When You’re a Stranger, There’s No Place Like Home
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Summary

After Thor and Odin learned how much Loki’s repressed Jotun sexuality had been affecting his mental state, they devised a plan to bring him home and treat him, but without the Tesseract, Thor pressed the Avengers into helping. After sex, SEX and more sex, Loki started feeling slightly less out of his mind and wound up helping the Avengers save the world.

Now Thor and Loki are returning home, with three SHIELD agents in tow, and there are still a lot of problems to solve.
This story is part two of the series. Part one is 'Your True Birthright (Was Never a Throne), and I recommend reading that first, as I am not sure if this part will make much sense otherwise.

I borrowed the idea of Loki being an ice maiden- a smaller, more feminized and more fertile Jotun, from Laufey's Mate/ Ice Maiden/ Laufey's Bride by Icemaidenstory, though I tweaked it a little. It's a terrific story, I highly recommend it!

Welcome to Asgard, everyone.
“Father,” Loki still felt like a fraud, calling Odin this, but he had been greeted as ‘son’, and it paid to be gracious when begging a favor. Gracious and humble. Thus Loki lowered his eyes, and very abjectly requested, “Please change me back.”

Thor’s hold tightened a fraction as they all waited for the All-Father’s answer, but before he even spoke, Loki could see the familiar denial coming. It would be ‘No, Loki,’ just as it always had been. No and no and no.

“We will speak of this later,” Odin proclaimed, brushing aside Loki’s request as if it were of no consequence that he was to be paraded through the streets of Asgard like this, to be made a figure of ridicule in every tavern and alehouse by nightfall.

“Thor,” and at least Odin sounded no less disapproving of his true son as he went on, “Who are these mortals, and why have you brought them here?”

Thor relinquished Loki to Frigga, who had come forward with arms outstretched. “These are warriors of SHIELD who fought beside me to save Midgard from the Chitauri, and they are come here at my invitation to witness justice and seek recompense for Loki’s crimes.”

Loki flinched to hear this stated so baldly, but Frigga was drawing him into an almost painfully tight embrace, and the familiar scent of her hair drove everything else temporarily from his mind.

“Loki,” she cried, her mellifluous voice choked with suppressed emotion, “We thought you lost to us!”

Frigga in tears was too much for him. Attempting humor, Loki replied, “I hope you did not send all my books off in a funeral boat. Some of them are one of a kind.”

“You took a thousand years off my life,” she teased. “You must not frighten me like that!”

She shook him slightly in reprimand, then hugged him harder, her half armor biting painfully through the soft gray sweater Tony Stark had gifted him with, once he had accepted that his old armor could not be made to fit. Stark had offered to make him a new outfit, but Loki had not wanted to believe he would be trapped in his new body long enough to warrant the effort. Now he wished he had.

Odin grunted irritably, but apparently accepted that Thor had acted responsibly, and that even beings he thought backwards did have certain rights. Asgard had declared Midgard a protectorate long ago, which gave its inhabitants a right to appeal to the All-Father for help or relief, though this hadn’t been tested since the mortals had ceased to pray to the Asgardians as their gods. Ironically, most of Odin’s final worshipers had been killed by invading frost giants before their prayers had been answered, making it less of an abandonment when the ‘gods’ had withdrawn to their own world.

The king more enthusiastically accepted the Tesseract, which Coulson handed over with his compliments. Fury had been less than happy about giving it up, but Thor had convinced him by repeating Loki’s warnings that it would continue to attract highly dangerous attention to Midgard, as long as it remained there.

“Be welcome to Asgard,” Odin told them. “We know much of what has occurred since Loki arrived in your realm, but we would hear your testimony as well, at a later time and better place.”
“We are at your disposal,” Coulson nodded politely. Romanov and Barton stood silently at attention behind him, making their roles as honor guards clear.

“Let us return to the palace,” Odin commanded, turning his back on the humans and putting them from his mind. “There is much to be done.”

He gestured with Gungnir, and the ranks of the Einherjar parted, revealing a flying boat awaiting them. He strode towards the lowered gangplank without a backward glance at any of them.

“Mother,” Still holding Frigga’s hands in his own, Loki made a final appeal, “Would you at least cast an illusion and make me look like myself again before we go?”

“I could,” she told him, releasing one of his hands to cup his cheek instead. “But Loki, there is no use in trying to keep your heritage a secret now.”

“Why not? Does all of Asgard now know I am Jotun?” A spurt of nauseous rage ran through him as he imagined Odin excusing all of his so-called ‘son’s’ misdeeds as a result of his bad blood. “Did you announce it at my funeral?”

“No,” Frigga’s expression was worried. “But it will come out at your trial, my love. It has to, to explain how ill you have been, and why.”

“I would rather rot in the dungeons,” Loki growled, uncertain whether or not if he meant it. “Am I to have no say in this? In any of it?”

“Of course you will have a say,” Frigga promised. “Once you are yourself again.”

“That was what I was asking for!”

Thor had escorted the SHIELD delegation up onto the flying boat, and had returned. “Loki, Mother, is everything well?”

Loki turned, preparing to unload his rising ire on Thor, who knew very well that everything was far from well, but a touch on his arm stopped him as Frigga took his wrist and started tracing one of the runes on the cuff there. It lit up and her fingers moved to another, and he felt some of the restrictions on his magic easing. She did not disable all the spells, or remove the bindings, but the least and simplest of his magics were returned to him.

As she repeated the procedure on the other cuff, Loki gratefully called on his own magic to summon the desired illusion of his Aesir form, dressed in his armor, though he left off the helm. He was still a Jotun aberration underneath, but he felt more at ease at least looking like his old self.

“Mother,” Thor protested, screwing up his ox-like features in dumb confusion, “Loki has not seen the healers, and he is yet to be tried for his misdeeds. If you give him his magic, how do we know he will not vanish and flee?”

“You need not worry,” the All-Mother assured Thor, as she captured Loki’s hand and placed it on her arm, inviting him to be her escort. “Your brother will stay with me, I am sure.”

“Of course, Mother,” Loki replied, smirking to see his brother so thwarted, while inwardly acknowledging his mother had neatly cornered him with her calculated trust. The cuffs still restricted his most dangerous abilities, including his ability to hide from Heimdall’s sight, so it would not be as easy as that to run, and he would not betray his mother for so small a chance.

When they boarded their transport, they both were treated to a disapproving look from Odin.
“You should not indulge his delusions,” the king told his wife.

“A little kindness will not go amiss,” she countered, leading Loki past to settle onto a cushioned bench next to her.

Shaking his head, the All-Father took the seat of honor in the prow. Thor cast Loki one last doubtful look before going to sit with their mortal guests, all of whom were covertly goggling at the views of the city in the distance and the galaxies stretching out above their heads.

Even if he had been willing to break his mother’s heart again by running away, Loki would have hated to leave now and miss seeing how Asgard would react to the humans, who were far from the easily impressed primitives they were believed to be.

The Realm Eternal was long overdue for a little change.

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Clint Barton had grown up in a circus, so he was no stranger to pomp and fanfare. Even if the kind he was accustomed to had all been painted props and playacting, while the royalty and the wealth and the weapons in this place were entirely real, it was all the same show, in the ways that mattered. The power of pageantry was in getting the audience to believe in it. Clint respected the showmanship, but he was no rube. A show was a show, and when it came his turn to perform, he knew he could impress as well as any of these guys in their fancy hats. Rather than pay attention to the setting, Clint kept his focus on the people around him.

Natasha was either unnerved by or disapproving of the ostentation on display, he thought. It was hard to tell. Maybe a little of both, considering it looked as if they were flying a sailing ship through what seemed to be outer space, and practically every spear, helmet, breastplate and the entire city rising up at the end of the truncated bridge seemed to be gilded with real gold. It was all but blinding, it was so shiny, and while Tasha had done her best to shed her Red Room conditioning, the communist dislike towards wealth still resurfaced every now and then. Barton suspected it was part of the reason she found Stark so trying. Not that Stark wouldn’t be irritating if he was dirt poor, probably.

Coulson seemed genuinely delighted to be here, in his reserved way. Maybe not quite as thrilled as he’d been at getting to meet and then go into a fight with THE Captain America, but he was definitely enjoying the trip so far, though he was no more over-awed by the fancy trappings of power than Clint was. Coulson was used to dealing with Earth’s elites, from monarchs and presidents to generals, billionaires and super villains, not to mention Fury. Dealing with Fury had likely been good practice at dealing with this new one-eyed, bad-tempered dictator. Clint expected that Coulson would soon be handling this one as smoothly as he did their boss.

Thor was obviously relieved to be back on his own stomping grounds, however much he enjoyed Pop Tarts and television and Jane Foster. He slid into his place like a knife into a sheath, or a sword into a scabbard. He seemed larger here, and more arrogant, though Clint couldn’t put his finger on anything in particular that made him think that. Maybe it was his treatment of Loki. What had seemed protective back on Earth now seemed downright condescending.

More revealing was how Loki’s parents were reacting to having their wayward son returned. Clint hadn’t spent as much time talking to Thor as he’d wanted to, between one thing and another, but
he’d had all the details from Natasha on Thor’s claim that somehow concealing Loki’s race and gender from everyone, including Loki, had made him mentally unbalanced, and that their father had come up with some disturbing but vague plans for his younger son’s cure.

Unless Thor had misinterpreted, those plans had included rape, or maybe only the medical iteration of it. Tasha had thought so, and Clint hadn’t wanted to pursue that line of questioning much, what with his own experiences still raw. From the way Loki had forced Clint to do things to him with Stark’s collection of toys, he guessed that Loki would have enjoyed whatever this ‘treatment’ had been, at least while it was happening. Maybe not so much after, though. It might yet happen that way, since Thor mentioned that Loki still needed to visit these ‘healers’.

Odin hadn’t shown a lot of emotion while greeting his kids, not even the one who had been thought dead for a while. Clint couldn’t tell if the king of Asgard was just reserved in his public persona, or if he was as cold and distant in private as well. He had seen that lack of warmth, as well as his refusal to change Loki back to his more accustomed color and gender, had upset Loki, but not surprised him.

The family dynamic was revealed a little more when the queen had swept Loki into her arms, made a fuss over him and then given him his magic back without a care for how crazy or dangerous he might still be. Odin and Thor clearly disapproved, but she disregarded them, keeping her boy by her side. Loki’s sly grin at his mother’s taking his side elicited what looked like a conditioned glare from Thor, and Clint hazarded a guess that this was a familiar family pattern as well.

The guards in the fancy armor were all trying for stone-faced professionalism, but like humans, they could not entirely keep their feelings hidden. Clint had had a SHIELD course in reading micro-expressions, a few years back. He wasn’t as good at it as Phil or Natasha, but he still remembered how to interpret a few, the guards were secretly angry and disgusted, but he couldn’t tell at what.

As their flying boat winged towards the golden city, Thor began to point out the sights, and Loki began snarkily adding sarcastic asides, mocking Thor’s ancestors when he pointed out giant gold statues, ridiculing everything Thor wished to praise, much to the ‘Thunder God’s increasing displeasure, until Thor just clamped his jaw shut, and the ride continued in silence, except for the slight rush of air being parted.

Neither of Thor’s parents had made the slightest admonition of Loki’s baiting his brother. It sounded as if it might be a long-standing tradition, and was not unlike the bickering of all most siblings, but Clint was now pretty sure that most of the guards didn’t see it that way, and despised their second prince. It was just hard to tell if he’d earned their enmity with his past behavior, his general attitude of contempt for their values, or if it was at least partially a result of his having shown up blue and sporting breasts.

He put the problem aside to discuss with Phil and Tasha, once they were alone, and leaned back in his seat to get his first close look at Thor’s home.

Asgard was fantastic, in the sense of being very much like a Peter Jackson film, and extremely surreal. From the bridge beneath them or the occasional floating building, it looked like a the epitome of a magic kingdom.

Loki and Thor had both proclaimed that while there was such a thing as magic, Asgard was also a much more advanced civilization than Earth’s. Maybe so, but it also seemed to favor a very archaic style. The guards all carried spears and swords and shields. Was this the way their soldiers all dressed, or just the king’s honor guard, the way some Earth royalty had their guards wear old-fashioned get ups? Or were the seemingly primitive weapons more than they appeared, like Thor’s hammer? Loki had said they believed in close quarters combat as a matter of honor.
Their transport ship seemed to be held up and propelled by some mysteriously glowing circles in back (maybe something like Stark’s repulser tech?), but why was it styled as a as Viking ship meant to sail on water? It was made of metal, but the metal was formed to resemble wooden planking.

As they grew close enough to the city to make out people, Clint saw people on horseback among them, and above, scattered among the towers, very advanced gun turrets, so Asgard didn’t limit itself to hand to hand weapons all the time. Was this Viking theme something ingrained in this culture for over a thousand years, or just a fad? How long was a fad to people who lived for thousands of years?

A touch on his arm pulled him out of his random musing, and he looked over at Natasha.

“Are you okay?” she asked, because she knew how much he hadn’t wanted to come on this trip.

Clint shrugged. “Fine.”

Her lips turned faintly down, but this wasn’t the place to discuss it. She shook her head, then touched the tiny camera hidden in the zipper of her suit questioningly. He nodded to indicate his own, located in the frame of his sunglasses, was recording everything. Clint hoped he would have a chance to see her recordings, later. They always caught dozens of shots of men staring at Tasha’s cleavage.

The thought made him grin and give her camera a little wave. She kicked him, but smiled back before Coulson’s raised eyebrow returned them both to the job at hand: learning all they could about Asgard.

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The queen of Asgard had extended her attention to the mortal visitors only far enough to ensure Odin would not be excessively rude and insular in his impatience to move forward with his plans, then turned all her attention to her restored child. His happiness at her embrace had been a balm to her broken heart, but after they boarded their ship, he had soon started trying the nerves of everyone around him, including herself.

Loki had ever been his own worst enemy, Frigga thought, as her miraculously returned adopted child mocked and jibed and heaped scorn on his brother, Asgard’s heroes and traditions. She wanted to sigh in frustration, even through the elated relief of having him home and safe.

She could easily read Odin’s disapproval, and the contained anger of the guards and the boat crew, and Thor’s open anger at being ridiculed in front of his latest companions. She made a few attempts to lead Loki into less intemperate conversations, but he would not be diverted, and she knew, with a mother’s awareness of her child, that Loki, so clever and perceptive about everyone except himself, would not be able to parse the difference between even a slight censure of his behavior and a disapproval of his whole self.

Later, she could take her husband and her firstborn aside and try to explain to them that this was Loki’s pride and desperation talking, that he was testing their love, and attempting to control the situation by rejecting Asgard first, to better pretend it did not hurt when Asgard spurned him, but there was no way for her to convey that explanation to those others, much less to all they people they would be talking to later, about Loki’s impertinence and lack of remorse for what all of them thought was his treason, though it had been no such thing.

Frigga could recall, though she doubted anyone else did, Loki’s attempts to be accepted, as a boy,
and maybe she would have to remind Thor and Odin that Loki had not been the one to start the war of insults. He had just turned out to be much more skilled at them, and had honed them to wield instead when it became clear that he would never match his brother or his brother’s friends with more traditional weapons.

She had begun teaching him magic as a child, to give him something to excel at, some light of his own, without considering how it would further alienate him from Asgard’s warrior culture. Odin had allowed it, knowing full well how useful it could be. The All-Father had tried to persuade Loki to keep his magic discreet, but Loki had always longed for recognition, and had tried to gain it by going along on Thor’s adventures. He had wanted to impress his older brother and their friends, and thus used his magic, often to their great advantage. In turn, they had spurned him for it.

A less headstrong youth might have stopped seeking out their company, and found others who shared his love of the arcane. Loki had persisted, determined to force them to respect what they would not, and neither Odin or Frigga had thought to intervene. After all, what parents did not wish their sons to be close and support one another?

Things had only gotten worse as they grew older, and Loki’s differences had expanded into the carnal. Frigga had suspected Loki’s inclination towards what seemed his own sex early, but Odin would not hear of it, especially not after Loki had gone on what she had seen as a clear campaign of deceit, making a show of seducing some of the palace’s maids. The incident with the wall builder had convinced her that she was right, but her husband had been equally certain that it was merely the ruse Loki had claimed, smiling through a face pale as new milk under the splash of giant’s blood.

After that day, Loki had grown more and more secretive and guileful, even with her. Her efforts to draw him out had done nothing but drive him away, until she had given up and stopped trying, hoping he would return, or that Odin would relent and tell him the truth.

She had never expected the truth to shatter Loki so. She had not even seen it, when she had placed Gungnir in his hands and made him king while Odin slept and Thor was banished. Her son had grown too skilled at his lies.

She had made so many mistakes with Loki, and her world had nearly crumbled when she’d thought him dead. Now she had a second chance, and she was determined not to make those mistakes again. Unfortunately, there was no guarantee that her good intentions would prevent her from making all new ones. She’d had nothing but good intentions before, after all.

The ship glided to a stop at the entrance to the palace proper, and Loki’s hand captured hers. He stood, helping her up and leading her forward to where the others were assembling to disembark.

Odin eyed how Loki had usurped the king’s usual role of escort, but made no effort to part him from her. That was wise of him, since Frigga had no intention of allowing anyone to do so. Not before she had time to talk to Loki, at least.

Servants met them at the gates, and a few issued instructions divested them of the mortals, who went off to be installed in the ambassadors wing, accompanied by Thor. Odin had also called for a feast, both to celebrate Thor’s successful return, and to fete their guests.

Frigga had frowned at Odin, who had to be well aware that Loki was in no state for feasting, but she did not comment. It was no one’s fault that it would be a slight to her second son. Thor had been victorious in his mission, and more, and ambassadors were always greeted with such ceremony. It was expected.

The king just shook his head, looking weary, as affairs of state in the form of his steward and
secretaries attempted to crowd him, all politely but emphatically insisting on answers to their many questions and concerns.

“\textquote“I must attend to a few things,\textquote” Odin said, holding them off a little longer. \textquote“I will meet you in the healing rooms as soon as I am able.\textquote”

Beside her, Loki flinched. She felt this through his still clenching fingers as they gripped tighter and went chill. His projected illusion maintained an air of bored indifference.

\textquote“The healers can wait until morning,\textquote” Frigga decided aloud, with a wave at one of her own hovering attendants that she should go and inform Eir and her fellow healers. The girl scurried off to do so.

Now Odin looked distinctly discomfited. Had he believed Loki could be somehow fixed in a matter of hours, or simply planned to hand his adopted child off to the healers and leave him there until he had been put right?

\textquote“He cannot be left unattended, wife.\textquote” This was a question.

She answered it, her voice firm and unyielding. \textquote“He will stay with me until morning. I am sure everyone will understand my not attending one feast.\textquote”

She and Loki would celebrate his homecoming in private.

He looked from her to the faintly smiling image of Loki and back, then sighed. \textquote“Very well, my dear. Send word, and I will join you to consult the healers in the morning.\textquote”

Stepping forward without letting go of Loki’s hand, Frigga kissed Odin’s cheek to let him know she forgave him, and they parted to attend to their chosen tasks. He to the running of his kingdom, and she to the well-being of her family.
“You need not miss the feast on my account, Mother,” Loki offered, after Odin had gone. “I am sure there is already a cell prepared for my coming, if you’ve already found some other use for my old rooms.”

He didn’t know why he was lashing out at her, now, when she had been nothing but kind, and happy to see him. But she had always been kind, and it had not prevented her from lying to him just as thoroughly as her husband had. Maybe more so.

“Your rooms are still yours, Loki,” she promised gravely. “But I do not want to give up your company for the time being, so you and I will have our own private feast. I will arrange to have all your favorite dishes.”

“I am not hungry.” He sounded surly, even to himself, but she only smiled and replied, “Then you can watch me eat.”

It was an old ritual between the two of them. He had always come to her whenever he was heartsick at having been excluded by Thor and his companions, or at having been made mock of for his poor showing in combat. She would send for the foods he loved best, trying to cheer him.

“Mother,” he protested, attempting to free his hands from hers. “I am not a boy any more!”

“Yes, that is what we need to talk about.”

Loki nearly wrenched loose and fled, but the corridor was lined with guards. He wouldn’t get more than a few steps.

“In private,” Frigga went on, pitching her voice low enough not to be overhead. “There are things I would tell you about now, so you will not be surprised by them on the morrow.”

As he had been so disastrously surprised by the discovery of his birth, did she mean?

Reluctantly, he nodded. “Very well. I would be pleased to dine with you, Mother.”
She released one of his hands, but, tucking the other firmly into the crook of her elbow, towed him to her private chambers, keeping up a light smattering of conversation about a dozen inconsequential things that had happened in his absence. Mostly she talked of love affairs, and weddings, and the births and impending births of babies, and blithely ignored how the servants and courtiers they passed in the hallways would stare, then avert their eyes at the sight of him.

Loki kept quiet as they walked, repressing the impulse to tell her about Stark, and Banner, and the kindness they had both shown him, in such different ways. He had no desire at all to tell her anything about the Hulk, or about Barton.

Heimdall would have seen it all, but how much had he told the All-Father? The guardian was notoriously reticent about sharing what he saw, unless it was a threat to Asgard. Was their younger prince’s lewd and depraved behavior such a threat? How much was going to be revealed to and by the healers, or at his ‘trial’? Would Frigga still want anything to do with him if she learned how low and wretched he truly was?

He brooded, his mood sinking further and further as she chattered, and while she ate and he picked at morsels, washing them down with too many cups of honeyed mead.

As the room began to spin, Frigga’s river of gossip dried up, and she reached out and took his cup before he could fill it again from the sweating gold pitcher. She poured him a cup of fruit juice instead, casting a simple sobriety cantrip on it and handing it back to him expectantly.

As little as he wished to be sober, Loki obediently drank it down, then set the cup down with sufficient force to rattle the plates.

“Well?” he demanded. She was the one who wanted to talk, so let her start.

“I am sorry, Loki,” she said, quietly. “So is your father, even if he has a hard time expressing it.”

“He is not my father. Laufey was my father. Or was Odin lying about that too?”

“Laufey was your sire, but Odin Borson is your father. He was not always the best father, or the father that you needed, I know, but that does not mean you are not his son, or that he does not love you.”

“He meant to use me!” Loki cried, his voice ringing too loud and high and sharp in his ears. “He told me so, in the Vault!”

“Oh, Loki.” She rose and came over to fold him into her arms, ignoring his stiffness until it melted out of him, and he leaned into her. “We’ve made such a mess of things, but we both love you dearly. You have to believe that.”

“He said he meant to unite Asgard and Jotunheim, through me,” Loki whispered. “What did he mean, then, if not to make me a puppet king of that wretched, frozen world?”

“Oh, my son. My dear child.” She stroked his hair as he leaned against her. “There was never any plan. Only a short-lived idea of a royal marriage, such as Odin and I have made, uniting Asgard and Vanheim.”

“A- what?” Loki drew back, his thoughts spinning wildly. “Between... who?”

“You and Thor, love,” she told him. “But it was impossible without Laufey’s consent, and if he had known we had taken you, he would have been within his rights to demand you back.” Frigga’s normally gentle expression hardened. “He had thrown you away. He did not deserve you, and I
would not have given you back to him, if I had to make war on Jotunheim myself.”

“You meant to marry me to Thor?” Loki didn’t know whether to laugh or start screaming. “A Jotun… whatever I am?”

“It was just a thought. All parents make foolish plans for their children.”

“Extremely foolish,” he commented, still appalled at the very concept of marrying Thor.

“Well, we would not have raised you as his brother, if we had decided to go that route,” Frigga said, smiling sadly. “Though we might have erred in the other direction and things would have worked out no better.”

“Thor did try to convince the mortals that I was a woman. Of sorts. I am not!” he all but shouted.

His mother took his face between her hands and gazed down at him. “You are not, and I know your Jotun form has been a shock to you, but you will have to come to terms with it.”

“No,” he refused. “That isn’t who I am.”

“Do you know who you are?”

“I know who I am not,” he argued, taking her hands from his face.

“That isn’t the answer. That is just running away.”

Loki hunched in his seat. Now even his mother thought he was a coward.

Frigga’s voice softened again, as she put a hand on his shoulder, comfortingly. “I am willing to help you become whoever you want to be, but to do that, you need to understand what you are starting with.”

That… made sense, when he allowed himself to examine the thought. Whether it was by magic, or by some physical means such as alchemy or metallurgy, if he wanted to change something, he needed a thorough understanding of the properties of the original materials, as well as a clear grasp of what he meant to create.

Still, he did not really want to, in this case. “Could you not simply get Fa- the All-Father to change me back?”

“I should think you would wish to learn enough that you can do it for yourself, if you choose.”

“It won’t be my choice if he doesn’t allow me sufficient magic!” he snapped, brandishing the cuffs that were repressing the greater part of his abilities. “I am a prisoner here. I may be for quite some time to come.”

Frigga pulled her chair closer to his and sat down again, taking his hand. “You will have a choice, my dear child, but it will be a choice made from full knowledge of what your options are. You will not shirk the knowledge, or shrink from any facet of yourself out of concern for the opinions of the ignorant.”

“Easy for you to say, Mother. You are loved and admired by all the Realms.”

“That was not always true,” she said. “I wed your father to end the war between Asgard and Vanaheim. Half our subjects thought of me as naught but a war trophy and puppet queen, while the other half accused me of being a witch who would ensorcel the king and rule in his stead.”
He raised his brows at this idea, but didn’t think it was the same at all. The Vanir had never been so despised as the Jotuns were.

“Your father,” she put a clear emphasis on the word, “Is not so all-knowing as his subjects pretend. When he cast his spells on you as an infant, he thought he had made you his son in every way, Loki. He never meant to tell you you had been born of Jotunheim, because to him it was no longer what you were.”

It had been ages since Loki had thought Odin perfect, especially in matters of magic. The All-Father’s powers were not inborn, or gained from centuries of learning. Instead it was the right of the kingship, the Odin-force, more properly called the Asgard force. It was the magic of the realm itself, concentrated by Hlidskjalf and wielded by Gungnir.

Thor would gain it when he took the throne, and use it in much the same way: as brute force. Loki had realized this around the same time he had started gaining real skill at his own magic, and had foolishly hoped that Odin would recognize that he, Loki, would be more suited to make use of such power.

That was before he understood that the Odin-force was tied up with the will of the people, and could not be usurped. Or even wielded by one who was believed to be so. His mother had given Gungnir into his hands while Thor was in exile, but it had never granted him its true power, else he could have ensured his brother would not return and ruin his plans.

“He did not know enough about the Jotnar and their nature, so his changing of you was incomplete,” Frigga continued, “else you would never have changed at the mere touch of your own kind.”

“They are not my kind,” Loki started to snarl, then moderated it to a boorish mumble. To better avoid her too-compassionate gaze, he poured himself more wine. He did take a small meat pie as well, and nibbled, to allay its effects.

“They are a part of you, whether you like it or not, Loki,” his mother pressed on. “They are not the monsters you seem to have made them out to be.”

Snorting derision, Loki barely avoided choking on his bite of lamb and onions in gravy. “Oh come now, Mother. You attended the same feasts as Thor and I, when we were children. You heard all the songs and sagas, and the boasts of your husband’s warriors on how many monstrous frost giants they slew, in the same way they bragged of killing trolls and giant serpents.”

“They only meant that the Jotun warriors were fearsome opponents,” the queen argued, weakly.

Loki tilted her a sardonic smile in return. “It seems I fail at even that. Failed prince and failed warrior and a poor monster as well.”

“They are not monsters, Loki. They are a people, and they are not all warriors, just as all Aesir are not warriors, however much they pretend to be the only ones that matter,” she finished acerbically.

Loki returned her a half smile, because she had been saying that as long as he could recall, usually after some thick-headed warrior or would-be warrior had annoyed her.

Frigga took up her own cup, not to drink but to toy with, agitated. “One of the healers you will see in the morning is… will be able to tell you more. Mengloth studied with Eir, long ago, and has come at her request, as well as mine and Odin’s, to help you.”

She seemed so desperate that he accept this healer, and her proffered assistance. Loki sighed. He did not especially wish to, but was this not part of why he had decided to come home? There had been
something wrong with him, even before he had fallen from the Bifrost, into Thanos’ warping grasp. Hadn’t there?

“If you think she can help.” Loki yawned. His mother’s spell had cleared his head, but the wine still had the effect of relaxing him, and though he had eaten little, the smells and taste of familiar dishes had comforted him in a way nothing had in what seemed a very long time.

“About Mengloth-” his mother began.

“Yes?” Loki yawned again, putting a hand over his mouth as he stretched. “Sorry, I’m very tired.”

“Come and sleep, then,” she urged, leading him to a long couch strewn with soft pillows and helping him off with the still unfamiliar ‘sneakers’ Stark had gifted him.

She smoothed back his hair and covered him with a blanket of her own weaving, imbued with spells of comfort and sweet dreams.

“What were you saying about this healer?” he asked, even as his eyes were drifting shut.

“It can wait till morning,” she promised. “Sleep well.”

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As he led the three SHIELD agents to quarters reserved for envoys and their staffs, Thor half-heartedly pointed out some of the palace’s more spectacular features, to which the mortals responded with polite admiration, rather than the awe he had hoped for. It was unrealistic of him, he knew, to expect them to be as impressed as he’d hoped, but somehow, he felt Loki had spoiled their wonder of his home with his spiteful attitude.

He tried without much success to put aside his resentment at Loki’s aspersions, and at their mother’s favoritism. What good could come of her allowing Loki to put off seeing the healers, or hiding his true self behind his tricks? What had been the point of going to such trouble to get his mind cleared, if Father was just going to let Mother coddle him as she always had?

He didn’t wish to be angry at Loki. He had sworn, both to his brother and himself, that he would stand by Loki and protect him, come what may, and while they had been on Midgard, Loki had seemed grateful. Now that they were home, his presence irritated Thor like a stone in his boot, and Thor didn’t know why. Was it envy of Frigga’s attention? Was that only fair, when Loki had always proclaimed that Thor was Odin’s favorite? Was it because Loki no longer needed him as much, with their mother there to aid him? Was it just Loki’s arrogance returning?

Why was it that his brother’s mockery pricked his temper so, when his other friends were just as swift with a gibe? Sif could be merciless at what she considered ‘male stupidity’, Fandral’s tongue could be as cutting as his sword, impugning intelligence, looks and virility as the mood struck him. Hogun had a talent for insulting one by saying nothing, at just the right moment. Volstagg was not the wag that Fandral, or even Thor was, but he was a good sport about their teasing, which kept it all in fun.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Sif and the Warriors Three appeared in the hallway, meeting Thor and his party as they turned a corner. Their faces lit at seeing him, and they rushed up to greet him, laughing. Sif and Hogun, usually reserved, both embraced him, after waiting out Volstagg’s bone-
crushing hug, and Fandral’s grinning shoulder thumping.

As it almost always did, their presence lightened Thor’s mood, and his own smile had returned full force as he turned to introductions.

“My friends, do you remember Agent Coulson, of SHIELD?”

“Aye!” Volsgagg stepped forward to welcome Coulson, gripping him lightly by the shoulders. “Were you not the warrior who first faced the Destroyer when Loki villainously sent it after Thor?”

“He was the leader in charge of sorting out the mess Loki made of that little village,” Sif reminded them. “Is that why they’ve come? To seek recompense?”

“In part,” Coulson answered, extending his hand to her. “We are also interested in forming closer ties to your people.”

She shook his hand, looking thoughtful, as Hogun eyed Barton and the bow and quiver strapped to his back. Fandral’s attention had locked on Agent Romanov.

“And who is this delectable creature, Thor?” he inquired, with a cheerful leer, as he swept up one of her hands to kiss.

She eyed him back with a dangerous gleam in her eyes, and a smirk that reminded Thor entirely too much of Loki, just before he planted a knife in someone. He quickly moved to separate his old friend from his new one.

“This is Lady— I mean, Agent Romanov, who is a shield maiden of great accomplishment. And this is Agent Barton, a skilled warrior, and the finest archer of Midgard!”

“That so?” Fandral was no mean bowman himself, though Hogun was better. Although the bow was not considered a man’s proper weapon in a fight, it was allowed in the hunt, and in tests of skill. Fandral adored all tests of skill, to compete or gamble on, and Thor could see plans of contests and wagers sparking in his friend’s eyes.

“It would be an honor to test my skill against you,” Hogun told Hawkeye, with a slight bow.

“Any time,” Barton answered, confidently.

“Well, we are keeping you from your duties,” Sif reminded Thor, “But we wanted to see that you were well.”

“Well and glad to be home,” Thor said.

“And Loki?” she asked, hesitantly. She had never much liked his brother, even as children, and had never forgiven him his trick with her hair, though she now scorned any suggestion of returning her hair to its original gold.

“With the queen,” Thor responded, trying not to let his indignation return. Loki had been worried about coming home, unwilling to believe Thor’s assurances, so perhaps some time with their mother would calm his fears.

“Ah,” Sif nodded her understanding.

“You must tell us all about it at the feast!” Volstagg insisted. “There is going to be a feast, right?”
“Of course, my friend!” Thor laughed. “It is even now being prepared, if you can bear to wait that long!”

“I may need to find some light snack to hold me over till then,” Volstagg admitted.

“Yes, you might be blown away by the faintest breeze else wise,” Fandral told him, rolling his eyes.

“We shall hear all about Thor’s adventures and battles soon enough.” Sif turned Thor back to his duties with a smile. “But for now, he must get his guests settled and see to their needs.”

With that, they departed, and Thor continued to the suites where the palace’s efficient servants had already delivered and unpacked the trunks and cases that Coulson and the others had brought along, so that everything was prepared for their comfort.

He was gratified at last to see their admiration and amazement at their spacious quarters, filled with light from the floor to ceiling windows that let out onto splendid balconies, from which all of Asgard could be seen spreading out below.

He took a few moments to tell them all about the suite’s many amenities, some of which were not too dissimilar to the ones he had seen on Midgard, and the ones which were. Recalling a few embarrassing experiences in Jane’s bathroom, he started to explain to them how the bathing and necessities functioned, but the son of Coul swore to him that they could manage the rest on their own.

The mortals seemed somewhat anxious that he leave, and Thor decided that they must wish some time alone to rest and refresh themselves for the upcoming dinner. Graciously, he gave way and took his leave, after making certain they knew how to call up their assigned servants if they needed anything, or the guards if there was an emergency.

As the door swung shut behind him, Thor was tempted to seek out his friends and tell them all that had occurred on Midgard. They would be most interested to hear of the battles, and of Loki’s—well, he was not sure he could call it a recovery, and it did not seem to be exactly repentance, either. And would they not wish to know how these changes in Loki had been effected?

Thor paused mid-stride, imagining Fandral’s probable witticisms concerning Loki’s coupling with Stark. Then he imagined Loki attempting to gut Fandral (with his bare hands, should he not be allowed his daggers) upon what the dashing warrior would no doubt say about Loki’s encounter with the Hulk. It would be as bad as that horse rumor that had never completely died down, or worse.

No. Whatever news of the happenings on Midgard should eventually be revealed, it would not come from Thor. Must not, if there was to be any hope of repairing his relationship with his brother, which he did earnestly wish, however much he was displeased with Loki’s behavior in the flying boat.

I should talk to Father about this, Thor decided, turning back to go in search of the king. He doubted that Odin would wish to discuss such an uncomfortable subject any more than he did. He would not start with that, but with an offer to help with whatever tasks Odin might assign him. That had been Loki’s advice, from before Thor remembered. Loki had always been advising him, and Thor had almost always ignored him. This time he would heed his brother’s wisdom, and hope that someday Loki would be willing, and able, to offer him such guidance again.
As the holidays are descending on us, and I have a ton of baking, shopping, cookie delivery and actual work to do, this might be the last chapter of 2014, but if I can, I'll post one more as a present to you all!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Thor and Odin discuss Loki's upcoming trials.

Chapter Notes

Back at last, after holiday madness! I wanted to give you guys a longer chapter, but the next part is stuck in rewrite hell, so here's a short bit to tide you over a while!

Thanks as always to the generous tilla123 for beta reading and helping me think things through, and making excellent suggestions!

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Odin was not in the first three places Thor checked: the throne room, the Council chambers, or his private receiving room, so Thor finally resorted to capturing one of the rushing servants and questioning him. The man didn't know, but was able to direct his prince to someone who knew someone who knew someone who could tell him where the king had gone. It was a trifle embarrassing, and Thor thought if he had been more assiduous in learning how to rule, he would have known where the king was likely to be.

Still, he did not think he should ever have expected to find the ruler of the Nine Realms in a meeting with what looked to be a collection of builders and mages in a seldom used, slightly shabby hall in the very bowels of the palace. Why had Odin simply not summoned them to attend him?

Instead of simply barging in and demanding his father’s attention as he once would have, Thor decided to hang back just inside the doorway and determine what was going on. Being king involved a great many meetings, Thor had observed. It was yet another aspect of ruling that he was not looking forward to, along with the endless paperwork.

As Thor listened, he realized they were planning how to best use the Tesseract to complete the repairs to the Bifrost. They all seemed excited and optimistic that, with the king’s aid, the bridge would be completely restored in a matter of days, rather than the decades that had been previously estimated.

Since he had always had Loki for any spells or advice on magic, Thor had seldom had reason to seek out any mages, but over the centuries he had learned some names, and looking more carefully, he recognized a few faces as Loki’s old tutors. Putting these clues together, he determined that Odin had called together a group of mages that he trusted, at least as far as it was wise to trust any mage.
Thor had not realized that the Tesseract could be used to fix the Bifrost; he had thought it might be used to expand their limited means of travel, such as to send his mortal friends back home, but it seemed that this would not be necessary. Travel between all the realms and all their worlds was about to open up again, and there would be much for Asgard’s warriors to do to restore order.

Had Loki known the bridge could be rebuilt so soon? Did that have anything to do with why he had insisted Thor bring Coulson and the others? Or with the way he had been so insulting to Jane, only to be polite the next morning? Or had that merely been a ploy to drive Thor away so Loki could sneak Stark into his chamber for the night?

Thor heaved out a long sigh. It was useless to try to untangle Loki’s motives. His brother’s logic had always been an impenetrable tangle to him, even before Loki had gone mad.

The meeting broke up, and the mages and workers all departed, chatting amongst themselves about plans and decisions, eager to get started on their tasks. They would lay the groundwork so all would be in readiness for Odin to use the Tesseract. Not being warriors or nobles, none of them would be attending the feast tonight, so they had promised all would be ready on the morrow.

“Sire,” a secretary slipped through the outgoing crowd, “Lord Tyr requests a meeting with you at your earliest convenience, and the lords of the privy council also wish to convene before the feast begins, to discuss-“

Odin held up a hand to stop the rush of demands. “I will speak to Tyr in the map room in an hour. Send word to the privy council we will meet tomorrow, after I have heard the healer’s reports and the Bifrost restoration is begun. There is no point in discussion until we have more information.”

The secretary nodded and opened his mouth to bring up the next thing that needed the king’s attention, but Odin waved him away.

“Tell the guards I do not wish to be disturbed, short of war breaking out. I need to speak with my son.”

“Yes, All-Father,” the secretary cast Thor a curious glance, then scurried off to deliver his messages.

Thor studied his father, noting with concern that the All-Father looked as weary now as he had facing Laufey, only hours before collapsing unexpectedly into the Odinsleep.

“Father,” Thor went to him. “Perhaps you should rest first? A few days of delay cannot make that much difference.”

Odin shook his head. “Marauders have been growing bolder since you left for Midgard, and Heimdal reports they are now launching raids on Vanaheim. If we do not send them aid, it will embolden the rebel factions there.”

“Can no one else do it? It will do Vanaheim or Asgard no good if you drive yourself too hard and collapse again.”

His father looked sour, but grunted an acknowledgement of the point. “Your brother could do it, if he could be trusted with the Tesseract.”

Wincing at the thought, Thor shook his head. “I do not think that wise, Father.”

“I was not seriously suggesting it. But to answer your question, no. I would trust the Tesseract’s power to no one save myself, and I would prefer to get the work completed quickly, before word that it has been returned spreads.”
“You think Thanos might be able to send someone here to attempt to take it?”

“All the Infinity gems attract dangerous attention, my son. I would prefer to send this one away again, as soon as a secure hiding place can be found.”

Odin moved to sit heavily on a bench, and beckoned for Thor to join him. “Tell me about these mortals. Why did you bring them to Asgard?”

At least his father didn’t sound angry, only disapproving. Thor mentally collected his arguments. It had been Loki’s idea, but he could not say that; it would seem as if he was trying to avoid taking responsibility for his actions.

“You must agree we owe them, Father,” Thor began. “Both for the damage Loki has done, and for their help in defeating Thanos and regaining the Tesseract.”

Odin hrumphed. “Heimdal tells me that Loki came to his senses and put an end to his invasion plans. How are the mortals owed for this?”

“I do not think he would have… come to his senses, as you say, without their help,” Thor admitted.

“Did you even attempt to reason with him, before you allowed them to… that creature..” Odin ground to a halt, and yes, he was angry after all. Angry and disgusted.

“The Hulk was not- I would never have allowed—” Thor spluttered, still smarting with chagrin over that. “I did try! He was raving, Father. And I am not certain he is well, even now. I do not think it was wise to allow Mother to allow him to delay seeing the healers.”

“Your mother knows what she is doing,” the king retorted, sounding as if he were trying to convince himself as much as Thor. He shook his head. “It is only for the night.”

Accepting this, Thor reluctantly went back to the subject that neither of them wished to discuss.

“Father, about Loki. How much- What must be told, and to whom?”

Slowly, Odin answered, “That he is Jotun, and Laufey’s son, the council already knows. I had to reveal as much when I began negotiations with the new king of Jotunheim, since I had to tell Helblindi. Though they were sworn to secrecy until after Loki’s trial, I expect news is already spreading.”

Thor expected it was widespread by now, oath or no oath. It was too salacious a secret to be kept. “But what of his illness? Can its nature be kept private? Could we not say it was merely the shock of learning his true race? Or some other thing gone wrong?”

“I would that it were so,” the All-Father muttered, pensively drumming his fingers along the shaft of Gungnir. “But both the Council and the Jotnar must be convinced that there was a reason for his madness, and that reason has been found and cured, so they can feel secure he will not be a threat in the future.”

“They will not take your word for it?”

“As I have so often told you, a king cannot simply do as he wishes, Thor!” Odin responded. “Loki attempted to destroy an entire world, and all its inhabitants. Do you think I can simply take him back and tell everyone that he made a mistake and all is forgiven?”

“You could simply strip him of his powers and exile him, as you did me,” Thor suggested.
“Yours were the actions of a rash boy, and something a father could punish. Your brother’s were those of a madman wielding the power of the throne. He must be tried by the council.”

“You will not allow them to pass sentence, though?”

“No. The final judgement will be mine.”

“He believes you will imprison him,” Thor offered, hesitantly. Loki also seemed to think it possible that Odin would sentence him to death, but that was only his madness, and not worth mentioning.

“Some period of confinement may be needed, to put the Council’s mind at rest.” Seeing Thor draw breath to protest, Odin held up a hand. “Confinement to the palace, with his magic bound, or partially bound. Not some cell in the dungeons.”

Thor exhaled relief. That seemed reasonable enough to him.

“Much will depend on what sentence he receives on Jotunheim,” Odin went on, demolishing Thor’s returning equanimity.

“What?” Shocked to his feet, Thor loomed over his father and shouted, “You would let the Jotuns try him? You cannot, Father! They are-

Monsters, beasts, animals. His mind ricocheted from ingrained epithets to the newly laid memories of the Jotuns he had met with his father, during their attempts to get help for Loki, then to Loki himself, who was Jotun born, if not raised. He could not say those things. He hated that he was even thinking those things, but he still didn’t want them to get their hands on his brother.

“They are our enemies,” he finally said, stiffly. “How can you think to let them try Loki? They will kill him, or worse, just to avenge themselves on you, and on Asgard!”

“You think I would allow that? Allow them to harm my son?” Odin also rose, ominous as a storm cloud, lightning glinting in his one blue eye.

But he’s not your son by blood, a traitorous voice in Thor’s mind whispered. “Then what do you mean by sending him there?”

“I mean to bring about peace! When you are king, I expect you to do the same.”

“Explain how this accomplishes anything,” Thor said, barely holding onto his temper.

“King Helblindi and I have come to an agreement,” Odin rumbled. “He has used the Casket of Ancient Winters to repair the damage that Loki did with the Bifrost, but only that, before I reclaimed it.”

Thor nodded. He had been there for that, part of the king’s bodyguard. They had gone to Jotunheim through the secret ways Loki had used to let in the three Frost Giants who had tried to steal the Casket on the morning of Thor’s coronation. Through messages beforehand, they had arranged to meet Jotunheim’s new king with only his own small group of guards, and Odin had woven powerful enchantments on the Jotun relic to ensure it would not be stolen. Helblindi had had the use of it for a day, then it had returned itself to the Vault.

“You offered to return the Casket if Loki is not found guilty?”
“No. I expect they will find him guilty. But I informed Helblindi that if Loki comes to harm, I will destroy the Casket. He will not risk that for petty vengeance.”

This was all too convoluted for Thor. “Why let them try him at all if they cannotpunish him? Will this mockery of a trial not make them more angry?”

Odin paced a moment, then sat down again, just looking up at Thor expectantly until he sat as well.

“I do not mean to send Loki there until we are sure he has his wits again. The healer Helblindi sent, Mengloth, has assured me that she can see to that, and she will testify as to his condition to the Jotuns. He will be allowed to speak for himself. Remember, your brother is a highly skilled diplomat and negotiator. He will be able to soothe their anger.”

This all sounded highly dubious to Thor. Yes, Loki had always been able to talk himself out of trouble in the past, but was their father taking into account how much self-loathing and despair Loki seemed to be carrying? However much the madness had been exacerbated by Loki’s unmet needs, some of it must be rooted in having been lied to by those he had trusted most.

“I hope you are not relying on that,” he ventured, carefully.

“Not entirely.” Odin sighed. “I stipulated he not be killed, nor permanently injured. They may sentence him to a period of imprisonment, or some harm that he can heal, in time, if he does not endeavor to extract himself from this.”

“You would let them hurt him?” Thor felt like shaking his father. “After all he has already suffered? Why?”

“Think, Thor! Soon the Bifrost will be rebuilt, and now all the realms know how it can be used as a weapon. They must be shown it will not be, ever again!”

“Can you not stop being a king for one moment, and act like Loki’s father?” Thor demanded, angrily. “This will destroy him!”

“I have done all I can, just to save his life, Thor!”

But you are All-Father! Thor wanted to shout at him. You should be able to do more! But being All-Father was to put the good of the realm first.

“You must understand, my son,” Odin did not quite plead. “Soon, you must be king.”

“I do not wish the throne,” Thor told him. “I would rather be a good man.”

“So would I,” Odin replied. “But I will do my duty to my people, and so will you, when the time comes.”

Not at the cost of people he loved, Thor wanted to yell, but Odin was not going to change his mind. If he kept arguing, they would only end up screaming at each other, possibly until he went too far and wound up banished again, or Odin collapsed again, or both. Asgard could not afford that, and it certainly would not help Loki.

With his feelings boiling just under his skin, he rose to his feet to take his leave. “We will speak more of this after Loki has seen the healers,” he warned.

“Of course,” Odin answered tiredly, getting up to go back to work. Undoubtedly General Tyr was waiting for him.
“Thor,” Odin reached out to prevent his opening the door. “Keep your mortals in line,” he warned. “We have enough problems right now.”

“Do you have some reason for concern?,” Thor asked, puzzled as to what harm his father believed the SHIELD agents might do.

“From what Heimdal has told me, and the contents of their baggage, they would appear to be here as spies. Who knows what they might attempt to pry into.” Odin answered acerbically.

Outraged on behalf of his new friends, Thor frowned thunderously. “They are no spies! They fought bravely beside me and the rest of Midgard’s heroes, against the Chitauri. They would not do something so dishonorable as skulking around, listening at doors.”

“You think too much as a warrior, my son. Information is vital to a ruler.”

“You are not saying that you employ such means?” Thor did not wish to believe it.

“Between Heimdal, the gazing crystal of the High Seat, and my ravens, I have seldom needed to employ others to gather information, my son,” Odin replied, with a quirk of his lips that put Thor briefly in mind of Loki’s sly smile. “But I do send out agents, for other reasons.”

“What reasons?” Thor demanded.

Odin only shook his head “I need to see Tyr. We will speak more of this some other time. Just keep your guests close until we can send them home.”

Stalking off, Thor decided he would seek out Sif and the Warriors Three after all, and ask them to spar before the feast. He needed to hit something repeatedly.

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Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to everyone leaving kudos and comments! I’m always happy to hear from you guys and answer any questions.
Chapter 4

Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Summary

When Asgardians party all night long, Phil and his fellow agents are in for a really long night.

Chapter Notes

Contrary to what most people who worked with him (and especially the junior agents) assumed, Phil Coulson appreciated a good party. He liked good food and drink, even if he didn’t overindulge. He liked a wide variety of music, and he loved to dance, especially with a skilled partner. He liked meeting new people and having interesting conversations. Not to mention that professionally, as a diplomat/spy, a soiree thrown by a country’s ruler, chock full of the rich and powerful, was THE place to gather intelligence, sound out potential sources and allies, spot probable obstacles and enemies, and generally get the lay of the land.

This party had all all of that and more. Tables the length of football fields were barely visible beneath their burden of foods, featuring whole roast beasts from boars to birds of monstrous size, but not scrimping on breads, fruits and vegetables, pies, cakes, and dozens of little finger foods, all of it nearly too perfect looking to be real, and all of it a seduction of the taste buds. Attractive young men and women continued to bring in more constantly, along with roving the room with seemingly bottomless pitchers of a strong, heady ale, a different wine with every course, and mead as sweet as honey, with a kick like a horse, or possibly a Hulk.

Phil, Tasha and Clint had all nursed their drinks as best they could for the first few courses, then requested something non-alcoholic. The servers had brought pitchers of honeyed, spiced milk, and a fruit juice that put him in mind of tangerines, spring’s first strawberries, and the nectar of the gods. He wondered if the fruit could be grown on Earth, and if he could get the seeds.

There had been music, wild and riotous, and slow and somber. There had been singing, and dancing, which Phil had enjoyed even if he had only watched, not knowing the words or steps. There had been long, epic tales of valor and derring do, told with skill and some parts acted out. He and his fellow agents had been invited, urged really, to relate their parts in ‘Loki’s defeat’, as they had put it, but he had politely declined, claiming they preferred to listen for the time being.

Thor had given the eager crowd an abbreviated yet flowery version of the battle with the Chitauri, and if it was somewhat self-aggrandizing, he did emphasize that Loki had been the one to close the portal in the end. He went on to relate how they had saved Banner from his mortal enemy, without mention of how that had been Loki’s idea. Phil wondered if Thor had forgotten that part, or if he was being politically astute. The majority of the audience had been at least suspicious of Loki and his motives. Some had been outright hostile, so it probably wouldn’t do his mission of establishing ties to this world much good to be associated with Loki. Whether or not that was going to be possible, Phil was uncertain.

The entertainment had also included feats of strength and skill. In the area between the long tables,
men and a very few women fought exhibition matches, hand to hand, and with swords and staves and shields, axes, maces and war hammers. The seemingly medieval weapons sparked and flashed with some kind of energy as they fought, making Phil think they weren’t such low tech weapons as they seemed.

At Thor’s insistence, Clint had shown off his skill with the bow, letting the crowd set the challenges. He’d delighted them all, skewering tossed fruit, extinguishing candle flames, hitting distant, tiny targets, then splitting his first arrow—all the tricks he’d done in his circus act, flashy and crowd pleasing but not really giving away even a tenth of his true abilities. After his final shot of the night, putting an arrow through a woman’s gold ring after she’d thrown it high overhead, the king had awarded him a solid gold wine cup nearly the size of his head, decorated with gems. The men had cheered and pressed drinks on him, and a fair number of women crowded him, flirting. At least, Phil thought they were flirting. He hoped Clint wouldn’t take any of them up on their advances. Although usually he could be counted on to keep his personal urges under control during a mission, there was a better than average chance that after the fucked up, sexually loaded situation with Loki, Clint would feel driven to assert his ‘totally normal heterosexuality’.

Maybe Natasha would have a rough analysis of the sexual rules and mores by the end of the night. She was in her element, playing at being equal parts seductive and unattainable. Thor had introduced her as a shield maiden, which was clearly a desirable trait, and a small crowd of men had surrounded her all evening, hanging on her every word and doubtless telling her everything she wanted to know.

His conversations had been highly fascinating as well. His fellow guests were all curious about his world. Most of them seemed taken aback to learn how different things were from the last time Asgardians had visited, over a thousand years ago.

So it was an excellent party in every respect. Phil would have to list it in his top ten, but as the hours wound round on his SHIELD issued wrist watch (complete with GPS tracking system, communication device, taser, and detonator), he was starting to feel it was a bit too much of a good thing. The feast had thus far gone on almost fifteen hours, and was showing no sign of wrapping up any time soon.

Catching sight of Thor escaping a throng of his subjects, Phil excused himself to Lord Hoethgar, who had been going on at great length about animal husbandry, specifically the giant sheep raised on his estate, and eelied through the crowd towards the crown prince.

“Thor!” he half-shouted to be heard above the din, not able to get through the press with any speed, and not wanting to lose him again in the crush.

Thor turned at his call, his face lighting in recognition. “Agent Coulson!” The crowd parted like a bow wave around him as he made his way to Phil’s side, beaming down at him.

“Are you enjoying the feast?”

“It’s great!” Phil replied, with as much sincerity as he could muster, tired as he was. “Really impressive! How much longer is it going to go on?” he asked.

“Till the break of day, my friend,” Thor told him, cheerfully. “For there are yet many tales to be told, and songs to be sung. Also there are yet prizes to be won! Mayhap Lady Natasha would like to compete in the knife throwing?”

“Maybe,” Phil said. “Just how much longer is it till day break?”
Thor’s smile dimmed as he took in Phil’s expression. Phil knew he didn’t look anywhere near as
tired as he felt, but apparently he looked pretty beat.

“We are midway through the night now, so the feast is but half over.”

“So, another fifteen hours?”

“I know not the exact time, but if it has been that long by your reckoning, then it will be night for
almost that long yet,” Thor admitted.

Inwardly, Phil winced at the thought. He and his agents could hold out here for another fifteen hours,
but it wouldn’t be fun, and they would be wiped out in the morning. Though with such long days,
possibly nothing would be going on for quite some time.

Somewhat plaintively, he queried, “Would it be rude if we didn’t stay for the whole evening?”

“Nay, my friend,” Thor assured him. “You are our guests, you need not do anything you do not
wish.”

“If you are sure.” Maybe with a little rest, they could have a look around the palace before morning,
while everyone else was still partying, Phil thought, cheering up slightly.

“Come,” Thor announced, “We will find Barton and Lady Natasha, and I will escort you back to
your rooms.”

“Thank you, but that isn’t necessary!” Phil tried to tell Thor’s swirling cape, which he had to chase
after.

They found Clint first, in a circle of armored warriors instead of women, Phil was relieved to see.
They were shouting and laughing at whatever he was telling them, and once they were close enough
to overhear a few snatches, Phil recognized the story of Clint and Natasha’s infamous Budapest
mission. Or at least Clint’s version of it. Natasha told it very differently.

Clint paused as he caught sight of him and Thor. “Hey Thor. Boss. What’s up?”

“I thought the three of us might as well call it a night,” Phil told him, noticing enviously that Barton
didn’t seem tired. Well, Barton was younger, but at least Phil outranked him.

“Thor says this party is going to go on another fourteen plus hours,” he added.

Shrugging his acceptance, Clint hopped to his feet. “I’ll have to tell you guys the rest another time,”
he told his disappointed audience.

Clapping a large hand on Clint’s shoulder, Thor declared, “I would also hear this tale! We must all
plan to meet later, if Agent Barton would be willing to begin again.”

“Happy to oblige,” the archer told him.

The armored men cheered at this news, and snagged a passing serving girl to refill their flagons, and
Clint fell in step on Phil’s left, both of them following in Thor’s wake as they went in search of
Natasha.

It took longer to find her, and Phil belatedly wondered if she had taken a possible source to some
more private spot to talk, but they located her with two of Thor’s warrior friends and the Lady Sif.
She and the Asgardian woman were sitting side by side, talking.
Thor inquired after his missing companion, “Where is Hogun?”

“He was in no mood to celebrate,” Sif replied.

To which Fandral quipped, “When is he ever?”

She ignored him and continued, “You heard Vanaheim has come under attack?”

“Aye,” Thor said, looking serious. “Was it near his home?”

“Too near for comfort.”

Looking almost as grim as his missing friend, Thor told them, “The All-Father was making ready for sending help as soon as the Bifrost is repaired. It should not be long ere we bring these marauders to justice.”

“Aye!” Fandral thumped his mug down. “We are overdue a good brawl.”

Sif just nodded. “We’ll be there.”

As the conversation stalled, Natasha guessed at why Clint and Phil had come looking for her. “Are we calling it a night?”

“Not entirely,” Phil answered. “I was thinking we might get a good night’s sleep, then come back and catch the last five or six hours of the party. Thor tells me they are going to party till dawn, and the nights are long here.”

“The days are even longer, compared to your realm’s,” Sif affirmed, as Natasha took this in. “Though I forget by how much.”

“Our days are as five days on Midgard,” Thor told them. “After I returned to Asgard from my banishment, I had a scholar explain it to me. A day and a night on Asgard are as five Midgardian days.”

“Wait,” Clint spoke up, “Wouldn’t that make your nights more like sixty hours, not-“ he paused to do the mental arithmetic. “Thirty?”

“The nights on Midgard are as long as the days?” Fandral waggled his eyebrows and leered comically. “I think I would like that. Much more time for pleasure!”

“And for feasting!” Volstagg agreed, around a leg of something.

“As if the time of day ever prevents you two from eating or wenching,” Sif exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

Phil checked his understanding. “So if your night is thirty-odd hours, your days are ninety? Is Asgard near one of your poles?”

“Poles?” Thor repeated, clearly flummoxed.

“The most northern and southern points of your planet?” Clint attempted to clarify with a fruit that resembled a furry purple orange and two gold toothpicks.

“Ah, yes!” Thor brightened. “Jane Foster showed me images of your world from space! We have such worlds, for farming and hunting, but Asgard is not made so. Our day and night and our seasons were set by our forefathers, not by the spinning of a globe.”
“Maybe when you’re king, you can arrange for longer nights,” Fandral suggested.

“I’d like to hear all about how your people managed that,” Phil said, truthfully. “After we get some sleep?”

“Let me see you to your rooms,” Thor said, starting out for the closest exit with almost all of them following. Volstagg elected to remain at the feast, promising to see them when and if they returned.

As they emerged into the corridor, Thor spoke. “Loki would be better able to explain the workings of our sun and moon than I, since they were created with magic, but I do not know if there will be an opportunity for you to speak with him before his trial.”

He sounded rather gloomy about it. Phil felt for him. Not so much for Loki.

Sif was of the same mind, it seemed. “Whatever they decide to do to him, it will not be half as much as he deserves, Thor! He tried to steal the throne from you, and started a war with Jotunheim!”

“I was the one who started the war,” Thor protested. “If I had not gone there, filled with vanity and wrath—”

“He tricked you into going! He let the frost giants into the Vault and they almost managed to steal the Casket!”

This was a story Phil hadn’t heard. He made a mental note to find out more about it later.

“As my father said, the Destroyer prevented them! Loki well knew they would not succeed.”

“It was still treason,” Fandral pointed out.

“So was our going to Jotunheim, in violation of the king’s command,” Thor’s mood had turned stormy. “And your coming to Midgard to find me after I was banished.”

“Thor!” Sif protested. “We could not let Loki get away with it!”

“I am not saying you were not right to do so. I am only saying that Loki might also have had his reasons.”

The palace was enormous, so the walk back to their guest suite was a long one. Phil decided to join in the conversation.

“Does anyone know how long Loki’s illness might have been affecting his behavior?” he asked, before belatedly wondering if that were common knowledge outside of the royal family.

“What illness?” Fandral turned, curiously, between Coulson and Thor. “What is he talking about?”

“Do you speak of Loki’s madness?” Sif asked. “I confess I am unsure how much he can be blamed for his inborn nature.”

“What do you mean?” Natasha moved closer to Sif so she would not need to raise her voice. The hallways were quiet, but not deserted, and they passed guards on watch and busy servants as they walked.

“His being Jotun,” Sif answered. “Not even the All-Father could make a hunting hound of a wolf cub,” she stated, shaking her head.

“The Jotnar are neither dogs nor wolves, Sif,” Thor rumbled.
“They are war-like and treacherous,” she argued, her eyes flashing rebelliously. “And even if that is not inborn in all of them, Loki’s true father was Laufey, who was ambitious, sly and vicious. Does that not sound like Loki?”

“I think that might be a bit of an exaggeration,” Fandral admonished gently. “Finding out he is secretly Jotun, and adopted, and Laufey’s son, then being put on the throne while Asgard was on the verge of war with Jotunheim, such shock and strain might drive anyone mad.”

“How certain are we that he did not already know who and what he was?” Sif demanded, still belligerent, despite, or possibly because of an air of guilt.

“My father said he did not know,” Thor said. “He told me how distraught Loki was, when he took up the Casket of Ancient Winters and was changed.”

“And the whole gender and sex drive thing?” Clint asked, drawn in at last.

And this was why Clint was best used on missions where he could keep his distance, either observing, or as a sniper. The archer didn’t have a shred of diplomatic instinct, preferring to have everything out in the open. Also, he was still pretty pissed at Loki, and probably wanted a bit of petty, or maybe not so petty revenge.

Phil gave him a quelling look, and Clint just shrugged. Sif and Fandral had stopped to stare at him, and everyone else had to stop as well.

“What gender thing?” Was Sif’s question, while Fandral predictably asked in disbelief, “Sex drive? Loki?”

“We should not speak of this here,” Thor told them, and strode off, forcing them all to hurry after him.

When they reached the room assigned to ‘the Midgardian envoy and his guards’, everyone gathered in the sitting room, or whatever the main room was called. Nobody sat, despite the abundance of chairs and sofa-like furniture.

Sif took up her line of interrogation first. “What is going on, Thor?”

Thor sighed, defeated. “My friends, there are a great many things about Loki that we did not understand.”

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Natasha understood why Coulson disapproved of Clint’s having spilled Thor’s and Loki’s secrets to Thor’s friends, but she also knew why Clint had done it, and she couldn’t fault him for it. In any case, the results had been very interesting.

Thor had been uncharacteristically hesitant about telling Sif and Fandral about his adopted brother’s change in gender, and the reproductive urges that it supposedly entailed, but his friends reactions surprised him. They didn’t really surprise Natasha, even though she had only known them for a few hours.

Sif, who had clearly been fighting against some kind of gender bias to gain respect as a female
warrior, suddenly became more sympathetic to Loki when she learned that the younger prince had been born female, sort of.

“Is that why they left him to die?” Sif asked. “Because he’s one of these ‘ice maidens?’”

“I don’t know,” Thor replied. “From what we were able to learn from books, ice maidens are rare, but they are supposedly prized for their beauty. The new king of Jotunheim, Helblindi, said that no one had known of Loki’s birth, and it would have been considered a great crime if his subjects had known Laufey tried to kill his own child.”

He paused to take a sip of the wine Phil had poured for them all from the suite’s generous provisions. “Though I do not think Helblindi entirely believed Father’s account about having found him in the temple.”

Flirtatious, womanizing Fandral had clearly taken a lot of flack for his own energetic libido, and Natasha recognized his tendency towards disparaging others as deflection. Thor had probably thought Fandral would mock Loki’s plight, but instead, the man had seemed to empathize, and even expressed remorse at the idea that Loki had been too ashamed to admit to his desires.

“Now I am sorry I made all those damned jokes about his being ergi,” Fandral groaned, tossing back his drink and holding the glass out to Coulson for a refill. “I never thought he actually was. I just thought he was too full of himself to sleep with anyone.”

Sif also accepted a refill, asking, “But he can’t truly be ergi if he’s a woman, though.”

“Just out of curiosity, what does that word mean, anyhow?” Clint asked. “Does it mean gay?”

“Happy?” Fandral stared quizzically at Clint.

“It’s slang for men who are sexually attracted to other men,” Coulson explained.

“You Midgardians are strange,” the blonde warrior observed.

Thor cleared his throat, and attempted, “Bruce Banner, a much regarded healer of Midgard, says that we should treat Loki as a man because he wishes it, regardless of whether or not he can bear children.”

“Very strange,” Fandral amended.

“Um,” Coulson pinched the bridge of his nose, the way he did when he was wondering how he’d wound up in whatever surreal situation he was in.

Natasha took pity on him and attempted to clarify. “On Earth, we’ve always had some people who felt that they would prefer to live as the opposite gender from what they were born. There have been a few cultures where this was accepted, but mostly it wasn’t, until a few decades ago.”

“It’s still not, in some places,” Clint not very helpfully pointed out.

Natasha gave him her patented ‘shut up now’ look. She loved Clint, she really did, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t think he was an ass sometimes.

Seeing his friends expressions hardening again, Thor stepped back into the conversation. “The important thing is that it makes Loki very angry and unhappy to be called a female.”

Scornfully, Sif answered, “After all he has done, I do not see why we should concern ourselves with
his happiness, Thor.”

Fandral gave her a sidelong look, raising his eyebrows comically. “Don’t you think that is a somewhat hypocritical view, considering how you have always beaten anyone into the ground when they insinuated you were trying to act as a man?”

“That is hardly the same!” Sif bristled. “After all, I was not claiming to be one!”

“And if you were?” Thor challenged. “How would you feel if you found out you had never been what you thought you were? That being a woman had been a spell cast on you as a babe, and you had been a man underneath all along?”

“Not to mention being from an enemy race,” Clint added, because not even Natasha could shut him up for long.

“I do not know how I would feel,” Sif admitted, grudgingly.

“Nor do I,” Thor said. “But it is not impossible I would have done as much harm as Loki.

“You have been known to lose your temper rather spectacularly,” Fandral mused, though Sif looked disbelieving.

Phil, who had been flagging during the party, now seemed to have been reinvigorated by the flow of information. He refilled all the Asgardians glasses again. Neither he, Natasha or Clint had finished their first glass of the strong vintage.

He asked Thor, “Are you worried about all this coming out at his trial?”

Ponderously, Thor shook his head. “I was, before I talked to Father earlier.”

“He is going to be tried, right?” Clint snapped, going stiff. “Your dad isn’t just going to let him get away with everything?”

“Is the All-Father going to sentence him without a hearing?” Sif guessed.

“There will be a trial,” Thor told them, almost despondently, turning to face Phil. “Though I may not be able to keep my word to your Director Fury to allow the three of you to act as witnesses.”

“Why not?” Phil asked quickly, as Natasha caught Clint by the arm to keep him from exploding before he knew all the facts.

Thor’s hand closed tight on the haft of his hammer, and his voice was a low growl. “For the crimes he committed against the Jotnar, the All-Father has decreed that they will be allowed to try my brother first.”

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Chapter End Notes
As always, thanks to tilla123 for beta reading and so much more, and thanks to everyone else who read and left comments and kudos. I love comments and kudos, keep them coming!

A note on Asgardian time. I wasn't able to find any hard facts about the length of days on Asgard, but according to Marvel, it isn't a planet, and it doesn't rotate around any star or rotate on an axis, but in the movies, we do see it having night and day. I figured that Asgard, being very advanced, would have come up with an artificial sun and moon, and set up night and day and seasons for themselves. They would still keep to something like Earth years, or not too different, since their plant life would still need it, and it's nice having the weather change so you can enjoy summer, spring, fall and winter, and their attendant holidays.

Also, my take on Asgardians is that they sleep very little, being more than human, but would still enjoy having 'nights' as time to rest and socialize. Loki has been sleeping a great deal more than normal, which is a sign of how tired and ill he's been.
Chapter 5

Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Even if it was a matter of life or death, or the possibility of life spent as a raving maniac, Loki was not going to discuss his sex life in front of his parents. Or his fake parents, even. They were the closest thing he had to parents, he supposed. In any case, he was not going to talk about anything related to sex in front of them.

Not that his refusal to participate was slowing the conversation down any. He stood, arms crossed, in the center of Eir’s main healing chamber, surrounded by Odin, Frigga, Eir and the towering Jotun healer, Mengloth, and wished he could sink into the floor as they all argued over him.

He could disappear if he chose, the suppression cuffs had been removed so as not to disrupt some of Eir’s diagnostic instruments. But since Odin had sealed the room with his strongest wards beforehand, it would probably seem a childish gesture. He’d already lost the argument about maintaining his illusion, and the one about keeping his clothes on. He had forced a compromise there, at least, and kept his trousers.

“Jo should have had jos first mating cycle centuries past,” Mengloth was saying, disapprovingly. “But jo is small-statured, even for one of jos kind. It could be that being raised as an Aesir has somehow stunted jos growth.”

With rapidly fraying tolerance, he allowed Mengloth’s hands, each twice the span of his own, to run lightly over his bare shoulders and back, lightly touching the breasts covered by a silk band. He felt like a broodmare that had been stolen away as a filly and raised (badly) by trolls.

“Provided that jo is one of our own, as you claim,” the Jotun healer added, narrowing scarlet eyes as it peered down at Loki.

Loki ground his teeth, despising the creature for its existence, and for trying to imply that he was only pretending to be one of its kind. As if he would… Well, in truth, he might have, once. If there had been need. But if he were going to impersonate a Jotun, he would have chosen to look more like the other Jotnar he had seen. Like one of the warriors Laufey had sent against them when Thor had so foolishly trespassed in their realm. Twice again his hieght and broad in the chest and shoulders, with massive arms and thews to make any Aesir warrior green with envy.

Or more like Mengloth, had he known such Jotuns existed. The healer was more leanly built, more like Vanir men, with a long face, a penetrating gaze, sharp cheekbones much like Loki’s own, and a narrow, beak-like nose. Also, unlike those massive blue warriors, the healer had long hair, mostly silver now, but with a few remaining streaks of a gold as bright as Frigga’s, worn in a neat braid. Instead of a mere loincloth, Mengloth was dressed in knee-length black breeches above bare feet, and an open vest of bright green silk. It was almost the precise green of of Loki’s cape and armor, which was disturbing. But the chest framed by it was flat and smooth, hairless as his own had always been, and though adorned by more necklaces than any man would wear, definitely lacking tits.

Although Mengloth presumably had the same double set of sexes hidden away under those trousers,
Loki’s mind kept insisting it was male, though he had been informed, by a nervous Eir, that ‘jo’ was the correct pronoun. Loki chose to substitute ‘it’, and hate it.

“He would have grown no larger, left to die of exposure,” Odin growled, seemingly stung by the charge of parental neglect.

The All-Father was ignoring the ‘jo’ pronoun as well, Loki noted, and he wondered if it was because of Loki’s stated preference, or old habit, or merely to spite the berating healer.

“Jotun children do not die of simple cold,” Mengloth snapped, as if such should be obvious. “No matter how small they may be.”

“Hunger, then,” Odin retorted, his blue eye ablaze with anger, “or thirst, or a stray blast of power, or scavenging animal! He was all alone, on what had been a battlefield. Is this how you treat all your children?”

“There is only your word for how you found him,” Mengloth sniffed.

Sounding remarkably like Thor in a snit, Odin rumbled, “You accuse me of being a liar in my own hall?”

“Stop it, both of you!” Frigga shouted, getting between them.

Loki could not help but tense, afraid for her, though she was a formidable fighter and mage in her own right. But Odin settled from a boil to a simmer, and Mengloth took a step back, lips quirking faintly in an almost smile.

“The queen is right,” Eir joined in, in her most no-nonsense manner, tsking at them and fixing both the Jotun and the king with her sternest look. “None of this is helping Loki.”

“True,” Mengloth agreed. “And my apologies for the slight to your honor, All-Father.”

“Accepted,” Odin grumbled, at a prompting glare from Frigga, who added, “Your doubts are only sensible. How might we convince you, so we can move on to helping Loki?”

“Jo does not show any sign of needing to mate,” Mengloth noted.

“What?” Loki’s head shot up, and he glowered at the so-called healer. “You had a potion for this malady all along, and you did not tell my father, or send it with Thor?”

“I do not give out remedies to patients I have not examined,” Mengloth informed the room, immune to the angry stares all around. “Nor would Eir, if she still follows the training we received when we were learning our craft.”

“Not usually,” Asgard’s head of healing confirmed with reluctance. “But…”

“It is not without risks, if not used correctly. I would not be accused of poisoning Asgard’s prince.”

That was logical, Loki supposed, but he could not help but suspect there was more to it.

“Will you give it to me now? Or at least teach Eir to use it, since you say this ‘cycle’ is over?” Loki
asked, with as much patience as he could summon up.

Mengloth frowned, studying him. “Your father claimed it was the Heart of Winter that roused you to need.”

“The what?” Loki looked to Odin for an explanation.


“Oh.” Loki shrugged uncomfortably. “It changed me when I picked it up.”

“You had no knowledge of your true nature before?” Mengloth pressed.

“On Jotunheim, one of the warriors grabbed me, and my arm turned blue, instead of being burned, as Volstagg was.”

The memory brought a grimace of distaste, and he scowled down at his bare, blue arm with as little liking for it now as he had the first time he’d seen it.

“The deep touch,” Mengloth said. “That might have triggered it. It is only harmful to non-Jotuns. Among ourselves, it is very pleasurable.”

Eir and Frigga both made small sounds of interest, and Odin snorted softly. Loki said nothing.

“I would touch you deeply,” Mengloth requested, extending a hand.

Loki backed away. “Why?”

“No other race can withstand this without harm, not even with seiðr. Loki thought that unlikely, but without more study he could hardly argue the point. “So if you can touch me without my being burned, you’ll accept that this is no trick?”

“Let us say I will be more convinced than I am currently,” Mengloth replied.

Loki was impressed in spite of himself. After all, even if it should burn him, he could likely maintain an illusion of being unharmed. His time in the company of the Other had taught him a high tolerance for pain.

He did not think it likely that Mengloth’s mere touch would cause him to do anything too embarrassing; he did not recall any arousal from that first time when the frost giant trying to kill him had caught him by the wrist. He’d felt only shock and fear. His only pleasure had been at killing that creature a moment after, but he had been too terrified to enjoy even that.

“If you are correct, and it puts Prince Loki back into that state? You have the medicine on hand?” Eir asked, before Loki could.

Fishing in a deep pocket, Mengloth withdrew a rock crystal vial with a silver cap. The fluid in it was a thick, milky white.

“Very well,” Loki stepped back into the giant’s reach, and tried not to flinch under the huge hand that curled around his neck and left shoulder.

It was heavy, and no cooler than his own, so far as he could tell. Suddenly he felt a shock run through him, thrilling his nerves like a plucked harp string and setting them abuzz. Cold washed over him, welcome as a spring-fed lake in high summer, and a tug of wanting between his legs fed into his
brain, once more insisting that Mengloth was very much a male. It was too vividly like how he had suddenly recognized the Hulk as male, and uncomfortable and unnerving in the extreme. Without thinking, he caught Mengloth’s wrist in both his hands and shoved it away.

“Loki? Are you all right?” Frigga asked, worriedly. Eir peered at him, inching forward.

“I am fine!” Loki declared, panting slightly, partly in fear of his response, and partly with the desire to murder someone. “It did not hurt.”

Mengloth’s brows had flown up in startlement, though Loki had no idea why, but the look was slowly changing into something more speculative.

“Eir, I think we should move on to examining the prince with your soul forge,” Mengloth suggested.

“It has always given odd readings for Loki. I thought it must be because of his strong gifts of seiðr.” Eir confessed, looking abashed that she had not somehow figured out that ‘odd readings’ equaled ‘frost giant disguised by Odin’s spell’.

“I will show you how it should read for the Jotnar,” Mengloth offered, following Eir to the diagnostic field generator. “Though we have had no such devices since the war, I believe I recall how it functions.”

Frigga came to Loki, gazing into his face to assure herself of his continuing well-being, then smiled in attempted reassurance as she put a hand to the small of his back and chivied him along after them. Odin followed, keeping well out of the way, or wishing himself elsewhere?

Lying down on the table without further prompting, Loki stared up at the glowing representation of his body as it sprang into being. As it hovered above him, he inwardly reviled this new body. He had never been as well-muscled as Thor, or even Fandral, but now he was almost as slender as Sif, with only small breasts and a slight rounding of hips and limbs to mark him as other than male. It was if he were trapped between the sexes, neither one or the other, lacking the beauty or purity of either form. A freak born to monsters.

As if she sensed his growing despondancy, Frigga caught up Loki’s hand and gave him her most encouraging smile, as Eir and Mengloth worked the controls of the soul forge. The Jotun healer was frustrated at the small controls, and finally had to settle for talking Eir through what she wanted to do.

The two healers at last came to some agreement, and the view narrowed, then expanded, allowing everyone an enlarged view of Loki’s internal organs, focusing in on whatever those mysterious shapes were. Loki had studied some anatomy, but nothing he could make out looked much like the neat, clean illustrations in his books.

“There,” Mengloth was gesturing to something. “A little larger, please.”

Eir complied, then exclaimed, “Oh!”

“What is it?” Loki demanded, as Frigga’s face lit into a smile of delight.

“Loki,” his mother began, then faltered.

“Well, Prince Loki,” Mengloth moved to look down at him, past the sparkling, oversized images of Loki’s insides. “I no longer doubt that you are indeed Jotun.”

“Why not?” Loki peered suspiciously up at the floating image. Whatever mysterious bit they were so concerned with seemed brighter and shinier than the rest, though perhaps that was an effect of the
Eir pasted on a healer’s smile, which was fake and terrifying in its falseness. “It is a bit soon to say for sure, I think,” she began, in a chirping voice.

Mengloth cut through these niceties, stating flatly, “You are pregnant.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to tilla123 for beta reading!

Jotun pronouns: Jo=he/sh, Jir=him/her, Jos= his/hers, and Jostaf =himself/herself. If any sees where I've botched it, let me know.
Chapter 6

Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Notes

Mengloth is a figure from Norse mythology- a Jotun goddess of healing. I wasn't able to find much about her, except she is supposedly the one to address prayers of desperation to, and her name means necklace-glad, implying she was very fond of jewelry.

As always, a thousand thanks to tilla123 for beta reading for me! And thanks to everyone leaving kudos and comments. I really love hearing from readers!

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“You cannot possibly expect me to go through with this,” Loki said, mostly to his mother, though he was aware of the two healers who were hovering nearby (or looming, in the case of the twelve foot tall Mengloth), and the All-Father who stood well apart, looking grim. Well he might, Loki thought, resentfully. Odin could hardly be expected to be overjoyed that Loki had found a new and novel way to embarrass Asgard’s royal family.

He had grudgingly accepted their diagnosis, after his initial shock and perfectly reasonable fit of somewhat panicked denial, but he refused to go along with any assertions that his unlikely pregnancy was a good thing.

“Here,” Eir attempted to press a golden cup into his hands. “Drink this. It will help you calm down.”

“I am calm.” Loki refused to take the cup, which by the smell, contained some kind of medicinal concoction, as opposed to the stiff drink he would have welcomed.

“It’s only a mild sedative,” Eir urged, her lips tight with restrained emotion. “You’ve had a shock, it’s understandable-“

“I am fine!”

He was far from fine, but his being drugged wasn’t going to fix anything, except possibly Eir’s rattled nerves. He supposed he could hardly blame the healer, seeing as how he had lost control of his temper and magic earlier, unleashing a wave of power that had wrecked the soul forge and thrown everyone near him back. Eir and Frigga had both been knocked off their feet by the mishap, but no one had been hurt, thankfully.

“Loki,” Frigga laid a reproving hand on his arm. “Eir is only trying to help.”

“I am sorry,” he managed to get out through teeth that kept trying to clench. “But you needn’t worry. You are all perfectly safe from the crazed monster.” He held up a hand to display one of the magic-binding cuffs that Odin had put back on him after the incident. He had not even left Loki the minimum spells that Frigga had returned to him earlier, so now he was stuck in this wretched form
again, without so much as an illusion to hide behind.

“You are not crazed, nor monstrous,” his mother argued, stroking his hair back from his face. “But you are upset, which is why Eir is trying to help you.”

“I am not upset,” he lied, but his shaking voice betrayed him. “I don’t want any damned sedative.”

Unexpectedly, the frost giant spoke up. “Your medicines may not work the same on the prince now. There are some of ours that do not work on the Aesir, or the other races, in the same way they do for us.”

Mengloth’s unexpected support made Loki want to be contrary and reach for the cup. He didn’t, though, and Eir withdrew it, admitting, “I had not thought of that. Could it harm the baby, do you think?”

“I have no idea,” the Jotun healer shrugged. “But better safe than sorry.

“There isn’t going to be any baby,” Loki scowled at the two healers, now wishing he’d taken the wretched potion. It probably wouldn’t have worked like that for him in any case. He was never that lucky.

“Perhaps not,” Mengloth conceded, thoughtfully studying him. “It is too early for any surety.” The large head cocked to one side, quizically. “You do not mean you would intentionally do something to cause a miscarriage? Have you not taken enough innocent lives already?”

“There is no baby!” Loki snarled. “There is only a biological mistake that should be erased, lest it be even more misbegotten than myself.”

“Loki,” his mother’s tone was a mild rebuke, and an echo of a thousand other times she had spoken his name just that way, then gone on to lie to him about how there was nothing wrong with him.

“All children are precious,” Mengloth insisted. “Every child should be given every chance to live!”

“Then why was I cast out?” Pulling away from Frigga’s attempt to embrace him, Loki screamed his questions, uncaring how deranged he must seem.

“If every child is so prized, why should a royal runt be left to die, abandoned for the enemy to pick up and carry off?”

The frost giant frowned, flicking a glance at Odin, whose dark expression implied he would respond poorly to another accusation of lying about this issue.

“I could not say. It should never have happened. And you are not this word you say… runt.” Mengloth’s distaste turned the word sharp and bitter. “Nor a monster, for all that you have clearly been taught to hate us.”

“Only a freak, then?” Loki challenged.

“Not that either. Your kind are very special.” Mengloth paused, then clearly held back why he was special. Did that mean it was a secret, or merely a lie?

“This discussion can wait,” Odin declared, coming back into the conversation. “Right now, I need you to do whatever needs to be done to restore Loki’s sanity.”

Fisting his hands in the silky white robe he had been given to wear, Loki stared down at his bare
blue feet and wished he could get dressed, if not in some of his own clothes, then the garments that he’d been gifted by Tony Stark. Maybe the grey sweater. It was one of Stark’s own, and still carried a trace of his scent.

No one spoke. It was as if everyone was waiting for someone else to speak first.

Growling with impatience, Odin came nearer to Mengloth, unconcerned by the Jotun towering over him. “I was given to understand you had a cure for his illness.”

“What illness?” Mengloth asked, sounding confused. “Needing to mate, that is natural, not an illness!”

“But if it caused him to go mad-“ the All-Father started, but the Jotun healer swept out a hand in a gesture of emphatic denial.

“You will not blame that on us, Odin Child-Thief! If the young one is mad, it is not the fault of jos being Jotun, or in need of mating, but in your having taken jir from jos people, and jos proper realm, and lying to jir!”

“You cannot speak to me thus!” Odin roared, banging the butt of Gungnir angrily against the healing room’s gold-veined marble floor, causing angry sparks.

Loki sighed, unwilling to side with either party in this. He felt less unbalanced and manic since having been so very thoroughly fucked by the Hulk, but he could not really claim to feel sane. He wasn’t certain he could imagine what sane would feel like, but he was certain he was not.

Eir took Mengloth by the arm, trying to forestall the argument, and Frigga slid in front of Odin, saying, “We are not saying that the need is not natural, Healer Mengloth, but we had read that it could cause problems, if it was allowed to continue without…” she paused to come up with a delicate way to put it, “without being fulfilled.”

Loki’s mother had been his teacher in the skills of diplomacy as well as magic. The frost giant unbristled, nodding a curt concession.

“I will not say it did not contribute to an already slipping mental state, especially if jo did not know what was happening to jir. But that alone could never cause one to do what jo did, to my people, or to Midgard.”

Loki swallowed hard. His eyes burned with the effort not to shed any tears, not knowing if they were tears of remorse, or just self-pity.

“However,” Mengloth turned to look steadily at him. He glanced at his- jos? face, then away. “Jo shows signs of long-term malnutrition, even starvation, and evidence of having been tortured, and influenced by magics or forces I could not identify. Such trauma is like to make anyone go mad, and is not something to be cured with a healing stone or simple elixir.”

“Eir, do you concur with this?” Odin inquired, calm again.

“If there is no hormonal imbalance,” Eir looked questioningly to Mengloth.

“Jo is with child. It can cause some moodiness, but not madness.”

Loki choked back a laugh.

“Then Mengloth speaks truly,” Eir told Odin. “If his mental state is due to what he went through in
the Void, and in Thanos’ custody, it is not to be cured by my arts.”

Loki clasped his hands together tightly in his lap (over his womb, where who knew what was growing), feeling despair dragging his thoughts down like an inexorable current. He’d come back to be fixed! Asgard’s healers were the finest, the most knowledgable in all the realms, and now Eir, who was the best of the best, was saying he could not be helped.

“The heat in this realm cannot be helping jos state of mind,” Mengloth huffed, flapping the corners of the bright green vest to create a breeze. “My wits will likely steam out my ears if I must stay here much longer.”

Leave then, Loki thought resentfully.

“We can find some way to cool your rooms,” Eir offered, placatingly.

“Perhaps,” Mengloth said.

“Are you too warm, Loki?” Frigga asked him, concerned as always for his comfort. “You often complained of the heat as a boy, but I thought you had outgrown it. I should have thought-“

Loki shrugged. “It’s not so bad.”

It was not that he had come to find the heat less oppressive as he’d grown older; he’d come up with some spells to combat it, but for the most part he’d simply learned to live with it, keeping to the cooler environs of the indoors, and to the shade when he’d ventured out in Asgard’s unforgiving summers. It was worse now, in this body. He had thought it odd that he was not sweating. Maybe Jotuns did not sweat.

“Jo should have a cool place to rest,” Mengloth stated. “I would also like jir to have certain foods from home, both for jos sake, and the child. Perhaps a list can be sent by messenger, if our departure is to be delayed for long.”

“We can certainly arrange that,” Frigga promised.

“When might we be going?” the Jotun healer inquired of Odin.

Odin didn’t answer, but turned to look uncertainly at Loki, who began to feel strangely uneasy about the question.

“Wait a minute,” he said slowly, an awful idea taking hold in his mind. “Who is ‘we’?”

“Loki,” Odin started, then stopped, stroking his beard.

“We wanted to be sure you were well before telling you,” Frigga offered, hesitantly.

“Before telling me what?” Loki backed away from them, turning to his lying, scheming not-father. “You’re sending me to JOTUNHEIM?”

“Loki-“ Odin began again.

“I see!” Loki yelled, tears welling up to make the room blur and waver. “You’ve thought of a way to use me after all! Buy a new peace treaty by handing over the villain, and rid yourself of an embarrassment all at the same time! Bravo, Father! What cunning statecraft on your part!”

“It isn’t like that!” Frigga cried. “Loki-“
“Silence!” roared Odin, slamming his spear butt down with a crack like thunder. His gaze settled like an immense weight on Loki.

“I would like to speak alone with my son.”

“I am not—” Loki started, hotly.

“Hold your tongue, boy!”

Loki swallowed back tears and rage, gulping hard.

Eir tsked softly, but started for the door, and Mengloth muttered disapprovingly, then strode off after her.

Frigga was clearly angry and worried, but did not attempt to gainsay her king and husband while he was in this mood.

“We will speak later,” she said, to both husband and son, then she also went out, leaving Loki alone with the man he had wanted a father’s love from for so long.

“You cannot wait to be rid of me, can you?” Loki cried, bitterly.

“Such a noble king, willing to sacrifice the son—no! only your pretend son—for the good of Asgard! Was this a part of your plan for me all along? A contingency, if you couldn’t make me a puppet ruler of Jotunheim, you could turn me over to the new king so they could eliminate a potential rival, and be grateful to you for it?”

“Always you twist my words and my intentions.” Odin sighed. “Always you assume the worst.”

“How else am I to see it? What should I think, when you are sending me to be ripped apart by our worst enemies?”

“You should see it as an opportunity to help us fix this mess that you’ve caused!”

“That I caused? So now I’m to blame for all of it? Even if Thor was the one to start a war? That’s convenient!”

“You were the one to let the Jotuns into the Vault!”

“He would have started a war within a week of becoming king! You saw what he was like!”

“You should have come to me with your concerns,” Odin argued.

“You should have known! You’re supposed to know! You’re supposed to be this wise ruler, and you can’t… can’t even see…” Loki’s words clogged in his throat, choking him as his tears spilled over.

The All-Father was a golden shadow in front of him, then a hand landed on his shoulder and guided him back to a bench, where he collapsed, gasping with the effort not to sob.

Odin settled heavily next to him. “I should have known,” he agreed, voice rough. “Loki, I am not…” He cleared his throat. “I know I’ve made mistakes. I never meant… It does not mean that I did not… do not love you, as a son.”

“Just not as much as your real son?”

“You are my real son, as much as Thor is.”
“And they call me a liar,” Loki scoffed.

“You are Loki Odinson, my son. Nothing you have done, or ever could do will change that,” Odin vowed. “I swear it by the Tree.”

“Then why are you sending me to my death? You should at least love me enough to do it yourself! Don’t I deserve at least that much mercy from you?”

“No, Loki!” Odin caught one of Loki’s hands, gripping it tight. Loki tried to pull loose, and failing that, returned the grip with interest, trying to inflict enough pain to make Odin let go. Or at least suffer along with him. The bones of their fingers and hands ground together as they silently grappled, glaring at one another.

Just as it felt as something in his hand was going to snap under the strain, Odin growled and released him. Loki jumped up and drew the abused hand to his chest, massaging away some of the ache and savoring his hollow victory.

Odin huffed. “I am not sending you to Jotunheim to be killed. I have informed their new king that if you are killed, or permanently harmed, that I will destroy the Casket of Ancient Winters. They will not risk that.”

Absorbing this, Loki considered. “So how long are they to be allowed to torture me? Or is that open-ended? You would never do this to Thor!”

“I am not sending you there to be tortured, Loki!”

“Of course not.” Loki resisted the urge to pace, or just flee. “Just as you could not possibly rescue me from the Other, or Thanos.”

“I would have, if there had been any way. But the Bifrost was broken. Even if I had managed to summon enough dark energy to send someone, there was no way to retrieve them, or you, from that place!”

“Yes, you always have some reason for everything you do, or don’t do, right?”

Odin’s hands gripped his spear the same way Thor gripped Mjölnir when his brother was wishing he could just flatten all his troubles. Was this where he’d learned that attitude? Funny that Loki had never noticed that before.

“Can you not trust me to have your best interests in mind, as you once did?”

“And look how well that has worked out for me!”

Moving heavily, Odin used Gungnir to lever himself to his feet. “I cannot talk to you while you are like this.”

“Like what? Honest for a change?”

“Go and see your mother, Loki. Maybe she can make you see reason.” The All-Father turned away and headed for the door.

Too furious to think of a reply, Loki wrenched at the binding cuffs, then hurried to the other side of the chamber to scoop up a piece of the broken soul forge that was roughly the size and shape of one of his throwing daggers.
“I would have been better off keeping the Tesseract!” he shouted at Odin’s retreating back. His father did not slow, or turn. Reaching the door, he opened it.

“I should have let Laufey kill you!”

Odin left, shutting the door calmly behind him. Loki hurled the piece of metal at it, where it struck and embedded itself, quivering.
Mainly because Odin had practically ordered Loki to talk to Frigga, Loki decided he would go instead to his own chambers. After getting dressed, he ignored the main exit, where guards, and possibly healers, would be waiting, slipping instead down the laundry chute. From there it was simple enough to keep to the shadows and the least travelled routes. He’d had centuries of practice moving through the palace unseen, and he’d prepared no less than four secret passages in and out of his rooms.

He was just stepping out of the door concealed behind one of his bookcases, thinking with somewhat spiteful pleasure of the consternation that was no doubt stirring at his disappearance, when he caught sight of someone sitting in his favorite reading chair. Chilled air wafted gently against his skin, indicating that Mengloth’s suggestion had been put into place.

“I see some things never change,” Frigga mused, putting aside the book in her lap. She had added a warm woolen shawl to her summer attire, but it did not look sufficient for the temperature she had set in his rooms. Still, she might be using a spell to keep warm, as he had always done to keep cool. She didn’t look bothered by it in the least.

“You were always determined to cause mischief after a fight with your father.”

“He is not my father!” Loki said hotly, as he overcame his surprise and shut the bookcase/door with sufficient force to cause several tomes to topple out. He ignored them, though Frigga raised an eyebrow at this abuse of his beloved books.

“Am I not your mother, then?” She got up and gathered him into a hug before he could deny it.

“Hush,” she whispered, shaking him loose from his stiff attempt at staying cold and aloof. “Why must all the men I love be so Norns-begotten stubborn?”

“I am not,” Loki muttered, rebelliously. “Not stubborn, or a man, according to Eir and Mengloth.” Or according to practically everyone, throughout his entire life.

“After all, men do not get pregnant,” he added, pulling free of her hold to fall heavily into his second-favorite reading chair.
“You were always one for breaking rules,” Frigga pointed out with a smile.

“You are too happy about this!” he accused, staring up at her serene, beautiful features. “How can you possibly be happy about any of this?”

“I have been looking forward to being a grandmother,” she replied, coming to sit across from him. “Truly, this is not the disaster you are making it out to be, Loki.”

“You are likely a grandmother ten times over already, the way Thor has been spreading his affections around,” he groused.

“Thor is not quite as reckless as you think,” she remonstrated, gently.

Sighing deeply, Loki admitted that was so. “He would be dead long since if he were.”

She also sighed. “Let us leave that for another day, shall we?”

Loki was more than happy to not discuss Thor and his shortcomings. Leaning back in his chair, he covered his face with his hands and groaned, “Fine. What do you want to talk about? Besides grandchildren, because that is not happening!”

For a long moment, she did not reply, and the only sounds in the room were of the breeze through his windows stirring the crystal chimes gifted to him from a fellow mage on Alfheim. They were supposed to be soothing. Loki did not feel noticeably soothed. Lowering his hands, he looked over at Frigga, expecting to see anger, disapproval and disappointment. Instead, she looked thoughtful.

“When was the last time you meditated?” she asked.

He stared at her. “Meditated?”

“That’s what I thought.” Her blue-gray eyes shone with… well, maybe not quite triumph. More like intent.

“I have been… somewhat distracted,” he confessed. They didn’t really need to go into details about how difficult it was to find one’s center while being starved or tortured. And truthfully it had been much longer than that. It had been since well before Thor’s coronation. He had not been able to sit still and empty his mind for the thoughts of his brother’s impending rule crowding into his mind.

“I think it would be good for you,” Frigga told him.

“Possibly.”

She looked expectant.

“Now?”

“No time like the present,” she pointed out.

“I have too much to do,” Loki protested. “Perhaps later, if I’m not dragged off to my doom before I get to it.”

“Loki,” she gave him her sternest look. “There is nothing more important than you having a clear mind right now. Eir and Mengloth say there’s nothing physically wrong with you, so we need to work on the emotional.”

“Imminent death might qualify as more important! Then there’s the impending motherhood thing.”
“Which we will discuss after you’ve cleared your mind and centered yourself.”

“There’s nothing to discuss! I am not going to… to… I’m just not!”

“Do you have any idea how to accomplish that?” she queried, calmly.

“There must be a potion… Something!” He needed to sneak down to the library and start researching it. It was definitely something he wanted to find out before he started planning his escape.

Getting up, Frigga took his hands and pulled him to his feet. “I can teach you.”

Startled, Loki darted a look at her face. “I thought- You said you wanted me to go through with this.”

“I said I wanted grandchildren. That is not the same thing.” She released his hands in order to gently cup his face. “No one is allowed to use your body against your will. Even if that person is a part of you, and not doing it on purpose.”

Loki burst into tears, and she gathered him into a hug, holding on tight as he struggled to regain control.

“I should have known you would help me,” he breathed, once he could speak again.

“You are my child, I will always help you,” she told him, producing an embroidered handkerchief for him to dry his eyes. “Now blow your nose and dig out your meditation cushion. Find one for me as well. I haven’t had time to keep up with it like I should lately.”

He blew his nose as instructed, and felt better, though a bit ashamed of breaking down again. Maybe Frigga was right, and meditation would help him find his balance. It had worked wonders when he was an adolescent, and his magic was growing more powerful at the same time his body had been going through so many changes. Frigga had started him on a strict regimen of meditation, every morning and evening, after he had inadvertently set Sif’s hair on fire.

When he had done a spell to speed its restoration, it had grown back in black, and everyone had blamed him, rather than admit that her parents had spelled their daughter’s hair artificially gold in the first place, because most of the Aesir were fair-haired, while dark hair was more common in the Vanir. Loki had always assumed as a boy that he had inherited his looks from his mother’s side of the family, even if he did not look like her any more than he did Odin, or Thor.

Going into his closet, he found a stack of cushions just where he had left them, and chose his favorite for himself, and the least worn one for his mother. Coming back, he handed her that one. They chose their spots, not too far apart, but not so near as to distract each other. Loki removed his shoes, while Frigga had to take longer to remove shoes and the bits of all but useless armor she wore as part of the royal garb.

As she took her seat, crossing her legs and folding her hands in her lap, Loki thought to ask, “Just what is it you mean to teach me?”

Frigga had already closed her eyes. Now she opened them again to look over at him. “How to control your fertility, as the women of Asgard and Vanaheim do.”

“Women’s magic?” Loki was taken aback.

She raised an eyebrow at his tone. “It seems to fit the situation.”
“Couldn’t we just use some kind of potion, or spell?” he asked, weakly. Everyone already thought his use of magic was womanly without adding actual women’s magic to his crimes.

“What I teach you will be safer, and surer, and will likely help to prevent anything like this from happening again.”

“Oh.” He considered this as she shut her eyes again and slowed her breathing. It sounded like she was certain he was going to live long enough for that to be a concern. “What about Jotunheim?”

“One thing at a time, dear,” she replied. “Now breathe.”

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The tiny drone whizzed around the high arched space of their guest chambers, furiously scanning its surroundings and scattering the small flock of musical bird construct things that were Asgard’s idea of a sound system. It wobbled to dodge through the tendrils of the network of vines clinging to the wall and ceiling, producing ten different fruits, all delectable, as well as sweet-smelling flowers, and adjustable globes of light.

Coulson made no effort to make any sense of the readings, he was too busy practicing steering the tiny robot by looking through it’s camera, instead of just watching it. It was proving more difficult than it had seemed. He had mastered steering at low speeds, but the little drones were semi-autonomous, which was proving to be more of an impediment than an advantage at the moment.

They were able to fly themselves in pre-programed mapping and search patterns, and they did that beautifully, independently flying through a room, narrowly but consistently avoiding obstacles and mid-air collisions, as long as they were in an area defined by the operator. They had scanned their guest quarters down to the millimeter, gathering reams of data to be analyzed upon their return to Earth, after which Coulson had thought to use them outdoors, to see what he could learn about the city sprawling out under their windows.

Three of the seven drones had been subsequently fried like mosquitoes in a bug zapper, by the shimmering gold force field that had popped up around a weapons turret. Two others were missing, unable to find their way home without GPS positioning, a fact Coulson had not been aware of until he’d lost contact with them.

He was down to the last two, and if he wanted to send them out to scout, he was going to have to fly them manually, and the controls were complex and sensitive.

Although he was seldom called on to do so, Phil was trained to fly choppers, planes ranging from single prop to quin jets, and Lola (who he was going to get full custody of from Fury one day soon, having racked up more than enough favors), but this was giving him more trouble than all of the above ever had, combined.

He was just finishing a successful mission around the adjoining bathroom, which more resembled a forest grotto with hot pools and an indoor waterfall, when he heard someone come in behind him. His thumb slipped as he tried to bring the drone back for a landing, and it wobbled, crunching alarmingly as it bumped into the door frame and tumbling to bounce on the thick carpet when he overcompensated.

“Want me to give that a go?” Natasha smirked, striding in with Clint a few paces behind her. She
was dressed in a set of Asgardian armor that Sif had gifted her, after they had bonded over an exchange of martial arts. The Asgardian woman was far stronger than Natasha, but no swifter, and the two had developed a mutual respect and were teaching each other their different styles and techniques.

“Why not?” he smiled to suppress the urge to snap, and handed over the controller.

Of course it took her all of two minutes to become an expert with the little device.

Phil gave the little machine, now flying with smooth perfection for Natasha, a dirty look, then shook his head at his own childishness and went to pour himself a tiny cup of strong, honey-based mead, and took a sip, letting the sweetness burst in his mouth as heat struck his stomach and started spreading rapidly to soften stress-stiffened muscles. He’d grown frustrated, which wasn’t like him, especially as there was no threat or danger involved in this mission, but Asgard was wearing on him.

His role here was to act as a diplomat, and to gather information, and he had started to feel ineffectual at both jobs. He knew it wasn’t rational; he was learning a great deal while he waited for someone in charge to get around to talking to him about why he’d come. Diplomacy was always an exercise in patience, but the time difference, and the attitudes of extremely long-lived beings, was wearing on Phil. They had been on Asgard for three Earth days already, but by their hosts’ time, it was only mid-morning of the first day of their visit.

Phil accepted the fact that the king and queen were very busy, and had thought to do the same as Clint and Natasha, and get out and learn more about this alien place, but though he was in excellent shape for his age, he didn’t have the stamina they had any more, to try and keep up with a race of super beings. He’d let the two younger agents socialize with Thor and his warrior friends, and made a try at the more sedate, scholarly types instead.

It had been dismal. It seemed most of the people with real knowhow were tied up in rebuilding their rainbow bridge, and the only people either willing or available to speak to a human ambassador specialized in history, or agriculture, or poetry. That last had tied him up for over eight solid hours because he had been too polite to decline to hear a recitation of an original ode to Odin’s father, Bor, and his war with the ‘dark elves’, and he had learned a fair amount about Asgard’s crops. According to the expert, who had been very condescendingly sympathetic about Earth’s primitive methods, these people had no issues with drought or disease, or pests of any kind, thanks to ‘magic’.

After that, he’d decided to retire to their rooms and see what he could do with the equipment they’d brought along. He was soon regretting not having brought along a scientist or two on this mission.

SHIELD R&D, Stark, Fitz-Simmons and even Banner had all colluded to provide their mission with an impressive collection of tech designed to gather information, along with hastily written instructions. Phil had been assured that every bit of it was easy to operate, but there had been no time to review or train on any of it. Equipment that was blindingly basic to the genius who had created it was proving to be nothing of the kind to Coulson, who thought of himself as better with people than with machines, with a few exceptions for older tech, mostly from the Howard Stark era.

At least if Natasha could figure it out, it wouldn’t go to waste. Phil took a larger sip of mead, feeling old.

“I’ve used this kind of tech before,” Natasha half-apologized, as she easily sent the little device on a figure eight around Phil and Clint’s heads, giving a little wing waggle. “What is it you want to do?”

“I didn’t have anything particular in mind,” Phil admitted. “I was just thinking to send it out on a little exploratory flight.”
“Right.” The pink tip of Natasha’s tongue protruded just slightly, giving her a very human look of intense concentration as she steered the drone out the balcony door and through a window. “Just tell me which way to go.”

Phil leaned over her right shoulder to watch, and Clint crowded up close on the left, avidly watching the tiny screen as the city flew by. This one was codenamed ‘Sleepy’, and along with its camera, it recorded energy signatures.

“There,” Phil urged, reaching to point as best he could without jarring her elbow or blocking her view. “That floating building just off to the right. See if you can get in a close. Maybe we can get some idea of what holds it up.”

“I asked Volstagg that,” Clint offered, as Natasha flew the ‘bot towards the impossibly large, impossibly floating tower. “He said it was magic.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty tired of that answer,” Coulson replied.

“I don’t think most of the people here know what holds it up, or how their tech works, any more than most Americans know how computers or television really work,” Natasha commented. “There are mages, or technicians who know how things work, but it doesn’t seem to be a prestigious- Whoa!”

She jerked on the controls, causing the ‘Sleepy’ to jink hard to the right to avoid colliding with a black blur that had appeared out of nowhere to fill most of the small view screen. Then it dove, rolling and veering, not out of control but performing evasive maneuvers. Phil and Clint kept quiet, not wanting to distract her, but when several minutes had passed without any other hazard, it seemed the danger had passed and Natasha blew out a long breath and allowed the drone to resume level flight.

“What was it?” Phil asked.

“I think it was a bird,” she answered, shrugging. “A really big, black bird.”

“Like a hawk?” Hawkeye asked, grinning. The smile was struck from his face as, on the little screen, there was a renewed flash of black, then the drone was no longer flying under Natasha’s control, but falling fast, its camera capturing it’s descent and the uprushing tiles of a building. Though there was no sound transmitted, all of them winced on impact as if they’d heard the crunch, and the picture fritzed out.

Frowning, Natasha rewound the recorded flight, slowing it at the time of the second encounter to show a clear view of a glossy, blue black wing. Then she went back to the first attack, slowing it to single frames until she got a view of the entire bird.

“That’s not a hawk,” Clint said. “Though it looks nearly big enough to be one.”

“Some kind of crow?” Natasha guessed, trying to get a clearer resolution.

“It’s a raven,” Phil stated, grinding his teeth a little. More and more, it looked as if the little mishaps to their equipment might not just be accidents.

Clint looked at him curiously. “I didn’t know you were into birds, Coulson.”

“Odin supposedly has ravens that gather intelligence and report back to him, according to the myths. Huginn and Muninn- Thought and Memory.”

“When did you have time to learn all this stuff?” Clint demanded.
“I got Fury to commission an in-depth report on Norse Mythology after Thor first showed up in New Mexico,” Coulson said.

“I looked up a few things on Wikipedia, but it looked like fairytales to me, so I didn’t read much.” Clint said. “Wasn’t there some story about a giant snake, and Thor in a wedding dress?’”

“Those are different stories,” Phil started to explain.

Perhaps sensing an oncoming spate of stories, Natasha forestalled him. “Is there anything in those myths we need to know about?”

“It’s hard to say. Thor says most of it’s not true, but he didn’t say what was.”

“Stark was talking to Loki about some story about a horse, and a builder,” Natasha said, slowly, a tiny frown making a crease between her eyes as she tried to remember.

“I doubt that one is true,” Phil said. “It’s about Loki shapeshifting into a mare to distract a giant’s stallion, in order to win a bet, or cause the stallion’s owner to lose one. He supposedly then gave birth to Odin’s eight-legged horse, Sleipnir.”

“Speaking of horses,” Clint plucked one of the green gold fruits from the room’s vines and took a bite. “They aren’t real.”

Phil put down his drink. “What are you talking about?”

“The horses here aren’t real horses,” Clint clarified. “Thor and some of his friends invited me to go for a short hunt, and we rode out to some kind of game reserve. It was a three hour ride; must have been eighty or ninety miles at least, maybe more. We kept up a gallop the whole trip, and the horses didn’t get tired, or even break a sweat. When we got there, I asked if they didn’t at least need water, or a rubdown, but Thor just laughed and said no. And there are a lot of horses in the streets, but no manure, or even a whiff of it. Not real horses.”

Wincing a little, he rubbed his ass and stole Phil’s drink, draining it. “Going to beg a rubdown myself, ‘Tasha, if you’re willing. I haven’t been on a horse in over a decade.”

“Sure,” she agreed, amiably. “Don’t I always have your backside?”

“So the horses are no more real animals than these birds,” Phil waved to indicate the tiny feathered simulacrum who could sound like birds, or orchestral music. “Or the fish in the toilet.”

Said fish had startled Natasha into the only shriek he’d ever heard from her, when they had appeared without warning and spouted streams of warm water at her bottom like a weird, overly naturalistic bidet.

She gave him an annoyed look at the reminder, then asked Clint, “What did you hunt?”

“Big-ass boar the size of a stegasaurus.”

“Was that a fake too?” Phil inquired.

“Don’t think so,” Clint shrugged. “They said we would be eating it later tonight.”

A knock at the door had them all turning to see a palace servant stepping hesitantly in. He peered doubtfully at them, then cleared his throat and announced, “The All-Mother would like to see you, Agent Coulson of Midgard, and she requests your warrior, Barton, as well.”
Phil brightened. “We’d be honored to meet with the queen, of course. Does she want us immediately, or do we have time to change?” Phil wasn’t too rumpled, and just needed a jacket and tie, but Clint was about as dirty as a person should be, after hunting porcine dinosaurs.

“You may come as you are,” the servant told them. “I’m to escort you to the healing rooms.”

That surprised Coulson. He’d assumed this would either be official business, or maybe a more personal, intimate talk. “Why the healing rooms?”

“It has something to do with Prince Loki’s attempt to conquer your world, I believe.”

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Natasha promised, looking mildly curious as to what was going on.

That made no sense to Phil, but he decided to let the queen explain when they got there. Clint stripped off his kevlar vest and sweat-soaked shirt, hurriedly donning a fresh one, while Phil put on his jacket and tie. At least they would be somewhat presentable.

The servant opened the doors for them, and they followed him, walking at a purposeful speed into the maze of the palace corridors.
Chapter 8

Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to tilla123 for beta reading and much more, and to all the readers who commented, or left kudos or bookmarked. It's always nice to know folks are reading and enjoying!

Sorry to take so long. Next chapter will be sometime after tax day, since I am as behind with record-keeping as with writing.

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The queen was waiting for them, accompanied by a shorter, older woman with sharp, lively features and dark hair swept back into a practical bun. Clint liked the look of her, more so than the queen, though she was not as beautiful or compassionate looking. She looked honest, though.

“Agent Coulson,” the All-Mother’s smile was gracious and seemingly sincere, though faking it was undoubtedly a necessary skill in a ruler. “And Agent Barton. This is Eir, our head of healing arts.”

Phil made a shallow bow. “A pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

Though he could not recalling seeing anyone else around her bowing, Clint somewhat clumsily copied the gesture anyway. Excess kissing up was more likely to go over well than too little.

The healer nodded distractedly, too busy studying them both up and down. For what, Clint wondered. Maybe she’s never seen humans before?

“I apologize for not making time for you sooner,” the queen continued. “And I am sure you are wondering why I called you here, instead of arranging something more social.”

“We were a little curious,” Phil admitted, with that friendly little smile of his.

“My son has been telling me somewhat of what happened on Midgard, with the Tesseract. He said that the two of you were both under the influence of an unusually strong compulsion spell, and should be checked for any residual effects.”

Clint stiffened, alarm zinging through him like a breaking bow string. “Is that likely? I haven’t noticed anything…”

“It isn’t likely,” the older woman said, with enough firm belief to settle Clint’s nerves somewhat. “But it is better to be sure.”

“What about all the others who had the scepter used on them?” Phil asked. “If there are long-term problems-“
“If either of you still show signs of coercion, we can try to come up with a way to treat them and send it back with you,” the queen promised. “As part of Loki’s restitutions.”

“How is Loki?” Phil asked. “Thor mentioned that he might be extradited to Jotunheim soon, to be tried for attacking them?”

“It’s difficult to say,” the queen told them sadly. “I fear we’ve made a great many mistakes with him, and since his fall through the Void, he has been so terribly misused.”

Clint couldn’t help but wonder if his own treatment of Loki was being counted as misuse. It had been abuse, yes, but it had been deserved. In fact, Loki had enjoyed it far too much, Clint thought savagely, as disjointed memories rose, of a muffled shriek as an oversized toy was rammed home in Loki’s ass, of merciless little pincers attached to dark blue nipples, and of repeated blows of the flogger, while Loki writhed, tormented by the vibrating cock ring. Personally, he wished he’d had more time to experiment and that Stark’s toy box had contained some harsher tools.

“Barton?” The note of concern in his handler’s voice brought him abruptly out of the fantasy. He blinked away the lingering vision and became uncomfortably aware that he was rock hard, and that it would be perfectly obvious under his too-tight leather pants if either of these women were to look down. Thankfully, everyone was focused on his face. How long had he been spacing out?

“Yeah?” He plastered on an ‘aw shucks’ smile and willed his body to settle. “Sorry, guess I’m a little tired from our hunting trip earlier.”

The queen and healer both seemed to accept this at face value, but Phil would likely be wanting a better answer once they were alone.

“We will try not to keep you long,” Loki’s mother promised.

“If you’ll just come this way,” Eir swept off in a soft shushing of fabric, leading them to what looked for all the world to Clint like an ornate, gilded sacrificial altar.

“If you would lie here,” she directed, moving to the far side where she activated a projected control screen.

With his dick still at half-mast, Clint was not ready to take an alien MRI. He took a step behind Phil, playing it off as a joke. “You first.”

Phil narrowed his eyes but went along with it. “Some bodyguard you are.”

“I guard better from a distance,” Clint grinned.

“Do I need to undress?” Phil asked Eir.

She shook her head. “Just lie still. It may take some time to get the calibration right. We’ve only just got the thing repaired.”

Phil stretched out, making himself comfortable. A fuzzy, transparent copy of him coalesced into being a foot or so above him. Eir studied it, then began making adjustments to bring it into clear focus. At least it wasn’t as claustrophobic as an MRI. Fury had threatened Clint with a full medical work up, including that. Only this trip had saved him from more than a cursory examination. If this thing cleared them, maybe they could get Fury to cancel it. Probably not, though. Fury wasn’t the trusting sort.

“Your energy levels seem somewhat low, even for a mortal,” Eir mused. “And you seem to be
suffering from stress-related ailments. Too much blood flow. Over-abundant bile production.” She looked down from Phil’s image to meet his eyes. “Headaches? Poor digestion?”

“Nothing major. It’s been a busy few weeks,” Phil told her.

“Hmm…” Turning away, she went to rummage in a tall glass and gold cupboard, and returned a moment later with two long rods of glass or crystal. One was clear, the other was a blue so dark it was almost black.

As she passed the rods over Phil, Clint bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at the idea of space Vikings practicing New Age hippy-dippy crystal healing. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the queen watching him with a quizzical expression, and forced his face to sober up, faking a little cough to cover the remainder of his laughter.

She tilted an inquiring look at him, but he just shook his head. “Sorry,” he managed to sound professional after swallowing. “Just an odd passing thought.”

“There,” Eir said crisply, lowering the rods and stepping back. “I think that should do it. You can get up now.”

Phil did, getting to his feet and tugging his suit jacket back into order, then smoothing his barely mussed hair. Clint was damned if he didn’t look better. More rested.

Pointing the clear rod at Clint, Eir indicated the bench. “Now you, please.”

“Okay.” Clint handed his bow and quiver to Phil and climbed on the platform.

Eir waved her hands to activated the whatever it was, and the air over him lit up with such brilliance that Clint had to shut his eyes against the dazzling glare.

“Oh my,” the healer exclaimed, sounding startled. In Clint’s experience, doctors being surprised was seldom a good thing. Also, Phil’s 3D image hadn’t been too bright to look at. “Your energy level is much higher.”

He attempted a peek, cracking his eyes open a hair. All he could make out were streaks and lines of intense color, like the world’s most garish neon sign.

“I wouldn’t have thought a mortal would have such a high energy field,” Eir said, puzzled.

“Is that good or bad?” he asked, starting to get back up.

“No, keep still, please,” Eir commanded.

“Could this be a side effect of the mind control?” Phil asked, before Clint could work up the nerve to.

“No,” Eir denied, but ruined it by adding, “Though there is some… well, I don’t know if I would call it scarring, exactly…”

“What would you call it then?” Clint forced his eyes open. The glow had been dimmed so that it was merely uncomfortable to look at, not retina cooking. It looked like a body made of light. His body. Certain areas did look brighter, but it was hard to make out… Maybe his head… torso…left shoulder… Oh yeah.

“Loki healed me a few days before we came here,” he admitted, reluctantly. “Could that have
anything to do with the energy reading?"

Eir and Phil both asked, “Loki healed you?” in an eerily similar tone of disbelief. Well, that wasn’t unnerving or anything, Clint thought.

“Yeah, well, it was his fault I was hurt in the first place.”

“No one mentioned this to me in the debrief,” Phil complained.

“Loki healed you?” Eir repeated again. “But he’s never studied- This doesn’t look like a typical healing.”

“Let me see,” the queen spoke up. Clint had almost forgotten that Loki’s mother was there. He swallowed back the accusation that tried to fly out of his mouth, at least for the moment. After all, it MIGHT not be a bad thing.

“Yes, this is Loki’s energy pattern,” Frigga affirmed, too calmly for Clint’s liking. “But I’m also seeing temporal disruption.”

“Temporal? Like time travel?” Phil asked, in full on geek mode. He was a huge sci-fi buff. Clint was more an action kind of guy, but they could usually find movies in common, when they had the time.

“No time travel,” Clint protested. “I had a broken shoulder, a concussion and cracked ribs. Loki just fixed it, that’s all.”

The women didn’t answer. Clint opened his eyes and sat up, disrupting the device. “That is all, right?”

“It’s difficult to say,” Eir hedged. “It is a very unusual method of healing someone.

“I’m sure there was a compelling reason,” the queen soothed.

“Okay, what the hell did he do?”

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Sparing the two Einherjar assigned to guard the door to their younger prince’s rooms a brief expression of disfavor for failing to announce jir, Mengloth swept past them both into the young one’s startled presence. From jos expression, the guards had not sought their prince’s permission to admit jir, either. They barely allowed Mengloth time to clear the too-short door before pulling it shut behind jir with a clang.

“Your guards are rude,” jo pointed out to the prince, because while it was exactly the kind of behavior Mengloth expected of the snobbish Aesir, jo would not suffer it without comment. “You should have them dismissed.”

The little one’s hostile, wary look changed to a brief twisted smile. “Prisoners seldom have little say over the behavior of their jailors, but I invite you to take your complaint to the All-Father.”

Mengloth sniffed in disdain at the thought and looked around for a place to sit or kneel, as Prince Loki’s anxiety was less likely to abate whilst jo towered above jir. All the chairs available looked too small, so jo picked two of them up and set them out of the way, leaving one for Loki, and a clear
space on the floor in front of it. Settling down, jo crossed jos legs, arranging the basket jo had
brought in jos lap.

Prince Loki stared at jir with evident dislike, and mostly masked fear.

“They have made your rooms tolerably cool, I see.” Jo waited patiently for the little one to sit. “Are
you comfortable?”

Slowly, jo edged nearer. “What concern is it to you?”

“I am a healer, Prince Loki,” Mengloth reminded jir, trying not to sound too impatient. “It is my
business to ease suffering when I can.”

Having reached the waiting chair, Loki stood before it. Standing, jo was a few handspans taller than
Mengloth was sitting down.

“I sought to wipe your kind out,” jo reminded jir, stiff with anger. “Along with your realm. You
cannot possibly wish to ease my suffering.”

Mengloth decided not to argue this point. Actions would speak louder than words in any case. Jo
lifted the basket instead.

“I brought you some foodstuffs from home to try.”

“I want no part of your foods, or your world, or you,” jo hissed.

Mengoth growled. “You know nothing of us! Nothing of yourself! You know these Aesir who stole
you are liars. You know how they have lied to you since you were an infant. How can you go on
blindly trusting what you have been taught?”

“So I should believe you instead?” jo scoffed.

“Of course not. I but ask you to make your own judgements, based on knowledge, not on the lies of
our adversaries.”

Frowning, the little one perched on the edge of jos chair. It put Mengloth higher again, but not
uncomfortably so.

“Now, I have brought you some very nutritious foods to sample. It is likely too late for you to gain
any more height, but you could stand to be healthier.” Jo offered jir the basket.

The prince made no move to take it, claiming, “I am not hungry.”

“As rude as your so-called brother,” Mengloth observed. “I should not be surprised, I suppose, as
both of you were raised by a tyrant and his weak-willed queen.”

Jos hands shot out to snatch the basket. “You will not speak of my mother so! She is not weak!”

“Then she is as arrogant as the rest of the Aesir, and raised you to be so as well, that you have no
manners at all?”

“Creature,” jo said coldly, “If you continue to insult the All-Mother, I shall have you ejected from
this realm, and not necessarily sent back to your own, either.”

“Impolite, ungracious and unkind.” Mengloth tilted jos head to study the fuming little one. “Are you
starving yourself? Your- Odin claimed you let yourself fall into the void after you were prevented
from destroying our world. Dost still seek annihilation?"

“Of myself?” White teeth flashed in a fierce smile. “Or your world?”

Unperturbed, Mengloth replied, “Either.”

The grin died, and jos slim shoulders slumped in resignation. Jo stared down at the basket, hugging it closer. “No. Not really.”

“It is being said that you also attempted to destroy Midgard.”


“I care nothing for Midgard, myself,” Mengloth shrugged. “But it is good to hear you are in a less destructive frame of mind now.”

Gesturing to the basket, jo invited, “Try the food. To be polite, if nothing else.”

The little prince made a face, then pulled open the hinged top of the basket to explore the contents. Jo sampled a few dried kraen berries, which were sour enough to make jos mouth pucker, followed by a nut and tree sap candy. Jo ate three of these before putting the rest aside with obvious reluctance.

“I did not think you had nuts and fruits on Jotunheim,” jo commented, after surreptitiously licking jos fingers clean.

“Did you think we lived on the fresh-driven snow?” Mengloth asked, raising an eyebrow. “Or that we were strictly cannibals?”

The prince winced, murmuring “Wicked Asgardian children?”

Mengloth snorted. “On Jotunheim, Odin is the one who parents warn will steal away bad younglings to roast for his warriors.”

“Gruesome,” Prince Loki’s lips quirked briefly, and jos eyes flashed with a glint of humor. “Perhaps he was waiting for me to get big enough to cook?”

“Perhaps you were fiendishly clever not to eat your vegetables,” Mengloth conceded dryly.

“Speaking of vegetables,” Jo reached back into the basket and drew out the largest item - a dull green bundle as long as jos forearm, still damp and smelling of the sea. Jo eyed it dubiously. “What in the nine realms is this thing?”

“That is a great delicacy,” Mengloth assured him, smiling. “The wrappings are just to keep it fresh.”

“Ah.” Jo seemed relieved that jo was not expected to try the somewhat slimy seaweed, a relief that vanished as the wrappings fell away to reveal the spiny, bright blue crustacean, still alive and wriggling. Jo poked a wary finger at a snapping claw, hurriedly drawing it back before being pinched. “What is it?”

“A huemmir. It’s a sea creature,” Mengloth explained. “The seas of Jotunheim are bountiful, though, without the Heart of Winter, the storms make fishing a much more hazardous occupation.”

“Is it- how do you cook it?”

“We do not.” Extending a hand, Mengloth said, “May I?”
Jo gave it to jir, and watched with appalled fascination as Mengloth formed a scalpel sharp blade of ice around one forefinger and used it to separate the head and wildly waving legs from the tail, then slice the tail down the center, peeling it apart to extract the pearly white flesh. Slicing off a piece, jo offered it to the prince.

Gingerly, jo took it and bit off the smallest possible bite, chewing slowly.

“It's sweet,” Prince Loki exclaimed, surprised. Jo deliberately finished the rest of the piece. “The texture is a little strange, though.”

Mengloth gave jir the rest of the tail. The little one ate another piece, jos face still wavering between enjoyment and distaste. The flesh was high in fat and protein, and in jos condition, Prince Loki would be craving both. Probably jo would not care to sample the brain, which some Jotuns considered the best part of the huemmir. Mengloth wrapped the leftover parts, still moving feebly, back in their seaweed covering and froze it to save for later. It would not be as good as fresh killed, but it would still be edible.

“I think I would like it better cooked,” the little one opined, as jo set aside the now empty shell and licked jos fingers clean. “I apologize for-“

The door flew open with a crash, startling Mengloth and the little prince both, and an assassin wielding a bow burst into the room. Mengloth raised both hands, swiftly calling up ice and defensive spells.

Prince Loki seemed to recognize the archer, though, and did not seem as alarmed as the situation called for. Mengloth hesitated. Perhaps they were friends, or at least well acquainted, and the archer often arrived with bow drawn?

“Barton.” Jo got to jos feet. “What brings you to my-“

“You bastard.” The archer let fly, the arrow aimed at the little prince’s head.

Mengloth’s breath caught, and jo cursed jostaf. Too damned slow. I am a healer, not a fighter! Jo readied healing spells instead, but held onto the ice.

Unperturbed, the prince caught the arrow mid-flight, a handspan from jos face, and Mengloth breathed easier.

“Really, Barton, I thought you had seen the futility of-“

The arrow exploded into a blinding ball of burning gas, and sent the little prince flying, limbs akimbo, to fetch up against a bookcase with bruising force. Jos hair and clothes were scorched, and jos eyebrows were singed away. Jo looked dazed.

Mengloth shook off jir shock and swept up a hand, intending to encase the assassin in ice before he could make another attempt, but Loki stammered out, “No, don’t! Don’t harm him!”

The archer had another arrow readied, but another male had appeared at his side and put a hand over his, speaking urgently and seeking to dissuade him.

“Your guards are not only discourteous, they are incompetent!” Mengloth spat, as the little one struggled to jos feet. Jo hurriedly moved to assist jir.

“Again, they are here to prevent my escape, not to protect me,” jo explained, looking blackly amused.
“Sorry about all this,” the older male who was still restraining the archer called. “I’m afraid Agent Barton was a bit upset when he learned your healing method had certain side effects.”

“You stole a year off my life, you asshole!” the archer yelled.

“How so?” Mengloth queried, jos curiosity piqued about a possible new method of healing. “You have healing talent?”

“No,” the little prince kept a careful eye on the two males as jo poured water from a small, burbling fountain onto a cloth and dabbed cautiously at jos face. “I was forced to try something a bit unorthodox. I gifted Barton with a portion of my own lifeforce, then sped him up long enough to completely heal his injuries.”

“Healers do not use their own energy for good reason,” Mengloth criticized, taking the cloth and also pulling a handful of crystals free from one of jos many necklaces. The beads were not Asgardian healing stones, but they worked in the same manner. “For several good reasons, in fact. You shorten your own time, giving too much away!”

“Well, we were in a hurry,” Loki protested, as Mengloth turned up jos face and applied the stones to the light burns on cheeks and forehead, and the bruise on one forearm, and wiping away the resultant dust of the spent beads. “I did what was necessary.”

“You didn’t tell me you were doing that! You just said you would heal me. I wouldn’t have agreed to what you did if you’d told me what you were doing!” the archer spat, coming closer. His companion had a firm grip on his arm, and was dragged along perforce.

“It worked,” Prince Loki pointed out to the angry patient. “You would not have wanted to miss the fight, or be unable to rescue Agent Coulson! You would have hated me forever if he had died.”

“I was going to hate you forever no matter what!”

“Wait a minute,” the archer’s companion frowned as if this meant something to him. “You did this for me?”

The archer, this ‘Barton’, ignored the question, still raging at the little prince. “Eir said you used up a year of my life at least with that little stunt! I don’t have thousands of years to live like you!”

“You are one of the Midgardians?” Mengloth had heard a few had come back with Prince Thor to give testimony of some kind.

Prince Loki drew up straight, towering over the two mortals, which was remarkable for one that seemed so diminutive. Mengloth idly wondered if all Midgardians were so tiny. Jo had heard that they were.

“I did not shorten your lifespan, Barton.” The little prince tried to tell him. “The benefits should outweigh any loss. I gave you a bit of my godhood, and made it stick. You should be stronger now, healthier. Less likely to get sick or injured.”

“And the psychic bond?” the archer growled, baring his teeth. “You just forgot to mention that I would have some kind of mental attraction to you!”

Mengloth didn’t see any evidence of attraction, unless mortals expressed such things very differently. Anyway, this Barton had misunderstood.

“Oh, that.”
“Another good reason healers do not use their own life force,” Mengloth said, dryly. “But it is not so much an attraction as an affinity.”

“Potato, Poataho,” the mortal replied, nonsensically. “It’s a connection of some kind, and I would never have said yes to that.”

Shrugging uneasily, Prince Loki said, “If I remember correctly, the effect is temporary. It should wear off in no time. Nothing to worry about.”

Jo, as well as the two mortals, looked to Mengloth for confirmation.

Stroking a hand over Jos necklaces, Mengloth slowly rumbled, “Well, yes.”

This did not seem to reassure anyone. The archer was either very astute, or just very suspicious by nature. He demanded, “How temporary?”

“It shouldn’t last more than, say, half a hundred years,” Mengloth told him. Jo could not remember what the exact lifespan of a typical Midgardian was, but jo knew it that it had been very short. That had been one of the arguments during Laufey’s invasion of their world, that they live such a short time anyway, it made no difference to kill them a hand of years sooner. Mengloth had suspected even then that the mortals would not see it that way.

Prince Loki winced, looking abashed. “Barton-“

“You- you- I will fucking skewer your ass!” The archer wrenched free of the older male’s hold and drew back his bow.

Mengloth decided it was time to step in. “While it sounds as if you might have a just complaint, I cannot allow you to attempt to harm the little prince. Not while jo is with child.”

The nocked arrow went slack, as did the archer’s angry features. “What are you talking about? Who is ‘yo’?” He turned to stare. “Loki?”

“Are you saying that Loki is pregnant?” the second mortal asked, also staring at the little one.

Mengloth did not understand why they were so disbelieving. “It is the natural result of a mating cycle,” jo stated.

“Buggering bilgesnipe,” the little prince groaned, sinking down in the now somewhat worse for wear chair. “I hate all of you. I hate my life!”

“Who’s the father?” The archer collapsed his bow and hung it across his back. “Stark or the Hulk?”

“Barton,” the older mortal said, “I don’t think this is any of our business.”

“The sire is a mortal?” Mengloth was surprised. “I thought Prince Thor-“

“What?” Prince Loki’s head came up, and jo glared. “Thor is my brother!”

Mengloth shrugged. “Not by blood. Such a child might go far in bringing peace between our realms.”

“Well, Thor isn’t the father,” the little one said, sullenly.

“It was the Hulk, wasn’t it?” Barton guessed. “Stark hasn’t dodged paternity suits all his life to mess up with you.”
“Stark had a vasectomy at eighteen,” the second mortal, Coulson, said.

Mengloth had no idea what that was, but from the context, jo assumed it ruled this mortal out. “Who is this ‘Hulk’?”

Turning rebellious, Prince Loki declared, “It doesn’t matter. I’m not keeping it, and I am done talking about this. All of you can see yourselves out now.”

“I’m not finished!” Barton snapped. “You aren’t getting away with what you did to me just because you’re knocked up!”

Coulson took a firm tone, indicating a superior rank, “Barton, let’s go.”

“I do not think you should be left alone,” Mengloth told the little prince, after the Midgardians had taken their leave.

Prince Loki crossed jos arms. “I am sure someone else will be barging in soon.”

“Very well, little one.” Mengloth inclined jos head. It would only make the little one more upset to stay and argue. But jo would make certain someone did come, and jo would see to it that the guards were replaced by others who would protect the prince, even if jo had to send to Jotunheim for them.
Chapter Notes

Taxes done for another year. To celebrate, have a new chapter!

Thanks as always to my beta, tilla123, for catching eras (like this one. ERRORS) and letting me think at her in chat!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Women’s magic turned out to be a simple and subtle thing, requiring patience and intense concentration, not unlike other so-called womanly skills, such as weaving and needlework. It was slow, requiring a great deal of time to accomplish results that went mostly unseen, which was probably the reason that Asgard’s men disparaged it. But by his third lesson with Frigga, Loki was half convinced that the women themselves were conspiring in the men’s dismissal of their magic, because women’s magic also had the potential to be immensely powerful.

The basis of it was an inward focus, deeper and more physical than he had ever gone with meditation and mental exercises. In his own training, Loki had learned awareness of his heart beats, and his breathing, and how to direct them. Now he was learning a complete awareness of his body, of every muscle and sinew, of every nerve and every organ from tear ducts to the cock that twitched with hopeful arousal every time his attention strayed to it. At the same time, he was supposed to be studying the interaction of his magic and his body.

Every Asgardian, along with the Vanir and the elves, both light and dark, had an innate gift for seidr. It granted them all long lives, and greater strength than their physical forms would seem capable of, and the ability to heal grievous wounds, or throw off the ailments that affected mortals. It also provided each person a pool of energy to tap into, if they chose. Most had only a small amount of excess, and never bothered to learn more than a few simple spells, if that.

Hogun could focus a healing stone to be more effective, and make a far seeing lens in the air. Volstagg could light a fire, and make it burn more quickly, a talent he had cultivated to speed the cooking of his meals when necessary. Sif could repel mosquitoes and biting flies, and sharpen a blade by magic. Fandral had never used any spells that Loki had known of, but his excess energy seemed to naturally channel itself into his charm, especially when he directed it at unattached women.

The amount of power Thor carried rivaled Loki’s own, though his brother had never made any attempt to make use of it, beyond channeling it through Mjölnir to summon storms and wield the lightning. Learning that his brother had the power to best him at magic, as well as at arms, had been what had sparked the first true embers of hate in Loki’s heart, but Thor scorned spells and deliberate use of magic. He had chosen the warrior’s way, using a specially made weapon that allowed its user to direct power in focused strikes.
The women of Asgard and Vanaheim had long ago learned to turn their magic to more intimate use, such as enticing possible husbands, soothing crying babes, and the upkeep of homes and everything that lived and grew in them. Loki had been cognizant of some of those skills, having used some of the techniques in creating Sleipnir, but the creation of a construct, even one as life-like as the All-Father’s war steed, was nothing compared to the complexity of manipulating living bodies, which was the essence of women’s magic. In theory, directing one’s magic to make tiny, gradual changes in one’s own body should not be much different than willing one’s heart to slow.

Frigga had not mentioned the possibility that it could be used to affect the bodies of other people, but Loki has quickly grasped that there was no reason it could not, so long as that person was in close proximity. With practice and skill, a practitioner of women’s magic could dispel or create impotence in a man, or send him to sleep, or perhaps even stop his heart. Small wonder the women would not wish such knowledge to be learned by lovers and husbands.

Combined with the knowledge Loki already had, the uses expanded exponentially. He was only beginning, and as yet had not the skill to find and end his unwanted pregnancy.

He might have had it by now, but a different opportunity had presented itself during the first lesson, and Loki had been dividing his attention, putting off that task for the time being. Instead, most of his focus was on his mother, the huemmir he had secreted in her meditation cushion, and the oh so tiny trickle of magic he was directing from her to it, without her knowledge.

His mother had gotten the All-Father’s permission to release him from the suppression cuffs so he could learn this, but she had not been able to convince Odin to let him out of them entirely. Loki had decided to take matters into his own hands. Or rather, he’d decided to fake his mother’s hands.

He’d memorized the sequence of runes she used to release him - a different set keyed to her, just as Odin and Thor had sequences keyed to them. No amount of tracing the runes in the right order would open the cuffs without the proper life energy to match it, so Loki was going to make a facsimile of Frigga. It didn’t need to be big, or to last very long.

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Standing a pace behind and to the left of Coulson, Clint Barton eyed the stacked chests of gold and gems with barely contained fury. While he was no expert at appraising such things, he didn’t doubt Odin was correct in saying that the value should more than cover the replacement of both of SHIELD’s destroyed facilities, and provide generous benefits to those who had been injured, and the families of those few who had actually died, with a couple of millions tossed in for “whatever else you deem appropriate”.

Phil was making a case for getting less gold and a few advanced weapons, or anything else that might aid the Earth in warding off future threats from outer space, pointing out that Thor had said that using the Tesseract had acted as a signal to the other realms that Earth was now ready for a ‘higher form of war’. Also, no one was sure if the threat from the Chitauri’s leader, Thanos, was ended with the closing of the portal. Loki had not been able to say for certain; he’d only said that Thanos was yet a great distance away.

Odin wasn’t buying the argument. He claimed that ‘Midgard’ was under Asgard’s protection, and thus needn’t worry about such things. Thor, at his father’s side, had chimed in that he had already pledged to Director Fury that he would always come to Earth’s aid, and Odin added this to his reasons SHIELD wasn’t going to get Asgardian toys to take home.
Clint didn’t care much either way, though he knew he ought to. Phil was usually right when it came to this kind of thing. But he couldn’t keep his mind off Loki, couldn’t stop thinking about how it was looking more and more likely that Loki was going to get away with what he’d done. Just like rich kids on Earth who got away with shit from vandalism up to murder, Loki had a wealthy, powerful daddy who was planning to just buy his kid out of the consequences of his actions.

Not if Clint had anything to say about it, he wasn’t. As his handler and Loki’s father started in on yet another polite round of argument, he decided there wasn’t going to be a better time to have his own say.

“Look,” he began, stepping up to stand in front of Phil, avoiding Natasha’s reflexive attempt to stop him. “I don’t give one good goddamn about what kind of deals you make with SHIELD or Earth in general. There is no amount of gold you can pay me to make up for what Loki’s done to me.”

That stopped everyone for a long minute. Natasha was looking like she wanted to slap her forehead, or possibly Clint. Phil was giving him an especially bland look which was three parts pissed off and one part ‘I hope you know what you’re doing’. Clint had no idea what he was doing; he just knew that what he’d said was the truth. Money had never meant much to him, and he wasn’t going to be satisfied by a payoff.

Thor eyed Clint, then his father, and attempted to intercede. “It is true Agent Barton has been grievously wronged by Loki,” he suggested.

“You could say that again,” Clint agreed, with a tight smile. “He took control of me, made me turn against my own people, and my world, and then when I was free of that, he put some kind of hex on me AGAIN.”

“You do not believe Loki meant merely to heal you?” Frigga asked, soothingly. “Some mortals would consider what he gave you a great gift.”

“Well, I don’t. Not if it’s going to leave me with this psychic bond or whatever it is.”

“Is it affecting you adversely?” the queen asked, tilting her head slightly. “You do not seem to be displaying the usual symptoms of such a bond.”

“You think I should be happy about wanting to be around him?”

Eir had said such a healing usually caused the subject to wish to be in the company of the healer. Clint hadn’t followed it entirely, it had to do with energy and resonance and sympathetic attraction. The why didn’t concern him, he was only interested in results, and the result seemed to be that he was going to want to be near Loki for the next fifty years.

“No,” Frigga continued to peer intently at him. “I suppose you would not be.”

“What is it you want, then?” Odin inquired, dangerously calm.

“I want Loki to be the one to pay,” Clint ground out, ignoring Phil’s blandly panicked expression. “It’s supposed to be a punishment, right? It’s supposed to teach him a lesson. How does your giving out a pittance of the gold you guys have here do any of that?”

The All-Father looked like he was going to lose his temper and maybe blast Clint into a million little bits, but Frigga put a hand on his arm, and he visibly reined himself in.

“Loki has a personal fortune,” the king began.
“I don’t want your damned money, and I don’t want his!” Clint yelled. Phil and Natasha both tried to settle him down, but he ignored them. “Money isn’t going to help me.”

Frigga tightened her grip on her husband, and asked, “Do you have something in mind, Agent Barton?”

“I want him to undo this,” Clint gestured at his head.

“Eir seems to think that would be very detrimental to your health,” she replied.

“Then I want him to get rid of the damned side effects.”

“Which are?” she arched one golden brow at him.

Clint did not reply. He was not about to tell her that he was obsessed with doing dirty, filthy, painful things to her precious baby boy.

“It is a complex magical problem,” she told him. “If it can be solved at all, Loki will have to be the one to do it. I am not sure when he will be able to even begin,” she sighed. “Not with all the other things that are happening.”

“I’m not leaving till it’s fixed,” Clint declared, adamantly.

“What?” Phil and Natasha both said, though she said it in Russian, with a lot more ‘oomph’.

“I see,” Frigga almost smiled.

Thor started into “Barton, you must not-“

Everyone was drowned out by Odin’s fierce bellow. “You think to order me in my own realm, mortal?!”

“Not leaving without my head fixed,” Clint repeated, stubbornly. He wasn’t cowed by Fury, and he wasn’t going to back down to any other one-eyed tyrants either.

“You might end up living in our realm for many years,” Frigga pointed out, reasonably.

Years? In this place, where all but a handful of people treated him like an especially bright performing animal? No, that was not acceptable. “Then Loki should come back to Earth with us.”

They all stared at Clint as if he’d started speaking in tongues, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made.

“Let Loki work off his debt to Earth. We could use his help on lots of things, I’ll bet. Not to mention he’s carrying a half-mortal kid. He should get with Banner on that, right?”

Phil took him by the elbow and squeezed just hard enough to get across the message that Barton was to shut up or get a nerve pinch that would disable his right arm for the rest of the day, and hurt like a wicked bitch.

“All-Father,” he said, once he was certain Clint had shut up, “I would like to be excused to discuss some things with my people.”

“You may go,” Odin rumbled ominously.

“We will also discuss your suggestion, Agent Barton,” Frigga called after them, as Natasha and Phil
dragged him towards the exit.

“I appreciate that, your majesty!” Clint yelled back, just before the heavy gold plated doors boomed shut behind them.

Outside the royal audience hall, Phil and Natasha stopped and turned nearly identical glares on him.

“What?” Shaking out his tingling arm, Clint shrugged. “It’s a good idea!”

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When the guard interrupted his meeting with the viceroy’s of Asgard’s agricultural planets to quietly whisper in his ear that Loki had vanished from Heimdall’s sight, Odin could not really say he was surprised.

“Should we call out the guard and begin a search?” the same guard inquired, as the All-Father had risen, calling a recess and excusing himself to the viceroy’s.

“No,” Odin kept his expression calm, though his mind was racing through various scenarios, many of which could be disastrous for his younger son. This time, he was determined to make things come out well, or at least as well as possible, given the circumstances.

“No search. I will see to this. Tell no one else,” he instructed, heading for Loki’s rooms.

“Not even the queen?”

“Not yet.” This would be a gamble without Frigga, even if his best guess turned out to be right, but Jotunheim was pushing to have Loki delivered to them for trial, and he and his adopted child needed to settle things between them before then.

Two Einherjar stood on guard outside Loki’s rooms, these chosen by Frigga after Mengloth had complained of some of the previous guards. They greeted the All-Father without any sign of concern, which only meant that if Loki had fled, he had not gone out by the main door. Odin would hardly have expected him to, though.

Making no mention of anything amiss, he ordered them to get the door, and then to go off duty.

“Should we notify our captain to assign others, my king?” one of them asked, conscientiously.

“No. I do not believe a guard will be needed henceforth, but if I change my mind, I will make arrangements for it after I’ve talked with my son.” If he was not gone. Odin hoped fervently that he had not waited too long to make Loki understand.

They frowned, but left, allowing Odin to enter Loki’s rooms alone, pushing the door shut behind him.

The rooms were neat, without any sign of an escape, except for the two open magic-suppressing cuffs lying discarding on the rug. Beyond them, against one wall, stood a new addition—a large crystal tank half filled with water and obsidian sand. Half a dozen spiny, multi-legged sea creatures scuttled about in it.

Walking slowly, Odin circled the room, listening for the slightest sound and thinking. Nothing
appeared to be missing. All of Loki’s books and keepsakes were exactly where they had always been. Odin had memorized their places. He had memorized everything about these rooms, when he’d come here to grieve, and contemplate all the mistakes he’d made with his proud, clever boy.

He breathed a little easier, a surge of hope welling up, despite the apparent lack of Loki. His breath fogged, the room was chilly, set at a temperature to make a frost giant comfortable.

“Your mother told me you were doing better,” he told the seemingly empty room, as he collected the abandoned cuffs and set them on the side table nearest the exit and deliberately walked away from them. He also leaned Gungnir in a corner and left it there. “You must be, to have figured out how to slip the bonds. Someday you’ll have to tell me how you did that.”

Nothing stirred. The room was still and silent as a tomb. Odin took a seat, after picking up the book that had been resting on the chair. He glanced at the title, then shut it and put it aside.

“Your mother also tells me I must trust you, if there is any hope of this plan succeeding,” Odin said, to anyone who might be listening behind an illusion.

“She also informed me that if I seek to play you as a tafl piece, you are going to refuse to play by the rules, move where you will and probably overturn the whole board.”

Across the room, the tank bubbled softly, as two of the crustaceans fought a short skirmish, sending up a cloud of sand. A set of chimes rang, though Odin felt no breeze. Tension rippled across his shoulders, with that particular quality of being watched by someone unseen. Or perhaps it was just his imagination.

“I did not believe you were ready to listen before, but we are running out of time. Will you listen, if I explain?”

The silence was mocking. Odin fought the urge to roll his eyes, practically hearing his younger son’s sarcastic voice whispering “You won’t trick me so easily, old man.”

“Of course, I might be able to prevent your escape, if I choose. Then again, I might not. I do not intend to try.”

He thought he heard a soft, indrawn breath from somewhere nearby.

“Loki, we are trying to help you. If you flee, you will be alone, and Thanos’s servants will be seeking you. Do not do this to your mother.” He paused, then continued, “Do not do this to me. Let me help you, my son.”

Odin caught a subtle shimmer in the air, a faint glimmer of green, in the door to the bedroom, but Loki’s voice, soft and ragged as torn velvet, came from behind him.

“You have a queer idea of the definition of ‘help’, All-Father.”

Odin turned, relief and hope surging through him. Loki had taken up Gungnir and was casually leaning against the wall, wearing the Aesir guise again. He projected boredom, spite and contempt, but Loki, like Odin himself, rarely allowed others to see what he really felt.

He is more my son than Thor, in some ways, Odin mused, knowing his own mien was that of a stern father and ruler, reflecting little of the dozens of conflicting emotions Loki always aroused in him. Anger that he should defy and threaten his king and father. Pride in his quick wits and daring. Gladness for the spark of curiosity, nearly hidden, in Loki’s gaze. Dismay at the tension revealed in the tight set of his shoulders, and the white-knuckled grip on the spear’s golden shaft. The spear
would avail him little, of course, being bound to Asgard’s kingship, but perhaps he believed that without it, Odin was no match for Loki in magic. This was not so, as the kingship was more than a tool, but it might be best to allow Loki to believe it for now.

Slowly leaning back in his chair, Odin ruthlessly quashed his anger. He had said the wrong words to Loki once and lost him; he must not say the wrong thing now.

After a long moment of internal struggle, he asked Loki, “What kind of help would you prefer?”

The question clearly startled Loki, and baffled him. He straightened, the false detachment giving way to real interest.

“You could simply just pardon me,” Loki suggested mockingly. “You forgave Thor a great deal, after all.”

“I could, yes,” Odin agreed. “What would that accomplish, except to make you more despised by all of Asgard?”

“You think to make them love me by sending me Jotunheim?” Loki’s eyes widened in sudden realization, then narrowed in anger. “You want them to pity me!”

“I prefer the term ‘sympathize’.”

“I don’t want their sympathy, or their pity!” Loki raged.

“What is it you do want from Asgard, then?” Useless question. Loki would never ask for things he thought he could never have, like acceptance for his differences, or even the love that Thor gained so effortlessly.

His boy turned aside, trembling visibly. “Nothing,” he lied.

Changing tactics, Odin stated, “The Jotnar will not kill you, Loki.”

“Why do you say that?” Loki challenged. “Why would they not? I tried to kill them.”

“Is that what you meant to do? Do you know that for certain?”

Blinking slowly, Loki took two steps closer to where Odin sat. “Explain.”

“I think it would be better if you saw for yourself.”

Slowly, so as not to appear threatening, Odin levered himself to his feet and extended his hand for Gungnir. He did not demand it, he merely fixed Loki with an expectant stare.

Loki’s features writhed with doubt and anger and indecision, mingled with fear and longing and hope. “Fine!” he spat, all but throwing the spear at Odin.

But Odin only caught it, and adjusted his cloak. “Are you up to extended seidr work?”

“What sort of seidr?”

“You will need to veil us both for a considerable amount of time. Can you?”

Though he tried to hide it, Loki was curious, and flattered. It occurred to Odin that he had never asked his son to work magic for him before. He had given him assignments where he’d known magic would likely be needed, but he could not recall ever asking him to use what Loki considered
his greatest talent on his king’s behalf.

“I can,” Loki swore. “Where are we going, that we mustn’t be seen?”

“We are going into the past, to the day of Thor’s coronation.”

His son flinched, looking betrayed. “Why?”

“Because I need to know what happened, Loki,” Odin informed him, tiredly. “And so do you.”

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to everyone who has already left kudos and comments. I love kudos and comments, guys. Tell me what you think, I beg you.
Chapter 10

Chapter by Crazy_Cat_Lady

Chapter Summary

Odin and Loki visit their past.

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure how many of these jaunts into the past that we'll be taking. I'm open to suggestions for what the readers think ought to be covered.

Thanks as always to tilia123 for all her encouragement and fixes!

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As he stared at the man who had lied to him all his life, claiming to be his father, Loki’s mind buzzed like a kicked beehive, so full of angry, urgent questions that he could not decide what to ask first. He opened his mouth and one flew out.

“How did you know I was still here?” Because his concealment spell had been perfect. Even Heimdall couldn’t have detected him.

“I did not know,” Odin replied. “I only hoped, based on my estimation of your intelligence, and a memory.”

The child within Loki, that sentimental, needy part of himself that he could not seem to stamp out no matter how he tried, preened at the All-Father’s praise. He shoved the feeling down hard. Odin was only trying to manipulate him. Wasn’t he?

A second question, as confused and upset as the first. “What memory?”

Eying him thoughtfully, Odin answered, “I was thinking of that time when you and Thor snuck into the Realm Below and were imprisoned by the rock trolls.”

It took a moment for Loki to call up that particular scrape. Rock trolls were a hazard throughout many of the Nine Realms, and he and Thor, along with Thor’s friends, had run afoul of them many times and been captured more than once, but he did vaguely remember a time when it had been just the two of them.

“What about it?”

“I recalled you tricked the guards into opening the cell they were holding you in by simply seeming to be gone, and escaping when they came in to check.”
Loki crossed his arms, scowling faintly as the memories sharpened. “You think I was waiting for someone to open the door?”

“No.” Odin scratched at his beard and rubbed his chin. “You told me, afterwards, that your plan had been to steal the keys and stay safely in your cell until the search died down, and everyone was certain you were already well away.”

The specifics were coming back to Loki now. The trolls had used an unfamiliar kind of magic to cast illusions, which was how they had been caught, and he had wanted a chance to study it more closely.

“It was a clever idea,” his not-father said.

“Thor did not think so.” Thor had compared Loki to a cowardly rat, after he had slain their guards and committed them to fighting their way out of a warren of enraged trolls. “No son of Odin hides and slinks away from battle!” he had laughed, eagerly leaping into the fray, and never a word of apology for getting Loki’s leg broken as he tried to guard his brother’s back.

“You brother prefers to rely own his own strengths, as do you, Loki,” Odin replied. “It was a good plan, nonetheless.”

A shrill laugh broke free of Loki’s constricted throat, and he began to pace, unable to keep still. “No one else in this benighted realm would have called me aught but a skulking craven for suggesting the use of stealth instead of slaughtering our way out!”

“Some would,” the king argued, in a too-calm voice. “But none of them would have gone with Thor into the Realm Below.”

But I thought he was my brother, Loki thought, angrily. I thought I had to look out for him. “So it’s my own fault, as usual?”

“You always twist my words,” Odin grated, with a hint of impatience. “It is no one’s fault!”

“No one’s fault that I am constantly mocked and reviled, when I am not simply ignored?” Loki challenged, sneeringly.

“Asgard’s might is built on its warriors, and they fear magic. They suspect things they do not understand, and despise anything that might make them look weak or foolish, and you go out of your way to do both, constantly!”

He flung up a hand to halt Loki’s next words, and drew in a slow breath, then said slowly, “But I should have done more to prevent it.”

“What? Their despising me, or my mocking them?”

“Both,” Odin growled, then shook off the argument. “I have been remiss in many things. We have not the time to go through them in detail now. We need to get started. Are you ready?”

Odin was exactly like Thor, Loki brooded as he came to an abrupt halt, facing away. He doled out praise generously when it pleased him, and blame in equal measure, but when it came to his own sins - his own mistakes, it was “However I might have wronged you”, or “I should have done more”. Vague mouthings that accepted no responsibility.

He crossed his arms, then uncrossed them because his breasts, hidden by his Aesir guise, had grown unwontedly sensitive. Eir and Mengloth had both told him this was normal, but it was uncomfortable all the same.
Behind him, Odin waited silently for his answer. Loki was tempted to say ‘no’ just to see what would happen. But he was curious about this plan.

“Every book I’ve ever read that mentioned time travel claimed it was not possible,” he said, marveling to himself that he had managed such a conversational tone.

“It is more effective to discourage the practice that way than trying to forbid it,” the All-Father admitted.

“Asgard is as filled with lies as a fallen apple is with worms,” Loki smiled, bitterly.

“Some lies are necessary. Some are even beneficial.”

“Except when I am the one telling them?”

Odin sighed gustily. “Traveling through time is dangerous, and requires a great deal of power. If more people knew it was possible, they would not be able to resist the idea of trying to change the past.”

That was undoubtedly true. It was the first thing Loki had thought of. He turned to face Odin. “Would that be so terrible? Why not undo your mistakes?”

Which mistakes to fix, though? Don’t let me fall from the Bifrost. Stop Thor from going to Jotunheim and dragging us with him. Leave me where you found me as a baby, to die in the cold.

“That is what is impossible,” Odin explained. “The past is fixed, immutable.”

Loki frowned. “How so? If you can go back, you can change things. Make them come out differently.”

“You can change things, but not for yourself. Any appreciable change results in a new timeline. A new universe. Or possibly one that already existed, because the change had always occurred. You will always return to your own future, where what has happened to you is what has always happened to you. The different past you have created, or participated in, happened to a different person. Another Loki, or another Odin.”

The multiverse theory was something Loki had read of, though not in any great depth. Those alternate realities were supposedly only hypothetical, as far as he knew.

“If changing the past is not possible, then why not teach that, instead of the lie?”

“There are some truths that people are unwilling to accept, my son.”

Like my being your son, Loki wondered. But he wasn’t ready to let go of his previous question to chase after a more hurtful one. “What difference would it make, if they can’t change anything?”

“The amount of seidr needed is great enough that most who would attempt it would need to tap into some source of power that they likely could not properly control. Beyond that, what right has any person in meddling in the lives of their other selves? Who can say that the changes made in the timestream would bring about better lives for those other selves? Shouldn’t they be allowed to make their own choices?”

“But you said it was possible those other selves would not even exist without that meddling,” Loki reminded him. “Or if they did, that it stood to reason that you had always meddled.”
“Time travel is inherent with paradox,” Odin agreed. “In truth, it makes my head ache just contemplating it. But we are going to look only. No interfering. Even if it were not wrong, it would negate our purpose for going.”

“Which is what? What is it you want to see? Surely Heimdall has told you most of it by now, and you have found my secret way into Jotunheim. You can simply ask me what I did, in those times I hid myself from the Guardian’s sight. I have no reason to lie about it now, I assure you.”

“It is not so much what I want to see, as I want to know what you were thinking, which is not something Heimdall could see. Nor could I, in the glimpses of awareness I had while in the Odinsleep.”

“You might just ask me,” Loki insisted, not sure why he was trying to avoid this. The prospect of time travel should have been exciting. It was a whole new aspect of magic, and despite what Odin said about changing the past being impossible, every rule had its loophole. But the idea of merely watching himself fall apart and fail, fail, FAIL at everything, as everyone he’d cared about turned on him… why would he want to see that?

“I do not think you are remembering things as they truly were, Loki.”

Oh, this again. “So I imagined that I was lied to my whole life? I am not actually the child of your greatest enemy, stolen away as a babe and hidden from even myself?” Loki sputtered. “I wasn’t grossly betrayed by Asgard’s greatest warriors, and by Heimdall himself, even though I was the rightful king after Thor was banished? Did I dream that, All-Father?”

“We will discuss these things after we have seen what happened!” Odin growled. “Now, make ready.” He took a firm grip on Gungnir and Loki felt him calling on the vast well of power the spear conferred on Asgard’s ruler. The air… reality itself, began to tremble and unravel. It felt like falling again. Like drowning. Like being unmade. It was utterly terrifying.

Against his will, Loki stepped closer to Odin, gathering his own magic around them both, calling up shields, veiling them from sight and sound, conjuring for good luck the same way he did when he walked the hidden ways, making his own luck, or trying to. How was it he could slip unharmed through the perilous roots and branches of Yggdrasil unscathed, and have such terrible luck with the rest of his life?

The world was a blur around them, filled with rapidly shifting shadows that Loki perceived hazily as nights and days passing, and even swifter glimpses of figures moving hummingbird swift through his rooms. Then the spell ended with a sickening wrench, leaving them standing exactly where they started. Loki fell against Odin, but quickly righted himself, stepping back from the All-Father’s offer of support.

A second glance around confirmed that there had been changes after all. The light streaming though the windows had changed from dimming afternoon to bright early morning. The chairs had been moved back to their more accustomed places, and the huemmir tank had vanished. There was also a slight air of lived-in messiness that Loki had forgotten. Bed rumpled and unmade, papers left strewn across desks and tables, weighted down with books and scattered with writing implements, crystals, jars and vials and bottles of everything from wyvern feathers to rock oil. The servants had cleaned his rooms after his ‘death’, and tidied the detritus away.

On its stand by the wardrobe, Loki’s ceremonial armor waited, gleaming from a recent polish, glowing green as a poison tree frog in the sun. The door to the bathing room swung open, and Loki saw himself walk in, dressed in only a towel and an eager grin.
I look so young, he thought, as Odin took his elbow and moved them both to a corner of the room where they would not be bumped into. Loki could prevent them from being seen or heard, or detected by most other means, but not from physical touch, except by stepping out of the world entirely.

“It’s the day of Thor’s coronation?” Loki asked, unnecessarily. He watched himself dress, remembering as his earlier self hummed a spritely little tune.

“Yes,” Odin confirmed, also seeming mesmerized by this cheerful Loki. This Loki who was still living the lie. “I miss seeing you smile.”

“You never paid the slightest attention to whether or not I smiled,” Loki reproached him, annoyed and disturbed by the sight.

“I did. I knew you were unhappy as well,” Odin countered, sadly, “Though I did not pay as much attention as I should have.”

They fell back on silence then, watching as then-Loki all but danced around the room, donning armor and boots, ending with the horned helm that Loki had always thought both wonderful and slightly ridiculous. But all formal helms looked that way to him. They were highly impractical for battle, and of course half of Asgard’s warriors wore them into battle anyway. Idiots.

Past-Loki finished getting ready and left his rooms. Loki and Odin followed, weaving carefully through the crowds of excited servants, following past-Loki to the staging room of the great hall. There, they all paused, waiting, listening to the roar of the crowd bleeding through the walls.

From the far end of the room, a boisterous cry of ‘Another!’ rang out, accompanied by the smashing of a cup into the room’s decorative fireplace. The flames shot up, presumably from the fumes.

Thor in all his glory and arrogance strode into the room. Then-Loki smirked, and went to stand next to him.

“Nervous, brother?” he inquired of Thor.

Thor laughed, excited and possibly just a little drunk, and exclaimed, “Have you ever known me to be nervous?”

“There was the time in Nornheim,” Then-Loki reminded him, but Thor only laughed again.

“That was not nerves, brother,” Thor insisted, his eyes shining with good humor, “That was the rage of battle. How else could I have fought my way through a hundred warriors and pulled us out alive?”

A little of the cheer went out of Then-Loki, as he replied, “As I recall,” he said, with a slight stammer, “I was the one who veiled us in smoke to ease our escape.”

But Thor only laughed again. “Yes,” he both agreed and brushed his younger brother’s words aside with that laugh, following it up with the taunt, “Some do battle, others just do tricks.”

Loki remembered Thor saying that. Remembered it as contempt, as yet another example of Thor’s dismissal of his skills. Watching it now, though- It was the latter, yes, but he could not see the contempt. His brother had been nervous, and overly loud and blustering in an attempt to conceal it.

A round-faced servant had come up with a tray, bringing Thor his requested cup of wine, and heard Thor’s jest. He laughed along, and there was the derision Loki had remembered. Little lickspittle toady, laughing at a joke not meant for him. Then-Loki’s face blanked, and he gestured sharply at the
offered cup.

The servant looked down in concern and confusion, then dropped the cup and tray with a sharp cry of alarm. The cup spilled out its new contents, three writhing black adders. The little toady looked fearfully at the two princes.

Unconcerned, Thor chuckled, reproaching gently, “Loki, that was just a waste of good wine!”

“It was just a bit of fun,” Then-Loki said, giving the frightened servant a warning look. “Right, my friend?” He waved his hand again and the serpents vanished without a trace.

Thor laughed along with his brother’s little joke, and the man returned a sickly smile, hastily gathering up the tray and cup and scuttling off. Then-Loki suppressed mirthful laughter, his good mood restored.

One of the Einherjar came in as the cup bearer fled, bringing Thor his own winged helm. Thor took it, sobering, and the guard bowed and took his leave.

Thor looked so serious, Loki thought, watching from Odin’s side. As if he might be realizing the responsibilities he was planning to take up. Then-Loki attempted to lighten the mood, bringing up the old joke between them, “Nice feathers.”

Playing along, Thor retorted, “You don’t really want to start this again, do you, cow?”

“I was being sincere,” Then-Loki protested, totally insincerely.

“You are incapable of sincerity,” Thor told him.

“Am I?” Then-Loki was all mock innocence and outrage.

“Yes,” Thor tried to keep his expression stern, but his eyes twinkled, and his mouth kept twitching up at the corners.

“Is this how you remember it?” Odin asked softly, making Loki start.

It was, and yet it wasn’t. Loki rubbed his face with both hands, surreptitiously wiping away his unbidden tears. He remembered this day, this moment. He remembered Thor calling him a liar, sneering, implying that he had never trusted Loki. That wasn’t what was happening here; this was just brotherly bickering, the kind they had always done with one another. Was this truly his own past? How had he recollected it so differently?

Across the room, the mood shifted. Then-Loki spoke softly enough that Thor leaned closer to hear him. Loki who watched cast a tiny spell to bring their words to him and the All-Father more clearly.

“I’ve looked forward to this day as long as you have, my brother. My friend.” He admitted, “Sometimes I’m envious, but never doubt that I love you.”

Loki had forgotten saying this. Forgotten feeling… he had loved Thor. He still loved Thor, he couldn’t help it, but this was so untainted, somehow. He remembered resenting Thor so much. He had been jealous. He had hated as much as he loved, even then, hadn’t he? It didn’t look like it, from the outside. Am I simply that good a liar, even to myself? he wondered. And which part was he lying about?

Thor had grasped him by the back of his neck. (Like a dog. Cringing cur), the other whispered in Loki’s memory, and he desperately shook the memory aside, concentrating on the now that was his
“Thank you,” Thor said, eyes shining as he gazed at Then-Loki, who teased, “Now give us a kiss.”

They both laughed, and Thor swatted Then-Loki lightly, admonishing, “Stop it.”

Sobering again, Thor asked, “Really, how do I look?”

Then-Loki turned to study him. “Like a king,” he assured. Then he sighed deeply. “It’s time.”

Loki who watched shuddered inwardly, recollecting that this was the moment before he had signaled the frost giants to begin their attempt on the Vault. It was so tempting to speak up, to catch his earlier self by the elbow and say ‘No, don’t do that!’

He could stop this from happening. Stop it from all going so wrong. Then-Loki might be able to prevent anyone from finding out about the frost giants, but if not, he could surely pass it off as a prank, so long as they never got near the Casket. This Loki would never be dragged off to Jotunheim. Would never find out his monstrous heritage.

Thor would be crowned as he had been - a vain, greedy, arrogant boy, but he would have Then-Loki to try to steer him, however difficult it might be, and Frigga’s wise counsel. The dire possibilities that Then-Loki had foreseen might be avoided, especially with some help from his future self. Whatever came of it, it had to be better than what had happened, even if what Odin had claimed was true, and it would not change what had happened to him in his own time.

And in that instant of temptation, Loki saw it: the loophole. The way time travel COULD be used to fix things. ‘I could kill this Loki,’ he thought wildly. ‘I could kill this version of myself and take his place. Live his life, and not make the same mistakes.’ It was a mad idea, wasn’t it? Would it be murder, to kill himself? His first attempts at suicide had not worked out well. But knowing what lay in store for this Loki, if he didn’t intervene, it could almost be considered a mercy. The Norns knew he had longed for death more than once while in the Other’s ungentle custody.

“What?” He looked around. His past self was gone already. Beyond the moment of no return. Deep in the bowels of the palace, three frost giants were making their way through the tunnels, following the instructions they had been given. Thor was gone as well. Loki could just see the flash of his swirling crimson cape as he moved off towards his destiny, waving and exhorting cheers from the huge crowd.

“Are you ready to go on?” the All-Father asked, concerned. He had placed a hand on Loki’s shoulder, and had been lightly shaking him.

Loki stepped back out of reach. “I’m fine,” he lied. He would need to think more on this idea later. It was drastic; perhaps something to consider only when all else had failed. He didn’t think he could kill his former self lightly.

Odin looked doubtful, but let his hand fall again to his side. “Shall we go?”

“Of course,” Loki nodded, checking that his spells were holding strong, then leading the way out the same way his brother had gone, into the sea of adulation that Asgard had for Thor, and only for him.

As he sauntered down the aisle, flanked by the honor guard, Thor twirled Mjolnir, tossing it lightly in the air and catching it. It was utterly without the solemnity that the occasion deserved, but the crowd
loved it, and screamed with approval.

From this new vantage point behind Thor, Loki could see all the watchers on the dias, including his past self. Sif was rolling her eyes at Thor’s irreverent antics, and their mother was attempting to look stern, but wound up smiling indulgently instead.

In contrast to the rest of the onlookers (save perhaps Hogun, who never looked anything but gloomy) Odin looked… worried? He definitely looked tired. How much of his rush to put Thor on the throne had been influenced by the All-Father’s desire to be off of it? Had he had more doubts about that decision than Then-Loki had known of?

Glancing at the supposedly wiser king at his side, Loki thought the All-Father looked only a little less weary now, and he felt an unwanted stab of guilt for his role in that exhaustion. Pushing it down, since it would not be dismissed, Loki turned his attention back to the past. He had been brought here to see, not to let current events crowd his mind.

Stopping at the foot of the throne platform, Thor finally wiped the silly grin from his face and knelt, removing his helm and bowing his head.

The ‘future’ Odin and Loki caught up with him and passed by to a clear spot off to one side, where they had a clear view both of Thor and of all the people standing on the steps up to the All-Father, waiting in his high seat.

Unable to maintain the gravitas, Thor smiled again, and gave Frigga a saucy wink, which made her shake her head slightly, but she smiled back, helplessly. Their mother had always been as susceptible to Thor’s charm as the rest of Asgard. Might things have been better if she had been stricter? It was hard for Loki to wish that, seeing as how she had extended that leniency to Loki as well, and he had always needed it more.

Then-Odin got slowly to his feet, leaning heavily on Gungnir to do so, but once he was up, he stood tall and straight, every inch the indomitable king. Thor was smirking at the Warrior’s Three. The only person he did not bother to look at, there on the dais, was Loki, standing beside Frigga.

With a hollow boom, the butt of Odin’s spear crashed down, cutting off all other sounds. In that echoing silence, he looked down on Thor and spoke slowly and seriously.

“Thor… Odinson.”

Now-Loki blinked at that hated pause between Thor’s name and the patronymic - the same pause that Odin had used on him when welcoming him back to Asgard. He did not remember Odin doing that to Thor as well. That wretched pause, which he had filled with the belief that Odin was reluctant to claim him, was that pause merely a habitual bit of theatricality?

“My heir,” Then-Odin continued, his voice shaking with some emotion that Loki could not guess. “My first born.”

At the word ‘heir’, Then-Loki had lowered his eyes, and pressed his mouth flat. The jealousy was just as he remembered, then. ‘I never wanted the throne. Never. I was not jealous of THAT.’

He’d always known Thor would be king someday. He was the firstborn. Odin’s oft-repeated platitude that they were both ‘born to be kings’ was something that was long past and gone by the time they were both becoming men, and Loki had always assumed that it had merely been a ploy to get him to be diligent in his studies, which he had been. If he had not been lying about having abandoned his half-baked plan of uniting the realms through Loki, it might have also been some
clumsy attempt at reassurance.

The Odin of the past was now going on and on about Mjolnir, ‘forged in the heart of a dying star… tool to build or destroy… fit companion for a king… etc..’ Loki tuned it out, his mind gone down and down, into the dark passages below even the palace dungeons, to where he now knew there were two guards where there were supposed to be none, checking Odin’s treasure house, as if it needed any greater protection than the Destroyer housed in its walls.

The coronation was reaching its end, and Odin swearing Thor in. Did Thor swear to guard the Nine Realms?

Thor did. The problem with that had been that Thor had believed that guarding the Nine Realms would be simple. That it was merely a matter of might.

They went on to the oath to preserve the peace, and Loki knew that despite the honesty in Thor’s face and voice that this was the oath Thor would not have been able to keep. He had craved war, and would have had it sooner rather than later.

Thor swore also to set aside all selfish ambition, and pledge himself only to the good of the realm, except that Thor had not been able to recognize any difference between those two things.

Loki watched his former self trying not to fidget, knowing that he was growing more and more worried, wondering what could be taking the damned Jotuns so long. Then-Loki’s face went lax with sheer relief when at the last possible moment before Thor’s crowning, Odin stopped, gazing away into the distance and muttering, ‘Frost Giants.’ Caught off guard, Thor scowled in petulant anger.

The guards and the crowd all began to mill about in confusion, as Odin strode down the steps.

The Odin standing beside Loki moved closer to him, and began to summon magic again. “I think we have seen enough for now.”

“We aren’t going to the Vault?” Loki asked, feeling befuddled.

“Perhaps later,” Odin shrugged. “The past will always be there.”

And then time was rushing by like a cataract going over a falls, tumbling Loki down and around, spilling him out again in the same place, but a different time.

The great hall was empty now, seeming even more vast without most of the lights, or the celebratory red and gold banners.

“You can drop your illusions now,” Odin reminded him.

Though he was not entirely sure he wished to, Loki did. He had expended a great deal of magic. After going so long without having it, or access to it, he was feeling the strain. He kept his Aesir guise, though.

“Now what?” he asked, cautiously.

“Now I think we could both stand to have a few drinks,” Odin said, emphatically. “And then we will talk.”

Loki thought about this, and decided that he agreed with the first part of the plan, anyway. “Lead the way.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone leaving comments and kudos. I live to hear from you guys!
Chapter 11

Chapter by Crazy_Cat_Lady

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, sorry this took so long! Work has picked up, and I am having some extensive dental work done, so spare time has been scarce. But here's a long one to make up for it. Hope you enjoy it!

As always, thanks to tilla123 for beta reading, cheerleading and letting me plot, complain and brainstorm to her.

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“Prince Thor! Prince Thor!”

Although the guard trainee’s young voice cracked in its urgency, Thor was too well trained to allow it to distract him during a fight, even such a friendly competition as he was engaged in with Sif, Fandral and Hogun. Sweat flew from his hair as he leaped to block Sif’s glaive, then ducked under the hissing sweep of Fandral’s sword, managing to step inside Hogun’s guard too closely for the burly, mustached warrior to swing his mace effectively, and shoved, landing him on his back on the grass of the practice ring.

“Hold up, lad!” Volstagg called from the sidelines, where he was pausing to consume a leg of mutton with all the trimmings. He used the now well-gnawed bone to block the boy from pelting headlong into the sparring ring in his excitement.

“If you run into someone’s blade and get killed, you won’t be able to deliver your news at all, so just slow down and catch your breath.”

The lad obediently gasped in a huge breath that set him to coughing, while Thor and his friends disengaged, collecting handy cloths to wipe the sweat from their faces. Thor had been fighting bare-handed, since using Mjolnir would have made the fight grossly one-sided, even against three of Asgard’s fiercest fighters, and he had no interest in using any other weapons.

Volstagg kindly slopped cold water into his empty wine cup and pressed it on the winded boy, who drank gratefully and at last got out his message.

“Prince Thor,” he panted, “A horde of frost giants have come through the passage near the Vaults, and I was sent by Lord Tyr to summon you!”

At this alarming news, Thor called for his hammer, and was heartened as always to feel its weight smack into his palm, its power thrumming through him, eager to be used. Sif and the Warriors all pressed closer around the messenger, demanding answers that the inexperienced young man clearly did not possess.

“A horde, you say? Attacking the palace?”

“Have the defenses been raised?”
“Has the king been informed?”

“Did they already take possession of the Casket?”

“I don’t know!” the boy clutched at Thor’s arm. “But Lord Tyr says for you to come right away!”

“Aye! I will go without delay,” Thor said, “Alert the rest of the guards.”

Sif and the others fell in behind him, though Volstag quickly fell behind as they charged down to the lowest level of the palace, to the previously overlooked corner room where they had found the pathway to Jotunheim that Loki had created from a weak spot where Yggdrasil’s branches overlapped.

The room was now packed to overflowing with nervous, jostling Einherjar, all of whom were holding weapons and aiming them at the three massive Jotuns who had emerged. Size alone would have made them dangerous foes, but they also bore enormous swords, tree-sized spears and clubs the length of Thor himself, all made of the gleaming, magic-infused ice. They stood still, not attacking or retreating.

Behind the three, the air glowed faintly, swirling with shadows that indicated it was still in use. More visitors were on their way, but at least the rent that Loki had made between the realms was not wide enough to accommodate more than a few frost giants at time, though its height reached beyond the ceiling of this hewn out chamber.

“They are even uglier than I remembered,” Fandral commented, grinning as he came alongside Thor.

Thor considered instructing his friend on his prejudices, seeing as how Loki was Jotun, and attitudes towards the race really needed changing here in Asgard, but in truth, these three were ugly. They were as heavily built as trolls, but twice as tall, and their red eyes glowered out of scowling, ritually scarred faces, and their shaved heads were like great boulders.

“Why aren’t they attacking?” Sif whispered, taking in the tense scene with narrowed eyes and a frown.

“They are waiting for something,” Hogun said.

The outermost ring of guards was turning, reacting to the arrival of Asgard’s crown prince, and Tyr strode out of the thicket of spears, all but running to Thor.

“Odinson,” he greeted Thor with his typical brusqueness. “We’ve got trouble.”

“What is it?” Thor asked. “What are they doing here?

“They are the king’s bodyguards,” Tyr told him.

“They’re what?” Sif demanded, while Thor simply stared blankly at his father’s general, who waited for his response.

Fandral craned his head, trying to look past the three intruders to the mostly obscured gateway. “If they are his bodyguard, does that mean they are here to guard his—“

There was a sudden flash of silvery light, and a gust of frigid air, and a new group of Jotuns stepped through. There were two more just as huge and armored and fierce-looking as the first three, and one whose height and build had been worn down by great age, leaving him stooped and wizened amid his long, green and gold sashes of high office. Where the others were hairless, this elder’s white hair
dripped down over his shoulders like icicles.

Then a youth stepped through, slighter and shorter than the warriors, and his face bore only the curving tracery of his lineage markings, and none of the deep, straight slashes that denoted victories in battles or duels. Though his features were blunter, those lines were identical to Loki’s. He was dressed in an ornately woven kilt and heavy gold armor plates and jewelry. The regalia was meant to make him look impressive, but instead it seemed too much for his unfinished frame, emphasizing his youth. A circlet of heavy gold and precious uru curled around his shaved head. The crown of Jotunheim must be heavy indeed, Thor thought.

With the arrival of their king, the Jotun warriors turned wary and tense. The Einherjar tightened their grips on their weapons. Thor recognized they were on the verge of a major diplomatic disaster. Launching himself through the crowd, he forced a polite smile.

“Helblindi King,” he boomed, in as friendly a tone as he could manage. “Be welcome to Asgard.”

The Jotun warriors glowered down murderously as he pushed his way through the front line of guards. Behind him, Asgard’s defenders settled slightly, knowing he was well able to defend himself with Mjolnir.

Helblindi, Laufey’s son and the new-crowned king of Jotunheim, looked down with dislike plain on his unmarked face. He had been considered too young to be among the warriors that Laufey had brought with him to confront Thor and his companions on that fateful trip to his realm, but now, due to Thor’s actions, and Loki’s, he had been forced into ruling before he was even of age. His was a precarious position, and if he did not have Laufey’s memories of war and defeat to embitter him against Asgard, he had no cause to be grateful, either.

“Your arrival is—unwelcome, Thor thought, but managed, “Unexpected.”

It was not the most politic of greetings, but if the Jotuns wanted diplomacy, they would not show up uninvited, Thor decided.

“I have come for Loki,” Helblindi declared, in a voice almost as deep as his father’s had been, if lacking the gravelly harshness. “Mengloth has sent word of his health, and says he is fit to stand trial.”

On either side of him, Sif’s and Fandral’s expressions matched Thor’s flash of outrage, that this Jotun thought to trespass in the Realm Eternal and demand that one of her princes be delivered up to him.

Seeing this, Helblindi sneered mockingly, “Where now is this bragged of honor of Asgard? Did the All-Father not give his word that my stolen sibling was to be given over to us to make reparations for the great harm done to our world?”

A soft murmur rippled through the crowd, and Thor winced inwardly. That Loki was of Jotun birth was becoming widely known in Asgard. That he was also Laufey’s son was a much more closely-held secret, or had been.

“The All-Father keeps his promises,” Thor snapped. “In his own time.”

“What excuse have you for delay, Odinson?” Helblindi leaned down, so close his breath washed over Thor, cool and sharp smelling as metal. “We are also informed that repairs on the Bifrost are suddenly proceeding far more rapidly than we were given to believe would be possible.”

“The Bifrost is no business of Jotunheim,” Sif stated stiffly, and unwisely.
“Jotunheim does not agree,” Helblindi rumbled, deep and threatening as distant thunder, echoed by his warriors. “We have been well schooled on the dangers of your rainbow bridge.”

“You don’t appear to have heeded your lessons,” Fandral quipped. “Maybe you need a refresher course?” All around, the Einherjar muttered approvingly. The Jotun warriors snarled, and the air chilled as they brandished their icy weapons.

The elder Jotun moved in front of his king and the bodyguards, peering down at Thor through red eyes gone pink and filmy with cataracts.

“These are weighty matters,” he wheezed, in a cracked voice. “Our king has questions for your father, Odinson. We have grave concerns regarding bargains made, and would have his reassurances.”

Helblindi looked as put out by these weaseling manners as Thor felt, but did not gainsay his advisor. Lord Tyr, who might be thought of as an advisor, was less inclined to diplomacy.

“The All-Father does not answer to the likes of you, Frost Giant.”

Clearly it was up to Thor to be the more mature one here. Thor’s father had made an agreement with Helblindi to allow them to try Loki for his crimes, however little Thor agreed with it, and angering Helblindi would do Loki no favors. After all the work they had done to restore a tottering peace, Odin would likely banish Thor for a thousand years if he started another war, if his mother did not kill him first.

“I am sure the All-Father will be able to answer all your questions,” Thor told them. “We will send word to you—”

Helblindi rudely interrupted him. “We are not leaving without Loki.”

Mjolnir was a singing temptation in Thor’s grip, urging him to drive it into the supercilious blue face leering down at him. Taking a deep breath, Thor hung it from his belt instead, ignoring the disbelieving looks of his friends and the old general.

“Then if you would follow me, I will see to it you are made comfortable while you wait for my father.”

The old Jotun turned a prompting look at his young king. Helblindi scowled, but replied, “That would be most welcome.”

Turning, Thor led them upwards through the palace, trailing Tyr and at least half the guards along with him, along with Sif and the Warriors Three. Thankfully, Tyr had thought to send some of the guards in advance to warn the others, so the troop of giants striding through the palace hallways collected nothing more offensive than frightened or angry looks, and Volstagg, who had still been trying to catch up to them. It gratified Thor to note that the frost giants all peered about in awe at Asgard’s grandeur, however much they tried to hide it.

Once he had delivered them to one of the largest and grandest receiving rooms and sent for some suitable refreshments (he hoped the servants knew what that would mean from Mengloth’s tutelage, since Thor had no idea), he turned back to Lord Tyr, who was speaking animatedly with one of his soldiers.

“Where is my father? Why did you not send for him sooner?”

“That’s the bigger problem,” Tyr said, taking off his tall, gold and silver helm to scratch his balding
pate. “No one can seem to find the All-Father.” He jutted his thumb back at the soldier who was looking pale and ill at ease. “I sent Hvold here to ask Heimdall, after no one could tell me where to find the king, and he’s just got back.”

“Well?” Thor looked at the man, who swallowed, his eyes darting between his commander and his prince. “Prince Thor,” he stammered, clearly not wishing be the bearer of ill news.

Tyr rescued him, saying, “Heimdall sent word to the king that he could no longer see Loki.”

Thor cursed softly, but it was hardly unexpected. His brother was clever and slippery and had no reason to wish to cooperate with their father’s commands right now, if he were even in his right mind.

“What has that to do with the other?” A very unpleasant thought sprang into his mind. “Has Loki done something to our father?”

Before Loki’s fall, before his madness, Thor would never have suspected his brother of such perfidy, and it had seemed he was making some progress at recovering his mind as late, but he still had bouts of such rage. Could Loki have been so infuriated at Odin as to have somehow harmed him?

“We have no idea, Prince Thor,” Tyr said. “Heimdall said that he saw the All-Father dismiss the guards on Loki’s door and enter his room, and then he simply vanished.”

“Well,” Volstagg said, when no one else was willing to say anything, “That’s not good.”

“We must find Loki!” Sif caught Thor’s arm. “Thor, we have to stop him before he goes too far!”

“Yes,” Hogun hefted his mace.

“Yes,” Fandral looked up and down the endlessly stretching corridor, “But which direction do we even start?”

Tyr, veteran that he was, said, “The guards are searching the palace grounds, and I’ve sent word out to the city guards to begin a search as well.”

“Good. Remind them if you have not already that Loki is not to be harmed,” Thor ordered. “Hogun, will you take a far speaking glass and go to the Observatory, to let us know if Heimdall should find them?”

“Aye,” his friend nodded, and went.

Thor struggled to think what else to try. “Fandral, will you go to the mages hall and see if they can come up with any help?”

“I’ll see to it they give their utmost efforts,” Fandral promised, raising his sword in a salute before departing.

“I’ll check the kitchens,” Volstagg volunteered. “If Loki plans an escape, he’ll need provisions.”

Well, Thor supposed that was not impossible, and besides, Volstagg was likely to wind up in the kitchens anyway, no matter where else he might be sent. “You do that.”

To Sif, he said, “I am going to go and search Loki’s rooms. Perhaps there is some clue there.”

“I’ll go with you.”
“No,” Thor shook his head. “I need you to do something else for me.” Mainly because he could not bear to do it himself, though he knew he should.

“What?” she asked.

“Go to the queen and tell her what is happening.”

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Loki resumed the illusion that kept them hidden from sight as they exited back into the palace’s crowded halls, and led them back to his own rooms. Odin had raised an eyebrow, then nodded his approval of this idea. They both knew well the demands Asgard made on its king; if they were to talk about what they had seen in the past, they needed time and privacy.

Unfortunately, on opening his beverage cabinet, Loki made a dismaying discovery.

“That damnable, interfering creature has made off with all my liquor!”


“Because I am ‘with child’,’” Loki retorted, rolling his eyes as he went on rummaging through the now sparse collection of bottles, decanters and flasks. “Though why any hybrid offspring of mine should so concern him- it- jir, I have no idea!”


“Everything containing alcohol is gone.” Now that he thought about it, Loki suspected his mother was also involved in this little theft. Otherwise, how could Mengloth have known when he was not in his rooms, much less managed to sneak into one of the most guarded areas of the palace and carry off a clanking, rattling, sloshing collection of his liquid refreshments?

A circuit of the room, opening drawers and boxes, informed him that the common mind-altering herbs he’d had were also gone. Some of the more esoteric ingredients he used for visions and astral travel might still be in their hidden compartments; he would have to check when he was alone again.

“We could send out for something,” the All-Father suggested.

Except that would require letting a servant in, and if one servant knew Odin was here, the whole palace would know in no time, and some crisis or another would interrupt their talk. Sighing, Loki chose a sweet fruit nectar and poured a cup.

“I think perhaps I should keep my wits about me.”

“Perhaps we both should,” Odin said. It was disconcerting for him to be so agreeable, but Loki could hardly complain about that. Instead he poured a second cup and handed it over.

Odin sipped, and moved back to the chair he’d occupied before. Loki took the one that his mother usually sat in when she visited, across from Odin. They stared at each other like two chance-met cats, each warily awaiting the other to move first.

It gave Loki some slight satisfaction when Odin spoke first.
“Was it as you remembered?”

Loki hesitated, not certain if he knew. It wasn’t that he had forgotten any of the scenes Odin had taken him into the past to watch, but there were details he’d missed before, and other things had seemed different as well. But Odin had said that there were alternate realities; how was he to be sure that what he’d been shown had been his own past?

“What does it matter?” he fenced. “Why do you think it may not be? Because I was going mad, even then?”

“No, not then.” Draining his glass, Odin set the cup aside. “Loki,” he paused, drawing in a long breath, “When you fell… when you let go—“

Loki stiffened, about to open his mouth to protest that he had not done any such thing, that Thor had thrown him off the Bifrost. Or shaken loose his grip on the spear. But Odin’s face was filled with sorrow, he bit back the words.

“We did not believe anyone could have survived the Void. We truly thought you dead,” the All-Father went on, with a tremor in his voice.

“Did you mourn?” Loki demanded. The words echoed oddly, and he remembered he had asked the same of Thor, after his brother had thrown him - again? - from what should have been a fatal height. The memory… both memories, tangled strangely, details intermixing. Thor’s face, angry, frightened, laughing, angry again. ‘I could have done it, Father!’ Father’s ‘No, Loki.’

Anger burned brightly in Odin’s one eye for an instant, reminding Loki vividly of that moment in the observatory, just before their father (no, not mine!) had stripped Thor of his godhood and flung him out of the Realm Eternal. Then the fury was quenched, and Odin looked merely sad.

“How do you really doubt it? Have I been so poor a father as that?”

Hugging himself tight, Loki shut his eyes. “You are not my father.” His heart pounded in his ears as time stretched, and Odin did not reply.

“If you are not my son, how were you rightful king of Asgard?” Odin inquired, mock-mildly.

Outraged, Loki opened his eyes, snarling, “I was the rightful king!”

“Yes,” Odin replied, and there was no mockery now that Loki could detect. “You were.”

Loki glared. “Now who is twisting whose words?”

“It is not pleasant, is it, boy?”

Growling, Loki cast about for some way to refute the All-Father’s logic.

Odin forestalled him, saying, “Never mind. We were speaking of your death, and yes, to answer your question, I did mourn you, more than you will ever know, as did your mother and brother.”

“And then you moved on, of course,” Loki said, flatly.

“We tried to. What else could we do but try?” Odin sighed, picking up his empty cup and looking at it as if he were once again considering sending out for something stronger.

Recalling that his brother nearly always kept a little flask of thousand year old liquor somewhere on his person, Loki reached out with seidr and drained its contents into Odin’s cup. He regretted it an
instant later. Why was he still trying to impress Odin? Still, it was a good joke on his brother.

The All-Father smiled slightly, and took a sip, smacking his lips appreciatively afterwards. “Thank you.”

“You were saying how you all bravely got on with things without me,” Loki prompted, nursing his own fruit drink.

“No, I was not. We were not. Your mother was a shadow of herself, and your brother started so many drunken brawls with anyone who dared say an unfavorable thing about you that I thought I would have to banish him again.”

“And then you all got over it.”

“And then we learned you were alive!” Odin did not quite shout at him, but it was a near thing. “Your mother had been having dreams all along, but I did not pay that any heed. I was so certain you must have died, and Heimdall could not find any trace of you.”

“I was not hiding,” Loki shot back. “I called -“ he choked on the admission, but forced it out. “I tried to call for help. Many times.”

“Thanos must have done something to hide you, or else it was that minion of his, the Other. Even when we knew you lived, it was difficult to get any clear sight of you for long.”

“And you decided to just leave me there?”

“The Bifrost was broken. There was no way to -“ Odin stopped himself, and swallowed down half the potent liquor. “You are right. I should have tried harder.”

“You could hardly be bothered to put yourself out to retrieve-“ Loki started.

“When we were finally able to make you out, you were making an alliance with the Mad Titan. You were describing yourself as our enemy. I thought you were tricking him, but now I think you have come to believe those lies.”

Loki opened his mouth to hotly deny that they had been lies, then shut it, confused. He did remember lying to Thanos. Sort of. Anything to get away from that place. And at Thor’s coronation, he’d been different. Not as angry as he’d remembered, and Thor’s affection for him had seemed genuine, even if his arrogance had as well. But Odin had lied to him about his whole life, how could he trust that he wasn’t lying now?

Behind him, the door to his room slammed open, and Thor rushed in, his face grim. Since Loki was still keeping himself and Odin invisible, Thor’s worried gaze passed over as he stalked into the room, stopping to pick up the restraining cuffs where they lay abandoned on the small side table.

He snatched them up, looking utterly horrified. “Brother, what have you done?”

“Something terrible, no doubt,” Loki drawled, making a clone of himself visible.

“Loki!” Thor lunged for him, and of course passing straight through it as it vanished and reappeared behind him, smirking. “Really, Thor, are you ever going to not fall for that?”

“What have you done to Father?” Thor bellowed.

“What have I done to him?” Loki’s double challenged, angrily. “Where is your outrage for all he has
Sighing, Odin rose to his feet and addressed the real Loki, still concealed by the spell along with him. “End this now, Loki. Your brother needs to speak with me.”

Because whatever Thor needed had to come first, of course, Loki thought, resentfully. But he let the invisibility fall, taking some small satisfaction at the stupid look on Thor’s face at seeing Odin unharmed.

“Father,” Thor hurried to the king’s side and took his hand. “Helblindi King has arrived, demanding Loki.”

“What?” Loki took an involuntary step towards the door. It was too soon. He hadn’t decided whether or not he was going to go along with Odin’s scheme. He wasn’t ready to decide, either. He wanted to stay here. He wanted to go on meditating with Frigga, and Odin had only just started to explain things.

“I’m not going,” he declared, in the unlikely case that anyone cared about his opinion.

Odin made a wordless sound of anger. “That young, impatient upstart! Was anyone hurt when they showed up unannounced?”

“No,” Thor replied, surprising Loki with, “Lord Tyr sent for me when they could not find you, and I kept our guards from doing anything rash.”

“Did you?” Odin looked just as amazed as Loki felt. “Well done. I will go get this sorted out.” He stalked out, muttering something about not being able to leave the realm unattended for an hour without war nearly breaking out.

Left in his wake, Thor and Loki stared at one another. Thor glanced down at the cuffs he still held, and Loki summoned his two longest, sharpest daggers.

“Did Father free you?” Thor asked.

“He decided I need no longer wear them,” Loki replied. Or at least he hadn’t tried to put them back on his wayward sort of son. Yet.

His brother narrowed his eyes, evidently sensing he wasn’t being told the whole truth. He was getting slightly better at that. Loki was perversely proud of helping Thor learn to be more suspicious. A king could not be so trusting.

Tossing the cuffs back onto the table with a clatter and little care for the highly polished surface, Thor smiled. It was the cheerfully threatening smile he offered his enemies, and sometimes to his brother. Loki vanished his knives and gave the same smile back, with interest.

“Shall we go see what Father tells the king of Jotunheim?” Loki inquired, saccharine sweet.

Although she was forced to rush things more than she preferred, the All-Mother had planned her meeting with the three Midgardian representatives with great care. For the setting, she had chosen one of her private gardens, filled with fruit trees and flowers, all of her own design, but based on those found on the mortals world, so as to seem more familiar and put them at ease. She had consulted Heimdall, who, after much badgering, had used the newly rebuilt Observatory to call up some scenes showing the rituals of amity practiced by noble-born women of Midgard.

Armed with this knowledge, she had sought out artisans and merchants who had provided her with plates and cups that were not made of gold, but of fired clay, glazed with a variety of bright colors, along with a matching pot (though the artist had not been able to resist making the spout, handle and lid of gold) and a set of simple but elegant silver utensils. She had found a table just large enough to seat four people, with a round top of plain Alfin oak, rubbed with oil to bring out its fine grain and luster, to accentuate her new tableware. Four chairs, all smaller and less grand than anything else in the palace, were hand crafted by Liosalfar masters to match.

To plan her menu, she consulted with Thor on his experiences of Midgardian cuisine, but his descriptions of things called coffee, popped tarts, and pizza had not been very helpful. Thankfully, her handmaidens had thought to consult the kitchen staff and the servants assigned to the guest wing, who had been able to provide her at least with a list of what Asgardian foods the mortals had seemed to like, along with a list of those they had rejected.

Keeping to the theme of simplicity and informality, she settled on a variety of small pies filled with meat or fruit, little cakes with nuts and honey, and an assortment of fruit. She had opted for the strong, astringent beverage that Asgard thought of as tea over the Vanir’s more delicate, flowery beverage.

She wore a plain gown of blue and gold silk, and none of her ceremonial armor, and only a few pieces of jewelry. Her hair she wore swept up from her face, but falling in a long tail in the back, held in place with blue ribbons, rather than jeweled combs.

To ensure her guests would be as comfortable as they could wish, she sent a selection of new clothing to them as a gift, stressing through her messenger that they were in no way required to wear any of it to this or any other function. The servants would launder anything the mortals wished, of course, but they had not brought very much with them.

It did not surprise her that their leader, Agent Coulson, had chosen to keep to his own attire of mostly black over a white shirt, but his subordinates were wearing some of the gifts. Agent Barton wore his armored vest, as always, but had donned a long sleeved gemsilk tunic of a bright plum beneath it, and supple black leather boots over his own trousers.

Agent Romanov, who Frigga suspected had experience at infiltrating the courts of her adversaries, had changed completely from shield maiden to a deceptively delicate creature, garbed in a knee-length gossamer creation from Alfheim. The gown’s snug emerald bodice was without sleeves, or even straps over the shoulders, while its scarlet skirt flowed into translucent layers like flower petals, and the gold kid leather slippers she had chosen evoked the stamens of a flower.

Frigga met them at the entrance to her garden, pleased to see them all pause and gaze around with startled expressions.

“Do you like it?” She asked, gesturing for them to step in and indicating the table set at the end of the winding path through the flowering meadow.

“It’s marvelous,” Romanov exclaimed, almost dancing as she moved forward.
Agent Barton turned back towards the door they’d just come through, but it had vanished.

“We didn’t just change planets, did we?” he asked, turning back again to the view of the staggering view of green fields juxtaposed against a cerulean sky, reflected in a deep, wide lake and framed by soaring, ice-capped mountains. “Where’d the city go?”

“Is this Norway?” Agent Coulson inquired, unruffled as always.

“I don’t know the name of it,” Frigga admitted, as they walked towards their waiting refreshments, going slowly so the mortals could pause to examine the flowers and brightly plumaged birds, and to gaze after a fox in chase after a fleeing hare. “It is simply a place on your world that I thought very beautiful, when we were accustomed to visiting.”

“So we’re still on Asgard, right?” Agent Barton was staring around with a strange look on his face.

“Oh yes,” she assured them, as they reached the table and all took a seat. “Most of this is merely an illusion.”

Reaching for what she could no longer see with her eyes, but only sense with her seidr, she touched the light tracery of runes inscribed into a sun-warmed obsidian spell stone resting on its nearby pedestal, and willed the spell to cease.

Without it, the trees and plants remained, but they were fewer, constrained in flower beds between the paved stone pathways. The table was now set at the edge of a balcony overlooking a section of the artificial waterfall that encircled the palace, bringing water to all the terrace gardens. It was still an incredible view, with the city stretching out to the sea below, and the sparkling water casting up a thousand ephemeral rainbows, while in the distance, the forever-frozen rainbows of the Bifrost reached out, unfinished but beautiful nonetheless.

“How does this work, anyway?” Agent Barton asked, leaning closer to brush his fingertips across the spell globe. A tiny spark of green leaped from him to a set of runes.

“Shit!” he yelped, shaking his hand as he drew it back.

But somehow, he had activated the sphere, and it was not her spell that he woke. All around them, the world shifted from a sunny day to night. But it was by no means a dark night. High above, the stars glittered like sequins on black velvet, brightening to the wide swath of the Milky Way spilling down toward a breath-stealing conflagration of impossible, hallucinogenic emerald, violet and azure. The still waters of the lake now doubled the aurora’s blazing brilliance.

“Ничего себе!” Lady Natasha gasped, her eyes fixed on the sky with a childlike expression of longing and wonder.

“What happened?” Agent Coulson asked.

“Loki created this for me, when he was not much more than a boy,” Frigga replied, letting the nightscape play for a while longer while she recalled how happy and proud her child had been to be able to make her as fine an illusion as her own. It had been a gift for High Summer, when mothers were honored.
But wondrous as it was, it was too distracting for the kind of careful conversations she needed to have with these mortals. Even more so than she had originally believed, it seemed. With some reluctance, she reached out, and the vision of a sun-drenched meadow, mirrored in a blue lake and encircled by high peaks sprung back into existence, populated by birds and other animals. There was even a small herd of roe deer off in the distance, almost hidden in the dappled shadows of trees.

“I hope you will like the tea,” Frigga said, using a spell to heat the water as she poured it into her new ceramic pot, where the dried leaves immediately began to give off a delicious scent. She vanished the lids from the waiting trays and bid the mortals help themselves to their choices.

Once the tea had steeped, Frigga filled four cups, and they all took a few moments to appreciate the tea and the food, and the beauty around them. All conversation was fixed on the polite social comportment. Her guests complimented the comestibles with proper enthusiasm, and remarked on the realism and the many delightful details of the created scene.

At last, Agent Coulson washed down a bite of cake with a long sip of tea, wiped his mouth with his napkin, then set it down and cleared his throat.

“So, Your Majesty,” he began, “As pleasant as this is, I know your time is probably very precious, so you didn’t bring us here for just tea and cake. So…Is there something you would like us do for you?”

“You are very astute, Agent Coulson,” she told him. He only smiled his genial smile and waited for her to go on. So, he was not much taken with flattery. She put down her cup. “I have given much thought to your suggestion that Loki make his amends to your world by returning there and doing some service.”

“It wasn’t my suggestion,” Coulson reminded her, his eyes straying to Agent Barton, who was staring in the direction of the spell stone with narrowed eyes. “Barton,” he called, causing the other mortal to straighten and turn back to them.

“Yeah, Boss?” he asked, distractedly.

“We are discussing your idea of having Loki repay your world through service,” Frigga explained.

“Oh,” Barton’s face was a study in conflict, with his satisfaction warring with antipathy. But he only said, “Good.”

“Nothing is decided,” Coulson hastened to inject, though Frigga could tell he was intrigued by the idea. “Suppose you tell us why you would like Loki to go back to Earth?”

Folding her hands around the napkin in her lap, Frigga began, “Loki has committed crimes on three realms, and must pay for these crimes. The All-Father in his wisdom has decreed that the realm of Jotunheim is to have the first trial.”

“Thor told us he tried to destroy their entire world,” Lady Natasha said, without the slightest hint of judgment. Frigga knew not if this was a good or bad sign.

“You think they might kill him for it?” Barton asked. “Break the bargain you guys made about that casket, whatever it is?”

“No.” Frigga shook her head. “That would gain them nothing but more war, and their realm cannot afford that.”

Coulson brushed crumbs off the narrow cloth that hung down from his collar, and inquired, “Are
you worried they might imprison him indefinitely?"

“I am worried they will try to use him, somehow,” Frigga said.

“If they are as badly off as we’ve heard, that’s almost a certainty,” Lady Natasha agreed.

“You would rather we used him instead?” Coulson seemed genuinely perplexed.

“How do you think they could use Loki?” Lady Natasha asked, putting down her fork with a precise clink on her now empty plate. She had eaten very little so far, and that she had eaten very slowly, as it testing every bite for poisons.

“There are three ways that I can think of,” Frigga answered. “The first is as a hostage. They might simply keep Loki and threaten to do as much harm as will not endanger him, over and over, to force concessions from Asgard.”

Barton distilled this to it’s bare bones. “Give them what they want or they’ll torture him?”

“That kind of setup only works for so long,” Lady Natasha stated, as if from personal experience. “When they started asking for more and more, Asgard would have to either decide to write him off or start the war up again.”

“I would not allow it, but it would mean war, and that would do Loki no favors in the eyes of Asgard,” Frigga said. “They would forgive Thor for starting a war, but despise Loki for being the cause of one.”

Coulson grimaced slightly. Barton scowled outright.

“What are the other two possibilities?” Coulson asked.

“The second one worries me more because I believe that the All-Father, and most of Asgard, would have no objections to it,” Frigga told them. Or at least she had not been able to make Odin see the harm. As fond as she was of him, Asgard’s king could be intractable when matters of the heart collided with the affairs of state.

“The Jotnar may attempt to force Loki into a political marriage to secure closer relations with one of the other realms.”

“That make sense,” Lady Natasha nodded slowly. “Is it a strong possibility?”

Sitting up straighter, Barton demanded indignantly, “You guys still have forced marriages? That’s just barbaric.”

Since she tended to agree with the sentiment, Frigga could hardly refute him.

“Barton,” Coulson shot a reproving look at his underling, “We aren’t here to judge this world’s culture.”

Barton continued to look rebelliously disapproving. “So much for Asgard’s being more advanced.”

“Asgard is a hereditary monarchy,” the lady of SHIELD pointed out, dryly. “You can’t have kings or potential kings just marry anyone.”

“That is unfortunately true, Lady Natasha,” Frigga sighed. “Not that we would have ever forced our sons into any match which would have made them miserable, but they were both raised with the expectation that they would be required to choose someone high born, with the proper upbringing
Pouring more tea for herself, Frigga offered more to the rest of the table. Coulson accepted a warm up. Barton and Lady Natasha both declined. Breathing in the fragrant steam, Frigga revealed, “My marriage to Odin was part of the peace treaty between our peoples, to end a war. A political marriage does not necessarily mean an unhappy one.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Barton wanted to know.

“Any marriage would likely be a disaster for Loki right now,” Frigga answered. “And for his unlucky partner as well. I don’t intend to let that happen.”

“Because of how traumatized he was by finding out he wasn’t who or what he thought he was?” Lady Natasha frowned thoughtfully. “I can see that.”

“Not only that,” Frigga replied. “There is also his child to consider.”

Coulson looked quizzical. “I didn’t think he planned to go through with the pregnancy?” Seeming to realize he had said something indelicate, he hastily apologized. “Forgive me. I don’t know your customs, and I know this is a very private matter.”

“I am the one asking you and your world to become more involved,” Frigga acknowledged. “Right now, Loki thinks he is not going to have it.”

“You want him to?” Coulson attempted to puzzle it out, “But you don’t want to tell him so yourself?”

“I have reasons to think that having a child would be very good for Loki, but it must be his decision. Which world he ends up on will have a profound influence on that decision, and conversely, his decision about whether or not to keep the baby will greatly affect which world he chooses as his future home, at least for the near future.”

“So why not tell him yourself?” Barton probed.

Frigga sighed softly. “Right now, Loki sees me as his only ally against all his foes.”

“What about Thor?” Coulson rocked back in his chair. “Is he not on Loki’s side too?”

“Of course he is,” Frigga said firmly. “And Loki loves his brother, despite the damage that learning that they are not blood relations has done. But based on their past experiences, I would guess that Loki does not trust Thor to be able to help, if that help doesn’t happen to come in the form of killing things.”

Barton grinned, remembering Thor’s zeal and proficiency in combat. “He is really good with that hammer, all right.”

Pride pinked Frigga’s cheeks, and she smiled back. “He is Asgard’s finest warrior, but he has much yet to learn about politics, and diplomacy.”

“So you don’t want to do anything to damage Loki’s trust in you?” Coulson theorized.

“No. Nor do I wish my son to do something as consequential as becoming a mother, just to please me.” Frigga hoped she could make these mortals understand.

“I do not know how much you know of what Loki did before he fell from the Bifrost, about his
killing his blood father, and attacking Jotunheim?”

“Thor told us a fair amount,” Coulson told her, cautiously.

“Much of what he did then, Loki did in a desperate bid to please the All-Father,” Frigga informed them. “And when he believed he had failed, he let himself fall.”

None of them made any reply. Frigga thought it just as well. Any sympathy they professed would be shallow, and in any case, Loki had not died. He had suffered, but she had him back. Their comprehension was more important than their sympathy.

“Loki is still half-convinced that Odin only saved him as an infant for some political purpose. When he sought to end himself, he fell into the hands of a madman who sought to use him. I cannot blame the Jotnar for their hopes of exploiting him to somehow improve their world, but I will do all I can to ensure that they do not.”

“And how does this involve Earth?” Coulson wished to know.

“Loki has spoken to me a bit on how highly he thought of your people’s recent progress, and of how kind some individuals have been to him, despite his having arrived on your world as a would-be conqueror.”

“Stark took a real shine to him,” Barton muttered, adding in an undertone that he might have believed Frigga would not hear, “Assholes united.”

“Your older son explained to us that Loki was not in his right mind at the time he committed some of his crimes,” Coulson replied. “We try to make allowances for that.”

“And you concede that he was a great help in closing the rift that was threatening your world?” Frigga asked.

Barton started to argue, “There wouldn’t have been any rift if he hadn’t-“

“He did help, yes,” Lady Natasha agreed. The table jostled slightly as someone’s feet moved underneath and Barton stifled a yelp and shot her an accusing look.

“What of the child’s father?” Frigga asked. “Loki has only said that he was very gentle.”

This caused Barton to choke on the bite of meat pie he’d just taken, and the conversation halted momentarily while Coulson looked disapproving and Lady Natasha thwacked her fellow agent between the shoulder blades with rather more force than seemed necessary.

Frigga raised an eyebrow, sensing that she had been given misleading information, somehow.

Coulson wiped his mouth with his napkin, and carefully said, “Doctor Banner is a very compassionate man, but he also has a rather unique condition.” He picked carefully through his words like a man negotiating trapped ground. “He can be very dangerous when he’s angry, but we have no reason to think he harmed Loki.”

Lady Natasha’s words were much more reassuringly straightforward. “Loki didn’t seem in the least afraid of him.”

Frigga considered this. “Well, Thor is also possessed of a prodigious temper. Loki is well accustomed to it.”
“Maybe that’s it,” Coulson agreed affably.

“Do you think this Doctor Banner would be pleased to be a father to Loki’s child?” Frigga asked.

Barton choked again, but less seriously, and he quickly swallowed half a cup of tea and got himself back under control.

“That is hard to say,” Coulson told her. “I don’t believe he thought he was capable of having any children.”

“Then it should come as a joyous surprise,” Frigga proclaimed. When the three mortal’s expressions continued to be skeptical, she soldiered on, “Well, even if he does not wish to be involved in rearing his child, Midgard might be a more agreeable home for both Loki and his child.”

“Well, if he, and Asgard, were willing to agree to some conditions and safeguards, we could probably take him,” Coulson said. “I’d need to consult with my director before I make any promises.”

“Of course,” Frigga beamed. “Now for the more difficult part. I need you to somehow convince him to agree to this plan before he leaves for Jotunheim.”

“What?” Barton blinked. “Why do we have to talk him into it?”

Proving his keen insight once again, Coulson deduced her logic. “You think Loki can talk his way out of whatever the Jotuns are planning for him?”

“If he wishes to, Loki can talk his way out of nearly anything,” Frigga assured them, with wry amusement, before sobering again. “If he is thinking clearly, and not reacting to anger and fear. Or giving in to despair.”

“You want us to give him some incentive to try?” Lady Natasha’s elegant brows lifted like wings over eyes that seemed to constantly shift between blue, gray or green.

“I want you to give him hope that he could find acceptance on your world,” Frigga said, adding with a sigh, “At least for a time, while he heals, and Asgard’s anger cools.”

“Hmm,” Coulson said, noncommittally.

“Just tell him we’re the lesser of two evils and to get with the program,” Barton grumbled. “Hell, I’ll tell him. I don’t give a fu- a damn about what he owes the rest of the universe. He owes me…” Barton wound down into a sullen mutter. “He’s got to fix me.”

“Yes, I think that would be-” Frigga’s words were cut off by a hail from the direction of the palace, from someone invisible behind the illusion of the Earth meadow.

“All-Mother!” the yell came again, and Sif appeared mid-stride, standing practically on top of the undisturbed little deer.

Knowing that Sif was not prone to bursting in uninvited, Frigga stood, her heart suddenly thumping faster. “What is it, Sif?”

“My Queen,” Sif paused to drop quickly to one knee and salute, before rushing out with, “Thor sent me to tell you that the Jotun king has come demanding Loki, and that no one knows where he is, or the All-Father either. Not even Heimdall.”
Frigga was too well practiced in diplomacy to curse, except in her thoughts, where she reeled off a litany of the most profane language she knew, before squaring her shoulders and turning back to her guests.

“I’m afraid I must go. Please finish your repast without me, and we will return to this conversation another time.”

Agent Coulson had courteously risen when she did. Now he bowed slightly. Such good manners.

“Of course.”

Absently, Frigga touched the stone to dismiss the illusion, so the humans would be able to more easily find their own way out, then she went to find out where her sons and husband had gone, and how she could fix whatever troubles they were in now.

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With the Queen gone, and her magic with her, the garden reverted to its smaller, less wild beauty. Even the sounds had changed, from the drone of insects and melodic birdsongs, to the soothing roar of constantly falling water. The table was still heaped with food, though, and Clint took two more of the little pies, then, reluctantly put one back. The snug waistband of his pants told him that he was gaining weight in this place, even with the exercise he was getting riding horses around and doing some light sparring with Thor and his buddies.

“Fury isn’t going to approve,” Coulson announced, staring at Barton. “You know how he is about non-humans and enhanced.”

Clint just shrugged, concentrating on cutting his pastry into neat little triangles.

“He’d be an incredible asset, just for intel,” Natasha pointed out, reasonably. “We didn’t really get a lot of information from Thor about these other realms. And we don’t know that Thanos isn’t still a threat, somehow.”

“That’s true,” Coulson agreed, “But Loki could also be a threat. Even if he wants to help, it could be that Thanos still has some ties to him. We don’t know how much he was being controlled, or how.”

“Thor said the scepter didn’t work on Loki,” Clint reminded them, then, more slowly, “But I don’t think Thor knew how it worked. Loki didn’t either, he said.”

“There are a lot of ways to control people,” Natasha’s voice was dead level, as if it had nothing whatsoever to do with her. “It doesn’t take magic.”

“So, possible high-value asset, and high level threat.” Coulson tapped his pursed lips with the flat end of a fork, thinking. “The World Council is not likely to agree to Loki being anything except a prisoner.”

“None of the other Avengers would take that well.” Natasha was running her hand over the black spell globe as she spoke. “I don’t think Thor or their mother would go for it either.”

Pushing back from the table, Coulson paced a few steps and then turned back. “If the Jotuns are here to take Loki, we haven’t got a lot of time to come up with a plan. Barton, it was your idea.”
The wary look on Phil’s face felt like an accusation to Clint. His handler had been oh so careful with him lately, knowing full well what it had been like to be under the influence of the alien scepter, but since the healer had revealed the accidental bond that still existed between him and Loki, Clint heard every cautiously worded question concerning the situation as ‘Are you still compromised?’ And the truth was, he had no idea. He just knew it was something he and Loki were going to have to sort out somehow, not something for SHIELD shrink’s to pry into with their so-called attempts to ‘help’.

“So?” He hated how belligerent he sounded. Phil had been patient with him, and inviting an alien sorcerer prince back to their planet was not just about his problems.

“Barton,” Coulson sighed, frowning.

Natasha looked up. “How did you turn this thing on?”

“What?” Clint and Coulson both turned to look at her. She had risen from her chair and was lightly cupping the globe beneath her hands.

“You made it night.”

“No I didn’t,” Clint denied. “I just touched it and it changed.”

“It doesn’t change when I touch it.”

Moving to her side, Phil reached a tentative hand out and lightly caressed the black sphere. Nothing happened, and he exhaled loudly, revealing that he had been holding his breath.

“You try,” Natasha challenged, her eyes watchful and far too discerning.

Clint’s breathing tried to speed up. He refused to allow it, no matter how afraid he was, or how angry he was at the moment at Natasha for pushing him. Refusing would just make him look guilty. Guilty of what, a little voice asked. He had no idea. Snarling under his breath, he got up, shoving back his chair and slammed his hand down on the globe.

Nothing happened. Relief like joy washed through him, making Clint feel weak. “See? It wasn’t me.”

“Did you want it to work?” Natasha queried.

“What does that have to do with it?” Clint took his hand away again, then put both hands in his pockets for safekeeping.

She shrugged. “Frigga wasn’t saying anything or tracing any of these lines when she turned it on and off, so it must be triggered by intent.”

They both looked at him expectantly. Clint put both hands on the damned thing and kept them there. Again, nothing.

“Are you trying?” Phil asked.

“Yeah, I’m trying,” Clint lied. “I told you, it doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Too bad,” Natasha turned her face up to the blue, daytime sky. “It was so beautiful. It reminded me of my childhood in Russia. So much color. So much light. Like a dream.”

It had been wondrous, Clint admitted, remembering. A tiny shock, like static electricity, flashed
between him and the orb, and they were engulfed by the night and the northern lights. He gasped.

“Like that,” Natasha smiled, triumphant but with as much sympathy as she was capable of.

“Interesting,” Phil commented.

Before they could start asking questions that Clint couldn’t answer, he bolted, running without thinking back up the path until he passed through into day again, an arm’s length away from the closed door leading back into the palace. He ignored Phil’s voice calling after him, yanked it open and fled.

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By the time she’d managed to catch up to Barton, Natasha’s (admittedly little) sympathy for his feelings had pretty much been utterly wiped out by the growing pain in her calves, thighs and glutes. Whenever he was upset, Barton gravitated to the highest perch he could find, so she’d sought him at the top of the palace’s, and the city’s, highest spire. Asgard, despite being advanced in so many other ways, didn’t seem to have bothered to invent the elevator.

As she shoved open the door to the roof, her ingrained habit of compulsively memorizing her surroundings informed her that she had climbed 1,847 steps. She was in peak physical condition, of course, but even so, it was a lot of goddamned steps. If she’d guessed wrong and he wasn’t here, she was going to kill him, and if he was here, she was going to get to the bottom of what was bothering him, if she had to dangle him off the side of this blasted tower.

Thankfully, she had guessed correctly, and she spotted him pretty much immediately, sitting on the gold and marble railing meant to protect people from falling thousands of feet. If she wasn’t accustomed to his habits, and his preternatural ability to perch, walk, run or even leap from precarious positions, she would have been alarmed to see him there. She wasn’t. Well, at least not by that. She was taken aback as she got closer to see to see that instead of idly toying with one of his arrows, as she had first assumed, Clint had rolled up one sleeve and was using the razor-sharp tip to carve a bleeding runnel into his bare arm. And that it wasn’t the first such cut, either. He looked up as he caught sight of her, grimaced, and went right on cutting.

Lengthening her stride, she caught his hand and wrenched the arrow away, tossing it aside. After a quick check none of the cuts were life-threatening, she grabbed him by the collar of his armored vest, spun him away from the ledge, and punched him hard in the jaw, letting him drop at the same time.

He sprawled on the gleaming white stone, his blood spattering in shocking little crimson drops, and looked angrily up at her, rubbing his jaw.

“Damn it, Tasha,” he complained. “What did you do that for?”

“One thousand, eight hundred, forty-seven steps,” she retorted, aiming a kick at him for good measure. He rolled away, hurriedly getting to his feet.

Barton tried out a sullen expression. “I didn’t tell you to come after me.”

“You’re endangering the mission,” she snapped. “And you’re my friend. I’m not going to let you keep this all in your head any more. Tell me what is going on with you!”
He stared stubbornly at her. “It’s nothing. I can handle it.”

“It’s not nothing, Clint, and you are not handling it.” She looked pointedly at his blood-streaked arm.

He tucked it against his chest, hiding the wounds. “I can handle it,” he insisted.

“I can beat it out of you, if that’s what it takes,” Natasha promised him. “You know I can.”

His mouth twitched up at the threat, then twisted into an even direr frown. “Not any more, I don’t think,” he muttered, dropping his eyes.

She felt her brows lift at this mysterious statement. She’d always been able to best him at hand to hand fighting, and he always beat her at precision shooting. If he hadn’t looked so miserable about it, she would have thought he was just joking.

“You think you can beat me?” she checked her understanding. He didn’t speak, but his head dropped in a nod. “Well, maybe after nearly two thousand stairs—” she began a joke of her own.

“It’s not that!” Clint burst out, raggedly, shaking his head. “I mean, that’s part of it. Shit. I didn’t even notice the stairs. I should be wrecked, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What Loki did to me!” he shouted, thrusting his arm out towards her.

She stared at the cuts in bafflement, glad that they were no longer bleeding. “What does that have to do with—”

“Look!” He scrabbled at the cuts, clawing away the scabs. She reached out, intending to stop him, then stopped, staring in disbelief. ‘See what I mean?’

The cuts were healing at a phenomenal speed. The one highest on his arm, close to the elbow, was nothing more than a bright pink line of new skin, and the one she’d stopped him from finishing was well closed, like a wound at least a day old.

“I see,” she said, looking up to meet his panicked eyes. “Well, that could be a good thing. Provisionally.”

He gaped, and she shook her own head impatiently, “It’s strange, but it won’t prevent me from kicking your ass, so I’m assuming there’s more.”

His whole body was rigid with tension, and the spasm of frustrated anger gave her some warning, she still only barely managed to dodge when he suddenly swung at her. He was much faster than she’d expected, so instead of engaging as she usually would have, she danced backwards, staying out of reach and watching. The muscles in her thighs and calves protested, but she ignored it, not allowing it to distract her, or goad her into trying to repay that pain on Clint, however much a little voice inside her mind urged her to kick him in the nads for being such a stubborn, antagonistic, testosterone-poisoned idiot who would rather get his ass stomped than discuss his feelings.

The first punch wasn’t a fluke; he was faster now, but it wasn’t helping him as much as it might have. He hadn’t gotten used to his new speed yet, and it was throwing off his timing sufficiently that she was still able to get in behind him and take him down with a leg sweep. He recovered before she could close, and came up fast with a flying round kick that struck her a hard, if glancing blow to the hip.
She hissed in pain, letting her features contort into a pained but attractive little frown that she’d been taught at the age of ten, and his sudden guilt and worry made him hesitate.

“You okay?” he asked, dropping his guard and stepping closer.

Letting her voice quaver a little, she said, “I’m fine.”

His remorse redoubled, and he reached out as if to comfort her. “Shit. I’m sorry—”

Natasha gave in to the little voice, and she kneed him in the balls.

Keening a high-pitched obscenity, Clint folded, and the next minute she had him on his stomach, while she sat on his back, holding his arm in a lock. It was the arm he’d been cutting, so she got the opportunity to get a good look at it. She couldn’t see any new improvement, so she theorized that his healing was fast, but not instantaneous.

“Fuck, Tasha!” he yelped in protest, trying to thrash loose. She applied more pressure to his elbow and he stopped. So whatever new abilities he had, resisting pain didn’t seem to be one of them.

“Are you ready to talk?” she asked, sweetly. He cursed her roundly for being a cold-hearted, sadistic bitch. She took it as a compliment, and waited.

“Fine, I’ll talk!” She let go and he got up slowly, still moving a bit gingerly and giving her a reproachful look. “I can’t believe you kicked me in the nuts, Tasha,” he growled.

“I didn’t kick you that hard,” she scoffed.

“You did too!”

“Besides, you have super healing powers now. You’ll be over it in no time.”

“It still fucking hurt!” He limped back to the balustrade and leaned heavily against it.

“Eighteen hundred stairs, and you kicked me first. Suck it up and spill,” she ordered.

“Yeah, yeah.” But he didn’t go on.

“You’re worried about how much Loki changed you,” she guessed.

He nodded, staring down into the city far below them. “I don’t even know how enhanced I am now. SHIELD will put me on the Index if they find out. They’ll want to put me in a lab or something, lock me up like they did those mutants—”

“Those were criminals,” Tasha pointed out. “You’re not. You’re an agent.”

“I’ve got some kind of alien powers. They aren’t just going to let me go running around loose.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Natasha promised. “Coulson won’t either. We’ll go back to Eir and find out all there is to know about this… this situation, and we’ll come up with a plan before we go back.”

That seemed to calm him down a little, but he still looked worried.

She went to stand next to him, taking in the view. The sky overhead was bright turquoise, but a few stars shimmered through, and far off in the distance, she could just barely make out the thin, shining ribbon of the Bifrost, extending out into the stars.
After a while, she judged he’d relaxed enough. Time to resume her interrogation. “So what does that have to do with you wanting to bring Loki back to Earth?”

If he’d bitten down on a lemon, he couldn’t have looked more sour. “Nothing.” He lied badly, but with great determination. “I just want to see him pay for what he did.”

Interestingly, that last part had a ring of truth to it. “See him pay? Or make him pay?”

Clint’s face flushed, and she didn’t think it was all anger heating his cheeks. What was going on? Her mind flashed back to the scene in Stark’s safe room, to the scattered collection of BDSM gear they’d found discarded, once the Hulk and Loki had been sedated by the gas.

“Barton?” she probed, and he flushed brighter, gripping the handrail hard enough to turn his knuckles bloodless.

“Yeah, okay? I want to hurt him! I can’t get him out of my head!” he snarled, not looking at her. “He’s screwed me over, and I can’t stop thinking about him, and if what that healer said is right, I can look forward to being obsessed with Loki for the next fifty fucking years! Why shouldn’t I want some kind of payback for that?”

She shrugged. “You think it could help?”

He turned, clearly surprised by her lack of censure. Honestly, he ought to know her better.

“I’m Russian. We believe in holding grudges.”

He laughed till tears wet the corners of his eyes, then snorted. “Honestly?”

“Whatever you need, Barton, I’ll help you. For you, I would even put on a leather corset and apply a riding crop to Loki’s shapely blue bottom.”

Clint’s breath caught, and his pupils shot wide, letting Tasha know she’d hit the mark.

“Or,” she twisted her wrist, summoning the magic knife Loki had given her at Clint’s request and holding it up, “We could just kill him.”

Shuddering, he shook his head. “No,” he answered. “I- No. I’m pissed as hell at the bastard, but I’m not ready to murder him. Besides,” he gave a sickly smile, “It might not help, then where would I be?”

“Okay, then.” She tossed the knife up, letting it vanish. “I’ll help you get Loki back to our planet, and we’ll see about whether or not a little revenge helps.”

“Okay,” he huffed, getting to his feet. “Let’s go talk to Phil.”

“All right, but if you really want to get on my good side, you need to figure out a way down that doesn’t involve stairs.”

Clint looked around, and spotted one of the flying boats passing down below, and unstrapped his bow with a cocky grin. “I can do that.”
Chapter 12
Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Notes

Warning for potentially disturbing scene. Dubious consent, and probably not safe or sane.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loath as he was to admit it, Loki could see a great many similarities between himself and the new king of Jotunheim, once he got past the fact that his ‘younger brother’ was over ten feet tall. They shared the same pattern of ancestral markings, and were the same deep shade of blue while the rest of the Jotnar ranged from a lavender to dark indigo. Like Laufey, and like himself, Helblindi was not so broad shouldered and stocky as the giants around him, but was more wiry, with muscles that rippled like whipcord beneath the skin. They shared the same level brows and the same wide, thin-lipped mouth, though Loki’s were fuller in his Jotun form. Helblindi’s features were blunter, more like Laufey’s in the width of his forehead and jutting chin, and the high cheekbones that some elves had deigned to call elegant on Loki were hollowed out to an almost gaunt appearance in the young monarch.

But although the physical resemblance was disquieting, the truly disturbing connection Loki felt to his supposed sibling was to his seething anger at the world and everyone in it. He supposed he could hardly blame him. Except for the temporary period of lunacy inspired by Thanos, Loki had never wanted a throne and he especially had not wanted to rule Jotunheim.

Though he had studied that frigid realm less than any of the other eight, he had been vaguely aware that it was a poor place, with little in the way of trade. From Mengloth’s frequent complaints and accusations of Odin’s actions during the war and after, he had also gathered that the loss of the Casket of Ancient Winters had severely disrupted their weather patterns, causing more extremes in temperature.

He had thought of the world as forever frozen, but according to Mengloth, it did have seasons, and places where the snows melted for part of the year. In these temperate zones, they raised crops and livestock. The blooming of the tundra supported all of Jotunheim’s life that did not live in their ice-clogged seas. Now those warm seasons were warmer, but this was no blessing. The world was out of balance, and there was rain in seasons when there should be snow, and little or no snow when snow was needed, and in both warm and cold seasons, there were storms the like of which Jotunheim had seldom known. Crops were drowned by flood, or destroyed by drought. Game had become scarcer, and fishing more dangerous.

Raised in the abundance of Asgard, Loki could have scarcely imagined going hungry, until he had fallen into the Other’s clutches. Now he had experience in starvation, and he knew well that such privations must be making Jotunheim’s people angry and discontented. An angry, desperate populace was difficult to manage, even by a wise and well-loved ruler. A transplanted Aesir cuckoo would have had little chance, Loki thought.

And from what he was telling the All-Father, the prospects of the underage son of a disliked king were not likely to be favorable either.
Even if he was saying so in the most proud, insulting manner conceivable.

“We are not vassals of Asgard, to wait for whatever scraps you choose to throw.”

Helblindi had worked himself into a righteous fury, after Odin had gone into his ‘how dare you insult the honor of Asgard’ mode, trying to cow the younger ruler into backing down and leaving. The two of them had spent some time now, bellowing at each other and exchanging pointed barbs and insults. This evoked a powerful sense of deja vu. Were the Norns so determined to saddle him with a hot-headed, rash sibling that as soon as Thor began to show signs of patience and prudence, they sent him another?

Helblindi did not have Laufey’s subtlety, and he was sorely outmatched in power, but he would not give in. Instead, he had threatened to seek a meeting of the rulers of the Nine - a seldom used protocol to mediate disputes between realms and avoid war, and though it was called a ‘Conclave of Nine Realms’, it was seldom represented by more than four or five of those realms. Such meetings had no real power to enforce their rulings, but it made for a fine opportunity to sway opinions. It would make Asgard look bad in the eyes of the other realms, however little they cared about the fate of Jotunheim and probably would not weep if it had been destroyed, save that they would abhor Asgard’s exercise of such destruction, lest it be turned on them next.

Loki looked across the lesser assembly hall to where the three mortals had somehow inveigled their way into this purportedly private meeting, and wondered if they might insist on having their long-ignored realm send members to sit in judgement on their former gods. That would be funny. Maybe he should causally suggest it to them.

What am I thinking? Loki shook his head, dismissing the impulse to make mischief. It seemed unlikely that the result of such a meeting would be of benefit to him. Not that he could think of anything that might.

Frigga was standing protectively beside him, but thus far Helblindi had not so much as looked in his direction. Possibly he did not recognize Loki, since he had kept his Aesir seeming on. Thor had flanked him on his other side, and had thus far kept a remarkable rein on his tongue, though he had argued and got his way when Odin had attempted to dismiss Sif and the Warriors Three, along with everyone else, even the Einherjar.

Helblindi had likewise dismissed his own guards, keeping only his old councilor with him.

After the two sovereigns had spent nearly an hour butting heads, neither seemed any nearer to backing down. Loki had to admit that the Jotuns had excellent reasons for their demands, whereas Odin’s only excuse for waiting was that he did not feel Loki was ready.

Helblindi turned a blazing red gaze his way, proving that he did in fact know who Loki was. “Well, kinslayer? What say you? Will you go on siding with our enemies, after all they have done to you?”

Looking Loki up and down, Jo sneered. “Will you go on pretending to be one of them?”

Loki stiffened, crossing his arms despite his oversensitive breasts, and dropped the glamour, too late remembering that he was barefoot, and dressed in the somewhat shabby attire he had chosen for meditation because it was loose and comfortable, and that his hair was a mass of loose curls, untamed by comb or oil. He could have changed it to his formal armor, or some other finery, and fixed his untidy hair, of course, but that would be letting Helblindi know he cared for his opinion. Which he did not.

“I am not pretending,” Loki ground out. “I just find this appearance repulsive.”
Helblindi stared at him, then snorted derisively. “You are freakishly small, but not ill-favored, for one of your sort. Mengloth said as much to us.”

“Youre opinion means exactly nothing to me,” Loki shot back, wincing when his mother covertly poked him hard in the back for his rudeness. He thought it fairly polite compared to some of the things he’d thought about saying.

“I feel the same about you,” Helblindi responded, and received a not so furtive whack from his old advisor, which made him growl.

“I care not what you think of us,” the Jotun king went on, after giving the old one an angry glance of reproof.

He turned back to the All-Father. “I cannot afford to wait, as well you know. You have taken the Heart of Winter, without which our world is slowly dying. Your heir invaded our world and slew dozens, merely for his injured pride, and however you came to be in possession of my sibling, you have warped jir so that he would lure our father to jos doom.”

“He tried to kill me first,” Loki pointed out, though not very loudly. Frigga nudged him, less painfully this time, and Odin looked peeved.

Helblindi just looked cold, and told Odin, “For the sake of my younger sibling, and my dam, and for my world, which can ill afford a civil war, I will not leave without what I have been promised.”

“You can wait one more day!” Odin told him, glovering up at him.

The Jotun king glared down, just as angry and as adamant. “There is no cause for waiting!”

“If the All-Father commands it, you will wait,” Thor said, with a hint of his old arrogance.

Helblindi thrust out a blue skinned, black taloned finger the length of Loki’s entire hand, pointing directly at him. “We were promised he would be sent to us when jo was well enough, and our healer says jo is well enough!”

“Well enough for what?” Loki reluctantly asked, not seeing what difference a day was going to make in any case. It didn’t seem he was going to be able to get out of it altogether, so he was kind of curious about just what kind of tortures they had in mind.

With more caginess than Loki would have expected of the young, hot-tempered king, Helblindi muttered, “That will be up to the Løgting.”

Though Loki had only the vaguest notions of how Jotunheim was governed, Løgting translated through the All-Speak as ‘Law Thing’ and implied that the Jotun king was not so all-powerful as Odin was. The All-Father had his Council to assist him, half of them selected by Odin himself, and half of them sent from far-flung territories to represent their people’s interest. But though it would be unwise for Odin to disregard their opinions too often, or make them his opponents, in Asgard, the king’s word was law.

“Just when is this Løgting to meet?” Loki asked, suspecting that he already knew the answer.

“On the morrow,” Helblindi confirmed his guess with a snarl of frustration.

Of course it was tomorrow, Loki thought in exasperation. Why else would the young king with little leverage be here, in the heart of his enemy’s realm, demanding things he could not gain by force, if he were not desperate.
In the silence following this statement, Agent Coulson cleared his throat and stepped forward, sketching a hasty but polite bow before saying, “I hate to intrude, but would someone mind explaining just what a Løgting is?”

Startled by this interruption, Helblindi turned to stare down, and down, at the unimposing mortal, who in turn gazed unperturbedly up at him.

Before anyone could do or say something unforgivably rude or possibly violent, Frigga urged Loki in a whisper to make the proper introductions.

He sighed at being thrust so unceremoniously back into his diplomat’s role, but to please his mother he spoke up, “Helblindi, King of Jotunheim, this is Agent Phillip Coulson of SHIELD, a spokesman for the powers of Midgard.”

Turning to Coulson, he finished, “Agent Coulson, this is Helblindi Laufeyson, king of Jotunheim. And my… sibling, I suppose.”

“Laufeysbarn,” Helblindi corrected with a sniff, before explaining, “the Løgting is comprised of all of the thanes and clan chiefs, and the law-speakers.”

“And they are the ones who are going to try Loki?”

This obviously made no sense to Thor. “Are you not king? Is your word not law?”

“The law is the law, and the king must enforce it. Loki is of the royal blood, and my kin, so I may not try him myself. But the Løgting is also charged with electing the king, and removing any king they feel is a danger to our people.”

“So you aren’t really king yet?”

“Not until they have approved my ascension to the throne.”

“But your father was king?”

“It would be most foolish to grant the throne to a king’s offspring if he could not prove himself an able ruler,” Helblindi looked disparagingly at Thor as he said this.

Loki winced for both Thor and Helblindi. He had deliberately cost Thor the throne, at least temporarily, but it was beginning to look as if he might cost this younger, very unwanted sibling the throne permanently. Possibly fatally. Deposed kings and their heirs could be a threat to those who had displaced them. And Helblindi had mentioned a younger sibling, and had seemed to think that sibling at some risk.

Of course, this was a very petty offense, compared to his murdering Laufey and attempting to destroy Jotunheim and every last person on it.

He really wasn’t looking forward to facing them, but he did regret it. Sort of. He still didn’t like them, or want to be one of them, but he no longer thought killing them all was the right thing to do. He hadn’t really thought it was right even when he was doing it, really. He’d just somehow got it into his head that if they just were not, then he could not be one of them. It had been deranged, and he was glad Thor had stopped him, and even if they were horrendously hideous brutes, he supposed he did owe them whatever aid he could give in not causing any more harm.

Getting his birth siblings killed and maybe starting a civil war, for instance.
Loki sighed and rubbed his face to wake himself from his meandering thoughts, barely aware that Thor and Helblindi were nearly ready to start exchanging blows.

“I’ll go,” he said, loudly enough to be heard over the din.

Momentarily, the room fell silent, and then the cacophony redoubled. Helblindi wished to leave immediately, and Odin was demanding more time. Thor proclaimed he was not going to let Loki go alone, and this set off new, even more heated disputes, with Sif loudly volunteering herself and the Warriors Three to accompany Thor, of course.

Frigga drew Loki a little to one side and spun a minor sound buffering spell so they could talk without shouting to be heard over the noise.

“Are you certain you are ready for this?” his mother asked, looking worried.

“No,” Loki shrugged uneasily. “But you and father have already started the groundwork with Helblindi. It sounds like if we wait, you risk having to start over, with a complete unknown.”

Her blue eyes narrowed, and she glanced back at the contesting kings, but did not ask him if he harbored any sentiment for his blood kin. Instead, she embraced him, all too briefly, and kissed him on the forehead.

“You take good care of yourself, and keep meditating,” she instructed firmly. “You will need your wits about you, but I have faith you can make this come out well.”

“Well for whom?” he muttered, bleakness threatening to overwhelm his resolve.

She shook him lightly by the shoulders. “For you, Loki,” she answered firmly. “As far as I’m concerned, all Nine Realms can rot, so long as you are happy.”

Right now, that seemed utterly impossible, but Loki quipped, “Well, then, as long as we both have our priorities straight.”

Giving him a serene smile, she raised her hand, gathering the threads of her spell. “Ready?”

“Yes,” he said, though he wasn’t.

Her elegant fingers twisted, and the spell broke, letting the ruckus roll back in, unabated by their momentary absence.

Moving to Odin’s side, Loki yelled, “Father!” He was tired of trying to deny it. Maybe as Frigga had told him, Odin was not the best of fathers to him, but he was the only father Loki had, or would ever have, now. Laufey had rejected him twice, and Loki had killed him.

Odin put up his hands. “Enough!”

Thor and his friends and Helblindi and his advisor all subsided with various degrees of grumbling, resorting to exchanging dagger-sharp looks at each other instead.

“Thank you, Father,” Loki said. He swallowed, then said in a clear, firm voice, “I am ready to go to Jotunheim, there to be punished for my crimes. I understand that this was agreed between you and Helblindi King, and I see no reason to delay.”

Odin grimaced, looking as if he wanted to argue.

Thor beat him to it. “If this Løgting should not confirm Helblindi as king, he will not be able to
“I am nearly of age, and I have the support of my sire’s warriors and household,” Helblindi countered. “Our family is the blood of Ymir, and has ruled for twelve generations.”

“But you are not king yet,” Thor repeated, obstinately. “I am going with him.”

“No, Thor,” Loki shook his head.

“I cannot allow it,” Odin told his heir.

The would-be king of Jotunheim gave Thor an icy stare. “You killed dozens of my subjects over a trifling insult. It would please us to try you for your crimes.”

“I was punished,” Thor said hotly.

“Not by us,” Helblindi growled back.

“Restitution has been made for Thor’s offense,” Odin reminded Helblindi sternly. “Are you now saying that you did not have the authority to accept those terms?”

Helblindi bared his great, sharp teeth. “I will be king!”

“It would do Loki no good to have the Løgting reminded by your being there,” the old Jotun told Thor, almost kindly.

Thor looked so crestfallen that Sif said, slowly and with little enthusiasm, “The four of us could go as Loki’s bodyguards.”

“No,” Loki said, flatly, without looking at any of them. He was unsure about Thor’s behavior on the Bifrost when they’d fought, and unsure how they stood, as brothers, but he was absolutely certain that Thor’s friends had betrayed him when he had been Asgard’s king. There might be nothing he could do about that, but he wasn’t about to entrust his safety and honor to them. Not ever again.

Unsurprisingly, they did not argue. Loki looked at Thor, who looked unsure and confused by this rift between his brother and his friends.

Then, to Loki’s shock, Barton stepped forward, squaring his shoulders. “I’ll go along and look out for him.”

This set off a new round of debate, with Barton’s fellow agents telling him he wasn’t allowed, while Odin, Thor and Thor’s friends all tried to tell Barton he wasn’t good enough, that a mortal was no match for Jotunheim’s climate, much less that realm’s folk. Helblindi seemed only mildly amused, as if Barton were some pet of the Aesir’s who was merely acting out of misguided loyalty.

Frigga said nothing, but only gave Loki that look which meant that he was supposed to figure out what to do, rather than having to be told. So Loki called up subtle spells of seeing and perception, luxuriating for a moment in the sheer pleasure at being able to use his magic at will again. Then he got hold of himself, and focused on what was going on with his ex-minion.

After Barton had so emphatically proclaimed his disapproval of Loki’s unorthodox healing method, via an explosive arrow to Loki’s face, Mengloth had spoken of the length of the psychic bond that had been created between them, but after Coulson had taken Barton away, Loki had mostly forgotten about it again, too consumed by his own problems. His dim recollections about such bonds had said that they were prone to generate attractions that were often mistaken for love. He’d figured Barton’s
anger and hate would easily overwhelm any such feelings, and put the matter out of his mind.

Studying Barton’s aura now, Loki certainly didn’t see any of the bright reds or mauves that indicated love or attraction. He’d learned those signs well, studying with Amora and briefly, with her younger sister, Lorelei. Love spells had been specialities of both sisters, so much so that Amora had wound up banished, and Lorelei now resided in the palace dungeons with her magic and voice bound by a cruel muzzle. Loki felt fortunate not to have met such a fate himself, though it was still a possibility, he supposed. Asgard’s Council would have their turn at punishing him for his misdeeds once Jotunheim had had their way with him.

And Loki had let himself be distracted from the troubles at hand again. He had to pay closer attention. Forcing himself to concentrate on Barton, Loki saw only the will and determination that had first attracted him to the archer, though his beautiful steadfast calm had been all but destroyed, supplanted by a morass of darker emotions: anger, fear… lust?

Loki blinked in disbelief, trying to make sense of that last one. It writhed, maroon and green, both nearly dark enough to be black, swirling muddily into each other, entwined and intermixed with the glow that was Loki’s own magic clinging to Barton. Did that mean it was Loki’s desire, somehow infecting Barton?

“Agent Barton and I need to discuss this!” Loki announced, loudly, meeting those sharp hazel eyes and jerking his chin to indicate the mortal should follow, before turning on his heel and heading for the door. He felt Barton follow, close as a shadow and just as dark.

A chorus of protests started up behind them, but Loki only shouted back, “We won’t be long!” and kept going, shoving past the guards by the door and leading Barton to the nearest place they could speak privately - the royal portrait gallery. Except on state occasions, the huge room full of paintings and statues was only used by the occasional trysting servants.

A fast scry revealed it to be empty now, so after Barton had shut the door behind them, Loki sealed it with a spell, then turned to face him.

“Well, Barton?” he demanded, aware that he sounded imperious, but unable to stop himself.

Hawkeye, Loki’s prized hawk no longer, scowled and clenched his fists, but refrained from striking out. “You owe me,” he challenged hotly, barely able to part his gritted teeth to speak.

“Yes?” Loki whirled away, paced two steps, then spun again and paced back to where Barton waited like a cocked crossbow, aimed directly at him. “I owe you, yes! I admit it freely. So what do you want?”

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Alone with Loki for the first time since the awful, unforgettable scene in Stark’s over-equipped safe room, Clint stared at the instigator of the hot mess his life had become, wishing he could become that X-Man who had lasers shoot from his eyes. It felt as if his hatred should be boring holes through the arrogant blue prick.

Even as he stood there, too damned tall by half, admitting that he was in debt to Clint, Loki didn’t sound the least bit sorry. It was seriously pissing Clint off, especially since he wasn’t going to use his fists on Loki if Loki really was up the duff.
He glared up at the crimson eyes, and the sharp cheekbones, and that mouth… God, how he wanted to fuck the smirk off those lips.

Unable to think of anything else, he shouted, “To start with, you can stop fucking looming!”

Surprised as if he had been hit, Loki fell back a step. “What?”

Clint clarified, “Sit the fuck down!”

There were long benches in front of each portrait, all made of gold and padded with silk cushions. Loki moved almost automatically back to one and folded down onto it.

The thrill that went through Clint at having Loki follow his order was hot and visceral, and it left him instantly hard, and even angrier than before.

“Lower,” he snarled, softly, stalking closer to the confused demigod. “On your knees.”

Those ruby eyes went wide and round, and Loki’s jaw dropped in shock. “Barton,” he stammered, staring up at him for a change. But not from far enough down, yet.

Deliberately, so as not to startle him, Clint reached out and tangled his fist in Loki’s long, curling hair and tugged. His former master resisted, but did not do anything to try to push Clint away, or free himself.

“My- Hawkeye,” Loki’s voice was dust dry and soft. “This isn’t you. You don’t really want this.”

“But you do, don’t you?” Clint pulled harder, knowing it would hurt if Loki did not give in. “I remember exactly what you like, and right now, it squares just fine with what I want. So…On. Your. Knees.”

Letting Clint’s grip pull him forward, Loki slid off the bench, gracefully going to his knees on the gleaming white marble floor. He stared up worriedly, his breathing just a little rough and fast, betraying nervousness.

Clint slackened his hold, but did not let go. With his free hand, he started unbuckling his belt, then popping the buttons of his new Asgardian trousers, one by one.

“Barton-” Loki tried again to pull back, and Clint tightened his fingers again, preventing him. “Barton, someone might come in,” he protested, weakly.

“Make sure they don’t,” Clint ordered, not really knowing or caring if that was something Loki could do. It was crazy, but he was past caring. Now that Loki was kneeling in front of him, he was going to take what he’d been wanting.

His nemesis didn’t argue further, but stared in rapt fascination as Clint worked his pants down, followed by the straining underpants. As his cock sprung free, erect and dripping in its eagerness, Loki actually licked his lips. Then he looked up, guiltily.

Clint grinned fiercely. “Ready for me?”

“This- this might actually make things worse,” Loki whispered, dropping his gaze back to Clint’s waiting erection, then to the floor instead.

Clint dragged his head up by his hair. “I don’t think it can get worse,” he informed Loki. “So unless you can figure out how to fix this-“
He took his cock and moved it to touch Loki’s firmly closed lips, pressing gently. “This is what I want.”

The cool, soft lips parted, and he shoved himself into a mouth that was equally cool, but deliciously
soft and wet, and so reluctantly willing. Teeth rasped lightly over his cock, but did not bite, and
Loki’s tongue slid around, exploring him.

After a moment or two of letting Loki go slowly, sucking and licking and tasting him with apparent
enjoyment, Clint let his other hand join the first in the ebony mass of curls, dragging Loki closer as
he thrust forward.

Caught off guard, Loki choked, trying to pull back, but Clint refused to let him. Moaning softly, the
god of lies shifted position and relaxed his throat, accommodating Clint’s thrusting deeper and
deeper, until his balls were slapping into Loki’s chin, and his aristocratic nose was buried in Clint’s
groin, his breath whistling through Clint’s pubic hair.

“Until you fix this,” Clint panted at Loki as he moved faster and faster, feeling the climax building
fast, “I’m staying with you, and your mouth is mine.”

Loki moaned around him, the vibration almost sending him over the edge, but he held out. “Your

He decided to take the choked noise for assent, since Loki was continuing to suck him as best he
could. “We don’t have Stark’s toys to play with, but I’ll come up with something. I’m good at
improvisation.”

A shudder went through Loki, and he looked up pleadingly. The wanton, begging expression
pushed Clint over, and he came fast and hard and it felt like it lasted forever, with Loki swallowing
again and again, then slumping to his hands and knees when Clint suddenly released him.

Despite the languorous tide of pleasure washing through him, Clint still had to restrain the urge to
kick the kneeling figure, but as he watched Loki gasping and struggling for composure, his long hair
trailing like curtains across his face, the rage was swept aside by purest satisfaction. Despite having
just spent, his cock twitched it’s hunger for more.

But Loki was right about people getting impatient and coming to look for them. But there would be
time. At least, if he had judged Loki correctly.

He tucked himself back into his underwear, and fastened his pants and belt, then nudged Loki, who
had yet to look up, with the toe of his boot. “Are we agreed?”

“Agreed,” Loki nodded, slowly getting to his feet and wiping at his swollen mouth, shoving at
tendrils of hair dampened with spit and semen and maybe tears, and trying to look as if he hadn’t just
been wrecked. After a minute, he seemed to realize this was futile, and the air shimmered emerald
around him, leaving him looking composed and pristine, still blue and androgynous, but in nicer
clothes.

“So I’m going with you.”

“If.. if Helblindi and your Coulson allow it,” Loki agreed. “Barton,” he licked his lips again, and
Clint clamped down on a smirk of his own.

“I do not know what they will do to me, on Jotunheim. They may not allow you to stay. They could
do something that… that would prevent me from breaking this bond safely.”
“Like I said, I’m good at improvisation,” Clint told him. “We’ll figure it out.”

“All right,” Loki continued to stare at him, lightly stroking himself, though whatever magic he was wearing hid any tell-tale tenting of trousers.

Clint took great pleasure in utterly ignoring Loki’s unspoken plea for release. “Ready to go back?”

Loki’s shoulders slumped, and he sighed. “Yes. Let us go. I will ask that you be allowed to go with me, as my-“

“Bodyguard,” Clint supplied with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to tilla123 for all her help. I hope you guys will tell me what you think of this development. It happened a lot more quickly and turned out a lot rougher than I’d thought it would.
Chapter 13
Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay, everyone. Work has been busy, my beta reader has been under the weather, etc.

With the taste of Barton’s seed still lingering in his mouth, Loki led the way back into the assembly hall, prepared to put forth his most persuasive reasons why the archer should be allowed to accompany him. As it turned out, he need not have bothered; in their absence, everyone else had come up with reasons of their own it seemed, because no one was even objecting.

In fact, things were moving forward at an almost headlong pace, so much so that Loki had little time to doubt the wisdom of agreeing to Barton’s terms, or his plan to go along.

Frigga had given them both a sharp look, but said nothing to indicate she knew anything untoward had occurred. She merely clasped Loki’s hands and assured him she would see to it that they both had all they would require for the trip, then hurried off.

Barton had left with his fellow agents, both of whom were blank-faced and stoic. Possibly they meant to talk Hawkeye out of this once they were in private, but Loki was almost certain that Barton would not be swayed, not even by the two people he loved best. That thought was a guilty pleasure so intense that it nearly swamped his fear and uncertainty of what would happen on the world of his birth.

Helblindi and his advisor, who had given his name as Skapti Gertrsbarn, went to rejoin the king’s contingent of warriors, to wait for the time of their departure in comfort. Thor and his friends left at the same time. Loki did not have the energy to inquire as to why.

This left Loki alone with Odin, just as they had been before, as it always seemed to, the affairs of state had come crashing in. The All-Father was frowning sternly.

“Jotunheim will wait if we command them to wait,” he said, lowering his bushy brows in disgruntlement as he leaned heavily on Gungnir. “These are but empty threats. You need not go if you are unready.”

“You were the one who wanted me to go,” Loki pointed out, with a touch of asperity. He struggled to check his own anger. “Are you going to change your plans now just because Helblindi was presumptuous?”

“I wished to have more time to show you-“

“I know that… that Thanos and the Other have… corrupted my memories,” Loki admitted, though the words were stuck like fishhooks in his chest, and left bleeding wounds as he ripped them out. I was weak, I let them break me and shape me to Thanos’s will. He bowed his head to hide the shame that must surely show in his face. Was he still being weak? Was that why he longed to be away from Asgard and alone with Barton, so he could be broken and reshaped to the human’s will?
No, it’s not the same. It harms no one.

“It doesn’t matter,” he went on in a rush. “It’s not as if I had any pleasant memories of Jotunheim.”

“That is not the point!” Odin seemed deeply upset, and very weary.

Loki was suddenly worried that his father might once again drop unexpectedly into the Odinsleep and fall at his feet, as he had in the Vault. Who knew what kind of disasters might come of that, all more sins to be heaped on his head. What if it should cause Odin’s death this time, as Frigga had feared it might last time? If that happened, Loki would have killed both his fathers.

Tears suddenly sprung to Loki’s eyes at the idea of Odin dying, despite how he had ranted and brooded about wanting just that. He kept his head lowered to hide them, but they clotted his voice till it was no more than a strangled whisper. “I’m sorry.”

And he was. Sorry for ruining Thor’s coronation, even if his oaf of a brother would have been a terrible king. Sorry for all his tricks and lies, sorry for all the grief he’d brought to Frigga, and all the disappointment he’d caused Odin, and sorry he’d ever been born in the first place.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated helplessly, trying not to start sobbing. Dimly, he remembered Mengloth had mentioned that his being with child would make him ‘moody’. Was that what was happening? If so, Loki wondered how any woman ever got through an entire pregnancy without drowning herself in her own tears.

Odin grasped him by the shoulders and Loki glanced up. His father did not hug him like Frigga would have, but he did not let go, either.

“I am the one who is sorry. I meant only the best, for both you and Thor, but I have been a poor father to you both.”

Loki shook his head. He did not even know any more. That voice was still there in his mind, slyly saying that Odin was not his father and never had been. Was that Thanos’s voice? Or the cry of a tantruming child?

“I need to go pack,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm and strong, like a proper prince of Asgard. “I need to fix this.” Though what ‘this’ was, or how it could ever be fixed, he had not the first idea.

But the All-Father’s fingers did not loosen their hold on his shoulders. “No, you need not.”

Confused, Loki risked looking up. Odin looked stern, and worried. “I don’t understand. You don’t want me to-“

“I do not want you do to something extreme, as you have done on certain past occasions,” the king warned gruffly, shaking Loki slightly, almost unintentionally.

“Extreme?” His first thought was to remind Odin of all the times Thor had done things Loki would define as ‘extreme’, but before he could pick the best one, Odin was muttering something about ‘that mess with the wall builder, and with the dwarves’.

“You told me I had to-“ Loki spluttered, half-strangled with remembered rage and sorrow. “Everyone was blaming me for… for making bad bargains, and I-“

“I was wrong!” Odin roared, shaking him harder this time.

Loki blinked at his father’s angry visage through a haze of tears, and as they slid away down his
cheeks, Odin’s expression changed to one of remorse.

“I have blamed you overmuch, and burdened you with fault that was as much mine as yours,” Odin said, terribly stiff and clearly unwilling to go into detail. “I will not do so this time.”

Wiping his face, Loki took in three deep, even breaths, trying to push his anger down far enough to talk instead of scream. He managed it somehow, and asked, “Then what is it you want me to do? Just be brave and cooperate with whatever the mons- the Jotuns mean to do with me?”

“No,” Odin released him at last, taking up his spear again and glaring, though not at Loki. “I want you to be clever, and to make the best of the situation. Just do not-“ He shook his head, making that same snarl of angry frustration he had used to silence Loki just before hurling Thor into a banishment on Earth.

As Loki continued to stare at him, Odin declared loudly, “Peace with Jotunheim is not your responsibility. I am king, and Helblindi and I will come to terms. You will strive to gain whatever favor you may with them, and accept what retribution they dole out, so long as they do not forget that if they dare to do my son grievous harm, I will condemn them and their world to the Void.”

The idea of Odin threatening genocide against the Jotnar for punishing Loki too harshly for attempting it himself was so preposterous that it drew a peal of laughter from Loki. Of course it was mere bombast on Odin’s part, but it did cheer him up slightly.

“I am not jesting,” Odin frowned deeply, as Loki collected himself.

“No, no, of course not,” Loki assured him, putting up a hand and biting his tongue against a resurgence of giggles.

“Loki-“

“I will be on my best behavior, Father,” Loki vowed, now desperate to end this awful conversation and flee. “I really do have a great deal to do to get ready.”

The All-Father heaved a great sigh. “Very well. I am sure this will all work out.”

Loki was sure that Odin was not as certain as all that, but that his father also wished to escape.

“Of course,” he agreed, politely, now that his bout of hysteria was fading. “Will you be seeing me off?”

“I will, as will your mother,” Odin told him.

That was good, Loki thought. It meant they could put off the farewells until they were all safely in the public eye. He bowed, prince to king.

“I will see you there.”

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Waiting out in the corridor, Thor brooded and waited impatiently for a chance to talk to Loki alone. His friends had all wanted to stay with him, especially Sif, and he had been forced to be brusque with them. They had gone away reluctantly, and Sif had been angry, but Thor did not have Loki’s
gift with honeyed words. He would make his apologies later, and all would be forgiven, he was sure. But then again, he had always been certain that his brother would forgive him anything, and that belief had been all but destroyed. He needed to do better at not offending.

But at last the door opened, just wide enough for Loki to slip through, and shut again, though apparently no one had exited. So was Loki attempting to slip by invisibly, or had he seen Thor and decided to wait for him to leave? Well, either way, he was not going to fool Thor this time.

Careful not to be obvious about it, Thor let his gaze slide down to the floor, where his light dusting of flour revealed a set of footprints moving past him at the cautious pace of a sneaky sorcerer. Feigning confusion as he pretended to search everywhere for his unseen brother, he let the footprints get closer, closer…

Then Thor pounced, lion-like, eliciting a loud squawk from his startled prey as they both tumbled to the floor in a tangle of flailing limbs. Loki’s illusion shattered, leaving him pinned on his back between Thor’s knees, staring up indignantly. The familiarity of the look made Thor grin.

“Just where do you think you are going?”

“I am not trying to make a break for it, Thor,” Loki responded, snippily.

Thor’s pleasure at having foiled Loki’s trick drained away like water in desert sands. He got up, catching Loki by the hand and pulling him up as well. They were both well coated with flour, and sending up powdery clouds with every shift of clothing or hair. Loki beat uselessly at the white streaks for a moment, then, realizing the futility of it, stomped down the hall in the general direction of the family wing of the palace.

“I did not mean to imply that you were,” Thor protested, catching up to him.

“If you trust me not to run away, then you do not need to guard me,” Loki snapped, now walking as fast as was possible without breaking into an actual run.

It was a rather uncomfortable speed for conversation. Thor persisted, though. “I only wanted to be sure I had a chance to talk to you.”

“You could have met me in my rooms.”

“I did not know for a certainty that you would be going there,” Thor pointed out.

“You could have just asked,” Loki said, sourly. “You need not have assaulted me in the hallway.”

“If I had tried calling you while you were invisible, you would have ignored me.”

Coming to an abrupt halt, Loki turned to look at him.

“What?” Thor asked, also stopping.

“It’s just always a surprise to me when you aren’t a complete idiot.”

“I can put you back on the floor, you know.”

Reaching out, Loki brushed at a particularly floury spot on Thor’s cape, to little effect except to make little puffs. He soon gave it up. “Flour, huh?”

Thor shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”
“It was a good idea.” Loki smiled almost fondly. “You tricked me. I’m impressed.”

This was high praise from Loki, who was much more prone to berating Thor, and it caused a warm glow in the vicinity of Thor’s heart. “Well,” he teased, “You are not as clever as you think you are, sometimes.”

“No,” Loki’s face closed down again, and he resumed walking, albeit at a less taxing pace. “I am only clever when someone wants something from me. The rest of the time I am cunning at best, or sly, or tricky.”

Again, Thor went after his brother, trying to think of what to say to bring back his little brother’s lighter mood. He knew people did call Loki those things, but tricks were Loki’s greatest talent, and he had just complimented Thor on being tricky himself. A person needed to be cunning and sly to pull tricks, so how could Loki take it so amiss?

“Why must you always see things in the worst light?”

“I see things as they are, Thor,” Loki all but hissed at him, then he seemed to reconsider his anger. “At least, that is how I remember things. I may be wrong,” he admitted distractedly, as they reached his chambers and he entered and began collecting books and various sundries in preparation for the trip.

Watching this, Thor felt almost as useless, and helpless as he had been as a mortal. It had not been pleasant then, and it was even less so now, knowing that his brother was heading into danger.

“I wish you would let me go with you,” Thor complained again. “I give you my word, I will keep my temper, no matter what any frost giant might call me.”

“A bold promise,” Loki mused, looking up from the task of selecting a portable arsenal from his gallery of weapons. “If it was your life at stake instead of mine, I’d be tempted to see if you could actually keep it.”

Offended, Thor bridled. “I keep all my vows, and unlike some people, I do not use slippery language to make others believe I have promised something when I have not.”

“No, you only break promises by forgetting all about them, or deciding that the person you made the promise to was unworthy or dishonorable, so you were not foresworn if you went against your word,” Loki countered.

As he spoke, he caused daggers, throwing knives, a garrote, caltrops, vials of mysterious liquids and powders, spell crystals, and a few things Thor did not even recognize to vanish into wherever it was that allowed them to be summoned again later, should the need arise.

“Do you really need all that?” Thor questioned. “You aren’t going there to fight.”

“Not if I can help it,” Loki evaded, continuing to pack.

“If you believe you will be in danger, you should tell Father to let me go with you,” Thor urged. “Or Sif and the Warriors Three.”

“I can look out for myself, Thor,” Loki replied, testily. “And your friends are no friends of mine.”

“You are being wrong-headed again,” Thor protested. “Of course they are your friends.”

“I do not have time to argue with you about it. They aren’t coming.”
“Barton is a good man, but I do not see how he can be of any help to you. He is but a mortal, however skilled he may be with his bow.”

“Hawkeye’s gift is not archery,” Loki told him. “However adept he is. His greatest talent is for seeing things clearly. I have need of such perception.”

That last part was true enough, Thor silently agreed. Loki surely was not seeing things very clearly if he believed Agent Barton would be of more aid to him than Sif, or Fandral or even Volstagg, who was a doughty warrior despite his tendency to be more on the lookout for his next meal than for potential dangers. Perhaps not Hogun, though. The grim warrior was much distracted these days.

“I grant you Barton is sharp-eyed, brother,” Thor said, tossing Mjolnir up and catching her. “But he is still very angry with you, I had thought. He seems a poor choice.”

Loki glanced suspiciously at him. “Angry or not, he asked to go, and I do not think he would deliberately cause me to come to harm.”

“Because it would be dishonorable?”

“Unprofessional, I think he would say.” Loki replied, apparently satisfied with his choice of weaponry. He moved on to his wardrobe, taking out flowing, loose garments of various colors and frowning at them.

Thor flipped his hammer again, thinking. “Are those not the same thing?”

His brother made a face at him. Frequently, Loki had disparaged honor; he seemed almost unable to understand the concept of it, despite being so very clever about most things, and Thor was not smart enough to explain it to him.

“I still think I should be the one to go.” If only the Jotuns were not equally as angry at Thor as they were at Loki.

His brother ignored him, irritably sorting through his best formal outfits, muttering about how they no longer fit properly and how he would have to keep up illusions constantly if he was to at least look properly dressed.

This gave Thor an idea. He heaved up from his slouch against a wall, brandishing Mjolnir triumphantly. “Loki!”

Turning, Loki flinched, as if he thought Thor was going to strike him, and Thor frowned uncertainly, lowering his hammer. “Brother, I-“

Loki face hardened as his momentary fear vanished. “Thor, I do not have time for this.”

“But Loki,” Thor argued, “I have an idea how I can go with you. You can use your magic to disguise me as Barton!”

He beamed at Loki, certain that his brother would approve of this plan, seeing as how often he had come up with similar tricks in the past. Most of those times Thor had not wished to go along with Loki’s deceptions, so how could Loki not be pleased that Thor was suggesting such an idea this time?

Surprised out of his annoyance, Loki stared at him. “Thor,” he started, then just shook his head. “No, Thor. You are needed here. Repairs on the Bifrost will be done soon, and if the gossip I’ve been hearing from the guards and the servants is true, Father will be wanting to send you out to fight
marauders as soon as it’s complete.”

“I could come with you, and come back to do that when the Bifrost is fixed.” Thor pointed out, proud to have worked that out for himself. Travel by Bifrost was almost instantaneous, so it was not as if he would get to Vanaheim, or wherever the raiders were, any later than if he stayed here.

Shutting the doors to his closet with a snap, Loki turned and leaned against them, looking thoughtful. Thor straightened hopefully.

“Do you really wish to help me?” Loki asked softly.

“Of course I do. You are my brother!”

“Then you should stay here on Asgard.” As Thor opened his mouth to protest some more, he overrode him, raising his voice. “You do remember I am to be tried here by the Council when I get back?”

This silenced Thor. He had not given Loki’s trial on Asgard much thought. It seemed much less hazardous than the unknown dangers of Jotunheim. Loki continued to await his answer.

Thor frowned, perplexed. “So?”

“So if you want to help me, you can stay here and talk to people. Get them to change their opinions.”

“I do not see how that would help,” Thor balked. Silver-tongued Loki was the one who was good with persuasion, not him. “It’s the Council that is going to judge you, and I cannot change their minds about anything. If I could, I would start with convincing them that I am no fool, which is what they think of me.”

Loki half smiled at that, but pressed his case, “There are a few immovable old sticks, but most of the Council can be influenced by public opinion.”

“What am I supposed to convince them of,” Thor asked, somewhat bewildered. “You are guilty of letting the Jotnar into the palace. That’s what you will be on trial for.”

“Officially that is what I am being tried for,” Loki looked exasperated. “Unofficially, I am being tried for stealing the throne from you.”

“But that is not what happened,” Thor said hotly. Admittedly he had heard this opinion bandied about, most particularly from Sif, but Sif had always had a little grudge against Loki. “Mother made you king. She told me so herself.”

Frigga had been almost distraught about it, in fact, believing that the added pressure of having to rule, on top of finding out about his hidden heritage, had contributed to Loki’s burgeoning madness and seeming suicide.

“Then tell people that,” Loki told him. “Tell them that you don’t believe I tried to steal your place. Maybe if you can get enough people to at least doubt that I am the villain of this piece, the Council will not demand I spend the next few centuries in prison, or exile, or whatever.”

“They would not do such a thing to a son of Odin,” Thor proclaimed, though he was not sure. He did not wish to believe it. “What people are you talking about, anyway? Loki,” he shook his head. “This is not- I know not how to do such a thing!”

“Of course you do,” Loki came towards him and poked him in the chest. “You do as you usually do,
taking your friends out drinking to every tavern and alehouse in Asgard, and talking loudly of how this trial is a travesty, and your innocent brother has been grossly wronged.”

“You are not innocent!” Thor yelped.

“Innocent of treason, Thor! Not of stupidity and spite and jealousy, no, but I never wanted the damned throne!”

Thor rocked back on his heels at his brother’s rather belated confession. He wanted very much to dig in and get more details, but as Loki had said, they did not have time, and he suspected his brother would only get angry if he tried.

“All right,” Thor huffed, hanging Mjolnir from his belt. “I will try, but you know I have no skill with words.”

“Just do what you can. Even a poor argument from you will win over far more people than any that I may make at my trial. I am well renowned as a liar, after all,” Loki quipped.

At this, Thor’s determination to save Loki resurged more strongly than ever. So what if he was far more skilled at battle than at blandishment? Was he not the mighty Thor, son of Odin, and future king of Asgard? He would find some way to convince all of Asgard that Loki was a good brother, and worthy of their admiration.

“I will win them over for you, I promise,” Thor vowed, putting a hand behind Loki’s neck in that old gesture of affection.

Loki’s eyes, green again in his Aesir guise, were so familiar and beloved, but melancholy instead of mischievous. Trying for a cocky smile, Loki called up their old joke, “Now give us a kiss.”

This time, instead of pushing him away, Thor dragged him close and kissed his forehead. Beneath the illusion, the raised lines on Loki’s skin did not feel as strange as Thor would have thought.

“Keep yourself safe then, brother, while I change hearts and minds here at home.”

Loki looked slightly dazed as he released him. “I almost think you will manage it,” he said.

Grinning, Thor answered, “Never doubt the mighty Thor.”

Loki rolled his eyes, and the moment’s fragile sweetness dispersed.

“Take your mighty self off. I wish to bathe before I leave. Who knows when I will have a chance to do so again. The Jotnar probably clean themselves with snow, if they wash at all.”

Thor had not noticed any of the Jotuns he had met seeming in any way dirty, but he supposed Loki might be right about a scarcity of hot water. “I will come with Mother and Father to see you off,” he promised solemnly.

“Thank you,” Loki said, also sober, though he did not say for what.

Though there was so much more that needed to be said, and heard, Thor turned and went out, planning his campaign against the opinions of everyone in Asgard’s drinking establishments. It looked to be a difficult contest, so he would begin as he would any other hard fight, by convincing his friends to fight by his side.
Once they were back in their assigned rooms, Phil went to one of the tall, gilded cabinets and took out the ‘nite-nite’ gun that Fitz had sent along in their gear, checked its ammo and turned off the safety, then turned to take a seat, resting the weapon casually in his lap.

Barton and Romanov remained standing, watching his actions with cool gazes, feigning only mild interest. Phil matched their expressions, adding his trademark little smile.

“All right,” he invited them to sit with the hand not holding the gun. “I think we need to talk.”

Neither of them moved. Barton pointed his chin at Coulson’s lap. “And you need a gun because?”

“You didn’t consult with me before you came up with this plan of going with Loki,” Phil replied.

“There wasn’t time,” Barton argued. “But you agreed with me that taking Loki back with us was a good idea.”

“I said it might be a good idea, which is not miles within the same ballpark as letting you go with him to another world we know nothing about.”

“Look,” Clint pleaded, starting to pace, “If we let Loki out of our sight, we lose all control of him. Of what happens to him,” he added hastily when Phil quirked an eyebrow at the idea they had any control over Loki at present.

“Sir,” Romanov joined the fray. “I agree with Barton that we should try to get Loki to Earth, and that we have a better chance of doing that if one or more of us goes with him to this trial.”

“One or more?” Phil queried.

“No!” Barton was emphatically saying, as she blithely volunteered to go along. She didn’t even look at him.

It was all too obvious Barton and Romanov were keeping secrets from him. That was not unexpected. They were spies, and they were both complicated people with complicated pasts that they didn’t like to talk about. Phil knew they understood each other better than he understood either of them. Lightly bouncing the knockout gun on his thigh, Phil considered them both, but mostly Barton.

He had recruited Clint Barton himself, years ago, drawn by the young criminal turned vigilante’s incredible skills with the bow, as well as his ability to accomplish goals. Barton had somehow turned Romanov, who was equally talented at her own methods. Phil had wound up as handler for both of them, and he suspected that he was stuck with them at this point.

Early in his childhood, Phil Coulson had been given a box of old newspaper clippings and comic books about Captain America and his Howling Commandos, and it had inspired a lifelong fascination with the idea of exceptional people. He’d gone on to read everything he could find about individuals with enhanced abilities, and it had been his idea to develop a team of super-powered people, after SHIELD had come into contact with the Hulk, and Iron Man, and then Thor. When Steve Rogers had been found alive in the ice, Coulson’s idea had crystalized into the Avengers Initiative, and he had pitched it to Fury and had it approved.

Since it had been his idea, Fury had assigned him to be the agent liaison to the Avengers, if they ever
formed, and to keep track of them as individuals until then. He’d had his hands full with that. Along with coordinating the recovery and treatment of Captain America, it had been his job to track Banner while he was on the run in one third world slum after another, diverting Ross with false leads. He’d also kept a close watch on Jane Foster and her research, fully expecting Thor to reappear at any time, and not wanting to be caught off guard. Officially, Tony Stark had been disqualified for the Avengers team, on the grounds that he was too egotistical and volatile, but Phil wasn’t about to give up on a genius weapons engineer in a flying armored suit, so he kept an eye on Stark as well, doing his damnedest to guard the man against his many, many enemies, and against himself.

Romanov had been no problem. Fury gave her missions himself, and assigned her whatever support she needed, but Barton had turned out to be more difficult. Phil made several attempts to hand Barton off to other qualified handlers, all of them people he knew and trusted: Sitwell, Garrett and Hand, among others. None of them had worked out. A few of them had even threatened to quit SHIELD entirely before working with Hawkeye again, citing his lack of respect for authority, his hotheaded nature, his tendency to go off-grid and incommunicado, argue with orders, and risk himself recklessly.

No one but Phil had been able to see these as positive traits in Barton. Irritating sometimes, but mostly positive. When Fury had come to Phil threatening to let the archer go, Phil had fought hard to keep him on. So Barton had a bit of a temper, and little regard for hierarchy. He was also smarter than most agents, lucky as loaded dice, with amazing instincts and independent enough to require very little in the way of help on any given mission. Fury had declared that if Phil wanted to keep him, he’d have to continue as his handler, and Phil had agreed.

Phil had sent him to guard over Selvig at PEGASUS - a task he had secretly thought was seriously underutilizing Barton, and then Loki had arrived and taken him, and events had spiraled out of control. The Avengers had come together, and Barton had wound up as part of the team, fighting alongside the heavy hitters and pulling his weight, but Phil knew he’d been damaged by the experience. He just didn’t know exactly how, or what to do about it yet.

Barton had been on edge since the Chitauri’s defeat, and it had only been getting worse, winding him up tighter every day they’d been on Asgard. Then he’d disappeared with Loki for half an hour and come back looking at ease, like all the tension had been drained away, and Loki, looking distinctly uneasy, had asked for Hawkeye as his escort to an alien world.

It didn’t add up, and Phil was not about to let Barton go until it did, though he had refrained from arguing about it in front of the Asgardians.

He swiveled the gun in Barton’s general direction. Not pointing, exactly, just making a point. “Loki would be an asset if we could get him, but you don’t care about that. Neither of you,” he said, giving Romanov a look as well.

“So unless you want me to drop you both for eight to ten hours and tell Odin you’ve changed your minds, start telling me the real reason you want to go on this insane trip to the land of blue giants.”

Barton studied Phil’s hands and the gun, probably calculating the odds of his being able to disarm Phil before he could get shot himself.

Romanov turned to Barton, subtly tensing like she thought she might need to prevent him from doing something stupid.

“Clint?” she prompted, meaningfully.
Barton gave her a resentful look, but eased back down off the balls of his feet. “Look, I need to get this sh- this situation between me and Loki sorted out.”

Phil had suspected as much. “So you have a plan?”

“Sure,” Barton replied, with a confident smile.

Phil waited to hear it. Romanov sighed softly, and Barton’s assurance slipped.

“I have part of a plan,” he amended.

Phil felt his eyebrows rising. “How much of a plan?”

“Geez, Phil, I don’t have an exact percentage, okay?” Barton snapped. “I just don’t want Loki to get away till I figure out the rest.”

“Not much of a plan,” Romanov deadpanned.

Barton spun on her, betrayal in his tone. “You agreed with me!”

“I didn’t say it was a bad plan, just really incomplete,” she told him, unperturbed.

“Is Loki in agreement with this plan?” Phil asked.

“Yeah,” Barton answered, so sullenly that Phil knew he didn’t want to go into it any more than that, and was probably going to clam up soon.

Changing tactics, Phil turned to Romanov. “And you want to go with him because?”

“Clint might need some help,” she shrugged.

“I won’t need any help,” Barton muttered.

Realizing they weren’t going to be any more forthcoming, Phil was really tempted to drop both of them and sort it all out when they got back to Earth. But he knew he couldn’t, for the same reason he’d argued with Fury to keep Barton on, and for the same reason he’d gone along with Barton’s outrageous plan to recruit one of the Soviet Union’s most deadly spies and assassins, when the assignment had been to eliminate her. Because, despite their flaws and their secrets, Phil trusted them.

He put the safety back on the gun and dropped it on the table next to him. “I feel sure I’m going to regret this,” he told them.

Barton relaxed again. “I’d better get packing.”

Phil nodded, and Barton headed for his bedroom. Romanov made to follow him, but Phil stopped her with a touch on her arm. “I need you to stay here.”

“How?”

“One of us needs to stay here and keep making our case, but one of us should go back to Earth and get Fury to agree to this ‘part of a plan’,.” Phil told her. “Especially the part about taking Loki back. You want to do that?”

She blanched a little at the idea, and shook her head.
“Then you stay here.” Phil wanted to find out what was happening with the rest of the Avengers, anyhow. There was a good chance that the team would scatter, now that the known threat had been defeated.

A knock at the door cut off anything else they might have said.

“Yes?” Phil called out. “Enter!”

The door swung open, framing the tall, golden figure of Asgard’s queen.

“I am sorry to disturb you,” Frigga said, scanning the room. “But I need to speak with Agent Barton, and give him some things he may need for the journey.”

It seemed that Barton’s going was decided, then.

“I’ll get him,” Phil said, starting for the bedrooms.

“That’s quite all right,” she said, swiftly moving to get there ahead of him while not seeming to hurry at all. “I would like a private word, but it should not take long.”

“Right,” Phil said, as she vanished through the door to Clint’s room, shutting it decisively behind her.

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Clint had no idea what he might need, so he was packing everything, and worrying about not having any winter clothes, when the door opened behind him. He turned, expecting Tasha and mentally calling up reasons why she couldn’t go with him. Reasons beside the actual one, which was that he would be inhibited about trying anything sex-related with Loki if she was anywhere around.

But it wasn’t Natasha, or even Phil. It was worse. Loki’s mom swept in, her white and gold gown flowing around her like trailing banners. She was taking his hands and smiling at him like he was her son himself, inducing a yawning pit of guilt in his stomach.

“Agent Baron,” she exclaimed. “I brought you some things for the trip, starting with this.”

She made a complex gesture like Loki might, and a bow appeared in her hands.

It was a recurved bow that reminded Clint of Turkish and Asiatic styles, though it was not quite the same. The core of the bow was made of a light gold wood, laminated along the limbs with wood of a deeper gold, and an ebony wood at the tips. Sinew backed the wood along the bow’s back, its bell was smooth white horn, and the grip and arrow rest were of gleaming ivory or bone, wrapped with what felt like shark skin leather.

It was utterly beautiful, and warm to the touch, almost seeming alive in Clint’s hands as he caressed the string, then lifted it to test the draw. It bent eagerly to his will, vibrating with stored energy, and an arrow appeared out of nowhere, ready to fly. After having seen Loki’s knives do the same trick, Clint was only a little surprised. He eased the tension, and the arrow vanished again.

“I’m really more used to my own bow,” he said, trying to give it back to her. “I couldn’t take this.”
The thing was a work of art, and if the arrows were never-ending, it would certainly be handy for some situations, but Clint was used to his own bow, and more importantly, his custom arrows. He’d designed or at least come up with the concept for most of them himself, seeking to use his bow for more than putting pointy sticks through people. He wasn’t interested in killing people if he could avoid it, and he usually could.

“Consider it a bribe from my husband,” Frigga urged, and, producing what appeared to be a purple leather haversack from the same nowhere, she stuffed the bow in. The bow was considerably longer than the pack was, but that seemed to present no trouble.

“It was Odin’s for many centuries, but he hasn’t had call to use a bow in over a thousand years, and it seems unlikely he will need it again at his age.”

She folded open the pack and started rummaging in it. “I’ve included plenty of clothes, socks and underthings, and a warm coat and boots. Oh, and of course gloves, hats, that sort of thing. I’m not sure what the weather will be like there, but it can get very cold on Jotunheim, so best to be prepared.”

The bag was about the size allowed by the stingy carry-on rules of commercial airlines, but obviously could hold a hell of a lot more.

“Undetectable extension charm?” he asked, bemused. During his stint watching over Selvig and the Tesseract, there had been a lot of long stretches of downtime, and he’d taken the opportunity to catch up on his reading.

Her smile was something close to blinding. “Something like that. A very useful spell.”

Clint gaped, about to ask if she’d read ‘Harry Potter’, but she pushed the bag into his arms and went on. “I include some other little things you might need, and also plenty of food and tea, just in case the Jotun cuisine doesn’t appeal to you.”

“Thanks,” he said, a bit overwhelmed, and really, really guilty now. But it wasn’t like he could say no to all this largesse without explaining, and that was not something he could do. He didn’t even really understand it himself.

The queen’s smile dimmed to a thoughtful expression, and she produced a tiny bag of black quilted silk and extended it to him.

“Then there’s this.”

“This?” Clint didn’t reach for it. He didn’t want to be ungracious, but neither did he want to accept a bag of jewels or gold coins, or jewel-encrusted gold coins.

“It may not be necessary,” Frigga spoke slowly. “But I noticed that you seem to have picked up at least a trace of Loki’s magic.”

“What?” Clint shook his head. “No, that’s not right. I can’t do magic. I’m just… no.”

Her expression grew more troubled, but she smiled through it, and attempted to reassure him. “You were able to activate Loki’s spell on the illusion sphere, but that only needs a tiny amount of power. It may be nothing to worry about.”

“But if it is?” He took the little bag gingerly, in the same manner he might pick up a dead mouse, and picked open the tasseled drawstrings to peer in.

The bag contained a ring, and now Clint’s mind shifted gears to Tolkien, especially after he fished it
out of its bag and held it in his palm to examine.

It was a thick band of a familiar silvery metal, dark sheened and engraved with runes all around the outer surface. It felt odd, almost dangerous, for no reason he could define. Lifting it for a closer look, Clint thought he sort of recognized most of them as the same symbols that had been on Loki’s magic-repressing cuffs.

“This blocks magic?” he guessed.

“Yes,” Frigga agreed. “Only small amounts. I fear there has never been a case like yours, and I do not know how this bond between you and my son is affecting you.”

And Clint wasn’t going to enlighten her, he thought.

“The two of you should discuss it,” she urged. “No doubt you can come to some beneficial arrangement.”

Clint’s brain flashed unhelpfully back to the sight of Loki, kneeling to swallow Clint’s cock, and it was all he could do not to choke. But he didn’t.

“If there are adverse affects, maybe that will help,” Frigga continued, gesturing towards the ring.

Clint started to put it on, but she stopped him with a light touch to his wrist.

“You may want to wait and let Loki monitor the affects. I know not what it may do.”

“All right. Thanks.” The ring went back into its bag, and the bag went into what he had decided to call the bottomless backpack.

Truthfully, Clint was glad of an excuse not to put it on. Despite his antipathy for being somehow connected to Loki, the ring just felt somehow ‘wrong’.

“Please look out for Loki,” Frigga did not quite plead, she was too dignified for that, but the sentiment was there. “I know he has done you and your world harm, but he has great good in him as well.”

“Yeah, well,” Clint could at least promise her one thing. “I’ll do everything in my power to get him out of Jotunheim in one piece.”

“Thank you, Clint Barton,” she favored him with a beautiful smile. “We have been promised that Loki will not be in danger on his home world, but I trust you will be careful?”

Attempting to look competent and sure, he nodded. “Always, your majesty.”

She turned to go, paused at the door to say over her shoulder, “Make sure he keeps up with his meditation. He’s much too likely to put it off if he’s under stress, which is just when he needs it the most.”

“I’ll do my best,” Clint told her, meaning it.

She took her leave at last, and he started consolidating all his gear into his nifty new magic bag.

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The moment of departure had arrived all too soon. Loki had made his awkward, stilted farewells to a still simmering Odin, who had gruffly instructed him to behave like a prince of Asgard. Thor had wrapped him in a rib-crushing hug and promised that he was already working on his promise to rehabilitate Loki’s reputation with the drinking classes of Asgard.

While this was taking place, the overcrowded room was slowly becoming less so, as Helblindi’s people departed a few at a time. The Jotun king had argued vociferously with both his most senior guard and his old advisor, Skapti, about the order of their return. Both of those attendants had been opposed to Helblindi remaining behind, unguarded and unsupervised, but the underaged king-to-be had been adamant, and now was waiting impatiently by the shimmer of the awakened portal.

Barton had already made his own goodbyes and stood nearby, though not within reach of the Jotun king. His own stance was hunter patient and relaxed, and none of the desperation or desire Loki had seen while they were alone together was anywhere to be seen.

Now came the most difficult parting of all. Frigga embraced him and her lips pressed against his brow like a brand and a benediction. He felt her warding and blessing wrap their protections around him and hugged her back.

“Be well, my son,” she said, stroking his cheek. “Never forget that we love you, and always will.”

The lump in his throat cut off words, so Loki merely nodded, and reluctantly drew himself out of the sanctuary of her arms. As he walked the short distance to join Barton and his long lost sibling, he found that despite the dread that still pooled in his stomach, he was eager to go. He was tired of waiting and doing nothing.

“Are you ready?” Helblindi asked, staring down from his not yet grown height.

Barton closed the distance and now stood at Loki’s side, almost close enough to touch. He didn’t look at Loki, or Helblindi, or glance back at his fellow agents. All his attention was on the portal, though its magic should have been invisible to a mortal. But that was a mystery that would have to wait.

Loki nodded sharply. “Let us go.”

Protocol should have dictated that Helblindi go first, but Loki suspected that the Jotun king was not leaving until he saw Loki depart with his own eyes. So. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the unpleasant, wrenching experience of moving between realms, then flung himself through.
Chapter 14

Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long, guys! RL and the dreaded writer's block conspired against me. A thousand thanks to my beautiful beta, tilla123, for urging me to write, as well as catching a lot of typos!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Clint found the trip through the portal exhilarating, but he also frequently jumped off buildings for fun during missions. He’d picked up the addiction as a kid in the circus, walking the high wire, learning the trapeze act, even if that had never been his gig. Free fall was one hell of a rush, especially the ‘not dying horribly’ part at the end, when he deployed his grappling arrow or simply found a soft landing spot.

The journey to Jotunheim was like falling down a well, or plunging at high velocity through a long tunnel. It was dark, with long, thin streaks of brilliance that didn’t illuminate anything except the speed they were moving, and then they were flying, tumbling out into cold blue light. They should have fallen, or at least stumbled, but the air seemed to solidify around them like a vast cushion, and they did no more than sway slightly as their momentum dissipated, leaving the three of them standing on a different world.

A distant blue sun shone high overhead, but it provided only about as much light as a winter dusk on Earth. As his eyes adjusted to the somewhat dim blue-tinted light, Clint saw that they were on a modest rise above a vast plain of tall purple grass. Dozens of tents in various sizes and colors were scattered about in a sort of wheel, leaving an empty space in the center, where a ring of stones had been erected. Creatures that reminded him of huge, hairy bighorn sheep wandered around in small herds, bleating loudly enough to be heard even at a distance. Tall blue figures dressed in practically nothing moved between them, some of them clearly herding the beasts, others intent on other chores.

Thor and his friends had warned Clint to expect bitter cold, and nothing but ice all around, so he was pleasantly surprised to find that although the air was brisk and clouded with his every exhalation, it wasn’t uncomfortably chilly. It smelled of growing things, and grazing animals, and the light dusting of snow that had recently fallen.

Three of Helblindi’s guards stood waiting, along with the ancient Jotun, and half a dozen new Jotuns who were attired in less armor and more jewelry. All of them, save the elder, who simply bowed his head, dropped to one knee, saluting their king’s safe return.
Helblindi stood straighter, accepting their fealty with a nod and a terse smile.

Catching sight of Loki standing statue still, staring down on the tents and Jotuns and their herds, Clint moved to stand next to him, mainly because he was the only other person around who wasn’t a freaking giant. Little guys needed to stick together, in a place like this.

“This is not right,” Loki said, his voice so flat it had to be concealing some intense emotion. “This isn’t where the portal comes out.”

“We moved it,” Helblindi replied, offhandedly. “The Løgting is traditionally held here, so oaths can be sworn. Besides,” he cast Loki a dark look, “The ruins of Utgard were hardly hospitable even before the Bifrost reduced it to rubble.”

Almost soundlessly, Loki repeated, “Moved it.”

One of the six strange Jotuns addressed Helblindi. “My king, do you still desire that we should close the gateway?”

Loki turned to stare, wide-eyed with… alarm? Outrage? Clint could not tell, but he didn’t look happy.

“What of Mengloth?” Loki demanded. “Is he… Is jo not still on Asgard?”

“That witch,” Helblindi snorted like a bull about to put its head down and charge. “Speak not to me of that wretched healer. Jo was the one who summoned the Løgting without my leave, and left me to go begging to Asgard for my rights.”

“But-“ Loki started again.

One of the strangers, who Clint guessed must be Jotun magicians of some kind, gave Loki a sympathetic smile. “Healer Mengloth is already here, little one. You need not be concerned.”

The kindly mage turned back to the shimmering hole in the air, as did the others, as the group raised their hands and began gesturing, presumably in order to close the shimmering rent in the air.

Loki’s hand went up briefly, either to blast the giant for the condescending pet name, or prevent them from sealing their potential escape route, but before he could do either, the portal’s faint glow turned too bright to look at, and then it was just gone, leaving green and purple afterimages burned on Clint’s corneas. He blinked repeatedly to dispel them.

“Come,” Helblindi led the way down the hill, his purposeful stride making no allowances for people only half his height.

Clint considered a jog, but Loki refused to be hurried beyond a quick walk, and Clint stuck by him. Half the king’s guards matched their monarch’s pace, and the rest, along with the elderly advisor, hung back, surrounding Loki and Clint, though they didn’t seem to be overtly guarding them against either attack or possible escape.

As they made their way into the sprawling camp, the snow underfoot vanished, and the ground was muddy and churned up by the hooves of the sheep between wide, marked pathways where it remained firmly frozen. The huge tents were a mix of styles. Some round and brightly colored, made of felt or wool, while others were made of dark, stitched together hides, and painted with red and white and green markings. The place bustled with activity, reminding Clint of camping out with the circus. Here and there, thin columns of smoke rose up, barely visible in the dim light, and between the wet wool and dung smells, he occasionally caught the scent of cooking food.
Dozens of Jotuns of all ages paused to stare at them. One group of children who had stopped to watch and giggle was accompanied by a hulking creature that looked like a cross between a dinosaur and an eight foot pit bull on steroids. It growled menacingly, and the nearest kid grabbed it by a wide collar and shook it like a misbehaving puppy.

The advisor had started up a one-sided conversation about the huge sheep. They were called ‘argali’, and they were only raised on this temperate region of Jotunheim, and highly prized for their wool and milk and meat. Distracted by this chatter and all the strange sights, Clint didn’t notice that Loki’s steps had faltered until their guards stopped as well.

Loki had turned aside and was staring fixedly at the children and looking shocked. Clint had no idea why; they were pretty typical kids, once you got past the big and blue part. Then he saw that one of the ‘small’ figures was not a child, as he had first assumed, but another diminutive adult like Loki, carrying a very large toddler braced against one hip.

Also like Loki, this Jotun looked much more female than the others. She, or whatever the proper pronoun was - Clint couldn’t remember just now, had long chestnut hair worn in a braid, and wore a fringed, beaded skirt of soft leather, a necklace of gold disks, and nothing else. As they watched, the child, who had been staring back at them, suddenly lost interest and began to nurse from one of the bare, full breasts.

As Loki continued to watch, Clint caught two of the guards giving each other distinctly knowing looks, and Skapti smiled with approval. Catching sight of that smile, Loki frowned and turned away, all but fleeing in the direction they had been going, towards the ring of upright stones in the middle of the camp.

The circle of tall, black stone pillars reminded Clint of Stonehenge - he’d never been there, but he’d watched a National Geographic special about it once, but as they got closer, he saw that this was very different from that ancient ruin. This was a place that was still in use, still being tended and kept in repair. The ring of stones was old and weathered, but the twelve soaring pillars were all standing straight and even as stone sentinels, and there were no lintel stones on top. There were smaller stones inside the main circle, but he couldn’t make them out.

At the edge of the stone ring, Helblindi was waiting for them with his guards and small crowd (if any sized crowd of beings averaging twelve feet could be considered small) of around twenty Jotuns, about half of whom seemed as aged and venerable as the advisor who had escorted them. These elders all wore matching long, broad sashes of white, bordered with gold, and Clint guessed these were the law-speakers. Mengloth was with them, looking satisfied, and ignoring the disgruntled looks from her young king.

As Loki drew himself up in front of this imposing group, only Mengloth gave him a welcoming smile. The healer did a double take as she recognized Clint, followed by a puzzled frown.

The rest of them regarded Loki with somber curiosity, or restrained eagerness. Clint saw none of the hostility he would have expected, considering Loki had tried to kill all these people, and destroy their world. It seemed Frigga had called it, and they had some plan to use Loki to gain something more than mere revenge.

Helblindi was standing with two Jotuns who had been greeting him in a way that made Clint think they were family. One of them was taller and older, but the other was clearly a child, and even more short and slender than Loki, if only by a little. Like Helblindi, the child shared the same pattern of facial markings with Loki.

Loki and the little Jotun, who Clint wanted to call a boy though he knew that wasn’t right, stared
warily at each other.

Helblindi moved forward, assuming an air of authority. “Venerable Speakers, noble Thanes and loyal Chiefs of Jotunheim. This is Loki, called Odinson, whom I have brought to be judged by the Logting, as I promised.”

“Aye,” one of the elders answered gruffly, gazing down at Loki. “Thank you for obliging us. The trial can start on the morrow, but we think it best to go ahead and get the oaths sworn. It will put everyone’s mind to rest that this is no trick of old One-Eye.”

Loki stiffened, and Clint had no idea if it was at the suggestion of deceit, or the insult to Odin.

“That seems a good plan,” Helblindi agreed.

“No point putting it off,” one of the other elders agreed querulously, and without further explanation, the crowd turned to enter the stone circle.

Clint fell back, trying to find a better vantage as Loki was surrounded by the giants and mostly cut off from view. It didn’t seem as if they intended their little lost prince any immediate harm, but he made sure his bow and quiver were ready, just in case.

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The trip through the portal had left Loki deeply unsettled, the more so when he had sensed the change in destination. For an instant, he had suspected Thanos had found him, found some way to reacquire him, the same way he had been snatched from the Void. It had only been marginally less upsetting to find out that the Jotuns had mages with the ability to move one end of a portal that he had created. Loki had never even heard of anyone changing one of a portal’s destinations. It was inconceivable. Unthinkable.

So he had emerged shaking, with anger as well as nerves. He’d used to love the rush of traveling the secret ways. It had been his special gift, something that no one else he knew of could do, but somehow these Jotnar, who were supposed to be monsters and barbarians, could take control of his gate! It was not right. They were not supposed to have such magics.

They were not supposed to have sheep, and tents, and look like normal people, like many of the Vanir, even. They were not supposed to have children, and livestock, and pets, hideous though it might be.

The sight of another runt, or ice maiden, had caught Loki off-guard. Deep down, he had not truly believed there were others like himself, but the creature had been unmistakable. Why had jo been allowed to live, when Loki had been found unworthy? Had jo birthed the child jo carried? The babe was large, far larger than the few Asgardian infants he’d seen. His hand crept towards his belly of its own accord. Would a child of the Hulk be so large? This Jotun, who was not much taller than he was, had apparently borne a full sized Jotun infant.

Belatedly, he realized he had stopped to stare, and that he was being stared at in turn. He hastened on, all but running to catch up with Helblindi, who was waiting with a large group of what were clearly dignitaries. Probably this Council of theirs, who had gathered to judge him.

And there was another child with them, hugging Helblindi much the way Loki had once hugged
Thor, when he had been much younger and his brother had returned victorious from some hazardous quest. Before Loki had been old enough to go along, and learn how foolish most of those quests had been. Helblindi was too young to have any children of his own, so this must be the younger Jotun prince. Laufey’s youngest child, Byleistr. Who was also Loki’s younger brother. Who he would have killed, along with all the rest of them.

His trembling increased. Loki focused on his breathing, determined not to let his anxiety show. He could do this. He could. He was better now.

Helblindi left the boy and came over to introduce him to his judges, only half giving them his name and no royal title. Insulting. Loki chose to let it go, just as, a moment later, he chose not to make an issue of one of the so-called law-speakers insulting the All-Father’s name and honor by implying Loki’s presence here was some deception of Odin’s. As if he were not fully capable of his own falsehoods.

But he let it go, and turned to go where they led him, wishing to get these ‘oaths’ sworn, and all of this ceremony over with, so he could retreat to somewhere private, with Barton. Where was Barton, anyway? Loki surreptitiously glanced around, but saw only frost giants, and very unpleasant it was to only come up to waist height on most of them. It meant any close up conversations were forever face to groin. Mengloth had always had the good manners to sit or kneel in his presence.

Barton was nowhere to be seen, but Loki sensed him nearby. Odd. He’d not been conscious of being aware of Barton before, but he had the feeling that he might easily be able to turn and point to the mortal without looking. But he was fairly certain the man was somewhere behind him. It was not as much a comfort as having him close would have been, but Loki knew Hawkeye preferred working from a distance. He said he could see more that way.

Meanwhile, he was getting less and less confident about this ‘oath-taking’ plan. Whatever this circle contained, it was powerful magic. Loki could sense the increase in concentration crawling on his skin with every step he took, like static in the air before a lightning storm. It made him wish, just for a moment, that he had let Thor come. But that was sublime foolishness, and weakness. Nothing too terrible was going to happen. Odin and Frigga and Mengloth had all assured him of it. It was just unfamiliar magic. Loki should be fascinated, not quailing like a vapor-headed maid before a mouse.

The crowd in front of him parted, giving him his first look at the source of the magic. It was a tall pillar of bluish white stone, the color of glacier ice. Or maybe it was ice, Loki could not tell, but ice or stone, it rested on a raised platform of the same black stone as the pillars, with three steps leading up. It was an irregular rectangle, with a hole that looked to be natural piercing the center a little above mid-height. The stone shone with a soft internal light, and its surface fairly crawled with runes that were not painted or carved, but just there, as if intrinsic to the material. Many he did not know, but the few he did, runes of binding, and of blighting, made him want nothing to do with the thing.

Without planning to, Loki found he had fallen back on one of his favorite battle tactics, and was invisibly stepping away from a clone of himself, just as the elderly Jotun who seemed the spokesperson for the group began explaining that they were all going to take oaths on this stone, and that its magic would bind them to terrible consequences if they were foresworn.

Loki didn’t stay to listen. Circling wide around the delegation, he sprinted for the far side of the circle, away from where they had come in. He had no plan, no destination in mind. He barely knew where he was, beyond somewhere on Jotunheim. There would be time to think of something, once he was away from here.
Clint had found sufficient hand and toe holes in one of the pillar stones to scramble up it. No one had tried to stop him, or seemed to mind, though he had gotten a few strange looks. He didn’t care about a few looks, and now he had an excellent perch from which to watch the proceedings in the center of the circle.

He picked Loki out easily from the much larger bodies, standing in front of the glowing light blue rock that was the axis of this stone wheel. As far as Clint could tell, one of the older Jotuns was giving some kind of speech, and Loki and the rest were just standing there listening. Nothing to be concerned about. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was not right. Narrowing his eyes, he stared harder at Loki, who was still just standing there, doing nothing.

But somehow, Clint knew, in his gut, that was not right. Clint’s eyes were telling him lies. Or maybe the blasted ‘God of Lies’ was telling Clint’s eyes lies. Fucking illusions. Why had they let Loki have his magic back already? Did the All-Father really think Loki could be trusted not screw this up?

Clint decided to trust his gut over his eyes. Backing up as far as he was able on the top of his pillar, he took a running jump at the next one over. The gaps were about twenty feet. Clint cleared it easily, rolling into a somersault, then coming up still running to leap to the next one. By the third jump, he had momentum, and was running as smoothly as a hurdle jumper.

On the fifth, some subtle shift in his senses had him drawing his bow. He spun his quiver controls, hesitated a heartbeat over one of the new arrowheads that Stark had given him, for possible use against Asgardians or rampaging Hulks. But he spun again to something a little less drastic. He could keep the others in reserve. The newly chosen arrowhead clicked into place, and Clint pulled the arrow free and readied it, drawing the bow mid-stride.

A glance back towards the center of the circle showed that the Loki whom he did not believe in was still just standing there, listening to the grand high muckety-mucks, and none of them were looking his way. Looking outward from this vantage, he could see pretty much the whole camp, and the hills and planes beyond. He saw tents and sheep and tall blue figures, a few of whom were watching him with mild confusion and wonder. But no Loki, even if Clint knew that was the right direction. Something in him was pulled that way, drawn like a compass needle. So he ignored what his eyes and head were telling him, shut his eyes, paused long enough for a single inhalation, and let fly.

The bola arrow hissed out, releasing the three weighted balls attached by high-strength carbon fiber cords, but Clint didn’t bother to wait and see if his shot had hit anything, but was drawing a grappling arrow, setting it on the lip of the pillar and swinging down the extending cord. His landing in the frosted grass wasn’t pretty, but he didn’t fall on his ass until an unseen hand grabbed an ankle and yanked. A tall, lanky form rolled on top of him, pinning him down, and a hand covered his mouth. Pitting his strength against Loki’s was useless, but Clint did it anyhow, fighting hard and dirty to throw his invisible assailant. He felt soft, fuzzy wool under his fingers, and caught the faintest whiff of Stark’s expensive cologne. Long strands of hair fell into his face, and he managed to snag a handful and drag Loki down for a head butt, but his attempt to knee him in the groin missed. But by the feel of it, the bola was still wrapped around Loki’s calves and ankles.

They wrestled, grunting and hissing, for several minutes, until Clint felt the keen edge of a blade tucked up under his chin. He froze, breathing hard. From the sound of it, Loki was only a little less winded.
When his throat wasn’t slit, Clint dared to try to speak, still muffled by Loki’s hand.

“Quietly,” Loki instructed, his own voice barely above a whisper as he drew his hand away.

Clint couldn’t see it, but he was betting the hand was hovering close, to shut him up if he started yelling. He kept his voice low, but managed to convey his fury. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going? We had a deal!”

“You don’t understand,” Loki’s voice was almost pleading. “They want to bind me to some oath, force me to do what they want. I won’t be forced.”

“Only you get to force people to do what you want?” Clint asked, sarcastically.

The knife disappeared, and the weight on him along with it. Loki’s voice was off to his right. “I said I was sorry, Barton. That doesn’t mean I have to let it be done to me.”

“So you’re just going to run? Renege on your bargain with me, and your dad?”

There was a ‘snick-snick’, and the bolas rolled into view, their cords severed. “You could come with me,” Loki offered.

“Oh, fuck that.” Clint sat up, brushing the snow and grass from his now damp clothes. He hoped he hadn’t rolled in sheep shit. The smell of it was strong all around.

“And fuck you too, you cowardly asshole!” He glared in the direction Loki’s voice had come from. “I am not about to leave my planet, my life, and join you as an intergalactic fugitive.”

“You don’t understand,” Loki repeated.

“I understand all right,” Clint snapped. “You thought you could wriggle out of your punishment somehow.”

“That’s not it!” Loki’s whisper was also furious. “I can handle pain. If that’s all it was.”

“You don’t get to decide what your sentence is. You tried to blow up their whole damned planet!”

Loki didn’t answer that. Maybe he couldn’t. Instead, he asked, “How did you see through my illusions?”

Clint shrugged uncomfortably. “I didn’t.”

“Then how did you find me?”

“I just knew, all right?” The silence stretched. “Your mother says I got some of your magic when you did what you did to me.”

The silence this time was tense and even longer. A perverse impulse took over Clint’s tongue. “I can find you. If you run, I’ll come after you and drag you back.”

“You think you can?” Loki’s voice was colder than the ground they were sitting on. At least, he assumed Loki was still sitting, from the direction of his voice.

“You’ll have to kill me to stop me,” Clint warned.

“Do not tempt me.”
Getting to his feet, Clint pressed harder. “Go back in and take your god damned medicine, Loki. You owe these people, and you owe me. You can’t fix a damned thing by running. I should know, I’ve tried.”

There was a long sigh, and Loki appeared, looking much different than his neat and formal clone in blue skin and Asgardian armor. This Loki was pale and green-eyed, but was wearing the SHIELD issue pants and the grey angora sweater that he’d worn during their departure from Earth. It was a strange mix of truth and lies, making Loki’s contemplative expression hard to believe in.

After a few seconds, the look turned quizzical. “Take my medicine?”

Almost, Clint told him to forget it, then he changed his mind. “On Earth, most medicine tastes terrible,” he explained.

Loki crossed his arms, frowning at the implications. “But it would be childish to avoid taking it?”

“We also use the expression when you’ve done something stupid and brought some kind of consequences on yourself.”

Looking away, Loki peered back into the circle, making certain no one had noticed his vanishing act. It looked as if the Jotuns were performing some kind of ritual, and Loki’s clone was just watching. Clint knew Loki could make the clones talk; he wondered if he could hear through them too. If not, they were probably running out of time to discuss this.

“Your parents seem pretty sure they aren’t going to execute you,” Clint pointed out.

Scowling, Loki tugged at the sleeves of his sweater, then looked directly at Clint. “Would you rather they did?”

“No,” Clint said, flatly. “I don’t kill people if I can help it, and I don’t believe anyone else should either. Or the state.”

Truth to tell, he had thought about making an exception for Loki once or twice, when his rage had been at its white hot peak, but he was over that now. Now he wanted Loki to pay in other ways.

“You know,” Loki mused, watching him speculatively, “what the Jotnar have in mind may prevent me from keeping my word to you.”

“Yeah, nice try,” Clint told him. “I’m not helping you get out of this.”

“But-“

“That is, I will help you, but it has to be the right way. Through the proper channels and whatever.”

“Even if it leaves you in some distress?” Loki queried, as if Clint’s selflessness was incomprehensible.

Clint wasn’t planning on being a martyr or anything. “As long as you make every effort to keep your promise. Without running out on your other problems.”

“I did tell Thor I brought you with me for your ability to see clearly.”

Loki frowned at the scene inside the circle, where it looked as if the Jotuns were starting to suspect something was off; they all were staring at Loki’s clone.

“Fine. We’ll deal with the monsters first.”
Clint figured Loki was expecting to be rebuked about the monsters crack, but he wasn’t interested in playing along. He picked up his bow from where it had fallen during their scuffle and checked it for damage, pulling off a few loose strands of grass that had gotten tangled in the cams.

Denied an argument, Loki changed his look back to armor and blue skin, put on his diva’s smile, and swept back into the stone circle with Clint trailing like his shadow. Just as the first few noticed this entrance, Loki vanished the clone, causing no little consternation.

“Pardon my momentary absence, oh gracious hosts of mine,” Loki called out. “My guard and I had lost track of each other for a time and needed to confer. I fear I may have missed some of your explanations. What is it you wish me to swear?”

Clint was somewhat impressed by how this was the truth, as far as it went, but didn’t give the least hint that Loki had been attempting to duck their trial. He certainly didn’t act like he was worried about it now. Only Helblindi and Mengloth looked as if they suspected something.

The Jotuns all murmured at this turn of events, and their speaker nodded slowly, saying, “We had been informed you had a strong talent for seidr.”

Loki bowed with a flourish.

“Can you do anything useful with it?” Another of them asked, causing Loki to straighten hastily, looking stung.

“I have been told so, once or twice.”

One of the oldest Jotuns crankily commented that it was a waste of time educating ‘frost femmes’ and bad for them besides, but two of the others hurriedly shushed their colleague.

Loki had caught the comment and looked equally curious and angry. Clint didn’t blame him, honestly. It was beginning to look like these people had some version of sexism, despite all being the same gender. If so, Tasha was going to be pissed about not getting to come along. She really loved busting chauvinistic attitudes into smithereens.

The spokesperson of the group gave the one who’d made the comment a warning look, then, speaking quickly and somewhat loudly, asked Loki, “We have all finished giving our oaths that we will make all our decisions in accordance with our laws, without personal ambition or rancor, with the good of our realm and our people in mind. Are you satisfied with this?”

The question startled Loki, and he looked at the group in confusion. “I suppose. Why? Do you wish me to swear the same oath? I cannot say -“

“No, no, of course not,” Mengloth chimed in briskly. “All you need swear to is to abide by the judgment of the Løgting.”

“Nothing else?” Loki’s edged tone implied that he considered that a pretty big concession all by itself.

“One other thing,” the elder speaker admitted. “We would have you swear not to speak of the Oath Stone to anyone not of Jotunheim.”

Eyeing Clint, the Jotun added, “We would ask this of you as well, human. Asgard has stolen enough from us; we would not give them more.”

“It seems rather pointless,” Loki told them. “Heimdall will inform the All-Father.”
Someone in the group snorted derisively, but their spokesman only said, “We would have your oaths, even so.”

Now Loki was suspicious. “Are you saying you have some means of obscuring Heimdall’s sight? Because it would be treason if I kept such information from my fat- from the All-Father.”

“Are you not a traitor already?” Helblindi impatiently snapped, lifting his crown up to rub his forehead.

“We are not saying that,” the elder answered. “We are only asking you not to speak of this object that is of great importance to us.”

Clint volunteered, “I got no problem swearing to that. I have to make a report, but I think I can leave the magic rock out of it.”

“I will make no oath that might cause harm to Asgard,” Loki warned.

“Those thieves,” someone muttered, “Don’t deserve such loyalty.”

“Just swear,” Helblindi exploded. “So we can get on with things!”

“You may so stipulate in your oath,” the head speaker of the Jotuns decided. “I see no way in which our having a means to hold our own people to their word can do harm to the Aesir, but if at some time you come to feel that there is a true threat, you may tell… One person.”

“Any one person?” Loki questioned.

The Jotuns huddled up, talking quietly amongst themselves, then gave Loki a specific person. “You may tell the All-Mother. If you believe there is a threat.”

“I will swear to tell no one save Frigga,” Loki agreed, leaving out the rest. “How do I do it?” He reached gingerly towards the glowing stone.

“Put your hands on the stone and swear by all you value,” their spokesperson told him.

“By all I value? It does not compel?” Loki questioned, squinting at the moving runes.

“Compel?” The old Jotun frowned, causing his wrinkles to shift into new patterns.

“Oh. No, nothing like that.” The wrinkles moved into a look of distaste. At least that was Clint’s interpretation. “You can choose to break your oath, if you are willing to pay the price.”

“So it’s a curse?” Loki checked his understanding. “Break your word and lose all you value?”

“Exactly.”

“That is a potent magic, if it works.”

“Oh, it works, little one,” the elder said, soberly. “We have been using the stone to seal vows for aeons, and there are many stories of the fates of oath breakers.”

“I see.” Loki didn’t seem entirely convinced, but he didn’t argue the point.

Approaching the stone as if it might bite, Loki slowly put his palms flat against it. It’s shining
intensified, and the light and the markings extended onto his hands and began slithering up his wrists. With a startled oath, he leaped backwards.

“It will do you no harm, Prince Loki,” Mengloth promised.

But Helblindi added nastily, “As long as you don’t break your word.”

Loki glowered at his supposed brother, and slowly moved back, returning his hands to the thing and allowing the soft light and moving marks to quickly cover him completely.

Clint found the effect creepy, and wasn’t looking forward to his own turn.

“Now make your oaths,” the elder directed.

“By all I hold dear, I, Loki Odinson, do swear that I will tell no one of this stone, or this oath, save Frigga, Queen of Asgard.”

“And that you will abide by the ruling of the Løgting.”

Loki hesitated. “I will be allowed to argue my case?”

“Yes,” the elder nodded, as did many others.

“I would not be the cause of harm to Asgard. More harm,” Loki added, stalling.

“You must be more specific, the Law Speaker warned. “Harm is too vague a thing. If our ruling makes one Asgardian unhappy, that might be considered harm.”

“Physical harm then,” Loki corrected.

“Can’t see as to how that would come up,” the cantankerous old Jotun who had called Loki a ‘frost femme’ before muttered. “We don’t need all this persnickety nitpicking, do we?”

Again, the others shushed him. It looked to Clint like this was a regular thing for this guy. He supposed it was just to be expected that if these were some kind of elected judges, at least one of them would be a narrow-minded old coot. Maybe one who was a bleeding heart type, to balance him out.

Ignoring this, their leader considered, tilting his head as he peered down at Loki. Finally, he said, “I believe this would be best accomplished by our swearing to not ask such of you. Will that satisfy?”

Loki didn’t seem entirely happy with it, but couldn’t find a reason to say no, so he stepped aside and most of the Jotuns in turn, starting with their leader, put their own hands on the stone and swore that they would not seek to use Loki to cause physical harm to any Aesir.

After they were done, Loki had evidently run out of delaying tactics, or was just ready to have it over with. He gave the oath to go along with their ruling, with little enthusiasm, but no more attempts to evade or prevaricate.

Then it was Clint’s turn. He took Loki’s place at the foot of the Oath Stone and put his own hands near it, not quite touching. There was a faint humming, a vibration, more felt than heard, now that he was close to it. It grew stronger when he let his fingers touch, but it wasn’t unpleasant. It reminded Clint of a big speaker at a rock concert, or maybe a generator. Gathering his nerve, he pressed both hands to the stone and watched the creepy blue marks crawling up his arms.

Following the form the others had used, Clint said, “By everything I care about, I, Clint Barton do
solemnly swear that I will not intentionally tell anyone about this stone.”

This got him a raised eyebrow from the leader of the Law Speakers, whose name, Clint had learned when he gave the new oath, was Imr Thrudnirsbarn. “Intentionally?”

“Can’t say what might happen against my will,” Clint informed him. “I’ve been mind-controlled just recently.”

“Oh,” came the enlightened nod. “A sensible precaution, though I hope that is not likely to happen again.”

“It isn’t,” Loki crossed his arms, not looking at Clint.

“I’m going to do all I can to prevent it,” Clint promised.

“Are we done for now?” Helblindi asked. “I would like to speak to my birth parent and my sib, and I assume we are going to have some kind of feast? All the tribes and clans have sent representatives?”

“We are done. I think everyone has arrived, and of course there is to be a celebration,” Imr agreed, smoothing down his long sashes.

Helblindi turned to Loki and Clint. “Come along, I’ll show you to your tent.”

“We will have a private tent?” Loki asked, anxiously.

“Of course.” The Jotun king didn’t pull an eye roll like a human teenager, but it was a near thing, Clint thought.

Their tent was round, like a yurt, topped by a shallow dome made of heavy green and white cloth woven in stylized plant motifs, with a few scattered flowers depicted in gold, red and blue. It was small by Jotun standards, about thirty feet in circumference and twenty feet in height at the top of the dome, but it was plenty roomy for just the two of them. It was not as primitive a dwelling as it had looked from a distance, either. There was a screened off area with with toilet facilities, thankfully to their size, and a large tank of icy water that could be used to fill a tub or basin for drinking or washing. Both used magic in some way. Clint had learned to recognize it; it was like a color he knew he shouldn’t be able to see.

There was only one bed, though it was big enough for two, if only just. Clint eyed it with disfavor. He didn’t appreciate circumstances pushing him faster and further than he intended. To hell with it. Loki could sleep on the floor.

The god, or frost not-giant, or whatever he was, didn’t seem to have noticed that little wrinkle. He was moving around restlessly. Not pacing, exactly, but unable to keep still and moving from place to place without seeming to see anything around him. He exuded anxiety like a stove radiated heat, itching at Clint’s nerves. He’d rucked up one of the sleeves of his borrowed sweater and was dragging his nails down his arm without seeming to notice.

Clint wanted to be reminded of an addict, but the mostly healed lines on his own arms refused to be ignored. He could not help but think that when your own body seemed strange to you, pain could be a familiar friend and welcome distraction. And shit, he didn’t want to empathize with Loki. Turning away, he took off his bag of holding and dumped the contents onto the bed to see what all was in there.

It was a lot, as it turned out. Besides the beautiful magic bow, there was a small mountain of clothing, skis, snow shoes, boots, hats, gloves, a freaking spear, knives in sizes ranging from paring
knife to short sword, enough fresh food to last a month, and enough dried food to last at least three months. There were also mysterious bottles and vials, and a lumpy bag that turned out to contain the very gems that Clint had not wanted, and they were even bigger and more sparkly than he’d ever imagined.

Sighing, Clint tossed the bag of jewels back onto the bed. Loki was still roaming the confines of their tent and yet ignoring his surroundings utterly. It was unnerving and Clint needed to put a stop to it.

Pulling a sturdy-looking black belt out of the tumble of clothes Frigga had sent along, Clint made a loop and chased his fretful charge down, catching up the hand that was still digging into the flesh of Loki’s forearm and snugging the circle of leather around his wrist.

Caught off guard by this, Loki tried to pull away. “Barton, what are you-“

“Just shut up,” Clint ordered. He wasn’t going to try to explain; he had no earthly idea what he was doing. He took hold of Loki’s other wrist and looped the belt around it as well, then circled both, round and round, till the belt was mostly used up. Then he slid the tongue back through the gold buckle and cinched it as tightly as it would go.

Loki did not resist. He was staring at Clint, giving him his undivided attention. That was even more daunting than watching him pinballing around. Clint dropped Loki’s bound hands.

“Sit down,” he ordered, trying not to think too hard about the last time he had given Loki the same command, and what had come of it. That wasn’t going to happen, at least not now.

Slowly, Loki sank to his knees, clearly of the opinion that it was.

“Fuck,” Clint growled. “We are not doing that!” And now it was his turn to bounce around the room, unable to keep still. Loki was fucking infecting him with the heebie-jeebies.

Loki watched him, warily, making no effort to free himself from bonds that surely would not stand up to any effort to get loose. He wanted it. All the more reason not to give it to him, right?

Clint stalked closer. Loki tensed. “Shit,” Clint hissed, standing over him. “I’m not going to hit you!”

Loki relaxed, but only marginally. His eyes were green again, hungry and watchful.

“I’m not going to fuck you either,” Clint decided, firmly. “Change back to blue.”

“What?” It was clear Loki found this concept less appealing than sex, which only increased Clint’s resolve to force the issue.

“Change to your real self.”

“This is my real self,” Loki insisted haughtily.

Clint hesitated only a moment, then insisted. “Yeah, okay, but the blue you is your real self too. I want you to be that.” Clint wasn’t sure why. Was it because Loki was more female in that guise? Or because Loki hated it? “No more damned illusions.”

“As you wish,” Loki replied, and changed back to his Jotun skin.

Clint was unwontedly pleased, but not happy. This was just too fucked up. Totally FUBAR. He turned his back on Loki.

After a moment, Loki hesitantly spoke. “Barton?”
“Just be still,” Clint told him. Then he had an inspiration. “Do your meditation.”

“What?”

“Your mom told me to make you do your meditation,” Clint told him. “So do it. Meditate.”

“You talked with my mother about me?” Loki asked, worriedly.

“Yeah. She told me about getting some of your magic, and gave me all that stuff to bring along.” Clint waved at the huge pile on the not big enough for two not intimate people bed.

“We need to discuss that,” Loki suggested.

“Yeah, probably. But first, you do your meditation thing.”

Raising his bound wrists, Loki inquired wryly, “Is this necessary?”

“Consider it a mental exercise,” Clint said, crossing his arms and standing firm.

When Barton had tied his wrists, Loki had been glad of the distraction, certain that something of a sexual nature was in the offing. He hadn’t expected the order to meditate. It was… oddly comforting, as secondhand concern from his mother. But from Barton, it was confusing.

“I don’t… Barton, what is this?”

“Just do it, okay!” the mortal snapped, turning back to glare down at him. “You are on edge, and you’re making me nervous. We can’t afford that. You need to be sharp, and so do I.”

Letting his hands drop back into his lap, Loki ducked his chin, conceding the truth of this. “You’re right.”

“No shit.” Barton relaxed gradually, staring down at him. “So you work on getting your head straight.”

“And after?” Loki’s eyes drifted to the pile of gear, and the single bed. It was too much to hope for, he knew. He’d be fortunate if Barton didn’t bind him hand and foot in some torturous position to wait while he slept. Not that such paltry bindings would hold him, unless Frigga had packed more substantial fetters than these. But she wouldn’t. She would not.

Barton studied him for a long moment, then drew in a long breath and slowly let it trickle out. “After that, I guess we should talk.”

Then he turned and exited the tent, leaving Loki on his knees, with his hands bound. Which was unsettling, and potentially embarrassing, if someone else should happen to come in. Maybe not as awkward as being caught fucking your bodyguard, but potentially more difficult to explain.

Almost, Loki removed the belt around his wrists. It was snug, but not cruelly tight. He could have escaped it with a little effort, without even resorting to magic. But. But. But. Clint had put it on him. For some reason. Maybe he was trying to regain some control, even just only symbolically, after Loki’s attempt to flee, or maybe it was a continuing effort to even the score for Loki’s using the
scepter on him. Letting him have that seemed a small price to pay to gain some goodwill from the aggrieved mortal.

So Loki left it on, and cast a warding on the tent’s entrance that would discourage anyone from entering without good cause. It would give him enough notice to hide either himself or the binding, which he did not care to explain, even if he could. Then he summoned his meditation cushion, vanished his boots and sat down, slightly adjusting his posture to accommodate his bound wrists. The feel of the leather on his arms was a welcome diversion from the feel of alien magic infusing his being.

Drawing in a long breath, he held it, reaching for mindfulness, letting the air slowly trickle out his nostrils, willing his tension to go with it. And again. His body slowly relaxed, habituated to this routine, even in such difficult circumstances. No, he corrected himself in grim amusement, these were not difficult circumstances. Being starved and tortured by the Chitauri had been difficult. Being the ‘honored guest’ of the Mad Titan, and still starving and suffering from the oppressive heat of that place, because Thanos had apologetically explained that these circumstances could not be changed, that had been difficult. This was merely unsettling. He could do this.

He focused on his breathing, on his heart rate. When these were slow and even, he practiced what he could of the women’s magic Frigga had been teaching him. He was not yet proficient enough to make changes, but he could observe how his meditation was lowering the frenetic activity in his stomach and other digestive organs, causing the sick churning in his gut to ease. As his muscles softened, constricted blood vessels expanded, soothing aches. The inner world of his body was a marvel, and learning its workings kept him from thinking too much about what might happen in the next few days.

As his awareness deepened and expanded, Loki let it move to the womb that Eir told him had always been within him, hidden, to consider the tiny spark of life there. There was little he could make out, except that it was very, very small, and yet so energetic. He could literally sense change and growth every moment. Such a determined little scrap of life, urgently racing time to come into being. It seemed unfair to put a stop to its efforts, to pry it loose from the wall of his womb - not that he was sure how to do such a thing, or at least not safely - and flush it away. But the longer he waited, the more difficult it was going to be, both physically and emotionally.

The memory of the other Jotun like him rose in his mind’s eye, with her confident stance and the large baby in her arms. Would any child of Loki’s thank him for being born? Could the child of a runt frost giant and a Hulk be healthy? Would it be small and blue? Big and green? Human-hued, like Banner? It was like the child would have three parents. He imagined the Hulk smiling at the idea of a baby. Banner would no doubt be horrified, though.

Loki sighed, putting these thoughts aside along with worries about the upcoming trial, and being cursed by Jotun magic, and how unlikely it was that Thor would be able to win him any sympathy before he was tried on Asgard. There was nothing to be done about it now, after all. He rose, stretching away the slight stiffness that came from sitting so long, and, hands still bound, went to examine and organize the pile of things that his mother had gifted to Barton, and clear the bed for whoever ended up sleeping in it.

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Chapter End Notes
Comments make my day, and questions are always welcome.
Clint went back up one of the stone pillars nearest to their tent and made himself comfortable. A few Jotuns looked up at him briefly, but the only ones who seemed even curious about what he was doing were the kids. A knot of them gathered at the base of his perch and peered up.

“What are you doing up there?” called one of the taller children, a gangly youth about nine feet tall, with short cropped coppery hair that contrasted vividly with the crimson eyes and dusky blue skin.

“Sitting!” Clint called down, knowing perfectly well that the non-answer wouldn’t discourage them, the way it might an adult.

Some of the smaller children split off from the group and scrambled up the two flanking pillars, racing for the tops and then arguing over who had been the first to get there. The redhead turned both palms towards the ground in a gesture that reminded Clint of Stark firing his repulsors, and a column of ice formed, swiftly lifting the kid up to Clint’s level. And then a yard or two higher.

Definitely showing off, Clint decided, taking in the kid’s cocky stance. He grinned, performer to performer, as the rest of the kids whooped and yelled suggestions up to the youth.

“Ask jo what jo’s doin’?”

“Ask if jo is a dwarf!”

“Knock jir off, Boda!”

“Shut up, you nugga turds!” the redhead, who was apparently called ‘Boda’, yelled back. “Anyone can tell jo ain’t a dwarf!”

“And not ‘jo’, either,” Clint helpfully pointed out. “I’m a he.”

“That’s so weird,” the kid informed him, screwing up an impishly round blue face. “You came with the lost royal, right? Are you an Aes?”

The nuances of this ‘All-Speak’ deal were totally lost on Clint, so he couldn’t make out if this kid was deliberately using a form of ‘Aesir’ that sounded to his ears like ‘ass’. There was a hint of defiance in the gleaming eyes that seemed to indicate that was the case.


The red eyes widened in surprise, and there were even more questions bubbling up from the kids still standing on the ground.

“Midgard? I thought they were all dead.”

“Do they still live in caves?”

“I thought they were really little!”
“Is jo here for revenge for the war?”

This last question earned a shove. “Don’ be stupid! What’s a little being like that going to do all by jostaf?”

The worried child shoved back. “You don’t know either!”

“Ask jo, Boda!” a third child demanded, bouncing up and down with excitement.

The youth on the ice platform of ice gazed down, considering Clint. “Are you here for revenge?”

“Kid,” Clint informed the youth wryly, “Nobody on my planet even remembers your invasion. We’ve had too many of our own wars since then.”

“Oh,” Boda said, somewhat taken aback at this. “Well, then, why are you here?”

Clint hesitated, then admitted, “I’m here to keep an eye on Loki.”

The youth brightened, which wasn’t the reaction that Clint had been expecting. “That’s the royal femme that Odin stole, right?”

“Um, yeah?”

From below, there was a lot of Odin-bashing, and childish bragging, as the children all competed in what was apparently a universal game of upping one another in explaining how they would defeat the Aesir ruler if he ever came to steal anyone they knew.

Boda flung down an barrage of ice splinters that sent them skipping back, yelling protests. “I am trying to have a conversation!”

When they had quieted to mutters, Boda turned back to Clint and asked, “Is it true jo uses seidr to fight, like in real battles?”

“Loki, you mean?” This business of only having the one pronoun made it tough to distinguish who was being discussed, but Loki was the only person Clint knew here.

Boda nodded. “I am really good at seidr,” the youth proclaimed, summoning a pillar of what looked like blue flame in one cupped hand. “Better than anyone else in all the Ironwood!”

“Impressive,” Clint told the kid, though he truthfully didn’t have the first idea about whether it was or not. What the hell. He couldn’t call up fire, so it was impressive to him.

“So does Loki fight with seidr?” Boda’s magic fire vanished, and Clint was barraged by a torrent of questions. “Have you seen it? They said jo was fighting alongside the Odinson, and that jo made a pathway here and tricked Laufey king into starting a war, and then caught Laufey king in Asgard and killed him with fire and lightning!”

“I don’t know about Laufey, but I’ve seen him fight, sure. He’s pretty good.” Incredibly good, to be honest, but Clint wasn’t in the mood to be praising Loki to a kid he tried to kill, along with the rest of his birth race.

“How does jo use seidr to fight?” Boda wanted to know. “Does jo throw fireballs?”

“Not that I’ve seen,” Clint replied. “He throws knives, and he can make them appear out of nowhere.”
“Anybody can do that with ice!” the Jotun teenager responded with the kind of know-it-all dismissal that caused Clint clint to assign the kid an approximate corresponding human age of fourteen.

“He also uses illusions to trick people, so they don’t know which one of him to attack.”

“Huh,” Boda’s brows scrunched in contemplation. “But no fireballs, or lightning, or… or turning enemies inside out so their guts explode?”

There were gagging noises and giggles from the audience down below.

“He did blow some stuff up,” Clint granted, though he wasn’t sure if that had been Loki’s magic, or the scepter. “And he totally blew up a space whale during a battle.” That had been with the Tesseract, though.

Still, Boda brightened at the news.

“How do Jotuns use magic in battle?” he asked, curiously.

“They don’t,” the youth scowled. “Mages aren’t supposed to fight.”

“What do they use magic for then?”

The scowl intensified. “Just boring stuff.”

Clint did not have time to formulate another question before the small, feminine Jotun they’d passed on the way into camp strode confidently into view below, loudly calling for the children to go elsewhere and stop bothering their guests, or parents would have to be informed, and were any chores undone by chance?

Boda groaned, protesting this interference. “Gotta go. Can we talk to you later, though?”

Clint didn’t like to make promises. “I might be too busy, but if I can, sure.”

“Boda!” Standing at the bottom of the stone pillar and the ice platform, the shorter Jotun’s voice held the mixture of impatience and fondness that could only be a mother’s. “Come down now.”

The Jotun youth sighed dramatically and began rapidly sinking, the ice pillar vanishing with the same dramatic speed as it had come to be, but this was not fast enough to suit, apparently, because the kid jumped off while still a good ten feet in the air. The ice splintered and fell into a pile while he? jo? ran off after the others.

Clint was a little sorry to see them go; he’d hoped to ask more questions. Kids were always a good source of information.

Before he could decide on how to strike up a conversation with this Jotun who was so physically similar to Loki, she…or rather, jo, gave him a single shy glance and also hurried off, seemingly as little interested in him as all the rest of the adults here. Or maybe it was a manners thing. Hell, maybe he was ugly and smelled bad to these people. Well, it wasn’t like he was planning to stay long, if he and Loki had anything to say about it.

He settled back into a comfortable crouch, scanning the area and trying to sort his head out. He had spotted seven others on guard. Three were Helblindi’s men, in matching armor, and four others were just extra large, tough-looking, and armed. Four were arrayed equidistantly around the perimeter of the camp, looking out, but three were positioned in a loose ring around the tents in the center.
His first assumption that they were there to keep Loki from escaping soon proved false. They spent equal time keeping an eye on the king’s tent, and some of the other larger tents that Clint guessed housed important attendees. They did not seem to be expecting trouble concerning Loki; the guards looking out were by far the more alert. Clint wondered what they were guarding against.

The encounter with the kids had lightened his mood enough that he could think, and not just brood about how his life had turned to shit. Tasha had been right to kick his ass; he’d been angisting like a damned teenager. He needed to figure out what was what and move on, and to do that, he needed to have a very in-depth conversation with Loki.

Of course, the minute he made up his mind to go talk to the source of all his trouble, the fucking universe threw up a complication. The Jotun healer who’d been visiting Asgard was striding resolutely towards their tent. Where Loki was very possibly still sitting with his hands tied. That could be awkward.

Making a rapid descent, Clint hurried to intercept. He wouldn’t have made it in time had the healer not paused outside the tent, looking suddenly hesitant, which was a look that didn’t seem at all at home on the usually assured face.

“Did you need something?” he asked, sidling around to get in front of him- jo… jir? He spoke as loudly as he could and still sound natural, hoping Loki would hear and be prepared for company.

The healer, Clint thought the name was Menglod, or something like that, glanced down at him. “I was thinking to check on Prince Loki. Jo seemed upset, earlier.”

“He was… a little,” Clint conceded, hurriedly adding, “He’s meditating now. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“I could offer jir a soothing elixir,” the healer suggested, looking hopefully past Clint at the closed tent doorway, as if wishing to be invited.

Clint wasn’t about to oblige. “He probably won’t want anything, but I’ll send someone to get you if he does.”

Clearly not satisfied by this, the healer frowned at him, and then at the tent. “Send for me if Loki is in the least way unwell or upset.”

“Will do,” he promised, and waited. The healer left in a state of profound discontent, heading somewhere else with the same stalwart pace. Clint suspected jo (he was getting the hang of the pronoun) was going to find someone to complain to, so there was no time to lose.

Nevertheless, he too found himself somewhat reluctant to go inside. The idea made him uncomfortable. There was a trace of wrongness in the air, somehow, and a hint of that undefinable something that he was starting to associate with magic. So Loki was probably doing something. Just fucking wonderful.

Letting his resurgence of irritation drive out his qualms, he threw the hanging door open and went in, blinking a little as his eyes adjusted to the brighter light.

Loki was indeed just sitting around with the completely pointless belt still encircling his wrists, but he had been busy. The pile of things had been cleared from the bed and put neatly on hooks and hangers along the tent’s walls. A low table that he didn’t recall seeing before had been laid with an assortment of the food Frigga had sent with him, along with a variety of bottles that he had learned to recognize by shape as wine, ale and mead, and a teapot. Two settings had been put out, but from the looks of it, Loki had not yet eaten or drunk anything.
“Barton,” Loki greeted him rather warily. “Is everything all ri-“

Clint cut him off. “What are you doing?” he demanded. He knew it was something; he could sense the magic.

“Nothing.” Loki dared to pretend to be confused. “I unpacked, and I thought you might be hungry, and I did meditate, as you asked.”

“What magic are you doing?” Clint corrected, growling low.

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Loki was a few seconds in remembering what magic the mortal was talking about. “It’s nothing,” he hastily explained, once it came to him. “A little warding to discourage visitors. I’ll take it off.”

Barton frowned, but put up a hand to stop him. “Wait.”

Because it was slower and clumsier to work magic with his hands tied, Loki had not already dispelled the minor working. So he stopped, putting his hands back in his lap and raised an eyebrow at Barton.

The archer inquired slowly, “This spell will keep us from being bothered?”

“Unless it is important,” Loki answered. “And it will give me some warning of visitors.”

“It kept that Menglod out?”

“Mengloth,” Loki corrected absently. “What did jo want?”

“Just checking on you,” Barton answered. “Jo thought you might be upset earlier and wanted to dose you with something.”

Loki snorted at the profundity of the understatement.

“Did you want any drugs, or whatever?” Barton asked.

“No.” Loki had guessed that would be why the healer had come by. Mengloth was even pushier than Eir about fussing and hovering with potions and such.

His Hawk (he needed to break himself of calling Barton that, he reminded himself firmly) nodded shortly in agreement. “Like I said before, we both need our heads on straight here.”

“So should I leave the warding up? I can try to set it out further if it is bothering you.” It was clear that Barton could somehow sense his magic, and that was something that Loki needed to understand.

Barton frowned and rubbed at his forehead, thinking. Then some idea lit his face up like a lamp. “Hang on. I’ve got an idea.”

Loki waited as the man dug into a pocket and took out a little silk pouch, and as he opened the pouch and took out a ring of dark metal, etched with runes that made him uneasy.

“Where did you get that?” he asked, twisting his hands into position to slip the leather bindings in a
flash if Barton made any move to put that ring on him. He realized that he was being foolish, that so
small a thing could not constrain him, and even if it could, he could easily remove it. It made him
nervous, nonetheless.

But the human was sliding it easily onto his own finger. “Your mom gave it to me. She said she
thought it would block… something.”

Loki winced at the idea of wearing that ring, but Barton looked more relaxed, once it was on. The
tension melted from his face and shoulders as he looked around again, for what?

“Seems to work,” Barton commented, taking a seat across the table and picking up the bottle of ale.
He worked the stopper off and poured a small glass, then sipped appreciatively.

“On what?” Loki asked. He sent a delicate probe of seidr at the binding ring, trying to ascertain its
effects. It seemed a much weaker version of the cuffs that had bound him for so long. How could
they be affecting Barton, and why? What in Hel’s name had he done to Barton with his rushed
attempt at making amends?

“Your Jedi mind trick, or whatever it is,” Barton answered easily, his eyes dropping to Loki’s wrists
thoughtfully. “Want me to take that off?” His tone was overly casual.

“If you don’t mind.” Loki matched Barton’s nonchalance. He extended his hands, and Barton
unfastened the belt, tossing it aside.

“You could have taken it off yourself,” Barton commented, taking another sip of the strong ale.

“Yes.” Reaching for one of the wine bottles, Loki stopped himself and poured a cup of tea instead.
He took his time adding cream and honey in little dollops, stirring each in and waiting for his
erstwhile bodyguard to ask why he hadn’t.

Barton didn’t ask. That made Loki even more uncomfortable. “I thought I had annoyed you enough
for one day.”

“I wouldn’t say annoyed. Pissed off is the word I would use.” The archer’s grin was fleeting and
sharp, but Loki decided it was a good sign. Relieved, he took a larger sip of the cooling tea.

Putting down his still mostly full glass, Barton leaned forward, intently. “We need to talk.”

All Loki was able to say was, “Yes,” and an echo in his memory taunted, “Silver tongue turned to
lead?”

“Did you really think I’d be pissed if you untied your hands?” Clint asked.

Flippantly, trying to pass it off as a joke, Loki laughed, “It didn’t seem worth risking.”

Barton was not to be deterred, though. “Did you think it would please me if you didn’t?”

“Why would I care to please you?” Loki snapped, stung in his pride. “I may need your help later. It
seemed worthwhile to cultivate a good working relationship.”

“By trying to please me,” the mortal pressed.

“Well, I had to try something, since you mislaid my scepter!”

For a few seconds, Barton’s face contorted with rage. Then, just as quickly, it cleared, turning wry.
“You know, I am really, really tempted to make some seriously dirty jokes here.”
Loki had been wondering how to take his words back, or if he should drive them home further, drive Barton away before they both wound up hurt. Now his mind went blank at Barton’s strange response. “What?”

“You know,” Barton gestured to his crotch and thickened his voice into a lewd drawl. “I got your scepter right here.”

It felt as if another portal had somehow opened up under his feet and landed him in another new planet, with some alternate Barton.

“Have you been drinking, Barton?” Loki asked, peering suspiciously at the man. He didn’t look especially inebriated.

Gesturing vaguely at his barely touched drink, Barton shook his head. Now he looked very sober, and deadly serious. “Not drinking. Thinking.”

Loki put down his own cup. It rattled slightly against the cheerful green and gold saucer. “And what were you thinking that has put you in this mood?”

“I was thinking that if somehow we both get back to Earth, I am going to fuck you.”

The words seemed to reverberate in Loki’s ears. His voice was husky as he pressed, “You do not have to wait, Barton.”

“No,” Barton said flatly, and took a long swallow of ale. “No, we’re going to wait. This place isn’t as private as I’d like, and we don’t need to get distracted. There may be dangers here we don’t know about.”

That was true, of course. Barton seemed to be taking his role as guard seriously. Still… “I could—”

“NO.”

Loki clenched his teeth to hold back retorts. Demands. Pleas.

“We need to hammer some shit out, before… before we do anything else,” Barton said. “So I need to ask you some things. If you lie to me, I swear I’ll find a way to make you regret it.”

“Go ahead.” Loki met Barton’s blue gray gaze and tried to project trustworthiness. He didn’t want to lie to Barton; he hoped he wouldn’t have to. Folding his hands in his lap to keep them steady, Loki tried not to anticipate.

Barton demanded, “Can you fix what you’ve done to me?”

“I.” Loki bit his lip and confessed, “Barton, I don’t even know what that is. The way I healed you— I’d only ever read of it as something done in emergencies, between Vanir.”

“And the affinity thing? Did you do that on purpose?”

Loki tried to think back. Barton’s face hardened. “I don’t remember!” Loki cried, desperate to make the archer understand. “I wasn’t… I wasn’t as lucid as I thought, I don’t think. I did want you to… to forgive me. It’s possible… His words trailed off like the blood trail of wounded prey, bleeding out.

After a long, long moment, Barton sighed, rubbing the frown off his face and taking another drink. He took a up gold skewer with roasted boar and ate a piece, chewing thoroughly. Loki dared to take up a round of bread and spread it with soft cheese and fruit preserves, and nibble. His stomach,
despite being knotted in anxiety, did not immediately rebel as he’d feared.

“So you don’t know if you can fix it,” Barton stated.

“Fix what?” Loki put the food down and wiped his mouth. “What is it you want me to do?”

“That scene at Stark’s tower,” Barton ground out, slowly. “That was you, right?”

“I don’t understa-“

“That’s what you like, right? You like being tied up? You like being… used? Forced? Punished?”

Loki started to get up, meaning to escape, maybe excuse himself to the facilities and play for time. He didn’t want to lie to Barton already. He didn’t want to answer, either.

Barton was faster than he remembered. Faster and stronger both. He caught Loki by the shoulders and pushed him emphatically back down.

“Yes or no. Is that what you like in bed?” Barton’s fingers dug into his upper arms. It verged on pain, and Loki’s nerves thrilled in excitement. Of course he could easily break free, or even call in a knife and gut Barton. But Barton was right; they needed to talk about this.

He hedged, “I would prefer not to tell you, Hawkeye.”

“Yeah, well, I get that. I don’t much want to talk about it either. Tough titty,” Barton’s grip eased, and he sat down behind him, close enough for Loki to feel the heat of his body.

“You tell me why you don’t want to talk about it, and I’ll tell you why I don’t want to. Even Steven, as we Earth folk say.”

Loki rubbed his wrists, where the bite of the leather had left just the faintest impressions on his already lined skin. It was a fair bargain, and probably more generous than he deserved.

He breathed in, and let it out in a rush. “It is shameful.”

“Shameful?” Barton queried. “What, wanting to be tied up?”

“To wish to be used.” It was easier to speak with Barton behind him, where he did not have to see his face. “It is does not befit a prince of Asgard. It is… unseemly to desire… to want…”

“Oh,” Barton sounded enlightened, somehow. “Oh, shit. I get it. Asgard has that machismo thing dialed up to eleven. Right. Men are supposed to be real men, always on top, dominant, blah blah blah.”

Feeling a spark of hope, Loki turned to look over his shoulder. “You do not think it dishonorable?”

“I don’t think it’s any business of mine what anyone gets up to in their bedrooms,” Barton declared, blithely, then adding with a bitter edge. “At least, it wasn’t until suddenly I started getting these urges.”

“Urges?” Loki was afraid he was starting to understand.

“Urges to fuck you, in low, dirty, mean ways,” Barton elucidated, in a slow, low growl that made Loki’s cock suddenly strain against his trousers.

“You think.. you believe I made you want me?” Loki figured, feeling bleak. His only consolation
was that both the mortal’s hands had returned to rest on his shoulders, firm and warm.

“Well, let’s examine the evidence.” Barton moved closer, one hand stroking slowly across the soft wool of Stark’s sweater and continuing on upwards to caress his bare neck. “This isn’t like anything I ever wanted before.”

Leaning into the touch, Loki tilted his head back. Strong fingers, calloused from bow strings, traced the column of his throat like a threat, or a promise.

“I don’t like men,” Barton explained. “And I’ve never been into kink.”

All-Speak was not always perfect at interpreting slang, but Barton’s inflection had a slight edge. Loki closed his eyes and ventured to ask, “Kink is something… not normal?”

The trailing fingers had reached Loki’s jawline, and now they paused, just over his pulse. No doubt Barton could feel how his heart was racing. The mortal shifted even nearer, and his breath wafted through Loki’s hair in a long, thoughtful exhalation. “It’s not… I think it’s not way out of the norm, in small doses. Or as fantasy.”

“Fuck if I know,” Barton’s lips grazed Loki’s ear, making him shudder and bite back a groan. “Fifty Shades of Grey was a damned best seller, so it can’t be that weird, I guess.”

“I do not understand,” Loki murmured, leaning back into Barton as much as he dared. “Is it acceptable or not?”

“Depends on who you ask.” Barton’s other hand moved downward to cup one of Loki’s breasts and prod one of his nipples into a sharply sweet stiffness that sent jolts of pleasure to his cock.

“Nnngh…” Loki gasped and tried to regain the threads of the conversation, but all he could manage was “What?”

“My culture also has some serious hangups about sex,” the mortal explained, with a soft chuckle.

“Oh, I see.” Norns, I must sound like an idiot, Loki thought despairingly. Barton’s hands were driving him beyond the ability to think at all. Before he could make an utter fool of himself, the wards chimed in his senses, informing him that someone was crossing them, and that someone was sufficiently determined as not to be deterred.

“Someone’s coming,” he warned.

Barton, Hel damn him, seemed to have no problem shifting back to business as he rose swiftly, readying his bow.

“Loki prince?” a deep voice called, from outside the tent’s door. “May I come in? I have brought you some things to wear to tonight’s feast.”

Whoever it was, their timing was terrible, Loki decided, irritably, but both curiosity and the manners Frigga had taught him prevented him from yelling at them to leave whatever it was and go away.

He got up as well and straightened his clothes as best he could, and checked that Barton was ready. The archer had fallen back and taken a position that gave him a clear shot at anyone coming in, and he dipped his chin to signal assent at Loki’s inquiring look.

“Enter!” Loki called.
The frost giant who came in was tall, even for one of that race, but whipcord thin, with long limbs and a long face, and long flowing hair as black as the wings of Odin’s ravens, giving her the overall appearance of having been somewhat stretched out. But the red eyes, when they landed on Loki, lit with pleasure, and the smile she bestowed on him seemed genuine.

Jo was dressed in a gold and crimson kilt and a matching vest, with heavy gold jewelry at her throat, wrists and ankles. Under one arm, she carried a rectangular leather box, about the size of a traveling trunk, painted with colorful geometric designs.

Setting this down, the Jotun sat behind it, and studied Loki, giving Barton only a brief examination.

“So Loki, in case my bairn forgot to do so, I welcome you to our family. We are most pleased to have you here. If there is anything you need, you must let me know.” Jo spoke warmly, almost gently, as if soothing a shy child.

“Excuse me,” Loki said. “But who are you?”

“Oh, forgive me,” the giant grinned unrepentantly. “I am Farbauti, bera of Helblindi king, and Byleistr prince.”

Loki startled, and almost retreated a step. This was Laufey’s consort, and the mother of his children. The legitimate children, anyway. How could she be smiling at him, after what he had done? “I-“ he stammered, then swallowed, cleared his throat and said, “Do you not hate me? I killed your husband! I tricked him into coming alone to Odin’s chamber and I ran him through!”

Farbauti’s expression softened. “It was a terrible thing, yes, but Laufey was the one who called for war. Laufey was the one who was so blinded by his hate that she fell into such a trap. I warned her. I begged her not to go.”

“But I murdered him, I mean, her,” Loki protested, feeling vaguely outraged that this, the wife, or mate or whatever of Laufey did not seem inclined to even blame him, and also like an idiot for constantly forgetting the right pronouns with these people.

“We were informed that you killed Laufey just as she was about to stab the All-Father in his sleep,” Farbauti answered. (So at least Loki was not alone with pronoun problems.) “And while I would not in most cases trust Odin’s word, I knew well Laufey’s loathing for Asgard’s king, and she spoke to me of just such a plan.”

“Yes, but-“

“Also we were informed that you had just discovered that you were Jotun, and that Odin All-Father had deceived you on your true birth,” Farbauti added, pointedly.

“Well, yes, but-“

“And were this not enough to impair anyone’s judgment and cause them to do rash and unwise things, we are also told by Mengloth that you were entering your first fertile cycle, very late, without knowing what was happening to you?”

Loki felt his face going warm and stupidly wondered how that looked with his face already blue. Was he turning purple, or what?

“Jo told me this also,” he admitted, without adding that he still was not totally convinced it had come upon him so early as that. His memories of that time were muddled and had been distorted by his time in Thanos’s company, wildly telling lies and twisting truths in hopes of some advantage, but he
seemed to recall feeling much more murderous than amorous.

“So, you were angry, and confused, and unbalanced,” Farbauti summed up briskly. “And Laufey king was bent on war. I say not that you are guiltless, Loki prince, but there is much blame to spread around.”

Loki’s mouth was slightly ajar at this, and he shut it with a snap, his brows knitting in a frown. He could not fathom this attitude. He thought of Frigga, and tried to imagine her being so forgiving of anyone who murdered Odin. He supposed it was not impossible… just very unlikely. Or maybe these creatures were incapable of love, and that was one of the things that had always been wrong with him.

He asked, “Did you not love Laufey?”

The Jotun queen sighed, leaning back on jos heels. “I would have, had Laufey king given me even a little in return. But let us speak of Laufey some other day. Jo was the past, and you are to be part of our house’s future.”

“Let’s see what we can find for you to wear tonight.” Unfastening the straps, Farbauti opened the box, and lifted out something that looked like a two wide red silk ribbons attached to a gold chain of fire crystals. “This would be lovely on you, I think. Here, try it on and let us see.”

Jo thrust it out at him and his fingers closed on the thin silk automatically. Turning it this way and that, Loki worked out that what Farbauti held was a loincloth like he’d seen other Jotuns wearing. He had assumed that part of the cloth had gone between their legs, but this one was a simple length hanging at the front and back.

“Um. I did bring better clothes,” he argued, only now realizing that he’d forgotten to resume the illusion of wearing his armor. The black SHIELD fatigue pants and Stark’s sweater were comfortable, but must look poor and plain.

“You will wish to wear Jotun attire,” Farbauti stated, unequivocally. “You are part of the royal line now.”

Loki caught Barton looking on with great amusement, and possibly a bit of malice. “Could I not wear trousers? Mengloth wears them, and I’ve seen others here wearing them as well.”

“Not tonight, Loki prince. You need to let the people see your lineage markings.”

“Oh,” Loki replied, rather helplessly. Mengloth had told him about the raised lines on his skin, and how certain patterns of them were inherited. He did share some facial markings with Helblindi. “All of them?”

Farbauti seemed to realize the issue. “You are used to the Aesir and their prudish ways, I suppose?”

“I am accustomed to not going around mostly nude,” Loki muttered rebelliously.

His meddling visitor, consort of the king he had killed, mother of Jotunheim’s king in waiting, ignored this and went back to rummaging in the trunk, bringing out several swaths of fabric.

“Perhaps a wrap?” Jo held up a swath of pure white velvet, heavily embroidered with gold and bright blue fish. Each fish had a red gem for an eye. “This is pretty.”

It was pretty, what there was of it. Barton was waggling his eyebrows behind their visitor, and Loki struggled to keep his composure, unsure if he would laugh or cry if he lost it.
Farbauti must have read some of his mood on his face. Jir smile slipped from happy to self-conscious. “Forgive me, I am being presumptuous.”

“No at all,” Loki’s training in diplomacy belatedly kicked in.

“No, it is a fault of mine, Helblindi and Byleistr are both quick to tell me I am too overbearing in telling them what to wear and what to eat, and everything else, according to them, and you are no child, no matter how small you may be. I must keep that in mind.”

Decisively, Farbauti rose. “I will leave you the clothes and jewels and let you decide what you like, but if you will allow it, I would like to help you with your hair. I am thinking you are not accustomed to wearing it in any elaborate styles?”

“No,” Loki acquiesced, mostly to get rid of jir. But it would be foolish in the extreme to reject Farbauti’s attempt at kindness, no matter how puzzling it was. “I mean, yes, I would be glad to have your assistance.”

“Then I will return in an hour,” jo said, turning to go. “That should give us just enough time before the feast.”

“Wonderful,” Loki replied sarcastically, though not until Farbauti was gone. He stared helplessly at the open chest of clothes, wondering if it was possible that this was an elaborate joke on the Jotun queen’s part.

“I guess we should get cleaned up,” Barton suggested, breaking his trance. He was brushing ineffectually at the dirt and grass stains on his SHIELD uniform. “You first?”

“Yes,” Loki sighed, reluctantly heading for the bath.

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Despite the fact that they had already been pretty damned intimate more than once, and also despite the fact that Clint was certain that Loki wanted them to be so again, Loki was unwilling to get undressed in front of him, so Clint had him demonstrate how the taps worked, and how to get hot water by pressing a series of clear gems until they turned gold. Then he left Loki to his ablutions and went to pick out his own outfit for the upcoming festivities.

Loki’s mom had sent several fancy outfits, three of which incorporated Asgardian style armor, except it was awesome bad-ass black leather and matte black metal, without any shiny bits that would detract from it being used in stealth operations. Some of the fastenings were a challenge, but it fit like a glove, and wasn’t nearly as heavy and encumbering as it looked. Running his fingers down the overlapping plates of the chest piece, Clint recalled bullets harmlessly bouncing off Loki’s armor, back on Earth. Oh yeah, totally bad ass.

He had stripped it back off and found his shaving kit, and other toiletries, a clean pair of underwear and a shirt snug enough to go on under the armor. As soon as Loki swanned out in a flowing green robe, toweling out his hair, Clint went in.

When he emerged, squeaky clean and steaming slightly, Loki was contorting himself in front of a tall, floating mirror, in an attempt to fasten what looked to be a skimpy bra fashioned of gold, crystal and jet beads. He already wore a wide matching belt, from which fell a wide panel of black and gold
silk in front and back, coming to below Loki’s knees. It was a gorgeous, exotic outfit, or would be, if he ever got it hooked.

“Need a hand with that?”

Loki shot him a suspicious look, but Clint had his face under control. If he laughed, he suspected Loki would try to murder him, if his pissy expression was anything to go by.

“If you don’t mind,” Loki said, releasing the ends of the recalcitrant garment and lifting his hair out of the way as Clint stepped in.

The thing turned out to have tiny crystal buttons instead of hooks, making a seamless closure once they were in place. Loki’s skin was like cool satin under his fingers, and his hands drifted down Loki’s back briefly, before he stepped back.

He couldn’t help but make fun of Loki’s discomfiture. “Nice outfit.”

Loki’s glare was pure poison. “It was the only option with anything that covered my chest.”

Clint’s grin escaped him. He knew it was low to laugh at a guy who was being forced into drag against his will, but Loki’s discomfiture was just too funny.

“That’s it,” Loki snarled, reaching for a thin shoulder strap. “I am not wearing this ridiculous costume.”

“No, no,” Clint caught Loki’s hands before they could tear the fragile looking material. “Wait up.”

“Why?” Loki frowned at their reflections, and Clint couldn’t help comparing Loki to a certain famously grumpy cat he’d seen on the internet. “I know you are enjoying this, Barton, but I am not going out there looking like a fool.”

“It’s not the outfit,” Clint explained, as Loki’s hands relaxed beneath his. “The outfit looks good on you. You look hot.”

“Hot? How does it look hot? It barely covers anything, Barton!”

“No, sorry. Hot means good. It means sexy. You look sexy in that getup.” Or he would, if he didn’t look so harassed.

“I look like a cut-rate brothel dancer,” Loki complained, shifting his hips and causing the beads to flash and glimmer, and Barton’s breath to stutter.

“Nobody we’ve seen has been wearing a lot,” he pointed out. “You won’t stand out that much, I’m positive.”

Loki looked doubtful. “I don’t see why they even care what I’m wearing. None of this makes any sense. Nothing has made any sense since we got here! What in Ymir’s name are they up to? I came here to be punished, not… whatever this is!”

“Yeah, well,” Barton let go of Loki and moved back a pace. “Your mom said something about them maybe wanting to marry you off.”

Loki spun around, and the mirror turned to smoke and vanished. He looked utterly panicked. “Marry me- To whom?”

“No idea,” Clint shrugged. “Some kind of political thing, she said. Alliances?”
Lowering his head, Loki clenched his fists and trembled, his breathing fast and harsh. Clint hated seeing him so upset. Which made no sense, but he grabbed Loki by the arms and shook him.

“Calm down, okay?”

Fiery eyes bore into him, furious and desperate. “You have to help me get out of this!”

“I will. Just breathe. Do you need to meditate again, or something?”

With an act of sheer will, Loki got his breathing slowed and shook his head. “No. I’m well. I just…”

“I get it.” Clint let his hands slide up Loki’s arms to his shoulders, into the mass of night black curls. Loki moved closer, and Clint could smell the clean scent of his hair, and the slight musky sweetness of his skin. It made him hungry to taste, to lick and suck and bite.

“Barton?” Loki’s hands had come to rest lightly on Clint’s chest.

“I like your hair better this way. Without that stuff in it.”

A hint of amusement sparked in Loki’s eyes, despite everything. “It’s unmanageable.”

“It’s soft,” Clint argued, tangling his hands deeper into it and drawing Loki closer. “Touchable. You are more touchable like this.”

Reaching up, Loki patted Clint’s gelled spikes. “I suppose your hair does this naturally?”

“I’ll leave mine off if you will.” And damned if that didn’t sound dirty. Clint was sweating despite the cool temperature.

“I-“

Whatever Loki was going to say was lost, as Clint pulled him in and kissed him, hard and deep. Loki made a muffled sound, but he could not tell if it was protest or pleasure.

Then, appalled, he broke off, pushing Loki away from him. “Shit.”

Loki rubbed his lips, staring at him. “Hawkeye?”

Now it was Clint’s turn to take a few deep breaths. “Sorry.”

“I’m not,” Loki told him. “Except that it bothers you.”

Turning, Loki called the mirror back into being. Clint absently noted that he didn’t feel the tingle of magic. Another sign that Frigga’s ring was working, so he couldn’t blame what had just happened on Loki. Well, he could, and he did, but at least he knew it wasn’t something Loki was doing right this minute.

“I don’t know how to feel about any of this either, Barton,” Loki said, staring again at his reflection.

“What do you see?” Clint asked, suspecting he knew the answer, and that it was a big part of the problem. Of a problem. There were many.

“A monster,” Loki answered, bitterly. “A freakish creature who was meant to die at birth.”

“Well, mirrors fucking lie,” Clint retorted, snatching up the abandoned bottle of ale and taking a drink. “Mine tries to make me out a petty crook with delusions of heroism.” He belched. “And an
This distracted Loki from his pity party. “You don’t think you’re a hero?”

“Hell no. I’m just a guy who’s good with a bow. But I work for SHIELD, and I told you what they are like.”

“I told your Widow they were liars and killers,” Loki told him.

“Yes.” Clint shrugged. “SHIELD protects the world from worse threats, but they aren’t really the good guys. Just better than the alternative.”

“Not unlike Asgard, I suppose. The All-Father does protect the Nine, even if it is in a rather high-handed and arbitrary sort of way.”

“Yeah, that sounds a lot like SHIELD,” Clint said. “It’s a dirty job, but someone’s got to do it.”

“Hmm.” Loki frowned, turning back to the magicked mirror. “What do you see, when you look at me?”

Caught off guard, Clint hesitated, and Loki’s expression crumbled despairingly, prompting him to blurt out, “I see a gorgeous blue chick.”

Loki blinked. “A what?”

“A woman, okay? I look at you like this, and I see a beautiful woman.”

“I am NOT-“

“I KNOW!” Clint shouted over Loki’s angry denial. “I know you are a guy. It’s just…” He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Look. As much as it bothers you to look like a woman, it bothers me to want to fuck a dude, okay?”

Crossing his arms, Loki considered that. “All right. I can understand that. Why you prefer me this way.” He glanced back at his reflection. “I suppose it is preferable to… less flattering views.”

“Yeah,” Clint allowed, relaxing minutely. “Okay. Good. So we’re good?”

Loki looked pointedly around. “I think that is overstating things quite a bit.”

“Right.” Clint went and started putting on the Asgardian armor.

Loki went back to staring vexedly at his mirror. “I still don’t think I should have to wear this. I am not going to be married off. I’d rather be tied down under a giant snake, like in that ridiculous story Stark told me of.”

To Clint’s chagrin, he couldn’t help but think that a forced marriage to a frost giant was kind of like being tied down under a giant snake. Well, a giant trouser snake attached to an actual giant. Who probably didn’t wear trousers.

“I think you should wear it. You look great in it. You should totally own it.”

“I haven’t the least desire to own it,” Loki grated. “I am giving it back to Farbauti, if I can. If I can’t I’m going to burn it at the first opportunity.”

“I don’t mean own like possess,” Clint tried to get his meaning across, despite being terrible at
talking. “I mean like… inhabit. Wear it like you mean it. Strut your stuff.”

“Strut,” Loki echoed flatly.

“Sure. This should be right up your alley, Loki. Think of it as a disguise.”

Loki’s stiffly angry expression loosened, and he looked thoughtful. “I suppose that is one way to look at it.” He turned this way and that, studying how the garment moved with him, flashing his long legs with every step, and calling attention to his cleavage every time he drew breath.

“I still think I look like a slut.”

Clint remembered something Tasha had said to another female agent who had been making similar complaints about wearing what she had thought of as an exploitive outfit. He didn’t think he could make the case as well as Tasha had, but he gave it a try.

“Look, that outfit makes you look desirable. That gives you a kind of power. It makes guys… well, it makes some guys stupid. It makes it easier to manipulate people, and you’re already really good at that.”

“I am not accustomed to being thought of that way,” Loki admitted. He didn’t say how he was used to being thought of, but Clint assumed it would be something negative.

“Then they’ll underestimate you,” Clint quipped cheerfully. “That gives us the advantage.”

Loki made a face. “I suppose I do not care what Jotuns think of me, since I have no intention of staying here.”

He vanished the mirror again, and came over to help Clint fasten on his armor. As he bent to cinch it in at the waist, Clint could not help but look down the expanse of Loki’s back and the curves of his ass peeking out around his skimpy costume. His mind flashed back to using Stark’s flogger on that skin, and how all his efforts barely left any impression. He wondered if he might now be strong enough. Maybe with a harsher whip…

And damn it, why was he still thinking this crap? He was still pissed, but he couldn’t really hate Loki now. Clint was not a sadist. He didn’t enjoy hurting people. Except Loki had liked it. Had wanted it. And Clint had enjoyed it. If somehow they managed to get Loki back to Earth, working for SHIELD, what would happen? It would be easy to deny himself these dark fantasies if he didn’t know that Loki wanted it. Only he couldn’t really want Clint to treat him as badly as he was thinking, could he? Thor had said Loki had been tortured by the guy who’d sent him to invade Earth; he couldn’t really want to be tortured again? Could he restrain himself, if Loki was offering?

“You never did say whether you thought you could break this connection between us,” Clint reminded Loki, as the other man straightened, standing too close.

“It isn’t a connection. If it were, this ring would have disrupted it,” Loki said, taking Clint’s hand to get a better look at it. “Or the cuffs I was wearing would have, but you were feeling it then, right?”

“Yeah.” Those heavy metal bracelets had looked good on Loki, as had the way they made him nervous. Clint wondered if he could get hold of them? Or maybe with his ring as a template, Stark could run something up?

“My mother must really like you, Barton,” Loki said, releasing his hand to run a hand up Clint’s new armor. “This is very fine work.”
“Maybe she shouldn’t,” Clint muttered, thinking it was more that Frigga absolutely wouldn’t like him, if she could see what went on in his head.

With a quirky smile, Loki stepped back. “She is usually a good judge of character. Except that she loves me, for some reason.”

“She’s got no idea what I’d like to do to you,” Clint informed him, harshly. “Neither do you.”

“Oh, I have a few ideas, Barton.” Loki smirked wickedly at him.

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Sorry. It’s a nervous habit of mine.” Loki sighed and shoved back the nearly dry mass of his dark hair. It was thick and curling and did indeed look like it would tend to get in his face if not restrained.

“Flirting? You flirt when you’re nervous?”

“It makes Asgardian warriors enraged,” Loki admitted with a grin.

“They make you nervous, so you deliberately piss them off?”

“Something like that.”

“Okay, you know that’s crazy, right?”

“I cannot best them at brute strength, but when I beat them with the skills I possessed, they called me ‘womanly’.” Loki shrugged as if to rid himself of a weight. “They deserved to be ridiculed.”

*You didn’t want to let them make you ashamed, but they got to you anyway.* Clint didn’t think Loki would care to have that pointed out. “So does that mean I make you nervous?” he drawled.

“I did not say that,” Loki denied. “Anyway, you started it.”

Shaking his head, Clint disagreed. “Oh, no, I did not.”

“You did, with your talk of your ‘scepter’.”

“That was just trash talk. To blow off steam.”

“And suggesting you want to ‘do things to me’?”

“That was more like a threat,” Clint grumbled. How had this conversation gone so far off the rails, anyhow?

Loki planted his hands on his hips, staring down at him, once again reminding Clint that he was unfairly tall. At least the boot heels gave him a few inches while Loki’s feet remained bare.

“You damned well kissed me, Barton! Among other things!”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“And I didn’t meant to do whatever it is I did to you.”

“That’s different! Clint protested.

Loki just glared at him, his chest heaving with pent up emotion and giving Clint a very distracting view of his jewel-decorated cleavage.
“What were we talking about again?” he asked, after a long moment passed and his mind wrenched itself out of breast related fantasies.

“Never mind, Farbauti is coming,” Loki hissed. “Just keep your eyes and ears open tonight and see what you can learn that might help get me out of… of whatever they have in mind!”

“Okay,” Clint unhurriedly gathered up his bow. “I can do that.”

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my beta, tila123 for catching a lot of annoying typos, and letting me go on and on about plot, and motivation. She is a total saint for not being bored to tears by it all!

Thanks also to all you patient readers putting up with my glacial writing speed, and to everyone who leaves kudos and comments. I really appreciate the feedback!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

As always, sorry for the delay! RL, procrastination, writer's block, file deletion mishap, power out for a week, yada yada yada!

My wonderful, patient and brilliant beta reader, tilla123, gets a co-author credit for this chapter. We decided to try and write each other's next chapter as an experiment in breaking our writer's block. She turned out much better at writing mine than I did hers! If you enjoy this chapter, maybe leave a comment! We would love that, and kudos are always great too!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was not as bad as Loki had feared, dining with the monsters. There were no wicked Asgardian children being served, either raw or roasted. In fact, compared to the banquets of the Aesir, there was very little flesh on offer. There was lamb and mutton, and fowl and fish, but all of it was portioned out in stews, or slivered small in bowls of roasted roots and cooked cereals.

The sheep that surrounded them had contributed much of the bounty in the form of butter, cheeses, yogurt and even a sweet, frozen confection flavored with that same tree sap as the candy Mengloth had brought him back in Asgard. Mostly this treat was being served to the children, but he had been given a small bowl of it. His palate, more accustomed to cow’s and goat’s milk, found it grassy and oddly granular, and he had given it away to a child half again his height who had stared mournfully at it when he had set it aside after a single bite.

Loki was too tense to eat in the midst of these creatures… people. He reluctantly upgraded them to ‘monstrous people’, with the caveat that they were not currently behaving like monsters, however huge and hideous they were to his eyes. He wasn’t hungry anyway, having eaten a light meal earlier with Clint, from the supplies his mother had sent along, so he just took a bite or two of each dish, to be polite.

As they ate, everyone there stared at him; most curiously, some with what looked like greed, and a few with the almost welcome hostility he knew he had earned. It seemed the Norns must be punishing him by giving him this twisted version of the attention he had so long craved, living in Thor’s long shadow. He wished Barton had accepted the invitation to join him at the table, just to take some of the attention off himself, but the mortal had declined graciously, and was now standing guard somewhere behind him, and Loki could not even sense him because of that damnable ring.

Hopefully Hawkeye was living up to his name, because Loki was too distracted by how naked he felt, and by trying to hold his head in such a way that the complicated mass of curls and braids Farbauti had created and fixed with combs of dwarven silver and star metal pins with black opals the size of quail’s eggs did not tumble down. It felt strange and unnatural, as if he were balancing something on his head, and he found himself sitting very erect and moving with a careful slowness that he’d been shocked to realize was very much like the way Frigga always comported herself at
formal functions. All of Asgard praised the All-Mother for her regal manner; was she too trying to keep her piled up hairstyle from collapsing?

There was considerable talk about his parentage. No one denied that he was Laufey’s get, but apparently he also carried the marks of his mother’s bloodlines, a prolific clan called the Hvnir, which led three of the frost giants present to declare him a cousin, and led to a long debate on who his mother might have been. The prime candidates seemed to have been one of Laufey’s guards, or one of his mages. Both had been killed in the war, it seemed, but the other Hvnir promised to make inquiries.

For the sake of the happy children at the table, Loki gave them a polite nod of thanks, instead of informing them that he had no interest at all in which whore had born Laufey an unwanted bastard. After all, whoever it had been had not wanted him either.

That shouldn’t have bothered him, but the other ice maiden, whose name was Asvid, was seated at a place of honor near him and the rest of the royal clan, among the law speakers and the other important Jotuns. Possibly it was Asvid’s mate, Thrasir, who was the important one, since no one seemed to find it the least surprising when Thrasir moved jos little mate into his lap and doted on jo. Maybe they thought of jir more as a pet, Loki thought sourly, watching as Thrasir stroked Asvid’s hair between offering tidbits.

Unlike a feast in Odin’s palace, there was no entertainment. No games or singing between endless courses, or skalds reciting heroic sagas, or warriors bragging of foes struck down, only quiet conversation about food and weather and families that Loki knew nothing of. There was enough food to satisfy everyone, but it wasn’t the plentitude of Asgard, with its accompanying waste. Every last morsel was consumed, and most of the crowd ebbed away. Thrasir and Asvid left as well, along with all the children, a great many of who seemed to be theirs, leaving Loki alone with only his new ‘family’, and the members of the Løgting who were to decide his fate: the law-speakers, thanes and clan chiefs of Jotunheim.

Loki kept his chin up and his shoulders straight, and reminded himself that Barton was with him, and would not abandon him.

From the far end of the table, a heavyset Jotun who had been glowering hatefully at him most of the night spoke up. “Now can we talk about what’s to be done with this murderous femme?”

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence, and all eyes turned to Helblindi. The young king to be cleared his throat and tried to look as dignified as his scant years and smaller stature would allow among these, his most powerful subjects. Loki was miserably reminded of his own short reign, and how he had tried his best to act like a king, all the while feeling like a fraud and secretly terrified.

“Jorn Farthirsbarn,” Helblindi addressed the speaker coolly, but without rancor. “We know you have suffered a great loss, as have many-”

Jorn stood up, pointing angrily at Loki. “That cursed Odinson slew my bairn, and this creature is to blame! I want jo punished! I would that we killed jo, painfully, and slowly.”

There was a flurry of protest from the rest of the people around the table, and Jorn paused, breathing roughly before continuing, “I accept we cannot kill this femme… this Loki. I would not start a war for vengeance, but we were granted the right to punish jo, in any way short of that.”

Loki met Jorn’s glare with a very tiny smirk. Maybe, with luck, he could prod the Løgting into merely beating him to a pulp and sending him home. “I believe maiming was also prohibited in the agreement,” he mentioned casually.
Something stung him sharply between the shoulder blades, startling him into jumping nearly out of his seat. His hair shifted dangerously, and he recovered his balance and turned around to see Barton looking... well, he looked like a stone-faced guard, as he was pretending to be, but there was a glimmer of disapproval in his eyes. His lips shaped a word. 'Behave.'

Loki frowned at him and turned back around to find everyone looking at him again. It really was most disconcerting.

“We could inflict considerable and lengthy pain without either killing or maiming the femme,” Jorn grated out. “It would be no less than jo deserves.”

Helblindi cast Loki a worried look. Loki clamped his tongue between his teeth and said nothing. He would assent to Barton’s wishes for the time being.

“You were not the only one to suffer loss,” Mengloth appeared from behind Loki, where he had not known jo was. “I had a sibling in Laufey’s service who was slain when the Bifrost was unleashed on us.”

This was unwelcome news to Loki, and a worm of guilt squirmed in his gut when he thought of how solicitous the Jotun healer had been to him.

Mengloth had come closer, and was standing just behind him, from the sound of jos voice as jo continued, “If you wanted jo to suffer, I can testify that someone has done the deed for us, for when I examined the prince, I found signs of great abuse at the hands of those who held him captive and sought to force jo to steal for them.”

The twisting worm of conscience shriveled away in the flames of Loki’s outrage, and he stiffened, outraged that Mengloth should reveal his secrets so offhandedly. Some of the hard gazes directed towards him softened, and he gritted his teeth so hard they threatened to crack.

“The femme looks well enough to me,” Jorn muttered, unconvinced.

“There are many ways to do harm that leave few marks on the body, but I have seen his spirit image, and it is much scarred.” The healer tried a more tangible argument. “Jo has regained flesh in the past days, but is it not evident jo has been starved?”

This did not impress Jorn, who sneered, "I've seen worse lately." Around the table, some few others nodded their agreement with this.

“As have we all,” Helblindi snapped, joining the fray. “And revenge fills no bellies. Jotunheim needs allies, and trade, and Loki can bring us that.”

“I see no reason we cannot have both,” a different Jotun pointed out in a bass purr.

“Oh yes, let us flog the little femme till jo cannot stand, then send jo off to wed a powerful personage from another realm,” came the sarcastic suggestion from a huge Jotun lord in leather trousers and a cape of thick black fur. “No doubt they will both work diligently in our cause after that.”

This silenced everyone for a time as they considered it. Loki bared his teeth in what only an idiot would take for a smile.

Farbauti had been refilling jos pipe, and now jo lit it and puffed, drawing smoke deep into jos lungs. Then, blowing it out in a great, aromatic cloud, like a dragon, the consort of their late king spoke in an even, conversational voice.

“Laufey craved vengeance, more than anything else. Jo was obsessed with it, and spent all jos time
in the ruins of our capitol, brooding on the past, instead of trying to save our future. You all know where that has gotten us!” Farbauti waved a hand in a general ‘here we are’ motion. “Revenge just goes on and on. Mayhap Loki wanted vengeance on Laufey, for trying to kill jo as an infant.”

“We do not know that was what happened,” one of the law speakers primly corrected.

Unclenching his teeth, Loki told them. “Laufey did not seem pleased to see me, when I revealed myself to him. To jo, I mean.”

This caused a commotion as they all started asking questions at once. Finally, they all gave way to Helblindi, who was staring intently at Loki.

“You told Laufey king you were his lost child? When was this?”

“After the All-Father fell into the Odinsleep, and Thor was banished,” Loki said. “I was made king, and I came to try and make peace.” Was that why he had come? It must have been.

“Could it be he thought you were lying?” Helblindi suggested, somewhat hesitantly. “Is it not possible he did not believe you were… who you claimed to be?”

“Laufey said that jo would have killed me, had jo not believed Odin had done it first.” Even now it infuriated Loki to remember the contempt in those hooded blood red eyes, looking down at him like… like he was nothing more than filth, even though he had been king!

Everyone stared at him in such disbelief, Loki began doubting it himself. Had that happened, or was it another distortion of memory? Something he had fabricated for Thanos? Even if it was, it hardly mattered, did it? Laufey had still deserved his death.

But he could not actually recall suggesting peace.

“Laufey was the one who declared war,” Loki reminded them, trying to keep the anger from his voice. “I merely sought to win it.”

“Just because Laufey said there would be war did not make it so,” one of the provincial rulers insisted, bitterly. “A second time Asgard has punished all of Jotunheim for the actions of our ruler.”

A voice from the recesses of his damaged memory whispered to Loki, ‘Even in war, you do not destroy a whole realm due to the actions of a bad king.’ Who had said that? When? He couldn’t recall.

These people had no right to complain. Were they not responsible for who ruled?

“You should have chosen your king more wisely,” Loki informed them, starting to cross his arms then deciding against it. The damned jewels on his skimpy top were uncomfortable enough without being pressed into his oversensitive tits.

The huge Jotun in the fur cape let out a booming laugh, slamming a fist onto the ice of the table. “The little femme speaks the truth. Laufey was not a good king. We need to choose more wisely this time.”

“You are volunteering, I suppose, Lord Thrym?” Helblindi was on jos feet.

“These are strange and troubled times, and our own realm is in crisis,” Thrym replied. “We need a strong king, with experience ruling, not an untried youth.”
“We must keep to tradition,” Imr Thrudnirsbarn declared. “The bloodline of Ymir has ruled for a
dozen generations!”

“You would lead us into civil war!” Others broke out. “You have no better right than any of us to be
king!”

“I am not suggesting we abandon Ymir’s line!” Thrym roared them down. “I am saying we should
increase it!”

Thrym pointed at Loki, who was watching all this with bemusement.

“Why should we send this treasure away as jarnsaxa vif?*” Thrym demanded. “Appoint me, or
some other worthy lord as king on the condition that they wed Laufey’s firstborn.”

Loki started, staring at the hulking blue brute whose strong white teeth stood out in sharp contrast,
making him look fierce and savage. Jo was taller by a head than any other frost giant Loki had yet
seen, and almost as heavily muscled as the Hulk. “What?”

No one answered him. Everyone had fallen unexpectedly quiet, and Thrym continued persuasively,
“Laufey was the only surviving child of the last king, as was the king before him. Thrice the Løgting
has been faced with the choice of confirming the last of Ymir’s line, or risking civil war, and now,
though Laufey had two surviving children, which is a blessing,” he hastened to insert, “Helblindi and
Byleistr are just that: children.”

He swept out a muscular arm to indicate Helblindi, slight and only standing shoulder height to most
of the rest of the group. “Is it fair to burden such a young bairn with the responsibility of the crown?”

Against his will, Loki was impressed by this Thrym; he hadn’t ever in his wildest dreams imagined
any of them capable of such skillful politics.

Helblindi started to speak, but Thrym raised his voice and spoke first. “Just imagine, my lords and
speakers, having a dozen or more heirs of the bloodline to choose from, when it comes time to
choose the next king!”

Barton had told him that Frigga thought they meant to make a political alliance by marrying him off,
but he had assumed that it would be to another realm. The idea of marrying one of these monsters…
Dozens of children? No. Absolutely out of the question. It was possibly the most insane plan he’d
ever heard, even including some of Thor’s so called ‘battle strategies’.

He looked around to see several of the giants nodding and talking among themselves and felt a
prickle up his spine and across his scalp. If they forced him to marry this Thrym, he'd slit his own
throat first - or Thrym's if he could reach it.

He needed time to think. To plan. Barton would not let him just run, and besides, he had made the
damned oath, and didn’t want to break it, at least not before he had some time to study the
enchchantment.

Maybe he could use his magic to create a distraction, and get them all off topic? But what? It
couldn’t be too obvious that it was something he was doing, of course, so anything showy like fire or
say, a meteor impact was probably out. Perhaps an illusion of an attack by one of those creatures
that had come so close to ending all of them on that ill-fated trip to Jotunheim? No, that would be
instantly attributed to him, once weapons started passing harmlessly through it.

He crossed off plan after plan after plan in his head, feeling almost as helpless as he had in the
company of Thanos, oppressed by the mad Titan’s seemingly limitless power and malice. Almost as
desolate as in the Void, endlessly falling with nothing to see or strive for.

Except he knew that Barton was somewhere behind him, and imagined him smirking at Loki’s inane predicament. It helped to know he was not alone, and that as funny as the mortal probably found the idea, he would not want Loki married off here on Jotunheim, any more than he wanted him to be married off to some lord of the dwarves or the elves.

In the distance, sheep began to bleat. Only a few at first, then more joined in, their panicked cries sounding alarm to all the herd. Lower and shriller came the moans of the løpers, great elk-like riding beasts that Loki had not much paid attention to previously, except to walk wide of their heavy hooves and sweeping antlers. They had seemed placid beasts, content to shuffle slowly in their hobbles and nibble at the piles of fodder placed in front of them, but now they were rolling their eyes, and lowering their horns, shifting restlessly.

Suddenly, as if from all directions, eerie howls filled the air. All the Jotnar leapt to their feet, looking about wildly. People were running every which way, some towards the rearing løpers, some to herd panicking sheep, and others in search of their young.

What in the nine Hells was happening? Several mages were glancing suspiciously at him, so Loki put on his most innocent face. It did not move them, by the look of things.

While he debated what to do, something pricked him sharply between his shoulder blades.

"What are you doing?" Barton hissed.

"Nothing," Loki responded, turning around to see Barton had poked him with an arrow. The mortal seemed even less appeased by his proclamation of innocence than the Jotun mages, who he could see out of the corner of his eye were still watching him. Their attention was soon diverted though, as Helblindi and his lords and law speakers scrambled about, trying to ascertain what was happening.

He lowered his voice, admitting, "I was thinking about creating a distraction to get them off this ridiculous topic." Barton frowned, and he went on hurriedly, "But I hadn't come up with anything before all the noise started."

Some of the stiffness in Barton’s shoulder’s relaxed, and he opened his fist to show Loki the ring Frigga had given him. "If it is you, you’re not using magic," he granted.

“It’s not me,” Loki promised.

“Huh.” Barton considered, then stepped past Loki, calling loudly up to the frost giants. "What’s happening?"

"Wolves," said Thrym, who had taken up a spear the size of tree, with a long gleaming blade.

Grimacing, the archer queried, “On a scale from one to ten, how much trouble are we in?”

No one answered him. They were all too busy going into action. The oldest of them were retreating, while the younger and more vigorous were arming themselves as retainers rushed to their sides with weapons and armor and sometimes news.

Helblindi and Thrym were having something of a power struggle, as they both sought to give instructions, but it quickly became clear that Thrym was by far more experienced, and more confident. "You, little femme, will go with Asvid and the children to a safe place," he commanded, pointing a finger near as long as Loki’s forearm at him.
Loki clenched his jaw, fighting the urge to bite. "Surely you jest," he said in disbelief. "I am not about to hide from wolves."

"We do not jest and when you are my mate, you will learn to obey."

"I'll see you in Hel first," Loki muttered direly under his breath, staring down at Thrym’s knees, wondering if putting a few knives in them would discourage the marriage plans.

There was a tug on the back of his ridiculous halter, causing the crystal beads to dig into his flesh. Barton had hooked two fingers into the flimsy thing and was dragging him back by it. He could either move with it or have it break.

He moved with it, but protested angrily, "I can fight. They’re only wolves, after all."

"Based on the way these guys and their livestock are acting, I’m betting they are a bit larger than the wolves I’m used to. Have you ever fought giant wolves?" Barton challenged.

Loki shook his head and looked around at the giants, who looked to be preparing for war. "Not really," he said with a tiny frown. "Big?"

Barton nodded. "I'd say really big."

Loki stared around in consternation at the dozens of thin-walled tents. "If they're that big, how is anyplace going to be ‘safe’?"

Thrym was now fully armored, partly in metal and leather, partly in thick plates of ice. He growled impatiently, "Stop talking and take the femme to safety."

"Where do you want us?" Loki’s self-appointed keeper asked.

"The center of the circle," Thrym ordered, raising his deep voice to a bellow that cut through the shouts of confusion and sounds of terror-stricken sheep, “Get the femmes and the younglings, the mages and those who are too old to fight to the center of the Oath Circle, along with as many of the sheep as can be driven in quickly!"

“A good plan,” Helblindi acknowledged, only a little grudgingly, adding his own, “As Lord Thrym says! Go now!”

Given clear instructions, the crowds began to get hastily organized. Children were streaming into the stone circle, escorted by the four mages and a few of the eldest, frailest Jotuns. Many others, almost as old to Loki’s eyes, were determinedly readying themselves to fight. A few of the smallest children wept at being parted from their parents, or from sheer contagion.

“The rest of us will form a ring around the circle and keep them out,” Thrym directed, as they all moved en masse towards the stone circle.

The howls were growing nearer, closing in from all sides. The wild warbling cries from the south being answered by calls from the east, passed on to the west and north, then back again, making it clear that they were surrounded by a large number of these wolves. No matter what size they might be, their numbers would make them a threat.

The widely spaced pillars did not seem as if they would offer much shelter to him, but there was no better place to defend; no nearby high ground, no fortress or caves. At the entrance, Loki paused again, offering to help.
“I am not Thor, but neither am I useless in battle,” he called to the warriors, who were forming ranks as best they could while still allowing sheep to be herded through.

Thrym said sharply, “Femme, you will go with Asvid and the younglings, and the mages.”

Loki started to argue, but Thrym cut him off, looking pointedly at Helblindi and Byleistr. "Those too precious to risk must be kept safe in the center.”

“Lord Thrym is right,” Farbauti said firmly, pushing jos children towards the dubious shelter.

Byleistr went, looking back unhappily, but Helblindi resisted. “I am your king,” the young monarch complained. "I must fight with the warriors. How can I lead if all see me hiding amongst the babies and old folk?”

Loki tended to agree; Thrym was stealing the mantle of leadership out from under him in front of the very people who would be deciding who got the crown.

Thyrm frowned and shook his head. "You are unblooded, youngling," he said slowly. "Were you in the vanguard, all would be looking to keep you safe at risk to themselves and those they must guard.”

Well, Loki thought, that was also true. It had never stopped Thor, or even slowed him down. Which was not an argument in its favor. Besides, Helblidi did only look half grown. Had he ever fought in a battle before today? His face bore no markings to show it, unlike Thrym’s dozens of straight slashes.

The argument was briefly delayed as they all stood aside to give a wide berth to two Jotuns dragging a screaming, bucking løper into the circle. It’s agitation reignited the distress in the sheep, who tried to bolt. One of the mages hurried over, casting a very effective calming spell on all the animals. It was not a spell Loki recognized, but it was not dissimilar to some of Frigga’s magic, in feel.

With the fracas over, Thrym picked up the thread of conversation, speaking in a reasonable voice to Helblindi. "Should you fight and fall, your sibling would inherit the kingship. Would you risk that?"

It was hard to say in the light of only the spelled torches, but Loki thought the young king paled. Jo looked around, finding no yielding in the expressions of jos parent or the guards surrounding them.

“Please, my liege,” one of the liveried guards urged, waving jir towards safety. “You will have other battles.”

“What of the human?” someone called out.

"I can help.” Hawkeye’s hands flexed on his bow, eager to draw.

Thrym considered Barton, then seemed to dismiss him. "He will guard Loki femme, as is his duty.”

Loki and Barton stared; Helblindi frowned and all three began to speak at once.

Loki overrode the others, yelling as he savagely yanked the jeweled pins and combs from his hair, causing the braids and curls to fall medusa-like around his face. "I am not some damsel in distress to cower among sheep and children!”

“If Loki fights, so do I,” Helblindi staunchly asserted, puffing out his chest. “I will not be outdone by a crazed, Asgardian femme who cares nothing for our people!”
“Helblindi!” Farbauti chided.

Thrym took a long step nearer, towering and glaring down at Loki. "Do not shame yourself, femme," he growled.

"Shame myself?" Loki asked. "How could I shame myself worse than this?" He plucked angrily at the jewels he wore. "I was raised a Prince of Asgard. I do not hide behind children."

“Guys…” Barton was looking up at the low hills surrounding the camp, bow drawn taut. Dark shadows flitted through the night, passing through and over the high grass like the wind foretelling a storm. The howls were growing louder.

"Move now!" Thyrm roared. Then, assuming their obedience, he turned and strode off, bellowing orders to everyone else as well.

Helblindi glared once more at his back, and at Loki, then allowed Farbauti and one of his guards to chivvy him off in the direction his sibling had gone.

"Loki," Barton took him by the arm and tried to guide him into the huddled group at the circle’s center. "Let's just do what the big guy says and not make waves, okay?"

“Make waves?” Loki wrenched loose of Barton and gesticulated wildly at the lack of ocean, lake or stream around them. “Out of what? If there was any water I would make such waves as would drown the wolves, this entire place and everyone in it - myself included.”

"Will you just shut the fuck up," Barton snarled, grabbing Loki's arm again and twisting it behind his back. Loki dug in his heels trying to arrest his forward progress and failed utterly. Barton applied upward pressure, sending pain shooting through his shoulder and elbow.

“Ow ow ow!” Loki struggled briefly, then gave in as the archer marched him determinedly toward the center of the circle.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?” Barton hissed, furiously.

"Yes," he snapped. "No . . . maybe? I don't know! Every time I think I've escaped a fate worse than death, a new one comes along!"

He tried once more to free himself and Barton paused out of hearing of the knot of huddled children and wavering elders standing guard over them, though they looked as if they would fall over in a stiff breeze, like creaky old trees with all the sap dried up.

“If I let you go, are you going to do anything stupid? Barton asked, easing the pressure on Loki’s arm slightly. “Because we do not have time for your bullshit.”

“Sorry,” Loki murmured, sighing. “You’re right. I just…”

Barton evidently decided that was good enough and let go, freeing his hand to set an arrow to his bow. "Suck it up. I’m supposed to be guarding you, and I can’t protect you if you’re running around arguing with people and crying ‘woe is me!’"

Loki bared his teeth at the archer. "I don't need guarding or protecting," Loki snarled back. “And I am not whining!”

"Fine," Barton said, turning to try and look in every direction for potential threats. "Suit yourself.”
“Suit myself?” Loki echoed, angrily. Then a slow smile crept across his features. “That is an excellent idea.”

Summoning his magic, Loki gleefully vanished the jewels and flimsy costume he'd been wearing and restored his green and black leather armor. Barton spun around, sensing his use of magic, but his scowl melted to first a look of perplexity, and then wry approval.

“You did say I should suit myself,” Loki commented.

“Yeah. Good idea.” He took the arrow from the bow to use it to point at the group of mostly children. “I know you don’t need protecting, but they do, and I can help, but not if I have to chase after you. So how about this? You protect me and I’ll protect them.”

Loki stilled, his smirk dying away. “You would trust me to protect you?”

“Believe it or not, it isn’t the stupidest thing I’ve ever done,” Barton said.

“Loki!” Helblindi had been watching them argue, and now rejoined them. “You need to come over to the stone with the rest of us. You’re too valuable to get involved in this!”

Loki ignored jir, summoning his throwing daggers.

Shouts and curses, followed by yelps and snarls, then a scream rang out. Loki turned to look, straining to make out what was happening in the poorly lit camp. He could just make out tents collapsing, some crushed, others torn from their moorings by streaks of silvery black, and now and again, huge, eldritch green eyes.

Jotun warriors rushed to meet the fanged, furry tide, hurling spears and blades of ice, wielding clubs and axes and swords of ice and occasionally metal. Wolves fell, but warriors did as well, and they were too few to prevent gaps from opening up.

“Fuck,” Barton swore, launching an arrow at a wolf the size of one of the SHIELD quinjets as the huge, slavering muzzle hove into view between the largest tents in the center of the camp. “Those bastards must be twenty feet long.”

The arrow flew true, how not? and embedded deeply in the beast’s eye. It yipped, faltering and pawing at its face in pain, but a horde of its pack mates were coming hard behind it.

The littlest children began to cry, despite Asvid and the older ones trying to shush them. A sheep bolted past, out of its ovine mind with terror, and was snatched up whole and shrilling by a wolf which had bowled over a warrior wielding an axe that would make Volstagg’s seem a children’s toy.

“Can’t we just give them the damned sheep?” Loki asked Helblindi, who was standing helplessly beside him, holding a greatsword almost as long as himself.

“What, and starve? Anyway, when they’ve digested this meal, they’ll be back, hungry again!” the young ruler snarled at him.

Barton fired an arrow into the beast’s throat. There was a loud buzzing sound, and sparks rippled across its fur as it twitched and convulsed, dropping the sheep, which scrambled away to the relative safety of the rest of the milling herd. Then the wolf collapsed, tongue lolling out, eyes glazed.

Loki and Helblindi both stared.

“That’s new,” Loki commented.
“Stark tech,” Barton replied, setting a new arrow to his bow and looking around for the next target.

“Is it dead?” Helblindi asked.

“Probably not,” Barton said. “Taser’s not meant to kill, just stun.”

The Jotun king gave him an incredulous look, then charged over to hack through the wolf’s neck. Once it was thoroughly dead, he moved back to stand beside Barton, looking around for what he should do next. Outside the circle, the fighting was heavy, but so far the warriors were keeping the wolves at bay.

“Was that magic?” a high, clear voice asked from behind them. One of the older children had come out to watch, looking far too bright-eyed and excited.

"It must be," Helblindi said softly just as Barton barked a denial and Loki laughed, "Magic?Hardly!"

Barton turned with a glare. "It may not be 'magic' but Stark's tech is as good as anything you've got, smart ass, so why don't you take Boda there back to the others while you explain the difference?"

"Why don't you?" Loki shot back, wondering how Barton knew this child’s name.

"Because," Barton growled, "I'm no scientist."

Loki scowled. "What makes you think I understand your 'science' any better than you do?"

"You understood that damn scepter of yours, didn't you?" the archer snarled. "And the Tesseract enough to get Selvig to build that fucking portal." He turned back to the battle. "And stop scowling before your face freezes like that."

"Apparently, not as well as I should have understood it," Loki hissed, hurling a small fireball into the face of a wolf who had slipped between hard pressed warriors and was loping straight for them. It yelped and stumbled, blinded, and Helblindi fired a hail of ice spikes through it, killing it. "And the Tesseract isn't 'science'; it's an object of Power."

"I can do that, too!" The young Jotun spoke eagerly, calling up a decent-sized blue flame of jós own. "See?"

“Interesting,” Loki admitted, staring in wonder at what appeared to be coldfire. "What do you plan on doing with it?"

Boda frowned and stared uncertainly at the ball in jós hand.

"Don't bait the kid, Loki," Barton cautioned softly. "If um... jós temper's anything like yours, you may not like what jò does with it."

He fired another arrow into the gap between the warriors and the ice barricades that were going up. This one burst on impact with a wolf’s muzzle into a cloud of fine dust. The wolf ceased attacking and began to sneeze violently, shaking its head until a nearby frost giant rid it of the problem via decapitation.

Loki whistled appreciatively, and Boda giggled. Barton bowed his showiest bow.

Then, while waiting for his next target, he chased back up the conversational tree. "Why are you saying 'Power' like it had a capital 'P'?"
“About the Tesseract?” Loki asked, distractedly watching Boda’s blue handful of blue flame and wondering if possibly coldfire, usually considered a very advanced spell, was something easier for Jotuns. Maybe for them, true flame was more difficult?

“Were you talking about some other capital P Power?”

Loki twisted his hands through the mass of curls on his head and snapped, “The Tesseract is not mundane science; it's something greater even than mere magic.”

Turning away from Barton, Loki quirked an eyebrow at the young Jotun and instructed, "Throw it.”

Despite being three feet taller than Loki, the kid looked at him as if he was an authority. "Throw it? Where?"

"Oh, for Norn's sake," Loki snarled. "At the damn wolves, of course. Where else?"

"Like this?" The youngster shrugged and tossed the ball high overhead to fall in the midst of three wolves who were harrying Thrym.

One of them began to yip and snap, shrieking in pain and rolling in what little snow still lay on the ground in an effort to put out the fire. This was useless, since coldfire could not be drowned or smothered like normal fire. The other two broke off in alarm, and Thrym put the burning creature out of its misery with the blow of heavy ice club.

Boda yipped in triumph and ran up to look for the chance to throw another fireball.

"Kid," Barton called, “Stay back, out of the way!”

"Return to your parent," Helblindi growled, pointing back to where Asvid and the younger Jotun children stood, surrounded by the armed oldsters.

At the same time Loki whispered, "Well done, padawan." He turned back to Barton. "The Force is strong with this one," he said, grinning.

Barton rolled his eyes. "Oh, for fuck's sake! Star Wars? Really?"

Loki shrugged. "Why not? Jo has potential. Mayhap I could be Qui-Gon to jos Obi-Wan."

"More like Darth Sidious to Anakin," Barton muttered and Loki frowned.

"I do not entirely understand that reference, Barton, but it sounds suspiciously like an insult."

Hawkeye snickered and let loose another bolt. “You’ll have to watch the other movies to find out, I guess. You only saw episode one, or what?”

“What’s a padawan?” Boda wanted to know. “What’s the force? Is it a kind of seidr?”

"I saw a few things," Loki said, calling up another flame and hurling it at a large gray beast. "Not enough, apparently. I thought your people were more advanced.” He turned to Boda. "To answer your question, a padawan is, I suppose, an apprentice. And the Force is a form of seidr."

"A-prentice?" Boda asked, puniting more blue flames into the midst of the wolves. "What is a prentice?"

“A student,” Loki replied. “Or a student assistant.”
Hawkeye snarled. “We were advanced enough to kick your candy ass.”

Loki shrugged. "Yes, but I thought ... when I was watching ... your medicine seemed so advanced compared to the last time we visited your realm and you had transporter stations and ... warp drives ...” He shook his head and heaved another flame a bit wild, wincing as it landed in a patch of dried grass, sending up a brief but startling shower of sparks, quickly followed by a cloud of smoke and ash.

“Warp drive? What the hell are you on about? When did you have time to watch Star Trek?” Barton shot five arrows in rapid succession, trapping one wolf in a net, blinding another, and kneecapping yet a third. Helblindi charged around finishing them off.

“I spent a great deal of time scrying Selvig and the others working on the Tesseract. They spoke often of these things, so I thought…” Loki trailed off.

“Are you fucking with me?” Barton accused, turning to give him a disbelieving look. “You are, aren’t you?”

Loki just smiled.

Realization filled Barton’s eyes as he considered. “Were you spying on me too, at the PEGASUS compound?”

Loki smiled even wider, and Barton swore. “We are going to have words about that later.”

“If we live, of course,” Loki agreed, stepping aside to give Helblindi room to swing his sword at an oncoming wolf.

Boda squealed in alarm and set the thing ablaze with such a strong spell that the huge beast exploded, sending frozen wolf parts scattering. Helblindi looked equal parts relieved and annoyed at having been rescued by someone even younger than jo was.

It put Loki in mind of Thor, in their younger days. “That was well done, but try not to use so much magic, padawan,” he cautioned. “You’ll tire yourself out.”

“Right,” Boda looked abashed and pleased, returning to hurling small fireballs.


“Like what?” Boda asked.

“Well, I’m partial to illusions,” Loki explained. He made Thrym seem to vanish, which confused the wolf that had been closing in on him enough to allow him to run it through unimpeded.

“Oh, that’s good,” Boda clapped jos hands. “But I don’t know how to do that.”

“What else can you do?” Loki asked.

“I can do ice, of course,” Boda explained. “But I haven’t had many real lessons yet. Most of my magic is just tricks.”

“No magic is ‘just tricks’,” Loki corrected. “Watch this.” He summoned up a very simple spell, slowly enough to let Boda grasp the way he shaped his seidr. It was much simpler than fire, after all. Then he hurled the spell at the nearest wolf. It immediately broke off its lunging and snarling, sitting down on its haunches and furiously starting to scratch itself.
“I see!” Boda said. “Like this?” But instead of copying his itching spell, jo wove a tangle spell in a clump of grass, causing a wolf to stumble at just the right moment to lose its head to an ax.

“Very clever,” Loki congratulated. “Always let the warriors do the hard work, if they’re around. They get their feelings hurt otherwise.”

“Do not be teaching jir your ways!” Helblindi had found a moment to pause and catch jos breath, and apparently regain jos highhanded manner as well.

“I will do as I please,” Loki informed his half-sib.

“Me too!” Boda said, defiantly.

Any possible argument was postponed by a commotion from the other side of the circle, and they all dashed to meet a new threat as more wolves tried to get through. They had to fight their way through the madly milling sheep, risking being trampled.

"Jesus H. Christ! How many of these mother-fucking sons-of-bitches are there anyway?"

Barton's exclamation caught Loki off-guard and the fireball he was throwing went wild, landing in the midst of the camp and setting at least one tent ablaze.

"Language, Barton," he chided, running one hand through hair that kept getting in his eyes. Had he the energy he'd magic it into tameness, but they were too busy fighting the damn wolves. "There are children present."

"I am not a child!" Helblindi cried and Loki could almost imagine the young king stamping his foot as he said it. “And there are more wolves than I’ve ever heard of. The packs must have combined, in order to hunt more difficult game.”

"Speaking of ‘children’" Barton said, calmly putting an arrow through one wolf's eye, "shouldn't you two be over there with the other kids?"

"Again," the young king growled. "I am no child. And if Loki fights, I fight. I will not be outdone by a . . . "

Loki arched a brow and smiled. "By a what, pray?" he purred, hamstringing a black wolf with one flying dagger, and hurling the next to slit the throat of what might have been it's twin.

"Fine!" Barton snarled. "At least Boda ought to be back there with his mom, shouldn't he . . . jo?"

"I am Loki's padawan," the kid protested, looking to Loki for confirmation. "It is for jo to command me, not you."

"I am your king!" Helblindi reminded the younger Jotun. "It is for me to command you, not this femme."

"You must realize" Loki said softly, stopping in mid-throw, "that I really am excessively tired of hearing myself referred to as 'that femme' as though people wanted to spit when they said it. It's terribly annoying."

Clint turned slightly. "Could you all stop arguing for like five minutes and figure a way out of this mess? How do we get rid of these monsters?"

Loki and Boda each threw another fireball into the pack. "I would assume," Loki muttered, "that
we just keep killing until there aren't any more. What else would you suggest?"

"You kill the leader," Helblindi said with a smug look at jos half-sibling. "Even a fool knows that."

"Of course, you'd have to be a fool to not know the ways of wolf packs," Loki shot back, irritably. "Even through you yourself said these wolves are not behaving normally."

"That's not helping!" Clint pointed out. "Your mom gave me a magic bow with probably endless ammo, but it's back in our tent, and I'm going to run out of arrows soon. I'm guessing you and the kid can't throw fireballs forever?"

"No," Loki replied. As if to prove this, Boda's next try at producing a fireball was a mere splutter of flame that flickered out.

"Keep doing ice, or other easy things as long as you can," Loki suggested.

"Right," Boda nodded, and went back to more careful, small magics.

"So we take out the leader and see if that works," Barton said. "Worth a try."

"How would you determine the 'leader' amongst this pack?" Loki challenged Helblindi. "Surely size doesn't matter here or that fellow over there would be king today." He indicated Thrym, who had been mowing through wolves like an industrial threshing machine, but even he was showing signs of tiring.

"We are not wolves, to follow the biggest and the strongest!" Helblindi snapped. "We have reason, and traditions."

"So it is the biggest and the strongest wolf we need to kill?" Loki checked.

"Maybe. How would I know?" Helblindi asked.

"You were pretty certain about killing the leader," Loki pointed out.

"All right. So how do I find 'the largest and strongest'?" Barton asked, firing another arrow. Loki stabbed a big brute leaping toward the archer. More were getting through the defenders now. The warriors had been thinned out, and those still standing were getting tired. They needed to end this.

"They all look pretty damned big from where I'm standing." He turned. Thanks for having my back, Loki."

Loki gave a little bow. "My pleasure, Barton. Nothing I like better than killing things that are trying to kill me."

"We don't have time for self-congratulations!" Helblindi yelled. A wolf had closed with him, and his guards, who had been following his orders to stay with the children and his sibling, now came running to help. "Stay back," he ordered, slicing the wolf's throat. "Guard the children!"

"Damn it," Barton muttered, reaching into his quiver and finding only a single arrow left. "I'd use my last arrow, if I thought I could find it."

"Would being higher help?" Boda asked, glancing around at the pillars. "You said you could guard better from up high before."

Barton paused and looked up at the Oath Stone, then back to the circle of taller stones, all of which had warriors and wolves between them now. He shrugged.
“Maybe. But I think I’d need to get up a lot higher than any of these. I need to be able to see the whole battle.”

Loki looked around frantically. “I know a levitation spell, but I don’t think I have enough magic left.”

“I can help.” Boda suddenly chirped, bouncing on the balls of jos feet with excitement. “I can make you an ice platform to look down from, like the one I made earlier to talk with you, but bigger!”

Loki frowned doubtfully. He was now using his daggers more than his magic, and though he was deathly accurate, there were only a few places he could strike the wolves and do any real damage, and he was having to allow them closer to make those.

“A pillar that high?” Loki said doubtfully. “Would not that be a strain for you? We're both tiring, padawan.”

You said small, easy magics,” Boda reminded him. “Ice is the easiest magic I know.”

“But so much? Alone? I don’t know how to call ice, or I would help you,” Loki said.

Helblindi had been listening and cleaning gore from jos sword while there was a brief lull in the battle, at least in the inmost circle. It was still raging at the perimeter and beyond, by the cacophonous din of shouting, snarling, howling and cries of pain from both wolf and Jotun.

Now jo looked back toward barricades of ice around the children, created and protected by the cadre of elders and mages. “Jo doesn’t need to do it alone,” Helblindi said, suddenly looking more confident. “They will help.”

He called out several by name, including his old counselor, Skapti, and signaled for them to step forward. They came without hesitation, though they cast wary glances at the nearest attempts by the wolves to reach them. Loki and Helblindi worked in tight cooperation to end any wolf that came near, with Loki blinding and crippling, and Helblindi delivering the final blow.

As the final wolf within range crumpled to the ground, twitching, Boda and Barton explained to the newcomers what needed to be done. Skapti and the mages readily agreed, and followed Barton to where the archer thought would give him the best view from the least height.

The ice erupted under the archer’s feet in a smooth, flat platform, rising swiftly into the dim sky. The ice crackled and snapped as it grew, causing Loki to break off wolf watching to stare up at the rapidly shrinking figure. He wished fervently that he might wrap Barton in spells of luck and protection, such as Frigga had placed on him at their leave-taking, but he knew well Hawkeye would not wish it. At least not from him.

Something hot and wet struck his cheek, and he jumped away, turning to see a now headless wolf careening away, and Thrym wielding a greatsword fused of metal and ice.

“Pay attention to the fight, little femme, if you will insist on being in it!” he rumbled.

Loki scowled, but wiped the blood from his cheek and returned his attention to the carnage all around them. It looked as if all the Jotnar had been pushed into the circle, herded into a tight group in their determination to protect the weak and wounded, along with their livestock. He summoned the last reserves of his magic and his stoutest spear, leaning it against the tower of ice to be in easy reach, then went back to holding back the oncoming tide of fang and claw.

Above them, Barton was a silent enigma, and Loki was beginning to be worried that their plan was
going to come to nothing. That there would be no way to tell which of the wolves was the leader, if they were even right about there being one. Maybe there wasn’t. After all, Helblindi had said that this pack was far, far larger than normal. Maybe they were behaving in other abnormal ways as well. Maybe it was every giant starving wolf for itself, in which case they were all doomed.

Then he saw a flicker of movement overhead, almost too swift to follow, then the black shafted arrow came to a sudden stop between the jaws of a gray beast that had been hanging back, watching as the others moved into the fight.

The beast roared in pain, but had only a second to shake its great head, trying to dislodge this thing that had pierced its throat from inside, before the arrowhead exploded in a gout of flames and flying wolf parts.

Loki almost tripped at the force of it, and had a moment to be thankful that the arrow Barton had shot at him had nowhere near that much explosive attached.

The attack did not break off all at once, but the wolves charging the defenders became fewer, and less sure, until, at some unseen signal between them, they all began slipping away, vanishing back into the night from whence they came. Unlike their chorus on arrival, their departure was as silent as ghosts, leaving only the sounds of bleating sheep, bellowing riding beasts, crying children and the occasional stifled moan of the wounded.

Then, as the realization of their victory slowly dawned, the Jotuns began to laugh and cheer. Loki managed to stay on his feet long enough to see the tower slowly shrink, delivering Barton safely to the ground, and then his Hawk was there, supporting him by the elbow and leading him away to rest. It put him in mind of their first meeting, how Barton had helped him to escape the collapsing compound.

“You alright, Bo- Loki?”

Boss, Barton had sometimes affectionately called him, while under the scepter’s influence. Loki pretended not to have noticed the slip.

“Just tired. I used too much magic, too quickly,” he explained, as the SHIELD agent helped him to sit on a bench.

Barton settled next to him, too far for them to accidentally touch, and they both spent a few minutes quietly looking around at the utter shambles of what had been an orderly camp.

“Well,” Barton offered in a low drawl, “I’m guessing the discussion of your wedding is going to have to wait.”

Chapter End Notes

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* Jarnsaxa was a figure from Norse myths, a giantess who was a lover of Thor. Jarnsaxa vif is roughly translated 'iron blade wife, so my take on this is that in the distant past, Jotunheim has made martial alliances with other realms through marriage, and the bride was thought of as having been pretty much sold for 'iron blades'. 
Done with his own chore of cleaning and inspecting his bow and the arrows he had managed to recover so far, Clint put them aside and turned his attention to watching Loki stalking around their newly re-erected tent, fussily putting things back into order.

It really wasn’t that disordered; their tent had only been knocked flat by the rampaging wolves, unlike some others he had seen that had been shredded, or trampled, or dragged, or all of the above. The gear that had been hung from hooks on the walls had fallen, and the food and bottles and dishes he and Loki had left on the small, low table had been knocked off and scattered. A lot of people had suffered much worse.

They had both offered to help out however they could, but their offer, or at least Loki’s, had been adamantly rebuffed. In fact, Loki had been soundly criticized by nearly everyone for putting himself in danger. Only Boda’s seemingly shy and gentle mother, the only other femme in the camp, had not given the Asgardian hell for risking himself.

Instead, Jo had launched into him like a banshee for encouraging Boda to join the battle. Jir mate and some of the law speakers had separated the two small Jotuns before their exchange of heated words could turn to blows, and Helblindi had strongly requested that Barton and Loki go back to their tent and stay there until Jo called for them.

Loki bent down and came up with a tea cup, only to have it fall to pieces in his hand. It was the green and gold one that Loki had been using earlier. The demigod let out a soft sound of dismay, and knelt to scoop up the pieces, his hands taking on a faint luminescence. The pieces of the cup floated back into shape and joined, cracks vanishing in a tiny sparkle, leaving the cup good as new. Loki, however, staggered and nearly collapsed, his face draining to blue gray.

Clint jumped up and steadied him, frowning. “Didn’t you say you’d already used too much magic tonight? Cut it out before you collapse.”
Loki grimaced guiltily, setting the restored cup on the table. “I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“Come sit down before you fall down,” Clint ordered. He snagged a pillow and thrust it into Loki’s trembling arms. “Sit down and meditate, or something.”

“I’m too agitated to meditate right now,” Loki tried to hand the pillow back, but Clint wouldn’t take it.

“Isn’t that when you need it most?” Clint asked, sweetly reasonable.

Loki made a face. It was totally stupid how attractive Clint found Loki’s face, even when he was pouting, or sulking, or being a complete drama queen. He’d always been a bit of a sucker for prima donnas. Most of them had had bigger tits, though, and Clint had always imagined that had been the attraction.

Seeing a gold hairbrush tumbled among some piled clothes, Clint had an inspiration. “Sit down and I’ll straighten out the rat’s nest you’ve made of your hair.”

Tucking the cushion under one arm, Loki shoved a hand into the tangles left after he had lost the combs holding up his elaborate coif and frowned in distaste. “I should likely wash it again.”

They both needed to wash, Clint thought. They both stank of adrenaline and sweat and wolf blood, but Clint wasn’t ready to let Loki out of his sight, or see him naked. They were both too worked up, and the camp was still in an uproar. Someone might come in at any time. He picked up a folded blanket for himself and sat down cross-legged, patting the tent floor in front of him. “Later. Sit down.”

"They act as though we did something wrong," Loki grumbled, tossing down the cushion in the indicated spot and flinging himself down after it, sitting with his back to Clint. "Had you not slain the wolves' leader," he muttered, "where now would be their king and all their judges?"

Clint opened his mouth but Loki forestalled him. "That was a rhetorical question, in case you weren't aware."

Barton grinned. "I was aware," he said, leaving the brush in his lap while he started undoing braids with nimble fingers.

Asgard's junior Prince made a little noise of complaint when a knot proved insoluble and Clint had to yank a few hairs loose by main force. The sound did complicated things inside him, and Clint had to pause for a minute and breathe slowly. He wasn’t sure if he liked it and wanted more, or hated himself for even thinking that, and damn it, they had put off their talk for long enough. They were going to hash this shit out if he had to put a tranq arrow through the next person who interrupted them.

“You've been very quiet about all this,” Loki grumbled.

“About what?”

“Everything! You haven’t backed me at all against this Council. You just hang back and watch, pretending to be my bodyguard!”

Clint resented that. “I’m not pretending. I’ll protect you if you are in some kind of danger, I promised your mom and Thor, not to mention Coulson. But I’m not a lawyer or whatever. Hell, Loki, I don’t even know the laws. My job is to guard you, and it’s your own job to figure your way out of this mess or fix it.”
“But I don’t have the first idea how to fix it,” Loki snarled bitterly. “Ow!”

“I may have to cut a few of these knots out,” Clint informed him.

“You can cut it all off for all I care.”

“You’ll just have to think of something.” There were no scissors, so Clint used one of Loki’s razor sharp daggers to snip out the worst of the tangles.

“Short of giving them back their wretched Casket, which is impossible, I cannot think of anything that I could do for Jotunheim that would benefit them more than going along with their plans for a marriage alliance of some kind.” Loki’s shoulders were slumped, and he sounded as dispirited as Clint had ever heard him.

Confused by this change in Loki’s demeanor, Clint asked, “Did you have a plan when you agreed to come?”

Shrugging, Loki muttered, “I had some idea of offering to teach some of them magic.”

“They didn’t seem very impressed,” Clint observed dryly, as he removed the last of the knots and picked up the brush. Loki groaned in pure animalistic pleasure as he started brushing.

Neither of them spoke for a while, but as Clint expected, Loki broke first.

“Barton,” he whined pitiably, “You said you would aid me. Help me think of something!”

About half a dozen sprung into Clint’s mind, all suggestive and most mean. Thankfully they collided into one another in a snarl and none escaped his mouth. Once the traffic jam was cleared, he managed a civil, “All right, I’ll see what I can do, but first we need to discuss a few things.”

“What sort of things?” Loki asked nervously.

“Such as how this accidental bond of ours works.”

Loki flinched. “I told you, it’s not a bond. We aren’t connected.”

“I don’t care what you call it. I care how it’s affecting me.” Clint continued ruthlessly, “I’ve got part of your magic, whether I like it or not, and we need to get that sorted out, but more importantly I have to know what… whether…”

Untangling his tongue, Clint cursed. “God damn it, Loki! I have to know if these feelings are some kind of magical side effect of what you did to me, or the scepter!”

“Barton.” Loki turned his body to look at Clint, which made talking to him even harder. His red eyes were intent and confused. “You are going to have to be more specific.”

Gritting his teeth, Clint managed, “Eir and Mengloth said your spell would cause us to be attracted to each other.”

The alien sorcerer who had wrecked Clint’s life calmly explained, “As I understand it, the magic and the attraction are both caused by the same thing. I gave you a portion of my own life force. That life force is what gives me a long life and magic, and the ability to heal much faster than a mortal.”

“How big a portion?”

“Somewhat bigger than I intended, according to Eir,” Loki confessed with another little shrug. “But I
feel certain it will be of great benefit to you, Barton. You may even survive your highly dangerous
and reckless missions for SHIELD and live to grow much older than ordinary mortals.”

“So I should be grateful?” A flicker of Clint’s previous anger surged up at this hint of manipulation.

“I did not say that,” Loki replied, hunching warily away.

“I’m not. I was surviving just fine without your help. I’ll have you know I’m one of SHIELD’s best
operatives.”

“I know that, Hawkeye,” Loki said earnestly. “That’s why I wanted your help.”

“In conquering my planet,” Clint pointed out, acerbically.

Groaning softly, Loki flaked some dried mud off his leather pants. “I’m getting tired of apologizing,
Barton.”

At the reminder of how dirty they both still were, Barton stiffly got to his feet and started stripping
off his armor, letting in rain down in pieces around the still seated demigod. “Well, I’m not interested
in apologies.”

“What do you want then?”

“I told you already.”

“You’ve told me different things, Barton. First you say you want me to undo what I’ve done, but
then you say you want to have me.”

Right. They’d gotten off the subject again, and damn it, why was it so hard to talk about this shit?

“You are going to land me on a shrink’s couch, I just know it,” Clint complained.

Loki only looked confused by that. “What?”

“Never mind.” And never mind trying to find a good way to say this, Clint decided. There just
wasn’t one, so he might as well just shoot.

“I do want to. Have you.. F-fuck you,” his voice stuttered on the word, but strengthened as he
continued, “But not if it’s caused by this magic crap.”

“Oh. I see.” Loki stared up at him, a frown causing a small crease between his eyes. “Well,” he
licked his lips nervously. “I have to admit I don’t know that.”

“Well… What about you?” Clint asked. “Does it make you attracted to me?”

The ruby gaze dropped and slid uneasily away as Loki murmured, “I wouldn’t know. I was already
attracted to you, Barton.”

“Yeah, but you had that heat thing going on, and you were ready to jump anybody.”

“Not anybody!” Loki denied weakly.

“You fucked the Hulk.”

“He is very virile, and not as unintelligent as he seemed.”
“Yeah… Sure.” Clint regretted bringing it up. He regretted he’d been unconscious and hadn’t got to watch. “Fuck, you are making me crazy.”

“Sorry.” Clint glared and Loki winced. “I do not think it is the magic. I had assumed you just wanted to avenge yourself for what I did to you,” Loki shrugged eloquently.

“You mind-control me and I want to fuck you in revenge? That makes sense to you?”

“Yes?” Now Loki also got to his feet, and was once more looking down at him from his half a head’s greater height, damn him.

“And that’s okay with you?” Clint kept his voice down with an effort. It wouldn't do to have half the camp roaring in here thinking somebody was being murdered.

“It was an improvement on your shooting me!” was the furiously hissed reply.

“Is that why you… Did you… because…” Clint spluttered in outrage, and he wasn’t even sure what about. Pushed beyond his limit, he struck out, aiming a fast uppercut at Loki’s sculpted azure jawline. The royal bastard was taken almost completely off guard, but at the last instant his centuries of training and instincts kicked in and he ducked enough to avoid the full force of it.

“Barton,” Loki fell back and Clint pressed him with a flurry of jabs and kicks, all of which were blocked or ducked or turned aside. “I do not want to fight you,” Loki insisted.

“What, you’ll let me fuck you, but won’t take a punch?”

“This is insane. You are a terrible bodyguard!”

“Answer the damn question!”

“All right!” Ducking two long steps back, Loki dropped his hands, steeling himself. “If that’s what you want, go ahead and hit me.”

Clint hesitated for all of two heartbeats, then spun on his heel to aim a roundhouse kick at the supposedly empty space behind him. His foot connected with a sharp ‘smack’ into Loki’s open hand and was caught.

He tugged briefly before switching to a more verbal attack. “Liar.”

Loki pursed his lips, but defended. “I am not going to be your pummel dummy, Barton.”

“But you’re willing to be my fuck toy?”

“No.” Releasing his boot with a shove, Loki crossed his arms. Barton staggered back but regained his balance, his nerves singing and muscles taut.

“Come at me again and I’ll take you down and sit on you, Barton,” Loki warned.

“We had a bargain.”

“And I am changing it. I am not going to let you abuse me! I have had my fill of such treatment and I will not suffer it from you, no matter my debt, or your desire for revenge!”

“This is not about revenge!” Clint was not a revenge kind of guy. He’d met enough of the type to know that wasn’t him. That way lay mustache-twirling, monologuing super villainy.
“You shot me! Twice!”

“Yeah. Well… You did deserve some payback,” Clint grouched.

“I am not disagreeing, but I am reaching my tolerance,” the prince of two realms informed him huffily. “And how is ‘payback’ not revenge?”

Shrugging some of the tension out of his shoulders, Barton attempted to explain, “Payback is you hit me, I hit you back. Revenge is some kind of longterm evil plot.”

Loki narrowed his eyes, but the corners of his mouth twitched up. “I see. So what did I do to cause you to try to hit me just now?”

“Shit.” Barton tried to get his brain in gear. He knew what it was, just not how to make any sense of it. “I don’t want you to let me fuck you out of some kind of obligation. That makes me an asshole. A bigger asshole than I already am, I mean.”

Chewing briefly on an indigo thumbnail, Loki thought this over. “You’d rather I let you hit me as ‘payback’ than sex?”

“I’m not sure I actually want either,” Clint groaned. “Fuck, I just feel so damned out of control. I can’t stand feeling like this!”

“Hmm.” Loki stared hard at him. “I must confess, that part might just be my fault.”

It was like a bucket of cold water to the face. Clint felt himself gaping. “You admit it? You did this to me?”

“Told you,” Loki corrected him. “This is likely a side effect of your getting magic. You need to learn to control it.”

“What? Hell no. I am not interested in becoming a real life Harry Potter.”

“I have no idea who that is,” Loki sniffed, “But having uncontrolled magic is undoubtedly affecting your emotions, and it will only get worse if you allow it to go unchecked.”

“I hate you. I really, really hate you.”

“It’s not that onerous, Barton!” Loki exclaimed, throwing up his hands in frustration. “A few simple exercises and a regular meditation routine, even if you do not wish to learn any other uses.”

“Meditation? That’s all?”

“And a few focusing exercises. You need to know how magic is affecting you. Right now it is,” Loki paused to come up with a simple explanation. “It is if you had been born blind, and suddenly were given a modicum of sight. You would not know how to make sense of that, and it would undoubtedly cause great stress until you learned to use it.”

“That makes sense, I guess. What if I just want to learn how to turn it off?”

“You can put on that ring my mother gave you,” Loki reminded him.

Fishing the little bag out of his pocket, Clint untied the drawstring and dumped the ring out into his palm. The little circle of dark metal gleamed dully between the brighter marks of the inscribed runes. He slid it onto his left ring finger. It looked like a goth wedding band, but he wasn’t going to wear it on his right hand where it might interfere with his archery.
Loki tilted his head inquiringly, “Well? Does that help?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Clint considered. He guessed he felt a little calmer, but he couldn’t really tell. He was still edgy and confused as all hell, but this was a pretty fubar situation. It was still pretty tempting to punch Loki right in his sculpted jaw… or pin him to the floor and kiss him till he moaned.

Shaking his head to clear the images, Clint muttered, “I don’t feel better, if that’s what you mean.”

“Well,” Loki sighed, “At least you are less likely to start fires by accident while you are wearing it, so maybe you should keep it on till I’ve taught you some rudimentary control.”

“Maybe you just want me to keep it on so I can’t catch you at your tricks,” Clint accused suspiciously, tugging the ring back off.

Rolling his eyes melodramatically, Loki said, “Barton, I applaud your suspicious nature, truly, but I swear to you that I only mean to help.”

“I haven’t started any fires yet,” Clint reminded Loki, “And it doesn’t help with what’s bothering me, so I think I’ll keep it off for the time being.”

“Is what is bothering you your desire for me?” Loki tentatively asked. “I know you do not usually lie with other men, but you did say you perceive me as more female in this form.”

“Yes. Sort of.” Turning away, Clint scrubbed at his hair with one hand. “If you gave me part of your magic, and your healing, is it possible you gave me some other part of you?”

“Like my sexual preferences?”

“Yeah. Like that.”

“I don’t think so, Barton,” Loki replied, too confidently.

“How can you be sure?” Clint insisted. “You’re the one who is into guys, and kink. I never was.”

“Are you interested in any other men, Hawkeye?” Loki asked. “How about Stark?”

“Hell no.”

“Do you wish to be the one submitting? Do you crave being made to kneel and take your lover’s cock into your mouth, and have him hold you by your hair while he takes his pleasure of you?”

Clint would have flushed, but all the blood had gone south, filling his cock to a state of rock-hard readiness at the thought of Loki on his knees, sucking him off. He gritted his teeth, snarling, “Not fucking likely.”

With a too knowing smile, Loki closed his case, “Then whatever feelings you have are your own, Barton.”

That made sense, however little Clint liked it. Fucking feelings. Clint hated emotions. He performed better at everything from a distance.

“Shit,” he groaned, hating feelings, hating Loki, and especially he hated how much he wanted to make Loki do exactly what he’d described.

“Barton,” Loki took a hesitant step towards him, clearly worried that Clint would take another swing
at him.

Determined to keep himself in check, Clint stuck both hands in his pockets so he wouldn’t be tempted to either hit or grab.

Encouraged by the lack of violence, Loki moved within reach, and even put a hand on Clint’s arm. Clint tensed, but refused to give in.

“How do you want to control me?”

It sounded awful, put so directly like that. What kind of jerk wanted to control other people? That was what Loki had done to him and he’d hated it. Hated him for it. Clint couldn’t pry his mouth open to answer, but his silence was pretty much an admission.

“Do you feel more in control if I do what you want, Hawkeye?”

Loki was too close; Clint wrenched loose and moved back. “Not if it’s not what you want.” Because he wasn’t going to do that. Be that.

“What if it is what I want?”

“You don’t. Nobody would want that. I sure as hell didn’t,” Clint growled.

“Within reason,” Loki amended.

This made Clint’s brain overload, thoughts breaking apart and flying around like shrapnel in his skull, cutting a million little holes in his self control and good intentions. “What?”

“If it helps you, I am willing to do what you want, within reason,” Loki repeated.

“Out of what, guilt?”

“Guilt, lust, self preservation!” Loki answered, losing patience. “I owe you, yes! I desire you, I’ve already said so, and you are the only person here who is on my side against all of Jotenheim. I need you, and I need you in control.”

Clint licked dry lips. Breathed in. Watched Loki’s breasts rise and fall under his tunic. Breathed out, thinking of the silky mass of Loki’s black hair flowing through his fingers. Breathed in, whispered in a low croak, “Kneel.”

Chapter End Notes

Questions and comments much longed for!
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Clint and Loki come to some kind of agreement.

Chapter Notes

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These two have been so hard to write, guys. You would not believe how many drafts wound up in the trash bin. But I think this version is at least not terrible, and perfection is the enemy of progress, so I'm posting and slogging onwards. Hope you like it!

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_I should really learn not to bait people_, Loki thought as he hesitated at the order to get on his knees. The careworn voice woke in the back of his mind reminding him that no true prince of Asgard would humble himself so. Remarkably prescient, his little voice. But in truth he did not mind kneeling, or letting Barton use his mouth if that was what he intended. He’d likely even enjoy it, even the twisting shame of his own depravity; he had before. But he feared he was not alone in his sense of self-disdain, and he truly did not want to cause Hawkeye any further harm.

Barton was watching him expectantly, tension in every line of his taut, muscular body. He did not repeat his demand, or insist; he just waited to see what would happen.

It would be churlish to renege. Besides which, he did not believe he had been entirely wrong about this aiding Barton in regaining his mental equilibrium. Pushing down his worries, he lowered himself to the thick rugs that covered the floor of the tent. Through the layers of wool, Loki imagined he could sense the cold of the frozen ground below.

Some of Barton’s animosity melted away at this compliance, which simultaneously pleased and worried Loki. As much as he wanted his hawk to be unruffled, he wasn’t good at taking orders. But no orders seemed to be forthcoming. Barton was only looking at him in that sharp, focused manner of his. It made Loki uneasy.

“Is this all you wanted?” he asked, unable to keep a touch of peevishness from his voice, “Me on my knees?”

“Hardly,” Barton chortled with a wry smile, shifting to a more relaxed stance as he studied Loki thoughtfully.

Loki returned a frown. “Well?”
“It’s a good start, though,” the archer said, his smile stretching to a grin at Loki’s growing impatience. “But I think we should move this to a better spot.”

Taking Loki by the elbow, Barton drew him up and led him through the now somewhat crooked curtains that separated most of the tent from the bathing and toilet area.

“What are we doing?” Loki asked, looking around.

“We are going to get cleaned up,” Hawkeye answered. “We’ll both feel better.”

“But I thought—”

“I know what you thought, since you’ve been doing your best to get me to fuck you.” As if it had worked, Barton went to work on the fastenings of Loki’s armor.

“I was not!” Loki denied hotly, though maybe he had been, as he started to try to help with the spell-locked armor. “Let me, you won’t be able to—”

“No, just be still,” the mortal ordered, as the breastplate came loose in his hands and he set it aside. “I’ve got it.”

Stilling more in surprise than anything else, Loki watched in growing consternation as his armor came off, piece by piece. “You shouldn’t be able to do this. I have my armor enchanted so no enemy can remove it.”

“I’m not your enemy,” Barton replied, gruffly. “Even if you piss me off sometimes.”

“You could have fooled me. Do you often try to punch, kick or skewer your friends?”

“Actually, yeah,” Barton snorted, shaking his head. “We aren’t friends either.”

“I am so crushed,” Loki sneered. “Here I thought we were boon companions. “But what I meant was you must be using magic to open the locks.”

“Oh,” Barton hesitated only an instant, fumbling slightly as his usually steady hands trembled, but then he returned to the task of stripping Loki of his vambraces, setting then aside and looking up. His sharp, piercing gaze saw entirely too much. “You don’t like it any better than I do, do you?”

“That you have a portion of my magic and no idea how to control it? No, Barton, I am absolutely ecstatic about that! I am sure nothing dreadful could happen at any moment.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Barton told him, and went to work on getting him out of his footwear.

“That’s not reassuring,” Loki murmured, putting a hand on his bodyguard’s shoulder for balance as he wriggled out of the knee-high leather boots.

“It kind of is to me,” Barton paused, looking up. “It means you really didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I told you that. Repeatedly.”

“Yeah, but you could have been lying your pretty blue ass off.”

“If I were not so tired, Barton, I would turn you into a toad,” Loki muttered crossly.

“Okay… now you’re lying.” Barton was wrestling with the closures of Loki’s leather trousers. The
thickness of the waistband made the buttonholes stiff and stubborn, even before magic was involved.

“Just let me do it.” Pushing the archer’s hands aside, Loki awkwardly undid them himself. “It’s easier to just change by magic.”

“So usually only you can get it on or off?” Barton queried, watching as Loki skinned out of the pants, leaving him in only his tunic and small clothes.

“Is that safe? What if you got hurt and needed medical treatment? Is that even a thing? I mean, that Lady Eir is a healer, and if you have healers, you must need them sometime, right?”

“Eir could open it, as could Odin,” Loki explained, warmed by the archer’s concern. “And Thor.”

“Thor?”

“He is the bane of my existence, it’s true,” Loki complained. “But he is my brother, sort of. I trust him, at least not to murder me.”

Barton’s lips quirked, as he rose and gathered the tails of Loki’s tunic and drew it up over his head.

“I just didn’t think Thor did any magic.”

The tent was heated with a scattering of magically fueled braziers, but the air felt cool on Loki’s bared skin. His arms automatically rose to cover his exposed breasts. Flustered, he struggled to keep still while Barton divested him of his last flimsy garment.

“Thor can do a few simple spells.” Shivering slightly, though not from the cold, Loki watched as Barton turned away and filled a bucket from the much depleted water tanks. It steamed promisingly as he poured it into the large ceramic basin that the Jotuns had provided as a tub.

Once he collected a cake of honey and jasmine soap and soft cloths for washing, and armful of clean towels, then gestured for Loki to sit in the tub. The water was blissfully warm, but shallow enough not to spill over the sides when he lowered himself into it. Wetting one of the cloths, Barton went to work soaping and scrubbing Loki’s back. It would have felt wonderful, if Loki had been less nervous about what might happen next.

With a quick twist, Hawkeye coiled Loki’s hair up on top of his head and secured it with what felt like one of Farbauti’s jeweled combs. Guiltily, Loki hoped his bodyguard had collected most of the discarded trinkets. He should have thought to do it himself. As much as he’d felt a fool wearing them, it had been thoughtless of him to just toss loaned jewels away like unwanted trash. Frigga would rightfully scold him, and he needed to be gaining goodwill with the Jotuns, not squandering it.

As he moved the sudsy cloth up to scrub Loki’s shoulders, Barton picked up the thread of their previous conversation, “So Thor has some inborn magic, like you?”

“Yes, all Aesir do,” Loki replied. Streams of soapy water trickled down over and between his breasts, reminding him yet again that he was not Aesir. So did all Jotuns also have some inborn magic as well?

“But they don’t use it? Or you have more?”

“Thor has a great deal of inborn seidr.” It was a sore subject, but he supposed Barton had a right to know, especially if he might be learning a bit of seidr. “On Asgard, magic is the occupation of women, not fit for warriors to study.”

“Uh-huh,” Barton answered, sounding as if he had heard more than Loki had actually meant to say. “So does Thor have to do meditation too?”
“No.” Loki had been an idiot, suggesting what worked for him instead of what would suit the mortal better. “Thor uses sparring practice as his focus drills. You can probably use archery practice. I’ll show you.”

“I think I’d like that better,” Barton acknowledged as his hands moved to soap Loki’s breasts with merciless gentleness.

As he struggled not to squirm away from the too-intense sensations, Barton shocked him by kissing the back of his neck. His back arched, and he made a small sound much too close to a whimper. Annoyed, he cupped water in his hands and vigorously splashed his face, making Barton yelp when he was doused as well.

“Cut it out.” Barton’s distracting hands vanished as the man dried his dripping face.

“Then stop being a tease.”

“You started it.” Hawkeye leaned in again, his calloused fingers ruthlessly tweaking Loki’s nipples and sending a jolt of heat to his cock.

“Oh, Norns,” Loki’s breath stuttered, as Hawkeye’s lips and teeth grazed down his shoulder, sucking and biting lightly. “What… what are you doing?”

“I am enjoying making you suffer,” Barton told him, sounding perfectly serious. He stopped his attentions and used a ladle to rinse the slippery suds away. “Stand up now.”

“I can do the rest myself,” Loki snipped, standing up and reaching for the soap, which Barton drew away with an evil grin.

“All right, but then you won’t get a chance to get even, when it’s my turn in the tub.”

“What?”

“I do you, you do me,” the archer dangled the soap and cloth just within reach. “So whatever bits I do for you, you can do for me.”

“I am not your body servant!”

“Don’t you want your chance to get even?” Barton waggled his eyebrows mockingly. “Or should we both stay above the waist?”

As much as Loki did want to get to touch Hawkeye, and run soapy fingers all over the man, this seemed unfair. “You don’t have… I can’t…” He gritted his teeth in frustration.

“Up to you,” Barton said. “But just so we are clear, we are not having sex tonight. Just a little tit for tat bathing.”

“That is not entirely up to you!”

“Yeah, but I’m just saying, I’m not up for it. So do you want me to keep going, or not?” Barton held out the soap and cloth, no longer joking.

“I do not understand you,” Loki admitted reluctantly. “You said you wanted me, but you want to wait?”

“I said when we get back to Earth, and I think I should stick to that. We need to get some things straight first.”
“Like what?”

“You want me to finish or not?”

Loki let his hands drop to his sides and braced himself, then nodded. Barton dipped the cloth into the cooling water and went to work on his calves, soaping his way up. It was agonizingly good when the cloth moved between his legs, then along his hard length, squeezing lightly. Loki stifled a groan as his hips rocked forward to prolong contact.

Barton looked up, frowning, then started rinsing, not lingering to tease now.

“I don’t want you to do anything out of guilt, or to pay me back, or because you need my help,” he muttered darkly. “That would make me someone I don’t want to be. So we wait till I’m sure that’s not what this is.”

He handed Loki a fluffy towel that Frigga had sent in their luggage. “Is it?”

Taking it, Loki wrapped himself and started drying off, trying to think. “I don’t think it is. I’ve always found you attractive, my- Hawkeye.”

“Yeah, but you were kind of out of your mind,” Barton reminded him with a chuckle. “I think I’d better give you time to be sure.”

“I think you just like tormenting me.”

Laughing, Barton turned away and started stripping off his own clothes.

Fastening the towel firmly around himself, Loki poured out the used water into the drain that also connected to the toilet. Despite the rustic conditions of the camp, there was a buried plumbing system, made up of flexible pipes that all funneled wastewater to a tank outside the main camp. It was very primitive compared to Asgard, but Loki had to admit it worked well enough. He drew more hot water and half filled the basin as Barton finished undressing by hopping on one foot at a time to strip off his socks.

He got into the water with a contented sigh, and Loki worked the cloth and soap into a thick lather and went to work on his back. The tight muscles relaxed as he worked, and his fingers found a multitude of old, faded scars. None of them marred Barton in the slightest. Loki felt a powerful urge to trace each one with his fingers and lips, and have Barton tell him the tale of how he’d come by every one.

When he’d finished with his back, Loki moved on to Barton’s lightly furred chest. He did spend a little extra time on the archer’s small nipples, attempting reciprocation, but while they stiffened pleasingly under his touch, they disappointing were nowhere near as sensitive as Loki’s. Nor was his neck or earlobes, though Loki did manage to draw a few soft sounds of pleasure from him, teasing the warm skin with teeth and tongue. He moved down to shoulders and arms, exploring.

Barton smelled of musk and leather and somewhat like fresh baked bread, and whatever he had used on his hair smelled clean and sweet, if somewhat chemical. His skin was flavored slightly with salt and honeyed soap and Loki would have loved to spend hours just tasting him.

Though he was clearly enjoying the attentions, after a while, Barton cleared his throat. “Sorry. The water’s getting cold,” he explained.

“Right.” Loki rinsed Barton thoroughly with clean water from the bucket. It was getting cold.

Without thinking, he warmed it with magic, and nearly fainted.
“What did you just-“ Barton had turned, accusation on his lips, but he broke it off and caught Loki by the shoulders. “Whoa. Easy.”

“I’m fine. Just a slight miscalculation,” Loki promised, putting on one of his mother’s ‘everything’s fine’ expressions.

“You’re about to fall over,” Barton remonstrated, starting to get up. “You need to go to bed.”

“No,” Loki also rose, determined not to appear a weakling in this moment, not in front of Hawkeye. “I’m fine, really.”

It was only a minor spell; one he’d been doing since he’d been barely out of the nursery. His magic had been drained to a mere flicker after the battle. He had overdone it, idiotically showing off, trying to impress… who? Barton? That eager child, Boda? The Jotuns who were to determine his fate? It had been foolish. His seidr had been so depleted for so long, by the fall and all he had endured at the hands of the Chitauri and in Thanos’s ‘service’. Using the scepter and the Tesseract in such a sorry state had done him ill as well.

Sleep, good food and the ministrations of Frigga and Eir had helped him make a start on recovery, but he had not been anywhere close to his previous strength, and he had overspent himself. Gallingly, while his own magic was at low ebb, tremendous but diffuse power from the oath he’d sworn clung to him. It was like being parched with thirst while drowning in thick fog.

“You are not fine, Loki,” Barton shot back, dripping and scowling as he reached for another towel. Not willing to give in, Loki hurriedly used a variation of the woman’s magic technique Frigga had been teaching him to draw a tiny amount of power from the oath magic. It buzzed and tingled alarmingly, and he immediately stopped, assessing. The foreign magic seethed, then calmed again. He let out his breath in a sigh of relief. That had been reckless, but he was somewhat restored.

Barton’s expression had turned as thunderous as his brother’s. “Now what did you do?”

“Nothing much,” Loki demurred, which was at best a half truth. The full truth was that he was not quite sure. He would have to think about it later, though. Now he needed to reroute this conversation. “Are you trying to get out of our bargain?”

“What bargain?” Barton stared at him in suspicion. His body was poised as nocked arrow, sleek and powerful.

Loki licked dry lips and smiled brightly as he could manage as he held up the soap and wash cloth in reminder. “Tit for tat. Wasn’t that our agreement?”

For a moment, Loki thought Barton would not go along with it, but since he was no longer on the verge of falling over, Barton decided to let it go. “Want your payback, huh?” he smiled.

I want to touch you all over, Loki thought, longing and half miserable at the thought Barton did not truly want it. Did he?

“I think I’m owed.”

“Okay. Go ahead.” Barton had no better luck keeping still than Loki had, and though he did not use his mouth bellow the waist (Barton hadn’t, it was only fair), Loki did relish being able to cause the archer to make the most delicious sounds while he worked over Barton’s balls and up and down the cleft of his tight, round ass before, last but far from least, up, down and around the now engorged cock.
Slowly, he used the now warm water to sluice away the soap, leaning in close enough to let his
breath sigh over Barton’s erection and smiling to himself at at least having got even. “You are certain
you don’t want?” he suggested hopefully.

Dragging Loki’s head back by his hair, Barton looked down at him. Heat and want and danger
flashed in his gaze, making Loki flush. An answering warth pulsed between his legs, and his mouth
watered.

But Barton was a tease and a bastard, and only said. “Towel.”

Loki obliged, picking up the waiting towel. Barton took it and stepped out of the tub, scrubbing
himself dry while Loki poured out the water and put the soap and cloth away.

“Come on,” Barton said. “Let’s put some clothes on. It’s too cold to run around in the buff.”

The tent was plenty warm to Loki, but Barton was breaking out in gooseflesh, so he followed the
archer back and dug through his own clothes for something comfortable, choosing a long green tunic
with gold vines embroidered on the sleeves, and the loose black pants that were for sleeping in.

Barton had made a similar selection of casual, loose fitting attire: a white short sleeved shirt and a
type of black drawstring pants that were not as flattering as his usual attire, but looked very
comfortable, and two pairs of socks.

Sitting down on the bed, Barton patted the spot next to him invitingly.

“I am not tired,” Loki tried to protest. He did want to crawl into bed next to Barton, though not to
sleep.

“You nearly fell over a minute ago.”

“It was nothing,” Loki argued. “I am well enough.”

“Well, I need to sleep, and I want to be sure you don’t make a break for it,” Barton told him
emphatically, “You can come rest next to me, or I can drag you out and let Helblindi and his guys
keep an eye on you for a few hours.

“I am not going to run away, Barton. I swore not to on everything I valued.”

“Humor me.” Barton said, implacably.

It felt foolish to refuse, but still Loki balked. Barton was confusing him and he didn’t know how to
react. He wanted to give in, but he did not want to be ruled like some hapless slave.

Watching him struggle with this dilemma, Barton sighed and ran his hand through his messy hair,
making it stick up even more. It was ridiculous and utterly charming.

“What happened to doing what I told you?” Barton inquired with a tinge of astringency.

“I believe I said ‘within reason’,” Loki pointed out, but reminded of it, he padded slowly over and sat
down on the far end of the bed. *Maybe I don’t want to be tempted by what I cannot have?*

Barton, damn him, looked amused. Loki resolved to steal all the covers once the archer was asleep,
and possibly turn the man’s hair bright pink, with eyebrows to match.

Primly, he drew his feet up to sit tailor style. “Happy now?”
Drawing back the covers, Barton got under them, nudging Loki’s leg with a foot. “Come lie down next to me.”

“I fail to see how you are going to guard me if you are going to be asleep, whether I am lying down or sitting up.”

“I’m a very light sleeper,” Barton informed him. “If you’re next to me, I’ll know if you get up.”

Contrarily, Loki pointed out, “I could be doing something more productive than lying around in bed.”

“Like what?” Barton wanted to know. “Everybody else is busy getting things back in order, and they don’t want your help.”

“I should be coming up with some kind of plan! I haven’t got time to waste lying about.”

“You can plan while lying down,” Hawkeye insisted, leaning back against the small mountain of pillows and thumping the spot beside him.

“Fine.” Crawling over, Loki lay down beside Barton, not letting their bodies touch, and pulled the covers over himself. The bed was comfortable enough and the blankets were soft and warm, but he didn’t think he had ever felt less like sleeping, however tired he might be.

“Good.” Barton yawned hugely, stretching. “Wake me if anything happens.” He shut his eyes.

Loki lay quietly, listing to the muffled sounds of the camp as they came through the tent walls. Things had settled down considerably; there were no longer people shouting or calling out for missing family members or missing sheep. The wounded no longer cried out, and all the crying children had been quieted. The panicked sheep had returned to their normal occasional bleat. There were only calm, resolute voices, rumbling in the low registers of giants, as the Jotuns worked to put things to rights.

None of the sounds were threatening, but they were a reminder that Loki was under threat, even if it were not so dire a threat as he’d first imagined when he’d first learned his father was sending him to Jotunheim. The Jotuns were less barbaric than he’d imagined, but still, the idea of wedding one of them made his stomach twist.

“I’m sorry I tried to hit you,” Barton said, unexpectedly. Loki had thought he was asleep. Apparently not.

“You couldn’t have harmed me.”

“You don’t know that,” Barton cracked one eye slightly to glare at him. “There’s always a possibility of a lucky hit.”

Not wishing to argue the point, Loki said, “I forgive you, then. Think nothing more of it.”

“I can’t help it,” Barton exclaimed, burrowing backwards into the bedding and beating his fist against the woolen mattress with his fists. “Thinking about it, I mean.”

“What?” Loki moved closer, curious and perplexed.

“Can’t help thinking about hitting you. Hurting you,” Barton’s voice was low, and subdued by the pillows surrounding his head, but his words were clear enough.
Loki had hoped they were moving past this. Foolish of him, to think he could be so easily forgiven. “It’s understandable, I suppose,” he ventured. “You are still angry with me for taking your mind…”

“It’s not that,” Barton sat up on his elbows, opening his eyes. “I mean, yeah. Still pissed about that. But that’s not it. I can’t explain.”

“You are also angry at me for changing you by giving you seidr without your consent?”

“That too.” Barton flopped back down and sighed.

Hoping to make sense of it, Loki guessed, “But you don’t wish to harm me, because that would make you someone you do not wish to be?”

“Yes. No..” Barton groaned again, louder, then into a pillow. “It’s the sex thing…” he said, very, very quietly, after emerging from the cushions.

“The sex thing?” A little flame of optimism flickered in Loki’s frozen heart.

“I liked what I did to you in Stark’s Tower,” Barton blurted out, turning his face away in shame.

“So did I,” Loki replied, not comprehending. “Though I am sorry I forced you to-“

“No, see, I liked it, but I didn’t want to like it, and it made me want to beat the crap out of you.” Barton turned back to face him. “Sorry.”

“No, my- I mean, it is perfectly understandable,” Loki stammered.

“But I still want to,” Barton said.

“Beat the crap out of me?” Loki was not sure he was following Barton.

“No. Well, sometimes. You are really an annoying asshole, but I get that, so am I a lot of the time. But that’s not what I meant.”

Loki spread his hands in entreaty. “I do not understand, Barton.”

“I still want to… do more. To do things to you like I did in the Tower.” The archer sounded guilty but determined to get the truth out once and for all.

“Ahh.” Loki breathed in deeply, then out slowly. How to proceed? “You know I would not mind?”

“It can’t be just not minding,” Barton struggled to express himself.

“Barton,” Loki rolled onto his side and put a hand lightly on Barton’s chest. “I think-“

“I want you to want it,” Barton said, reaching out to take Loki’s wrist, holding him fast. “You say you do, but I’m not sure I believe you, okay?”


Barton laughed. “Fuck, Loki, I don’t understand it myself. That’s part of why I’m so pissed off and crazy. But the stuff I want to do to you, I can’t do unless I’m sure you’re willing, and I’m sure I’m not going to really try to hurt you, because it shouldn’t be about anger, or revenge or whatever, and I’ve got to get my head straight, all right?”

Leaning over, Loki kissed him softly, full on the mouth. Drawing back, he studied Barton’s
expression of surprise and hopefulness, maybe? “You are a good man, Hawkeye.”

“Oh, man,” Barton relaxed, letting Loki tuck himself into his side. “You are such a liar.”

They lay quietly, both unwilling to break the tenuous peace for so long Loki thought he must have drifted off, but then Barton asked, “What about Stark?”

“What about him?”

“When we get back to Earth, maybe you’d rather have Stark? I mean, he’s rich, and smart, and all that.”

“I—“ Loki was not quite sure what to say to that. He had found Stark very attractive, in more ways than one.

“You’d have to be crazy to want a banged up, piss-poor SHIELD agent over a billionaire playboy inventor,” Hawkeye continued. “Unless it’s out of guilt or whatever, and I won’t let you—”

Putting two fingers to Barton’s mouth, Loki shut him up. “I barely know Stark.”

“You said you found him attractive. You fucked him. Twice.”

“He is attractive,” Loki agreed. “But so are you.”

“And what about Banner?”

“Banner? He was very kind, but I am not attracted to—“

“The Hulk?” Barton asked.

Just thinking of that great green brute made Loki’s body shiver appreciatively. “Mmmmm.”

“Seriously?” Barton demanded, looking aghast and scrambling up.

“What? I can’t even think about other men without you being jealous, and we haven’t even done more than kiss!”

“We’ve done more than kiss!” Barton snapped. “And I am not jealous!”

“Then do not act like it! I can find others attractive, and still want you!”

“Sorry,” Barton’s shoulders slumped. “I just don’t see why. You could do better.”

“Better is a matter of opinion,” Loki sniffed. “And I will attempt to explain it to you some other day, perhaps. Provided it does not prove wholly irrelevant, due to my marrying someone in the near future at the behest of the Jotun council!”

Barton sighed. “Yeah. Right. We’ll have to work on that first.”

“Priorities,” Loki pressed Barton’s knuckles to his mouth for a quick kiss.

“I’m not jealous.” Barton lay down again, relaxing, “If you and Stark want to knock boots, I won’t try to interfere.”

“I assume that is a euphemism for sex?” Loki caressed Barton’s stomach mischievously. “Do mortals like to do it with boots on?”
“It’s just a saying.” Capturing Loki’s hand before it strayed any lower, Barton entwined their fingers and raised it to his chest. “If you’d rather…”

“It isn’t that I would rather… Can I not have you and Stark?” Loki cried softly. “It is not as if any of us plan some lifetime commitment, right?”

After a moment, Clint admitted, “That’s true, I guess. As long as you want me too?”

“I do want you.” Loki proved his point by sliding his body in tighter against Hawkeye and nibbling his earlobe. “I would prove it to you, but you said you wanted to wait…”

“I do,” But Barton turned and kissed him, just a light kiss, but he lingered, his lips close by. “Though you are making it hard.”

“I can make it harder,” Loki insinuated, snaking a leg over Barton’s thigh and writhing against him.

“You keep it up,” Barton said gruffly. “When I get you to Earth, I’m going to tie you down and spank you for everything you’ve put me through.”

“Promises, promises.” But Loki stilled, content that he’d gotten his point across.

Relaxed again, Barton murmured, “You know, it’s too bad you can’t just marry Stark.”

The words exploded like a firework in Loki’s brain, bright and loud and lovely. “Barton,” he laughed happily, “You are a genius!”

Barton stared up at him, eyes wide and round. “What?”
Chapter 19

Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Notes

Hey, I'm not dead or gone! The story will go on, and I will try not to be so slow in updating!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Upon waking in a strange place, in a still unfamiliar form, and with the brand new sensation of someone else in bed with him, Loki experienced a few minutes of disorientation, and it took a few moments for him to be certain that he was not actually still dreaming. But his queasy stomach insisted that it at least was real, and lying still was not helping.

Barton was still sleeping, but the faint light filtering into their tent and the sounds of children playing somewhere outside indicated that the camp was rousing for a new day. Loki briefly considered casting a minor spell to deepen Barton’s slumber so as not to waken him, but decided against it. It would be a violation of the trust they were just beginning to build.

They had talked long into the night, making plans as best they could, and though he had not intended to fall asleep as well, Loki felt remarkably refreshed and optimistic. He would have said he felt as well as he had in at least a century, if not for the fact that he was sure he was about to throw up.

Unable to wait any longer, he slipped out of the bed as carefully as he could. Barton stirred and cracked open one eye, reminding Loki of a sleeping raptor. Hawkeye indeed.

“Everything is fine, go back to sleep,” Loki told him, and sprinted for the toilet. That there was very little to bring up didn’t seem to make any difference, and he knelt, dry heaving for several minutes afterwards.

Of course Barton had not gone back to sleep, but had followed him. He put a hand on Loki’s shoulder and handed him a damp cloth. “What’s the matter?” he asked worriedly. “Are you getting sick? Is it something you ate?”

The cloth was wonderfully cool against his face, and lightly scented with a citrusy fragrance. Loki buried his face in it for a long moment, breathing in the clean, sharp smell, then emerged feeling better. “I’m not certain, but I think this is a symptom of pregnancy.”

“Oh,” Barton replied, looking relieved. “Morning sickness?”

“What?”

“That’s what we call it on Earth,” Barton explained. “Morning sickness.”

“It’s a hormonal imbalance,” Loki said, somewhat irritably. “What does morning have to do with it?”
Shrugging, Barton told him, “I think it’s usually worse in the mornings. You want some water? We use crackers… have you got crackers? You want me to go get Mengloth for you?”

“No,” Loki sighed, straightening. “I’ve already got some tea that should help, and Mother taught me… I’ll be all right.”

“As long as you’re sure you haven’t been poisoned or you’re not coming down with space flu or something.”

“Let me get some tea and meditate on it.” With a gesture, Loki opened the small flap in the ceiling of the tent, and with another he set the air flow circulating to chase out the sour smell of vomit. The fresh air helped, and he breathed in deeply.

“Want me to get some water boiling?” Barton offered, solicitously.

“No, thank you. But if you wish to be of help, you can make yourself presentable and go look for Farbauti.” Speaking with the Jotun consort was the first step in the plan, and Loki was ready to get started.

“Do you feel up to this?”

“I will be. Don’t worry.”

He made a shooing motion at Barton, who shrugged acquiescence and put on his boots and bow, and combed damp fingers through his bed-mussed hair while Loki used magic to heat a cup of water and plunked a perforated tea ball into it, breathing in the herbal steam.

As he parted the heavy flap to leave, Barton called over his shoulder, “Don’t even think about embarrassing me by not being here when I get back!”

“I am not going to run away!” Loki yelled at the now closed flap, then grumbled into his tea, “I’ve talked my way out of worse situations than this.”

The tea helped, as did some bland, crisp biscuits with just a hint of salt and gyin root for flavor. Once he felt certain that the sickness had abated, Loki washed up and dressed in loose black trousers and a long, flowing tunic of gold silk, and determinedly sat down to meditate.

It was not easy. His thoughts kept trying to leap ahead into the future, worrying about his plans and how they might go wrong, but he concentrated on controlling his breathing, and once he was centered, he slowly let his attention expand deeper into his body, utilizing the rudiments of the women’s magic that his mother had taught him.

He was not yet knowledgeable or skilled enough in this subtle art to dare to try and make any changes to his hormonal balances, or anything else, but he could sense the places where his body was working harder, and direct his magic there. Just a light touch, to help things along.

Deep within him, the busy, tiny life was drawing on his magic as well. Loki did not know if that was normal, or a cause for concern. He would have to ask Frigga, or maybe Mengloth. Little as he liked the Jotun healer, Eir had seemed to hold her in high esteem, and Asgard’s chief healer was not an easy woman to impress.

Despite his best efforts to remain in the moment and concentrate on keeping himself centered, a thousand concerns and problems kept creeping in, most of them centered around the child- potential child? growing so swiftly within him. Had his mother known, when she had so cleverly delayed his first panicked desire to be rid of it that it could help him escape the plans Jotunheim was hatching for
him? Or had she merely hoped he would change his mind?

He had always planned to have children, of course, though it had never occurred to him that he might bear one. He liked children. Volstagg had married young and already had several offspring. Loki had always enjoyed doing tricks and spinning yarns for them when he visited.

Was this child even viable? Half-mortal children had once been fairly common, back when the Aesir had been regularly visiting Midgard, but the Hulk was no ordinary mortal, and he was no Aesir. It seemed almost unbelievable that he had even conceived in the first place. If it should live to be born, what sort of child would it be? What characteristics of its strange parents might it inherit? Would it be blue? Green? What if it grew too large for his body? It was surprising to Loki that he desired to see what the babe would be like. What the child would be like as it grew.

Deep in contemplation of possible futures, Loki did not notice Barton’s return, or Farbauti behind him, until the archer called out.

“Loki! I brought you some company!”

Starting out of his reveries, Loki blinked up at the queen consort of Jotunheim, who seemed tall as a tree with him sitting on the floor at her feet. Hurriedly, he got to his feet and bowed a greeting.

“Feeling better?” Barton inquired, taking up a pose that was no less on guard for its seeming casualness.

Farbauti’s tired expression immediately became concerned. “Are you unwell, Prince Loki? Shall I summon a healer?”

“I am well,” Loki promised blithely. “It was only a minor indisposition, and it passed quickly.”

Helblindi’s mother, or parent, or whatever the term was, looked doubtful. “Perhaps Mengloth should have a look at you, just to be certain.”

Since he had been considering doing so anyway, it was easier to give in gracefully. “Very well. I will send for jo in a bit, after we’ve talked.”

“Good. You must take care of yourself,” Farbauti approved, folding down to sit on the floor across from Loki. With him remaining standing, they were nearly eye to eye. “You are still recovering from Odin’s neglect.”

That was not a subject Loki wanted to discuss in the least. “Dowager Consort,” he began, hesitantly.

“Please, call me Farbauti,” jo urged genially.

Loki put on a friendly smile. “Farbauti, then. Thank you for making time to see me. I’m sure you have much to do this morning.”

“Yes, but you are family now, little one,” jo assured him. “What is it you wish to see me about?”

Loki looked to Barton, who gave him a slight nod of encouragement. Squaring his shoulders, he began, “I think it would benefit us all if I knew more about Jotunheim.”

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Phil’s finger paused in attempting to finish his report on the tiny letters of his Stark phone, and he was forced to delete yet again what the dratted device had decided to put, rather than his own words. The smart phone was entirely too smart, in his opinion. He would have much preferred a legal pad and a nice Montblanc ballpoint pen, but this assessment of Asgard was meant to be for Fury’s eyes only. Phil had decided that the encryption on the phone made using it to write his report via hunt and peck slightly less of a headache than trying to write it in a decent cypher by hand.

But he was seriously reconsidering that when his sentence in progress came up with ‘goat marshmallow confetti’ instead of ‘great military confidence’. Maybe Stark had hacked his phone to make it spout gibberish? Delete, delete, delete.

“Coulson?” Natasha called from the main room of their guest suite. “We have company.” Her subtle inflection on the last word warned Phil that their ‘company’ was someone important.

With a sigh of relief, he saved his file, put on his jacket and smoothed down his hair and tie, then went to see who had come to call.

He was only a little surprised to find the queen of Asgard standing there, smiling a kind, motherly smile at him. Her silver satin gown, sans armor bits, was simpler than the previous gowns he had seen her wearing at the feasts and court functions they had attended, or even the outfit she had worn for their tea party in the magical hologram of Norway, and her hair was gathered back in a loose style that flowed down her back. She wore only simple pendant earrings of a clear stone, and a single heavy ring, but she bore herself with such a regal air that she needed no more ostentatious trappings.

“Your majesty,” Phil made a little polite bow. “What an unexpected pleasure.”

“Agent Coulson,” she greeted him warmly. “I am informed you are soon to be leaving our realm?”

“Yes, your majesty,” he nodded. “Tomorrow, if all goes well with the fine tuning today.

“I regret I have had so little time to speak with you,” Frigga said. “As does my husband, but things have been in such a disordered state lately.”

“I understand,” Phil sympathized. “But Natasha is planning to remain here for the time being, and I trust she can answer almost any questions you might have about Earth.”

“Thank you,” the queen said to them both. “But what I most want to discuss are my sons, and the proposed plan of having Loki return to Midgard to make reparations.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t a decision I can make,” Phil hedged.

“But you are amenable to the idea? You can influence your leaders to agree?” Frigga pressed, stepping nearer.

“Why would you want that?” Natasha asked. “Are you worried Loki might be in danger if he stays here?”

Turning to her with a rustle of skirts, Frigga shook her head. “Not danger, exactly. But Loki has always found it difficult to gain acceptance here, and recent events are only going to make things worse. Your world seems less mired in tradition and, while my younger son has committed crimes against you, he tells me he found great kindness and acceptance there.”

“I think we would be willing to try it,” Phil offered. “But doesn’t he have some kind of trial to go through here first?”
“He does, and I believe you may be able to help with that as well,” the queen beamed.

Curious, Natasha said, “Thor mentioned something about helping Loki with that, but I haven’t seen him for a few days.”

“He did not come to me, but from what I’ve heard, Thor is trying to convince our people that Loki did not commit treason.”

Phil asked, “Did he commit treason?”

Frigga sighed. “Officially, yes. He endangered Asgard by inviting a few Jotuns in to disrupt Thor’s coronation. But by such stringent standards, Thor and his friends are all equally guilty. Thor invaded Jotunheim and nearly started a war, and his friends defied Loki’s orders, and Odin’s, to return Thor to Asgard while Loki was regent.”

“If Loki’s as unpopular as you say,” Natasha ventured, “I would guess Thor isn’t having much luck?”

“My eldest has many skills,” Frigga agreed solemnly, “But his diplomacy is as of yet somewhat lacking.”

Phil pursed his lips into a little smile. “If he’s going to be king someday, he needs to get better at that.”

“I agree. His father and I have both tried many times to instruct him, without much effect.”

Guessing where she was going, Phil offered, “Maybe we can help?”

“If you could, I would be most grateful,” Frigga promised. “As would the All-Father.”

Natasha stood up from her perch on the sofa arm. “So where can we find Thor?”

“He’s been making the rounds of Asgard’s taverns,” Frigga told them. “My informants tell me that he was last seen entering a rather rough establishment called ‘The Dragon’s Den’.”

“We will look for him there,” Natasha said.

“I’ll arrange your transportation,” Frigga said, turning to leave. As she exited, she called back. “If Thor’s ideas of convincing people have not improved, you will probably wish to go well-armed.”

“Well,” Phil mused as the door closed that Loki must have learned scheming at his mother’s knee, “This ought to be fun.”

"Are we sure this is the right place?” Coulson asked skeptically, as they both disembarked from the flying boat Frigga had arranged for them.

Natasha shrugged and waved towards the large carving of a toothy, sinuous reptile wound around what appeared to be a beer barrel. "There's a dragon, at least."

Asgardians didn't seem to use anything so mundane as street signs, or signs of any kind. The only
hints were artistic depictions ranging from obvious (a gigantic mural of fruits and vegetables) to unguessable (a spinning orb that constantly shifted colors).

From the outside, The Dragon's Den didn't fit Natasha's expectations of a 'rough' drinking establishment. The neighborhood was at the edge of the city, and the buildings had grown progressively smaller as they moved further from the palace at Asgard's center, but they were still three to four stories high, and built of shining white stone liberally adorned with gold. The streets were narrower but still perfectly smooth and spotlessly clean. Across that street, green fields stretched out towards distant forest. She wondered if that was where Thor and his friends had taken Clint to hunt their dinoboar.

"This is the place, all right," the boat's pilot confirmed, giving their destination a leery look. "Are you certain you wish to go in there? This is the most disreputable inn on all of Asgard."

Completely deadpan, Coulson intoned, “You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy. We must be cautious.”

Looking at the gleaming exterior, Tasha snorted her disbelief, and also her opinion of Coulson’s using Star Wars quotes during missions.

She needn’t have worried, Lucas’s movies had apparently not reached the Asgard, because their pilot nodded vigorous agreement. “You’d be better off going back to the palace and waiting for Prince Thor.”

Checking her Widow’s Bite, along with the rest of her weapons, Natasha started for the large gilded doors. “I’m sure we can handle it.”

Coulson touched the non-lethal gun holstered under his jacket and matched her stride.

A few paces from the entrance, the heavy doors swung open with a crash and a squat figure came hurtling towards them, along with the cacophony of a full-on bar brawl. They both dodged, and turned back to see a bearded dwarf who looked straight out of Tolkien climb back to his feet, spit out two yellow teeth and a mouthful of blood before charging right back inside with an angry roar.

As the doors opened a second time, Thor’s voice could be heard above the din, shouting something about how dare they insult the son of Odin and smashing in their cowardly faces.

“Do we want to sit this one out?” Tasha inquired, looking to Phil. “They are basically gods.”

Coulson drew his weapon and toggled off the safety. “Part of our mission was to gather intel,” he reminded her.

“How to take down gods?” Tasha considered. “Might be good to know.”

“Ready?” he smirked. His smirk was a quiet, understated expression. The Black Widow was one of the few people who knew just how dirty Coulson could fight.

“Clint is going to be so pissed to have missed this,” she told him.

“He got to fight giant wolves,” Coulson said, with only a trace of the anger they had both felt at finding out about that far too late to help.

Grimacing in remembered frustration, Tasha was more than ready to crack a few Asgardian skulls in retribution. “Let’s do it.”
Ever the gentleman, Phil opened the door for her. She went in first, located Thor in the center of the maelstrom, and started towards him. The brawlers ignored her at first, too busy with their own chosen opponents or assuming that a woman was not a threat, despite the example of Sif, fighting at Thor’s side, who was easily beating off all corners, even when they came in twos and threes. Volstagg was still at the bar, refusing to abandon his meal and using his bulk to block, bump aside or crush anyone who came close.

Slipping past hurrying bodies and flying fists, tankards, bottles, tables and chairs, Tasha managed to reach the long bar where Fandral was staving off attackers with a sword that flashed and darted hummingbird swift, rapping helmets and denting breastplates but not drawing blood. His enraged foes went staggering and stumbling back, howling for his blood while he laughed and managed to slice one adversary’s trouser strings so that they dropped to his knees. He fumbled for them, dropping the table leg he was using as an improvised club.

Tasha scooped it up, put on her most doe-eyed expression and held it out as if she was offering it back to the heavily muscled warrior. He goggled at her like a stunned ox, then reached for it. Tasha brought it up hard, smashing the blunt end into his chin and driving his head back with enough force that, had he been human, would have shattered his jaw and given him a probable concussion. As she’d suspected, Asgardians were tougher. He fell back three steps, dropping his pants again, but he was clearly more infuriated than injured when he started back her way.

She braced, but nearby Hogun threw off three burly dwarves using a bench in a way that would have made Jackie Chan proud, then leaped several yards to plough that same bench into the warrior, driving him back and back to crash into the wall, after which he slumped to the floor.

“Agent Romanov!” Fandral greeted her with obvious pleasure and without slowing his sword.

“Is this a private party, or can anyone join?” she yelled to be heard over the noise.

“Beautiful ladies are always welcome!” he called back.

“Women who can fight are even more so,” Sif added, braining a massive, hairy warrior in a horned helmet who was charging Thor like an enraged, axe-wielding buffalo.

Two seedy looking individuals rushed at Tasha from opposite directions, perhaps deciding that a smaller female with no armor and no visible weapons would provide an easy victory. Neither looked Asgardian or had any decent training, but they were both considerably larger than herself and armed, one with a heavy cudgel and the other with a wicked-looking dagger.

Waiting till the right second, Natasha ducked under the swing of the cudgel and let its owner have a double shot from her Widow’s Bite in the neck and groin. At the same time she kicked a fallen chair up to intercept the dagger, then used the chair as a launchpad as she activated her spring-loaded garrotes. She flipped over the knife guy’s shoulders, looping the cord tight and wrapping her legs around his waist.

If he’d had the sense to stab at her legs, he might have managed to dislodge her, but as most people being strangled, he reached for the cord instead, dropping the knife. He was definitely stronger than a human, as was the fellow with the cudgel, who had only been momentarily stunned rather than rendered unconscious. Now he was taking another massive swing at her while she rode her second opponent. Tasha ducked and used a sharp boot heel to goad her ‘mount’ into turning into the swing.

He went down like a felled ox and she leaped off, right at the cudgel wielder, and this time she gave him a taste of the Widow’s Kiss, an aerosol instant knock-out gas she modified herself, based on some of SHIELD’s earlier tries at something that would take out the Hulk. He snorted once,
wavered, and dropped face first into a pool of spilled beer and blood.

With a moment of breathing space, she looked around for Coulson and spotted him behind a cobbled together barricade of overturned tables and benches and doing more observing than fighting, though he did hurl a full pitcher at the back of a furry, apelike man who was trying to wrestle Sif’s staff from her. The pitcher struck him in the back of his head and shattered, splattering liquid that streamed off his hair and into his face. The distraction enabled Sif to head butt him in his blinking face, wrest back her stick and wallop him once, twice, then jab him to land bonelessly on a heap of previously defeated foes.

Sif saluted Coulson with a nod and turned to look at where Thor was smashing through a heaving crowd of enemies, taking down a half-dozen with each swing of Mjolnir and howling with laughter. It seemed insane to Tasha that there were that many people who would attack the prince-heir to the kingdom, but clearly combat without actual deadly intent was a form of entertainment here. Or something. No one was using swords or axes, and Thor was obviously pulling his hammer blows, since she had seen him demolish Chitauri flyers with the thing, and he didn’t summon lightning.

Maybe it was because he was the prince, and beating him would earn his contestants more glory, or maybe because Thor kept laughing the whole time, but he was definitely attracting the lion’s share of fighters. The tavern, which was oversized was like everything else on Asgard, had apparently been quite crowded, but now the number of those able or willing to get back up and rejoin the fray dwindled to the point that those sturdy or lucky few recognized there was no point and slunk away.

Coulson came out from behind his barrier just as Thor emerged from his battle fury enough to notice their presence with surprise. “Son of Coul! And Lady Natasha! I had not thought to see you here!”

“We wanted to talk to you,” Coulson told him, “And see a little more of the sights before I have to go back to Earth.”

“Aye, you mean to leave on the morrow, do you not?” Thor confirmed. “I am glad you were able to join me in this contest!”

“What were you fighting about, Thor?” Natasha inquired. “Your mother said something about you trying to persuade your people to have a better opinion of Loki?”

Scowling thunderously, Thor nodded. “I fear it has not been as yet very successful.”

Sif and the Warriors Three looked variously sheepish and annoyed. “I think we’ve rather given up on talking,” Fandral admitted ruefully.

“Maybe we have a few ideas about that,” Coulson offered graciously, turning an unbroken chair upright and taking a seat.

Thor brightened like a golden retriever at the sight of a tennis ball. “I would be most glad of your advice-“

The swinging door to the kitchen burst outward, expelling a gray-skinned being who towered twenty-odd feet in height. She had the build of a neanderthal linebacker, save for the great sagging bossum beneath the much stained cook’s apron, and she sported a pair of cleavers each bigger than Volstagg’s axe.

“I’ll teach ye to wreck my establishment an’ ruin me business!” she shrilled, striding towards them.

Sif and the Warriors sidled into a defensive flank, preparing to close around the cook rather than impede her.
Thor resumed a firm grip on his hammer but tried charm first, “Lady, I assure you we will pay—“

Blood lust filled her oversized features, and spittle flew from her lips as she screamed, “You’ll pay, all right!” She raised her well-honed cleavers high.

Coulson shot her three times in the forehead with his nite-nite gun. Pop, pop, pop. She stiffened, broad face going blank and slack, then toppled backwards like a tree, breaking three shelves and sending the two remaining unbroken bottles in the place tumbling.

Fandral caught the one nearest him, and Tasha rescued the other.

“Sorry about that,” Coulson said blandly. “I’m a little pressed for time, and we need to make plans.”

“Here?” Sif looked around at the piles of bodies, a few of which were still moaning and twitching.

Phil shook his head. “Privacy would be better. We’ve got a boat waiting.

“Then let us retire to the palace!” Thor suggested.

By unspoken agreement, Tasha and Fandral brought their salvaged bottles along as they all headed out.

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Back in the guest quarters at the palace, those two bottles, both containing a fiery, potent liquor, were divided in various portions with Thor and Volstagg each taking a mug full, and everyone else sticking with sensibly small cups. They all sipped or swilled in silence, till Coulson opened the conversation.

“So, Thor, I take it your efforts to get Loki acquitted on the treason charges aren’t going well?”

Draining his mug, Thor thumped it down on the table, frowning. “Nay, Son of Coul, they are not! Loki has brought this on his own head, with his tricks and his scorn of tradition, but he is my brother, and I do not believe he is guilty of trying to usurp the throne, but I cannot convince anyone of this!”

“I thought your mother made him king, or regent, or whatever, when your father collapsed,” Natasha said.

“That is true,” Sif agreed. “But many believe that Loki engineered the circumstances that led to Odin’s collapse, after getting Thor exiled in the first place.”

Fandral nodded affirmation of this, while Volstagg looked woefully at his now empty mug. Natasha moved to refill it for him.

“Have either of your parents spoken to you about the possibility of Loki returning to Earth with us, as a way of making reparations?” Coulson asked. “Your mother seems to be in favor of it.”

Sif’s eyebrows went up. “Banishment?”

Thor growled, “I will not allow my brother to be banished!”
Tasha suggested, “What if it was something along the lines of your own stay on Earth? A chance for Loki to prove himself worthy?”
“That might work,” Fandral said, considering. “Provided people would actually believe he’d succeeded.”

“What if we stipulated that it should take a really long time,” Coulson offered. “Say, a century?”

“At least that,” Sif nodded.

Looking rebellious, Thor muttered, “It is not right that they should question the All-Father’s judgement on whether Loki is worthy.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t, except that he’s also Loki’s father,” Volstagg soothed, gesturing for Tasha to top up Thor’s drink as well.

With only a little hesitation, she did so. He seemed to have a prodigious tolerance so far.

“Right,” Coulson nodded agreeably. “He can’t be seen as soft on crime, and all that. What’s the usual sentence for treason?”

“Loki seemed to think it might be death, when we were back on Earth,” Tasha added, and watched Thor and the others all flinch at that idea.

“It has sometimes been punished by death, in the past.” Thor acknowledged unhappily, shrugging his broad shoulders. “But that was for much greater offenses!”

“Like trying to murder the rightful ruler and steal the throne,” Fandral explained dryly.

“Exile is much more common,” Sif hurried to assure them.

“To the Isle of Silence,” Hogun grunted.

“No!” Thor shouted, banging his cup down again with such force the last bit of liquid in it fountained out with a splash, filling the room with the fumes. “None go there willingly, and few have ever returned!”

“Even fewer with any wits left,” Volstagg said.

Deciding she would try to learn more about this ‘Isle of Silence’ later, Natasha pressed, “So exile on Earth is a better choice.”

“Especially if we stress that Loki will be gone from Asgard for a long time. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“But I do not wish for my brother to be gone from Asgard for so long!” Thor exclaimed. “He is my brother!”

Coulson hesitated, then ventured, “What if it is what Loki wants? Your mother seems to think Loki might come to feel more at home on Earth. That he doesn’t fit in here.”

“That is true,” Fandral sighed.

Thor glowered, but Sif insisted, “You know well that he doesn’t suit Asgard, or it him, Thor.”

“You’d be welcome to come and visit him on Earth whenever you like,” Coulson promised, rather rashly in Natasha’s opinion.

Thor perked up a little.
“All this might be premature,” Tasha reminded them. “Jotunheim has first dibs on Loki, and they seem to want to use him as a political pawn.” Or a brood mare, but she didn’t think it would be productive to point that out. “If he is forced into a political marriage there, how does that affect his trial on Asgard? Is it a moot point?”

“Nay,” Thor shook his head. “They agreed to return Loki for his trial here. The All-Father has agreed Loki must be punished for his transgressions.”

“It depends on who they marry him to,” Sif said, looking somewhat ill at the idea. “If it’s to an enemy realm… Asgard’s enemy, I mean, the Council would probably want to make sure that didn’t happen.”

“The Jotuns probably wouldn’t want to provoke a war by allying with the Dark Elves,” Fandral argued.

“They would be wiser to try for Alfheim or Nidavellir,” Volstagg was pulling an armload of ripe fruit from the ceiling vines.

“Neither of which is strong enough to defy Asgard,” Fandral used his sword to steal an especially plump orange fruit from Volstagg’s hand and started polishing it on his vest. “There’s nothing that says Loki can’t be married, then sentenced to the Isle of Silence. Or maybe just the dungeon,” he added apologetically to Thor’s glare.

“Vanaheim would be all right,” Sif mused slowly. “Perhaps.”

“They would not accept,” Hogun declared. “No benefit.”

Natasha decided she did need to bring the brood mare thing up after all. “That Lord Thrym seemed to think they should marry Loki to a Jotun.”

Thor clutched his hammer tightly. “They wouldst not dare to coerce my brother into the bed of a frost giant!”

“Thor, Loki is a frost giant too!” Sif said, with some exasperation.

“A very small one,” Fandral could not help but mention.

“He is MY BROTHER!” Thor’s roar was somewhat muffled by his gritted teeth.

“Right,” Coulson got up and found a new bottle of somewhat less potent stuff and poured them all a fresh round. “So let’s work on getting Loki sent to Earth, shall we?”

“Clint proposed the idea,” Tasha told them. “So he’s probably working on Loki to go along with the idea already.”

“Agent Barton is a good man,” Thor approved.

Natasha kept her face carefully neutral; she agreed Clint was a good man, but she didn’t think his motives for getting Loki back to Earth would meet with Thor’s approval.

“I will advance your plan, Son of Coul, Lady Natasha,” Thor announced. “But as the past few days have shown, I have poor skills at convincing Asgardians to give Loki the benefit of the doubt.”

“I don’t think you’ll ever get far, framing it like that,” Tasha drawled.

“Not if Loki is as disliked as you say,” Coulson agreed, sympathetically.
“How should I convince them, then?” Thor demanded.

“You won’t be able to get them to do it for Loki,” Tasha responded, thumping Thor lightly on the chest and smiling. “But I bet they’ll be happy to do it as a favor to you.”

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always to my beta, tilla123, who is my proofreader, cheerleader and sympathetic ear!

Kudos, bookmarks and comments make my day!
Chapter Summary

Loki faces the Løgting.

Chapter Notes

Ha! Not abandoned, just a victim of writer's block, rewrite hell and a lot of procrastination! Anyhow, I hope you guys like it. Probably won't be posting again till after the holidays but I will try not to take so long. I have a plan, and the chapter after the next chapter is written...

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You know, this all reminds me of a really weird game of ‘Fuck, Marry, Kill.’”

Barton’s whispered voice was an insect buzz in Loki’s ear, distorted by the hastily invented spell he’d crafted to mimic a SHIELD com link and allow his bodyguard to offer commentary from a distance with no one else being any the wiser. Some of the mortal’s comment’s had been quite insightful, and Loki was grateful to have the reminder that he was not facing this ordeal alone, but he rather thought the archer was enjoying it far too much that Loki could not readily reply.

“Because at least two of them want to fuck you, four of them want to marry you off, though none of them agree as to who, and three of them would rather kill you,” Barton explained, from his vantage point at the top of the nearest stone pillar. “The rest of them either support one of those plans or don’t really care.”

Having guessed it was something of the sort based on his own observations of the arguments that had now been going on for half of Jotunheim’s day, Loki fought off the urge to roll his eyes at the nonsense, then faked a yawn so he could cover his mouth and hiss a low ‘Shut up,’ into his palm.

“Are these proceedings boring you?” Jorn, the most outspoken of the ‘kill’ or at least ‘maim’ faction, spoke up sharply, overriding Bakrauf and Hrokkvir’s debate on whether it would be better to marry Loki to an upstart Dark Elf sorcerer called Malekith or settle for making him a concubine to either King Eitri of the Dwarves or his brutish brother, Brokkr, since both were already married.

Round as a melon but bitter as poison due to having lost one of his grown offspring in Loki’s attack on their world, Jorn Farthirsbarn would undoubtedly join his grating voice to the ‘fuck’ or ‘marry’ camp if he should ever realize how much Loki would prefer being maimed. Maybe not killed.
It was the Oath curse that was giving Loki mental fits. He was certain he could wriggle out of a marriage or sexual slavery without violating any legal terms that might be involved, but he had made his oath to abide by the Løgting’s ruling. Would losing everything he’d ever loved be worse than thousands of years of being the fucktoy of someone who cared only to own him as prize or breed children on him? He loved Frigga and Thor, would he lose them as in they cast him out of their hearts, or could the curse harm them somehow?

It was if the Norns were punishing him by making all his most depraved fantasies a reality. Most Dark Elves were egotistic and manipulative at best, and if they were ambitious at all, likely to be sadistic, ruthless and scheming. Dwarves, on the other hand were possessive, autocratically inflexible and brutish. Compared to his memory of Stark’s creative passion and Hulk’s unlikely gentleness, Loki shuddered and willed his stomach not to heave, however empty it had to be by this time.

Ever the attentive healer, Mengloth inquired, “Are you growing fatigued, Prince Loki?”

“Not at all,” Loki lied, politely folding his hands once more on the intricately carved, curved ironwood table. It was a one of thirteen such tables, and presently the entire Løgting and all the witnesses were seated at twelve of them which were all placed together forming a half circle that echoed the pattern of the stone circle around them. Loki was seated by himself facing them, with the curve of his table blocking any escape and the Oath Stone itching at his back.

“I am,” Barton snorted softly, still audible only to Loki. “Bored and fatigued both.”

With most of the rulers of Jotunheim looking at him, Loki bit back his impulse to point out that tedium was an occupational hazard for bodyguards and snipers, both Barton’s chosen professions. “Please continue,” he urged, when the arguments did not immediately resume. “I did not mean to interrupt.”

“Oh please don’t let them start again,” Barton whined. “They haven’t said anything new in hours now.”

“We can stop if you are tired,” Thrym declared in a low rumble that was probably intended as kind, but set Loki’s teeth on edge with its patronizing tone.

Thrym, the giant among giants who had suggested Loki should marry him in order to gain Jotunheim’s throne for himself, had been making obvious attempts to woo him all day, which would have been funny had it not been so horrifying.

“I am fine.”

“Maybe we should ask the prince what jo wants, since jo will have to live with the decision,” Imr Thrudnirsbarn suggested. Wizened and wrinkled as a Harvest Festival apple doll, jo was the eldest and Chief Law-Speaker. This did not officially grant him more power than the others, as they were purportedly all equals here, but jo was in charge of the official proceedings, deciding who would speak and when and the various little rituals that helped keep order. Imr was obviously highly respected, and Loki was cautiously hopeful that the elder didn’t seemed particularly inclined to see him suffer.

“Bah!” snorted Ofoti, the most hidebound of the thanes, despite being comparatively young and fit. He reminded Loki of many of Asgard’s lords who were still young enough to go to war. They tended to think in terms of force and it made them simplistic. “We are deciding the future of our realm here. In any case, jo will be happy enough once someone plants a child in jir.”

“Do not be crude, Ofoti,” Thrym growled.
Mengloth cleared his throat, giving Loki a searching look and nervously playing with one of his many necklaces.

“Do they not know you’re already knocked up?” Barton asked.

Loki frowned, growing increasingly tired of biting his tongue.

Now Helblindi, who had said very little thus far, not being an actual member of the Løgting, chimed in with the most appalling suggestion yet. “Maybe we should marry Jo to Thor.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, and the underaged king apparent continued, “Asgard wants Loki back. They have made it clear, and they are the strongest realm with the greatest resources. An alliance by marriage could garner us the aid we need! Maybe even the return of the Heart of Winter!”

This caused a fresh eruption of tumult, louder than before, as some shouted that the Aesir could not be trusted, while others clamored loudly in favor of the plan.

This was not an idea Loki wanted gaining ground. Farbauti had promised him that he would be allowed to speak at the proper time, but he was done playing demure, or penitent, or whatever they had thought he was being while they were not inviting his opinions. He stood up from his raised stool, stepping not on the ground but on the table, which put him at least a little higher than every Jotun seated save Thrym.

“Excuse me!”

Silence dropped like a blade, cutting off all debate as they turned to face him. Loki read hostility, surprise and curiosity in the oversized features, and hints of grudging admiration. He could work with that.

“Revered Law-Speakers,” he began in a strong, clear voice, toeing aside a wooden trencher of dried seaweed to make more room, “I beg you to forgive this divergence from your formal customs. I was told to wait for my turn to speak, but I believe I could save you all a great deal of time by speaking now.”

“Oh, thank god,” Barton approved. “Let’s move this show along.”

There were a few grumbles and mutters about impropriety and how he didn’t deserve to be heard, but the majority seemed willing to listen. Imr gave him a nod, waving for him to go on.

“I would like to address the suggestions that have been raised by this council concerning my disposal, and explain how none of them are the best proposal for solving the problems Jotunheim is facing.”

“You are claiming to know our problems now?” Jorn sneered. “After being here only one day?”

“No, but I know a great deal about the realms you are hoping to deal with,” Loki shot back. “I was raised as a son of the All-Father, and I have traveled to all the realms, and dealt in either war or diplomacy with most of their rulers and policy makers.”

The reminder of Odin angered them, Loki saw, so he hastened on, “You need more food, or some way to produce more food. The best efforts of your farmers and fisherfolk, hunters and herders are not enough, and you have little to trade.”

“We need both,” Geirröd, who had also proclaimed a willingness to marry Loki and become the next king, rose to his feet. Silver-haired but still hale, Jo was older than Thrym, and a head shorter, but Jo...
was possibly more respected, and not just for his years. Geirröd was the overlord of a dozen scattered settlements that were all still prospering, thanks to jos skillful management. “We cannot allow our population to become dependent on outsiders for food.”

Nods and grunts acknowledged jo was right on this, and they were all grim. Thrym and Helblindi both glowered at the Jotun who sought to be their rival in contention for the throne.

“This is why we must make alliance with the Dwarves!” Hrokkvir rose ponderously. His face was deeply lined with sagging jowls like a scent hound, and jos once muscular body had turned to fat that was now melting away and leaving jo saggy and sad. “They have offered to build us artificial suns and provide us with plants from Nidavellir, so we may grow crops underground as they do.

Bakrauf the Bald was yelling, “The Dwarves demand our people as slaves in their mines! We should let the Dark Elves find us trading partners outside of Asgard’s sway! They ask only to profit.” Jo was a tall, lanky Jotun with an androgynous build and face, but jos head was as bald and shiny as a bird’s egg. Loki rather approved of jir for being concerned with the welfare of the poorest and least powerful of Jotun society, who were surely the ones who would end up in those mines if such a bargain were struck.

Yet he could not approve of Bakraulf’s plan either, and not just because he didn’t fancy Malekith’s hands and magic anywhere near him. If the Dark Elves happened to encounter any of the widely strewn agents of Thanos while they searching for that trade, Loki was absolutely certain that no treaty would prevent them from selling him back to his former captor, and that would be far worse. Far, far worse.

He raised his voice to a shout. “No!”

Barton’s whisper in his ear cautioned, “Easy now.”

Taking the advice to heart, Loki breathed in long and slow, seeking calm. His Hawk was right; they would not listen to him if he came across as a tantrumming child.

“The Dark Elves may ask only to profit, but if they control the supply you will be dependent on them, and they are not trustworthy. Their world is a blasted ruin and they live by trading, yes, but also by raiding and theft. It would be unwise to enter any agreement with them without being in a position of strength. Even then it is a risk.”

He turned to the smug Hrokkvir to add, “The same holds true to the Dwarves. They will keep their contracts scrupulously, but they are a highly avaricious lot, and no contract they offer you will be in your favor.”

“Asgard, then,” Helblindi rejoined tiredly. “Or the Vanir, with Asgard’s permission. As little as I like giving them anything more of our realm, they have whole planets just for growing food and game. If they want Loki back, they can come to some accommodation with us.”

Loki crossed his arms and looked aside. “Asgard does not want me, save to try me themselves for my misdeeds there. They certainly will not see me married to their golden prince.”

“I doubt the Aesir will judge you too harshly for trying to wipe us out,” Jorn drawled scornfully. “Unless they were looking forward to watching us all slowly starve.”

“More likely waiting for us to come crawling to them for aid,” Thrym commented, scratching jos battle-scarred chin thoughtfully as jo observed Loki.

This spurred another round of yelling about dying with honor vs. letting their children die as well,
with lots of accusations of idiocy, obstinacy and sheep-fucking thrown around. It was quite vociferous, but had a rather rote, tired feeling about it; as it had all been said and shouted more than a few times before now without any satisfactory conclusion.

Loki waited for things to calm somewhat rather than try to shout down the storm, and it soon blew over. He picked up his narrative threads and continued weaving.

“Yes, they would love for you to come begging,” he agreed. “And few of them would have cared if I had succeeded in my madness.”

He paused, cleared his throat, and inserted, “For which I do apologize,” with as much sincerity as he could muster.

Thrym chuckled darkly, as if it were a black jest. Helblindi glared balefully, as did Jorn and the other Jotuns who had been the most angry at him. Mengloth and Farbauti just sighed and most of the others looked disbelieving but not especially worried about it either way.

“Sorry doesn’t bail the leaking boat,” quoted Hrokkvir, who was from a coastal community. “Get on with it!”

“In other words, ‘Fish or cut bait’,” Barton quipped.

“Very well,” Loki nodded once. It was hardly surprising they didn’t believe in his apologies. He wasn’t even sure if he did or not.

“The Aesir care not for you, save in bragging how they have beaten you in war. They would not be adverse to rubbing your faces in it some more.”

Every blue, oversized face hardened with resentment at this, just as Loki intended. He continued more confidently.

“You might garner some grudging aid for my safe return; the Aesir enjoy thinking themselves the benefactors of all the realms. The All-Father might even agree to a sham marriage if you insist, but it will be no true alliance.”

“Why would the marriage be a sham?” asked a rather hesitant Ortr. The young thane was newly installed as a law-speaker. Jos father, Orfaulgr had the previous holder of that position but had been killed in the wolf attack. Ortr was around Loki’s age, give or take a century, with an affable manner and an open, guileless face. No one had really thought jo was ready for the position, but it was either appoint him or let jos people be without a voice in the Løting.

“Because the crown prince and I were raised as brothers,” Loki explained, substituting ‘Siblings,” when a few of the Jotuns continued to look somewhat blank at this. “We are not going to…”

“Fuck?” Barton suggested blandly.

“Produce heirs,” Loki finished.

The use of the word ‘heirs’ instead of ‘children’ caused a ripple of consternation, especially in the three would-be kings around the table, and rightfully so. Odin and Frigga had married to join Asgard and Vanaheim, and Thor would rule both worlds when he became king. If Loki married Thor and somehow survived, Asgard would consider it only natural that their child would be sovereign of all three worlds.

“Not Asgard, then,” Helblindi snarled, crossing his arms and glaring at Loki as if this were in some way his fault.
You brought it up, Loki thought back at him.

Most of the others appeared to be in agreement about not handing their world, broken though it was, over to their enemies, and they restarted the previous ‘Dwarves vs Dark Elves’ dispute with renewed fervor.

“Quiet!” Thrym roared, slamming down a fist the size of Mjolnir and causing the ironwood table to ring like a dull gong. It worked just as well as Loki’s thunderclap, which was fine as he hadn’t wanted to repeat it, or yell.

“I think you have a suggestion, little femme?” Jo asked, tilting jos head and smiling patronizingly.

Loki sucked in breath between clenched teeth and reminded himself that throwing a dagger into Thrym’s throat would not get him anything he wanted, save possibly the satisfaction of doing it. Instead, he forced a gracious smile.

“I do.” Loki braced himself, lifting his chin. “I propose that you enter an alliance with Midgard.”

“Ha!” Jorn cracked a laugh. “Jo is Laufeybarn alright, promising Midgard is the answer to all our problems.”

The comparison made Loki’s gut churn. “I am nothing like Laufey! I said ally, not invade.”

“Midgardians are weak and primitive,” Hrokkvir scoffed. “What help would they be?”

“The world is rich, isn’t it?” asked Ortr. “My bera used to tell me stories of vast forests and seas full of life.”

“That is true,” Geirröd agreed, nodding. “It’s why we tried to take it in the first place.”

“It is a rich world,” Loki promised, raising his arms and summoning illusion to illustrate his words with images he’d seen on the television in Tony Stark’s tower. Huge schools of silvery fish, flocks of birds filling an entire cerulean sky, vast, thundering herds of some animal that he couldn’t recall the name of, but they were numerous and meaty looking.

“It is a world of plenty. What you need is trade.”

“Don’t get carried away,” Barton warned into Loki’s ear. “We have people on Earth starving too.”

Loki knew that, but it was a problem of disorder, not shortage. He’d intended to fix that when he became king… He shook the errant thought away. Madness.

“What do you propose we trade for these riches?” Helblindi inquired sharply. “It’s the same problem we have trading with Alfheim or the Dwarves. Anything we have to spare, they will have plenty of already. Does Midgard lack for leather? Wool? Lin fiber? Salt? Worked stone?”

“Art! Exotic furs and plants! Hvalur ivory! Knowledge!” Loki shouted, letting his illusions shatter into wisps of green. “The other realms have long ignored both Midgard and Jotunheim. Your world was considered too poor, theirs too primitive and backwards, but Midgard has changed greatly since you sought to invade.”

He began creating a new scene: that of New York City as from above, based on Loki’s view from the SHIELD plane, emphasizing the skyscrapers crowded against each other and blazing with artificial light, and the flowing light ribbons of whizzing traffic. Expanding the image, he added the long, delicate seeming bridges of steel cable and hundreds of ships of every size dotting the waters,
also glowing with lights.

The Jotuns were all staring in rapt amazement. Small wonder, as the Midgardians they had last seen had been living mostly in small villages of one story huts, overshadowed by a stone fortress.

“They have grown wondrously, in numbers and in ability.”

He caused the view to swoop down to street level, cobbling together scenes from his visit to Berlin and from television to show dozens of prosperous, colorfully dressed humans rushing to and fro. He depicted the crowd of rich and elegant humans, and some of the art at the Berlin museum, though not the eye gouging, tempting though it was to remind some of these Jotuns that he was not harmless.

“They have built great cities,” Loki pulled the view up again to Berlin from above. “And they have invented weapons that can destroy those cities in an instant.”

The explosion and mushroom cloud were borrowed from a movie, but when they had been under the scepter’s sway, Barton and Selvig had both told him that such ‘atomic bombs’ were quite real and very numerous, though they had only ever been used twice. Well, three times if they were counting the missile they had sent against the Chitauri invasion site. Since it hadn’t exploded on their own planet after all, probably they wouldn’t count it. His mind-controlled servants had also assured him that they could acquire the components and assemble one for him if he wished. Loki had not wished, thankfully.

“Nice touch,” Barton commented. “Make sure they know Earth isn’t defenseless.”

“How do we know any of this is real?” Jorn demanded, querulously. “You are a well-known liar, Loki Odinson!”

“Loki Laufeysbarn,” insisted Farbauti.

Letting his scenes fade, Loki determinedly shrugged that issue aside. “Just Loki for the time being. And I would be foolish to lie about such things, or expect you to take me at my word. You shall see it for yourselves. At least some of you. Whoever goes to start trade negotiations.”

“How are we supposed to do that without our Casket?” Bakrauf pounded the table in frustration.

“The All-Father would never permit us to use the Bifrost.” Helblindi’s words were a fine blend of youthful angst masquerading as worldly bitterness, and Loki had to fight down an eye roll.

“There are secret paths between the realms,” he reminded them. “I have found many of them, not just from here to Asgard. I should be able to find at least one between here and Midgard. And if they should happen to occur in inconvenient places, your own mages have proven that they can move the entrance.”

Loki very much wanted to know how they did that, and whether that was all they could do. What if they learned to find more on their own? He hoped he wasn’t about to unleash a horde of ravening frost giants on all the realms. Or worse, more assassins sneaking into Asgard when he was not there to stop them.

This offer was met with a thoughtful round of murmuring as they too considered possibilities. Time to remind them that there were other, better forms of revenge.

“Despite all their recent advances, the mortals are still ignorant of much. They have no magic, and their science, while moving forward swiftly, they are still far behind in many areas. Jotunheim still has much of that knowledge. Mengloth and Farbauti have both told me that you still have some
scholars and healers who trained in Vanir schools. That it is a lack of resources, not skill that holds your world back.”

That had been a good tact; Loki could see their pride rekindling, along with their determination.

“Whatver bargains you end up making with Midgard, you will not be the lesser partner. You won’t be beggars, but teachers and mentors to a race that the other realms have also left to languish and get by alone.”

“What do you get out of this?” Helblindi leaned towards him. “I doubt that you’ve suddenly become overwhelmed by a sense of duty to your true people.”

Loki wanted to say that they were NOT his people, and that what he most passionately wanted was to never have to lay eyes on any of them ever again. His breath whistled in his nostrils as he breathed in deeply, pushing his unproductive temper down to vent some other time and place.

“I wish to go to Midgard, to live there. I have formed a connection to one of that realms most wealthy and influential men, and I believe I can use that to facilitate trade of goods and information.”

“What kind of connection?”

“I am with child,” Loki admitted. “Healer Mengloth can attest to this.”

Though he had been unsure as to when or even whether to confess his pregnancy, Loki had to admit their reactions were simply priceless. Confusion vied with outrage and skepticism, but the Queen Consort surprised him by reaching out and lifting him up into a very awkward congratulatory embrace.

“That is wonderful news!” Farbauti exclaimed.

Stepping hurriedly back as she lowered him once more to the table, Loki nodded a polite “Thank you,” to jos excitement and fought down an urge to either take back his words or run away screaming.

“Is this true?” Imr asked Mengloth. “Is it certain?”

“When I went to Asgard to examine Prince Loki, as requested by the All-Father and by many of you here, that I found jo had recently conceived,” Mengloth told the assembled group, speaking slowly as if choosing jos words.

“Of course we all know too well how often these matters go awry, but Loki is still showing the early signs.”

Loki blinked at the healer, his hand going unbidden to his stomach. Was Mengloth warning him, or trying to give him the out that he had so stridently claimed he wanted in jos presence?

“Bah!” Jorn waved that away. “Femmes never have those troubles!”

Others around the table nodded sagely at this, and Loki decided he really needed to have a long discussion with Mengloth about that heat suppression potion. Soon. He was getting the distinct impression that ‘ice maidens’ were considered something like baby factories, and the only other ‘femme’ he had seen was Boda’s parent. Jo seemed to be living up to that reputation, with no fewer than eight children present, Boda being the eldest. Loki liked children, but one was plenty. At least for the foreseeable future.

“You should have told us this sooner,” Imr chided him. “We will need to take this into account.”
“Who is the blod far?” Farbauti asked, still hovering over him and beaming just as Frigga had when she learned of his condition. It was unnerving. Loki would have stepped back well out of reach, but the table’s edge was behind him.

“As I said, the father is one of the most powerful men on Midgard,” Loki said, resuming his seat. Better to be looked down on as child-sized than picked up like one.

The Queen Consort seemed to realize his discomfort and returned to jos seat as well, but did not lose the little smile that was so like Frigga’s. It was a conspiracy of grandmothers.

“A Midgardian,” Geirröd frowned sternly. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Loki was not in jos right mind,” Mengloth reminded them. “He was likely very ill.”

“Should we allow our royal bloodline to be polluted like this?” Obnoxious Ofoti now crossed the line into offensive.

“You have no say in the matter,” Loki informed them. “This child’s father is stronger than Thor, wise as any scholar of Midgard and is compassionate and kind. I did not mean to get a child by him, but I do not regret that the Norns chose to tangle our fates.”

“Femmes,” Hrokkvir snorted. “Always so sentimental.”

“Mind your flapping tongues, Ofoti, Hrokkvir!” Farbauti snapped, coming once more to jos feet.

“It’s no different than the issue with marrying Prince Loki to the Dwarves or Dark Elves, really,” Helblindi’s old advisor Skapti pointed out. “The Løgting can simply make a decree that a halfblood child is not to be eligible for the throne.”

Hrokkvir muttered not quite under his breath, “If the child is half mortal, it likely won’t live long enough to be a problem.”

Loki gathered magic into his hand, shaping a blade of fire and virulence. “None are guaranteed long life, Hrokkvir.”

“Loki,” Barton’s hand was on his shoulder, having dropped from his high perch without Loki noticing. “Don’t.”

Imr Thrudnirsbarn rapped jos ceremonial whale’s tooth mallet sharply against the table, calling for attention and getting it. “I believe we should let Loki go and get some rest while we come to a decision. Unless anyone has any more questions for jo?”

Apparently no one did. Loki let his magic splinter away, surprised and alarmed at this sudden turn.

“I am not tired,” he protested. “I would prefer to stay.”

The Chief Law-Speaker shook jos head. “I believe we have all the information we require. We will let you know when we have reached a decision.”

“But—“ Loki gulped down sudden panic. He wanted to argue. It was too soon. He hadn’t done enough to sway them.

“I can come with you,” Farbauti offered.

“No, it’s fine. Stay.” He definitely preferred the Queen Consort here arguing his case than trying to comfort him. “Please,” he added, giving her a weak smile.
“Very well. Go get some rest and try not to worry.”

“Come on,” Barton took him by the arm as if they were friends and began leading him out. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

There was nothing he could do except be led away to wait.

Chapter End Notes

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As always, a thousand thanks to tilla123 for urging me to write and catching my typos!
Chapter 21

Chapter by Crazy Cat Lady

Chapter Summary

Clint and Loki talk about the future.

Chapter Notes

Okay, fine. Fine, fine, fine. The sex scene didn't work after all. Sorry, sorry, sorry to all you readers who came for smut and keep getting more plot. I have tried to shoehorn it in and failed, so I give up on forcing it. It will happen when it happens. On with the story! Finally!

Also, I am sorry if I deleted your comment on the previous version of this chapter, but I realized that if I just updated no one would get a notice about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clint was getting remarkably good at reading Loki’s shifting moods, which was why he was not the least surprised that as they exited the stone circle, he was jerked to a halt and there was suddenly an illusion of the both of them continuing onwards towards their tent. The guards stationed a few yards away ignored them and watched the false Clint and Loki as they strolled away. The sorcerer flashed him a manic grin and turned to go back in.

Grabbing the waistband of Loki’s pants, Clint prevented him, then hurriedly let go as Loki twisted like a cat about to lash out. Green tendrils of magic wreathed Loki’s fingers, but he didn’t attack. He just glared and let the magic fade as he started to turn again.

This time Clint caught him by the wrist. “Nuh-uh.”

Loki’s eyes flew wide, and he covered Clint’s mouth with his free hand to shush him. Tempting as it was to bite the cool blue fingers pressed to his lips, the SHIELD agent refrained. Getting them caught was the opposite of what he was trying to do, after all.

A few yards away, the towering figures of the two Jotuns on guard hand turned their way and were scanning the area perplexedly. Obviously ears the size of saucers were highly effective. Clint kept still. Loki wiggled his fingers, causing an illusion of something small and ratlike to go scampering away. The guards relaxed.

Loki took his hand slowly from Clint’s mouth. He tossed his head in the direction of the Løgting. Clint held fast to his charge and shook his head. They stared at each other, at an impasse. Of course, the Asgardian/Jotun prince could easily break free, but unless he wanted to resort to drastic measures of the sort that would leave a body on the ground, he couldn’t do it quietly. Clint, on the other hand,
was confident he could convince Loki why staying was a stupid idea, but he could not do that without talking. He was almost tempted to let Loki go back in. He could get enough distance from him and anyone else to use their communication spell, then he could explain in detail what an idiot Loki was being. Instead, Clint was forced to attempt to convey it by moving his eyebrows in a complex up and down pattern.

Long seconds ticked by with the two of them just standing there, invisible but evidently not inaudible. Loki made frustrated faces at him and tried to pull away. Clint tightened his grip and silently mouthed ‘No’ and pulled back in the direction of their tent.

The longer they stood here in the path, the more likely it was that they would be discovered. Someone would try to walk through the seemingly empty space, or given Clint Barton’s usual luck, they would attract an amorous sheep or be dive bombed by a flock of birds. The ‘luck of Hawkeye’ was legendary at SHIELD, but most people thought it was a good fortune that let him do things like jump off of skyscrapers and not die. Only agents who’d gone on missions with him found out that fate had it in for Clint Francis Barton, and he was forever in deep shit but miraculously escaping by the skin of his teeth. He’d learned long ago not to count on luck either way. It was his skill that let him survive.

It started to snow. Loki bared his teeth and pried at Clint’s clutching fingers with his free hand. Clint captured that hand as well. A series of glowing green runes appeared between them, but before he could worry he was about to be turned into a frog, they resolved into words he could comprehend.

‘LET GO. I NEED TO GET BACK IN THERE.’

As if he hadn’t understood that was what Loki wanted. But the runes and the reminder that he and Loki were not actually speaking the same language had given Clint an idea. Careful to keep a firm hold on the demigod with his left hand, he let go with his right and signed, ‘WE GO TENT NOW. OR ELSE.’

Clint’s ASL was only rudimentary. He’d been too close to a mortar round during a veritable shitshow of a mission in the Balkans a few years back and had lost most of his hearing for a few days. Phil had taught him some sign mostly to reassure him that even if the damage turned out to be permanent, he wouldn’t lose the place he’d found for himself. Over the years since, he and Natasha had developed it sufficiently to be very useful during stealth missions.

Loki’s fingers wriggled. The runes shifted, forming new words. ‘OR ELSE WHAT?’

The snow was coming down harder now; if they didn’t move soon, they were going to leave a tell-tale trail. Clint understood, and while he didn’t blame Loki for wanting to have some control over what the Løgting was going to decide, the plan they had come up with relied on the Jotuns believing Loki would keep his word. That was a tall order to start with, and getting caught trying to tip the scales would demolish any nascent trust there might be.

Loki frowned, torn. A light coating of snowflakes was collecting on their hair and clothes, and more importantly on the ground around them. On the plus side, the precipitation was distracting the guards nicely. They began a friendly argument over how much or little of it there would be.

Trying a different tactic, Clint signed, “YOU PROMISED TO LISTEN TO ME.”

Loki pouted guiltily, indicating that he knew very well he had promised but that he was now regretting it.
Acting on instinct, Clint stepped in and planted a light kiss on Loki's lips, then released him. "LET'S GO," he signed.

Loki's almost comically surprised expression turned contemplative, then blossomed into an impish smile. Then he vanished. Clint grabbed, his hand passing through the empty air. One of the Jotuns on watch suddenly exclaimed in startlement, and then both of the giants were staring directly at him.

"Where'd you come from?" One of them asked in confusion.

For a heart-stopping moment, Clint thought he was screwed. He smiled weakly up at the guard and waved. "I just wondered if you knew about how long this might take?"

The somewhat shorter of the two, who Clint guessed was older or more experienced based on his numerous facial scars, shrugged ponderously. "A lot of the law-speakers are eager to get back to their homes," he opined in a slow rumble, "But with the future of our realm at stake, they will take as long as they need to make a wise decision."

The younger guard nodded his agreement, and Clint did too, all the while trying to scan the ground and use his freaky magic detection ability to determine where Loki was, but he saw nothing and could only tell the asshat was still nearby.

The senior guard waited for the archer to either leave or do something besides stand there like an idiot. Clint was wracking his brain for something to say besides an inane comment on the weather when the sheep in the paddock nearest the edge of the camp started a ruckus, bleating and circling as if spooked by a predator.

The guards both instantly turned in that direction, trying to see what was happening. Clint looked down instead. Faint footprints ran for about five feet in the trajectory of their tent and then stopped. Barton hesitated, wondering if this was some trick.

Glowing green runes lit in the footprints. 'STEP WHERE I STEP.'

That would work. It was actually brilliant. Now the footprints would have a plausible explanation if the guards or anyone else should notice them. Clint sighed with relief and quickly started walking in Loki's footsteps.

"Sorry, got to get back!" Clint called over his shoulder as he saw new footprints appearing. He glanced back and saw them perplexedly watching his departure, but they let him go, seeing nothing suspicious.

They made their way through the busy camp like this, Loki a few steps ahead, weaving around obstacles and people in a circuitous manner that made Clint look like a drunken idiot.

"You are asking for it," he muttered through clenched teeth when the prints led him right up to one of the two-story horned løpers and went under its belly before continuing. It turned baffled brown eyes on him as he approached, along with its owner's red stare.

Clint went wide around, catching up with the fleeting footsteps in time to hear quiet laughter as the flap to their tent opened, seemingly of its own accord, and started to close. He quickened his pace and caught it, stepping inside to confront a grinning Loki.

Still annoyed by the near-ruining of their plan and having been made to look like a fool, Clint growled, "What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing. It's just the rest of my life at stake," Loki muttered. "Why should I be worried about a little
"The plan is working. Stick to the plan," Clint said firmly. "Let's eat something. Have we got any more of those little cakes with the raisins?"

"They are not raisins, they are dried drue fruit," Loki corrected him peevishly as he turned to rummage around in their still plentiful Asgardian provisions. He found the gold-inlaid box of cakes and thrust it into Clint's hands.

"Tastes like raisins to me," Clint replied, biting into one and chewing slowly, savoring the sweetness bursting across his celebrating taste buds. "Want one?"

"No, I'm not hungry." His brief playfulness reverted back to anxiety and Loki started pacing.

"You should eat," Clint suggested helpfully. "Or meditate."

The alien mage paused long enough to give his archer bodyguard a death glare of doom, then resumed his stalking back and forth.

Finishing his third little sweet cake, Clint brushed the crumbs from his hands and vest and sighed. As tempting as it was to eat a few more, his SHIELD issue combat pants were getting a bit too snug for comfort. He went and took a seat by the low table, put the box down and started making tea. Attempting to, anyhow. The magical teapot heater refused to work, then flared red-hot, scorching his fingers.

Changing course mid-stride, Loki snatched it away from him, burning himself in turn, dropping the thing and cursing viciously, which made Clint laugh. "Idiot," he commented to the pregnant blue prince Not-Charming.

"Fool," Loki snapped back. He captured Clint's stinging hand in his own damaged digits and muttered a few unintelligible words. Wisps of green light surrounded their joined hands and the pain eased. Startled, Clint jerked away.

"Did you just use magic on me without asking, again?" Clint tried to decide whether or not to be pissed off as he examined his un-burnt fingers. His nerves were still singing in memory, but the redness and rising welts were gone.

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Apprehension and guilt flooded Loki as he hurriedly stepped back.

"Ah. Sorry. It's only a little minor mending. I've always done it for Thor, since we were children. He is constantly getting injured, you would not credit how clumsy he can be sometimes," he babbled, trying to stave off his archer's justified anger. Norns damn him, he was such an idiot, always ruining everything with his foolish impulses. Things had been going relatively well between them, even after he had almost broken his word and ignored his sound advice. Now he had committed a far graver offense for simple lack of thinking.

He braced himself for hot rage, such as his brother’s violent outbursts, or worse, cold hatred like Barton had shown him previously.

Neither came, though the mortal’s expression was tense and suspicious.

"I thought you didn't normally do healing. Are we even more bonded or whatever?"
"I shouldn't think so," Loki said lightly, hoping he was being truthful. "It's a very minor spell, not really healing."

Clint raised a skeptical eyebrow, but there was no hostility. Loki could have wept with relief, if he were not a prince, and were it not foolish to shed tears over nothing.

"It wouldn't fix broken bones, or a deeper burn. It's a child's spell, meant for nicks and bruises." It was actually a mother’s magic, in the eyes of Asgard, but Frigga had taught it to him when he was quite young.

"You still should have asked first, asshole." Barton was not angry, though his tone warned he believed he had cause to be.

"I apologize." Loki would heed the warning. He would think before he acted henceforth.

Cautiously, Loki picked up the heating element and set it under the teapot, bringing it back to life and checking the water level. "What kind of tea did you want?"

"The strong kind. Black." Of course. Barton liked things to be pure and functional. It was one of the qualities Loki admired in him.

After deftly measuring the dried leaves into the two perforated gold balls, Loki took out two cups and saucers. The teapot began whistling and he bent to pour water into both cups. Spicy steam rose up, perfuming the air.

"When we get back to Earth, I am going to teach you better manners," Barton informed him, in that dangerous, sensual way that set Loki all a-tingle.

It was frustrating. Loki poured the steaming water in both cups, he went to his self-appointed guard sliding his arms around the Bowman’s strong shoulders and pressing their bodies close. "Why not now?" He invited, taunting because he was not going to beg.

Barton reciprocated the embrace, one hand cupping Loki’s buttocks. The other hand wound into his hair, gripping just tight enough to make him tilt his head back, baring the line of his throat. Light kisses danced across his pulse, then soft bites, gradually increasing in pressure till they were almost painful. Loki moaned, needing more. He dragged his nails down the archer's back, thankful but resentful of the barrier of cloth and leather in between them.

Barton's breathing had turned rough, and his heart thudded against Loki's chest. His teeth were surprisingly sharp, but there was no chance of him drawing blood. Loki wished it were otherwise. He longed to be marked, claimed by force. His pulse roared in his ears as he feverishly sought the mortal's teasing mouth with his own. Their teeth knocked together painfully, but neither of them paid it any mind. They were far too busy trying to drive each other mad with lips and tongues and hands questing under clothing to find silken skin.

Then Barton made a wordless sound of frustration and firmly pushed Loki back.

"Barton," Loki whined, then realized how needy and base he sounded, and straightened, clutching at his tattered pride. "You need to stop doing that if you aren't going to follow through."

"Sorry," the wretched tease muttered, not sounding nearly sorry enough. "But we could get company any minute here, and we are trying to sell the Løgting on your marrying Stark. How would it look if they caught us fooling around?"

"It is only to be a political marriage," Loki protested, though the heat of his desire was waning like a
campfire doused with a bucket of cold water, leaving behind only cold, muddy thoughts and emotions clouded with hissing steam.

"Norns damn it, you are right. Again." He glared resentment at the archer who was smirking back at him.

"Anyway," Barton drawled, "I want to really take my time with you when we get to play."

From the evidence in his trousers, the man was still eager enough, Loki thought. His will power was tremendous and annoying.

"If we get to." Doubts were creeping back in. Midgard would be a gamble for Jotunheim, and most of its leaders struck Loki as a conservative bunch, as set in their ways as Asgard and most of the other long-lived races.

"Stop worrying. You were very persuasive." Barton ran a calloused thumb over Loki's cheek, then pushed back an escaped lock of hair. It was unmanageable without being oiled.

"You think so?" It was so strange to be praised for his skill with words, without being called 'Silvertonge' or have his diplomacy called 'honeyed words' or 'some other insinuation that he was behaving dishonorably. It was childish to crave it, but at the moment Loki could not care.

"I do. You made Earth sound like the most appealing option by a long shot.

"I wasn't lying," Loki said, defensively. "It really is their best choice."

"And it was pretty sneaky how you implied Stark was your baby daddy," Barton chuckled. "I'm sure they are going to want to make an honest woman out of you. Or an honest femme, anyhow."

"I was honest enough about what was important. If Stark will just play along long enough for me to get a plan together, and SHIELD can introduce me to the right leaders, I should be able to garner Jotunheim a better partnership than any other they could secure, especially with so poor a bargaining chip as myself."

Loki went back and retrieved his tea, which had over-steeped and cooled to lukewarm. Barton, reminded of his beverage, drank his without seeming to care; Loki used a quick spell to reheat his. It was a touch bitter, but not undrinkable.

"You don't think those others, the dwarf king and that dark Elf guy- Malekith, would want to marry you?"

After snorting in derision, Loki shrugged. "If they wanted an alliance with Jotunheim, they would have already made one. The only reason they might want to get their grubby hands on me is as a potential hostage against Asgard."

"You don't seem too worried about that."

Loki shrugged, pretending more nonchalance than he actually felt. "Now that they know that I am a Jotun cast-off and not truly Odin's son, Asgard would not be likely to make any concessions for my safety. Quite the opposite. Even the Dark Elves and the rock-headed Dwarves should realize that."

"You don't think your dad would make sure you didn't get hurt? I thought he told Helblindi and the others they couldn't harm you before he let you come?"

"Well, there was no risk in that. The Jotuns are in no position to argue."
Of course, there had been the chance they would kill him out of spite, or out of vengeance for his attack on their crumbling realm. He supposed they might sell him into an unwanted marriage for the same reason. And he had in the past crossed both Eitri and Malekith and beaten them. Mostly. Enough to not wish to fall into their hands.

"I think the council will go along with the plan of getting you back together with the guy they think fathered your kid." Barton had picked up his bow and was cleaning and inspecting it. "They seem to place a lot of value on kids."

"With the notable exception of myself," Loki snapped. He had no idea why he should be harboring this grudge. It wasn't as if he wanted to have grown up here among these savage, backward people. Frigga was the only mother he wanted, and even if Odin wasn't all he desired in a father, he was still a thousand times better than Laufey.

Barton paused in his polishing to look up quizzically. "I'm not totally clear on that. What is it you think happened?"

"Odin said he found me in a temple after he'd won the war. He said I'd been abandoned and left to die, and he took me as part of some plan to unite our peoples."

"How?"

"He didn't say." The memories of that conversation in the weapons vault were mostly impressions of terror, confusion and rage. Learning that he was Jotun, then that he was the son of Laufey, the villain of his childhood nightmares, then the All-Father's collapse into Odinsleep, Frigga's giving him the throne... No one had wanted him as king on Asgard, despite it being his by right. He'd been surrounded by distrust, suspicion... Thor's friends had betrayed him as soon as they could. Thor had betrayed him... had tried to murder him by throwing him into the Void. No. That was not right. That was the lie he'd told Thanos. Thanos had told him? They had fought, he had fallen, right? Or had Odin cast him out, unwanted, useless. Unworthy.

He'd accused Odin of wanting to make him a puppet ruler of this frozen realm. He'd said Loki was born to be a king, the same as Thor, but how could he have ever been expected to be even a puppet king to a people he'd been raised to fear and despise? A people whose laws and customs he knew nothing at all about? It made no sense.

"Loki?" Barton's hand clasped his shoulder, giving it a little shake.

"Yes?" The swirling maelstrom of confusion and anxiety receded somewhat. There would be time later to unravel his corrupted memories.

"Is that a thing they do here? Leave babies in temples to die? Like a sacrifice?"

Loki blinked. "I don't know." He had no clue what Jotun religious practices were. The Aesir considered themselves gods, of a sort, but they worshiped none. They acknowledged the Norns, and some claimed there were mysterious higher powers, who sat above in shadow, but they made no efforts to seek their favor or appease them.

"But you say it was just after a war. Like right after a battle?" Barton once again interrupted his wandering speculations.

"Yes. I think so. Why?"

"Are temples sacred places in a war? On Earth we have this tradition of holy ground, and sanctuary, where people can hide out in churches and be safe from... uh... I'm not sure how it really works. I
mean, it used to be a tradition. I haven't ever heard of it being done in modern times," Barton rambled to an apologetic stop, looking embarrassed.

"You think Odin did steal me?" Accusations rang in his memory, raging at his father, "So I am no more than another stolen relic, locked up here until you might have use of me?"

Barton waved both hands in denial. "No idea. I'm just saying it's a weird place to abandon a baby. Did he even ask any of the Jotuns if anyone was looking for you? Or tell anyone about you? I mean, you've met Farbauti. Don't you think jo would have raised you?"

Would jo? What about the mage, or the bodyguard who had likely been his birth parent, according to his Hvnir heritage lines? He'd assumed he'd been discarded for his small size, like the runt of the litter thrown in a sack to drown, but that was wrong. He'd seen Asvid, the other femme, being treated with great fondness and indulgence by nearly everyone as jo interacted with jos mate and brood of children. To have so many children, Asvid must be older than him, so femmes had not been being tossed away like refuse before the war and the subsequent famine.

But Odin had not known about femmes, or mating cycles. The All-Father was supposed to be all-wise and all-knowing, but he was fallible. What had that plan been? Why had Odin rejected it?

"I don't know," Loki repeated. "And it doesn't matter," he insisted. "What's done is done." He would not worry at the missing gaps in his knowledge like a missing tooth. It was pointless. He could ask Odin when he returned to Asgard, but how could he trust that the answers would be the truth?

"I guess." Barton shrugged acquiescence. "I just wondered."

"Why should you care about my past?"

"I dunno." The archer gave his gleaming bow a final wipe with his cloth and set both aside. "It's just, I had a really shitty family, you know?"

"Yes, you told me."

Barton scowled at the reminder of having spilled so many secrets under the influence of Thanos' scepter.

"Sorry."

"Yeah. Whatever. It's just, I don't know much about how real families are supposed to work."

"Real families?" Loki had thought his family real enough until it had all been revealed as a lie. Was it all a lie? Frigga... but she had lied right along with Odin. She was not a subservient woman, why had she gone along with it?

"The kind that doesn't fuck their kids up," Barton clarified.

Volstagg had a large brood of offspring who all seemed happy enough, but Loki had no ideas of how he and his wife managed it. Privately he had thought the whole lot of them too simple-minded to worry, though he did enjoy entertaining the children with songs and stories and illusions.

"Why are we discussing this now?" Loki asked, pushing away the thought sharing those same tales and flashy tricks for a child of his own.

Barton glanced at the tent's closed flaps meaningfully.
"No one is listening," Loki informed him, after a quick scrying.

"Are you going to keep it? I know you need the Løgting to think you are, but are you?"

"I have not decided." His hands stole to his abdomen, where the tiny life was still growing. He had yet to learn a safe way of ending the pregnancy, but it was still very early. There was plenty of time to decide. "Why do you ask?"

Did Barton not wish him to? It was a freakish thing, after all. For all that his body was partly female right now, Loki still thought of himself as a man. Was Barton offended by the idea? Would he be repelled when Loki's belly had swollen like a ripening melon? For that matter, was Loki disturbed by that idea? It was alarming to consider.

"Does the idea of me having a child disgust you?"

"No!" The mortal denied fervently. "It's not that. I mean, it's weird, but what about this whole thing between you and me isn't weird?"

He barked a laugh, and Loki's lips twitched into a smile. "True."

"I'm just saying, a kid shouldn't be some kind of bargaining chip."

"Ah." Loki's momentary relief dissipated, leaving him unexpectedly wistful. "Unfortunately, all children born to royalty are destined to be bargaining chips of some sort, sooner or later. But if I do go through with having this child, or any child, it will not be only a bargaining chip."

Was he not already using the babe, to sway the decision of the Jotun law-speakers? Surely he need not feel guilty about that. It was hardly as if the little ball of multiplying cells could know or care.

Frigga had always told her boys that they would have a say in who they wed, even if they would be expected to choose mates who would benefit the welfare of the Nine Realms. Loki intended to make sure the Jotuns did not make a liar out her. Again.

Barton's gaze upon him was shrewd, watchful, but for what? "Do you want to have it?"

The question was too direct. Loki evaded. "I don't know. I can't decide now."

"All right," Barton nodded. "Okay. You want to do anything while we wait? Or I could go see if it looks like things are wrapping up over there?"

As anxious as he was for news, Loki didn't want to be left alone right now.

As if summoned by his wish, footsteps and a rustle of cloth alerted them both to someone's arrival, and they both turned to see Helblindi ducking into their tent, followed by his ancient advisor, Skapti. The young king's expression was dour, but since he disliked Loki, it was difficult to know if that was good or ill. Skapti looked pleased though, so Loki dared to hope.

"Well?" he inquired. "Have they decided?"

"Yes," Helblindi grunted. "And you are the luckiest bastard ever, if you ask me."

"Midgard then?" Loki beamed, which sent his younger half-sibling's mood from sour to incensed, by the look in his eyes.

"You had better not be lying about being able to make this work!"
Barton's smirk was a small, private thing, just for Loki, who purred, "I wouldn't dream of it."
"You'd better not."

Skapti cleared his throat meaningfully. "My king?" he prompted.
"Oh, right." Helblindi grinned nastily. "There is one condition."

There were always conditions. Loki tried not to deflate. "Yes?"
"You have to find us a usable route to Midgard first."

"Of course." Loki smiled and raised his chin, hoping it was not going to take as long as some of his other searches for secret pathways had. He did not want to be stuck for a year or more on this frozen rock.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, dear readers, for your patience. I know it's been way too long!

Also thanks as always to tilla123 for beta reading, cheerleading, and pushing me out of my slump!

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