wait - you said the child is here?"

"Yes. I thought it best to leave him outside in the hall while we talk."

Eir rushed to the door. Frost giant or not, a cold hallway was no place for a newborn babe. A small bundle lay on the floor and she stooped to pick it up. She pulled back the blanket he was wrapped in and was pleased to see that he still looked like an Aesir. She passed him to her queen.

Frigga took the bundle by instinct before she thought to refuse. She stared down at him. To her eyes, he looked remarkably similar to the child she had just lost - her child. The only difference between them was the startling green of his eyes; they looked unnatural for a newborn. Well, she realized, they were. His true eye color must be red. She felt a sudden wave of hatred wash over her. Why should this unwanted child live, when her own precious baby had to die?

She thrust him back to Odin. “Show me his true form."
Odin waved his hand and suddenly she was staring at the red eyes and cold blue skin of a Jotun. She couldn’t help the natural reaction that most people had when they stared at a frost giant - she shivered with horror. “Take it away, I don’t want to see it.”

Odin frowned. Spying the cradle in the corner of the room, he moved towards it. Frigga cried out in alarm. "Not in there! That is for our child!"

Odin ignored her and placed the infant in the cradle. "Frigga… wife… our baby is gone. We did not make another heir for Asgard, but we have found something better!"

Eir winced as he spoke the words. Odin may have been a great king, but she often thought he lacked tact.

Frigga drew in a shocked breath. "Are you mad? You are speaking of our child! Our own son! How could there be anything good in the death of our boy?"

Odin realised his mistake. "Of course that is not what I meant. How could the loss of our own flesh and blood be anything other than a tragedy?"

He moved towards her and put an arm around her stiff and resisting waist. "I did not mean to imply that I do not mourn. I only meant to say that now we have a chance to prevent future wars and thus save the lives of our people. By taking in this foundling, we can prevent the deaths of children throughout this realm. And perhaps, with this act of charity, the Norns will reward us with further offspring of our own."

Frigga allowed herself to soften in the arms of her husband. Almost in a whisper, she said, "I had such hopes this time… I was so careful."

"Do not blame yourself; there was nothing you could have done. We will have a healthy heir when the Norns decree it so and not before. In the meantime, we have a babe without a mother and a mother without a babe. Might it not be that this is meant, that we are fated to act as parents to this boy? Thor would like a brother, I think."

He led her to the cradle. “See? He is nothing more than a helpless waif in need of a home.”

She looked down and felt resentment wash over her. This wasn’t her child; her child was dead. This was an imposter, a cuckoo in the nest, lying in their son's cradle, already stealing things that weren’t his by right.

She turned away from him. "If it were not for the sake of Asgard and the love I bear for you, I would not do this thing! I will raise him, if I must, but know this - I will not treat him as my own. I cannot love this child and I never will."

Odin bowed his head and took her hand in his. He knew that his wife was stubborn and determined, and that her heart was broken; but he also knew that her capacity for love was boundless. Once her heartbreak had healed, she would grow to love the boy. There was no hurry; they had millennia.

Her voice broke into his thoughts. "Is there not a danger in having him so near our throne?"

"I had considered that. We will raise him to be a king, but it will be made clear that he is second to his brother in all things. He will know that Asgard is meant for Thor."

She considered and nodded slowly. "Alright."
He kissed her. "Thank you. I must leave, no-one must know that I was here."

As he turned to leave, a thought occurred to her. "Wait! What of Heimdall?"

"I will explain matters to him, he will understand. Heimdall is loyal to me and to Asgard. We can trust him not to say anything." He walked out the door and disappeared from her sight.

Sighing, she turned back to the room and the child she didn’t want.
All of Asgard celebrated when they were told about the new heir to the throne, the Prince Loki.

Thor was delighted by the news that he had a new baby brother. Frigga was pleased about that; she loved her son, but had started to fear that he might have been - perhaps - becoming just a little spoiled. The new baby would take a little of the spotlight off Thor and hopefully teach him something about sharing.

When Thor was a child, she had selected a group of children for him to play with. Unfortunately, Frigga noticed that they usually deferred to him, and always did as he wished. A brother would not be as likely to yield and let him have his own way.

Perhaps some good would come of this, after all.

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Thor stared in wonder at his new brother and reached out to him. “Hello, Loki!”

Instantly, the baby wrapped a tiny hand around his finger and pulled it closer.

Thor grinned. "How long must we wait for him to join us on our adventures?"

Frigga smiled indulgently. "It will be many years yet before he will be able to play your rough games. But in a few months, he will be crawling, and after that, it won't be long before he starts to walk."

Thor turned back to the baby and didn't notice the frown that came over her face.

She was disturbed by how little she knew about Jotun children. Did they grow at the same rate? Despite Odin’s assurances, she wondered how far the altered form went. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she already thought that he seemed a little cooler than most people, and he would cry loudly if he was bundled up in too many clothes or blankets. Would his growth and progress follow that of an Aesir or a Jotun? And if a Jotun, then what should they expect? Would he be towering over Thor in just a few years? A giant, albeit in Aesir form?

The Jotun would not allow themselves to be taken prisoner; so, without revealing what her husband had done, there was no-one she could ask. They would just have to muddle through and make the best of it.

The child began to cry and Frigga put a hand on her son's shoulder. “Thor, we should leave now."

He looked up, puzzled. "But he's crying. Shouldn't we try and make him feel better?"

"He's crying because he's hungry. We should leave so the wet nurse can feed him."

"Can't we feed him?"

"No. That is a job for Angrboda. We should let her feed him in peace."

Frigga couldn’t tell Thor that she couldn’t bear the thought of suckling a frost giant. Instead, they
hired a woman from the village. Angrboda would live in the palace and care for the new prince, while her own child, a daughter, would live in the village and be raised by her grandparents.

Thor pouted for a minute and then turned to follow his mother out of the room.

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Angrboda was exhausted. She couldn't understand why Loki didn't seem to be thriving. She could tell he was hungry and he would begin to feed; but there was no eagerness to the act and he would quickly turn away. More worrying still, he did not seem to be gaining weight as he should. Her own daughter, Sigyn, born at the same time, was plump and thriving in the care of her grandparents.

Angrboda wondered if she should take her concerns to the queen. Now the war was over, the king and queen were busy taking care of their soldiers and ratifying terms with Jotenheim. Angrboda knew they were both very busy, especially the king, who was frequently absent even at mealtimes.

She was puzzled by the king and queen's behaviour concerning their new son.

It had been almost two weeks since the queen had found time to visit him, and as far as the wet nurse knew, the king had only seen him once since their return.

Perhaps she could understand that; few fathers were involved with their children while they were babies. His interest would no doubt grow with the boy and, with so many calls on his time, perhaps it was understandable that he couldn't break away to visit his new son.

But surely, the Queen Frigga could make more of an effort? Angrboda had seen her around the palace, playing with Thor in the garden and relaxing in the sunlight on her private balcony. Couldn’t she have sent for Loki then? She seemed… well, almost to dislike the child.

Angrboda knew that some mothers could experience a depression after giving birth. She had even known a woman in the village with that had suffered that way. All the villagers had done their best to gather round and take care of the child until she recovered herself. It had taken a few months, and the woman had spent many of those months crying or sleeping.

But it was different with the queen; she didn't seem unhappy, just a little distracted. And if it was the same ailment, why would they not take her to the healer? Surely Eir, the royal healer and close friend, would be able to help? But it seemed that no-one besides Angrboda thought the queen was behaving oddly.

It was very strange.

She picked up the baby and ran a finger over his soft cheek. He smiled and reached for her finger, holding it his own tiny hand with a firm grip.

Perhaps she was worrying for nothing.

She decided to wait before alarming anyone. Some babies could be fussy, and it wasn't as though he wasn't feeding at all; she would keep her concerns to herself for a little longer.

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The queen was distracted.

At first, when she had agreed to take in the child, she had been too filled with grief and shock to think of anything else; but since then she had started to be curious about the boy.
He was so small. Small even for an Aesir child, and he was supposed to be Jotun. She would not have thought it was possible to conceal a frost giant’s appearance so completely.

Odin said the child's seidr had caused the illusion, but she couldn't help but wonder what was illusion and what was not. That dark hair and those green eyes... so much like Hela, Odin's daughter with his first wife.

Odin had been absent for a long time while they were fighting the war against Jotenheim. She didn’t know if he found the Jotuns as grotesque as she did; as most Asgardians did. She knew that long ago - long before they were married - Odin had seduced a giantess. Frigga wondered now what she had looked like. When she pictured the woman in her mind, she imagined her as beautiful: like an Aesir, but larger.

But what if she had looked like a Jotun? What if Odin found such creatures attractive? What if he had done much more than fight to gain an advantage over the Jotuns?

What if he had seduced a Jotun maiden and Loki was the result?

The boy could easily be a mix of Aesir and Jotun blood. It would explain his diminutive size. Surely, that was more likely than believing that this tiny infant was the offspring of the great King Laufey and his queen, the giantess Faubarti?

But then, how came the child to have Laufey's markings? Might it be that they were Faubarti’s instead? She and Laufey shared bloodlines. After all, there were not many mates for a Jotun king to choose from. Their royal family was small and they could not easily choose a mate from another realm - their freezing touch and their size made it almost impossible. Frigga knew that Laufey and Faubarti were second cousins; it was likely their lines were similar enough to make it hard to differentiate.

Perhaps that was why the child had been abandoned and left to die - because he was a bastard child, not fit to inherit the throne of Jotunheim. Why else would Laufey leave the child to die? Jotunhiem needed children of royal blood. Although the boy was small, he was still an heir to the throne; surely he could have been used as a marriageable pawn?

So what did it mean if the child was Odin's son in very truth? If he lay with another woman - if he had seduced the Queen Faubarti - was it politics? Or was it love?

She knew she would never ask her husband.

Chapter End Notes

Wouldn't a husband returning home after a long absence, with a child that he'd just 'found', set alarm bells ringing? Especially if the child had a familial resemblance? I find it hard to imagine that Frigga wouldn't be a little suspicious...

Also, I know that Angrboda and Sigyn were Loki's wives... but trust me, I'm going somewhere with this...
What’s Wrong With Loki?

If the royal family thought they could relax now the war was over, they were sadly mistaken. Treaties needed to be signed and agreements reached. Other realms, worried about the threat of Jotenheim as well as the danger of the Allfather’s increasing power, needed to be appeased.

To allay their fears, it was decided that the royal family would visit each of the realms that would benefit from their presence. The ruler of each realm would be expected to renew their oaths of fealty and, in return, the royal family would meet the local dignitaries and progress through the lands, reassuring everyone of their benign intent.

They were all looking forward to seeing Vanaheim and Alfheim, although only Thor was excited about Nidavellir. The dwarves were notoriously sensitive about protocol and who knew how long they would be expected to stay before the dwarves felt that honor was satisfied? Anything less than four months in each realm would be an insult, and the dwarves would expect the visit to Nidavellir to be the longest.

Odin decided that, for a treat, he would also take his family to visit Midgard. Although primitive, he thought his family would enjoy the beauty of the planet. After that, they would return to Asgard, progressing through their own kingdom before returning to the palace. It was always a good idea for the royal family to show themselves to the people.

They would not return for a long time. The bifrost could be used if the king was needed for an emergency, but to return for any other reason would be considered an insult to the realm they were visiting.

So it was unfortunate when they discovered that Loki would not be strong enough for the journey.

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Angrboda decided she would have to tell the queen about Loki’s poor progress. The child still wasn’t thriving or gaining weight as he should be. If he began to decline during their absence, Angrboda would be blamed for her neglect.

She sent a servant with a request to speak to the queen. It was a few hours later when Frigga appeared at her door.

Angrboda bowed low. “My queen.”

"You wished to see me… is something wrong?” As she spoke, she looked over to the crib as if it contained a bilgesnipe rather than her own baby.

Angrboda tried to find the right words. "Not wrong, exactly, your majesty, but…"

Frigga turned quickly. "But?"

She was nervous - what could be wrong? Had the baby changed back to his Jotun form? No, Angrboda would not be so calm with a monster in the cradle. Did she suspect, though? Perhaps they should have told her… but she would surely leave, and then what could they do? No sane person would want to nurse a frost giant.

Frigga was so lost in her own musings, that she almost missed what Angrboda said.
"The babe doesn't seem to be gaining weight as he should." She saw Frigga's look of surprise. "He is feeding but... not as he should be."

"Not as he should be?"

"He isn't eager to feed and he rarely seems to take as much as he should. He frequently stops when I am sure he must still be hungry."

Frigga bit her lip. She felt very far out of her depth. She had raised only one child so far and Thor had been an easy baby, loudly crying when he needed anything and taking as much nourishment as they could give him. She realized again how very little she knew about this child.

"What can we do?"

"I thought we might ask Eir. Perhaps she could help?"

"You think he needs a healer?"

"I think it might be a good idea, my lady. See what you think."

While she was speaking, Angrboda took the baby from the cradle and pushed him towards the queen. Before Frigga was aware of it, he was in her arms. She felt a moment of panic. She always tried to avoid touching the boy and now she was holding him. She was holding a frost giant!

She stared at him in shock. Despite the thoughts running through her head, he didn't look like a monster. He looked like a baby - an Aesir baby like any other.

She realized the weight of him. Angrboda was right - he was much lighter than he should have been. She was ashamed that she had paid so little attention. She may not have wanted the child, but she had promised to look after him.

"Please go and fetch Eir."

Frigga turned to hand the child back, but Angrboda was already hurrying down the hallway.

Frigga looked more closely at the (monster?) child in her arms. He yawned and gazed up at her with those unnatural green eyes. He reached out for her and she couldn't help herself - she stretched out a finger to him. He clutched it and made a little gurgling sound.

She smiled and he smiled back. He really was quite beautiful, with that shock of dark hair and those long eyelashes. She remembered Thor at that age. His eyes had been blue, of course, and he'd been larger and warmer...

She pulled back so suddenly that Loki started to cry. Warmer! Of course Thor had been warmer, Loki was a frost giant!

She quickly returned him to his cradle where he continued to cry.

Angrboda and Eir returned a little while later. Frigga was standing by the window, staring out, while Loki cried in his cot.

Angrboda tried to hide her look of shock and quickly went to pick him up. He quieted instantly in her arms. She passed him to Eir to be examined. If Eir thought there was anything strange in a mother ignoring her child while he cried, she said nothing.

"Hmm... You're right, I would expect him to have gained more weight by now. I'll know more once
I've had a chance to see how he feeds."

Frigga looked at the boy, worried. "We are planning to leave soon on our progress."

"Try not to worry, my lady. I am sure everything will be fine. Some children are simply fussy, I'll wager that's all it is. However... I don't think it would be a good idea to take him with you. I think he might be better off staying here with Angrboda and myself."

They tried to pretend they didn’t notice Frigga’s look of relief.

Eir came to a sudden decision. “Angrboda, would you give us a minute alone?”

The other two looked surprised, but the nurse stepped outside and closed the door.

Frigga looked concerned. “Eir, what is it?”

Eir picked up Loki and turned him so he was facing Frigga.

“Frigga,” Eir reverted to the name she had used when they had been nothing more than an apprentice healer and a young valkyrie. “Apart from being underweight, do you know what’s wrong with this child?”

Frigga stared in horror. “No...”

“Absolutely nothing.” Eir pulled him close and placed a light kiss on his forehead. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with this child except that he’s unwanted and neglected.”

Frigga’s face darkened. “You presume too much on our friendship. Have a care, healer. Do not forget that you are addressing your queen.”

She turned on her heel and strode out of the room.

That night, Frigga decided they needed no further preparations for their trip.

They were gone by the end of the week.

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It didn't take Eir long to learn that the baby wasn't simply being fussy. The child just didn't seem to enjoy Angrboda’s milk. Eir tried him with another wet nurse but the results were worse. She got the feeling he was only feeding at all because of Angrboda. They tried to bottle feed him but he didn't take to that any better.

Four months later, Eir was beginning to despair of ever getting the child to eat properly. He was significantly underweight, even for an Aesir child. Worse still, he was now starting to lose weight.

Eir was not looking forward to telling her king and queen that, not only had she not made any progress, but Loki was beginning to lose what little weight he had.

In desperation, she realised there was only one thing left to do. She began the long, slow walk along the rainbow bridge. "Good Sir Heimdall, how do you fare?"

“Lady Eir, how may I be of service?”

She chose her words carefully. "I wish to discuss the new prince. I believe we are both in the confidence of the king and queen, is that not so?"
Heimdall's eyes flicked briefly to hers before he answered. "It is so."

"I cannot find what ails the child. There are no books I can consult, nor anyone else I can ask. You can see everything in the nine realms. Can you turn your eyes towards Jotunheim and find the information I seek?"

He looked at her again, his expression unreadable. For a moment, she thought he might refuse.

He gave a single nod of his head. "I will do what I can and let you know what I find."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

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It took eight days - eight of the longest days of her life.

She was very conscious that they were coming close to losing Loki. While she knew the queen hadn’t taken to the child yet, she also knew the guilt her friend would feel if anything happened to him. But concern for her friend wasn’t the only reason she was sick with worry - she found that she had developed an affection for the tiny babe.

He was a sweet baby, quiet but loving. Now that he knew her, his little face would light up when he saw her and he would hold out his tiny hands for hers.

She was in the nursery with Angrboda when the messenger arrived and told her Heimdall requested her presence.

She put on her shawl and hurried along the bridge. She didn't even think to greet him. "You have something?"

He nodded. "I believe so. It seems Jotun children are fed a mix of their dam's milk and their sire's blood."

Eir gasped in shock. "Blood?"

She heard stories, of course, of the Jotuns' monstrous habits, but she had assumed they were just that - stories. She remembered a rhyme from her girlhood, one that children still loved to sing - 'Fee, fi, fo, fum, I'll drink the blood of an Aesir man, and be he alive or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread!'

She tried not to show her revulsion. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Jotenhiem was an unforgiving land and blood contained many nutrients. A child in that harsh environment no doubt needed iron and protein just to survive. And many cultures believed in the healing properties of blood. She had heard that the dark elves of Svartalfheim frequently drank blood for sustenance, and she knew there were tribes on Midgard that followed the practice. Even on Asgard, many seers drank blood as part of their rituals, and their own soldiers would often eat blood sausage for the health benefits.

Heimdall glanced at her, lips curled in distaste. "It seems they gain their strength from blood in the same way as the bats from Vanahem."

Eir snapped back from her thoughts and regarded the gatekeeper. She remembered his words - *dam* and *sire*, as if they were discussing animals.

She drew herself up to her full height and asked him coldly, "Is there anything else?"
He quirked an eyebrow, as if amused by her. “Fish oils. And they like their...” he paused, as if searching for a less offensive word, “… nourishment to be cold.”

She couldn't believe she hadn't already thought of that. Of course a Jotun child would prefer his milk (blood, her mind interjected) cold.

“Thank you, Sir Heimdall. Keep me informed if you learn anything more.” She didn't like the man - his dislike of the baby was clear - but she needed his help, nonetheless.

He nodded in acknowledgement and she walked back to the palace, her mind working furiously.

Obviously, she couldn't get blood from his sire or a Jotun, but perhaps animal blood would work? The thought of giving the child the blood of any person disgusted her, but if she had to, she would give the child her own. But she hoped it wouldn’t come to that, and headed for the kitchens.

It took a few attempts to get it right, but she soon found that a mix of chilled milk and pig’s blood seemed to work. Although the child was still small, he began to gain weight and ate greedily whenever he was fed.

Remembering Heimdall's look of disgust, Eir told no-one what she was doing. Her friend in the kitchen was discreet and never asked why she needed the blood. She didn’t even tell Angrboda, although she thought nothing would shake the love the wet nurse had for her charge.

But Eir had agreed to keep the king’s secret; so, every morning she made up the mixture herself, and had it delivered to Angrboda before every feeding.
I should have mentioned it before (although I'm sure you've noticed by now!) that I have a much larger age gap between Thor and Loki. I get hung up on trying to get details right, so I looked up the 'midgardian' equivalent of their ages, and this is the answer that made the most sense to me -

In 'Infinity War', Thor says he’s 1500 years old. In ‘The Dark World’, Loki says they live 5000 years or so longer than humans. Taking the average human male life expectancy as 80, let’s say that makes their lifespan approximately 5080. 5080 divided by 1500 equals 3.4. 3.4 divided by a male human lifespan - 80 - gives us an age of 23.5 (24, if we round up, which I’m going to do!). If we do the same for Loki (b. 965 A.D., Thor), we get an age of 16.6 (17). Which gives us an age difference in human years - of about 8 years. (I may have spend way too long researching this!) As for the ‘we were eight’ comment (Ragnarok), I’m just going to pretend I didn’t hear it...

Thor hadn’t thought much about his baby brother since his mother introduced them, all those long months ago.

At first, he had been excited, filled with plans of all the things they would do together. But after a few visits spent watching a sleeping bundle that basically did nothing, his enthusiasm began to wain. He wasn’t even allowed to wake Loki up and play with him!

Since neither his mother or father spent any time with the baby either, Thor started to think that perhaps people didn’t visit babies for that very reason. Perhaps everyone just stayed away from them until they were big enough to be… well, interesting.

So, he stopped going to the nursery. He was sure his parents would let him know when his sibling would be worth visiting once more.

He didn’t think about his brother at all when they began to talk about their progress through the realms. Thor was far too excited about the trip to think of anything else.

He had been to Vanaheim before, but although his mother told him he had been to Alfheim, he was too young to remember the it. And he was very excited at the thought of going to see Nidavellir. He talked to his friends constantly about visiting the realm that forged Gungnir, and begged his father to ask if he might see their fabled furnaces. He didn’t know much about Midgard, but Heimdall assured him that he would enjoy it.

So he was too full of excitement to spare a thought for his sibling, and he was ashamed to admit that he had all but forgotten him.

But that changed as they were travelling.

Although Thor knew where they were going and how long they might be staying in each realm, her hadn’t thought about how long they would actually be away from Asgard.
As they traveled around the realms, he saw many babes in arms, and he couldn’t help but smile at them. He began to think of his own little brother, waiting for him back in Asgard. He had never taken an interest in babies before, but now he asked the mothers all kinds of questions - how old was he? What was her name? How long before she would be walking?

He was surprised at how eager the mothers were to tell him all sorts of details; they were delighted to have a willing ear. In fact, sometimes they were a little too happy to talk, and he had to make an excuse to get away. It seemed odd; he couldn’t remember his mother saying much about Loki at all.

He learned that a baby can smile after only six weeks. He hadn’t known that, and he tried to work out when his last visit to Loki had been. What if Loki had smiled at him and he hadn’t even noticed? Babies could laugh as early as three months old, another mother told him. He realized with a pang that he must have already missed Loki’s first laugh.

Why had no-one told him of these things? Why was it that no-one else seemed interested?

Those thoughts led onto others and he began to think of all the other things he was going to miss - his brother’s first word, for example. He would have liked it to be ‘Thor’. And he would miss his brother’s first faltering steps; by the time they returned, Loki would no doubt be walking.

Thor had a generally happy disposition, but he had a temper - his mother always said it was like storm clouds on a sunny day. He felt his temper rising now. Why were they here, wandering through the realms visiting tedious and bothersome people, when they should be back at Asgard, with his brother?

He left to find his mother.

She was smiling politely as she talked to an incredibly dull ambassador. When Thor appeared at her side, asking to speak with her, she was very glad of the excuse to leave.

Nevertheless, she did feel the need to chastise him for his behavior. “Thor, that was very rude. I was talking to…” she realized she couldn’t remember the ambassador’s name, “that woman,” she finished lamely.

Her son glowered at her. “Why is Loki not with us?”

She stared at him in surprise. It was the first time he’d asked about the baby. “He wasn’t well enough to travel with us.”

Thor was shocked - his brother had been unwell and they hadn’t told him? “Is he going to be alright?”

“Yes, I heard from Eir that his health is much improved. He is better now.”

Thor considered for a moment. “But if he was unwell, why did we travel without him? Why did we not stay to look after him?”

Frigga swallowed. That was a harder question to answer. “Because we knew he was in good hands and we have a duty to the realms under our care.”

“Greater than that due to my brother?”

“You will understand when you are older. We must make sacrifices for our people.”

“But isn’t Loki one of our people?”
Frigga bristled. “My son, you are a child as yet and know nothing of a king’s duties. Be assured that the Allfather always knows best. Now, if you will excuse me, I have my own duties to which I must attend.”

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She left the room, but didn’t return to the gathering hall. Instead, she made her way to her rooms.

She didn’t like the feeling of guilt that now seemed to be her constant companion. She, like Thor, couldn’t help but notice all the children they met on their journey, and it seemed to her that she saw dark hair and green eyes everywhere.

She found herself dreaming about holding Loki in her arms; in her dreams she hadn’t thrust him back into his cradle, but comforted him instead. Every night she dreamed, and she wondered if they were dreams or visions. Loki, laughing and walking, falling and laughing again. She saw him giving her a flower he’d picked; then saw herself teaching him a spell, his earnest face screwed up in concentration. She saw two boys running together and giggling, and watched as she held out her hands to both of them.

She saw a hundred different visions of her life with Loki.

She began to think that she wanted to see him again, but it couldn’t happen; they were barely halfway through their trip and there was no way they could return any sooner. Perhaps she could send a message to Angrboda and have the two of them join the royal party? No... what if, once she saw him again, all her old feelings came rushing back? She couldn’t very well send them away, how would she explain it? Perhaps she could write to Angrboda and have her send reports of how the young prince was progressing? She shook her head. It would be too strange, to ask for information now, after so many months. It was probably best to leave it. They would be home soon enough.

She returned to her duties.

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By the time the royal family returned to Asgard, Loki was a toddler, running around on chubby legs and chattering constantly.

Most of his life had been spent with Angrboda.

When asked about Loki’s health, the servants were happy to tell the king and queen that the child was feeding happily and growing well. Satisfied, Odin immediately summoned his councilors, while a tired and hungry Thor was whisked away to the dining hall by his friends.

Frigga was also tired and hungry, but she felt guilty about the amount of time the baby had spent apart from his family. She was curious to see if Loki resembled the child from her dreams. Deciding that she could wait a little while longer before eating and resting, she turned towards the nursery.

The door was open and she could hear childish laughter from inside. Loki was being chased around the room by Angrboda. When she caught him, she raised him up and tickled his stomach while the child kicked his legs and giggled with delight.

Frigga stood, frozen in the doorway. Of course, they had been gone a long time, but she had forgotten how quickly children grow. She had left a baby; she returned to find a running, chattering child - the child she had seen in her dreams.

He looked up and his eyes widened as they connected with hers. He pulled away from his nurse and
pointed. “Boda, there's a lady.”

Startled, Angrboda whirled around quickly. “My queen!”

She put down the child and sank into a deep curtsy. Loki, confused, followed suit, and bowed with all the solemnity of a child twice his age. Angrboda had taught him well.

Frigga walked into the room. She felt like an intruder. "Well, I don't need to ask after Loki, do I?" She moved to take the boy's face in her hands. "How you have grown!"

Loki looked at Angrboda, unsure.

He obviously didn't know his mother at all. Of course, Frigga thought, why would he? She had left him when he was only a few months old and now he was a toddler.

Angrboda smiled at Loki. "Loki, this is your mother. Say hello to her!"

He still looked uncertain. Unsure of how to address her, he decided to follow Angrboda’s example. "Hello, my queen."

Frigga gave a tight smile. "No, Loki. You call me 'mother'."

Loki lowered his head, looking thoroughly chastised. “Sorry… Mother.”

Frigga mentally cursed herself for immediately correcting the first words the child spoke to her. “That's alright, you didn't know."

With a pang, she realized that she was right; he didn't know. He hadn’t seen her since he was a tiny baby. She had missed his first words and his first steps, and he had no idea who she was. His father and brother would also be strangers to him.

It occurred to her, for the first time, to wonder how the child had been raised while they were gone.

Angrboda was a commoner; she would not have been mixing with the elite of Asgard. Loki would not have been making friends with the sons of lords and ladies, he would have been consorting with the people Angrboda knew and playing with their children.

She chastised herself for not thinking about that sooner. Would he have any friends at the royal court?

She moved to sit on the floor. Angrboda jumped up in alarm and looked for a chair, but Frigga waved at her to join them. Nervously, Angrboda lowered herself beside her charge. Frigga watched sadly as Loki quickly hurried to Angrboda’s side and reached out for her. Angrboda gave Frigga a quick glance to make sure that it was alright, and then pulled Loki onto her lap.

Seeing the boy's nervousness, Frigga began to make conversation with Angrboda. Angrboda told her how Eir managed to get the boy to eat again with some kind of special formula, although she didn't know the details. She only knew that Eir used to bring the mixture to her each day and Loki would drink it eagerly. Even now, Eir oversaw the boy's diet - he wasn't fond of fruit and vegetables, but he liked fish and eggs. She was happy to report that he was thriving in mind and body.

Angrboda told the queen how clever the boy was. "He speaks far better than most boys of his age. He can even read a few words!"

The queen was impressed. Thor had been a bright child, constantly chattering like a magpie, but had
not started reading until much later. She smiled at the boy. "Can you read your name, Loki?"

Loki nodded. Rushing forward, he began to sort through his letter blocks, pulling out the letters that comprised his name.

Frigga turned to look at Angrboda in surprise. "Impressive."

Angrboda smiled proudly, then seemed to think of something. "My lady, there is one other thing…"

She tried to think of a way to break it to the queen that Loki was gifted with seidr. Despite the king’s knowledge and use of it, it was not generally considered to be a desirable trait for males.

"Never mind, Angrboda," Frigga said quietly, "I think I know what you're trying to tell me."

Angrboda turned in the direction of the queen's gaze, only to see Loki's letter blocks flying in the air above his head.
Thor intended to visit his baby brother as soon as he had finished eating. He turned to his friends eagerly and interrupted them as they tried to ask him about his adventures.

"Never mind that! What of my brother? How does he fare? Is he very big now?"

His friends exchanged surprised glances.

“Thor!” admonished Sif, "How would we possibly know that? We don't visit the royal nursery. Why on earth would we?"

Now it was Thor's turn to look surprised. “Why, to visit my brother of course.”

Hogan shook his head. “Thor, your brother is a baby. What possible interest could we have in a baby? We’ve only seen him a couple of times and even then, it was for a few minutes only."

Fandral nodded. "He wouldn't even know who we were! It would look very odd if we did go to see him."

Volstagg could see that his friend was starting to look angry. Thor seemed to take their disinterest personally. “Thor, once the child is older, then of course we will get to know him better; until then, he is best left in the company of his nurse. But perhaps we could all go and visit him after we have eaten?"

Thor nodded, his good temper restored. "A good suggestion! But I shall not wait until you have finished, my hungry friend!" He patted Volstagg's stomach and laughed. "Come, let us go now!"

The others rolled their eyes but rose to follow him.

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Loki was lying asleep in his bed when Thor burst into the room, with no thought of knocking. Angrboda, who had been reading, started up and dropped her book.

The noise woke Loki. He sat up quickly, his hair mussed and his expression worried. He looked at Angrboda in alarm.

She quickly recovered herself. "It's alright, Loki. See, it is your brother and his friends come to visit you!" She curtsied to the prince and his friends.

Loki watched the group warily. He was tired and just wanted to be left alone with Angrboda. He had already acquired a mother that day - how many more people would appear? He supposed there was a father somewhere as well. Loki hoped that he could stay away until tomorrow.

Now he studied the new arrivals. He had no idea which one was his brother. There was a dark haired girl and boy, a large, redheaded boy - older than the others - and two blond boys, one slight and one stocky. Loki had heard his brother was fair, so he supposed his brother was one of those two. He turned to Angrboda in confusion.

Angrboda wasn't sure what to do either. She wasn’t noble born; she had been hired as a wet nurse and had simply stayed on when it seemed no-one else wanted to look after the child.
Except for the fact that they lived in the palace and had everything they needed, she had been raising him almost as her own child. Loki was friends with her daughter and the children in the village, as well as the cooks, the gardeners and the maids. They didn't know anyone except villagers and servants. By every rule of propriety, Angrboda shouldn't have even been allowed to speak to the Crown Prince of Asgard…

But then, the Crown Prince of Asgard shouldn't have burst into Loki’s rooms and woken him up. She could see that her charge was upset and confused, and if she didn't intervene quickly, this meeting would not go well.

Angrboda reached out a hand and Loki climbed out of bed and went to her. She took him to stand in front of Thor.

"Loki, this is Thor - your big brother." She could tell from the faces of the others that the introduction hadn't been done correctly. She cursed herself for not finding out about such things sooner.

Loki also wasn't sure what he was expected to do; he had never met a prince or a brother before. Earlier, he had followed Angrboda’s lead and bowed to the queen when she curtsied, and since she curtsied to Thor, he decided to copy her again. He lowered his head and bent over in a solemn bow.

The visitors laughed loudly and Loki stood up quickly, his cheeks burning. Thor wiped the tears from his eyes. Really, seeing such a small child offer such a deep obeisance had been one of the funniest things he had ever seen. He reached out for his brother.

Loki stepped back. He didn't like being laughed at and he didn't think he liked having a brother. He’d managed very well without one so far and he didn't see why everything had to change.

Thor looked surprised. "Loki, come here! I want to see how much you’ve grown."

Loki shook his head and took another step back. Thor flushed with annoyance. He wasn’t used to being disobeyed. "Loki, I'm your older brother and the Crown Prince of Asgard; I am ordering you to come here - now!"

He lunged forward to grab his brother. His jaw dropped open when he found himself holding empty air as he suddenly spied his brother across the room. "What just happened?"

Angrboda frowned. It looked as though Loki had learned a new trick, one that was going to make a lot more work for her. "Loki, now is not the time for games. Please be good."

Loki bit his lip but stayed where he was. He always obeyed Boda when she spoke in that tone of voice.

Thor was angry that his brother had made him look a fool in front of his friends. He strode across the room and grabbed Loki roughly by the wrist.

Loki uttered a yelp and narrowed his eyes; Thor was hurting him and he was too small to pull away or fight back. Before Angrboda could intervene - and in truth, she had no idea what she was supposed to say to stop the future heir of Asgard - Loki lowered his head and bit Thor’s arm.

The others laughed, while Thor swore and pushed Loki away from him.

Loki tumbled to the ground, hitting his back against a chair as he fell. Tears of pain and anger filled his eyes. He didn't like strangers touching him. The only people that touched him were Angrboda, his friends and occasionally Eir. Angrboda had told him that other people weren't allowed to,
because he was a prince.

But now this other prince had not only touched him, but hurt his wrist and pushed him down, and Loki was too small to do anything about it.

He saw Angrboda coming towards him, but he didn't want to be seen by anyone. He thought back to how he had inadvertently made the clone earlier and made another, leaving it to sit on the floor while he rolled away under the bed. He left another clone there while he hid on the seat behind the heavy curtains. He wiped the tears from his eyes and wished that nothing had changed. He didn't want a mother and a father and a brother.

He only wanted Angrboda.

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Thor left his friends and ran to his mother's rooms and, as was his habit, burst in without knocking. "Mother!"

Frigga smiled and dismissed her waiting woman. "What is it, my love?"

"I don't like my little brother! He played a trick on me with magic and bit me!"

Frigga felt her blood run cold. Wasn't this what she had feared all along? That this child would not be able to suppress his Jotun instincts and would hurt her own precious son?

She held out her arms to him and he ran to her. "Show me."

He held up his arm. The skin was unbroken, but there were clear signs of teeth marks and a bruise was already beginning to form. "My poor boy, let me take care of it."

She laid her hand over the mark and uttered the soft words of a healing spell. She knew that even without the spell, the mark would heal quickly; but if she could save her boy from a moment's discomfort, then she would.

Odin came in at that moment.

"Husband, come and see this. Loki used his seidr and bit Thor."

He could almost hear her thoughts - 'I told you this would happen when we decided to adopt a frost giant.'

He sat beside her and pulled Thor to sit between them. "My son, will you tell us what happened?"

"I wanted to see him, but he didn't look very happy to see me. Then when I reached for him, he bit me and then he made other Lokis that weren't real and ran away."

Odin cast a curious look towards his wife.

She glared at him. "It seems Loki has a natural propensity for magic." Which you promised to suppress, she mentally added.

Thor frowned. "I thought only girls did tricks like that."

Odin ruffled the boy's hair and said humorously, "I can do tricks like that. Are you saying that I'm a girl?"
Thor's eyes widened in shock. "No! But you're the Allfather. It's different. You can do anything!"

Odin chuckled. "Well, that's good to know. I'll try to remember that the next time I'm trying to collect taxes from our people!"

Frigga gave a small smile at the joke, but returned to the subject at hand. "But what of Loki's violence towards Thor?"

"That is a cause for concern." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Do not worry, my dear. We will get to the bottom of this."

He turned to Thor. "Now, let's go back and hear this story again. You said he didn't look happy to see you… was he eating dinner, perhaps?"

"No, I'm sure he finished his dinner long before that. He was sleeping."

Frigga's eyes widened. "Thor, you do not mean to say that you woke him up?"

"Well, yes. I did not expect him to be abed so early and I wished to see him."

"But he's still just an infant, he needs his sleep!"

Thor looked mulish. "But I wanted to see my brother and I did not want to wait."

Odin nodded. "Well, I think we may have established why he wasn't happy to see you. Tell me, do you enjoy being woken from sleep before your time?"

Thor said nothing. He hated to be roused early and was notoriously bad tempered of a morning.

"What happened next?"

"He bit me!" Thor knew he was right to be indignant on that score.

"Describe for us the events that led up to that. You entered the room and woke him up. What then?"

Thor thought back and grinned. "It was actually very funny! His nurse introduced me and Loki bowed. It made us laugh…"

"Us?"

"The Warriors Three, Sif and I."

Now it was Frigga's turn to interrupt. "Wait - you are saying that, not only did you wake him from sleep, but you took your friends and laughed at him?"

"But he looked so funny! And why would he bow to me? I am his brother!"

Odin frowned at him gravely. "Do you enjoy being laughed at?"

"No."

"And would you like it if a group of people you didn't know came to your room, woke you, and then laughed at you?"

"But he should not have bowed…"

"And how should he have known that? We have been absent for most of his young life. Who would
teach him these things? Do you think he has been socializing with the court while we have been gone? I do not imagine his nurse has been spending much time with the noble men and women of Asgard, do you?"

Thor blushed. "No, Father."

Frigga was starting to realize how much more there was to his story. "What happened next, Thor?"

"I wanted him to come closer but he stepped back. Then I ordered him to come to me…"

"Wait! You ordered him?"

"Yes, but he refused. I reached for him, but he performed some kind of illusion and slipped from my grasp. I got angry." He hung his head. "His nurse told him not to perform tricks, so he didn't move when I approached him next. I may…" his head dropped even further, "I may have gripped him a little too firmly, and he bit me."

Odin and Frigga exchanged a look and tried not to smile. Their son may have had his faults, but at least he was honest about owning up to them.

Frigga put a hand under her son's chin until his eyes met her own. "Do you see how much that story differs from your original telling?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Is there anything else that you need to add?"

He swallowed nervously. "When he bit me…"

"Yes?" she prompted.

"It hurt and I got angry. I pushed him away and he fell against a chair. It looked as though it might have hurt. But then he made more copies of himself and hid. We couldn't find him again."

Odin and Frigga now looked concerned.

Odin stood and held out a hand to his son. "I think we should go and make sure your brother is unhurt, and I think an apology may be in order, don't you?"

"Yes, Father."

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As a family, they walked to Loki's room.

This time, Frigga gave a gentle knock and waited until Angrboda came and quietly opened the door. Seeing the royal family, she bowed her head and gave a deep curtsey.

"May we come in?"

"Of course, my queen." Angrboda kept her head lowered and backed away. She could not believe she was in the presence of the Allfather himself.

"Please, be at ease."

She raised her head and smiled nervously. She saw Loki's green eyes watching from his bed and she
flashed a reassuring smile in his direction.

Odin caught the smile and turned. "Ah, Loki! I am happy to see that you are awake. I know that it is late, but would you mind if we spoke with you for a moment?"

Loki sat up, hair mussed but his eyes bright. He hadn't been able to get back to sleep, his pride hurting as much as his back and his wrist.

He stared at them all with a mixture of worry and resentment. He wished they would all just leave him alone.

"Do you remember me?"

Loki shook his head.

"But you know who I am?"

"The king?" he said, guessing. Odin smiled and gave a small nod.

So this was his father. Once again, he didn't know what to do. He wasn't going to bow if they were going to laugh at him again. He flashed at look at Angrboda to see if she could tell him what was expected.

It was clear that she wasn't sure either. She made a small movement to indicate a bow and he frowned. He grimaced and began to climb out of the bed.

Odin put out a hand and stopped him. “Please, stay where you are. We have no wish to disturb you more than we have already."

The small family felt a little guilty. Loki was staring at them as though they were snakes about to strike. It was obvious that he was longing for them to leave.

"We heard about what happened earlier and thought an apology was in order."

Loki lowered his head. "I'm sorry."

Frigga sat beside him on the bed. Loki shrank back a little. She tried not to mind. “Thank you, dear, but you misunderstand. An apology is due to you. Thor?"

Thor moved forward and Loki tensed. "I am sorry, brother. I was excited to see you and I did not consider how my actions may have appeared. I should not have laughed at you or grabbed you and I am sorry if I was too rough with you."

He had obviously been practicing the apology in his head as they had walked to Loki's room. Now the practiced part was finished, his voice took on a softer tone. "I truly did not mean to cause you any pain, brother. Did I hurt you?"

Loki watched him for a moment and then held out his wrist accusingly. They saw dark finger marks bruising the pale skin.

Thor felt guilt wash over him. “I am very sorry. I have never had a little brother before. I promise I will be more careful in the future. Will you forgive me?"

Loki stared at him for a moment, as if judging to see if he was sincere; then he nodded.

Thor smiled. Loki decided that he liked that smile; it seemed to light up the whole room. He smiled
Frigga reached gently for Loki's wrist. "Let me take a look at that. I'm sure I can make it feel a little better."

Angrboda stepped forward nervously. She was used to the queen, but felt uncomfortable in the presence of the great Allfather, and her previous interaction with Thor hadn't gone well. Still, she was there to take care of Loki, and that was what she would do.

"Please, my lady… would you look at his back also? I think he hurt it when he fell."

"Of course. Loki, may I look?"

Loki nodded and turned. Sure enough, there was a nasty black bruise beginning to form.

"Why don't you lie down while I take care of this?"

Obediently, Loki lay back down on his side as Frigga began to utter the words of the same healing spell she had used earlier.

Loki felt his eyes close as he began to feel better.

The last thing he saw before he fell asleep was Thor, kneeling beside the bed and promising him, "Rest assured, brother, I will not hurt you again. I will be more careful in future."
It was a noble sentiment, but of course, Thor wasn't careful when he was with Loki. It wasn’t in his nature. Thor jumped into every situation with both feet and expected everyone else to follow. The idea that anyone else might be a little more fragile never occurred to him.

But he did try.

In the months that had followed their return, Thor and Loki became brothers in very truth. Thor thought the world of Loki and Loki would do anything for Thor.

Frigga couldn’t help but smile at the sight of the two of them. Thor, trying so hard to be the responsible older brother he clearly wasn’t, and Loki, seeming not to care for the bruises he got, as long as he could follow Thor around like a puppy.

The main problem was Sif and the newly named ‘Warrior’s Three’.

When they told Frigga of their new title, she had to quickly look away to hide her smile. Hard to imagine any of them as warriors - they were only just out of childhood and Volstagg, being older, would brag incessantly about any tiny wisps of hair that appeared on his face.

But they clearly saw themselves as adults now, while Loki had only just started school. He was little more than a toddler in their eyes. They didn’t want him trailing after them and ruining their adventures; and, in their annoyance, they didn’t make any allowances for his age.

It wouldn’t have been such a problem if Loki had friends of his own, but he didn’t seem to have Thor’s easy charm when it came to getting to know new people.

If it wasn’t for Angrboda’s daughter, Sigyn, he would have no friends at all. Or, Frigga thought, no friends of his own age. While they were away, Angrboda had taken him to the places in the castle where she felt comfortable - the kitchens, the gardens and the stables… Loki had many friends among the servants and villagers, all of whom doted on the little prince.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t spent any time with the noble men and women of Asgard and it sometimes showed in his manners. Frigga had nearly fainted when he reached out to Angrboda and asked her to ‘give us a kiss’. Apparently, it was a favorite expression of the head gardener.

Frigga asked Angrboda not to take him to see the servants anymore and to spend less time in the village. Since Angrboda’s mother took Sigyn with her when she went to work at the market, Loki was left with only Thor to play with.

Thor didn’t mind, he enjoyed Loki’s company; and he really did try to protect his little brother. His friends, however, seemed determined to prove how unsuitable Loki was as an addition to their group.

Thor and his friends seemed to constantly forget - or disregard - how much smaller the younger boy was, until they needed someone lighter to climb a tree with thin branches, or crawl into a hole to see if it led to a tunnel, or to help them with some kind of fighting technique they called ‘get help’. Neither Odin or Frigga were able to find out what the move actually entailed, and Heimdall would only say that he had promised not to tell. Whatever it was, it seemed to involve Loki coming home with a lot of bruises.

Frigga finally ran out of patience on the day that Loki broke his leg.
Loki watched forlornly as Angrboda pulled back the sheets of his bed.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Climb in, little prince!”

He hung back. “I’m not tired.”

“You look tired.”

“I’m not.”

She sat on the bed and watched him. “So, what do you want to do instead?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“Are you so ‘not tired’ that you can’t even speak in a proper sentence?”

He flushed. “I don’t know what I want to do. I just don’t want to go to bed.”

“Uh-huh.” She watched him try and stifle a yawn. “I’m still going to leave, Loki, regardless of whether you go to bed or not.”

She saw him press his lips together in a tight line, and sighed. “Loki, come here.”

He shuffled towards her slowly. When he was close enough, she scooped him up and sat him on her knee. “You love Thor, don’t you?”

He nodded reluctantly, as if sensing a trap.

“And if Thor wanted you by his side, you would be there, would you not?”

Again, he nodded.

“So you must understand why my sister wants me to be at her wedding. She traveled all the way here for mine, so it’s only fair that I do the same for her.”

She thought about that day, so full of laughter and sunshine. So full of hope; hope that would be dashed only a few months later, when her husband was killed in one of the last battles against Jotenheim.

She had been left a widow with hardly any savings and had been forced to move back in with her parents. After the birth of her daughter, she had been nearly despairing, with no idea of how to support them both. It seemed like the answer to her prayers when a servant from the palace came to see her, offering her the position of wet nurse to the new prince. And here she was now, almost closer to this child than to her own, but with enough money to be independent and travel in style to see her sister.

“Why do you have to be gone so long?”

“I have told you already. I will have to travel there and back, and then there will be the wedding. After that, I wish to get to know her new husband. And they want to introduce me to their friends.” She poked him lightly in the stomach. “I’m quite the celebrity - they all want to hear about the new prince!”

He tried to smile, but it quickly faltered and his lips began to tremble. “But I will miss you.”
She pulled him close and kissed the top of his dark hair. “Oh, Loki, I will miss you too! But Eydis will look after you. You like Eydis, do you not?”

“Yesss…”

Angrboda tried to hide her smile. Eydis was one of Loki’s favorite servants and often teased him and laughed with him. That was why Angrboda had chosen her to take over while she was away.

“And you will be good for her, will you not? Remember, your behaviour will reflect upon me. If you misbehave, they may think I’m raising you very badly and not allow me to come back at all!”

He eyes grew wide. “No, they couldn’t! I’ll be good, Boda, I promise!”

“Thank you, my prince.” She felt bad about extracting his promise that way, but she knew he could be difficult when he put his mind to it. But he always kept his word; if he promised her he would be good, then he would be.

He yawned, unable to suppress it any longer.

“Time for bed, sleepyhead!” She tucked him in and kissed his forehead. “Sleep well. I’ll be back before you know it.”

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Loki stabbed the soil with the stick he was holding.

He wished he hadn’t promised to be good while Angrboda was gone. He really was trying to keep his promise, but he was so bored. Whereas Angrboda had very few duties besides looking after him, Eydis had a lot of other things to do and he was spending a lot of time by himself. He didn’t even have Sigyn to play with. He felt very sorry for himself.

After three days of playing by himself in the nursery, he had finally persuaded Eydis to take him to the gardens. Almost as soon as they arrived, a message had come that Eydis was needed in the kitchen. Despite Loki’s suggestion that he accompany her, Eydis had left him in the company of a lone guard. So now he was by himself again, with no-one to play with.

He heard voices beyond the garden and recognized the loud shout of his brother.

“Thor!” He immediately ran out of the gate, and in an excited, garbled rush, asked, “Where’re we going?”

Sif rolled her eyes. Surely, he must see that the child couldn’t even speak properly; how could Thor think it was appropriate to let him follow them everywhere? They were all weary of having to modify their behavior because of Loki, and Sif was tired of him stealing all of Thor’s attention. Before Loki came along, Thor spent most of his time talking to Sif; now he seemed to hang on every muddled, incoherent sentence his baby of a brother uttered. It was enough to make her sick.

Thor lit up at the sight of his brother, as he always did. “Loki! We are going to seek adventure in the woods - will you join us on our quest?”

“Yes!”

Thor waved away the guard that had been with his brother and began to lead the way. His friends exchanged glances. Without a word passing between them, they began to walk at a faster pace.
Thor didn’t notice at first; he would usually stride ahead, leading the way. It was only when he heard a grunt that he turned around. His brother was lying face down in the mud some distance behind them. He had obviously tripped - no doubt because he was hurrying to keep up. Thor felt guilty; he should have remembered that Loki had shorter legs and couldn’t walk as fast as the rest of them.

He glared at his friends. “Why did none of you tell me we were going too fast for Loki?”

Sif gave a little sniff. “I assume for the same reason that you didn’t know. Because we weren’t watching him.”

Loki was scrambling back up and wiping the dirt from face; he was breathing very heavily.

Thor knelt beside his brother. “Are you alright, brother?”

Loki nodded, but Thor saw that his chin had been scraped in the fall and was bleeding. He pulled out a handkerchief and began to wipe away the blood.

Behind them, Sif rolled her eyes. “I swear, if he spits on it to clean the brat’s face, I will vomit.”

Fandral laughed, but Volstagg felt a little guilty. “He is just trying to take care of his brother. We should have been paying closer attention to him.”

“Why? I believe he has a nurse for that very purpose! Why should we have to do it?”

Volstagg frowned at her. “We should do it for Thor, because he’s our friend.”

While he agreed the boy was a nuisance, Loki’s presence made Thor happy. And Volstagg didn’t like to walk so fast anyway. Why not enjoy the day and go a little slower sometimes?

Fandral stepped in to defend Sif. “She is right though, and you know it. Loki should be back at the palace, playing in the nursery; not dragging along behind us. At this rate, we will never get to have any fun at all! Hogan, do you not agree?”

“I do.” Hogan didn’t dislike Loki as Fandral and Sif seemed to, but he had certainly enjoyed their exploits more before Loki had joined their group.

Thor watched as his brother tried to pretend he wasn’t tired or hurt. He was proud of him, but he was starting to think that the others were right; perhaps Loki should not accompany them on adventures such as these. As much as Thor loved to see Loki’s face light up when Thor showed him something new, perhaps some of the adventures were a little too much for a child that was still in the nursery. It was just that Thor hated saying ‘no’ to his brother.

He had an idea. “Loki, I wonder if you could help me?”

Loki straightened quickly, his eyes bright and eager. He would do anything for Thor.

“You see, I am so busy marking our path that I have not the time to be watching out for danger. I know it is a lot to ask, but would you consent to act as our watchdog? It is a great responsibility, and to perform the task well you will need to travel on my shoulders.”

Loki gave him a suspicious glance, as if wondering if he was telling the truth.

Thor smiled and reached out his hand. “I assure you, brother, it is a noble duty. I often performed it for our father when I was your age, perched upon his mighty shoulders.”

“Father?” Loki knew that Thor would not lie, but it seemed so unbelievable to imagine riding on the
Allfather’s shoulders.

“Yes, indeed. We had many such journeys.”

Loki nodded and Thor hoisted the boy up. “There! Can you see far ahead?”

Loki gave a breathless laugh. “Yes!”

“Then let us dally no more! Onward to glory and adventure!”
Thor ignored the looks his friends were giving him. Instead he marched ahead, the sound of Loki’s happy giggles occasionally breaking into his thoughts.

His conversation with Loki had started a train of thought. He was beginning to see that his childhood was much different to Loki’s.

When he was a child, his parents would often take him to the woods for the day. His father would lift Thor onto his broad shoulders and point out all the plants and birds they passed. Thor wondered why his father had not yet done that with Loki. They had been back at Asgard for many months and as far as he knew, Odin had never actually spent any time alone with Loki.

Now that he thought about it, even his mother didn’t spend as much time with Loki as she used to spend with him.

He remembered the hours they would pass in the nursery together, reading and playing; sometimes she just sat with him on her lap as he slept in her arms.

She never did that with Loki. He rarely entered the nursery and found her there, and she was never as affectionate with Loki as she was with Thor. Although Thor had seen her reading to Loki occasionally, he realized that she rarely seemed to hold him. In fact, now that he thought about it, she rarely touched Loki at all.

He wondered why.

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Loki gave a gasp and Thor snapped out of his thoughts.

They were standing in a beautiful grove filled with wild damson trees.

Volstagg slapped his hands together. “Wonderful! I was just starting to get hungry!”

Fandral sniggered. “Volstagg, you were starting to get hungry before we left the palace. I’m surprised you made it this far without sustenance!”

Sif and Hogun laughed, and Hogun reached up for one the fruits. “I confess, I agree with Volstagg.” He took a bite but quickly spat it out. “Sour.”

Fandral stepped back. “It looks as though the best ones are higher up.”

They all looked at Thor and Loki expectantly. Thor shook his head. “Nay. My mother was not best pleased by the tears on Loki’s clothing the last time we had him climb a tree for us.”
Sif scowled. If Loki couldn’t even do that for them, what on earth was the point of having him with them at all? “It doesn’t look that difficult. Loki just needs to take more care.”

Thor frowned back at her. “He doesn’t try to get scratched, Sif.”

Fandral snapped his fingers. “I know! Loki could take off his jacket and shirt. That way he won’t tear them.”

There was a pause. They could see Thor was thinking about it, so they waited.

Loki said nothing either and waited to see what his brother would decide. He didn’t much like climbing trees, but if Thor wanted him to do it, he would.

Thor couldn’t deny that the fruit looked good. High up, on the top branches where the sun the brightest, they looked plump and rich in color. His mouth was watering at the thought of them.

But he had promised his mother they would try to be more careful…

He had an idea - he would let Loki decide. If Loki didn’t want to do it, then that would be fine, he wouldn’t push him.

He hoped Loki would say yes.

He turned to Loki with a smile. “It will be your decision, brother. I shall support you, whatever you choose to do.”

Loki worked hard to keep the smile on his face. It was obvious what Thor wanted, because why on Asgard would Loki want to climb a tree? He saw them all watching him and he wondered how Thor could be unaware how much the others disliked him. Perhaps this could be a way to make them like him better.

He nodded. “Alright.”

He thought he saw Thor frown a little but the others seemed happy.

Sif motioned to Thor. “Alright then, are you going to boost him up?”

Thor knelt beside his brother. He didn’t know why Loki would agree if he didn’t like the idea, but there had been something in his face… “Loki, are you sure you want to do this?”

Sif sighed. “He already said so! Come on, Thor, we’re all hungry and thirsty.”

She glared at Loki and he nodded. Thor paused for a moment. He still wasn’t sure Loki really wanted to do it, but he couldn’t deny that now he was thinking about them, he wanted some damsons.

His thirst won the argument. “Alright, but you must be extra careful. Are you ready?”

Loki nodded and Thor grabbed him around the waist and boosted him up to the lowest branch.

Volstagg was walking around the tree. “It looks like the best fruit is up there.” He pointed to the top on the other side.

Loki started to scramble up. It seemed pretty easy at first and he allowed himself to relax a little. He plucked a damson and sent it hurtling to the ground.
Hogun picked it up and took a bite. “Still pretty sour. Try higher up.”

Loki swallowed. He already felt pretty high up. He started to go higher. The branches were closer here and he started to get scratched. He tried to clamber up between two branches and one of them snapped back into his face. He gave a small cry and touched the side of his eye; his fingers came back bloody. He looked down and froze. He had never been so high before.

He heard Thor’s voice. “Alright, Loki, that’s enough. I think you should come down now.”

Now he heard Fandral. “But he’s so close already. They’re just there in front of them. If he just tries a little harder and reaches out, he can get them.”

Sif agreed. “Loki, just reach over to the branch in front of you!”

Loki crawled forward on his branch and, gripping tightly with one hand, leaned forward and pulled off a damson. He threw it down.

After a minute, he heard Hogun. “Perfect!”

He began to throw more and heard the others scramble for them.

Thor called to him, “Loki, we have enough. Climb down now.”

“No!” Sif turned angrily to Thor. “Volstagg will take more than his share, you know that! I’ve only had one so far and he has had three. Loki, we need more!”

Loki had already picked the fruit he could reach. He needed to get closer. The branch swayed perilously beneath him as he shuffled forward. He tried to wrest the fruit away from its stem, but it wouldn’t come. Without thinking, he lifted his other hand and pulled.

The fruit came away with part of the branch and he fell back from the force of it. He felt the limb beneath him give way as he struck it; and suddenly he was falling, twigs and branches whipping against him as he hurtled to the ground below.

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There was a blissful moment of blackness and then Loki was suddenly, horribly aware of the most intense pain he’d ever felt in his life. He couldn’t help it; he began to scream.

Thor would never forget the sounds - the rustle of the leaves and the snap of the branches as Loki plunged down. The shouts of his friends, followed by the loud thud as his brother hit the ground. The snap of bone. And then, the screams. Loki’s screams.

Thor rushed forward and felt bile rise in his throat. The others were standing back staring in horror. Loki’s leg lay at a strange angle and they could see the fractured bone peeking out through the tear in the skin.

Thor wasn’t even sure his brother knew he was there, but he kept talking to him as he examined him. “It’s alright, Loki, it’s alright. We’ll get you home soon, it’ll be alright. I’m here.”

Well, that was stupid, he thought. He knows I’m here, I’m the one that sent him up the blasted tree!

Within minutes, his friends were beside him.

He heard the sound of Fandral vomiting and Sif saying, “Oh, gods!”
Hogan and Volstagg fell to their knees beside him. Hogun was examining the leg while Volstagg grabbed Thor’s cape and threw it over Loki, tucking it gently around him.

Loki’s hand was even colder than usual and he was shaking. His screams were now interspersed with sobs.

Volstagg turned to Hogun. “What should we do?”

“We have to get him back to the palace.”

Thor gripped Loki’s hand even tighter. “No, we can’t move him like this!”

“It would be even worse to keep him lying here in pain while we go for help!”

Thor tried to think of an argument. He didn’t want to think how much it would hurt his brother if they tried to move him. “What of Heimdall?”

“Heimdall may not even be watching. We should start heading back to the palace and hope he sees us and sends help.”

“But…”

“Thor, we must do something, and quickly. He’s losing a lot of blood.”

Loki’s cries had died down to whimpers. Volstagg put a hand against the boy's cheek. “He’s ice cold.”

Hogun nodded. “We need something to keep his leg in place.”

Volstagg hurried away. Hogun glanced towards Sif and Fandral in irritation. “You two, we need a stretcher.”

Thor’s head shot up. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. “I will carry him!”

“You dare not risk it. He needs to keep the leg as still as possible, he would be moving about too much in your arms.”

Sif and Fandral moved away as Volstagg returned with two strong branches. He snatched the cape from Sif as she passed. “We will need this.”

He handed the branches to Hogun and began to tear the cape into strips. As he did so, Hogun placed the branches on either side of Loki’s leg.

Hogun picked up one of the strips. “Thor, I’m sorry but you’re going to have to lift his leg so I can tie this.”

Thor knew that he was right, but he hated to cause his brother more pain. “I’m sorry, Loki. I am so sorry!”

When he lifted the leg Loki scream tore through the forest; then, thankfully, the boy passed out.

Hogun quickly tied the branches against the boy’s leg. “Where are… ah! Good.”

Sif and Fandral appeared at his side with a small stretcher made from Fandral’s cloak and more branches.
“On three… one… two… three!”

They lifted him quickly and moved him to the stretcher. Hogun and Volstagg carried it as Thor walked by the side, never letting go of Loki’s hand.

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Thor couldn’t understand why Heimdall hadn’t see them sooner. They seemed to walk forever before they were met by a party of guards and healers. The healers quickly went to work and signaled for the guards to take them all back to the palace.

Thor couldn’t take his eyes from his brother. Loki was ice cold and as pale as death. He hadn’t moved since they placed him on the stretcher.

“Will he be alright?”

“We’ll do our best for him.”

It wasn’t an answer.

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone else ever have this problem? I set the characters walking in the woods and they went off in a completely different direction.

I chose damson trees because my sister used to boost me into them for the same reason - even though I was terrified of heights. I never could climb down. Luckily, I never fell; I just sat there until someone could get me down again...
Thor had no idea how long he’d been sitting outside the healing rooms before his mother appeared. The color drained from her face when she saw the blood on his clothing. “Are you hurt?”

He followed her gaze. “Oh! No, only Loki was hurt.”

Her heart gave a lurch. All of that blood was Loki’s? “What happened?”

“We were in the woods and there was an accident. Loki… he fell out of a tree and broke his leg.”

“In a tree? How… never mind. Was it a clean break?”

Thor swallowed and looked guilty. “No. It was… bad.”

Frigga said no more, but pulled open the doors to the healing rooms and marched inside.

Eir looked up. “Frigga, you shouldn’t be here. You’re not going to want to see this.”

Frigga’s eyes went wide as she saw Loki, looking deathly white except for the scratches on his face. There was a gleam of bone below his knee. She put her hand to the boy’s cheek and winced as she felt the ice cold of his skin. He looked so small and helpless. “I’ll stay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. He’s my son, of course I’ll stay.”

Frigga and Eir locked eyes as they realized the enormity of what had just happened. It was the first time Frigga had called him her son and meant it completely.

Eir nodded and motioned to her assistant. Frigga stood by and watched as they carefully reset the bone and cleaned the wound. She saw Eir’s lips move as she uttered a spell, one that Frigga didn’t know.

“What will that do?”

“It will help to lessen the pain and hold him in a deep sleep. That’s as much as we can do for now.”

“Can’t you do anything else for him?”

“No. The break is too severe. Now, we must wait and let time work it’s own magic.”

“How long before it heals?”

Eir turned to her assistant. “Would you go and prepare a bed for the prince?”

They watched her leave.

“I don’t know how long it will take to heal because I don’t know how quickly Jotuns heal compared to Asgardians. Generally, as you know, our natural abilities are lessened when we’re away from the source of our natural power - which, in Loki’s case, is Jotenheim. Also, as you know, the healing
ability in children of that age is not yet fully developed.”

Eir took a moment to glare at her friend. “Ideally, they are not supposed to be getting into quite so much mischief. How does a child of his size climb a tree in the first place, anyway?”

Frigga didn’t admonish her friend for the comment, but her tone became steely. “I have no idea, but I intend to find out.”

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Thor stood up when he saw Frigga. “Mother, how is he?”

“You saw for yourself how he is!” Seeing Thor’s white face, she took pity on him. “Eir has done her best to repair the break, and we will have to hope that he recovers quickly. They are moving him to a bed now and, while they are doing that, you can explain to me exactly how this happened.”

“Well, he was in a tree and…”

“No, I want to hear the story from the beginning. You can start by explaining why he was with you in the first place, when I already ordered that he was not to accompany you on adventures where he might be hurt.”

“But it wasn’t that kind of adventure, we were just exploring the woods!”

“And yet, here we are.”

Thor swallowed. His mother was rarely angry, but when she was she could be more intimidating than Odin himself.

“We were setting out for a walk in the woods, when Loki ran out from the gardens and asked to join us. He wanted to come! We walked until we came to a grove of fruit trees, and realized how hungry and thirsty we all were. The fruit at the bottom was unripe, so Loki said he would climb up and pick the sweeter fruits at the top. And then he fell.”

Frigga narrowed her eyes. “It was Loki’s suggestion that he climb the tree?”

Thor thought back. “Well… no. They all seemed to expect it - you know, with Loki being the smallest. No-one else could have climbed it, the branches wouldn’t have taken our weight.”

Frigga’s tone was icy. “Clearly not. And when you realized their expectations, what was your response?”

Thor tried to defend himself. “I said that he should not! I told them you were unhappy with the rips in his clothes after the last time.”

“Please tell me you didn’t think my objections came from the damage done to his clothes?”

Thor kicked at the floor with his shoe. “No, Mother.”

“So, you told them that I would object and that you were against it, is that right?”

“Yes!” Thor was relieved that she finally understood he had objected.

“So… what then? They overpowered you? Wrestled you to the ground? Attacked you with fists or swords? Oh, my poor dear son, are there bruises to which I must attend? Injuries that Eir should heal? Should I send the guards to arrest them for attacking our princes?”
Thor colored and hung his head. Realizing she would have the whole story, he continued, unwillingly. “No. Sif said he should be more careful and Fandral suggested that Loki should take off his shirt and jacket.”

Odin walked in at that moment. “My dear, I’m sorry I couldn’t come any sooner. How is he?”

“No. Sif said he should be more careful and Fandral suggested that Loki should take off his shirt and jacket.” - Odin and Thor exchanged a quick glance. They knew Frigga was angry when Thor became Odin’s son only - “…was just telling me how this happened.”

She motioned to Thor. “Do go on. This is a fascinating tale. It tells us much about your honor and your valor. I believe we had just reached the part where you sent your little brother up a tree half-naked because you were all hungry…”

Odin had to hide his smile. Frigga in a temper was a wonderful sight - as long as that temper wasn’t directed at him.

“I did not force him! I told him it was his choice and I would support him, whatever he decided.”

“And you really think he would have said no, when he knew that doing it would please you and your friends?” Odin felt he had to speak.

Thor once again hung his head. “I am truly sorry. I will bear whatever punishment you devise, but please may I see him?”

He looked up again and Frigga saw tears shining in his eyes. How long had it been since she had seen her boy cry? Her heart softened and she reached for him.

Odin was not so easily won over. He smiled grimly. “Yes, you may see him. In fact, that can be your punishment. You and your friends will sit and watch over Loki until he wakes. Then, you will help him with whatever he needs and amuse him with whatever diversions he requests. In fact, you and your friends will be his constant companions until such time as I deem you to have made amends.”

Thor nodded eagerly. “I will, Mother, Father! I am truly sorry! May I go now?”

Frigga inclined her head and Thor ran to see his brother. His parents followed at a more sedate pace.

Eir was straightening the blankets on Loki’s bed as they approached. She began to bow but Odin motioned for her to stop. “How is he?”

“He’s very badly bruised and he lost a lot of blood. The danger with an injury of this kind is infection, but I have done what I can. The bone will heal with time, although he may experience twinges now and then, if he overexerts himself or when he gets…” she realized what she was saying and suddenly stopped. She saw Thor look up curiously and knew it would look odd if she didn’t finish the sentence. “When he gets cold.”

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Thor and his friends sat quietly waiting for Loki to wake. When Volstagg asked for some food to be brought to them, Eir told him, acidly, that they could eat when Loki ate. That was the last time any of them mentioned food.

The room was very quiet. Sif shifted uncomfortably in her seat.
Thor scowled. “Stop fidgeting, Sif.”

Fandral answered instead. “Sorry Thor, but these seats are very uncomfortable. We don’t all have the padding Volstagg has. Besides, you must admit that it’s very dull, just sitting here. Can we not at least talk? No-one has forbidden that, have they?”

“We are being punished. We should not sit around merry making as though we are at a feast!”

“But still…”

Sif interrupted. “He’s very pale. He almost looks blue, doesn’t he?”

Volstagg nodded gravely. “He never has much color as a rule, but he certainly looks very unwell. I would say he looks gray.”

Fandral nodded. “I agree. He’s closer to gray than blue. See?” He held his shirt close to Loki’s cheek. When seen like that, the boy’s complexion did look very gray.

Before Thor could object about their conversation, Hogun spoke. “He lost a great deal of blood. I imagine it will be a little while before he regains his normal color.”

His remark seemed to close that avenue of conversation.

Fandral tried again. “He will heal quickly, I am sure. I remember a cousin of mine breaking his ankle when he was only a few years older than Loki, and he was much recovered after only a couple of weeks.’

Thor frowned. “If I recall correctly, your cousin was almost twice Loki’s age. And he wasn’t ‘much recovered’ after two weeks - he aggravated the injury by putting too much weight on it before it was time. He still uses it as an excuse to get out of physical activity.”

“Hm, you are right, I had forgotten that.”

Thor squeezed Loki’s hand a little tighter. “We shall not let my brother suffer so. We will do everything we can to ensure that his recovery is swift and complete.”

Sif scowled. “Thor, whatever you do, don’t tell him that. He’ll use us like slaves if he thinks he can.”

“You wrong my brother, he would do no such thing. He…”

“He’s waking up!” Hogun pointed to the bed.

Loki’s eyes were fluttering. Thor jumped up and hovered over him. “Loki?”

Loki tried to open his eyes. They felt very heavy. He heard someone calling his name, but the voice seemed to come from very far away. “Boda?”

“No, Loki, it’s me. Thor.”

Loki forced his eyes open as he swam back to consciousness. He couldn’t understand why he felt so horrible. “Thor?”

“Yes, brother, it’s me. How do you feel?”

“E’rythin’ hurts. Thirsty. Where’s Boda?” He tried to turn onto his side but gave a gasp of pain that snapped him awake. “Thor!”
Thor made a shooing motion to his friends. “Go and fetch Eir. Angrboda isn’t here, Loki, but I am. What can I get you?”

“I want Boda!” In his muddled state, he couldn’t understand it. Angrboda had always been there when he was sick. Loki began to cry quietly.

Thor felt his heart break. “I’m sorry, little brother.” He pulled his chair closer and brushed Loki’s hair from his forehead.

Eir hurried over to them. “Loki? How do you feel?”

“Hurt. Thirsty.”

“Of course.” She motioned for one of the warriors to bring some water. Fandral returned a minute or so later with a glass, and Thor began to put his arms around his brother. “Let me help you to sit up.”

“No, wait!” Eir couldn’t help it. Thor wasn’t known for being gentle. “You don’t want to jostle his leg. Just lift his shoulders a little and I’ll build up the pillows behind him.”

It seemed to the waiting warriors that it took him forever to drink the water. Eir would only allow him sips and waited until he swallowed each time.

“Where does it hurt, Loki?” She had to be sure there was nothing she had missed.

He was hitching his breath through his sobs. “All over. Head hurts and my leg’s on fire.”

“Alright. I’m going to take care of your leg and then I’ll examine the rest of you.”

She moved away and added some powder with a little water. “Drink this. It will help.”

This time, she let him drink at his own pace. “Now, I’m going to remove your shirt and see where else it hurts.”

Once she removed his shirt she didn’t have to ask where it hurt. She heard the indrawn breath of one of the warriors. Loki’s body was covered with bruises.

She reached for a small pot near his bed. “I am afraid this will hurt initially, but it will make you feel better.” She began to apply the cream to the bruises as gently as possible, but tears still ran down the boy’s face.

Thor squatted by the bedside. “It will be alright, brother. You will soon feel better.”

Loki watched him, watery eyes wide and trusting. Thor tried not to think about how much he had betrayed that trust.

Loki yelped and Thor gripped his hand. “Have you nearly finished?”

“No. He is a mass of bruises and this will need to be done regularly to help them heal.”

He saw Loki close his eyes to hold back further tears. “Can I do it?”

Eir paused. “You have to be very gentle.”

“I will be gentle, I promise.”

Eir handed him the jar. Loki turned his head and watched him, his eyes watery and red. Thor smiled
reassuringly and sniffed the contents.

“Ah, I remember this!” He placed a little on his finger and began to carefully apply it to the bruises.

Eir watched in amazement. She would never have believed the God of Thunder could be so gentle.

“Our friends and I were adventuring a few years ago and we came to a cave. Now, what kind of warriors would we have been if we had not investigated further…”

He continued the story, but in a softer tone of voice than Eir had ever heard him use. Loki listened, hanging on his every word, and didn’t seem aware of his bruises any more. His friends would interrupt now and then, as he drew out the story of how they came to be covered in bruises and had to cover each other in the sweet smelling cream.

“I swear to you brother, the scent of this lotion is so pleasant, it’s almost worth getting bruises! Do you like it?”

Loki nodded softly.

“I thought you would! You are naturally very discerning. I believe we get that from our mother.”

Even Eir laughed at that. Loki smiled and his eyes began to close.

“That’s right, brother. Get some rest. Everything will be better tomorrow.”

Eir took the lotion from Thor. “We will need to apply it again tomorrow morning, if you are available?”

Thor straightened and nodded. “I will be here.”

Eir glanced at the sleeping boy. He had the smallest of smiles on his lips, and she didn’t think it was because of the sleeping potion she had given him.

“Alright, the punishment is over for today. You can all go and get something to eat.”

To her surprise, Volstagg turned back before they left the room. “What time may we come to see him tomorrow?”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks for all comments, kudos and bookmarks! They always make my day!
Old Friends and New Friends

Chapter Notes

I'm not super happy with this chapter, but if I stare it any longer my head will explode... On the plus side, the next chapter is one of my favourites.

The next few days were hard on everyone and Thor began to see why attending to Loki was his punishment. It was hard for him to see his little brother in so much pain, especially when he knew that he was the cause of it.

Volstagg, and to a lesser degree, Hogun, also seemed to feel guilty for the suffering they had inadvertently inflicted on the boy, although Sif and Fandral seemed to feel they had done no wrong. Thor had to bite his tongue on his temper while they were in the sickroom, not wanting to upset Loki. Once they were outside, however, he made his feelings known.

“Do you not feel any guilt at all?” he demanded of them.

Fandral raised his eyebrows. “No, none at all! Why should we? We didn’t cause him to fall! I have no idea why we’re even being punished.”

“He would not have fallen if we had not asked him to climb up!”

“Exactly! We asked him. Nobody forced him to do it, and if he didn’t want to, he should have said no!”

Thor was shocked by Sif’s callousness. “He only wanted to please us!”

She sniffed. “Then I can only say that he has failed spectacularly. I feel as though we have been stuck in that dingy room forever!”

“Then only think how Loki must feel!”

The door slammed behind them and Hogun appeared. “It negates the wisdom of stepping outside, if you then proceed to shout so loudly that they can hear you in Vanaheim!”

”Don’t worry about it. I’ve had enough of this punishment. If Odin wants to arrest me, I’ll be in the training yard! Fandral?”

Fandral hovered for a moment, unsure, and then followed her.

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When Thor went back into the healing room, Volstagg seemed to be trying to explain something to Loki.

They stopped talking when Thor appeared. “I’m sorry about that.”

Loki ignored the apology. “You looking after me… visiting me everyday… that was a punishment?”

Thor felt the ground shift beneath him as he realized what Loki had overheard and Volstagg must
have been explaining. “No! I mean, yes, it was, but I was already planning to stay with you until you were better.”

“So Father punished you by making you do something you already wanted to do? That was lucky.”

Thor hated the way Loki could make things sound so different from the way they were. For a child of his age, it was impressive; he could twist words around until you were all tied up in them.

Thor decided the best way to answer was honestly. “Yes, it was fortunate. But that did not lessen the punishment, because it hurt me a great deal to see you suffering so. I would rather have been injured myself than see you in pain, and in the future I will not be so careless with you.”

“I’m not a baby!”

“No, but we are older. We should exercise greater judgement, and not only when you are with us. It is a valuable lesson to learn, although I heartily wish it had not come at your expense.”

Loki hated to see his brother looking so downcast. “I do not blame you, brother. I agreed to climb the tree. I would not have done so otherwise.” It didn’t matter if it was a lie, if it brought a smile back to his brother’s face.

“Truly, brother?”

“Truly.”

“You forgive me for any wrongdoing?”

“There is nothing to forgive.”

Thor’s smile returned, and oh, how Loki loved that smile when it was shining on him!

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Still, the road to recovery was not to be so easy.

Loki’s leg was taking it’s time to heal, and until then he could not run about as much as he usually did. It was decided that he would stay in the healing rooms until he was better. Although he could move about with crutches, it would have been irresponsible not to have someone watching him at all times, and Eydis just didn’t have the time.

Despite Sif’s words, Odin didn’t arrest her - in fact, no more was heard of Odin’s punishment at all. Eir thought he had probably forgotten about it. Of Thor’s friends, only Volstagg occasionally visited anymore.

Thor - being Thor, and always seeing the best in everyone - had forgiven Sif and Fandral for their words, and his mornings were once again spent sparring in the exercise yard with them.

He would visit Loki in the afternoons, but if one of his friends suggested an adventure, it would be a quick visit with a promise to ‘tell him everything on the morrow’ - which he never did.

Loki was surprised that his mother visited him every morning before she attended to her royal duties. Something seemed to have changed between them. She had begun to be more affectionate with him - she would hug him and ruffle his hair, and even pull him carefully onto her lap and read him a story. He didn’t know what had caused the change, but he treasured those moments with her. If she could get away, she would come to see him at night before he went to sleep - sometimes, she even read to
him until he slept.

Even his father visited him once or twice. Loki didn’t see his father often and always felt very nervous around him. He didn’t like to admit it, but he was always relieved when his father left.

But Loki was very bored. He was still just a child, and there was only so much time a boy of his age could spend reading.

He studied the books of magic his mother brought for him and practiced the spells.

Some of them seemed to be really easy for him, such as freezing all the water in the pitchers and glasses - although Eir had been very upset about that one. He didn’t know why, it didn’t seem as though he had done any harm. Others were harder, like the spell that turned all the metal points into rubber. That one had been hilarious, watching them frown and wonder why the needles were soft and the knives wouldn’t cut.

He did feel a little guilty about it, though. It had taken him some time to work out how to reverse the spell, and his mother had explained that it was very irresponsible - what if someone had come in needing treatment? Oddly, though, Eir didn’t seem to be as bothered by that trick as she had been about the water, even though she hadn’t told his mother about that one.

They began to call him ‘the God of Mischief’. He decided he liked that.

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After the accident, Frigga completely forbade Loki to accompany Thor and his friends anywhere unless they had her express permission - she even went so far as to alert the guards.

The Warriors Three and Sif were delighted with the way everything had turned out. Although they would never have wished any of that on Loki, they now had their friend back with them and ready for adventuring.

Thor was miserable. He had enjoyed the company of his brother and had hoped to share all of his wisdom with him - where to find the best weapons, how to fend off an attack, how to track a bilgesnipe... Obviously, the only way to teach those things properly would be on the trail. When he tried to explain that to his mother in an attempt to change her mind, her response was so immediate and furious that he quickly gave up. He was brave, not foolhardy.

So Loki could no longer go anywhere with them. Unfortunately, there didn’t seem to be anyone in the palace - except for the servants - that Loki enjoyed spending time with.

In desperation, Frigga introduced Loki to as many suitable children as she could. Loki didn’t seem to get along with any of them. When Frigga asked why, he would simply shrug.

Loki wished Frigga would stop trying to find friends for him. He didn’t want to tell her why he was having such trouble making friends.

Loki knew he was clever. Even though he hadn’t been in school for very long, his teachers were already talking about teaching him at a higher level. Compared to most of the children he met, he was starting to think he was either a genius or that they were exceptionally stupid (his guess was the latter). The children that were interesting to him were too old to want to talk to a child of his age - even if he was a prince of Asgard.

That led to the second problem; he may have been A prince of Asgard, but he wasn’t THE prince of Asgard. Everyone wanted to meet Thor and get to know him. Hardly any of them had an interest in
Loki, except as a stepping stone to the golden heir of Asgard.

Was it so absurd to want a friend that simply liked him for himself? He was starting to think it must be.

And that was without even considering how many of the other children thought he was freakish because of his seidr.

It was one of the things he liked so much about Sigyn. Even though she didn’t like to study very much, she did like to read and she was clever about practical things. And she had been his friend long before she even knew he had a brother. At least he knew Sigyn liked him just for himself.

He was delighted when they had returned from their trip. Sigyn’s aunt had given her a puppy which she named Fenrir. Loki had been so envious that he immediately asked for his own pet. As he was still young enough to like everything his brother liked, he asked for a snake. He named it Jormungandr.

Frigga decided to bow to the inevitable. She informed Angrboda that Loki was once again allowed to visit the village, so Loki could play with Sigyn whenever he wanted. From then on, Loki and Angrboda walked down to the village almost everyday. While Angrboda helped her mother at the market, Loki and Sigyn would run and play, Fenrir at their heels. It seemed as though they were always together.

Loki was glad his mother had finally given up trying to force him to make other friends. He had Sigyn, and that was enough for him.
As I mentioned at the beginning, I originally planned to publish this as a series of one shots. I had a number of chapters that didn’t connect to each other, but I seem to have decided to make a story out of them. This is the second chapter I wrote - the first one takes place much later, and I have to figure out how to tie them all together. Please bear with me if there’s a bit of a gap between updates, I’ll try not to keep you waiting too long. Many thanks for reading, and for all comments and kudos!

Also, please note that I’ve updated the tags (I hope correctly). Let me know if you think there’s anything I should add.

As Loki grew older, Odin found himself worrying about the boy. What if Loki grew too large and too quickly, and revealed the truth of his birth?

Odin thought of the spell he had cast to cap the boy’s powers when Loki was a baby - when Frigga had been so scared he would hurt Thor. It seemed the spell had not worked. Even at such a young age, Loki was already quite adept at magic. What if Loki accidentally overcame the spell controlling his Aesir form? But when Loki’s growth followed that of an Aesir, Odin knew it had taken hold with more success than he could have dreamed possible.

Almost as soon as he had the thought, he began to worry again. What if his spell was too good - irreversible? If Loki could no longer revert to his Jotun form, then he couldn't be used to unite the two realms. No-one would believe that this child - who was even smaller than most Aesir - could be Jotun; least of all Laufey’s son.

All of his hopes and plans would be ruined.

Finally, Odin could bear it no longer. One evening he went to see Loki in his rooms, glad the boy had been moved out of the nursery.

Loki looked up in surprise. "Father?"

Loki didn't have many visitors. He didn't like a constant stream of servants throughout his rooms. Angrboda still took care of most of his needs and he was tidy by nature. The only area that was messy was the playroom; it was always covered with drawings and papers, and he hated anyone to touch those.

Thor visited him often. He claimed that, even though Loki’s rooms were smaller, they were far nicer than his own. Although their rooms were next to each other, Thor insisted the light was better and the view more pleasing. Loki didn’t like Thor's friends in his rooms, but he loved it when Thor would come and sit with him, and tell him of his adventures.

Frigga visited as often as she could. She would sit with her boys and talk with them or tell them stories - despite his age, Thor still loved to hear stories of battle and valour.

But Odin was the last person Loki expected to see.
Odin smiled, but Loki felt strangely disquieted. There was something about that smile that unsettled him.

"Loki, my son. I was passing and thought that I should like to see your new rooms." He glanced around. "Very nice. It was time for you to leave the nursery. Do you like them?"

"Yes, Father." Loki couldn't even remember the last time his father had visited him.

"Sit, my boy, sit. I see I’ve interrupted your reading. What are you studying?"

Loki turned back to his desk and picked up the book to show him.

"Ah, yes. I remember reading that when I was a boy. What do you think of it?" Odin was watching him very intently.

Loki swallowed. For some reason, his father’s presence was making him even more nervous than usual. "I like it, but some of it is a little hard for me to understand."

"Oh? Perhaps I can help. Why don't you find the part you're having difficulties with and read it to me?"

"Um… alright." Loki started to riffler through the pages. He couldn't seem to find the page he was looking for; he was having trouble focusing. He looked up, embarrassed, and found Odin's eyes fixed upon him. He thought he saw Odin's lips moving but he hadn't heard him say anything.

"I'm sorry, father? Did you say something?"

"No, child. I'm just sitting here waiting for you."

Loki felt his cheeks redden at the thought of making his father wait. He turned back to the book. His head felt so odd…

Odin watched as the book slipped from Loki's hand and crashed to the floor. His smile grew. "Loki, can you hear me?"

After a pause, he heard a dreamy voice reply, "Yes, Father."

"You fell asleep and you're dreaming. Anything that happens now is a dream, do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good."

Vacant eyes stared at Odin as he began to intone the counter spell that would change Loki’s form. He watched as blue softly began to crawl across Loki's skin and the boy's eyes turned to bright red. Loki's size didn't change, but his bones shifted slightly to reveal harsh ridges. Sharp lines appeared on his face, marking him as Laufey's son.

Odin looked on for a few minutes, almost fascinated by the changes. Loki no longer looked like an Aesir, but he was far smaller than any Jotun that Odin had ever seen. And why did Loki still have a full head of hair? Were the Jotuns born without hair, or did they lose it later - perhaps during puberty? There was still so much they didn’t know.

Odin leaned forward and touched the blue skin, wondering if it would burn him. It did, but not badly.
Red eyes flickered down curiously, and Loki stretched out his arms in wonder.

Odin felt a momentary sense of disquiet. Should the boy be so aware of what was happening? Odin told him it was a dream, but he expected Loki to be completely unresponsive. Instead, the child was turning his hands over and inspecting the dark fingernails. He decided it meant nothing. After all, people moved about in dreams. This was nothing to worry about.

But he did have other concerns. Despite everybody’s belief, he didn’t know everything. Both he and Frigga were skilled in magical arts, but this was unchartered territory for them. He had heard there might be dangers in performing a spell like this for an extended period of time. Was Loki’s diminutive stature simply the result of being born a runt? Or might it be that by enchanting the boy with such a powerful spell for so long, Loki had begun to grow as an Aesir instead?

Perhaps Odin should do this more often, to be sure Loki wouldn’t lose the ability to shift to his Jotun form when the need came for him to do so. The frost giants might be willing to accept a runt on the throne - especially if he had the backing of the Allfather - but they would not bend the knee to a king that looked like an Aesir.

Odin nodded to himself. He would try to make a regular practice of reverting the boy to his Jotun form. He wondered if he should tell Frigga. She wouldn’t like it; despite Odin’s reminders that they would have to return the boy one day, she had grown to love him. She hated any reminder that he wasn’t hers. Odin decided it would be better to keep it from her; why upset her for no reason?

As he stood up, he didn’t notice that Loki’s eyes were fixed on a point across the room. Odin realized he was almost late for a meeting with the ambassador of Vanaheim. Picking up the book, he handed it back to Loki.

He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "We have had a pleasant discussion about this book. I didn’t help you with the problem, because I think it would be better if you tried to work it out for yourself. You will tell no-one about this visit. The next time you see me enter your rooms alone, you will dream again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

Odin smiled. He could see why Frigga was so fond of Loki; he was a good boy. He felt sure that Loki would one day be a credit to them. He out a hand and Loki reverted to his Aesir form.

Loki blinked for a minute, disoriented. He looked down at the book in his hands. What had he been doing?

Odin stood up and smiled again at his son. "Well, I must leave you now, I have a meeting. It was nice to talk with you; we must do this again soon. Goodbye, my son."

Loki nodded. It had been nice; they had talked about the book. Odin hadn’t helped him with the problem, because he should work it out for himself. He remembered it clearly.

But there was something… something else that he couldn’t quite remember...

He pulled himself away from his thoughts. "Goodbye, Father." And then, remembering his manners, “Thank you."

Odin swept out of the door, but Loki continued to stand where he was.

He raised his eyes from the book and looked at the mirror across from him. He felt a sudden stab of revulsion and tasted bile. He continued to stare at the mirror. For some reason, he felt something was
wrong… no, not something. It was him; he was wrong, somehow.

He walked across the room and reached out to touch his reflection. He pulled his hand away at the last minute. He didn’t want to touch it, he was… scared? He returned his hand to his side. Why would he be scared by his own image? He looked just the same as he always did, but for some reason, he suddenly didn’t want to see himself. He couldn't say why, but he felt that he was… repellent.

He turned the mirror towards the wall.

That night, he had his first nightmare.
"Are you going to leave me?"

Angrboda paused in the act of turning off the lights in Loki’s room. "I’m sorry?"

"I said, are you going to leave me?"

"Of course not! Whyever would I?"

Loki sat up in bed and gestured to his rooms. "I was thinking… now that I’m in here… I’m older now. They probably think I don’t need you anymore."

She shook her head. "You’re not that much older. Just because you’re old enough to leave the nursery, it doesn’t mean you don’t need someone to look after you. You’re still just a child." She saw the set of his jaw. "You know what I mean, Loki. You’ve only just started school. You’re going to need me for a little while yet."

"I’ll always need you," he said. He kept his head down and tried to cover his embarrassment by speaking to his bedspread.

She covered the distance between them and pulled him into a hug. "I’m won’t leave you, child. Not until you’re ready for me to go."

"What if they send you away?"

She wondered if he had heard something. "Why would they?"

"They must have sent Thor’s nurse away."

Oh! She sometimes forgot how smart he was, how quickly he made connections. Thor didn’t have a former nurse working about the palace; therefore, they must have sent her away.

She tried to pick her words very carefully, without getting into the dangerous territory of Thor’s childhood. "Well… if they don’t think you need a nurse anymore, I’ll get another job in the palace. I’ll be your maid or," she said, trying to raise a smile from him, "perhaps I’ll join the Einherjar."

She saw a hint of a smile. "Or maybe I’ll become a prince. All those people to cook and clean for me all day long! What do you think?"

Loki giggled and she grinned. She loved to hear him laugh.

“Now if you’re all done with your foolishness, it’s time to lie down and go to sleep.” She straightened the sheets over him and kissed his forehead.
"I won’t leave you, little prince."

As she walked to her own room, she thought about what he had said - "They must have sent Thor’s nurse away."

Except, of course, Thor’s nurse hadn’t been sent away; she had never existed in the first place. Thor hadn’t had a wet nurse or a nursery maid of any kind - Frigga had done everything for him until he had insisted on taking care of himself.

Angrboda had never made sense of it. When she first started working at the palace, she had assumed that Frigga was one of those noblewomen that didn’t like to nurse their children, or felt they didn’t have time for it.

She quickly discovered that she was wrong; Thor had been nursed by his mother. And not only nursed - Frigga had taken care of Thor in every possible way. She had bathed him and dressed him and even sewn his clothes for him.

So why had Frigga wanted to nurse Thor, but not Loki? Why had she played with Thor and sang to him, and tucked him into his bed at night, when she had never done those things for Loki?

Angrboda was happy that Loki’s relationship with his mother seemed to have improved of late, but she still thought Loki deserved better. He was so pathetically grateful whenever Frigga visited him, and he was jubilant on the few occasions that she read him a bedtime story. He didn’t seem to realise that most mothers did those things all the time, as a matter of course.

People could, of course, point to Angrboda’s own relationship with her daughter. Angrboda often thought Loki spent more time with Sigyn than she did; but the circumstances were very different.

Angrboda came from a poor family; she needed to work. She had no husband to help her and her parents didn’t make enough money to keep them all. Now her parents were getting older, and Angrboda was happy to think she had saved enough to support them as they got older. She had achieved a level of independence most women of her class would never be able to reach. She and Sigyn had talked about it many times, and she was happy that Sigyn understood.

But Frigga had no such concerns. Of course, she had her royal duties; but they were the same responsibilities she had when she had given birth to Thor. By all accounts, she had managed very well, even going so far as to take him into meetings with her.

Unlike Loki.

Frigga hardly visited him when he was a newborn. On the few occasions she had come to the nursery, she was reluctant to hold him and generally disinterested in his progress. That had been one of the reasons why Angrboda hadn’t wanted to bother her with the news of Loki’s poor eating habits.

Angrboda had assumed that Frigga would be annoyed about Loki’s illness causing them to cancel their trip; she never imagined for one moment that they would consider leaving Loki behind. Surely, they could have postponed it until he was better? Or even shortened it. Angrboda didn’t think anyone would have been offended by the queen’s desire to return to her ailing child as soon as possible.

But no. They left and had taken their time to return - even stretching out the time with a pleasure trip to Midgard.
They were gone so long that Loki had been a child when they returned. A walking, talking child meeting his parents for the first time - how strange must that have been?

One day, she knew, Loki would discover that his relationship with his family wasn’t normal. With any luck, he would ascribe it to their royal status and think no more about it.

But Angrboda knew Loki well. It was more likely that he would continue to ask questions, and he would not like the answers. It was one thing to be raised differently from his peers; it was another thing entirely to have a different upbringing from that of his own brother.

She prayed he would never find out how different it was.

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Angrboda’s prayers were not to be answered. Still worrying about the question of Thor’s nurse, Loki decided to ask Thor himself.

He knocked on Thor’s door the next morning.

"Come!" Thor turned and smiled when he saw his brother. "Brother, good morning! How did you sleep?"

At the question, he gave Loki a searching look. He didn’t know why his brother had started to suffer from nightmares, but he was worried about him.

Loki dismissed the question. "Where are you going?"

"I was meeting the others in the exercise yard - will you join us?"

"No. My lessons start in a few minutes. Can I walk with you?"

"Of course!" Thor was always delighted to have his brother’s company.

"Thor, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course! What do you want to know?"

"What happened to your nurse?"

Thor looked puzzled. "My… nurse?"

"Yes!" Loki clicked his tongue in impatience. "From when you were a child!"

“I did not have a nurse."

Loki stopped in his tracks. "Then who looked after you?"

Without thinking, Thor answered, "Our mother, of course."

"Our mother?"

"Yes, brother. Sif, good morning! Loki, are you sure you would not like to stay a while and watch? I think you would find it instructive!"

Loki looked thoughtful but shook his head. "No, I must go to my lessons. I will see you later."

Thor nodded and ran to join his friends. Loki turned and walked back to the palace. His mind was
whirling.

Why was it that he had a nurse but Thor didn’t? What had changed between Thor’s childhood and his?

He turned from the classroom and made his way to the kitchens. Although he wasn’t allowed to visit the servants anymore, he still snuck down there as often as he could.

The cook smiled to see him. "Little prince! That’s timing. I’ve just finished baking some small cakes - would you like to give me your opinion?"

"Yes, please!"

One of the other servants made a jokey bow to him. "Your usual seat, my prince?"

Loki grinned and waved his hand regally. "Indeed!"

The servant scooped him up and sat him on the table, while another handed him a cake. They always enjoyed seeing their prince in the kitchens.

Loki grinned and took a bite. "It’s delicious!"

The cook placed her hand on her heart. "A royal endorsement!"

“Naturally! You are, without doubt, the best cook in all of the nine realms!”

“You silver-tongued flatterer! You’re only saying that so I’ll let you have another!”

Loki looked impish. “Did it work?”

All the servants laughed and the cook handed him another cake.

“Thank you!” Trying to seem as innocent as possible, Loki asked, "Did you give cakes to Thor when he was a boy?"

"Prince Thor? No, certainly not!"

"Didn’t he come down to visit you?"

"Norns, child, what a thought! Queen Frigga wouldn’t have brought him down here."

Loki kept the smile on his face as he asked, "He didn’t sneak away from her?"

"No, she never let him out of her sight. Took him everywhere, she did."

"But what about when she had to perform her royal duties?" Loki heard the phrase ‘royal duties’ so often, he was surprised they hadn’t been his first words.

"She didn’t let it bother her! She’d take the babe with her wherever she went. Never seen a mother so devoted. He even slept in their room until he was old enough to move to his own."

The cook suddenly realized what she was saying - and to whom. The older servants had often gossiped about how differently the two boys were treated, but they hoped their little prince would never notice.

"I mean… that is to say..." she trailed off, unsure how to recover.
Loki pretended not to notice and interrupted her with a beaming smile. "Well, I’m glad I can sneak down here whenever I want - these cakes are marvelous. May I have another?"

--------

He stayed and talked with them for a few more minutes, before making his excuses and leaving. He wanted to think about what he had heard. He decided to go to the library; if anyone came to look for him he could claim he had been there all along, hidden behind the stacks.

He pulled out a book and took it to a seat in a quiet corner.

He tried to make sense of everything he’d discovered. He had always assumed that perhaps Frigga didn’t care much for younger children; but apparently she had been devoted to Thor. Why? Why was Thor so favored, while Loki was grateful simply for a visit from her?

Deciding he needed more information, he went in search of more people to question. He kept his questions as vague as possible, but guided their conversations. They all said the same thing - Frigga had been a devoted mother to Thor and spent every possible minute with him.

By the end of the day, Loki had heard countless stories of Frigga playing with Thor constantly, reading to him and even singing him to sleep. Singing! Loki hadn’t even known his mother could sing. Apparently, Frigga had taken Thor everywhere with her, even into official meetings!

The only question to which he still didn’t have an answer was - why Thor and not him? Why was she so devoted to his brother, but barely present for Loki?

--------

Thor came to see him that afternoon and tell him about his sparring session with Sif and the Warrior’s Three. Loki was grateful for the distraction. He felt jittery and upset. He wanted to stop thinking about what he had learned, but he couldn’t.

He listened to his brother and thought of how Thor would run up to their mother and throw his arms around her. She would hug him back just as forcefully. When Thor was younger, she would even whirl him around in her arms.

Perhaps that was it - perhaps Frigga needed Loki to be more affectionate? Thor was naturally affectionate with everybody and they were affectionate to him in return. Perhaps if Loki followed his brother’s example, Frigga would respond in kind.

He heard the sound of the door and decided that was what he was going to do. As Frigga walked into the room, he ran over to her, just as Thor would.

Frigga saw Loki rush towards her. At the sight of that dark head barreling in her direction, she acted instinctively.

She pushed him away.
Oh, What a Tangled Web We Weave!

They all heard the thump as Loki’s bottom hit the floor, but for a moment, they all stared, frozen in shock.

Frigga couldn’t believe what she had just done.

She couldn’t count the times that Thor had run to her and she had joyfully clasped him in her arms; but she had never done such a thing with Loki. When she had seen him run towards her, the first thought that came into her head had been \textit{(monster!)} shock. She had instinctively pushed out her hands in defense and sent Loki sprawling on the floor.

She felt her cheeks flush in shame and horror. She had been trying so hard since the day she had seen him lying in the healer’s room, so small and vulnerable. Now she had ruined everything with this one thoughtless act.

If she was honest, she was still not used to showing him affection. Though she was loathe to admit it, there were still times when she had to steel herself to touch him.

She could almost forget what he was if it wasn’t for the coolness of his skin; a coolness that persisted, despite his Aesir form. Most people assumed that he simply ran a little colder, and she had more than once been subjected to that old adage, ‘cold hands, warm heart’.

She was ashamed to realize that she didn’t even know if he had a warm heart. She really didn’t know him that well at all. Even though she had begun to spend more time with him, he was always on his best behavior and very polite. They didn’t really talk much, except when Thor was there - and on those occasions, Thor did most of the talking.

She had even asked Odin if he couldn’t reinforce his spell a little more. Odin had refused.

Firstly, he was concerned that making the spell any stronger might damage Loki’s ability to change back to his original form. Secondly, he told her that it wasn’t a bad thing for her to remember what Loki was. Frigga should try not to get too attached; Loki was not their son and he would have to leave them one day. She would do well to remember that.

But, how then was she supposed to treat him as a son? And how on earth could she explain her actions now? Both Thor and Loki were staring at her as if she was a monster.

And she thought they were right to do so.

----------

Thor couldn’t understand what had just happened. He frequently ran up to their mother like that, his arms open, waiting for her to greet him with a hug.

Although he had never seen Loki do it before, it made sense that he would want to copy his older brother.

But why had his mother acted so strangely? She had obviously seen Loki, it wasn’t as though Loki had come upon her suddenly. Perhaps she may have been a little surprised - Loki had never run to her before - but surely, that should not have caused her to push him away as she did?

Loki was sitting on the floor, his eyes round with shock, staring at their mother in disbelief. Whatever
reaction he had expected from their mother, it obviously hadn’t been that.

Thor saw his brother’s eyes beginning to fill with tears and his breath was starting to hitch. That shocked Thor as much as anything else had that day. His brother didn’t cry over little things; the last time he had cried, it had taken the pain of breaking his leg to force tears from him.

Thor hurried over to him and put his arms around his shoulders. “Brother, are you hurt?”

Loki bit his lip. He felt tears very close to the surface but was determined not to cry. Even so, he could not help leaning further into his brother’s embrace.

It was a mistake. The contrast between his brother’s loving arms and his mother’s thoughtless cruelty made him feel so wretched that he couldn’t hold back his sobs anymore.

Thor looked up in alarm. For some reason, his mother was still standing by the door. “Mother, I think he must have hurt himself. Should we send for Eir?”

Frigga didn’t think that was why Loki was crying. She had seen his sudden look of shock as he fell; she knew his pain wasn’t caused by any physical wound. But how could she explain that to Thor?

“I’ll send for her.” She hurried from the room, glad to escape for a moment.

Once she was outside, she leaned against the door frame and tried to compose herself. She realized she had made a mistake. If she sent for Eir, the whole story would come out. She knew that Eir disapproved of the way she treated Loki, and her friend would not have a problem with lecturing her about it. But she could hardly go back inside and say that she was sure Loki was fine after all.

An approaching guard made the decision for her. “My Queen, is anything wrong?”

She tried to keep her voice steady. “There was a small accident. I’m sure the prince is fine, but please fetch Eir, so we can be sure.”

“Of course, my Queen.” He hurried away.

Frigga re-entered the room. Loki was clutching Thor’s shirt as if he would never let go. He was no longer sobbing, but his breath was hitching and tears were still running freely down his face. She was shocked to see tears mirrored in Thor’s eyes.

“I don’t know what’s wrong, Mother. Is Eir coming?”

“Yes, she’ll be here soon.”

Thor suddenly seemed to realize his position. “Mother, I’m sorry! I should let you take him.”

She saw a flash of emerald eyes and Loki’s hand gripped his brother even harder. She swallowed nervously. “No, I think he wants his big brother right now. But perhaps you could get him off that cold floor?”

“Yes! Yes, of course!” Thor scooped Loki up, happy to be doing something for his brother.

Loki kept his arms tight around his brother and hid his face. He was embarrassed to be crying but couldn’t seem to stop. In his mind, he kept seeing the look on his mother’s face when he had run to her.
He had seen horror and disgust - the same feelings he had when he looked in the mirror; that sense of something wrong. He didn’t know why he felt that way, but evidently, his mother sensed it as well.

He disgusted her.

Even though it was childish, when Thor carried him to his bed, Loki didn’t let go. Somehow, it helped to be holding his brother. Whatever it was that was so wrong in him, Thor apparently didn’t see it.

Loki hoped Boda didn’t see it either. But surely she must have? Possibly she ignored it. She was paid to look after him. Perhaps she saw it and thought she could put up with it, for the sake of the money.

He didn’t think so. He hoped not, anyway. He didn’t know what he would do if Boda didn’t really love him.

Then he would only have Thor.

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Eir came hurrying along a few minutes later. “What happened?”

Frigga kept her eyes averted. “There was an accident. Loki fell to the floor and has been quite upset since. We were worried that he might have been hurt when he fell.”

Eir looked at her sharply. There was something in Frigga’s voice that sounded false. “How did he fall?”

Frigga didn’t answer, but Thor spoke up. “Loki was running to Mother, but she must have been surprised… or something. She accidentally pushed Loki and he fell on the floor.”

Eir drew in a breath. That explained a lot. They had all seen Thor rush to his mother that way; Loki must have decided to copy his brother and do the same. Except, of course, he wasn’t the same.

Eir felt a surge of annoyance with her friend. She knew that Frigga was finding it hard, but it was unfair to take it out on the child.

Unfortunately, even before the war, everyone in Asgard had been taught from birth that the Jotnar were evil personified. They were creatures used to frighten unruly children - and probably Loki as well. She felt sick to think of how Loki would feel if he even had an inkling of what he was.

But Frigga and Odin had taken on the mantle of raising this child, and if they didn’t think they could put their own feelings aside… well, they shouldn’t try to do it. If Frigga couldn’t treat this boy as her own, it would surely be more humane to confess what they had done and give the child to someone else to raise. Certainly, Angrboda loved him so much that it would never matter to her what he was. He could be half Jotun, half dark elf and look like a bilgesnipe, and Angrboda would still love him.

At least he had that.

Eir approached the bed wondering how best to handle it. Like Frigga, she doubted the child was hurt just from a push to the floor. The true cause of his tears was surely the shock of being pushed away by his own mother. Eir thought it likely that the child was starting to realize how different things were for him.

But of course, she couldn’t say any of that; they had to continue to act out this charade.
She took another calming breath and tried to bite down her frustration. She was a doctor, not a specialist in family dynamics. “Thor, I need a minute to examine him - perhaps you and your mother would like to go and fetch some of my calming tea from my rooms? I think Loki would appreciate that.”

Thor looked up, torn. He was out of his depth trying to comfort Loki, and he’d like to do something more physical to help. But Loki seemed to be holding onto him so tightly.

Eir understood his dilemma. “Loki, would you mind if Thor went to get you some tea? And perhaps one or two of those lovely cakes I saw cook preparing earlier?”

Loki tried to compose himself and nodded, wiping his eyes. “We will be right back, brother.” Thor grabbed his mother’s hand and led her away.

Eir sat on the edge of the bed. “Do you have any physical injury?”

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and reached for his nose. Eir quickly supplied him with a handkerchief. “N..no. I w..was just s..startled, that’s all.”

“That’s a lot of crying for someone that isn’t hurt.”

He flushed. “It t..took me by surprise.”

She was glad to hear his breath calming. Time to jump in, she thought. “You know your mother never meant to push you, don’t you?”

Loki was staring at his sheets, fingers playing restlessly with a loose thread. She stilled his hand. “Loki?”

“Yes, Lady Eir.”

“Lady Eir? That’s suddenly very formal. Should I start calling you ‘my prince’?”

He looked up and flashed one of his sudden smiles. It was smaller than usual, but more than she had hoped for. “Yes, Eir. I know she didn’t mean to push me.”

“Good. You know your mother would never hurt you and hates to see you get hurt, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know that.” He knew Frigga would never hurt anyone if she could help it. It wasn’t her fault that he was so wrong.

“And you know your mother loves you very much?”

A pause. He gave her another smile, this one surprisingly insincere for such a small child. “Yes, Eir. I know how much my mother loves me.”
Methought I Heard A Voice Cry

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. I’m not happy with this chapter, but I’ve stared and stared at it until my head is ready to explode. I’ve decided that this is a good as I can get it right now. Perhaps later I’ll figure out what’s wrong and come back and fix it, but for now I’m too close to it. On the plus side, I have about three or four chapters after this one that just need editing, so they shouldn’t be too far behind.

Please note - I just wanted to make it clear that there is no central romance in this story. While I have enjoyed reading some amazing Thorki fics, this isn’t one of them. I can’t write romance. All affection expressed in this story is purely fraternal.

Eir was trying to fix a problem with the soul forge when Frigga entered the room. “My queen?”

"Please, continue with whatever you are doing." Frigga began to walk around the room, restlessly picking things up and putting them down again.

Eir watched surreptitiously; she guessed that her friend wanted to talk. “Tea?”

"I can make it." Frigga filled a kettle and started the water boiling. Eir preferred tea made the old fashioned way and Frigga agreed with her. The ritual of making it was part of the enjoyment.

They were quiet until Frigga put a cup in front of Eir.

Eir smiled and risked a joke. "What, no shortbread? This is what I get for not doing it myself."

It broke the tension, and Frigga laughed. Eir put down her tools and sat down to drink her tea. They were quiet for a few minutes.

Frigga broke the silence. "I apologized to Loki."

"How did you explain what happened?"

"I told him my mind was elsewhere, and that he startled me."

"And he believed you?"

"Of course he did. Why wouldn't he?"

It seemed incredible to Eir that Frigga had no idea of how perceptive Loki could be, but Eir knew it would be a waste of breath to try and tell her. Nevertheless, Frigga must have suspected something was wrong, or they wouldn’t be having this conversation.

"What did he say?"

"He said he understood. I told him I was delighted that he ran to me for a hug and I hope he will continue to do it in the future."
Eir returned her gaze to her tea. She very much doubted that Loki would ever do it again.

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Frigga didn’t know why she had gone to see Eir. Perhaps it was because she wanted her friend to know that she had tried to make things right with Loki. Or perhaps it was because - deep down - she didn’t believe Loki had really forgiven her.

But once she began talking, she realized she didn’t want to see Eir’s look of disapproval, or listen to her advice. Frigga was trying her best, wasn’t she? How many other mothers would be able to be able to adopt a frost giant and not have a few qualms here and there?

Before Eir had a chance to reply, Frigga put down her cup and stood up. “I’m sorry, I’ve just realized that I have somewhere to be. I completely forgot. This was nice, we should do this again soon.” She inwardly cringed as she heard the jumble of words fall from her lips, and she hurried from the room.

Once she was back in her own rooms, she mentally chided herself. She was a queen, the Allmother of Asgard - she didn’t need Eir’s advice. She could fix this herself.

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"You know I love you very much, don't you, Loki?" she said to him.

"Of course, Mother." Loki used the same insincere tone and smile he had used with Eir, and it was no more convincing to Frigga. She decided to let her actions speak in place of words.

It turned out to be harder than she thought.

Whereas before he had been grateful for any attention she showed him, now he was reserved towards her. If she pulled him onto her lap to read him a story, he would endure it politely for a few minutes and then gradually move away. He returned her hugs as though it was a duty. Now it was Loki, not Frigga, that flinched away from being touched.

She couldn't understand it; couldn't work out why he wouldn't forgive her for that one silly little mistake.

She would have been even more surprised if she had known why he didn't want her to touch him.

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He couldn't stop thinking about the disgust he had seen on Frigga's face as she pushed him away. He even dreamed of it - although in his dreams, she didn't just push him: she sneered and told him he was wrong, dirty, unclean... All the things he heard in his head when he looked in the mirror.

When he closed his eyes, he saw himself as he was in those dreams - a monster, with blue skin and sharp teeth and eyes the color of blood. Perhaps that was what she saw, too. Was that why she had rejected him? Because he was unnatural, a creature poised to hurt her and her family?

In the very worst of his dreams, he would be covered in blood, and he would know that it belonged to Frigga or Thor.

Sometimes, Thor’s voice would break into his dreams and Loki would feel a gentle hand on his shoulder. Thor seemed to be attuned to his brother's distress. Although Thor was usually a heavy sleeper, he seemed to know when Loki needed him, and he would leave his bed and hurry to Loki’s
room to offer comfort. Loki always slept well after that.

But there were times when Thor wouldn’t wake, and Loki would climb out of bed and hurry to his room to make sure he was alright.

The first time Thor saw Loki standing by his bedside, he had been startled. When Loki tried to haltingly explain, Thor reached out and pulled his brother into the bed beside him. Thor had asked Loki what the dream was about, and when Loki told him, Thor kissed his forehead and hugged him.

“You need not fear the frost giants, little brother. I will always protect you from them. Sleep beside me, and I will ensure they do not bother your dreams either.”

Remarkably, it worked. Safe in the strong arms of his brother, Loki always slept without dreaming.

--------

Thor was irritated with his friends. He knew they meant nothing by it, but their teasing of his brother was distasteful to him.

He had accidentally let it slip that he was weary because he had been woken up by Loki’s nightmares. Since then, they had begun to tease the brothers mercilessly - Loki for having night terrors at his age, and Thor for allowing himself to be disturbed by him. Everyone agreed that he should ignore his brother's foolishness. By pandering to Loki and comforting him, Thor was simply encouraging the younger boy's behavior.

Now, because of their teasing, Loki didn't want to come to him for comfort anymore, and began locking his door. Thor hated to think of his brother suffering alone in the dark. He knew how terrified Loki was by his dreams, and he blamed himself.

Thor had spent many nights telling Loki horrific tales about frost giants, and now his brother was plagued by evil dreams.

Loki told Thor that he dreamed of frost giants peeling away his skin and tearing at his face, revealing blue skin underneath. He dreamed their touch would contaminate him and he would turn into one of them - his white Aesir skin turning blue and his green eyes changing to an evil, inhuman red.

Thor did everything he could to reassure his brother. One day, he told Loki, he would travel to Jotunheim and slay every last one of the evil frost giants. He would wipe them from existence and make sure that none survived.

Then his brother would know that he was safe.

--------

Frigga frowned as she watched Thor over dinner. It was unusual for him to be so quiet. Now that she examined him more closely, she noticed that he looked tired. It seemed that his friends were trying to draw him out, but with little success.

She waited until Thor excused himself - far earlier than he usually did - and turned to her husband. “My dear, would you excuse me?”

“Is anything wrong?”

“I'm not sure, but I will find out.”
Odin nodded. He trusted her to tell him if there was anything he needed to know.

Frigga quickly caught up with her son. “Thor!”

He turned quickly. “Good evening, Mother. Is everything alright?”

“I was planning to ask you the same question. You were very quiet tonight and you look tired. Is something wrong?”

He seemed to be deciding whether or not to answer her.

“Please, Thor. I am your mother, you can tell me anything.”

He smiled and took her hand. “I know that, Mother. But this is not my problem.” He sighed. “It's Loki.”

“Loki?” Things had become so awkward between the two of them, that she had to admit that she had been avoiding him. She felt guilty for her neglect. She hadn’t even seen him at mealtimes; she frequently missed lunch, and Loki didn't enjoy the revelry of the evening feasts and often ate quietly in his rooms.

She tried to console herself with the thought that if something had truly been wrong, Angrboda would surely have told her. "What's wrong with Loki?"

Thor tried to think of what to say. After his experience with Thor's friends, Loki had made him promise that he wouldn't tell anyone else. Loki had even asked him to swear his friends to secrecy. How to explain to his mother?

Thor tried to think of the right thing to say. He was worried about his brother. "Loki has not been sleeping well. Perhaps he is studying too hard."

Frigga stared at him for a moment. She could tell there was something he wasn’t telling her, but she knew better than to pry. “Thank you for telling me.”

She went to Loki's rooms. Despite the lateness of the hour, there was a light inside. She opened the door a crack and saw Loki's small form curled up on a chair, reading a book.

She knocked lightly on the door and saw him jump. “May I come in?”

Loki brushed a hand over his hair and stood up formally to greet her. “Mother! Is anything wrong?”

"Why should something be wrong?"

“Shouldn't you be at dinner?”

“I was, and then I decided to come and see you. A better question would be, why are you awake at this hour?”

"I couldn't sleep."

"I see." She could see. Loki had dark circles under his eyes and looked exhausted. She looked at the chair behind him and picked up the book. It was a book of mathematics. “Might it be because you're studying late into the night?”

He gave a small shrug. "It isn't very difficult."
She smiled. It was a book for an older child. "I am not sure that's a relevant point."

She walked over to his bed and pulled back the covers and sat down. "Come here."

He climbed into the bed and she pulled up the covers.

"Would you like a story?"

He hesitated, and she realized he was embarrassed to show his need.

She went over to the shelf and choose a book. "I often find it very relaxing to read aloud. You don't mind, do you?"

He shook his head and lay down as she began to read. He was asleep within minutes.

She waited for a few more minutes and then went back to the feast.

Odin motioned to a servant to fill her glass. "What was the problem?"

"It seems our son hasn't been sleeping."

"Is something bothering Thor?"

"No, it's Loki that isn't sleeping. Thor is just worried about him."

"It is good they are close." He considered what she had told him. "Why isn't Loki sleeping?"

"Thor thinks he is studying too hard. I'm inclined to agree."

Odin chuckled. "Good luck trying to stop him. He loves his books."

"Yes, I have no idea what to do."

Odin was thoughtful for a few minutes. "I may have an idea. For some time now I have been thinking I would like to visit Midgard again. Perhaps it would be a good idea to take our boys. They would both enjoy the adventure, I think, and it would be a nice holiday for all of us."

Frigga beamed at him. It was a perfect suggestion.
A Trip to Midgard

Chapter Notes

For the next few chapters, I will be mashing up some characters and stories from the myths. Hey, if Marvel can do it...

As for the story… um… sorry in advance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor had to smile. Loki was torn between nervousness and excitement, and impossible to calm down. Thor watched, amused, as Loki began to dig through his bag again.

"Loki, what are you doing?"

"I wanted to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything."

Thor pulled his brother away and closed the bag. "You haven't."

"How do you know?"

"Because you had everything you needed the last three times you checked it."

Loki huffed in annoyance. "Do you think I should take another book?"

"No, I don't. I don't think you’ll need any, Loki. We're going away for a family trip to Midgard, I doubt there will be time for reading!"

"There won't?"

"No."

"Oh." Loki bit his thumbnail. "Perhaps you should check my bag?"

"Loki, I have seen you pack and unpack that bag three times now. I don't need to check it, everything is fine. Why are you so nervous?"

"I've never been on a trip anywhere before."

Thor stared at him in surprise. He’d never considered it before, but of course, Loki was right. He hadn't been on a trip before.

Thor sat on his bed and pulled his brother close. "It will be great fun, little brother. We will have a wonderful adventure."

Loki looked back at him with trusting eyes. "We will?"

"I promise."

"Alright."
A silence fell between them and Thor found himself wondering about his family.

When Thor was Loki's age, he had been on dozens of trips with his parents. Why, they had taken him to visit the realms while he was just a baby, to show him to the people. But no such trip had occurred with Loki. How was it that this was the first time he would travel outside his realm? He hadn't even traveled within Asgard! In fact, now that Thor considered it, he realized that Loki had never in his life slept anywhere but in the palace.

More worrying still, how was it that Loki had never before been anywhere with either of his parents? Once again, he found himself wondering about the differences in their childhoods. Thor remembered so many wonderful times with his parents; he remembered playing with his father, something he was sure Loki had never done. Thor was much closer to his mother than Loki was. Sometimes, although he was ashamed to admit it, Thor even found himself thinking of Angrboda as Loki's mother. Loki certainly seemed to think of her that way.

Thor couldn't understand it. Why were his parents so reserved around Loki? Odin hardly ever spent time with him, and when he did, Loki always seemed very nervous and desperate to please. As for their mother... well, Thor didn't know what the problem was there. For a time, it had seemed that they were starting to find a closer relationship, until that disastrous moment when Frigga had pushed Loki away.

Thor had thought of that moment so many times since. It still made no sense to him. Frigga must have seen Loki coming towards her, so why had she pushed him? She had seemed truly sorry afterwards, but Thor knew that Loki still hadn't forgotten or forgiven.

Thor wished he could understand it all.

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It was late when Odin finally arrived in Thor's rooms. As he opened the door, he was treated to the sight of Loki fast asleep on his brother's shoulder. He smiled; it was a heartwarming sight after a long and difficult day.

Thor looked up as his father walked in. He kept his voice low. "Hello, Father."

"I see your brother got tired of waiting." Odin was also whispering.

"I was surprised when I realized he had fallen asleep. He was so excited for the trip I was worried that he might explode."

Odin laughed quietly. "Then I am glad you managed to diffuse him. I would have been disappointed to see him explode before we had even left the palace." He looked a little closer. "He seems to be holding onto his bag."

Now it was Thor's turn to laugh. "I think he wanted to be sure he would not forget it. He has been very diligent about his packing."

"Did he pack any clothes at all, or is it just books?"

"I think he may have packed an extra pair of socks as well." Thor paused for a moment, and then asked, "Father, why hasn't Loki traveled anywhere before this?"

Odin looked surprised at the realization. "I don't know. I suppose I hadn't considered it."
"When I was Loki's age, I had traveled all over the realms, but this is the first time he has left the palace."

Odin sat at the foot of the bed and considered. "I suppose that is true. I wish I had an answer for you. I suppose the best answer I can give is that we are older now with more political entanglements to deal with. We have less time to spend with those we love. I have not spent as much time with Loki as I would have liked, and I miss the times that you and I would spend together. I can only hope that our reward will be peace throughout our realms, so that you may one day spend more time with your children."

It was a good answer and Thor was satisfied. "Are you ready to leave? Should I wake him?"

"No, leave him to sleep. I'm afraid there has been a bit of a problem."

"What's happened?"

"The ambassador for Vanaheim has requested an urgent meeting first thing in the morning. He says it is of the utmost importance."

"You can't see him now?"

"No, he had to return to Vanaheim. He wishes to see us as soon as he gets back."

Thor bit his lip and looked at Loki's hand, still clutching his bag. "But we will leave after that?"

"Of course. It is just an unfortunate delay."

--------

Loki was surprised to wake up the next morning beside his brother. They were meant to have woken him the night before, for their trip.

He reached out a hand and shook his brother awake. "Thor!"

Thor opened sleepy eyes and stretched. "Good morning, brother."

"Thor, why are we here? We were meant to leave last night." He looked worried. "This isn't because I fell asleep, is it?"

Thor chuckled. "Of course not! The ambassador of Vanaheim requested an urgent meeting for this morning, so the trip has been delayed. We will leave immediately after."

"You are sure?"

"Of course. In fact, you may want to start getting ready. I imagine they are in their meeting now, so it shouldn't be too much longer."

Loki looked uncertain, but headed to the washroom. Thor turned back to his bed.

--------

Odin had never seen the ambassador looked more flustered. He had obviously come straight to the throne room without stopping to tidy himself up.

"Lord Fritjof, how may we help you today?"
"King Odin, Queen Frigga, I thank you for seeing me at such short notice. I bear bad tidings from Vanaheim."

"Please tell me that my good friend Queen Freyja is well?"

Fritjof hesitated. "She is well for now, my queen."

"For now?"

"There is a sickness in Vanaheim. A plague. It is spreading through the people. At first, it was thought to be nothing serious, but it has taken a serious turn."

Odin and Frigga exchanged a worried glance. "Do you need us to send healers?"

"No, thank you, my queen. Our own healers are working hard to solve the mystery. But there is another service we would ask of you."

Odin leaned forward. "Speak. We will gladly assist you in any way we can."

"The queen fears for the health of the young prince, Baldur. He has been kept safe in the palace where there is currently no infection, but the disease spreads everyday. The king and queen cannot leave; they must be seen to be there for their people. But my queen wishes me to ask if you would take the child and care for him, until the land is free from contagion."

Odin didn't have to look at his queen to know what her answer would be. "Of course we will protect the child. Do you have him here?"

"Yes, my lord." Fritjof made a signal and a woman stepped forward, a baby in her arms. Frigga immediately stepped from her throne and reached for him.

Her face lit up in delight as she felt the weight of the small bundle in her arms. "Hello, Baldur."

The ambassador bowed. "You have the gratitude of all of Vanaheim."

Frigga looked up, her face shining. "It is no trouble at all. It has been too long since I held a baby. Tell your king and queen to have no fears; we will protect him as though he were our own."

---------

After the ambassador left, the queen continued to play with the child.

Odin looked at the small bundle. "He is a handsome baby. He reminds me of Thor at that age."

"There is a strong resemblance."

"The question now is - what to do with him?"

Frigga looked up, startled. "What do you mean?"

"We were about to leave for Midgard. Perhaps we could ask Angrboda to take care of him in our absence?"

"Angrboda? Of course not! I will look after him myself. He is far too precious to be left in the care of a servant."

"Do you plan to take him with us?"
"No. Midgard is too dangerous. I should not wish to risk the child in such a place. We will cancel the trip - it wasn't important."

Odin hesitated. "I think Loki was looking forward to it."

"He will understand. We can't leave this poor child with no-one to care for him."

Odin nodded. "As you wish. I will let them know."

-------------

Thor had thought Loki was excited the previous night, but at least he had been tired as well. Today, his energy was at its highest peak and he was practically bouncing in his excitement.

"Do you think it will be much longer?" he asked for the twentieth time.

"No, I do not. Although the time will go no faster if you keep asking me that question."

"Do you think…"

"Yes, I think you have everything you need and you do not need to check your bag again. Seriously, Loki, please - sit down for a minute."

Obediently, Loki sat beside his brother. He began to bite his fingernails.

"And stop that! You know Mother dislikes it when your nails are torn and ugly."

Loki pulled his hands away from his mouth and rested them on his bag, where the fingernails tapped restlessly.

Thor rubbed his temples. It was too early for this amount of energy. "Loki, sit on your hands."

Loki looked up in surprise. "What?"

Thor reached over and pulled Loki's hands from his lap. "Sit on them or I will sit on you."

Grinning, Loki sat on his hands. "Better?"

"Much."

"Do you think…"

"If you are about to ask me if it will be much longer, I will throw you in the fountain."

Loki began to jiggle his feet.

Thor sighed. "How would it be if I told you about Midgard?"

Loki beamed. "I would like that."

"Fine. Well, when I visited it last, the civilization was quite primitive - they have no magic at all. The land itself is beautiful, with large bodies of water and green fields. Everyone was talking about a religion they have, called ‘Christianity’; although many worship us as gods."

"Us?"

"Yes. They live very short lifespans. To them, our powers and longevity make us gods. There were
"What about me?"

Thor grinned and ruffled Loki’s hair. "No, there were no statues for you. They had not yet heard of you, you had only just been born! You were only," he held his hands to indicate a tiny space, "this big. No-one could make a statue that small!"

Loki jumped up, indignant. "I was bigger than that!"

"No, I don't think so. In fact - now that I think about it - you may have been even smaller." He moved his hands even closer. "Perhaps that is closer to your size."

"It is not!"

Loki launched himself at his brother and they wrestled together for a few minutes, Loki throwing tiny punches that Thor could easily deflect.

Eventually, Thor shouted, "Enough! I yield! You have defeated me!"

Loki pulled back, both of them laughing. They were interrupted by the opening of the door.

Odin smiled to see the two boys laughing together, but his smile died as he saw Loki leap up in excitement.

"Is it time to leave?" Without waiting for an answer, Loki grabbed his bag and tidied his hair with his fingers.

Odin walked over and sat on the bed. He motioned for Loki to sit beside him.

Thor felt his heart sink. He knew that look.

"My sons, I have sad news. I am afraid we must cancel our trip."

Loki froze, unable to speak, so it was Thor that asked, "What has happened?"

"There is a plague in Vanaheim. The king and queen have asked us to take care of their son while the sickness is a danger, and we have agreed. We discussed it, and your mother thinks Midgard too savage a place for such a young child."

Loki frowned. "But why would we take him with us? Can't we leave him here and get someone else to look after him?" Loki deliberately didn't say Angrboda’s name. Angrboda's job was to look after him. He didn't think she would like to look after anyone else.

Odin shook his head. "No, Loki. Your mother would worry too much about leaving such a young child with anyone else."

Thor shot his father a sharp look. He knew that Baldur was older than Loki had been when they had left on their progress, all those years ago.

"So what are we going to do? Will we travel somewhere else instead?" Thor hoped they had only changed the destination. He couldn't stand to see the look on Loki’s face. His brother had been so excited about his first trip, and now it had been cancelled.

But Odin shook his head. "No. She feels Baldur will be safest here in the palace in her care." He turned to Loki. "I am sorry for your disappointment, but I am sure you understand."
Loki worked hard to keep his face blank. He wanted to cry, to scream, to shout, ‘NO! I don't understand at all!’ He had been so looking forward to this trip, and they had just cancelled it for a child that wasn't even a part of their family! He wanted to wail at the top of his lungs, his disappointment was so great.

He said, "Yes, Father. I understand." He was proud of his voice. It had no emotion in it at all.

"Good, I knew you would. Well, I will leave you now. Do not worry, there will be other trips."

"Yes, Father." Of course there wouldn't be. Odin had already broken his word once, why would Loki believe him ever again?

"It is a fine day. Perhaps you could go riding instead." Odin turned and left the room, pleased that Loki had taken it so well.

Loki went back to the bed and picked up his bag. He couldn't stand the pity he saw on his brother's face.

"Loki…"

"I'm going to unpack."

"Loki…" Thor didn't know what to say. Loki's disappointment was clear and he looked like he was fighting to stay calm. Perhaps it would be better if he gave his brother a little time to himself. "I will see you later?"

Loki kept his back to his brother as he nodded. "Perhaps."

He went back to his room. He would not cry.

He began to unpack everything from his bag and return his things to drawers and hangers. When he was finished, he stared at the bag. He didn't have a place for it; he had never needed one before.

Well, he thought in sudden fury, he certainly didn't need one now!

Snatching up the bag, he ran to the window and tossed it out with all the force he could. It didn't help. The bag floated away gently, carried by the wind.

Loki pointed his hands in a sudden show of power and focused everything he had towards it. The bag exploded in mid-air and he saw people below look up in sudden shock as they ducked away from the burning fragments.

Well, what did he care? They didn't care anything for him, why should he care for anyone else?

Chapter End Notes

As I said, SO sorry about that. I genuinely planned a happy, fluffy Midgardian moment, but then the ambassador turned up and events got away from me. Apparently, happy, fluffy moments are not my forte.

Loki will get to Earth. Just not today.
Also, just a few thoughts that have no bearing on the story: I think it’s logical to assume Asgardians age at a slower rate. So - using the same figures as before, and dividing Loki’s Asgardian age (1053) by his Earth age (16.6), then one Asgardian year would be the equivalent of 63.4 earth years (and I thought going through adolescence on Earth was bad enough!). Anyway, I imagine Asgardians mature the same way as Earthlings, just a lot slower.

Don’t know why I added that, I’m just rambling.
Thor was doing his best to hold his tongue, but he was becoming increasingly angry with his mother.

It was bad enough that she had thoughtlessly cancelled the family trip Loki had been so excited about; but, to add insult to injury, it was clear that she doted on Baldur.

Thor remembered her fussing over him, but he had assumed that she had changed over the years. He believed Frigga had spoiled him because she had been younger, and because he bore the distinction of being the first born and the heir. He thought perhaps Loki was treated differently because he was the second child, and they didn’t feel the same sense of novelty and excitement.

But, seeing Frigga now, Thor found himself puzzled and shocked by her behavior.

She held Baldur whenever she could, and insisted on feeding him and bathing him herself. Thor even found her sewing clothes for him.

She wanted the baby beside her always. She even insisted on a cot beside her bed, so she could watch over him as he slept. Loki had been relegated to the royal nursery, and she had hardly ever visited him there, but Baldur couldn't be out of her sight for a moment.

Thor could see that he wasn't the only one puzzled by that.

Frigga's treatment of Baldur was so completely different from the way she had behaved with Loki that surely he must have noticed. There was no way he could not.

But Loki hadn't spoken of it, and Thor wasn't sure what to do. He could see his brother changing; his normally happy countenance becoming resentful and angry. Loki was quickly becoming known for his sharp tongue and quick put-downs.

Thor couldn't blame him, but he missed his sweet, trusting little brother.

There had to be something he could do.

--------

A few weeks after Baldur’s arrival, Thor and Loki decided to join their mother for afternoon tea in the garden.

As they approached, they saw Frigga playing with Baldur on the lawn. She was making cooing noises and tickling his feet, and they were both laughing..

Thor heard Loki make a little sound of disgust.

"It doesn't look as though we’ll find any intelligent conversation here. I'm going to my room."

Thor was sure he heard Loki mutter something about ‘vomiting up everything he’d eaten that week if
he stayed a minute longer’.

Thor sat on the grass beside Baldr. "Hello, Mother."

"Hello, Thor. See, Baldr, it's Thor! Can you give a little wave? Can you?" She waved to demonstrate.

Thor could see why Loki left. They were not used to seeing Frigga like this. Thor couldn't deny that it was annoying. "Loki went back to his room."

"Oh, did he?" She continued to wave to the baby, making him smile and laugh.

"Yes. He was going to join us for tea."

"Oh. That’s nice." She obviously hadn’t been listening to him.

"Mother!"

Startled, Frigga looked up.

"Mother, can you not see how this looks to Loki? To EVERYONE?"

Her face was a blank. "How what looks?"

"THIS! Mother, you barely spent any time with Loki when he was a baby, and now you're fawning over this child as though he was perfection itself! Can you not imagine how Loki must be feeling?"

Frigga turned back to the baby. “Thor, don't be so silly. I spent plenty of time with Loki as a baby, he just doesn't remember. Besides, I am taking care of this child for our friends in Vanaheim. His well-being is a matter of state. I am doing this for Asgard."

She bent down to the child, and spoke in a nauseatingly babyish tone, "I am, aren't I? Aren’t I?"

Thor gave up and wandered back to the palace. The idea of approaching Odin with such a matter was laughable, but Thor felt he had to talk to someone. He couldn't bear the thought of his wonderful little brother becoming so bitter.

---------

He made a sudden decision and headed down to the kitchens. Even though Loki often came down here, Thor never did, and he had to stop a few times to find his way.

When he opened the kitchen door, he was greeted by a shocked silence. There was a huge scraping of chairs, as everyone fell to their knees in homage.

He flushed. "Please rise. It was not my intention to disturb you. I was looking for… ah!"

Angrboda stepped through the door and froze in surprise. Then she, too, sank to her knees. It saddened Thor, to see that the woman that raised his baby brother still felt she needed to bow to him.

"Please, Angrboda, rise. I am sorry to disturb you, but I wondered if I might speak with you?"

"Of course, my lord."

Thor looked around at the watching servants. It was clear that no-one knew what to do. "Perhaps we could talk outside?"
"Of course, my lord."

They stepped outside the room, Thor letting the door swing behind him.

He wasn't sure how to begin. "It's about Loki."

"Is he alright? Does he need me?" Angrboda looked ready to run to Loki’s side immediately.

Thor felt a pang when he saw that. Why couldn’t his own mother show that much concern for Loki? Frigga had quickly dismissed Thor’s concerns, but Angrboda looked ready to defend Loki against every evil.

"No. That is, yes. That is… I think so." Thor threw up his hands. "I don't know what to do."

"My lord?"

"It's just… well… It's about my mother and Baldur."

"Oh." He saw her face close off, as if she didn't want her feelings to show.

"I am worried that Loki may feel… under appreciated."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I think he does."

"Oh. So you agree?"

"Yes."

"So… what can we do to help?"

"Honestly? Nothing. His mother is clear in her devotion to Prince Baldur. Nothing we can do will make that better for Loki. All we can do is make sure he knows how much we love and value him."

"Will that be enough?" Thor sounded doubtful.

Angrboda shrugged. "I hope so."

Thor was irritated. He wanted answers, wanted someone to tell him how to make things better for his brother; Angrboda didn't seem to know any more than he did.

He couldn't help but let his annoyance show. "I had hoped you would be able to give me better advice than ‘be nice to him’."

Angrboda felt her temper flare. "Well, I'm sorry, I don't know any more than you do! I don't have that much experience with mothers that don't like their children!"

She clapped her hand over her mouth as she realized what she’d said. "My lord, I'm sorry!"

He stared at her shocked. Did she really believe that? "Of course my mother likes Loki! She loves him very much!"

A movement caught his eye, and Thor realized that the door hadn’t closed behind him. He saw the looks the servants were exchanging; it was obvious that they all agreed with Angrboda.
Thor felt a sudden need to defend his mother. “She loves him very much,” he repeated.

Angrboda lowered her head. “Yes, my lord. Of course. I am sorry, I spoke without thinking. I meant no offence.”

Thor turned on his heel and walked away, thinking about what she had said. He was sure that Frigga loved Loki. Of course he was sure. Anything else was unthinkable.

But if Angrboda and all the servants believed otherwise… then what did Loki think?

He decided to find out for himself.

----------

Loki was in his room. He didn't look up from his book as Thor walked in. "I thought you were having tea with our mother and the Crown Prince of Vanaheim."

"I changed my mind."

"Really? How could you tear yourself away? I imagine the conversation was fascinating."

"Loki. She is just enjoying having a baby to fuss over. It doesn't mean she loves us any less."

"I'm sure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I don't believe she loves us any less than before."

Thor tried to puzzle out what his brother was saying. There seemed to be a hidden subtext to Loki's words that he was missing.

He decided to try another approach. "You know, Baldur is really quite an agreeable baby. I think if you spent a little time with him, you might grow to like him."

"I fail to see how that could be possible. It's not as though he actually does anything."

"He does lots of things. He laughs and smiles, and it's fun to see his face light up when you play with him."

Loki gave a little huff.

"Trust me, Loki. Babies are very sweet at that age. You were."

He thought back wistfully. Loki had been a very lovely child, always smiling happily on the few occasions that Thor had visited him. Not for the first time, Thor wished he had spent more time with Loki when he was a baby.

As if following his thoughts, Loki said, "How would you know? When I was his age, you were all in Alfheim. Or was it Vanaheim? I forget."

Thor didn't know what to say. It was true. Loki had been much younger than Baldur when they had left him alone as they traveled through the realms.

Thor gave the only answer he could. "I remember you very well. You were beautiful. You had a shock of dark hair and long eyelashes, and whenever you saw me you would smile."
He sat beside his brother and pulled him closer. He was pleased that Loki didn't resist.

"I was sad that I couldn't be here to spend more time with you. I asked all the mothers I met about their babies and would try to imagine what you would be doing."

He saw that Loki was listening intently, so he continued. "I wanted your first word to be 'Thor' and I wanted your first steps to be walking towards me. I was sorry to miss all of those moments. I remember coming back and seeing you again. It was like meeting you for the first time. You had grown up while we were gone and I had missed it all."

He brushed a hand over his brother's hair and Loki leaned in to his touch. "Even now, it seems that you are growing up so quickly. I am constantly torn between missing the child you were and enjoying the person you are becoming. Perhaps I should tell you more often how glad I am that you are my brother."

Loki looked up at him with shining eyes. "Truly?"

"Truly."

Loki looked away to hide his emotions, but he didn’t move from his brother’s arms. "Alright. Perhaps I’ll go and visit our royal guest and see what all the fuss is about."

----------

The next day, Thor and Loki once again joined their mother for tea in the gardens. This time, Loki made a deliberate attempt to pay attention to the baby.

For an hour or so, he made cooing noises and played peek-a-boo while he watched the baby smile and laugh.

When the time came for them to leave, he could honestly say that he couldn't see what all the fuss was about.

He was right the first time; babies were very dull.
The Poisoning of A Prince

Chapter Notes

Warning! - This chapter contains descriptions of a baby with a life threatening sickness, and may upset some people (is there a tag for that???).

Frigga had been glad to see Loki playing with Baldur. She knew that Thor must have been wrong when he confronted her earlier. Of course Loki didn’t mind her spending time with Baldur. When Loki had been a baby, she had spent plenty of time with him.

Of course she had.

She must have...

Of course, it was right after the war, and they had to take a trip through the realms, to show everybody that Odin was a strong and wise leader, and they had nothing to fear. They couldn’t have cancelled a trip like that, it was far too important. It wasn’t like cancelling a holiday on Midgard.

She thought about that.

Obviously, Loki would have seen how the situations were different. Taking care of a foreign prince was an extremely important and delicate matter. Taking the baby to Midgard or leaving him in the care of anyone else would have been foolhardy and reckless. If Vanheim had found out about it, it could have caused serious repercussions. Loki must have understood that.

Frigga pulled Baldur onto her lap. He was a sturdy baby, very like Thor. She remembered the weight of Thor in her lap - solid… reassuring. She tried to remember how Loki had been and frowned with the effort of concentration.

She could remember holding him in her arms. He had been very light, she remembered. As light as snow.

She shivered.

She was used to it now, the coolness of his skin. No-one else ever seemed to make much of it. There were even days when she barely noticed at all.

Although…

She still didn’t really touch him that often. After ‘the incident’ (that was how she thought of it in her head), she had tried to be more demonstrative with him, but he always seemed to pull away. She thought that perhaps he wasn’t fond of physical affection… but now she considered it, he was happy enough to receive hugs from Angrboda and Thor. She had even seen Eir ruffle his hair and kiss his forehead…

So why was he happy to accept affection from everybody else but her? Loki was the one pulling away, not her.

But the more she held Baldur, the more she became aware of the gaps in her memories where Loki
should have been.

The weight of him on her lap; his laughter; his first words and first steps. She hadn’t even asked what his first words had been.

She thought about him now, as a boy.

Did she know anything more about him now than she had then? Did she know what he liked to eat, or what his favorite books were? She knew that Sigyn was his friend, but where did they play together and what did they like to do?

The more she considered it, the more she realized that there were only two things she really knew about him: he liked to read - and that was impossible to miss - and he must like the color green. Angrboda dressed him in green all the time, and she wouldn’t have done that if it hadn’t been Loki’s preference.

With a guilty pang, Frigga realized she already knew more about Baldur than she did about Loki. Baldur’s favorite food was stewed apples and his favorite toys were Loki’s old wooden blocks. He loved to be tickled and he didn’t like men with scratchy beards. Her rose scented perfume always made him sneeze. He loved being outside in the sunshine but hated cloudy days.

How could she know so much about a child that she had only known for a short time, but so little about a child she had claimed as her son?

She thought again of Thor’s words - ‘Can you not see how this looks to Loki? To EVERYONE?’.

She was becoming aware of how it looked to her, as well.

--------

Loki had been searching everywhere for Angrboda. He finally found her in the nursery. She was tidying the room while she watched Baldur playing on the floor. It was an achingly familiar sight.

Loki stood in the doorway, frozen with shock. "What are you doing?"

She looked up and smiled. "Oh, hello Loki! I was just tidying."

"No, I mean what are you doing with that?" He gestured angrily to Baldur.

Angrboda frowned. "Baldur," she said, stressing the name, "is a ‘he’, not a ‘that’.

"Alright, what are you doing with him?"

"Over the next few days, your mother has to host a delegation of elves, and they have requested that she leave the baby behind. She asked me to be one of the women assigned to his care during her absences."

"One of the women? How many are there?"

Angrboda cursed herself for the slip of the tongue and didn't meet his eyes. "Oh… a few."

They were both aware that Angrboda had been the only person tasked with taking care of Loki. Loki would have minded more, if there wasn't something else bothering him.

"Why did she ask you?"
"Might it be because I was hired to look after royal babies?"

"You were hired to look after ME!"

"Well, now you don’t need as much looking after."

"You said you wouldn't leave me until I didn't need you anymore!"

She reached out for his hands but he angrily crossed them in front of his chest.

"Loki, I'm not leaving you, I’m right here! I’ll still have plenty of time for you. I’m just taking care of Baldur for a short time while your mother is busy."

"But WHY? Why does it have to be you? You look after ME, not HIM! You PROMISED!"

"Loki, I'm still here for you whenever you need me."

"Fine, I need you now."

She sighed and rubbed at her temples. She had never known such a child for twisting words.

"Loki, you know I can’t leave right now. What's so important anyway?"

"Not me, evidently. Not as important as that… THING!" He whirled around in a fury and flew from the room, almost knocking over a couple of maids as he ran.

Why was everything more important than him? A trip to the other realms was more important, visiting ambassadors were more important, Sif and the Warriors Three were more important and now Baldur was more important.

He thought Angrboda was different. He thought he would always be first with Angrboda - or at least, second only to Sigyn.

But now it seemed that even she was choosing Baldur over him.

He wished Baldur had never come to Asgard.

---------

It was well past Loki’s bedtime when someone finally came along to take over for Angrboda.

She was too grateful to be relieved from duty to complain about the hour. When Loki was a baby, she had slept at palace; but once he’d moved out of the nursery, she had been able to return home to Sigyn every evening. Angrboda had been worried that everyone had forgotten that, and she would have to spend the night there.

But she was annoyed that she wouldn’t have a chance to put things right with Loki. She hated to think of Loki going to bed unhappy, but it was far too late to try and straighten things out now.

She would come in early tomorrow and talk to Loki before she started work.

---------

Loki expected Angrboda to come to find him after their argument. He stayed awake for hours waiting for her, but she never came.

He didn’t sleep that night. He lay in his bed and thought about how much he hated Baldur. He
hadn’t minded so much, being second place to Thor. Who could help loving Thor? But now it seemed he had been pushed back even further, behind Baldur.

Baldur, who had won over everybody.

Loki had really believed that Boda had loved him, but she hadn’t even come to see him after their fight.

She must not have loved him much after all.

--------

Angrboda’s plans to apologize to Loki were thwarted. As soon as she arrived the next day, she was promptly pulled into the nursery by one of the new nursery maids.

“I am so glad you’re here! Dagmar hasn’t shown up yet and I haven’t been able to leave. I haven’t had a bite to eat and neither has the prince.”

Angrboda silently cursed. She wanted to find Loki before she started work. “What about Urd? Wasn’t she supposed to be here by now?”

“Haven’t seen her all morning. I’d guess she’s in a dark hallway somewhere with her sweetheart.”

“But I have something I needed to do!” Angrboda tried one last protest. Honestly, what was the point of having a horde of women to look after the young prince, if none of them could be relied upon to even be there?

Nanna was already at the door, “And I need to eat and sleep! I’m sure someone will come along soon!”

--------

Angrboda looked up in relief when Loki appeared at the nursery door.

“Loki, I am glad to see you! I know we need to talk, but Baldur has been fussy all morning and no-one has come yet with his food. Would you watch him for a few minutes while I run to the kitchen and get him something? None of us will get any peace and quiet until he’s fed, and you and I can talk properly afterwards.” She didn’t wait for an answer, but quickly hurried from the room.

Loki glared after her, his anger flaring up again. He walked over to the cradle and peered inside. Baldur laughed at him, as if reveling in his victory.

“I hate you,” said Loki.

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True to her word, Angrboda returned as quickly as she could. She put the food on the table and lifted Baldur into the chair that had been Loki’s.

Loki scowled. “What are you doing now?”

“I told you, Loki. I need to feed him, he hasn’t had anything all morning.”

She dipped a spoon into the bowl and lifted it towards the baby. “Loki, I wanted to…”

It was too late. She could already hear his footsteps as he ran away from her.
It was one of the rare days when the royal family were all able to eat lunch together. The Elvish party had been called back to Alfheim a little earlier than they planned, leaving Odin and Frigga free. Frigga had decided to delay reclaiming Baldur, as she knew he would be sleeping.

They gathered in the small dining room. Thor told Odin about his weapons practice, while Frigga took the opportunity to ask Loki about his studies.

Loki’s bad temper was starting to disappear as his mother talked to him. It seemed like a very long time since anyone had paid him any attention.

Their peace was shattered when the door of the dining room flew open. Odin jumped to his feet and Thor grabbed a knife that had been lying on the table beside him.

The intruder didn't even notice. "Your Highnesses, Eir sent me to fetch you. Prince Baldur is gravely ill."

At his words, Frigga leapt from her seat and ran from the room, the rest of them following after her. "Where is he?"

"The healing rooms, my lady."

She flew inside and ran to Eir. "How is he?"

"It is not good. I am doing everything I can."

Odin put his arm around his wife's shoulders while Thor and Loki looked on. The king turned to Angrboda. "What happened?"

"We heard a noise. When I went to see if he was alright, I noticed he was foaming at the mouth and having difficulty breathing. Urd sent a guard to run for help, but the baby started having convulsions just before Eir arrived. Eir managed to stabilize him and brought him here."

Frigga clutched at Odin's robes. He put a hand over hers. "Eir will tell us when she can. Until then, we would all do well to let her work in peace."

He turned to his sons. "There is no need for you to be here. I will wait with your mother."

Thor put his hands on Loki's shoulder. "No, Father. We wouldn't leave you at a time like this. We will stay, won't we, Loki?"

Loki said nothing, but Thor took his silence for assent.

"Thank you, my boys." Odin turned back to Angrboda. "You may leave. We will inform you of any changes in Baldur's condition."

"Thank you, my king." She gave a small bow, but her eyes turned to Loki. She looked as if she was about to speak, but then thought better of it. "I will wait in the servants hall."

She continued to look at Loki, as if there was a deeper meaning in her words, but Loki didn’t respond. She bit her lip and hurried away as the royal family sat down to wait.

They seemed to wait forever.
Eventually, Eir came over to them. Frigga quickly got up to meet her and the others followed suit. "How is he?"

"I think he may pull through. We have done everything we can, and all we can do now is wait."

Frigga felt her head spin. Odin pushed his wife onto a chair while Eir motioned to one of her helpers. "Bring some wine for the queen."

He returned in a few moments and Odin held the glass to Frigga’s lips. After a minute or two, the color returned to her face. "I'm better now. I'm sorry."

"It's understandable."

Odin squeezed his wife's hand. "Eir, do you know what caused this sickness?"

There was no way to break it to them gently. "Baldur was poisoned."

They stared at her in shock. "Poisoned?"

"Yes." She opened her hand. "I found these in his crib."

They all looked at the remains of several sprigs of mistletoe, loosely tied with a piece of green thread. Odin reached out and picked up one of the twigs. Only one small leaf remained. "How did he get these?"

Eir shrugged. "That I cannot know. It seems impossible that he could have got them by accident."

Odin felt rage well up inside him. How could anyone want to hurt a defenseless baby?

He summoned a guard. "Tell General Tyr to question everyone that has been in contact with the babe. Have him work with the Lord Fritjof - the ambassador has abilities that can help with the investigation. I will not sleep until I know who has committed this heinous crime."
Turning Up The Heat

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long to post, I didn't mean to leave you all waiting (stuff came up)! I wanted to get it out today, so I rushed the editing. Please let me know if you find any mistakes!

Tyr marched purposefully towards the Vanaheim ambassador. He had no idea why the king had suggested they work together, but he would follow his king’s orders.

He bowed. “Lord Fritjof.”

Fritjof inclined his head in response. “General Tyr. I thank you for including me in your investigation. We are most anxious to find whoever has committed this horrific deed.”

“My king was insistent that we should work together. He said you have abilities that would prove helpful - may I ask what those would be?”

Fritjof smiled grimly. “I have the ability to read people’s emotions. I can detect guilt. I will know who is lying and who feels responsible for this deed.”

Tyr raised his eyebrows. A useful gift indeed.

Together, they interviewed every servant that had gone into the prince’s rooms that day.

Fritjof could detect no lies or deceit from any of them. As far as he could determine, every one of them was completely innocent.

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After a few hours, Baldur was considered to be out of danger and was moved back to the nursery. Frigga refused to leave his side and the rest of the family continued to wait with her.

After a little while, Loki found his eyes beginning to close. He tried to force them open; he felt guilty for wanting to sleep at such a time.

Thor moved his chair closer and pulled his brother closer to his side. “Sleep, brother. I will wake you if there are any developments.”

They sat silently until there was a knock on the door. Tyr bowed to his king. “My lord.”

"General Tyr. Have you found the culprit?"

Tyr looked uncomfortable. "Not yet, my lord, although Lord Fritjof was great help with the questioning. We were able to exonerate every servant that entered the prince’s room.”

Odin’s brow furrowed. "So you have questioned everyone that was in contact with the child?"

"Not yet, my lord.”"
"Why not?"

“There are only two people that we have not yet questioned. One is the queen and, of course, she is above suspicion.”

“And the other?"

“Was seen going to the woods early this morning and then going straight to the nursery. Witnesses say he was left alone with the child for some time.”

“So why have you not yet questioned him?”

“That is why I am here, my lord. It was Loki.”

Frigga turned sharply towards them and Thor gave a gasp. “Surely, you do not think my brother would have done this?”

He saw Frigga and Odin exchange a glance. It was no secret that Loki disliked Baldur, but to think that he would hurt the child?

"Loki would never hurt anyone! Mother, Father, how could you think such a thing?"

Odin shook his head. "I am sure that Loki would never intentionally hurt anyone, but he will be questioned just like everybody else. Please wake him."

Thor shook Loki awake. "Loki, General Tyr wants to ask you some questions."

Loki tried to focus his bleary eyes. Tyr towered over him. "Prince Loki, I believe you went to the nursery this morning. Can you tell me why?"

Loki yawned and rubbed his eyes. He was still half asleep. "I was looking for Boda."

"I believe you were left alone with Prince Baldur for some minutes."

"Yes, Boda said she needed to get his food…” he broke off and his eyes widened. He straightened up in his chair. "You think I poisoned Baldur?"

"Heimdall heard you say that you hated Baldur, is that correct?"

Loki was suddenly afraid. There was no point trying to deny it, if Heimdall had heard it. "Well… yes, I did, but…"

"What did you do when Angrboda left you alone with Baldur?"

"Nothing! I didn't do anything!"

"Heimdall said you were standing over the cradle."

"Yes… but I didn't do anything! I didn’t hurt him!"

They all knew him well enough to know when he was lying, and the last statement had clearly been a lie.

Thor looked at him sadly and Loki’s heart plummeted. "You think I did this?"

Odin stood up. "I think it would be better if we took this conversation to another room. Loki, come
Loki shook his head. "No, you have to believe me! I didn't do it!"

"I said, we will discuss this elsewhere." Odin reached for Loki but the boy pulled away.

"No, I won't!"

Odin's face hardened. He didn't like his orders being disobeyed, much less by his own children, and in front of people he respected. "General Tyr, if you would."

Tyr took Loki's arm and began to pull him from the room.

Loki pulled back. "Thor! Please!"

Thor shook his head. "Go with them and answer their questions, Loki. If you are truly innocent, as you say, then you have nothing to fear."

The blood drained from Loki's face at Thor's words and he let himself be led away.

Thor watched them leave, a sick feeling in his stomach. He, like everybody else, had heard the lie when Loki said he hadn't hurt Baldur.

He couldn't believe Loki would have deliberately tried to kill Baldur, but perhaps Loki hadn’t known how poisonous mistletoe was? Perhaps, in his jealousy, Loki had wanted to make the baby sick and nothing more. Thor and Loki occasionally got into fights that got a little out of control, and Loki's temper could sometimes get the better of him. Thor hoped it was nothing worse than that.

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Once outside the nursery, Tyr turned to the king. "Where should we go, my lord?"

Odin raised an eyebrow. "Where do you usually interrogate people?"

“The dungeons, sir, but since this is the prince..."

Odin’s face darkened “If the ambassador of Vanahem thinks this is a crime perpetrated by the royal family of Asgard, it will be war. The prince must be seen to receive no special treatment in this matter. You will treat him as any other suspect. Take him to the dungeons."

---------

Tyr issued quick instructions to his guard, who hurried quickly away. Tyr slowly followed with Loki. He kept a firm grasp of Loki’s arm as he led the boy down to the dungeons. The detention block had been purposefully designed so that a suspect would have to brave the gauntlet of the cells before his inquisition.

Loki tried not to look as the prisoners of Asgard screamed obscenities at them, and Tyr took his time dragging the boy to the interrogation room.

Once there, Tyr raised an eyebrow and the guard nodded. Tyr pushed Loki inside.

The room was stifling; the guard had done well. Heimdall had suggested that Tyr should heat the interrogation room. Apparently, Loki had a low tolerance for the heat, and it would make questioning him easier.
Loki was sick with fear but trying his best to hide it. His expression was defensive and muleish, and he crossed his arms across his chest.

Tyr smiled grimly. Loki was not the first reluctant suspect Tyr had dealt with, and the boy was a fool if he thought he would be able to keep anything from General Tyr. Tyr knew well how to break stronger criminals than this child.

“I will be back shortly.” He left, locking the door behind him, and motioned to the guard to wait outside.

After half an hour or so, Tyr decided to return. He noticed that the boy was already beginning to sweat. “So… Loki. Are you ready to tell us the truth now?”

Loki’s mouth was dry and his head was muzzy from the heat. “May I have some water, please?”

“Perhaps once you start talking.”

“But I was telling the truth! I didn’t do anything!”

“You expect us to believe that? Everyone else that was in contact with the child has been questioned. They were all found to be innocent. Everyone except you, a boy that was alone with the child for several minutes and has admitted that he hates the child!”

Frustrated tears began to run down Loki’s cheeks. He couldn’t remember the last time he was so scared. “It wasn’t me!”

“Indeed. Tell me, Loki - what did you do this morning?”

“I…” Loki stopped. It wouldn’t do to give Tyr even more ammunition against him. “I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember? You expect me to believe that you don’t remember what you did this morning?”

Loki faltered. “No, I… I…” he swallowed down his panic. “I went to the library,” he said desperately.

Tyr raised an eyebrow. “Did you? Did anyone see you?”

“No, I don’t think so. I was in a quiet area, there was no-one else there.”

“Really? Are you sure about that?”

Loki faltered. The library was usually quiet at that time, but of course, he couldn’t be sure. “I think so.”

Tyr smiled. “Luckily, there is no need to check. Do you want to know why?”

Loki didn’t answer. He felt sick.

“There is no need to check because Heimdall and several other people saw you coming back from the woods this morning.”

Loki felt the color drain from his face.

“Would you like to tell me what you were doing there?”
Loki’s voice was barely a whisper. “I went for a walk.”

“A walk? I see. Just an innocent walk in the woods, before anyone else is awake.”

“Yes.”

“Then why lie about it? Why not tell the truth?”

“Because you wouldn’t believe me!”

Tyr gave another twisted smile. “Well, you are right about that. You walked in the woods this morning, so you had the opportunity to gather the mistletoe. You were left alone with the prince and you wanted him gone, didn’t you?”

“I… I…” It was too hot, Loki couldn’t think of the right thing to say.

Tyr pushed his face close to Loki’s. Loki could smell his breath in his face. “You were lying earlier when you said you hadn’t hurt him. You wanted him gone, didn’t you?”

“No, I…”

“YOU WANTED HIM GONE, DIDN’T YOU?”

“Yes, but I didn’t… I wouldn’t…”

Tyr stepped outside and spoke a few words to the guard. He came back after less than a minute. “Are you ready to confess?”

“No!”

Tyr considered for a moment. “Very well.”

Loki looked at him hopefully. “You believe me?”

“No. But I’m not going to sit here and wait for you to stop playing games.” He stood up and walked to the door. “I’m going to leave you here to think about what you’ve done. If you’re ready to confess, have the guard call me.”

And with that, he left. On his way out, he told the guard, “Turn up the heat.”

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Tyr returned three hours later.

Loki looked terrible; he was sweating profusely. His cheeks were red on his pale face and his lips looked dry and chapped. Tyr raised an eyebrow. It wasn’t that hot in there; Heimdall was right, Loki really didn’t handle heat well.

Loki looked up desperately as Tyr came in. “Please…”

Tyr winced; the boy’s voice sounded pitiful.

“Please may I have some water?”

“Are you ready to confess?”

He frowned for a minute, as if he was confused. “I…I didn’t…”
Tyr crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “If you aren’t going to talk, you don’t need any water!”

Tyr felt a wave of disgust. By now, it was definitely hot in the room, but no more than any Aesir should be able to stand. He wondered how a child of Odin could be so weak.

But he had to admit, the boy was holding out longer than he’d thought. He didn’t doubt for a minute that the boy was guilty. Everyone else had been exonerated, there was no-one else it could have been. And then, when you added all of the evidence... he just needed to know how to make Loki confess. Then he realized; he had one last card to play.

“We have to find a guilty party to present to Vanaheim. If you are indeed innocent, then we must conclude that the perpetrator was Angrboda.”

Loki’s head shot up, startled. “Boda?”

“The child was in Angrboda’s care at the time, therefore she was responsible for his well-being. She either poisoned him, or let someone poison him while he was in her care. Either way, it amounts to the same. If we do not find the true culprit, then she must take the blame.”

“No...”

“It is Angrboda, or it is war. Your father will not choose war.”

Tyr watched him, saying nothing. The boy was tired, thirsty and hot, and seemed to be finding it hard to concentrate.

Loki stared at Tyr for a long time. “Alright.”

Tyr raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“I confess.”
Viscum Album

Tyr stepped outside to speak to the guard and returned a few minutes later with a glass of water. Loki grabbed it from him and drank it within seconds. Tyr rolled his eyes and sent the guard to turn down the heat and fetch another glass.

They sat in silence until Lord Fritjof arrived.

Tyr stood to greet him. “Lord Fritjof, I have our poisoner.”

The ambassador stared, stunned. “This child? The king’s son?”

“The king has commanded that he be treated as any other criminal in this matter.”

“But I know him. I cannot believe that he would do such a thing.”

“He has confessed. But you can ask him for yourself.”

Fritjof sat down and reached out for the boy. “Loki, give me your hands.”

Loki did so. They were ice cold and shaking, but it looked as though the boy had been sweating heavily. Fritjof shook his head. Sweating was a common sign of a guilty conscience.

He tried to think of some words of comfort, but if the boy had committed this evil act, there were no words that would help him. “Loki, do you truly confess to this crime?”

Loki’s eyes looked dull and red from crying. “Yes, my lord.”

“I need you to say the words.”

Loki looked confused for a minute. “The words?”

“You need to tell me that you confess.”

“Oh. Yes, I do.”

“I need you to say the words, I confess.”

“Yes, I’ve said so already! Please, can I go now?”

There was a whining tone to his voice that reminded Fritjof of his own children when they were being punished for something.

Fritjof was surprised at the boy’s attitude; Loki was confessing to the attempted murder of a baby - a foreign prince, no less - but he was acting like a petulant child. He looked as though he barely cared what was happening.

Fritjof gave up on trying to get him to say the words; Loki was obviously trying to be as difficult as possible. Fritjof decided to try another tack. “Why did you do it?”

Loki sighed wearily. “I was jealous of him. I hated him and wanted him to go away.”

There was no doubting that statement. The ambassador could feel a roller-coaster of emotions from the boy, and guilt was certainly one of them.
Tyr leaned closer. “Well?”

“As far as I can tell, the boy is telling the truth.”

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Tyr nodded, satisfied and motioned to the guard. “Take Prince Loki to a cell. I will tell his parents.”

The guard reached out to take Loki’s arm and Loki jumped in surprise; it almost looked as though he had forgotten the man was there. He stood obediently and allowed the guard to lead him out.

Fritjof frowned. “He seems a little confused.”

“I think he believed he was safe, being the king’s son. It took him a long time to confess.”

“I would never have believed it of him.”

“No. It is shocking to think that someone so young could do something so evil.”

“Indeed.”

“May I ask, how is Prince Baldur?”

“It has been a worrying time, but your healer - Eir, is it? - thinks that he will pull through. We have yet to see if there will be any ill effects from this. What of your prince? What will happen to him?”

“That is for Odin to decide. But he wishes you to know that Prince Loki will receive no special treatment - he will be treated as any other prisoner.”

Despite everything the boy had done, Fritjof felt sick at the thought of such a young child locked away in Asgard’s dungeons. He didn’t want to think about what kind of punishment was awaiting the boy.

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Another person that didn’t want to think of Loki’s punishment was Odin.

When Tyr told him the boy had confessed, his heart sank. He hoped there might yet be someone or something they may have overlooked; perhaps Eir had made a mistake and the child hadn’t been poisoned, or perhaps someone snuck in unobserved.

But Loki’s confession removed all doubt, and left Odin with the unpleasant task of having to punish his son for attempted murder.

It was not, of course, the first time that Odin had to do such a thing, but at least Hela had been an adult, old enough to accept responsibility for her actions. Loki was still a child, not long out of the nursery. The usual punishments seemed far too brutal for a child of such a tender age.

He had to do something, that much was clear. The king and queen of Vanaheim would not be happy to hear that their son’s poisoner would pay no penalty for his actions. If Odin and Frigga tried to make excuses because of the boy’s tender age, they would simply point out that the child that was wronged was far younger.

It didn’t help that Loki always seemed such a fragile child. If he was strong and tall like Thor, it wouldn’t feel so wrong.
But Loki seemed fragile in other ways, too. His emotions always played so clearly on his face.

Odin let his head fall and he rubbed tired eyes. There were times - increasingly more as he got older - when he wished he wasn’t the king, but merely a man living a quiet life with his family around him.

He felt the Odinsleep creeping closer. It had been far too long this time. Loki would probably not even remember it.

Loki.

What was he to do about his wayward son?

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Frigga was still sitting vigil at Baldur’s cradle when she heard Odin approach.

She thought he sounded tired, and a glance at his face confirmed it.

“You should sleep, husband.”

“As should you, yet here we are.”

“I cannot sleep until I see the child wake up.”

“How is he?”

“I believe he is recovering, but we cannot be sure yet.”

Odin nodded and sat beside her. “I have some…” he tired to think of a word - unpleasant? Disturbing? Shocking? - “I have some news. It will be upsetting for you.”

She stilled. “Loki?”

“The boy has confessed.”

Her hands flew to her mouth. “No!”

“I am afraid it is so. General Tyr heard the confession himself and Lord Fritjof confirmed the boy’s guilt.”

She stared at him helplessly. “I would not have believed it. Despite his heritage, he has always been such a gentle child. Why would he do such a thing?”

“Apparently, he was jealous of the young prince.”

“Jealous!” Her thoughts raced. Wasn’t that what Thor had tried to tell her? That Loki was jealous of the attention they were paying to child, attention that he himself had never received?

She felt a wave of guilt wash over her. This was her fault as well. She had been neglectful of Loki and careless of Thor’s warnings, but she could never have imagined this. “May I see him?”

“You know that no visitors are allowed in the dungeons.”

Her eyes widened with shock. “The dungeons? You are keeping him in the dungeons?”

“He has committed a crime. Where else would he be?”
“I thought he might be held in his rooms.”

“He is being detained for attempted murder. This is no childish mischief.”

“But he just a child!”

“His crime is not a childish one. The people will expect him to be punished for this, he cannot be treated any differently.”

“But the dungeons…” She had only been there once or twice in her life, and always with an escort of guards. “It is no place for a boy like Loki.”

Odin sighed. “There are no boys like Loki. We must keep him in the dungeons until we decide what we are to do with him.”

“And what is that?”

“He must be punished, my love. Vanaheim will want to know something has been done.”

She thought of Loki, so small and fragile. “But he is just a child...”

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Odin had only just left the room, when the door flew open and Angrboda rushed inside. “My queen… They are saying terrible things about Loki… they are saying… saying…” she didn’t seem to be able to say the words aloud.

“Loki has confessed to poisoning Prince Baldur.”

“He didn’t do it!”

Frigga felt her heart leap. “You know something?”

“I know Loki. He wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“He said he was jealous.”

“Certainly he was jealous. He was angry and sulky and bad-tempered because of it. He wasn’t murderous! May I see him?”

Frigga shook her head. “The king has forbidden visitors.”

She was horrified to see Angrboda kneel before her. “Please, my lady, let me see him! I know I can make this right. Please, I am begging you!”

“Angrboda, do not kneel before me. I would visit him too, if it were possible. I cannot act against my king’s orders, though he is my husband. He will not - he cannot - give way on this. You must understand. The peace of the nine realms depends on how we act now. Vanaheim must see that Loki is being punished for his actions.”

Angrboda stayed on her knees. She looked completely hopeless. “At least tell me where is being held.”

“He is in the dungeons.”

“Enough, Angrboda. You must accept that there is nothing you can do. You should leave me now.”

Angrboda gave her the smallest of curtsies and whirled from the room. She headed for the throne room. If the queen couldn’t help her, she would speak to the king himself; and if that didn’t work, she would tear the palace apart until she found her boy.

----------

Frigga hadn’t been entirely truthful with Angrboda; there was one more thing she could do. She settled herself and sent a projection into Loki’s cell.

At first, she couldn’t see him and she thought perhaps she had made a mistake. Surely, the cell was empty.

Then she heard a sound from beside the bed. The bed wasn’t pushed against the wall, as she had originally believed; it had been moved so there was a gap between. She peered around; Loki was sitting on the floor, his arms around his knees. He looked very young.

“Mother?” He looked up in surprise. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

She lowered herself to the floor in front of him. “I’m not really here, and I’m invisible to all but you. It’s a projection, I’m afraid I can’t touch you.”

For a moment, his curiosity took over. “A projection? You can do that too?”

How did he not even known that about her? “Yes. Like you, it’s one of the first things I learned.”

“Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you, to make sure that you were... alright.” She faltered on the last word. It was clear he was anything but.

He studied her for a moment. “I didn’t think you’d want to see me again.”

“You’re my son. Of course I wanted to see you.”

She had the feeling he didn’t believe her.

After a few moments, he asked, “Is he alright?”

She didn’t need to ask who he meant. “Baldur’s going to pull through. We don’t know yet if they’ll be any lasting effects.”

He nodded. “How is Angrboda?”

Frigga felt an unreasonable pang of jealousy. “She doesn’t believe you did it. She wants to see you.”

Surprisingly, that made him smile. Then he frowned. “She can’t come down here, can she? I’d worry about her, the other prisoners, they shout nasty words and do rude things.”

Frigga looked up and saw the other prisoners surrounding Loki’s cell. They were shockingly close. Some of them were fighting and some were making lewd gestures to prisoners in other cells. Some of them were even... oh! She quickly pulled her eyes away. She felt sick at the thought of Loki being exposed to that.

“Has anyone bothered you?”
He eyes slid away from her. “I’m alright.”

Frigga sighed. She was so far out of her depth here. She wished she knew what to do. She wished she shared Angrboda’s certainty that Loki was innocent, but she couldn’t. Thor had warned her that Loki was jealous and Loki had admitted it. Loki had motive and opportunity. Everyone had been cleared except for Loki, and Fritjof said that he believed Loki’s confession.

“Do you need anything? Is there something I could get for you?”

Loki looked up hopefully. “Could I have something to read?”

She gave a small smile. “I think I can arrange that. Anything else?”

“Could you tell Angrboda that I’m sorry and I miss her?”

Angrboda again. Frigga fought down a stab of annoyance. “I’ll tell her. I should go now.” In a moment of forgetfulness, she reached for him and the illusion faded.

She stood purposefully and headed to Loki’s room to find some books.

--------

Loki was surprised when a guard arrived in his cell a little later. He waited, trying to suppress his nervousness.

The guard tried to maintain his distance, but he hated this. It didn’t matter to him whether it was a prince or not; this was a child that clearly shouldn’t be in a place like this. At least he could take some satisfaction in his errand. “The queen has requested we move you to a different cell.”

Loki nodded, his eyes round as saucers. He followed the guard, trying to keep his eyes averted from the other prisoners.

The guard led him to a cell much farther away from the rest. “This should suit you better. Bit more private.”

Loki stepped inside gratefully. “Thank you.”

The guard sniffed. “No problem. Should’ve been put here in the first place. Oh, and she asked me to give you these.”

He reached for a bag over his shoulder and pulled out a stack of books. Loki could have wept at the sight of them. They looked so familiar and comforting.

The guard tried not to notice the young prince’s reaction. He found it hard to believe this child could have hurt anyone. “You got everything you need?”

Loki was clutching a book to his chest. “Yes. Thank you.”

The guard turned and left.

Sometimes, he hated his job.

--------

While Frigga was visiting Loki, Odin realized there was one more person that still needed to be told.
Thor was in his room, alone. Odin didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. It might have been better if his friends had been there to help him deal with the news.

“Thor.”

“Father. Is there any news?”

Odin sat heavily. He would have given much not to do this. “Loki has confessed to poisoning Baldur.”

Thor opened his mouth and closed it again. He couldn’t think of anything to say. He couldn’t believe Loki would do such a thing, and yet he’d known how jealous his brother had been.

“What will happen to him?”

“I don’t know yet. He will have to be punished, and Vanaheim will expect us to treat this matter seriously.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the dungeons.” Odin waited for Thor to ask to see him, but he didn’t.

Thor didn’t know what to think. He couldn’t believe it, but Loki wouldn’t have confessed if it wasn’t true.

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Fritjof and Frigga were sitting beside Baldur’s cradle. Frigga hadn’t left the baby’s side. She had not been there when he was taken ill; she would not leave him again.

“Eir examined him this morning. She said that he is out of danger now.”

Frigga gave a weak smile. “I know. I played with him a little this morning and he seems much better, but I still regret that he suffered so.”

“I, too, am sorry about your boy.”

She turned watery eyes on him. “It’s just that…”

Before she could continue, they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Frigga wiped her eyes and called, “Enter.”

A nursemaid appeared, holding a large pile of bed linens. She gave a deep curtsy.

“What is it, Urd?”

“I’ve come to change the prince’s bed linens, my lady.”

“Of course. Please carry on.”

Fritjof and Frigga began to talk about less weighted subjects. To Fritjof’s surprise, the queen didn’t take Baldur from the nurserymaid, but allowed her to pick him and put him down on the floor to play.

Suddenly, Fritjof’s eyes widened and he rushed to snatch something from the child’s hand.
Frigga couldn’t see what it was, but Lord Fritjof held it out to Urd. “I believe this is yours!”

There was something in his tone - was he angry? Upset? Frigga couldn’t tell.

Urd didn’t pick up on it, but simply gave a little laugh. “Thank you, my lord. My sweetheart makes those for me everyday and pins them to my dress, but I’m forever losing them. He says they’re a symbol of love and fertility, and will bring us good luck when we marry.”

Fritjof stared at her curiously. “Do you know what they are?”

She shrugged. “He knows all about plants, but I’m afraid I don’t. He did tell me that one though; it’s... let me see…” She scrunched her face in concentration. “Viscous... something.”

“Viscum,” he corrected, “Viscum album.” He turned and showed it to the queen. “Commonly known as mistletoe.”
Frigga stared at Lord Fritjof in shock. “Mistletoe?”

She reached for it. It was a generous bunch of leaves and berries, tied with a simple green thread. Green thread… why hadn’t any of them considered the thread before? Loki was a child, and he didn’t sew - where would he have found green thread? He was always asking for bits of string for one project or another, but there was no reason why he would have thread. Why hadn’t she thought of that?

She closed her eyes. She felt sick. Why had been so easy for her to believe that Loki was the culprit? Although she hadn’t believed that Loki intended to murder Baldur, she had easily believed that, in his jealousy and spite, he might have poisoned the child.

Furthermore, he had confessed. Why would he have done that, if he wasn’t guilty?

She heard Fritjof dismiss Urd. “You believed his confession… you said he was telling the truth.”

Fritjof looked as pale as she felt. “I sensed guilt; he was telling the truth when he said he was jealous and wanted him gone.”

“He was jealous…” - that had certainly been true - “and when Tyr came to question him originally, Loki said he didn’t hurt Baldur, but we could all tell he was lying.”

“I think we need to speak to him again.”

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Odin had been staring at the same piece of parchment for almost an hour now. He couldn’t concentrate.

His mind kept turning back to Loki. How could he have been so wrong about him? Loki was an imaginative child and that frequently got him into trouble, but to go so far as to try to poison a baby?

Odin had never believed all that Jotnar were bad; his own mother was Jotun, and Odin had loved her dearly. He remembered her as happy woman that loved all children as her own, and was always there to offer comfort and support.

So if it was not his Jotun blood, then the fault must lie with Loki himself. Odin had not thought the boy could be capable of such evil. He had been shocked when Tyr told him of Loki’s confession.

He knew the responsibility for punishing the boy must lie with him; he was the law in Asgard. He supposed - since it was a crime against another realm - that he could simply give the child to them.
and let them deal with it; but it would put them in a difficult position. They would not want to treat the son of Odin too harshly, for fear of reprisals.

But the sentence for poisoning a foreign prince - a baby - would have to be harsh. And Odin did not want to think about what that would entail.

He already felt guilty for telling Tyr to take the boy to the dungeons; no child that age had ever been taken there before. But Odin lost his temper when Loki shouted and pulled away from him; he expected a prince of Asgard to behave with more dignity.

But he had to admit to himself that he would never have sent Thor there. What was it about Loki that made him so angry? Was it because Loki seemed a constant reminder to Odin of his failings as a father? Or was that, with this act, Loki reminded him of himself, with the same sharp mind and vengeful disposition? Perhaps it was so easy to believe Loki could do such a terrible thing, because it was so easy to imagine himself doing such a thing in the same circumstances.

Odin looked up when he heard the door open, glad of the diversion. He frowned when he saw who it was. “Lord Fritjof, Frigga. Is anything wrong? Has there been a change in Prince Baldur’s condition?”

Fritjof bowed. “Only for the better, King Odin. Prince Baldur continues to improve. The reason for our visit now is your son, Prince Loki.”

“I am afraid I have not yet decided on his sentence.”

Frigga stepped forward. Odin thought she looked very pale. “As to that, husband, it seems that matters may be less straightforward than we originally thought.”

“Explain.”

Fritjof told Odin about their meeting with Urd. Odin stared at him in disbelief. “I thought you had exonerated all of the servants.”

“I did. I found that none of them felt any guilt or were lying about their interactions with the prince.”

“But if Urd…”

Fritjof was so shaken by events that he didn’t even realise he had interrupted the king. “Urd wasn’t lying; she didn’t know she was responsible. We asked all of the servants about the mistletoe, but because she didn’t know it by that name, she didn’t know it was her fault. She had no idea that he had taken it from her.”

“But if the mistletoe came from her, why did Loki confess?”

“I think we would all like to know that, your majesty.”

“Then let us go and find the answer.”

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The three of them headed down to the dungeons. This time, there was no question of Frigga not visiting her son; she made it clear that she was not going to be left behind. Besides, Odin had a plan and her knowledge would be useful.

The guards snapped to attention, and two of them escorted the party to Loki’s cell.
Odin, Frigga and Fritjof kept their eyes averted from the prisoners, and did their best to ignore the screamed obscenities as they walked past. Odin tried not to think of how Loki must have felt, walking past those men to get to his own cell.

Eventually, the guards stopped beside Loki’s cell. Odin was relieved to see that it was further away from the others and a little more private. He gestured to one of the guards. “Open it.”

The cell was empty when they walked in, and they looked around in surprise.

“Loki?”

“Father?” A small voice came from the toilet cubicle.

“We will wait.”

After a few minutes, Loki came out. He looked very pale.

“Loki, are you alright?”

“Yes, Mother. Hello, Father, Lord Fritjof.”

Odin also took note of the boy’s lack of color. “Loki, this won’t take very long. We just have a few more questions for you, if you don’t mind.”

“No, Father.”

They wondered why Loki suddenly seemed so nervous.

Loki watched them warily. He had not slept that night, as he listened to the screams and cries from the other prisoners. While he had been in the other cell, he had seen them do things that horrified him; things that he did not know men did to other men. Even though he had been moved to a quieter cell, he had lain awake all night, terrified in case one of them should escape and make their way to where he slept.

Perhaps that was the reason he felt so terrible now; his head felt as though it was splitting, a steady throbbing with sharp stabs of pain whenever he moved. The bright, constant light in the cell hurt his eyes and he was so hot; his skin felt as though it was burning. He was extremely thirsty, but he everytime he tried to drink any water, he was sick.

Before his visitors arrived, he had been sitting on the floor by the toilet, eyes closed, waiting for the nausea to abate.

He couldn’t believe it when he heard his father’s voice in the cell. Then he realized - of course, Odin would need to deliver his sentence.

Loki splashed a little water on his face and headed back into the room. He was surprised to see his mother and Lord Fritjof there as well. He supposed he could understand why Lord Fritjof was there - it was a matter that concerned Vanaheim, after all. But why would his mother be there?

He almost thought she looked concerned when she asked, “Loki, are you alright?”

He could have laughed out loud at the question; of course he wasn’t alright! He was locked up in a
place that must surely be the closest thing they had to Hel; a dungeon where he was probably going to spend the rest of his life.

He tried to keep his voice level as he answered, “Yes, Mother. Hello, Father, Lord Fritjof.”

His father seemed to be watching him closely as he said, “Loki, we just have a few more questions for you, if you don’t mind.”

“No...no, Father.” Did it really matter if he minded? Loki felt his knees weaken and his heart began to race. Were they going to take him back to that room? He couldn’t go there again. Just the thought of it was terrifying.

He couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Do we go have to go back to the room?”

“What room?”

“The hot room.” He remembered the proper name, “The interrogation room.”

Odin frowned. “General Tyr didn’t question you in his office?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Odin looked thoughtful for a moment, and then seemed to remember why they were there. “We want to ask you about the mistletoe.”

“Alright.” He’d tell them anything, as long as he didn’t have to go back to that room.

Odin gestured to Frigga. “Frigga, would you mind?”

Frigga nodded and produced images of six different types of plants.

“Loki, would you mind pointing to the plant you gave Prince Baldur?”

Loki swallowed. “Why?”

Fritjof thought quickly. “It would help us determine how best to treat the prince.”

“Oh.” Loki stared at them blankly. “Is it very important?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Oh,” he repeated. He stared at the plants in front of him. “Um…”

He began to sweat. He had to get this right. For Boda’s sake, he needed them to believe he had done this, but he didn’t want Baldur to get the wrong treatment. “Which do you think it was?”

Fritjof shot a glance to Frigga. “What we think isn’t important, Loki. You need to show us.”

Loki bit his lip. He spent a long time studying the plants.

Berries, he thought. It was usually the berries that were poisonous, and most poisonous berries were red - Thor had told him that. He searched the plants for red berries. There were three. He frowned. What else did he know?

Shiny leaves! He knew that some poisonous plants had shiny leaves. Thor had told him that as well. He looked again. Only one of the plants had shiny leaves and red berries. It must be mistletoe.
He pointed to it. “That one?” He phrased it as a question.

Fritjof studied it for moment. “You are sure? There is no doubt in your mind?”

Loki paused. He didn’t want Baldur to receive the wrong treatment, but he was sure his reasoning was sound, and if they didn’t believe him, they might take him to that room again. “Yes.”

Fritjof seemed satisfied, but Loki could see tears in his mother’s eyes. He felt a sudden pang of guilt. This must be embarrassing for her. “I’m sorry, Mother.”

She tried to smile. “I’m sorry too, Loki. I’m so sorry.” She turned pleading eyes to Odin. “Is that enough?”

Apparently it wasn’t.

“I just have one or two more questions - could you describe where you found it?”

In an attempt to deflect them, he asked, “Why? Can’t you just find it for yourself?”

Frigga cleared her throat. “In nature, the antidote usually grows close to the plant, like dock leaves growing beside nettles or jewelweed and poison ivy. It’s very important, Loki.”

He tried to think about the plant he’d seen earlier. It had small leaves - he’d never seen a tree with leaves that small. So it must be from a bush or a plant. If it was a bush, surely he would have recognized it? He was sure he’d never seen it before.

“It was… a plant, I think. Growing off the trail in the middle of the woods, hidden by some bushes.” That would cover him if they couldn’t find it. “Does that help?”

Odin sighed and turned to Lord Fritjof. Fritjof nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid it does. I have one final question for you, Loki.”

Loki closed his eyes. He wished it could be over already. He wanted them to go away and leave him alone.

Odin’s voice cut through his thoughts. “Why did you lie about poisoning Prince Baldur?”

Loki’s eyes shot open. “What?”

“Why did you lie?”

Loki swallowed. He didn’t want Angrboda to be accused in his place. “I didn’t.”

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Frigga watched him with dawning realization. There was something about his manner, something in the way he persisted in maintaining the lie. He’s doing this for someone, she thought. Surely he wouldn’t have gone through all of this for Urd? “We found the person that did it.”

Loki’s eyes widened and he went very still. Were they telling him the truth? And if they were, why was he still here? Had he gone through this for nothing? Perhaps they had decided to blame this on Boda, to save Asgard from embarrassment?

“It was Urd.” Frigga saw the surprise on his face. “She didn’t mean to do it; she was wearing a spray of mistletoe on her shirt. She didn’t show any guilt because she didn’t know she was responsible.”
She sat next to Loki. “Who were you protecting?”

He seemed stunned. “Boda.”

“How?”

“General Tyr told me that if it wasn’t me, then Boda would be held responsible.” He glared at them accusingly. “Boda would never hurt a child. Boda wouldn’t hurt anybody, ever!”

“But if you were innocent…”

“No-one believed I didn’t do it.” He looked at her helplessly. “I kept telling the truth but no-one believed me.”

Frigga looked stricken. It was true; when Loki said he was innocent, no-one had believed him. When he said he was guilty, they hadn’t questioned it.

Odin lowered himself into a chair. “When we asked you if you had hurt him, you said no. That was a lie, wasn’t it?”

Loki nodded. “I was angry when I saw Boda fussing over him, so I pinched him and made him cry.”

Odin rubbed his temples. Why hadn’t he involved himself more closely with questioning the boy? Why had he left such an important task to someone else? “Why didn’t you tell us the truth?”

“I did! You didn’t believe me when I said I didn’t poison him. If I had said I’d pinched him and made him cry, you would have just thought it was proof of my guilt.”

The worst of it was, Loki may have been right. If he had admitted to hating Baldur, pinching him and making him cry, it would have been hard to believe that he hadn’t gone farther. They all knew how emotional Loki could be sometimes.

In the silence of the room, they could hear the shouts of the other prisoners.

Odin stood, determined. “We should discuss this somewhere else.”

Frigga nodded. “We should.”

She held out a hand to Loki. He stared at it for a moment and then stepped away.

“I—I just need to… to…” He suddenly turned and ran back to the bathroom.

They heard the sounds of Loki vomiting. Frigga pushed past Odin and ran to the boy’s side.

Loki was on his knees beside the toilet, shaking. Frigga reached for him and pulled back in surprise. “Odin, he’s hot!”

Odin put a hand against the boy’s cheek. Frigga was right; Loki would have been feverish, even for an Aesir. Odin surprised them all by kneeling down beside his son. “Loki, have you been sick all morning?”

Loki didn’t look up. “Yes.”

Odin leaned forward and lifted the boy as if he was nothing. Fritjof stepped aside, as Odin held Loki close and carried him to the healers rooms.
There might be a bit of a delay before I post the next chapters.

As I've said before, this was originally a series of one shots, but they ended up becoming a story - most of which wasn't planned (it was a comment from BlackWitchesCat that made me realize I should spend more time with the Frigga/Loki relationship, which I was getting ready to resolve back in chapter 11!).

Anyway, as a result, I only have about half of the next chapter written. Since I like to write two or three chapters at a time (so I can remember where I am in the story and don't accidentally write myself into any corners), there may be a short gap before the next posting. We've got Tyr and Heimdall to deal with, Loki will need hugs, relationships will have to be fixed and Angrboda's anger will surely make itself known - there's a lot of ground to cover!

In the meantime, I love to hear your comments and thoughts (and if you think there's anything I haven't sufficiently covered), and many thanks to all who are reading and enjoying! I won't leave you waiting too long!
Fritjof waited with Odin and Frigga while Loki was being examined. The ambassador couldn’t help but feel at least partly responsible for the boy’s suffering. After a little while, Eir came out to see them.

They stood as one, but Odin was the first to speak. “What’s wrong with him?”

Eir motioned for them to return to their seats. “He’s suffering from heatstroke.”

The parent’s exchanged a surprised glance.

“How did he get heatstroke? He hasn’t left the palace since…” Frigga trailed off, not wanting to add the words ‘since he went to the woods’.

Eir tried to keep her temper in check. “From what I can gather, he was interrogated in a room that was too hot and he wasn’t allowed any water.”

“What?”

Eir drew herself up to her full height. She was not about to be intimidated by a man that had allowed his own child to be treated that way.

Neither was Frigga. She turned to glare at her husband in horror. “How could you allow them to do such a thing to your own son? He’s just a child! What else did you let them do to him?”

Fritjof was also staring at Odin as if he was an animal.

Odin bristled under their scrutiny. “I wasn’t aware that Tyr was going to question him like that. I will speak to him about it, of course.”

Eir was surprised to see Frigga roll her eyes. “Well, it’s good to know he won’t be allowed to get away with what he did,” she said sarcastically. She turned back to Eir. “Will Loki be alright?”

“Yes, he should be. He’s badly dehydrated and has a severe headache along with the nausea. I’ve hooked him up to a drip to replace his fluids.” She looked as though she was about to say something else, but, glancing at Lord Fritjof, she said instead, “I want to keep him here overnight.”

She couldn’t stop herself from asking, “Where’s Angrboda? Has anyone told her about this?”

Frigga stared at her blankly. “She came to see me yesterday. She wanted to go and see him, but I told her she couldn’t. I’m afraid she left in a bit of a temper. I haven’t seen her since then.”

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**Accepting Responsibility**

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took a while. On the plus side, two chapters! Let me know if you notice any spelling errors. While I was editing, I noticed that I kept typing 'Firtjof' instead of 'Fritjof' and my 'heim's' and 'hiem's' were all over the place. As the old joke says, 'Transposers of the world, untie!' :)
Odin looked chagrined. “She requested an interview with me. I… refused. One of the guards told me that she was asking everyone if they could let her in to see Loki. I asked them to keep her from making a nuisance of herself.”

Fritjof looked curiously at the others. “Who’s Angrboda?”

“Angrboda used to be his nurse. She’s been looking after Loki since he was born.”

“Is she the ‘Boda’ he was talking about?”

He thought Queen Frigga sounded stressed when she replied, “Yes.”

Odin waved for a guard. “Can you find Angrboda?”

The guard looked embarrassed. “Um…”

“What is it?”

“She was locked in her room yesterday. She was causing a disturbance.”

“What kind of disturbance?”

“She was trying to get into the dungeons and would not take no for an answer.”

Odin rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. Could this day get any worse?

Frigga was equally horrified. “Release her at once. Inform her that the prince is here.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Frigga turned back to Eir. “May we see him?”

“Yes, of course. But please remember that he’s still a little muddled.”

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Loki looked terrible. He was propped against pillows, the drip running into a thin arm. A light sheet covered him and Frigga recognized a cooling spell. “Loki?”

He opened tired eyes and began to sit up straighter.

“No, don’t move.” She sat in a chair beside him and put a hand against his forehead. “You’re still very warm.”

“I’m sorry.” He sounded exhausted.

Odin frowned. “It isn’t your fault that you’re sick.”

Lord Fritjof stepped forward. “I hope you don’t mind me being here, Prince Loki. I just... wanted to make sure that you were going to be alright.”

“Thank you, sir.” The boy’s voice was very small; he sounded like the child he was. Fritjof felt horribly guilty.

They were interrupted by a noise outside, and the door burst open.

“Loki!” A woman rushed in and for the first time that day, Loki looked almost happy. “Boda!”
They threw their arms around each other as if they had been parted for years.

Angrboda pulled back quickly. “You’re burning up!”

She reached for a cloth beside the bed and began to wipe over his face and neck. Loki reached for her other hand and clung to her like a lifeline.

She ignored everyone else in the room and said, “I’m sorry I couldn’t see you earlier. I did try.”

He gave her a tired smile. “I knew you would have.”

“How do you feel?”

He flashed a look at the others in the room before answering. “I’m alright.”

She followed his gaze and her own face hardened. She gave the smallest of curtsies. “Your majesties, Lord Fritjof. I can look after Loki now.” Her tone was barely civil. “I am sure you must have other things you would prefer to be doing.”

Fritjof gasped at the woman’s rudeness and Odin pulled himself up to his full height, but before either of them could speak, Frigga intervened. “There is nothing as important as being here with our son.”

Angrboda didn’t look convinced, but Frigga continued, “I know I speak for both of us when I say we are sorry you were locked in your room, when you were only trying to do your best for Loki. And I certainly I speak for all three of us when I say that we are all sorry for the way Loki has been treated.”

She flashed a look at her husband and saw his stance softening. She knew that he never liked to admit that he was wrong, but he was happy for her to say what needed to be said.

Frigga turned directly to Loki, who was watching her with his mouth open. “We are very sorry, Loki. Can you forgive us?”

Loki and Angrboda looked stunned by her apology. Even Eir was staring at her in shock, her expression changing to one of approval.

Finally, Frigga was beginning to accept responsibility for her mistakes.

Loki gaped at Angrboda, and his look of disbelief brought her back. They had been together for so long that didn’t need many words to communicate; she quirked an eyebrow and inclined her head to indicate the others.

Er… yes, of course. And… I am sorry as well.” Loki didn’t think there was much he should apologise for, but Angrboda would like it. After all, he had lied about not hurting Baldur and he did falsely confess.

Frigga leaned forward and kissed him. “You have nothing to apologise for, does he, Odin?”

Odin seemed to consider for a moment - after all, the boy had lied - and then decided to follow her lead. “No. We are glad that everything has come to a satisfactory conclusion. I do have one further question, though.”

Frigga closed her eyes and prayed that he would not upset the boy.

“You told Eir that the interrogation room was very hot and you were allowed no water. Was that the
Loki reached for Angrboda’s hand and squeezed it, needing her comfort and reassurance.

“Yes, Father. At least,” he added, “I thought it was hot.” He didn’t want to risk upsetting anyone and being dragged into more questioning. What if they accused him of lying again and took him back down there?

“Can you tell me how long you were in there?”

Loki thought. “I’m not sure. It seemed like a long time.”

Lord Fritjof spoke. “I don’t know what time the boy was taken to the dungeons, but I was sent for shortly after the boy confessed. It was in the early hours of the morning - shortly before dawn. And it was very close in the room - quite stifling, in fact.”

“I see.” Odin considered. Why had the room been so hot? Was that normal, simply a problem with the room? And if so, why hadn’t Tyr told him about it before? Odin might have suspected the problem lay with Loki’s low tolerance, if it hadn’t been for Fritjof’s corroboration of the fact. Vanaheim was frequently hotter than Asgard, so if Fritjof noticed, the room must have been hot.

Then he considered the timeline.

It had been late when Loki was taken to the dungeons, but it had been before midnight. Fritjof said he was summoned early the next morning. That meant that Loki must have been there for at least four or five hours.

Why hadn’t he taken more of a part in the questioning of his son? Loki was a child - *his* child. A boy of that age should have been asleep at that time, but instead he had been shaken awake and dragged down to the dungeons - and Odin was ashamed to think that his temper had been the reason for that - where he had been interrogated for hours like a criminal.

Why had Odin assumed Tyr would treat Loki as the child he was, especially when Odin himself had ordered him to treat Loki as any other prisoner? He had assumed Tyr would understand that he meant him to make allowances for the boy’s age, but apparently, he had been wrong.

He opened his mouth to ask another question when he saw Loki reach forward and clutch Angrboda’s arm. She quickly grabbed the bowl from the table beside him.

Eir stepped forward. “My lord, I think that is enough for now.”

“Yes, of course.” He tried not to hear the sounds of the boy emptying his stomach again. “I shall return later, to see how he is feeling. Lord Fritjof?”

Fritjof quickly bowed before heading out of the room.

“My wife?”

“I will stay.”

“Then I will see you later.”

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Fritjof was still in view when Odin exited the room and he called to him. “Lord Fritjof, a moment, please.”
“Your majesty?”

“We have not discussed what we should do about Urd. What punishment would you wish her to receive for her part in this matter?”

Fritjof considered. He thought back to the brutality of the dungeons - a place the Asgardians had chosen to keep their own prince, a child barely out of the nursery. The idea of a child like that being held there made him feel sick to the stomach. He thought of the foolish young woman, Urd, in such a place.

“I will, of course, have to discuss this with my king and queen, but I personally feel that no further action is necessary. It was an accident, nothing more - she clearly meant no harm.”

Odin raised an eyebrow. “We will, of course, honor the wishes of Vanaheim in this regard. But we wish no ill feeling between our two realms because of this matter, and will administer whatever justice you require.”

Fritjof smiled tightly. “I feel that none will be necessary, your majesty, but I will let them know.”

He bowed and walked away, considering their conversation. Had Odin treated his own son that way because he believed that Vanaheim would have wanted it? For a child to be locked away in the deepest pit of Asgard, with the most depraved criminals in the nine realms surrounding him? Surely, nobody could have thought such a thing!

Fritjof didn’t even want to imagine his own queen’s reaction when she heard about the boy’s treatment. She had left her baby in the care of these people, and they had treated their own prince with such casual cruelty.

He decided to say nothing of it until Prince Baldur could be returned to Vanaheim. He would tell them of Urd’s foolish mistake and urge forgiveness, and he felt sure they would agree.

--------

Odin watched Fritjof hurry away. He had not missed the man’s reactions to all that had occurred, and guessed something of his thoughts.

The king sighed and sank down in the bay of a nearby window.

Fritjof may think now that Odin had acted too harshly - but at the time, he had said nothing. Fritjof was no fool. He knew how his people would have felt, if their prince had been poisoned and the culprit had gone free because he was a member of the royal family. Matters such as these were complex; the slightest hint of favoritism and the years of peace between the realms could have been stripped away in a moment. Vanaheim would not have tolerated the insult. It was all very well to consider Odin’s actions overly harsh now that they had been proved to be unnecessary.

Still…

Odin could wish he hadn’t lost his temper with the boy. He should never have told Tyr to treat the boy as any other prisoner, and he should never - NEVER - have let Tyr take him away to the dungeons. Odin should never have left the boy alone.

He wondered what damage he may have done, in his temper and his thoughtlessness.

Frigga had been horrified by the dungeons, but she had not witnessed the full horror of the place. Why had Odin not thought of it beforehand? Why had he not been more careful?
He consoled himself with one thought - at least the child had been placed in a cell away from the others.

Things could have been much worse.
On his return to the throne room, Odin hailed a nearby guard. “Ask General Tyr to come and see me at once.”

General Tyr arrived a few minutes later. He bowed deeply. “My king.”

“General Tyr. I would hear how you obtained the confession from Loki.”

Tyr looked puzzled. “Certainly, my lord. As you instructed, I treated him as any other prisoner and took him straight to the dungeons. I led him to the furthest interrogation room - I have often found that walking past the other prisoners will go a long way to loosen the tongue of a suspect.”

“And was this the case with Loki?”

“I am sorry to say that it was not.”

“So what did you do next?”

“When I was speaking with Heimdall, he indicated that Loki was rather more sensitive to hot temperatures than most. He suggested that the best way to get the truth from the lad would be to heat the room before I began.”

Heimdall, Odin thought. He kept his voice level as he asked, “Did that work?”

“Not immediately, no. He continued to insist on his innocence.” Tyr was warming to his theme. “I confess that I was surprised. I had not expected him to be quite so obdurate. But then I had an idea; I decided to raise the heat in the room and leave him there for a few hours until he was ready to confess. By the time I returned, he was almost ready. It just took the suggestion that Angrboda might take the blame for his deeds to make him realise the consequences of his actions and eventually confess.” Tyr smiled, looking extremely pleased with himself.

It was all Odin could do to hold himself back from striking the man. He had to remind himself that Tyr had done all of this on his orders.

Odin said nothing, and was pleased to see Tyr begin to squirm beneath his gaze.

Eventually, the man asked, “My king, is anything wrong?”

Odin waited a few more minutes before replying. “Frigga and Lord Fritjof found the true culprit this morning. It seems that one of the housemaids - Urð - was in the habit of wearing mistletoe pinned to her dress. It seems she also had a habit of losing it.”

Odin watched as Tyr’s jaw dropped open. “But… but… we questioned her! Lord Fritjof found all of the servants to be innocent. He said she was telling the truth!”

“In a sense, she was. She did not know that the plant she wore was mistletoe. Therefore, when she was asked about it, her conscience was clear. She felt no guilt because she did not know that she was guilty.”

“But Loki…” he stopped and corrected himself, “Prince Loki was lying when he said he did not hurt the baby, and Fritjof sensed guilt!”

Odin nodded. “Yes, that’s true. It seems he pinched Prince Baldur and made him cry. He also
admitted to wishing the child would go away.”

The color drained from Tyr’s face. “But he confessed…”

There was no mistaking the anger in Odin’s voice. “He confessed because he was a young child, dragged from sleep and scared out of his wits! He was then subjected to hours of intense heat and an interrogation that would have broken most grown men! He confessed because he was pushed past the limits of his mental and physical endurance!”

Tyr tried to defend himself. “My lord, I only did what I was ordered to do! Besides, the room was not that hot!”

“The room was not that hot for you! Heimdall informed you that Loki has poor tolerance for high temperatures. He is with the healers now, suffering from heatstroke.”

Tyr looked stunned.

Odin was angry, but he couldn’t place the blame entirely on the other man. Odin had instructed Tyr to treat the boy as any other prisoner. He could not blame Tyr for having done so. He could not, in good conscience, condemn Tyr’s actions without recognizing his own.

He also knew that he needed to be careful.

There were sounds of disquiet coming from Alfheim, and Jotunheim was a constant threat. Asgard needed Heimdall’s eyes and Tyr’s military genius, and a king would be a fool to alienate such men. In addition to that, they were loyal men, men he considered to be friends.

But they would also need to be taught that their loyalty must extend to all of the royal family - not just their king. Heimdall, especially, must learn to forget his dislike of Loki and serve him as he would Odin, Frigga and Thor.

Odin fixed Tyr with a gimlet eye. “I am aware that I bear some responsibility for what has happened. I should not have instructed you as I did. But when I ordered you to treat him as any other prisoner, I believed our standards to be higher. We represent the justice of Asgard and that has been proved to be a sham. We cannot hold up our heads as men of fair and honest judgement, if we use tricks such as these to gain the confessions that we want instead of the truth we need!”

Tyr fell to his knees. “My lord, I…”

Odin held up a hand. “We will say no more about this. It will go no further. It does us no credit to have our authority undermined this way. But I wish to examine the information we have on the prisoners currently in our care, to ensure there have been no other miscarriages of justice.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“You may go.”

“My king.” Tyr backed away and left the room.

Odin watched him leave. Now for the hard part, he thought to himself.

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Odin’s steps dragged as he walked to the bifrost. He could feel the Odinsleep approaching, but there were many things he must attend to first.
He remembered being young, as Thor was young. It seemed a very long time ago. He had been fearless and brash, just as Thor was. Life had seemed so simple, when all of his problems could be solved with a sword. Now he felt as though he was embroiled in an unending game of tafli, and every action was strategic. He had sacrificed Loki as a pawn, to save his kingdom from war.

And he knew that if he had to, he would do it again for the sake of his people.

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Heimdall did not turn to look at Odin as he approached. “My king.”

“You have been watching? You have seen all that has happened this day?”

“I have.” His voice had no inflection.

“Then you know what I am going to say. Heimdall, your eyes are vital to the safety and the peace of Asgard. Our people depend on you. In addition, we have been friends for many years, and I value your judgement and your counsel. But I will tell you this - although Asgard must always be my first priority, my family is important to me. Loki is my son.” He saw Heimdall’s eyes flash and his jaw clenched. “HE IS A PRINCE OF ASGARD AND MY SON! He will be treated with the respect due his position. If you cannot treat him as such, then you may leave; with my gratitude for your service. But understand this - if you decide to stay in Asgard to serve your country and your people, then you will treat my family respectfully - ALL of them.”

Heimdall’s voice was flat. “He is a Jotun. He will betray us all, it is his nature.”

Odin felt his heart sink. “Is that your decision?”

Heimdall finally turned and their eyes met. “No. You are my king and I am sworn to your service until death.”

“I will not have my authority challenged in this. I had good reasons for bringing Loki back with me that day, and those reasons remain. I charged you then to be silent and you assured me that you would do so, for my sake. Has that changed?”

“No, my king.”

“You can keep this secret?”

“Yes. I can and I will. I have sworn it.”

“Remember that when you next decide to hint that my son cannot tolerate the heat or is in any way different. These transgressions do you no credit.”

Heimdall stiffened. “I will say nothing more.”

Odin nodded. They would always disagree about this. Heimdall’s hatred of the Jotner was too deeply ingrained for him to ever change. He would never approve of what Odin had done, and he would never accept Loki. But his promise of silence was enough; Heimdall was a man of his word.

“Then let us say no more about this.”

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The next person Odin had to see would require less diplomacy, but would be no easier.
He found Thor sitting in the training grounds with his friends gathered around him. “My son, may I speak with you?”

Thor looked up. “Certainly, Father.”

He moved away from his friends and Odin motioned for him to take a seat beside him. “I have some news about Loki.”

Thor’s expression darkened. “Yes, Father?”

“It seems we were mistaken. Loki has been proved to be innocent of all charges.”

Thor stared at his father, his jaw dropping. “But I thought you said he confessed?”

Odin wondered how much he should tell his son. Thor was an honest, open boy and he despised secrecy. Odin had promised Tyr they would say no more about his methods of interrogation, and for the good of Asgard, this incident should remain a secret. Asgardian justice must never be questioned.

His mind made up, Odin replied, “That is so, but it seems he was unwell at the time and confused. We have since found the true culprit and Loki’s confession is invalid.”

Thor’s eyes widened. “Who was it? Who did this?”

Odin put a hand on Thor’s shoulder. “Peace, my son. It was an accident. One of the nurserymaids wore a posy of mistletoe on her dress. Either it was dropped or Baldur pulled it from her. Unfortunately, she didn’t notice and was ignorant of its harmful properties. She didn’t speak of it before because she was unaware of the name of the plant. That was why we were unable to detect any guilt from her.”

“But Loki confessed…”

“His innocence has been proved without doubt.”

Thor seemed to consider for a long moment. “Where is he now?”

“He is with Eir.”

At Thor’s look, he continued, “I told you he was unwell. He is being treated now and will soon recover.”

Thor nodded. “Thank you, Father. I am happy to hear of his innocence.”

“As am I. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go.”

Thor was thoughtful as he returned to his friends.

They looked at him inquiringly, but knew better than to ask about the king’s business. They waited silently for a few minutes.

Finally, Thor looked up at them. “It seems there is good news. Loki is innocent after all.”

The others exchanged confused glances. Fandral was the first to speak. “What do mean, innocent?”

“It seems the real culprit has been found and Loki has been exonerated.”
Hogun frowned. “But did he not confess?”

Thor seemed to consider a moment before replying. “My father said that Loki was unwell and confused.”

Volstagg thoughtfully ran his hand over his wispy beard. “Seems a bit odd, does it not? What kind of illness makes you confess to poisoning someone if you did not?”

Thor bit his lip. He was asking himself the same question.

Before he could answer, Sif jumped in. “If that is what the Allfather said, then that is all we need to know.”

Thor looked at her gratefully and the others took the hint.

Fandral spoke again. “So… who is the culprit?”

“It seems it was a mistake by one of the nurserymaids.” Thor tried to recall if his father had mentioned her name. “She was wearing mistletoe on her dress...” he trailed off, wondering why any woman would do such a thing.

Hogun wondered that as well. “I thought all of the servants were questioned and found to be innocent?”

“Apparently, she did not know it was mistletoe, so when she was questioned, she had no feelings of guilt.”

“Huh.” The four friends shared another meaningful glance and decided to say no more about it.

“Anyway,” Thor stood up, “I’m going to see my brother.”

They watched him walk away.

Hogun lowered his voice. “So…”

Volstagg nodded. “Yes, quite.”

Fandral looked between them. “Shall I be the first to say it? Something about this smells wrong.”

Sif nodded. “If you ask me, Odin has done this for Asgard. They needed to do something after Loki confessed. The last thing we need is a war with Vanaheim.”

Fandral agreed. “It seems altogether too convenient that they suddenly ‘found’ a maid to blame it on.”

Volstagg shook his head. “Thor didn’t even have a name! I would be surprised if she even exists.”

Hogun nodded. “Why would she be wearing mistletoe if she didn’t even know what the plant was?”

Sif began to pace. “If the Allfather has seen fit to do this, then we must do our best to help him with this lie. Can we agree that we will support him in this, and not upset Thor by questioning him further on this matter?”

“We can.” They all stood and clasped hands. “For Asgard.”

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Loki looked very pale, lying against the white sheets.

Thor tried to find a smile as he sat down beside him. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m alright.” His voice sounded very small.

“Father told me what happened…” Thor’s voice trailed off. He still didn’t understand what had happened. Why would Loki confess if he didn’t do anything? And if he was sick, why would he not simply have told someone, so they could question him later?

He couldn’t stop himself from asking. “Brother, why would you confess if you were innocent? That was a very…” he searched for a word, “odd thing to do.”

Loki stared at Thor, his expression hard to read. Then he rolled over and closed his eyes. “Go away, Thor. I’m tired.”

“But Loki…”

Loki didn’t reply. He buried his face in the sheets and tried to hide the tears rolling down his face.

---------

Loki continued to feign sleep even after Thor left the room. He heard Angrboda return with some dinner, but he ignored her.

He couldn’t stop thinking about everything that had happened. Everything had changed for him in such a short period of time.

That Loki hadn’t liked Baldur - especially when he was taking up Angrboda’s time and attention - was clear to everyone. But he hadn’t thought they could so easily believe he would hurt a baby. It still shocked him to think of it. His mother and father… even Thor! They had all thought him capable of such an act. Even when they found the real culprit, they continued to ask him questions, just to be sure that he was innocent.

Apparently, it was much easier to believe in his guilt than his innocence.

The only one that seemed to have believed in him all along was Boda. And because of that, they had locked her up too. Although, at least they had locked her away in her old room. They hadn’t thrown her in the dungeons, with those… animals.

They hadn’t even thrown Urd in the dungeons, even though she was the one that poisoned the prince.

One of the healers had heard that the king and queen of Vanaheim knew it had been a mistake and didn’t feel Urd should be punished for it. They wanted to be merciful.

If only, Loki thought bitterly, the king and queen of Asgard had wanted the same.

He hadn’t believed it when Tyr had taken him down to the dungeons. He hadn’t even known that such a place existed under the palace of Asgard.

He wished he didn’t know now.

Just knowing that it was there, underneath them… All those men, those creatures doing unspeakable things…
They were there right now, only separated by a couple of floors and a few doors. Any one of them could break free and find him at any moment.

He thought of the things they had screamed at him; evil things... vile, unspeakable things. And the things he had seen...

And they were there, right now, so close…

If they managed to get free, they could be roaming the palace in minutes. They would find him, he knew it. They had seen him, they knew who he was now. They could find their way into his room and be waiting for him when he returned… They could be hiding anywhere...

He tried to muffle a sob.

There was movement from beside his bed and he thought, *this is it, they escaped and they’ve found me, they’ve come to get me, I knew they would, I KNEW IT!*

He gave a small scream when he felt the hand on his shoulder.

He heard Angrboda’s voice and heard Eir’s footsteps as she hurried to his side.

“Loki?” Angrboda knelt down beside the bed, her eyes on a level with his. “What’s wrong, my little prince?” She held out a hand as if trying to convince a wild animal of her good intentions, and then placed it against his cheek.

He couldn’t stop shaking and there were tears running down his face.

Eir stood back a little, letting Angrboda handle the situation. After a few minutes, Loki began to lean into her familiar touch.

“Did you have a bad dream, my prince?”

He couldn’t find his voice, but nodded instead.

She climbed onto the bed and pulled him to her side, stroking his hair gently. “There’s nothing to be afraid of, little one,” she said, using the name that she always called him when he was upset. “You’re safe now.”

And his sobs began again, because he knew that she was lying. She could never protect him, no-one could. He knew better than she did, that there was everything to be afraid of, and he would never be safe again.
Eir prepared a potion for Loki and he drank it, his head cradled in Angrboda’s comforting arms. She stayed where she was, as his breathing calmed and he fell asleep. Even then, she was reluctant to leave him.

Eir lowered herself into the chair beside the bed. “Is he asleep?” she asked softly.

“Yes, thankfully.”

“Did he say what the dream was about?”

“No, he didn’t say anything at all. But I don’t think you need to be a genius to figure it out - they put him in the dungeons!”

He gave a little whimper in her arms and she forced herself to relax.

Eir reached out and ran a hand over his hair. “It has been a bad business, badly managed.”

Angrboda snorted derisively. “You have gift for understatement. I can’t begin to imagine what it was like for him there. The Norns only know how this will affect him!”

“I know.” Eir tried not to say anything further. She was as angry as Angrboda, but she was trying to keep her temper. It would do Loki no good to witness further conflict, he needed to feel calm and safe. She moved her hand to his forehead. “He feels cooler, at least. That’s a mercy.”

Another snort from Angrboda. “A small one!” She turned to face Eir. “What can I do for him? How should I help him?”

Eir sighed. “We can try to be there for him, for when he needs us; in case he wants to talk about it. And however angry we feel, I think we should try not to let him see it. He doesn’t need to see more conflict right now; he needs to feel that he’s safe.”

“Safe! Ha! With a father and mother that threw him in the dungeons and people that will interrogate a small child as though he’s a criminal! How could he possibly think he’s safe?”

Loki whimpered again and she tried to calm herself. “How could they do this to him, Eir? How could they do this to ANY child?”

Eir shook her head. “Thoughtlessness, miscommunication, assumptions. They don’t seem to have been aware of what he was going through until it was too late.”

“But why?” Angrboda hissed, as she tried to keep her voice low. “Why didn’t they know? They should have been there with him, every step of the way! I would have been beside him if I could, if I had known what was happening!”

“Odin thought Tyr knew how to question a child, and he must have thought Vanaheim would object if he was present. And Frigga trusted Odin. Once Loki confessed, they needed to show Vanaheim that they were taking the matter seriously.”

“But…”
Eir held up a hand to stop her. “I know. I’m not excusing them, I’m just telling you what they thought. Sometimes I wonder how they managed to raise such a happy, easy-going child as Thor. For a king that holds a realm as great as this one, I often think Odin has no idea how to deal with people. And Frigga…” she trailed off, but Angrboda prompted her.

“And Frigga?”

Eir tried to think of what she could say to try and explain. “Frigga has no idea how to deal with Loki. She and Thor were together all the time, but Loki was born so much later… Circumstances forced them apart for much of Loki’s childhood, and when she saw him again, they were strangers to each other. She is trying her best, but Loki is so different to Thor; and Frigga trusts Odin’s judgement more than she should.”

Angrboda kissed the top of Loki’s head before replying. “He can be hard to read. He feels everything so strongly and thinks about things far more than he should. Even before this, I worried for him. Now I’m terrified that this will have have hurt him more than we will ever know.”

Eir stood and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Mistakes have been made and we have to accept that and move on. We can only do our best, Angrboda, and we must hope that it will be good enough.”

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Frigga returned from lunch to the sight of Angrboda sitting on Loki’s bed with him propped up against her, sleeping heavily. Again, she felt that pang of annoyance.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes, my queen. He had a bad dream, but Eir gave him something to help him sleep and he’s been resting well ever since. His temperature has gone down and his color is better.”

“Good.” She reached out and touched his forehead. For any other child, his temperature would have been normal. For Loki, it was still a little warm. “I have come to sit with him for the rest of the afternoon, so you may leave. Get something to eat and try to sleep. I am sure that you had little sleep last night; you must be tired.”

Angrboda hesitated. She was tired and hungry, but she hated the idea of leaving Loki. “I don’t mind. I’d like to stay with him.”

Frigga tried not to show her irritation. Angrboda had been Loki’s nurse for years and of course she would want to stay with him. It was just that Frigga wanted to be there for Loki, to show him how sorry she was; how much she cared about him.

She tried to sound sympathetic. “Well, I am here now, so there is no need. Come back later when you’re fully rested. He will want to see you then.”

Angrboda knew an order when she heard one. Throwing a last, wistful look at Loki, she left.

Frigga felt a little guilty for ordering her away, but she knew she needed to spend some time with her son. Looking after Baldur made her realize too many things about herself and her relationship with Loki.

She had loved Baldur from the first minute she held him, and it hadn’t mattered that he wasn’t her own child. She cherished all of those wonderful moments with him; moments, she realized, that she should have - could have enjoyed with Loki.

It should never have mattered to her that Loki wasn’t her natural son or an Aesir. He had been a helpless, beautiful baby when they first took him in and she had missed all of those precious
moments they could have shared.

So what if he was a Jotun? There were surely good as well as bad. They had been peaceful now for many years and, although there were signs of growing discontent, nothing had happened as yet. She had learned things about them in the last few years; they liked plays and long tales of heroic deeds, just as Asgardians did. She had even read and enjoyed some of their books.

When Baldur had been poisoned, she had assumed - along with everybody else - that Loki was guilty. Why had she done that? If Tyr had told them that Thor was the suspect, would they have acted the same way? She knew they would not. They would never have believed Thor capable of doing such a thing. So why had they been so quick to judge Loki? Nothing in his previous behavior indicated that he would ever have committed such an awful deed. Nothing about Loki indicated that he was brutish or evil or likely to become so.

Thor had suggested that Loki might have done it by accident, a jealous prank that backfired. Such things frequently happened when the two of them were playing. It was not unknown for one - or even both - to rush to the healers with a cut or a stab wound from a game or prank that went too far.

She knew Odin thought the boy had done it out of jealousy and spite. It was something that Hela might have done. Something - if she was honest - that Odin himself might have done.

Perhaps that was the reason she had been so quick to believe that it was Loki. Odin and Loki were similar in many ways. Their tempers weren’t hot and immediate, burning themselves out as quickly as they flared up; not like her or Thor. No, Odin and Loki were like coals in a fire; quick to flare up, certainly, but slow burning, hard to extinguish.

She had wondered so many times about the boy’s true parentage. She never asked Odin if Loki was his true son. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. Would she even believe him if he denied it? The two were so alike. Loki didn’t just have Odin’s temper; he was also clever and deep and complicated, just as Odin was. Thor was her son completely, open and honest and joyful.

She had been Loki’s mother for so many years and she still knew very little about him, his thoughts and feelings, his loves and his passions.

She saw now that if she could love Odin, despite everything she knew and everything she suspected, then she must love Loki as well. One way or another, he was their son.

Loki began to stir, his breath quickening as though he was caught in the throws of some terrible dream.

She leaned forward and began to run a hand through his soft hair. “It’s alright, Loki. It’s alright.”

He started awake at the sound of her voice and looked around him for a moment, in panic. He relaxed when he saw her, although, she noted, not as much as he would have with Angrboda.

“IT’s alright, you were just having a bad dream. Would you like to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “No, thank you, Mother. Where’s Boda?”

Again, that surge of annoyance. “I told her to go and rest. She looked exhausted.”

“Oh.” Loki looked away.

“But I’m here - are you sure you wouldn’t like to talk about it?”
“No. Thank you, Mother.”

How had she never noticed the way he said ‘mother’? The same way he would say ‘my lady’ or ‘sir’. There was none of the warm affection that was in Thor’s voice when he said it. For that matter, there was none of the affection that she heard when he said ‘Boda’.

“How had she never noticed the way he said ‘mother’? The same way he would say ‘my lady’ or ‘sir’. There was none of the warm affection that was in Thor’s voice when he said it. For that matter, there was none of the affection that she heard when he said ‘Boda’.

“How had she never noticed the way he said ‘mother’? The same way he would say ‘my lady’ or ‘sir’. There was none of the warm affection that was in Thor’s voice when he said it. For that matter, there was none of the affection that she heard when he said ‘Boda’.

“Is there anything I can get for you? Perhaps you’d like something to read?”

“No, thank you.”

The silence drew out between them and Frigga searched around desperately for something - anything - to say that might help her connect with her son.

The silence drew out between them and Frigga searched around desperately for something - anything - to say that might help her connect with her son.

The words were out of her mouth before she had even thought about them. “Loki, would you like me to teach you magic?”

Chapter End Notes

Again, please bear with me if there's a bit of a gap before the next chapter. I know where I'm going with this (I have the ending written already), I just need to get there! Thanks again to everyone for your comments and support - every kudo and comment just makes my day! Almost forgot to say, apologies if I don't answer your comment straight away - my computer has decided to spice up my spam folder by throwing in all sorts of things (my mother is now spam but my mother-in-law isn't - my computer hates me)!
"You promised to teach him magic?" Odin’s voice was disbelieving.

Frigga took a sip of her wine before answering. "I did."

"But I thought you were concerned about his abilities? Are you not worried about what he may be able to do if you encourage him in that direction?"

She felt herself color with shame. She was, after all, the reason why Odin was capping Loki’s magic. She allowed herself to wonder what that must be like. Like wearing a jacket that was always a little too tight, she decided, or walking about in shoes that were too small; always uncomfortable and restricting.

"I am not worried. Not now. Even then, I was wrong to think as I did. We should never have confined him so."

Odin nodded. "Very well, my dear, if you are sure. However, I think it would be in everyone’s best interest if we allowed his magic to increase gradually. We do not want to overpower him by releasing it all at once."

She considered for a moment and sighed. "I suppose you are right. It would be a shock to him."

"And you are quite sure about this, my love?"

She thought of all of those lost years when she could have been a mother to him, and the way he treated her - like a stranger - and his love for Angrboda. She thought of how much she wanted him to love her like that. She couldn’t turn back the clock and make up for all of those missing years, but perhaps, if she opened up this world to him, they would become closer and he could grow to love her, too.

She straightened in her seat, determination flashing in her eyes. "I am."

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By the next day, Loki’s temperature was back to normal and he was - at least, physically - fully recovered.

Thor and Loki both hated being fussed over by the healers, so Eir was surprised to see fear in Loki’s face when she talked about releasing him from the sick room.

Angrboda saw it too, and sat down on the edge of the bed. "What is it, little prince? What’s wrong?"

Loki looked up at her, his eyes looking very large in his white face. "Do I… do I have to go back to the dungeons?"

Although Angrboda’s first feeling was shock, the second was a sharp stab of anger that he should worry about such a thing. "Of course not! Why would you? Your innocence has been proved beyond all doubt."

"But… no-one’s said I don’t have to go back, and I did lie. And Tyr said Vanaheim would want someone to blame, but I know they don’t want to punish Urd…” he was starting to get upset, his breaths coming faster, "so I thought it might mean that they still want to punish me?"
"Oh, Loki!" Angrboda pulled Loki into her arms and hugged him tightly. She pulled back and took hold of his chin, forcing his eyes to meet hers. "I promise you, that while there is breath in my body I will never - NEVER - allow anyone to take you to the dungeons again!"

"But if Father and Mother…"

"Look at me, Loki. Have I ever lied to you?"

He shook his head.

"I will tell you this… even if I have to raise an army from the depths of Hel, I will never let anyone - even the King and Queen of Asgard - take you from me again."

Eir turned away and pretended to look for something, so there would be no witnesses to Angrboda’s treasonous declaration.

Nothing less would have done it. Loki relaxed against her. "I really don’t have to go back again - ever?"

"Not as long as I live, my prince."

Loki snuggled further into her arms and felt his eyes begin to close. "Love you, Boda."

She kissed the top of his head. "Love you too, little one."

Watching them, Eir hoped that Odin and Frigga would never again have cause to send Loki to the dungeons. She had seen the look in Angrboda’s eyes when the woman had made her vow, and Eir believed her. If she felt she had to, Angrboda would raise the nine realms to fight for her boy.

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Loki’s rooms felt foreign to him when he returned.

It seemed impossible that only a few days had passed since he had last been there; they seemed to belong to a different time and place. He had always loved his rooms, they were his sanctuary, the place he could always go to.

Now, it was as though everything he believed had been stripped away. He had believed - foolishly, it seemed - that his parents, his brother and the guards were there to protect him and keep him from harm. Now he knew how foolish he had been. Even Angrboda, for all her comforting words, hadn’t been able to save him when the time had come.

His rooms weren’t a sanctuary, they never had been. A door could be torn down, a window could be broken, even the walls could be breached if the force was sufficient. And they couldn’t protect him from the guards. From General Tyr.

From his father.

Angrboda stayed with Loki as long as she could, but now that he was no longer a child, she was expected to leave when he left for dinner. They were both reluctant to part and Loki wished he could ask her to stay with him, to sleep in his room like she used to; to keep the bad men away.

There was still Thor, of course, but Thor… well…

From the beginning, Thor hadn’t believed him and he didn’t understand why Loki had confessed. He had visited Loki once more after that first visit, and it had been uncomfortable and stilted.
He obviously thought that Loki was doing this for attention, and acting like a fool and a baby. Loki didn’t want to prove him right by going to Thor’s room at night, and asking for comfort because he was scared.

And he was very scared.

Rationally, he knew that he was being silly. His room was just as safe - or unsafe - as anywhere else in the palace, and there was no reason why he should fear the night time more than any other time of day - but he did. Perhaps it was because he always thought of the prison as a place of darkness, a place of night. It had been unnaturally lit by bright, artificial lights, but it seemed to serve only to cast deeper shadows.

He had formerly been in the habit of going to his rooms as soon as he finished eating, but now he lingered long over his food, dragging out the time until he would have to return to his quiet bedroom.

Once there, he would put on every light and search everywhere - in the bathroom, under his bed, inside his wardrobe. When he was sure there was no sign of an intruder, he would turn the lock on his door and push a chair beneath the door handle.

Before he climbed into bed, he would place a knife beneath the mattress, where he could reach it quickly if he needed to.

Then he would climb onto his bed and pull his knees up to his chin as he watched the door, thinking of the dungeons beneath him and the evil things the prisoners had called out to him when they had seen him.

Eir noticed the dark circles beneath his eyes and made up a potion for him to drink, but Loki poured it away. It would be a bad thing if he was deep in sleep when the intruders found their way into his rooms - as he knew they must.

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Surprisingly, the little happiness he enjoyed at that time came from his mother.

He loved the magic lessons, and was delighted to find that he was good at them.

Although he was cleverer than Thor had been at his age, his tutors seemed to feel that it was lack of application that held Thor back, and that Loki’s quick intelligence merited no special praise. When it came to sports and fighting, Loki couldn’t begin to compare to his strong, fearless brother, and their trainers felt no compunction about berating Loki for his inadequacies.

So he was delighted to find that, when it came to magic, he far outstripped his sibling in every way. It was natural to him, instinctive. When he performed a spell, it felt as though he was releasing a breath he’d been holding for a very long time.

He asked his mother to teach him how to place protective spells, which he cast about his rooms, and he began to feel a little safer. He allowed a servant to enter once a day to clean, and of course, Angrboda could enter at any time; but Thor was amongst those he kept out.

When Thor had ceased to trust Loki, Loki had lost his faith in Thor. His brother was no longer his anchor, his strong defender. He could turn on Loki and believe him guilty of vile things; he could see him dragged to a jail cell without a word.

Loki would no longer allow Thor to witness his nightmares, fears and weaknesses. Thor’s friends would laugh about Loki for his strangeness and increasingly, Thor joined in, bemused by his
brother’s behaviour and hurt by his coldness.

Loki told himself he didn’t care. If he wanted friends, he had his friends in the palace - the servants - and he had Sigyn. She never laughed at his spells, or called them tricks, or ridiculed Loki for the things he could do. She even asked Loki to try and teach her, although they soon discovered that she had no sedir at all.

It didn’t matter, though; she loved to hear about the things he had learned, and watched with fascination while he practised his spells.

One friend like Sigyn, Loki thought, was far better than the Woollen-headed Three and the Lady "Sniff" as he and Sigyn had started to call her (as Sigyn said, she did always look at them as if she was smelling something bad).

And now, he was discovering how much he had in common with his mother and they were becoming closer all the time.

But above all of that, was the one thing he had that Thor did not - his Boda.
Chapter Notes

Sorry it took so long to update. I got distracted by a Halloween story I was writing. I wanted to get it finished before the 31st, so I was concentrating on that. Unfortunately, I realized last night that it was just awful. Maybe I'll come back to it another time.

BlackWitchesCat made some great points about seeing more of Loki's family and wanting to see the magic lessons, so here's a chapter about the first lessons from Frigga's point of view. Although there's a little fluff in there, Loki still hasn't recovered from his ordeal, despite what Frigga thinks. She can be a little blind when it comes to Loki's thoughts and feelings. But hey, at least now she's trying! And (I'm hoping!) that in the next chapter, we're going to hear from Odin...

“So, how are your lessons progressing? Is Loki a quick study?”

Frigga frowned reprovingly at her husband's question. "He is, although you would already know that if you took a moment to read the reports from his tutors."

Now it was Odin's turn to frown. "My dear, it is the nature of kingship that we must forgo the joys that other fathers experience. But if it eases your mind, I do look at his reports when I am able, and I know that Loki is a clever child. I merely wished to know how you find his magical gifts."

She considered for a minute before answering. "He is… surprising."

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She thought back to the first lesson.

She had asked Loki to come and join her in the garden. He arrived a little early and stood by the gate, as if waiting for an invitation to approach. He greeted her formally and stepped back politely, waiting for further instructions.

She smiled and held out a hand. "Come closer." He moved closer but didn't take her hand. Her smile wavered.

She thought about the best way to start. "Why don't you show me what you can do already?"

Loki showed her some of his favorite illusions (tricks, Thor called them). He could make illusions of himself, and although they were impressive for a child of his age, they wouldn't stand up to much scrutiny.

He could make other illusions as well - his favorite being the snakes he could conjure at a moments notice. Frigga was already aware of these, having heard the complaints about them. His favorite trick was to conjure magical snakes around Jormungandr, and leave the victim of the trick to guess which one was the real one.

He showed her some of the other tricks he had learned. She was surprised that he was able to transform matter, and Loki was warmed to realize that Eir had never told her of his trick in the
healing rooms.

He felt a disturbance and saw the air about them shimmer.

She saw his look of confusion. "Oh, don't mind that. I put up wards to make sure we wouldn't be interrupted." She was surprised by his expression. She used the spell all the time - surely he must have seen it before?

It occurred to her then that he never came to her, unless he was invited with Thor. She felt a pang. She was so used to Thor barreling in whenever he wanted to speak to her, it had never crossed her mind that Loki wouldn't do the same.

He put out a hand, as if to touch the enchantment.

"Can you feel it?" she asked curiously.

He nodded. "It's strange. Like the air before a thunderstorm." He grinned suddenly. "Like Thor in a temper!"

She laughed, and he looked pleased by her laughter. "I think we're both familiar with that by now! Would you like me to teach you how to do it?"

He looked eager. "Will it keep out everybody? Can anyone get through it?"

"You can set it to keep out just a few people or everybody. I usually set mine so that it allows only my family."

"I could get through it?" he asked hesitantly.

"Of course!" she said, but her smile dropped as she realized the implications of what that meant. Did he honestly think she would set up a ward that allowed Thor and Odin to enter, but not him? "Of course you could get through it! You can always come and see me, anytime you wish."

"Oh," he said, sounding uncertain. After a minute or two, he asked, "Can you teach me how to do it?"

"Of course! Would you like to try it now?"

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She was impressed by his natural abilities, as well as his determination. He learned the protection spell very quickly, and when he left, he was smiling. She saw him hurrying off, presumably to try his own protection spell upon the door of his rooms.

He returned to her garden the next day, uncertain and nervous, like a stray cat returning for food but sensing danger.

She smiled at him. "Hello, Loki."

"Hello, Mother." And then in a rush, he said, "I tried that spell but I couldn't make it work properly. It kept breaking."

He sounded as though his life depended on getting the spell right, and she smiled at his intensity. What a serious child he was!

"Well of course you couldn't be expected to get it right straight away. It will take a lot of practice."
He seemed to wilt before her. “There’s no way I can learn it quicker?”

She bit her lip. Perhaps Thor had been teasing him by going into his room uninvited. She put down the book she had been reading. "Would you like to work on it now?"

His face lit up.

"Alright then! Show me what you can do."

He wrinkled his brow in concentration and she felt the wards begin to fall into place. She was astonished that he had come so far with it already, and a small part of her felt a vague unease by it. This was what he could do with a new, complicated spell that he had learned only yesterday... How great were his powers, if he could achieve so much already, while he was a child with his power restricted?

She showed him what he was doing wrong and they practiced for the whole of the afternoon. By the time they left to get dressed for dinner, he could cast the spell perfectly.

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There had been two more lessons since then, each one seeing Loki become a little easier, a little more relaxed in her presence. She, in turn, began to learn more about him - and not just about his magical talents.

She already knew that he liked to play tricks, but she had thought it was from a desire for mischief and chaos, rather than amusement. Now, she learned that he loved to laugh. She hadn't known that the servants - his most frequent victims - enjoyed his pranks and would also play tricks on him in turn.

She learned this by accident. She woke early one morning and, finding she had a little time to spare, she decided to see if he would enjoy an impromptu lesson after breakfast.

A servant was delivering his breakfast. Loki obviously knew him well, because they were talking and laughing together. Frigga stood back from the door, unobserved, watching as Loki chatted with him. She so rarely got to see her son as relaxed and happy as he seemed to be then.

Loki sat straight in his chair. “So, what's for breakfast?”

The servant - was his name Bjarke? - grinned.

"Oh, I think you'll like this. Cook made it specially for you."

Loki sat expectantly as the servant placed a dome in front of him. Frigga watched as Loki examined every inch of the dome and then lifted it to reveal a plate underneath with a single egg upon it.

Loki knelt on his chair and began to examine the egg from every angle. The servant clearly didn't think his actions were strange. She moved a little closer to see what was happening.

Loki sat back down and lifted his spoon. He tapped the eggshell. Nothing happened. He struck it harder, but it remained intact. He began to giggle. He lifted the egg from its cup and threw it at the floor, but it still didn't break.

He snatched it up again and she heard Loki call out, "Birger," - that was his name, Birger - "catch!" as he hurled the egg through the air.
Birger caught it deftly and threw it back to him. Loki threw it again to him. He was enjoying the game so much that he didn't see the slight of hand that the servant used to swap the egg for a different one. He threw it back, but this time he threw it *at*, rather than *to*, Loki. It hit Loki square in the chest where it immediately broke on impact. Loki froze for a moment as the runny egg yolk ran down his chest.

And then he began to laugh. Frigga had never heard Loki laugh like that before; just occasional giggles when he was with Angrboda and short barks that sounded as though they had been forced from him when he was trying to contain them. This was different; it was the real, genuine laughter of a happy child having fun.

How was it the first time that she heard it?

Loki sank to his knees and wiped his eyes as he laughed. "How did you know I’d throw it?"

“Call it an educated guess!”

“What if I hadn’t?”

Birger knelt beside him and gave him a teasing poke in the ribs. “Maybe I’d have just thrown the egg at you anyway!”

“Wouldn’t have been as funny!”

“I’m sure I could have coped with the disappointment!”

Birger reached for a cloth from the tray and saw Frigga standing in the doorway. He abruptly stopped laughing and jumped to his feet. Loki looked confused by his actions; he opened his mouth to ask and then followed Birger’s gaze.

Understanding dawned on Loki’s face. "Ohhh." Then, recalling himself, he said, “Thank you, Birger, that will be all.”

Birger hesitated. He wasn’t sure if he should apologize or wait for the queen to take him to task. He had, after all, thrown an egg at the prince.

Loki spoke again in a regal tone. “You may go.”

Birger decided to follow Loki’s orders. After all, it wasn’t as though the queen wouldn’t know where to find him. “Very good, your highness.”

Angrboda rushed through the door just as he was leaving. “Sorry I’m late! So, did they get their revenge…"  

She trailed off as she saw the queen and sank into a deep bow. "My lady."

Frigga looked from one to the other. She couldn’t help but feel that she was an unwanted presence spoiling their fun. She felt frustrated. She wanted to be a part of Loki's life now; she wouldn't let herself believe that it was too late.

Forcing a smile on her face, she asked, "Revenge for what?"

Loki and Angrboda both looked uncomfortable. Loki looked down at his plate and mumbled into it. "I played a trick on Cook."

Frigga tried to think of something to say that would make her sound as though she was on his side.
"Was it funny?"

Angrboda shot her an approving look, for which Frigga was absurdly grateful.

Loki was considering his answer when Angrboda spoke. "It was, my lady. The servants thought it very ingenious. Margit - that is, the cook - said that they would get their revenge and we were waiting to see what she would do this time."

So this was a regular thing. Frigga had heard much of Loki's mischief from his tutors, but this was the first time she considered that some people might enjoy his sense of humor. "What did he do?"

Loki shot a panicked glance at Angrboda.

She smiled reassuringly; she guessed what Frigga was trying to do. "He made a small hole in each of the eggs and removed the insides. When the cook tried to make breakfast, she cracked egg after egg, only to find that they were empty." Seeing Loki's worried look, Angrboda added, "He did save the insides, nothing was wasted."

Frigga couldn't help it; she laughed. She remembered that for a few days now they seemed to have eaten nothing but omelettes and scrambled eggs. "Well, I suppose that explains all of the egg dishes we've been eating." She frowned in thought. "However did you do it?"

Loki looked nervous, but replied, "I used one of Eir's syringes."

"That must have taken a long time."

"Yesss…"

From his tone, she realized that he must have had help and didn't want to admit it, in case she was angry. She asked something else instead. "Why didn't you use your magic?"

He looked downcast. "I tried, but I couldn't get it to work. I was reading a spell that would make miniature birds fly out of the shells, but I couldn't do that either."

Frigga imagined how that would be, a kitchen filled with baby birds. She was surprised by how much she liked the idea, and even more surprised by what she said.

"Well, then I suppose that's the next spell we need to work on!"
From the window of his study, Odin watched as Loki practiced a spell under the tutelage of Frigga. He looked very earnest, biting his lip as he tried to concentrate.

Loki had been different since his imprisonment; even though he tried to maintain a normal, happy disposition in front of everyone, Odin could see cracks in his facade. Sometimes, when Loki thought no-one was looking, he would have an anxious, fearful look on his face, and Odin had quickly noticed the new protection spells Loki placed upon his door.

Frigga told Odin about their lessons, and of Loki's determination to master both protective and defensive spells. It didn't seem as though she had made the connection between Loki's imprisonment and his need for protection, but Odin had. It was obvious to him that the experience had scared the boy.

He sighed. Loki seemed to have forgiven Frigga for her part in the affair, but every time he saw Odin, he would tense and try to move away. He had never been demonstrative with his parents, but now he didn't even want to be in the same room as his father.

In his weaker moments, Odin allowed himself to feel a little angry. He had only done what he had to do for the good of the realm. It was all very well for Frigga to smile and laugh and teach the boy about magic now, but at the time she had believed with everybody else that Loki was guilty. She had not objected to his questioning, nor had she insisted on being present. Her fear of Jotuns had been the main reason that Loki's magic was capped, but now she seemed determined to help him develop his talents - talents which Odin suspected might be beyond her imaginings.

He threw down the paper he had been reading. It was from Lord Fritjof, informing Odin that he would not be returning to Asgard after he returned Prince Baldur to his parents.

Odin knew well what Fritjof thought of them. He wondered what Fritjof had told his fellow monarchs about the incident; he supposed he would know, soon enough. Gossip about the incident would quickly spread throughout the realms.

Vanaheim was now free of the contagion and the young prince would be returning home on the morrow. Odin knew that Frigga would miss the baby terribly, but at least now, she was being discreet enough to hide her infatuation. She still spent every minute she could with Baldur, but only when Loki was occupied with tutors or sleeping; and at least now her affection was tempered with her growing affection for her own child.

Odin sat heavily in his chair. He felt the Odinsleep was coming closer, but he wouldn't be able to rest until things were more settled. He didn't want to leave things as they were with Loki. He couldn't spend as much time with him as he had with Thor, but he could at least try to get closer to the boy. He could try to make the boy less fearful of him.
Making up his mind, he made his way to the garden. As he passed through the halls, he sent a servant to fetch Thor.

Frigga looked up in surprise when he appeared at the garden gate. "Husband! What brings you here?"

He walked forward and kissed her cheek. "I found myself desirous of better entertainment than a stack of dry political documents. I saw the two of you down here and thought we might all have lunch in the garden. I have already summoned Thor."

Frigga beamed at him. "It has been too long, husband, since we last did that. It is a wonderful suggestion! Did you tell the servants?"

"Not yet. I thought you might want to order things yourself?"

"Certainly. Give me one moment."

Loki rushed to Frigga's side as she began to walk to the gate. She put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You can wait here and talk to your father until I return. I will only be a minute or two."

"But I can…" She was already gone. Loki stood nervously by the gate not wanting to turn around and face his father.

Odin sighed. Well, he hadn't thought it would be easy. "Loki, will you come and sit next to me and tell me of your lessons? What have you been learning today?"

Loki walked reluctantly to the chair his father was holding for him. Once he was seated, he scooted as far from his father as the chair would allow. Odin pretended not to notice.

"W..we w..were..." Loki swallowed and tried to hide his nervousness, "we were practicing casting illusions."

"I see. And was the lesson progressing well?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, Father. Yes, Father."

"I would enjoy seeing what you have learned this day - will you show me?"

Loki's eyes were wide. "Um…"

"I would very much like to see what you can do."

Reluctantly, Loki pushed himself off the chair and stood before Odin. He took a deep breath and then began to call to mind everything he had learned. He had performed the spell perfectly three times now, but with his father watching he found he could only create a weak and temporary illusion. It faltered and flickered before disappearing entirely a few seconds later.

Odin smiled sympathetically. "Never mind. You still did very well." It wasn't a lie. Frigga was teaching him quite an advanced spell, and the fact that he had produced anything was impressive. Odin decided to ask for something simpler that he knew Loki could do easily.

"What about creating a double of yourself? I believe Frigga has said that you are very gifted in that area."

Loki took a deep breath and began to move his arm in the large, sweeping gesture that beginners often used. This time he did better; his double stood impassive and motionless beside him.
Before he could speak, Odin heard Thor say, "Honestly, brother! Are you still performing such childish tricks? You should be practicing with your sword! I saw you training yesterday and saw many areas for improvement."

Loki's double disappeared as soon as Thor began to speak.

Odin frowned. "Your brother produced the illusion at my request. It is impressive that he can do so much at his age. While he undoubtedly needs more practice with the sword, you would also benefit from studying to control your own abilities. You have great power at your fingertips, my son, if you would only try to learn how to wield it!"

Thor threw himself into the chair beside Loki. "I would rather win a battle with strength than with trickery!"

Odin couldn't help but smile at his son's brash self confidence. "A wise king uses every available advantage. Brute strength will not always win the day."

Thor looked muleish. "Brute strength won the day for Grandfather Bor in Svartalfheim. And it was brute strength that won the day in Jotunheim when you defeated the frost giants!"

Odin couldn't deny it. "There are times when there is nothing left to do than to deliver a show of strength."

He was pleased to see Loki staring at him with interest. "You have a question, my son?"

He saw Loki flash look at Thor, as if he thought Odin was addressing him.

"Loki?" Odin clarified. Was it really such a rare occurrence for him to address Loki? Or was it the words he had used - 'my son'? Surely, he often referred to Loki that way…

Loki cleared his throat and asked - his voice trembling only a little - "Did you really defeat the monsters in Jotunheim?"

Odin started in horror. "Loki, the Jotnar are not monsters…"

Thor interrupted him, in a way no-one else in Asgard would dare to do. "No, they are not monsters when faced with our father! They are little more than dull animals awaiting slaughter! Father, I have told Loki many times of your tales from the war with Jotunheim, but I am sure he would love to hear them from your own lips!"

There was a sound behind him and Odin turned to see Frigga, her face frozen in horror. They must not let this continue; neither of their children should be allowed to think of the Jotnar as monsters - and certainly not animals. Loki, especially, could not grow up thinking of his own people as that way; to one day think those things about himself…

"Thor, Loki, you…"

Thor interrupted again. "Father, tell him the story of the beasts you slew with magical fire!" He turned to his brother. Loki's eyes widened as his brother gripped his shoulder. "They screamed in agony as they burned alive, their flesh melting from their bodies as they…"

"Enough!"

As Odin's voice overrode that of his son, Loki jumped and looked ready to bolt. Odin felt a sinking feeling. His attempt to get closer to Loki seemed to be making things worse instead of better.
Frigga hurried to stand behind Loki's chair and put a hand on his shoulder. Like Odin, she seemed to be searching to find the right things to say.

"But Father…"

Frigga smiled tightly at her eldest son. “Your father’s right, that's quite enough. We will speak more about this later, but for now we will enjoy this lovely lunch that your father has planned for us. There will be no more talk of battles and wars. We will talk as a normal family for once.”

She sat down decisively and turned expectantly to her family. “So…”

Thor was angry about being told to stop; he refused to meet her eyes, his arms folded over his chest. Loki was staring at her as if begging her to save him. Odin seemed to be lost in thought.

They sat quietly as the servants brought the food and set it before them.

Frigga searched for something to say. "Loki has been progressing well with his lessons."

She had no idea what she had said wrong. Loki’s face flushed and his eyes fell to his plate while Thor snickered.

Odin tried to smooth over the moment. "He was showing me a little of what he learned."

Frigga turned to Loki, smiling, only to hear him mumble, "Didn't work."

"Oh." Silence again. This time she turned to Thor. "And what of your lessons, Thor? Are they going well?"

He beamed. "Indeed, Mother! We were practicing hand-to-hand combat this morning and I did exceptionally well - even our trainer remarked on my skill! He said he believed I could even take on a frost giant and be victorious!"

Loki gazed at him in wonder. “Really? You would win against one of the monsters?”

Thor faltered for a moment. The trainer hadn't said that exactly; he had praised Thor's skill, certainly, but he had gone on to say that Thor needed to practice more if he ever hoped to triumph in hand-to-hand combat with an enemy. That led Thor and his friends to question the man further about which enemies the prince might defeat. The trainer had eventually conceded that Thor might - one day and with a great deal of practice - triumph against a smaller, less skilled Jotun warrior.

Before he could answer his brother, however, Frigga interrupted sharply. "I said, no talk of fighting."

Loki - being Loki - immediately corrected, "Actually, you said no talk of battles or wars. And we weren’t. We were talking about fighting."

Frigga turned a sharp look on him and he fell silent. They ate in silence for a few minutes more.

“The weather is particularly fine today,” said Odin, trying again.

"Yes! Yes, it is," replied Frigga. "Very fine."

Silence again.

This time Thor spoke. "I saw them loading up a carriage in the yard - is someone leaving?"

Odin mentally cursed. Of all the subjects to pick! “The ambassador to Vanaheim is returning home
with his prince."

They all pretended not to notice that Loki suddenly jumped and dropped his fork. He slid off his chair and fumbled for it with shaking fingers.

"Leave it, Loki," said Frigga. "I have another one here you can use."

Loki returned to his seat, avoiding their eyes. He took the proffered fork from Frigga, but didn't begin eating again.

The rest of them continued to eat in silence until Odin pushed his chair back, able to stand it no longer. "Well… I must return to work. This has been…” he searched for a suitable word and gave up. "I will see you all at dinner." He hurried away.

As soon as Odin was out of sight, Loki asked quietly, "May I be excused?"

Frigga nodded her permission and Loki fled from the table.

Thor - now freed from the burden of uncomfortable conversation - leaned forward and took a large handful of sandwiches. He grinned at his mother between mouthfuls. “These really are very good!”

Frigga stared at him in disbelief before pouring herself another cup of tea and sinking back into her chair.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully, it won't be too long before I post the next chapter - it just needs to be edited. In it, Odin tries to make things better... I think we all know how that's going to go...!
Sorry this took so long. It's worse than you think, because I've had the chapter written for weeks - it just needed to be edited. Life just got crazy. I invited five people to Christmas dinner; eleven people said they were coming - one vegetarian, one gluten free (I don't have a problem with either, except it's a lot to think about when you thought you were just going to stuff a chicken for five people and call it good!)... I also got called for jury duty... my hubby has been interviewing for a new job and they're taking forever to decide, so I'm hopping about like a cat on a hot tin roof while we wait... and to top it all off, I've had a weird sort of migraine/vertigo thing for about three weeks now that just gets triggered every time I look at a computer screen (nothing serious, just annoying)!

Also, AdrianaBanner mentioned (as BlackWitchesCat mentioned once before) about Loki's birthday, and it immediately gave me an idea and made me start writing that, instead of finishing the chapter I already had written. Although, I'm glad I did - I had forgotten about birthdays, and he needs to have one!

Anyway, that's me explaining how the dog ate my homework! If my hubby gets the job (fingers crossed!), we'll be moving (I love moving house, is that weird?), so it may be a while before I update.

Also on the subject of birthdays, I read somewhere that Loki's birthday was December 17th (although I couldn't find any sources to back that up; it just comes up if you google 'when is Loki's birthday?'). Anyway, I choose to believe it, because it's also my mother's birthday, so - happy birthday to them both (and anyone else, obviously) and in honor of the day, here's an update (finally)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"It was good to see you at lunch today. I can't remember the last time we had lunch in the garden." Frigga was sitting at the mirror in their room, unpinning her hair.

Odin gave her an ironic smile. "Yes, that was an enjoyable experience, wasn't it? Definitely one of my better ideas. I'm sure we are all desperate to repeat the experience."

"Husband, it was a good idea. Just because it didn't go exactly as you hoped, it doesn't mean it wasn't worth the attempt."

"I think it's fair to say that it was the opposite of everything I'd hoped." He picked up the hairbrush and began to brush her long hair.

She closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the sensation. "What were you hoping for?"

He sighed. "For a happy family lunch. For unity and laughter. For Loki to stop cowering around me as though I were a frost gi…" he broke off as he realised what he was saying.

They were both silent as they considered his slip. Frigga spoke first. "It seems we have all been remiss in speaking the way we do."
"It was never my intention for the boy to think that way about his own people. I suppose we are so used to talking about the Jotner as the enemy; it never occurred to me that Loki would regard them that way too."

"They both seem to think of them as little more than beasts. We need to teach them that the Jotnar are not all savage brutes."

"How? All of Asgard believes them to be so. If you wander through the marketplace, it is all you hear - as stupid as a frost giant, as ugly as a frost giant, as evil as a frost giant. It seems we blame them for every ill."

"We must do something. When the time comes to tell him, he must not think of himself as a monster." Frigga paused and caught Odin's eye in the mirror. "We should have told him already. We should have told him from the beginning."

It was a point they argued many times. Frigga had wanted to tell him as soon as he could have understood. She recognized her hypocrisy now. She hadn't seen a problem in telling him, because she hadn't really cared enough about him; she wouldn't have worried if he was upset or unhappy or hurt.

Odin's voice broke into her thoughts. "When? When was it a good time to tell him? The secret must be kept from Asgard and Jotunheim alike. If Laufey thought we had a legitimate heir waiting to take the throne, he would immediately try to have him killed. If any Asgardian found out that we were raising a Jotun as one of our own - a Jotun in line to our throne - Loki's life would be worth nothing."

"He is a discreet child. He can keep a secret."

"Certainly, now that he is older. But how could we tell him now? When both he and his brother think of Jotuns as evil, mindless monsters?"

Frigga sighed. "You're right, I'm sorry. There are no easy answers to this, husband. But perhaps now is the time to start to teach them otherwise. To teach them what you know of the Jotnar."

"I know little more about them than how they fight. And what I know of Laufey is not to his credit."

"But your mother…"

"Died shortly after I was born and was rarely mentioned. I know nothing about the Jotnar apart from their conduct in war."

"Were there no acts of bravery you could relate? No noble deeds?"

Odin slowly nodded as he considered the idea. "There were some... As ever, my dear, your advice is sound. I will talk to them tomorrow and tell them what I know."

Frigga grasped his hand in hers. "Do not get carried away with your war stories, my love. This must be a story to emphasize our similarities, not to glorify our battles."

He kissed her hand. "Of course, my dear. Of course."

At breakfast the next morning, Odin told his sons that they would be spending the morning with him. They exchanged nervous glances; such a thing had never happened before.
Odin smiled as he led them into his study. "Please, sit down."

Loki moved to the straight-backed wooden chairs in front of the desk and sat down. He looked around curiously; he had never been in this room before. He stared in wonder at the books lining the walls before noticing that Thor hadn’t sat beside him. Instead, he was sprawled on a comfortable sofa by the window.

Odin leaned back into his large armchair and looked up in surprise when he saw where Loki was sitting. Why was the boy sitting there, as though he was a clerk waiting for orders? He gestured a little impatiently. "Over here, Loki, next to your brother."

Loki blushed scarlet and hurried to the sofa. Thor lay across most of it; when he saw his brother looking for a place to sit, he grinned and stayed where he was. Loki gritted his teeth and perched on the edge.

Odin didn’t seem to notice. "I thought it would be a good idea to talk to the two of you and give you a first-hand account of some of Asgard's history."

Thor sat up straighter. "Will you tell us how you defeated the monsters in Jotunheim?" He turned to Loki. "It is a great tale! When I was a boy, I would sit here while Father would tell me wondrous stories of heroism and valor!"

Odin thought back to those days. Thor had been even younger than Loki was now, bright and eager and merry. It had been a regular thing with them; a ritual, of sorts. Thor would creep out of his room at night and come to Odin's study, begging for a bedtime story, and Odin would sigh and pretend he couldn’t remember any until Thor prompted him… and Thor would hang on his every word while Odin spun tales until Thor fell asleep. Then the business of the kingdom had begun to get in the way, and Thor got older and didn’t care for bedtime stories anymore...

Odin tried to remember telling Loki bedtime stories, but couldn't. Surely he must have? He tried to picture Loki sitting here in this room, and again, the memory didn’t come. He shook his head. He must have; it was just that he was becoming forgetful. It was definitely time for the Odinsleep. But first, there were things he needed to do.

"Boys," he began, "I wanted to tell you of Jotunheim."

He saw the boys exchange an eager glance. The eagerness fell away quickly as Odin began to recount the political status of the realms at that time. He told them of the issues that beset the Jotnar people. He described in great detail the dual problems of over-population and famine, which finally led King Laufey to lead his men to break their peace agreement with Asgard and invade Midgard.

Perhaps he spent too long trying to explain to the boys the reasons for the invasion. When he next looked across at them, Thor was nearly asleep and Loki was craning his head to read the titles of the books.

Odin paused; he had been trying to explain Laufey's reasons and, therefore, make him appear more of a sympathetic character, but Odin didn't think either of the boys had really been listening.

He pursed his lips in irritation. “Thor! Loki! Have you been paying attention?"

Thor jumped, startled out of his doze, but Loki immediately answered, "Yes, Father."

"What was the last thing I spoke of?"

“The Asgardian envoy was sent to King Laufey…” Loki began in a monotone. Odin waved a hand
for him to stop. Good, at least the boy had been listening.

Thor rolled his eyes. He knew of Loki’s gift for listening with half an ear and being able to repeat back the last thing said, while actually taking in nothing. At the same time, he was glad Loki had answered - he hadn't been listening at all. "Father," he whined plaintively, "can you not tell us of your victory there? Of the battles?"

Odin frowned. “I am coming to that. But first it is important that you understand the reasons for the war - the reasons given on both sides.”

"We do, Father!" Thor looked at Loki, who nodded eagerly.

Loki had initially been envious at the thought of Thor coming here to be told stories by their father, but now that he had listened to Odin drone on for what felt like hours, he wasn't sure.

Thor evidently agreed. "Can you not tell us something of the fights? How the frost giants could be defeated in hand to hand combat? Loki would love to hear such a tale!"

Loki nodded eagerly. Odin saw that the boys were thoroughly bored. He sighed, realizing that he had lost their attention. Perhaps, if he told more about the battles, he could regain their interest and still try to work in some tales of Jotun bravery and valor.

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Loki’s eyes were round with excitement. "What happened next, father? Did you slay the beasts?"

Even Thor was perched on the edge of his seat.

Odin continued with the old tale, gratified by their enthusiasm. It was a story he had recounted so many times that it was more like a recitation. "We advanced on the enemy and they ran to meet us, their teeth bared and their ice spears at the ready… Tyr was fighting valiantly at my side, but the numbers were too great. I looked to see him pinned down, but I was able to leap to his side, driving Gungnir into one of the brutes only to see another one take its place…"

Odin broke off, suddenly remembering the moment he was describing and why he was telling the story.

It hadn't been a beast; it had been a Jotun, fighting side by side with a companion. When one fell, the other had rushed towards Tyr in a frenzy, and Odin had struck it down with the same weapon that had killed the first.

In the throes of death, the Jotun had crawled towards the other body, reaching for it… Odin remembered stepping forward and driving his weapon through the Jotun's chest with a death blow. It died a few feet away from its partner, one hand forever outstretched… Odin remembered the grin he and Tyr had shared before they turned to fight again.

He hadn't thought about that before. He had always told the tale as they told all of their tales, filled with good and evil, death and glory. Now, with a different perspective, he thought of the creatures fighting together - perhaps friends, perhaps family; possibly even lovers. Perhaps, to the Jotner, Asgardians were the animals - the beasts that killed friends and family alike in cold blooded cruelty.

"Father?"

Odin saw Loki, watching him curiously with his bright, inquisitive gaze.
The reason his perspective had changed. The reason he was telling this story.

But, carried away by the tale, Odin had forgotten why he was telling it. He had fallen so easily into his old ways, talking about beasts and monsters, just as he had always done. He hadn't told the boys tales of Jotun nobility and bravery; he had told them a tale of Jotun evil and Asgardian victory.

He thought of the dead Jotun lying in the snow, an arm outstretched. He could not tell that story; he could not tell his sons, boys that thought him a hero, that he had struck down a living creature as it grieved and then stepped over its corpse as if it was nothing.

Thor was also looking worried. "Is something wrong, Father?"

Odin shook his head. He opened his mouth to say that yes, it was all wrong; that none of them had been entirely right and none entirely wrong - that there should have been other ways to deal with the Jotner instead of forcing them into a war. That Jotuns were people, just as they were; that they loved and hated, laughed and cried, even as the Aesir did.

He meant to say that; but he found he couldn't. He couldn't bear to wipe away the look of hero-worship he saw in the eyes of his children.

He said, "I see that it is late and you must be ready for your lunch. We will finish this story another time."

Thor and Loki looked disappointed, but for the first time in a very long time, Loki seemed reluctant to leave his father.

Chapter End Notes

Odin thinks of the Jotun as 'it' in this chapter. This is simply because - despite what he says and is trying to do - he still doesn't quite think of them as people.

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