**A Tale of Two Lokis**

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**Summary**

Thor and Loki were not the first of Odin's loved ones to bear those names. After the events of the movie, Loki is planning his next moves when he discovers a frost giant imprisoned in a volcano, who proves to be both the uncle he was named for and Laufey's first child. Soon Loki has a new mentor, Asgard is shaking off isolationist tendencies, Jotunheim is receiving foreign aid, and Earth is suddenly and vividly reacquainted with the existence of aliens....

**Notes**

We were partially inspired by some of the theories proposed on the TV Tropes WMG page for the movie. We have taken the movie and combined it with the Eddas, the Gesta Danorum, and bits and pieces from other Marvel sources. We're having a lot of fun with it and hope you enjoy the result.
The room was blank white and sparsely furnished but, aside from the searing heat, not uncomfortable. Not at all what Loki would have expected to find inside a dormant volcano, even one he’d sensed the magic from while still a mile away. Normally no one came to this part of Asgard; he’d been looking to create a hideout from which he could reach the city without world-walking or he wouldn’t have been there himself. Enchantments on a volcano had been unexpected, this rather ordinary room more so. But what made him stare in shock were the two on the bed. An ice giant and an Asgardian woman sitting beside one another and curled together like lovers.

The ice giant looked up and smiled, a welcoming look that seemed strange on that cold, blue face. ‘You’re a new one,’ he said. ‘Did Odin get tired of visiting me?’

A prisoner, then, thought Loki. That at least made sense. ‘He did not send me,’ he said, cautiously. ‘May I ask who you are?’

‘Loki Laufeyson,’ said the giant. ‘And this is Sigyn, my wife.’

Loki took a moment to gather himself, to suppress whatever startled reaction might have pushed its way forward. It seemed he had been recognised after all. ‘You are not,’ he said. ‘You are mocking me.’

The giant only looked puzzled. ‘In what way? If you have heard of me then you must see I am telling the truth. How many giants do you think Odin leaves in volcanoes?’

‘I am Loki. And Laufey…is my father.’ Loki was sure the effort it took to say that was visible.

The frost giant’s eyes widened in surprise. ‘Then I think it was Laufey who was mocking you, to name one of his runts after the last. Take a seat, little brother, and tell me how you came to be here.’

‘Odin named me. I am more his son than Laufey’s,’ said Loki, the impulse to deny kinship with monsters overwhelming more sensible reticence.

The shock in those strange red eyes was the first strong reaction he’d got from the prisoner and Loki felt better for it, more in control. The Asgardian woman, Sigyn, put her hand on the giant’s arm.

‘Unlike him to be nostalgic,’ said the giant. ‘Perhaps you’d rather think of me as your uncle, then. Odin and I were sworn brothers.’

Oh. Loki had been told that he’d been named for an uncle, a great magician, as Thor had been named for an older brother who died in the last battle against the frost giants. It had been rather vaguely implied that the elder Loki had too. No one had mentioned he’d been named for a frost giant. It seemed it was Odin who had been mocking him.

Sigyn got up. ‘Please sit down,’ she said. ‘I’ll bring us all some wine.’

Loki nodded, grateful for the chance to collect his thoughts, and sat down at the small table. He quickly checked the magic around the place, he had known coming in that it was intended for only one target but there was a risk the coincidence of names might confuse it. There was no sense, though, that it was paying any particular attention to him and Loki turned his attention back to his namesake.
‘You were fighting on the side of the Asgardians?’ he asked.

The giant laughed, a surprisingly light sound. ‘I wouldn’t say fighting,’ he said. ‘And the whole thing was a little awkward from my point of view. I was glad enough to leave my father, but I still had friends in Jotunheim. Mostly I spent my time on Midgard, or ran less warlike errands.’

Loki forced himself not to drop his gaze, or show signs of how disturbing the thought of friends in Jotunheim was. Best not to mention what he had tried to do to Jotunheim if he wanted this conversation to continue. Sigyn returned with the wine, coming between Loki and the giant as she set his goblet on the table, and then returned to her place on the bed with her husband. It gave Loki time to focus on a different part of the conversation.

‘Did they mind?’ asked Loki. It wasn’t the important question, but still… ‘They mock me for fighting with magic. If you did not fight at all then I wonder what they said of that.’

‘They didn’t mind,’ said the giant. ‘They teased me endlessly, but that isn’t the same thing as truly minding. And I found plenty to mock them with in turn.’ He grinned, impishly. So strangely expressive for a frost giant. Or were more of them like this outside of battle?

‘You talk of them as if they were friends. But they imprisoned you,’ said Loki carefully. He was sure asking flat out ‘what did you do?’ wasn’t a good approach, less sure of what would be.

The giant’s look darkened. ‘There was…a disagreement. It had nothing to do with frost giants and a great deal to do with plans for Midgard. Aside from neither of us wanting it turned into a glacier it seems Odin and I had different ideas about it.’ He took a sip of his wine. ‘How is Midgard now?’ he asked suddenly.

‘Full of self-destructive humans,’ said Loki.

‘Ah. They’ve always had a touch of that,’ said the giant. He seemed almost reassured by the answer.

Loki blinked sweat out of his eyes, the heat in here really was almost unbearable. He considered bringing out the casket just to cool things down, but letting these two know he had a powerful magic artifact was probably a bad idea. He wasn’t sure whether it could break the seal on this place, but he was sure they’d want to try it.

‘You don’t like Midgard?’ asked the giant.

‘It could be a great deal better organised,’ said Loki. ‘Too many rulers and companies grasping for their own interests. You like it?’

“I’ve never been keen on organised,” said the giant. “They are, or used to be, a little too focused on dying gloriously. And certainly rather violent. But also chaotically creative. You have to love a race that decorates ear-picks.”

Loki wasn’t sure what to make of reasoning like that. Possibly it meant he should keep quiet about his own plans for Midgard. He had, a little while ago, entertained the notion that the “disagreement” between this giant and Odin had involved the giant wanting to rule Midgard. Now he was positive that was not the case.

The giant sipped at his wine pensively and then said, ‘If you are Odin’s son you should be able to lift the enchantment on this place.’

Not his blood son, thought Loki. ‘Why should I want to?’ he said.
'For one thing I’m a powerful magician. I suspect I could teach you a great deal,’ said the giant. ‘And it would prove that you are Odin’s son, would it not?’

‘I don’t need to prove myself to you,’ said Loki.

‘No. Not to me,’ said the giant.

He understood. Loki had never been understood, not by the Asgardians, and being understood by this giant was more disturbing than gratifying. But there was still a pull to the idea, the desire to prove himself, with no idea how to do so, willing to jump at any notion. No matter how ridiculous it was to think Odin would see him as more of a son for letting out dangerous prisoners. Odin wouldn’t approve. But Odin wouldn’t approve of any of his plans. He was looking to be his Father’s equal, not his favourite.

‘Will you consent to be bound to obey me?’ asked Loki impulsively.

The giant frowned. ‘That would be a powerful spell.’

‘I can do it.’ He had the casket.

The giant’s eyes flicked sideways to his wife. She met his gaze but didn’t speak, and Loki couldn’t read anything in her eyes beyond passive acceptance. She seemed a meek creature to be married to a frost giant.

‘Say you will not use me in combat. I prefer not to be a weapon. And, in any case, I am hardly effective as one.’

‘Agreed,’ said Loki. A shame, since this giant was remembered for powerful magic. But he would teach it all to Loki anyway, given time.

‘Then you may bind me.’

The giant stood and walked over to face Loki, who stood as well. They were almost exactly the same height. Loki held his hands out and the casket manifested in his grasp, the agonising heat dying down as it did. Loki’s skin turned blue as he held it and he suppressed the flinch the sight of it caused.

‘Odin did not give you that,’ remarked the giant.

‘It is my heritage,’ said Loki. The casket responded to his will more easily than he expected. The bonds it created were invisible strands of ice cold air, showing only when they touched the giant and his skin turned a darker blue in strips.

‘You are bound to my service,’ said Loki. ‘To teach, to act, to speak as I require. Only in battle do I exempt you. Be bound!’

The bonds seemed to dissolve and Loki thought they had broken, that the spell had been beyond his skill. But then they reappeared, like ink blooming through the blue skin, as lines of runes. The giant twitched his shoulders as if he was settling a burden and then nodded.

Loki took a breath. ‘As son of Odin I release the bond on this place.’

The magic in the walls simply faded away, like the fading echo of a struck gong.

Sigyn lingered long enough for two things: to see the light and relief in her husband’s eyes when he...
finally emerged from his prison and the caves into cooler mountain air, and to find out where this younger Loki would take them.

The latter proved to involve a particularly hair-raising trip between worlds. The boy didn't ask if they knew how and made fewer preparations than she'd ever seen, even when her own children had been young and reckless enough to fling themselves across the void and make friends or foes of the things that lived between worlds. As it was, they were towed rapidly through a veritable feeding frenzy -- she wasn't sure what the creatures were after, but it was very much like swimming among sharks when you weren't the one bleeding into the water yet. The casket would have been useful, if he'd actually used it; perhaps its presence at least warned them off. He was tense and wary, but that seemed directed as much at her Loki as at any of the actual hazards of the journey.

She knew they were going to Midgard when she sensed Jormungand's drowsy stirring, and she relaxed somewhat when they were past him -- he might not be paying much attention at the moment, but very few extradimensional predators were willing to violate his territory.

They emerged in a bland room, less spacious than the prison but significantly cooler. Sigyn marked the place in her mind, then gathered her own power and vanished with a light squeeze to her husband's hand, leaving him to explain her disappearance however he chose. Or, if necessary, however his namesake insisted.

The trip back, of course, was even worse. She emerged at the palace gates with sweat stinging a chemical burn on her neck from the blood of a metaphorical shark, and the energy of its death making her nerves itch and sing. She told the startled guards that she wanted to see the king. It had been a long time since she'd approached the palace. 'Sigyn Incantation-Fetter' seemed to mean little to them, when during the war with the Vanir it would have eliminated the need to ask Odin if he'd be willing to see her. She omitted 'wife of Loki' to avoid unneeded confusion.

Odin remembered her. She was conducted to a private room, not the throne room for audiences, and arrived at the same time as a young blond man in a great hurry who nevertheless let her enter before he went in to take his place beside Odin and Frigga.

'Odin,' Sigyn said, 'I think another of your children has gone crazy.'

'You've seen him?' the blond prince said, sounding more hopeful than alarmed. Frigga, likewise, straightened with her eyes suddenly bright.

'Thor,' Odin said -- Sigyn looked at the blond prince again, and her stomach flipped and sank. She hadn't kept up with the news since Loki's imprisonment, but if this boy was Thor, she doubted she was going to see the one she'd known again. 'Let her finish.' His eye narrowed. 'I take it Loki has met his namesake.'

'Did you not feel your own spellwork end?' Sigyn smiled sardonically. Probably not, actually. At the same distance in space and time, she might not have felt her own spells defending the palace being modified either, which was part of why she hadn't gone straight in. (The other parts were courtesy -- she did want him to listen -- and a lack of enthusiasm for having to look for him.) But that was no reason not to needle him a little. 'Your heir released him from his imprisonment, as you allowed. His price was that Loki be bound to obey him. Using Jotunheim's casket.' She stopped and raised her eyebrows. 'As you may imagine, I have questions.'

'So do I,' said Thor. 'For one thing, I thought our, ah, Uncle Loki was dead.'

'I want to know what the young prince is likely to want from him,' Sigyn said. 'Or if you don't know that, at least what he's been doing.'
'We know less of that than we would like,' Odin admitted. 'It has been a month since he fell from the broken Bifrost, and this is the first we've heard.'

Sigyn stared at him. 'No wonder the space between worlds is such a mess. Start again, my king, a bit further back.' Her eyes narrowed. 'Perhaps when he learned he's Jotun. He didn't seem terribly comfortable with the idea.' Actually, he hadn't seemed terribly comfortable with anything, but her husband's lack of affection for Laufey didn't manifest in actually looking ill.

Frigga winced. Odin sighed. 'Not long ago. During a distinctly ill-judged,' here he frowned at Thor, 'investigative trip regarding a Jotun incursion into the vaults here. Shortly thereafter, he reigned while I slept, during which time he tried to kill Thor, lured Laufey here in person to try to assassinate me and killed him over my bed, and attempted to destroy Jotunheim using the Bifrost. Thor broke it; they both nearly fell from the edge, and Loki... let go.'

Sigyn shut her eyes for a few seconds and rubbed at the burn on her neck. She was right: the prince was crazy. Possibly quite a bit more so than Baldr had been. And now Loki, her Loki, had agreed to be bound to obey him. Well -- that could be worse. He was very good at talking people around, at least when he kept calm about it himself. 'You made him king during impending hostilities with Jotunheim while he was still in shock about finding out he'd been born there?'

'That was my doing,' Frigga said. The pain in her voice was more obvious than that in Odin's. 'Odin had delayed the sleep longer than usual and then collapsed. We didn’t know how long it would be.’ Odin didn’t precisely look embarrassed, but he did look displeased. He ordinarily slept only a single full day out of every year, courtesy of a long-past piece of magic that Sigyn personally thought had been a bit mad. At any rate, it didn’t normally require a regent. She supposed it had probably been a bad time not to be sure who was in charge, but the boy she’d met still didn’t seem ideal. ‘Thor had been banished for his part in the trip to Jotunheim--'

'I am not sure I would have done better,' Thor muttered.

'--And Loki was also of age.' Frigga sighed. 'Holding the throne myself would have been a slight to him, and I meant to remind him that we did have confidence in him. I thought we could.' She raised a hand, palm up, and then let it fall. 'Odin took the casket from Jotunheim at the end of the war. They could have sent individual world-walkers against us, but not moved an army quickly.'

'I think the treaty with Vanaheim was better,' Sigyn said.

Odin eyed her. 'I cannot argue with that. And I thank you for... bringing warning.'

'Loki would want you to know, too.' The new binding was less restrictive than the old, which hadn't been subject to persuasion, but the boy clearly wasn't stable enough to be running around with that kind of power.

'Would he?' Odin asked.

Sigyn frowned at him. She'd hoped she hadn't really had to tell him. 'Even now, I thought you still had some faith in him.'

'Would someone please explain to me,' Thor broke in, 'exactly what we have been warned about? What can this other Loki do, that the one I know can now insist on? And Father, why had you imprisoned your brother?'

Odin looked grim. 'He gave Asgardian technology to a human king,' he said, 'to kill your brother Baldr and attempt to destroy Asgard itself.'
Sigyn's eyes widened, and she counted silently to nine, fingers flexing, before she could tell herself and believe it that throwing fire on the floor to punctuate her point would come across as a threat, not as emphasis, and that this was a bad thing at the moment. "Is that what you have thought all these years?" she asked, then forcibly unclenched her teeth.

Odin turned his head to her from Thor, and the rest of his body was very still. "It is what Hod did," he said. "And nothing that Loki said afterward suggested otherwise."

"He probably thought you had more sense than to believe he wanted Asgard to fall!" Sigyn shook her head. "He liked Hod. He -- we wanted to put him on a more even footing with Baldr, seeing no reason he should be permitted to conquer Midgard easily just because he was your son." There was acid on her tongue as she added, "Evidently, you didn't agree."

Odin frowned. 'Baldr's excesses would have been... dealt with, had he survived, but he was hardly about to conquer all of Midgard.'

'I'm sure it would have taken him a while,' Sigyn said. 'So you didn't intend to help him with that?'

Odin gave her a wry look. 'Even now, I thought you still had some faith in me,' he said, his voice very dry. 'I saw no reason Baldr should not seek a high place among his mother's people, but I had no intention of conquering Midgard through him. We could not let him or Hod continue as they'd begun, but Baldr did not respond by proving himself more of a threat.'

'Let me see if I have this clear,' Thor said. 'Your husband has just been released from centuries of imprisonment over a misunderstanding, may think we intend to conquer Midgard, and is bound to cooperate with my brother in whatever he's currently trying to do.'

'He arranged an exception to avoid being asked to fight,' Sigyn said, 'and it has become apparent that Midgard is not conquered. That is where I left them. But otherwise, yes.'

'Ah,' Thor said, looking as if he might be developing a headache. Sigyn felt it was only fair for her not to be the only one. 'Lovely.' After a pause, his gaze sharpened, and he asked, 'Wait. You were able to reach Midgard? They're on Midgard?'

Sigyn gave him a puzzled look. 'At some hazard. The Bifrost's fall has attracted scavengers.' She touched the mark on her neck again. 'What kind of question is that? I suppose Odin can hardly go charging about world-walking under the circumstances -- I wouldn't have gone myself if it were less urgent -- but surely the art hasn't been forgotten.'

Thor shot his father a look. 'I was aware it had been known once,' he said, very slowly, then turned back to Sigyn. 'My exile was to Midgard. I... learned much, there, and made friends to whom I had promised to return.'

'I see,' said Sigyn. She did, Asgard had forgotten world-walking, mostly, except as an obsolete magic. Odin could hardly leave under the circumstances. Thor had thought the Bifrost's destruction would cut Asgard off from the other worlds entirely, rather than making journeys the domain of the very skilled and very bold. And he was holding himself back just shy of pleading. 'Well, I am not going anywhere right now. I need a meal, a bath, a bandage, and I could probably use something to set on fire. After that I can think about what to do when I return to them.'

'I will see to that,' Frigga murmured. Sigyn suspected she was not sorry for a reason to leave the room.

'Are you bound to obey my brother?' Thor asked suddenly, eyes narrowed. Not a bad question, if
late in coming. More useful if he could compel her to answer truthfully.

'I am not.' Sigyn smiled thinly at him. 'He never asked me to agree to anything. I believe he thought I wasn't dangerous.'
Chapter 2

Loki’s first act was to go and look out of the window. Midgard had changed in a thousand years, at least when it came to technology. They’d discovered some brighter dyes as well, he rather liked the clothes they were sporting.

‘Where did your wife go?’ his younger namesake asked abruptly.

Loki looked up from the window. ‘To see our children, I imagine,’ he said, lying easily. ‘It’s been a long time since she’s had the chance and I’m no longer in direct need of her magic.’

‘Will she return?’

‘Perhaps. She might not care to be drawn into the edges of a binding I agreed to without consulting her,’ said Loki. She would be back, of course, when she had the chance. But the boy would never know it.

‘She knows how to world-walk?’ said the boy, pensively.

‘Evidently.’

‘What do you know of world-walking?’

‘More than you,’ said Loki. ‘That was the most ill-prepared trip between worlds I’ve ever been a part of.’

‘It’s a safe route,’ the boy said defensively. ‘I’ve used it several times.’

‘The energies of the casket are designed to ward them off,’ said Loki. ‘You weren’t using it properly, but it was enough to scare off most of the smaller ones.’ And, to be fair, the route had avoided most of the big ones.

The boy considered, eyes lowered in what was clearly a habitual gesture to hide his thoughts. ‘Is that why Odin took the casket? To prevent movement between worlds?’

Perhaps he should have kept quiet, thought Loki ruefully. Although that had never been his strong point. He didn’t really want the boy moving armies between worlds, although he clearly wasn’t allied with Jotunheim and there wasn’t anywhere else likely to provide him with one.

‘Answer,’ said the boy sharply.

‘I’d imagine so,’ said Loki. ‘The war was still going on when I was imprisoned.’

‘How many people can it move?’

‘As many as the Bifrost,’ said Loki. ‘It uses a lot of the same technology. Jotunheim and Asgard were trading knowledge for a while before Midgard was discovered and became a point of contention.’

‘That’s not true,’ said the boy. ‘Odin would not give knowledge to monsters.’

‘I could take offense at that,’ said Loki mildly. ‘Don’t forget I’m one of these monsters you speak of. Besides, most of the knowledge on world-walking was flowing the other way. He taught them rune magic as his part of the bargain.’
Really, had Odin completely neglected to give his sons any sense of their own history? What had he been thinking? Especially with this one who needed to understand the history of Asgard and Jotunheim to understand himself. The shocked looks the information was eliciting were starting to appeal to Loki’s sense of mischief, and turning this into a history lesson seemed like a good distraction from more dangerous topics.

‘Early world-walking was undertaken without much more preparation than you use,’ said Loki. ‘In a sense you’re re-inventing it, which is quite impressive. Odin was probably the first among the Asgardians to try it, and he made it to Jotunheim where it was already a developing art. We actually met in extradimensional space, the first time.’

‘The casket…you’re older than it?’ said the boy.

Loki laughed. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Bridging the worlds was a big project when Odin and I were young.’

‘He never told me,’ said the boy. ‘He never told us anything about himself. Not from before the war with Jotunheim.’

Loki smiled. ‘He was desperately curious, about everything, and quite reckless. I suppose I was, too, and we urged one another on, competing to see who could go furthest. After his father died he was forced to settle down, somewhat. At least to the point where he couldn’t be the one trying to world-walk from Yggdrasil’s roots to its crown and document everything on the way.’

The boy blinked. ‘He says Thor is too reckless. When he went to Jotunheim against orders Father was furious.’

‘So maybe that’s why he didn’t tell you.’

The boy shook his head. ‘If I can activate the Bifrost I can activate the casket?’

‘Yes,’ said Loki.

‘Then that’s all I need to know. Stay here, I need to contact Muspelheim.’

He turned to leave but Loki called after him, ‘Muspelheim?’

‘It’s none of your concern.’

‘It might be yours. The Muspel giants can’t use the casket, for one thing it uses ice magic. That’s hardly compatible with fire beings.’

The boy turned back, looking faintly embarrassed and trying to hide it. ‘I can simply lead them through the safe route, then, and use the casket to ward off danger rather than on them.’

Loki shook his head hard. ‘No, you can’t. The Muspel giants are energy beings. They’ll attract every extradimensional predator within smelling distance. There’s a reason they’ve never been able to world-walk.’

‘So I need to create something new. Something more like the Bifrost.’

‘Not unless it’s twice as strong. The Bifrost can’t carry things with their own energy, it would break under the strain.’

The boy looked at him. ‘Find a way to do this.’

‘What? You can’t order me to do the impossible,’ said Loki, suppressing the desire to laugh. ‘Have
you already promised them a way between worlds?’

The boy didn’t answer that question.

‘Ah, well. On the bright side they can’t get here to take it out on you,’ said Loki.

The boy looked up, eyes suddenly sharp. ‘Be silent. Do not speak again until I tell you to.’

Loki wanted to protest that that was distinctly unfair for a little flippancy. But, well, he couldn’t talk to protest anything. He wondered whether the boy was more perceptive than he realised, to choose a punishment Loki would hate, or simply annoyed enough to want him to stop talking.

Later that day he was given permission to talk again, with a simple, ‘What other ways are there of travelling between worlds? There are nine worlds, Jotunheim and Asgard can’t be the only ones to travel.’

Loki paused. ‘The Vanir had falconskins. The Dwarves never cared to travel, and the residents of Niflheim can world-walk by their nature, although few of the worlds they find are to their liking. The Norns and Elves bought technology from the Vanir.’

‘What are falconskins?’ asked the boy.

‘Single-person energy capsules. They’re less safe than the Bifrost but a lot more flexible. You can explore in them, they don’t just dump you at your destination. If you ever see one you’ll see where they get the nickname, they’re very streamlined.’

The boy nodded. ‘Do you know how to make one?’

‘No,’ said Loki, keeping the relief out of his voice. ‘The Vanir are very protective of their technology. They sell the finished falconskins, but not the design.’

‘Could they be adapted for use by Muspel giants?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Loki truthfully. ‘I’ve used one, but I have no idea how they work.’

‘Didn’t you and Odin ever try to reverse-engineer one?’

‘At length. And when I say protective... well, the security features would probably have killed anyone else. Or either of us working alone.’

‘Then we’ll go to Vanahem,’ said the boy. ‘Be ready to travel tomorrow. And glamour yourself.’

Loki rolled his eyes as the boy swept out. He did know better than to wander around Vanahem blue these days. Those days. And probably these days as well. Anyway there was no reason for the look of disgust in the boy’s eyes. Glamour was a way of fitting in, and sometimes fun, but there was nothing wrong with being blue.

The problem with going to Vanahem would be that Sigyn wouldn’t know about it. Currently she was the only one he was sure was on his side and Loki was reluctant to lose contact with her. There were sensible reasons, such as wanting Odin to know what his son was doing, but it was mostly emotion that was leading him to do something...well, rather stupid.

Loki stepped out beyond the slumbering coils of Jormungand and let off a burst of magic. It was a honed one, subtle enough for most of the creatures here not to feel it. The response was immediate.

A being came at him in a twitchy flurry of motion, a being composed mostly of curiosity and restless
energy. It grabbed at his mind, gnawing at it like a nut as it tried to break through to the thoughts beneath. They had described it to the Norsemen as a squirrel, but they had been trying for comprehensible rather than accurate. Loki summoned up the power to grapple with it and push it back.

‘A message,’ he said. ‘Carry a message. Tell Verdrfolnir to tell Heimdall that Loki is in Vanahem trying to borrow a falconskin.’

The response was immediate and enthusiastic. Ratatosk loved carrying messages, loved holding the information and passing it on. It was gone in a violent flurry leaving Loki to slink back behind Jormungand’s coils utterly exhausted.

Thor was trying to be patient. It had never been one of his strong points, but this did seem to be the time to exercise it. Going immediately to look for his wayward brother was not an option, as the most specific thing he knew about Loki’s location was that he couldn’t get there.

Sigyn could. Odin could. Odin had gone an entire month without even a hint that Asgard was not completely cut off from other realms by the Bifrost's destruction. Sigyn....

Among other things, Sigyn was asleep. However he chafed at the inability to do anything, Thor had hardly been going to interfere with offering her appropriate hospitality, and he rather suspected she had enough cause for frustration without adding sleep deprivation to the mix.

So when afternoon had drawn into late evening and it had become clear she wasn't simply taking a nap to recover, he'd gone to bed himself. He hadn't slept. Two hours before dawn, he'd stalked into the library. The history section seemed erratically used and not very well cleaned; half a shelf might be pristine and the other half coated in grey.

By the time the sun rose, Thor had located several books that might be useful, surrounded himself in a cloud of dust, chased it out the window on a brisk breeze, and apologised to a coughing and very confused gardener. He was starting to think it might have been more efficient to make another try at asking his father questions. It wasn't as if Odin slept nights.

He'd been reading for an hour and still didn't really know what was going on -- possibly in part because he wasn't concentrating terribly well -- when he was startled by Sigyn herself speaking to him. 'Perhaps this is an unfair comparison to your older brother,' she said, 'but I was surprised to be told you were in the library.'

'Ah,' Thor said, looking up and trying not to be flustered. He hadn't expected her to come and find him. Maybe that was a good sign? 'Good morning. No, it's unusual for me too, but yesterday's explanations raised more questions for me than they answered.'

'That's not very unusual. I suppose Odin and I were not giving you much help, but I'd have expected you to know the basics of the history involved. Though I imagine Loki's imprisonment might have been something Odin did not care to talk about much.' She looked over his shoulder. 'Found any of your answers?'

Thor looked down at the book ruefully. 'Not really.'

Sigyn took the next chair and rested her chin on her hands. 'Do you want to ask me any of the questions?'
'I wasn't sure you'd want to talk to me at all, but if you're offering.' Then it was a matter of choosing something. Herself, her Loki, his Loki. Walking between worlds. Baldr. 'Where on Earth are they?' he asked finally. 'He threatened... one of my friends. He said it to provoke me, I think, but I am not sure he wouldn't do it to provoke me now.'

'I didn't stop to ask what they're calling the area now, but it was on the continent we used to visit most often, and nowhere near the most recent residues from the Bifrost.' She shrugged, looking sympathetic. 'Not that it would be very difficult for them to go there.'

Thor nodded. 'Still something of a relief.' He hesitated, trying again to narrow down to a single question that requested only information. One topic predominated this time, at least, though even so it was hard to know where to start. 'Baldr,' he said. 'I have not heard much about him and... his mother's people.'

'He'd be terribly disappointed by that. He was quite famous at the time.' Sigyn's mouth quirked. 'His mother was a mortal princess. Rindr. Odin was quite taken with her. She decked him three times and tricked him into a rendezvous with a goat before he stopped courting her father and tried actually wooing her.'

Thor choked, partly at the idea of Odin with someone besides Frigga -- he knew it had happened, he just wasn't sure he wanted to imagine it -- and partly at the mental image itself. 'She sounds like Sif.' Mostly the violence, though Sif actually had pulled a trick on an importunate suitor involving a goat. Loki had helped. Well, Loki had done most of it. Thor sighed. That had been a good week.

Sigyn blinked. 'Er.. in what way?'

Thor spent a confused moment before remembering that Sif was named for his own namesake's wife -- well, he hadn't forgotten that, after the entertainment it had provided half the rest of Asgard -- and that Sigyn presumably knew one and not the other. 'I'm sorry. My friend Sif. My age. She is one of Asgard's fiercest warriors -- with blades, not sorcery.'

'Oh, I see. Interesting. Perhaps I'll meet her.' Sigyn picked up the previous thread of conversation. 'But Baldr. He grew up with his mother's family, mostly. He was very handsome, charming, very kind outside of battle and very fierce in it. He was nearly as sturdy as a full Asgardian and eager to help defend his home against the Jotun invaders, but a little taken aback on learning Loki was a friend. And Nari.' At Thor's confused look, she added, 'Our child. Took after Loki physically. Vali looked Asgardian and was thus somewhat less of a shock.' A smile. 'And Leikin was... unique. Anyhow, at a time when the larger war was being fought elsewhere, Baldr was competing with a human friend of Loki's for both a woman and a kingdom.'

'...And Loki decided to make things fairer.'

'Well, I don't think Hod needed his help with Nanna. He was charming enough himself, and she had heard Odin did not marry Baldr's mother and told him that relationships between gods and mortals would not work out. Because the gods were at once too illustrious and too untrustworthy, I think, which strikes me as a bit muddled. He didn't take it well, especially given how many women in Asgard thought he was an adorable child.'

Thor winced.

'And neither Hod nor Baldr saw any reason they shouldn't use gifts from the gods to preserve their own people and gain them glory and victory,' Sigyn concluded. 'And when some of Asgard's warriors fought on Baldr's side -- thinking to recapture the sword Mistilteinn -- Hod actually damaged Mjolnir with it and routed them.'
Thor glanced down at the hammer beside him in disbelief. 'Damaged Mjolnir?'

Sigyn flicked one hand out, palm up. 'It's a very good sword. Hod and his army, I think, got rather carried away. Asgard was more than a bit alarmed. And as it seems now... Loki thought Odin intended Baldr to take Midgard, Odin thought Loki meant Hod to turn on Asgard, neither of them knew everything that was going on, and things only got worse once they each assumed their own point of view was obvious and started shouting at each other.'

'That sounds like my arguments with Father,' Thor muttered, then looked at her thoughtfully. 'And your point of view?'

'Hah. Much like Loki's, with less yelling, as that's the side of things I was there to see. I only put much of this together yesterday.' She grimaced. 'Otherwise, I'd have made more of an effort to clear things up before now.' She returned his scrutiny. Thor got the feeling she was better at it. 'Your friends in Midgard. Would they include a lover?'

Definitely better at it. 'Someone I want to be.' Then, 'How did you guess?'

'A little by tone, a little by the look in your eyes. The interest in how your half-human brother lived.' She smiled sadly. 'Is that the friend your brother threatened?'

Thor nodded. 'And the one I promised to return to.'

'Before you broke the Bifrost to save Jotunheim.' A pause. 'My Loki would appreciate that.'

Thor looked away from her. 'Mine had reason to be surprised I would stop him.'

'I said some intemperate things about the Vanir in my youth,' Sigyn said after a moment, 'but no one ended up incorporating them into an identity crisis.'

'Mm.' Thor closed the book he'd been ignoring. That reminded him of another comment. 'You said another of Odin's sons had gone crazy. Did you mean Baldr was, for trying to conquer Midgard?'

'Well, I may not have been completely fair. I did think he should know better, but it wasn't exactly surprising that he'd want a kingdom. That he obsessed over Nanna to the point of making himself deathly ill, on the other hand....' Sigyn shrugged. 'He was handsome, charming, brave, and very competent at nearly everything he tried. He was also emotional, dramatic, and unsure of his place in the world.'

That did sound uncomfortably familiar. 'I would prefer to find my brother before he tries to conquer Earth or makes himself ill over his obsessions.' Thor grimaced. 'Or for that matter, provokes your husband to the point of getting him killed.'

'I'll take you to Midgard,' Sigyn said, 'but you must promise to do as I tell you between the worlds. Don't wander off, don't try any magic of your own, and if anything tries to eat us, smash it.'

Thor blinked. Those were easier instructions than he'd expected. 'I think I can handle that.'

They left immediately after a quick breakfast. The journey was strange, darker than the Bifrost and full of the sensation of being watched. They were attacked by nothing very formidable; he feared for a moment that something like a swarm of leeches would prove too immaterial for Mjolnir, but they splattered aside. One greater creature seemed to raise its head as they passed, suddenly alert; Sigyn smiled, and then light broke around them and they were in a cold room with furniture surprisingly like some of Jane's. And... no one else there.
Sigyn's smile dropped away. She went and opened all the doors, shut them again with more force than was really necessary, and then stood in the middle of the first room and swore. 'I can't tell where they've gone.' She ground her teeth, then took a long breath. 'Well, as we're already here -- let's go find your friend.'

Jane frowned and raised her head as she realised someone was steadily knocking at her lab door. One of the better sides of pursuing a discipline that frequently wrecked your sleep schedule was the ability to work without interruptions. Generally speaking, nobody spontaneously phoned to break her concentration at one in the morning, much less turned up in person. Although SHIELD was a lot more likely to do either one than your average funding agency.

She sighed, saved her work, and picked up her mug for a gulp of coffee on the way to the door. To avoid a lecture on security, she checked the peephole -- and was confronted by a pair of heartstopping blue eyes.

Galvanised, she suddenly had the door open without quite remembering how she'd undone the interior lock, and was holding on to the edge of it for support. It really was him. Thor. After a month. 'My God,' she said, 'it's you. You're here.' Her mug slipped from suddenly clumsy fingers.

Thor crouched and caught it, lightning quick -- Jane suppressed a wild urge to giggle at the thought. Coffee slopped onto his hand. 'I thought you said no smashing things,' he said, smiling.

Jane did laugh then. 'Hey, at least I didn't throw it. How -- uh --' How are you, how did it go with your brother, what kept you? She'd lost the question. There was a woman she didn't know standing behind Thor and looking amused. 'I'm sorry, I didn't see you. I'm Jane Foster.' She gathered the presence of mind to step back from the door and let them in.

'I know,' said the woman. 'I'm Sigyn.' Then, as Jane's eyes widened, 'Not his brother's wife, his uncle's.' Jane blinked. 'You looked as if you'd been doing some reading about us.'

'Some,' Jane said. 'I haven't been sure how much was accurate.' She hesitated, heading toward the coffee maker to give herself a moment to think. 'The main one I found about you involved keeping Loki from being tortured by a snake dripping venom in his face.' Which had clearly not been happening to Thor's brother Loki, but if there was another one....

Sigyn looked rather startled. 'I made his imprisonment more comfortable than it could have been,' she said. 'The prison was located in a volcano to weaken him, but he wasn't being deliberately tortured otherwise. Certainly not by snakes. But that's part of why we've come now.' She accepted the coffee Jane offered her and smelled it curiously. 'Thor's brother Loki... altered my husband's bindings. And last I knew, they were on Earth.'

Jane concluded that she was probably not getting back to work tonight. She was right. They went through three pots of coffee while Thor and Sigyn caught her up. Jane was absorbing the news and trying to think how and whether to break it to SHIELD when the air around Sigyn appeared to twist, and Sigyn herself flickered not quite out of visibility for a moment. Jane saw colour-bursts a little like those from pressing on closed eyelids, glimpsed one rather gruesome vision of what looked like an anatomical cross-section, and then Sigyn was sitting in the chair again, perfectly visible but rather pale. 'Are you all right?' Jane asked cautiously.

Sigyn nodded once, hard. 'Heimdall sends word,' she said, 'that Loki -- both Lokis, probably, have gone to Vanaheim.'
'Oh,' said Jane. 'Is that bad?'

Thor was frowning. 'In itself, not obviously, unless they intend to attack.'

Sigyn shook her head. 'Not to attack. To seek a falconskin -- the Vanir's way to travel between worlds,' she explained. Jane bit her tongue hard. The Bifrost was broken, but people were traveling between planets and dimensions on their own power, and now some third method. Surely she should be able to come up with something. At least the theory. If she had the theory, she'd bet Stark could implement it. But another way to travel didn't seem to account for how shaken Sigyn looked. 'If anything,' Sigyn added, 'that might make them both safer. But Loki sent the message by Ratatosk!'

Jane bit her lip, then asked carefully, 'Is that not a squirrel?'

Sigyn looked at her and then put her head down on one hand and laughed, although not really as if she thought it was funny. 'We did describe him that way. He is something like a squirrel. Only squirrels eat nuts, and he prefers thoughts. People who come into contact with him sometimes come away with less of them than they had going in.'

Jane winced. 'Okay, I can see why you're disturbed.'

'Loki's good at dealing with him. He's probably fine. I hope.' Sigyn sighed. 'And at least extradimensional space around Vanaheim shouldn't be as bad as around Asgard right now.'

'It didn't seem that bad,' Thor said. 'What did I miss?'

Sigyn looked up at him and chuckled. 'Those creatures you drove off were less trivial than you seem to think.'

'Are you going to Vanaheim to look for -- well, Loki and Loki?' Jane asked.

'If I'm to keep hunting all over Yggdrasil,' Sigyn groaned, 'I want a falconskin. Or at least more of this coffee stuff.' Jane might have taken this as a hint for a refill if the next pot hadn't still been brewing. 'I think we'd better. We need to find out what Thor's little brother is doing--'

'I was thinking we need to take him home,' Thor put in.

Sigyn raised an eyebrow at him. 'And anything else will probably be simplified if I can tell my husband Odin doesn't plan to imprison him again.' Well. That certainly made sense.

The next thing Thor said was, 'What about Jane?'

'What about me?' Jane replied, rather startled.

'That's a good question,' Sigyn said, eyebrows drawing together as she looked at Jane, nails drumming the handle of her mug. 'You may be in danger from the younger Loki; he seems to have taken offence at you. He is alive, travelling, and... erratic. On the other hand, he's been that way for a month, and right now we know he isn't even on your planet. Unassisted extradimensional travel is definitely dangerous.'

She hadn't thought they'd even consider taking her to Vanaheim, but now she really wanted to go. 'I'd like to try extradimensional travel,' she began.

'You will see Asgard one day, Jane,' Thor murmured.

'Ah -- well, that would be nice, definitely, but I actually meant I'd really like to see extradimensional
Sigyn was grinning by that point. 'That could actually make it easier to take you. As long as you don't will yourself anywhere we're not going. It's partly a question of mindset,' she explained. 'I'd hate to discover you had potential as a sorcerer by misplacing you.'

Jane tried not to look too eager or to frown. The thought of seeing other worlds, other spaces, fascinated her. But it wasn't a pleasure trip. She also remembered knowing it was stupid not to run, and being unsure if it would help if she did. She remembered seeing huge, solid Thor thrown and broken by what almost looked like a casual, impulsive blow from a giant robot. Not even its main attack. 'I wouldn't want to get in your way, either.'

'Even if we took you to Vanaheim,' Sigyn said, with an air of thinking aloud, 'we'd hardly take you along for any confrontations. The first thing would be find out what the Vanir mean to do. Odin must have contacted them by now.' She eyed Thor. 'Then I might leave you both behind while I talk to my husband.'

Thor looked displeased, but said, 'Especially if the plan is capture.'
Chapter 3

Loki had only activated the Bifrost once, and not for its intended purpose, but he did not think it would be a good idea to let the giant use the casket in order to show him how. Besides, the giant seemed curiously out of it this morning, he had had to be shaken awake and now seemed barely to be staying that way. So Loki took the casket in both hands and reached for its power as he had before, although never for this, holding the path he wished to take firmly in his mind.

They were gone in a flash, the sensation much like travelling by the Bifrost, although instead of being carried along Loki was directing it. The power flowing through him as he flowed through it was immense and exhilarating. It was with a sense of triumph that he brought them out on a hillside, lush with growth as all of Vanaheim was.

‘Nice landing,’ said the giant approvingly. ‘It can be hard to direct without Heimdall’s abilities.’

Loki turned, surprised by the praise, and was further surprised by what he saw. The giant had refused to glamour himself earlier, saying that travel by casket would undo it anyway, but now he looked like an Asgardian. Pale, with red hair and bright green eyes, and surprisingly handsome.

‘Is that a form the Vanir will recognise?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said the giant. It was harder to think of him that way, now that he no longer looked like a giant.

Loki sighed. ‘From now on you are bound to be truthful to me. Is that a form the Vanir will recognise?’

‘Yes,’ said the giant. ‘I can change it later if you wish, but this is my normal appearance when I’m glamoured.’

‘And you hoped to be recognised by the Vanir as someone my Father had imprisoned,’ said Loki. ‘In hopes they would catch me when they caught you? How can you still be on my Father’s side?’

‘You’ve been extremely evasive about your plans. I’m assuming you have reason to think I won’t like them,’ said the giant. Really, Loki was getting tired of thinking of him that way.

‘Give me a name I can call you,’ he said impulsively. ‘I’m not calling you by mine.’

‘It was mine first. But Lopt if you prefer,’ said…Lopt, Loki supposed. It would do.

Lopt looked down, grimacing, and then sighed. ‘You’ll have to tell me what they are if you want me to obey that,’ he said.

‘I am going to conquer Midgard,’ he said.

Lopt groaned. ‘Oh, not again,’ he muttered.

‘Again?’ said Loki sharply.

Lopt looked at him with brilliant green eyes somehow colder now than they’d ever been while still red. ‘I was imprisoned,’ he said deliberately. ‘For the death of the last son of Odin’s to try conquering Midgard.’
‘I bind you not to kill me,’ said Loki, the words out too quickly to seem motivated by anything other than fear. He hadn’t, technically, included that in the original binding. Which meant he’d slept in the same house as someone who could possibly have freed himself by murder.

‘Wise,’ said Lopt. ‘I wondered when you’d get around to that.’ He sat down on the grass, looking at the sky. ‘So the Muspel giants have agreed to be your army in exchange for world-walking. If you actually get them there you might wind up ruling a cinder, they aren’t compatible with most beings that live below the boiling point of water.’

‘They won’t need to enter Midgard itself. Their magic is strong enough to be used from distances within the solar system, from what they’ve told me,’ said Loki. He remained standing, it placed him in a higher position in relation to Lopt.

Lopt nodded. ‘So they colonise Sol and act as your army from there? A better plan than I expected.’

‘Even if I cannot give them world-walking properly, I believe they would do it in exchange for passage to Sol,’ said Loki. ‘If there was a way I could be sure of keeping safe it might be enough.’

‘So what are your plans here, now?’ asked Lopt. ‘I don’t see that a falconskin will do you much good, but since I’m bound to help you I need to know how you intend to get one.’

‘What would you suggest?’

‘I normally ask nicely and promise to bring it back.’

‘If they’ve heard anything from my Father then I doubt they’ll be inclined to lend things to me,’ said Loki.

‘So we change our glamours and go in disguise,’ said Lopt.

‘I’m not…’ began Loki and then stopped, because of course he was glamoured. He just still wasn’t used to thinking of it as a disguise instead of his face. But he’d been able to put the glamour back on every time he’d used the casket, he should be able to change it. ‘Will they lend them to strangers?’

‘It might be harder to borrow one, but if you’ve got any money they do sell them.’

‘I have money,’ said Loki. He’d never spent much as a prince and he had ways of storing things that kept them available to him wherever he was.

‘Asgardian?’ asked Lopt.

‘Of course.’

‘Then trying to pass ourselves off as Vanir is just going to be more suspicious. We could try being Elves. They trade with Asgard and Vanaheim so the currency shouldn’t raise any questions.’

Loki nodded cautiously. He didn’t like leaving so many of their plans up to Lopt, but neither could he improve on them.

Lopt held his hands out for a moment and his body shifted, his hair becoming blond and his skin taking on a slight reflective sheen. Loki had seen Elves before, but not frequently or recently, and he watched Lopt’s transformation closely before making his own.

Lopt looked him over and nodded approvingly. ‘Good,’ he said climbing to his feet. ‘We should pass for Elves well enough. Better get going.’
Loki had been to Vanahem before and this, their main city, was familiar to him. The main difference between Vanahem and Asgard had always seemed to him to be that the Vanir felt the best place for plants was *everywhere* and there was no gap between buildings not filled with sweet smelling blossoms or verdant bushes. If he were here with Thor they would be going to visit friends. Perhaps Hnoss and Gersemi, although Loki had found it difficult to look at them since Fandral’s last account of what the two of them had done with him.

The shop Lopt led him to was a small one, but near enough the centre of the city to be an important one. To all appearances it was a jewellery shop, and what was kept in a highly secure (physically and, to Loki’s senses, magically) cabinet looked to be rows of necklaces. Identical ones, all narrow bands of gold with a single drop of amber as a pendant.

Lopt moved forward confidently and bent to examine them. ‘Good workmanship,’ he said, pointing to one on the left. ‘Freya’s?’

The shopkeeper nodded. ‘The ones on the left are the highest in price. We have six made by Freya.’

Loki recognised the name, of course, as the mother of Hnoss and Gersemi. He had had no idea his friends’ mother could world-walk although she was well known as a powerful sorceress.

‘We might not need an expensive one,’ he said, thinking the security measures on a cheap one might also be sloppy.

‘Perhaps not. Even the cheapest falconskin sold by the Vanir is tested by masters,’ said Lopt. Oh. That probably answered Loki’s unspoken question.

‘Naturally,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘But in matters of speed and manoeuvrability, the best always exceed the middling.’

‘We’ll take one of Freya’s then,’ said Loki. ‘What is the price? In Asgardian currency, please.’

‘Ah,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘Forgive me, it’s been a while. Let me look that up for you.’

He disappeared into the back, leaving Loki and Lopt standing by the counter.

They did decide to take Jane to Vanahem. With a general sense that she was vibrating inside her skin -- and not from the caffeine -- Jane deliberately omitted all methods of communication that might actually get them interrupted and left a message on a notepad in the most prominent place in the lab: in the break room, propped against the coffee maker.

Then Sigyn, rather to Jane's surprise, put an arm around her shoulders. 'I don't think Thor is likely to move himself anywhere by accident,' Sigyn explained, 'and he'd be hard to drag off against his will. I have no idea about you. Here we go.'

All at once, *everything* developed the eye-twisting mix of colour and distortion that had accompanied the message to Sigyn earlier, and this time it didn't settle back out. It kept going, an assault on all her senses, painful and too amazing to let go, as Jane tried to find some way to process it.

She settled tentatively on a mental state that lay somewhere between conceptualising higher-dimensional graphs and looking at stereograms. The key, maybe, was to avoid assuming things were only the shapes she knew about. Everything was -- or seemed, for the moment -- dark and full of rich colours, with fiery pinprick lights that might or might not be stars. As she started to feel steadier, she realized first that she was breathing as if she’d tried to run a mile in the desert sun, and then that they didn't seem to be moving.
'Are you all right?' Sigyn asked. She looked, when Jane carefully turned to look up at her, surprisingly normal.

Jane nodded a bit unsteadily. 'It's wonderful,' she said sincerely. 'Just overwhelming. Ah -- did you stop for me, or can I just not tell we're moving?'

'We've stopped. We're in Jormungand's territory right now, which is as safe as Yggdrasil gets.'

Well, that was disconcerting. Jane had guessed Jormungand was either an Asgardian sea monster or imaginary. She managed to locate the correct direction to glance at Thor. Sigyn, still in contact, had been easier to find. 'Definitely not the impression I got from the stories.'

'That's a fairly recent development,' Sigyn said, 'at least from our perspective. Jormungand is very powerful and very territorial, and it really does go all the way around Midgard. In several directions. It delayed Midgard's discovery considerably. Thor's namesake -- an elder brother -- fought it a few times on the way in and out, but my son Nari eventually persuaded it that our type of being was only passing through, and didn't really want any of the things it was defending.'

'Persuaded,' Jane said. 'You can talk to it, then?'

'Oh, yes. Communicate, anyway. And while we're inside its coils, none of the other extradimensional predators are likely to attack us. I'm surprised it let Verdrfolnir though to speak to me; probably Heimdall fed him well first.' Sigyn looked around, then back at Jane. 'Are you ready to go? I'll introduce you on the way past.'

Sigyn started them moving again. It felt very peculiar, and Jane was torn between looking at everything, regardless of not understanding it, and concentrating on how the sensation of movement worked. She thought of wanting a closer look at a bright glimmering shape once, and started to lean in.

Sigyn's arm tightened abruptly on her shoulders, hand gripping Jane's upper arm tightly enough to hurt. Jane gasped.

'What's wrong?' Thor asked, turning.

'You can propel yourself, then,' Sigyn said. 'It's all right, I've got you, but try not to do it again right now.'

She could? 'I didn't realise I was going anywhere,' Jane said. 'Just looking.'

'Will can be movement here,' Sigyn told her. 'And distances can be tricky. That's why I kept hold of you. But you don't want to go in there.'

'In?'

'In from extradimensional space. Or out of it, if you like. That was your moon.' While Jane was still boggling at this evidence of the difference in distance, Sigyn added, 'Come, Jormungand's just ahead.'

Jane could get a sense of why Jormungand had been described as a great serpent; as soon as she was able to distinguish something from the space around them, her first impression was of massive length. And then it started paying attention to them.

It was like being focused on by a friendly earthquake but, once she'd scaled it down several thousand times, the sleepy curiosity reminded her of her neighbours' cat. She wanted to hold out her hand for it
to sniff. Somehow the thought caused her to do something, again, although it was more like holding her mind out for it to sniff -- and this time, whatever she did, Sigyn didn't find it necessary to yank her back. It gently examined her thoughts and responded with massive drowsy approval.

'What did it say?' Thor asked curiously, as they moved on.

'I'm not exactly sure,' Jane said, finding that she was grinning almost too hard to talk, 'but I think it liked me.'

The rest of the journey was similarly exhilarating and occasionally terrifying. Thor and Sigyn fought something, perhaps midway through. They finally emerged, rather to Jane's surprise, in a neatly bordered patch of what looked like clover between a busy street and an enormous, vine-covered palace. No one on the street looked the slightest bit surprised.

'Do people appear out of thin air often here?' she asked, as Sigyn let go of her and set off. Thor took her hand instead, and Jane looked up at him with a grin.

'Moderately,' Sigyn said. 'That's an arrival green.'

'Is that what those are for,' Thor said. 'I never realised.'

'Children these days!' Sigyn said, laughing.

Thor's eyebrows jumped. 'And what did children in your day do, my lady?'

Sigyn looked back at him and grinned. 'Well, you've just seen what your father and uncle used to do for fun. Except they didn't necessarily know where they were going.'

'Strange to think Father was running around with a frost giant all that time.'

Sigyn's eyes glinted. 'Why? You did.'

'I'm still getting used to that too!' Thor shook his head. 'I suppose so is he.'

*Jane* thought it was strange to be as worried as Thor was about someone who'd tried to kill you, but then, it was equally hard to imagine not worrying when someone you'd loved all your life had apparently gone off the deep end.

The guards let them into the palace, which struck Jane as more like a botanical garden than a government building. In a room full of gazing pools (with lilies in them) and people at desks with mirrored bowls, they were informed -- well, Sigyn and Thor were informed -- that word from Asgard had arrived, and an alert had gone out to the merchants who dealt in falconskins.

Sigyn said she would go and look for her husband in person. But while they were still talking, one of the bowls chimed like a bell, and the message arrived that two Elves were inquiring in a certain shop about the purchase of a falconskin with Asgardian money.

Jane was offered a seat. Thor told her he'd be back -- "Sooner this time!" with a bright but slightly sheepish grin -- and he and Sigyn departed in a rush with a cluster of Vanir. Jane sat back, reeling, and wished there were something she could do. Instead, she settled in to wait.
approached it. She raised a hand and slid it sideways, and the air between shop and street shimmered briefly. "They'll see nothing strange until we enter. They sell my work here,' she added. 'Only the best for a Prince of Asgard, I suppose.'

Sigyn entered first, Thor too impatient not to follow on her heels. He was in time to see one Elf straighten and take half a step toward them, a look of relief on his face and his eyes fixed on Sigyn. The other -- the one with Loki's features under golden hair and gleaming skin -- turned at Thor's arrival, and his jaw set and his eyes burned. 'You.'

The shopkeeper took a step back, raising his hands in a gesture vaguely like some of Loki's. The Vanir streamed in behind Thor, like water flowing. Thor paid them scant attention, only enough to know where they stood. 'Brother,' he said.

Loki's features twisted, and the unfamiliar colouring faded, black coming back into his hair and the light fading from his skin. 'I am not your brother.' His voice was raw.

The other Elf -- presumably not an Elf either, Thor supposed -- gave him an exasperated look. 'Don't be a fool, Loki,' Thor said. 'Come home.'

"No, Thor,' said Loki. "I will not be dragged home like a wayward child."

'Well, unless you act like one, you needn't be,' Thor suggested. 'What have you been doing? We thought you lost. We've only just found out you're alive.'

'Sorry to disappoint you,' spat Loki.

'Really,' said the... non-Elf. 'Do pay attention to what your brother's actually saying.'

Loki turned on him and snapped, 'Be silent.' Which unfortunately seemed to work.

'He has a point!' Sigyn said. 'Your family was relieved to hear you were alive and well. Or at least alive.'

Loki glared daggers at her. Thor was a little worried they would become literal. 'Loki,' he said, forcing himself to speak quietly, 'I never wanted to fight you.'

"Then you need not have. What is Jotunheim to you? How many times have you wished to be born before the last battles when you could kill such monsters for yourself?"

The other Loki's eyes widened behind him.

"You know I had to." Thor did not exactly want to announce in front of a crowd that his brother had tried to destroy a world. "I wanted challenges, glory. I wanted to defend our home and cut down our enemies. I ---" He caught his breath. It was still painful to say, and part of him rebelled against it. "I was a fool to seek the opportunity."

"I could have prevented our home from ever being in danger again," said Loki, voice rising. "You did not intervene for their sakes, the monsters you had always hated. But, no, you are magnanimous even to those you despise. Even now."

"Loki. Stop this." His heart hurt.

'Stop? And let you do what you will with me? Brother, I am your equal in power at least.'

Maybe so, from that last fight, but to all of them? 'I ask you to stop, and return home with me to our
'There is no place for me in Asgard,' said Loki, voice hard but eyes regretful. 'It is your kingdom and will never be mine.'

'Your place has ever been in Asgard!'

'My place has ever been in your shadow! No more. Father said we were both born to be kings and Asgard is but one kingdom. I will not accept a place at your heels.'

Sometimes Thor thought Odin's cryptic tendencies couldn't possibly be healthy. 'What about at my side? Loki, where else would you go?' Surely he wasn't actually planning to try to conquer Midgard?

'At your side? Are you offering to rule beside me, then?' Loki was moving closer, almost circling. 'To entrust Asgard to my judgement as much as yours?'

Not quite what he'd meant, although before, he had always assumed Loki would be available to consult. Thor turned slightly. 'Your judgement has seemed a little strange lately,' he said, 'since Asgard was entrusted to you. You're usually the level-headed one.'

'Entrusted to me only because you were elsewhere.'

'Because I'd been exiled.'

'As soon as Father fell into the Odinsleep they set out to get you back. It was a gesture. And one they were quick to end when it seemed it might have consequences beyond those to your pride.' Loki swallowed. 'Consequences like a frost giant on the throne of Asgard.'

Thor's eyebrows drew together. He suspected Loki's logic was suffering. Of course their friends hadn't been pleased by his banishment, but it wasn't as if they had been the ones to end it, or even had the power to end it. Nor, of course, had they known Loki was a frost giant at the time. 'What do you think happened there, Loki?' he asked. 'Mjolnir did not return to me until I had satisfied Odin's conditions.'

'Your friends would have brought you back, with or without Mjolnir.'

'Somehow I don't think Heimdall would have put up with that.'

'He let them come after you. Even knowing it was against my orders.'

'And you had come to Earth and lied to me,' Thor reminded him, starting to grow annoyed.

'Yes. I lied to you. And this makes you want me at your side?'

'That doesn't. But all the time before? I want my brother back.'

'What you want back is the brother you imagined, who adventured by your side but never claimed the glory. Your loving companion whose feelings you never gave a thought to. Brother, you have no idea how long I've hated you.'

The pain of that, the way Loki almost appeared to relish saying it, made Thor forget to breathe. He barely saw the flicker of motion, so fast, and raised a hand before his face just in time. Blood and bright steel had blossomed from the back of his hand before he felt the knife. It still hurt less than the words.

The circle of the Vanir contracted, and Thor, feeling sick, reached for Mjolnir left-handed.
Loki raised his hands. The Jotun casket appeared in them. Blue washed back over Loki -- for the first time, Thor saw him look like a frost giant -- and glittering ice sprayed out around him. It left the other Loki untouched; it sealed over Thor's face for a moment, but shattered as he surged forward. The glass jewellery cabinet cracked in the sudden cold.

Thor glimpsed several of the nearest Vanir coated in white. Then Sigyn raised her hands, the air flared orange and searing hot, and they all moved again. Most stepped surefooted over puddles oozing onto the floor; one collapsed with glassy red skin.

Freya clenched her fists, and the world seemed to contract around them somehow. ‘You might as well--’

Loki let go of the casket, which vanished. He looked like himself again, but deathly white -- and then the air twisted around him, and he disappeared too. Thor rushed forward and whirled, sweeping through the area, thinking it might be an illusion, but he felt nothing.

Thor turned back and saw, to his surprise, that the other Loki was still there, crouching beside the broken cabinet and looking distinctly frustrated. As Thor took a step toward him, he looked at Sigyn, mouthed Sorry and then something Thor couldn't follow, and swept one of the necklaces out and around his neck. Then he, too, disappeared.

This was entirely too many things and people vanishing for Thor's tastes. He looked around the shop, saw that someone was already bending over the fallen Vane, and turned to Sigyn. 'What was that about?'

'He took a falconskin to go and rescue your brother from his own foolishness,' Sigyn said. 'And asked me to make sure it was paid for. Very romantic.'

'How considerate of him,' said the shopkeeper. 'Prince Thor, do my eyes deceive me, or did your brother just use the Jotun Casket of Ancient Winters in my shop?'

Thor pulled the knife from his hand and surveyed the damage -- and worse, the definite absence of his brother -- with dismay. What had Loki done now that he had to be rescued from? 'It's a long story.'
Chapter 4

Loki’s first explorations into extradimensional space had been cautious, staying close enough to Asgard to jump straight back out if necessary. But he was sure that staying close to Vanaheim would only get him caught, they had falconskins and would not find it hard to search, so he set off warily past their moons and into the darkness. He knew how to do this, had found his way from Asgard to Jotunheim and Midgard by feeling his way like this; senses tingling as he expanded his awareness so as to sense any danger. Not, previously, so fast though.

The creature came at him unexpectedly. The large ones he had always found easy to avoid, the small ones he had to pick his way around and this time he had been too careless. It had a body like a winding, rippling sheet and approached him with curiosity rather than malice. It was not the first time Loki had had encounters like this. Once they’d seen you they were normally too fast to run from but, although it made his mind ache, he could normally overpower them and send them away.

One trailing end flicked out, slipping up his chest and over his face as Loki braced himself. He pushed at it but, while before it had been a struggle, this time it was like pushing on quicksand. No, he was the quicksand, the creature was quite solid. It was his mind that was losing shape in the struggle, strange wavering shapes flickering across his vision and the sudden taste of mead, too vivid a sense memory, on his tongue.

‘Loki. I am Loki,’ he told it, but the creature wanted to know who that was and only pushed deeper. Loki could no longer see what was around him, it was all blackness and violent jabs of light that were gone as soon as they appeared. More frightening, from what he knew of his previous trips, he could no longer see himself. He tasted salt and smelt oranges, the combination almost enough to make him gag.

Something grabbed him. The creature withdrew from his mind with a shocked disappointment, like a puppy that had just been slapped. Loki couldn’t tell what was holding him, it felt like arms but heatless, only that it didn’t seem to be continuing the assault on his mind. Stories bubbled up in his mind, tales of Hel who stalks between worlds grabbing men and carrying them away. No one knew where she took them, but they were never seen again.

Loki kicked out, trying to struggle. He tried summoning the casket but his mind couldn’t hold the spell. They were travelling, he could tell that, the minds of the creatures they passed like acid on his raw mind. He panicked, biting at his captor even though that had no hope of working against Hel.

They suddenly emerged from extradimensional space. The darkness didn’t change, but there was a solid floor under Loki’s feet. The sound of traffic outside told him what world he was on and he felt dizzy with relief, the arms still circling him were practically holding him up.

‘What? Lopt?’ he said.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ said Lopt. ‘Calm down.’

‘Why didn’t you say something earlier?’

‘I couldn’t.’

Oh, yes, Loki had made him be quiet during the confrontation with Thor. ‘It’s done something to my eyes,’ said Loki. ‘I can’t see.’
‘Your eyes are fine,’ said Lopt. ‘It’s done something to your perceptions.’

‘And how is that better?’

‘Because it’s temporary,’ said Lopt. He gently tugged Loki over a few paces. ‘There’s a chair here. Sit down.’

Loki did as he was told for the moment, letting his scattered thoughts pull themselves together. ‘Is this my apartment?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Lopt.

‘Then we can’t stay here. Your wife knows where it is and she’s with Thor.’

‘Ah,’ said Lopt. ‘It hasn’t done any damage to your ability to think. At least that’s reassuring. Where do you want to go?’

‘A hotel,’ said Loki. ‘For now. You’ll have to pack my things. Quickly.’

‘I can do that,’ said Lopt. Loki could hear that he’d moved away slightly, to the kitchen. He was opening doors in there. ‘But what’s a hotel?’

‘An...inn? A place where people pay to spend the night.’

‘The last time I was on Midgard, in the place Odin and I were frequenting, the mortals would rather have cut their hands off than charged money for hospitality. Of course, in that climate, leaving someone outdoors overnight meant finding his frozen corpse in the morning as often as not. Here, drink this.’ He had been moving back towards Loki as he spoke, and now Loki found a glass pushed into his hands.

Loki sipped at it. Absinthe, which was about what he expected since it was from his cupboard. Clearly Lopt had no idea it was normally diluted but Loki wasn’t going to complain about a strong drink right now. At least it burnt away some of the shock.

Lopt was moving around the apartment, gathering things to pack, and, Loki suspected, being deliberately noisy about it. ‘Do you have mortal coin?’ he called.

‘I have a credit card,’ said Loki, then sighed. ‘I’ll explain later. Just leave paying to me.’

Getting a taxi and a hotel to direct it to required Lopt reading to him from the phone book without actually understanding it and was an exercise in frustration. Fortunately, once they had that sorted out the actual trip to the hotel went smoothly and it wasn’t long before they were installed in a two-bedroom suite. Loki sat down on one of the beds and yawned, crawling straight into it was looking like a tempting option right now.

‘Don’t fall asleep yet,’ said Lopt.

Loki blinked, strange to feel himself blinking and still see only darkness. ‘Why, is it dangerous?’

‘It won’t do you any harm. But I’ve fallen asleep in the aftermath of a wolf attack and it wasn’t pleasant.’

That was almost reassuring, that he wasn’t the only one stupid enough to have something like this happen to him. Then he caught up with what Lopt had called it. ‘A wolf?’

‘Odin and I used to call most of the minor ones wolves at one point.’
‘Wolves?’ Loki was still incredulous. The ones like leeches, or tangles of weed, could still be called wolves?

Lopt laughed. ‘It was sort of a joke. This was after we’d found Midgard and we had friends there. A lot of our time with them was spent sharing fireside stories of trouble we’d got ourselves into or out of. The nature of what we’d been in trouble with usually wasn’t the point of the story and took far too long to explain. After a while a lot of our stories started with “Between worlds there is a dark wood full of hungry wolves, and the two of us were walking there when…” The name stuck.’

‘Possibly I should blame you for getting them started on kennings,’ said Loki. ‘When Odin took us to Midgard as children, Thor begged to be taken to see the carnivorous reindeer in the mountains. It took Father a while to realise he’d heard a kenning for wolves and longer still to explain it.’ Loki didn’t add that he’d been just as confused, and just as eager to see this strange new species of reindeer.

Lopt took a while to recover this time, he was laughing so hard. ‘They already had kennings when we arrived. They generally kept them within the bounds of reason though.’ There was a moment and then Lopt said, ‘Are you hungry?’

‘Yes,’ said Loki, surprised to find that he was. ‘You can get food by telephone, like the taxi. Try to find a place that does pizza.’

Lopt did rather better with the pizza than the taxi, he was a quick learner even if he’d been in the modern world for only a couple of days. Less, really, with all the travelling they’d done.

‘I’d run into those things before,’ said Loki quietly, after he heard the click of the receiver being replaced. ‘I’d never been overwhelmed by one before.’

‘Before you found out you were a frost giant?’ said Lopt.

Loki winced. ‘Yes.’

‘Identity’s a better defense against most of them than magic. Thor, my Thor, could never talk to them but they couldn’t do much to him either. He had a sense of self like a force-field and they just bounced off. My daughter, Leikin, was very sensitive to them but caught between two races in a number of ways. It was a while before she had a firm enough identity to risk facing them. But, if it’s any help, these things often come with age.’

‘I need to travel,’ said Loki. ‘I can’t just wait and hope things get better.’

‘You have the casket. We have a falconskin. There’s no need to dive into the void unprotected.’

‘We do?’ said Loki. He’d been thinking the whole trip had been a failure.

‘I needed to come after you quickly. So, yes, we do.’

Loki blinked, his vision was starting to come back. He could see the ginger blur of Lopt’s hair. ‘Falconskins can carry two people? Or did you stop using it once you had me?’

‘They can carry two people, at a pinch. I carried Idunn in one once. It’s not recommended, it makes them less maneuverable for a start. But I’ve never crashed a falconskin yet. And it’s more recommended than trying to travel without one with someone who’s already injured.’

They were like predators, then, or so Lopt was implying. They would be drawn to attack someone already wounded. ‘Was it trying to eat me?’
'No. Some of them do, but that one was…being friendly. Like a big clumsy dog trying to make friends with a canary.'

‘You said you’d been caught by some of them before,’ said Loki. ‘What happened?’

‘I managed to push some off with effort. Other times Odin rescued me. And then yelled at me. I’ve been rescued by Sigyn a time or two as well, that involves less yelling generally.’

They were interrupted by the telephone ringing, which turned out to be a call from reception saying their pizza had arrived. That probably explained why Lopt was still glamoured. Loki gave him some cash (he did have some, just not enough for a hotel) and sent him down to pay for it.

'Too wilting slow,' Freya snarled on the way back into the central communications office. Thor had arranged payment for the falconskin, and his hand had been treated. The one severe case of frostbite was still being looked after.

'Language,' said one of the monitors a bit diffidently. He gestured at Jane as she sat up from a cushioned bench. Thor remembered they had caught her in the middle of her night; probably the nap had been sensible. He sighed and went over to sit beside her, answering her questioning look with a shake of his head. She frowned down at his bandaged hand.

Freya rolled her eyes. 'That's barely 'language', and anyway, she's a human, not a child.'

'What happened?' Jane asked.

'We waited to see if Thor could persuade him,' Freya said, 'and didn't close in fast enough when that didn't work. I tried to block Prince Loki's ability to travel, but I think it only jostled him into a bad start. Sigyn's Loki went to help him. And I thought he was difficult to babysit before.'

'It's probably easier when you don't have to obey him,' Sigyn said dryly.

'Babysitting?' Jane asked in an undertone.

Thor cast his gaze briefly to the ceiling and wondered if it was comforting that Freya's talent for embarrassing him hadn't changed. 'Not really,' he said, 'or not much. But we do -- did --' He stopped and tried again for a less painfully definitive verb tense. 'Loki and I have visited her children a good deal, and I suppose the combination may have been something of a handful. At times.'

'I don't suppose you can track them?' Freya was asking Sigyn.

Sigyn grimaced and shook her head. 'Maybe if I'd tried to follow immediately, but I've been from Asgard to Midgard to here unassisted this morning, with passengers. I am really in no condition to go chasing people right now.'

Freya blinked. 'And then you decided to go up against ice magic thrown with the Jotun casket. That does it. I'll take you all back to Asgard, and we can try to sort the rest out from there.'

Sigyn acquiesced. Freya equipped them all for the journey with elegant necklaces like the ones the shop had sold, which Thor thought probably looked a great deal better on the women than on him. The gold looked and felt smooth until Freya fastened it, at which point there was an odd furry, buzzing feeling, as if he were holding a bee. Jane ran a finger under hers, looking intent.
'I'm mostly controlling all of these,' Freya told them. 'You'll have some freedom of movement, but not a lot. Now.'

The extradimensional dark swallowed them up at the same time as the falconskins leapt to life around them, sleek shapes that looked a bit like the solid parts of the Bifrost, but in iridescent green-bronze. The sensation was a bit more like flying with Mjolnir than the trips with Sigyn, but Thor still felt himself swooping after Freya without consciously willing it.

It wasn't a completely smooth trip, but Freya seemed to be exerting less effort than Sigyn had. Presumably that was what the falconskins were for. The few things Freya didn't dodge mostly glanced off them without effect. Still, they all nearly mired in something like bindweed, or maybe like an excited octopus, right before Freya brought them out. The poor monitor would have been scandalised; they all got to hear what Freya did consider profanity as Thor made quick work of the tendrils that came through with them. She didn't shut the falconskins off until afterward; considering the corroded marks the tendrils left on the ground, this was probably just as well.

'You do have a scavenger problem,' Freya said with distaste.

'I told you that,' said Sigyn.

'So you did.' Freya stretched. 'Very well. I think you and Jane need a nap, and Odin will probably want an update. Come along, Thor.'

'I know where we're going,' Thor said dryly. 'I do live here.'

'Then guide us, my host,' she returned. In a softened tone, she added, 'I can't imagine you'll enjoy the conversation. We might as well get it over with.'

The boy slept on his side, curled around himself defensively, but didn’t appear to be distressed. His vision had returned earlier and he seemed shaken but otherwise unharmed by the encounter. Loki checked on him one last time and then stepped into extradimensional space, activating the falconskin as he did.

Loki had always loved the falconskins. They were slower than the Bifrost but felt faster, as he jinked and swerved around dangers, just losing himself in the moment and enjoying the rush of flight. It was almost a shame to reach Asgard and he took a path through the forest of scavengers that required a lot of weaving just for the thrill of it, although he would have scolded any of his children who tried to do the same. He landed outside the palace and quickly veiled himself in invisibility before setting out for Odin’s study.

Odin was there, reading something and frowning. Loki stepped forward and dropped the invisibility. The glamour had been dropped earlier and he faced Odin looking just as he had when they first met, save for the bands of runes on his skin. Odin’s eye skimmed over them and his frown deepened.

‘Aren’t you going to welcome me home, brother?’ said Loki.

Odin's gaze snapped sharply up to Loki's eyes, and after a few seconds he rose and came toward him. 'Yes,' he said. 'Though I wasn't expecting to see you here.' He extended a hand, the one he'd cut long ago for a ceremony Loki had proposed. They hadn't worked out most of the protections against the temperature difference then; Odin's blood had been blistering hot, and his skin had frozen and crackled against Loki's.

Loki took his hand, clasping it easily. They hadn't touched while he'd been imprisoned. 'I thought we needed to talk,' he said.
'I misjudged you,' said Odin.

'As I did you,' said Loki. 'I took your side against the frost giants because you wished to protect Midgard for the mortals. When it seemed you had only wanted it for yourself I thought you had betrayed me. But Midgard is fine. Currently.'

'I have heard it may need protection again,' Odin said, looking weary. His eye flicked back to the runes on Loki's skin, and they itched lightly -- a precursor to pain if Odin tried harder to break them. The sensation faded. 'I suspect you are providing that, regardless of what he's told you to do.'

'I can't discuss his plans. I'm bound not to go against them, and telling you would probably amount to that. I came here to mend things between us.' He paused. 'I suppose his brother told you about what happened earlier. Some of the things he said sounded like things I might have said to you, at the end.'

Odin nodded slightly at the first words; probably he had expected the restriction. 'It's unsettling to think that Thor was less rash in his replies.' A pause. 'I have missed you, Loki.' Rare words, from him.

'And I you.' Loki pulled them together by their clasped hands for a brief embrace. Odin was not normally demonstrative but he did hug back. 'I've been getting quite nostalgic, trying to catch your son up on all the history he's somehow missed. Whatever did you teach him?'

Odin withdrew with a slight grimace. 'Evidently not nearly enough. I let him and Thor guide much of their own educations.'

'Forgetting that not everyone would take such determined advantage of that as you did?' said Loki. 'I was beginning to think something had gone so wrong in the war with Jotunheim that you had deliberately suppressed all evidence of the former alliance.'

Odin actually looked startled. 'The end of it was a foul enough business, but no. Never that.'

Loki nodded. 'Perhaps if the boy had had a better idea of his own nature he would have taken more interest in history.' He glanced at Odin, considering. 'Did he really try to destroy Jotunheim?'

Odin's breath hissed out. 'Using the Bifrost,' he confirmed. 'Thor broke it to stop him.' A pause, then, 'Please don't kill him.'

Loki shook his head. 'It took him a day to think of it, but he did bind me not to.' He looked at Odin's face and snorted. 'I won't. Truly.'

'Thank you.' A long sigh, another glance at the runes. 'Are you well? It's become apparent I don't know what to expect from him.'

Loki sighed. 'Restricted. Although from a practical point of view there may be advantages to this, when it comes to influencing your son into saner courses. He would never let anyone close to him if he didn't have power over them. And he's started thinking of me as more of a person since seeing me glamoured - which is deeply disturbing given his nature.'

Odin shook his head. Dismay, not denial, not after the discussion of Jotunheim. 'I set spells deeper than glamours into him,' he said, 'when I feared a Jotun infant wouldn't survive Asgard's summer, and -- when I was waiting for tempers to cool. I thought it unfair to make an illustration of a child. And then....' His expression couldn't really be called a smile. 'Instead of finding a time to explain, I waited for him to ask questions.'

And the child had been left with nothing to ask. At most a vague feeling of difference. 'How did you
come to have him?' asked Loki. 'He said he had mostly been raised by you, but you had him as an infant?'

'I found him,' Odin said, 'when the last battle of the war was over, alone among the rubble of the temple. I had not expected--' He broke off, then resumed with less anger in his voice. 'And I saw Laufey's features in him, and yours.'

Loki nodded. He remembered the temple exposures. The traditional words ran through his head, *Angrboda, take back this child. I cannot rear it.* It had been both a last resort of the desperate and a sanctioned way for the uncaring to destroy runts. Evidently Laufey had decided against raising a second runt, although the first had made himself scarce as soon as physically able and never troubled him again.

'And you told him that,' he said. 'All that waiting for the right time to mention he was a frost giant and you flat out told him his parent wanted him dead. Wise All-father, your priorities are terrible.'

Odin didn't look away. 'I told him he was mine,' he said softly, 'but I did not tell him nearly enough.'

Loki pressed his palms against his eyes for a moment. 'If I had been here...perhaps it could have made a difference, seeing that a frost giant can live among the Asgardians.'

A low snort. 'And you would not have put up with the silence.' Odin paused, then grimaced. 'This is also a terrible time to tell you, but I am not sure a better one will come. Loki, Laufey is dead.'

Loki paused, shocked but hardly dismayed. 'The boy killed him,' he said, starting to smile despite himself.

Odin inclined his head slightly, without lowering his gaze. 'Laufey seemed to expect to be permitted to kill me as I slept.'

'Laufey knows as much about the ways between worlds as an earthworm knows about flying,' said Loki. 'Oh. What was the boy planning with *that*?'

'I haven't had the opportunity to ask him -- but possibly an excuse.'

'Perhaps,' said Loki. 'Very dramatic of him, to kill one father over the sleeping body of the other.'

'The whole thing had a very stage-managed quality. Even Thor's return, but I'm not sure why or how he would have orchestrated that.'

'Hmm. He's inherited your penchant for convoluted plans, it seems.'

'And even less inclination to run them past anyone first,' Odin said ruefully.

Loki grinned, bright and sudden. 'You ran them by me often enough. And all that did was land both of us in trouble instead of one.'

'You did improve on them now and then,' Odin said. 'Of course, sometimes the improvement was an opportunity for more trouble....'

Loki smiled at his old conspirator and then sighed. 'I had better go. If he wakes up and finds me gone then this will be the last trip I manage. Give Sigyn all my love and tell your son...tell Thor...that he reminds me of his namesake and that I am glad to see Mjolnir in good hands.' A humorously accusing look at Odin. 'Especially after what I paid for it.'
'I will,” Odin said. He smiled back, very slightly. 'He has heard that story, at least.'

'Nice to know I haven't been forgotten,’ said Loki. 'Goodbye, brother.’

He stepped once more into extradimensional space, the falconskin flaring to life around him.
Chapter 5

Jane found Thor literally under his own personal thundercloud.

She heard the sound as soon as she went outside, and she spent a few seconds staring up at the blue sky in bewilderment before turning and walking to a place where she could see the lone patch of dark grey, out near the edge of the city. On her way there -- a winding route with several false starts down streets that didn't quite go where she expected -- she noticed that lightning looked really interesting when you could see the whole cloud at once.

Thor was sitting on the edge of a cliff, being rained on, in a patch of wet ground perhaps a few yards across. There was very little wind. Jane stood just outside where the rain sheeted down and held out a hand into it, thinking she should maybe have brought an umbrella. Well, it was a warm day. She hadn't put on eye makeup, so she wouldn't wind up half-blinding herself with it if it ran....

Or, you know, she could take the simple approach. 'Thor?'

He started and turned, and the cloud moved over the cliff and began to dissipate. He was drenched and, remarkably, did not look even remotely like a drowned rat. 'Jane.' He gestured to the ground beside him, then frowned slightly and stood up. 'Ah, perhaps you'd prefer to sit somewhere dry.'

'And also not right on a precipice,' Jane suggested, as Thor was walking right along the edge. She supposed that mattered less when you could fly.

He paused, then came straight toward her and gestured back toward a rock projecting at a low slant from the ground, big enough for two. 'I'd never let you fall.'

'I believe you,' said Jane, 'but it's still not that relaxing.' She sat on the upper end of the rock and found it warm from the sun. The water dripping off Thor stained his section of it a deeper grey. 'Are you all right?'

He spread his right hand and turned it to show her both sides. The only sign of the wound was a narrow patch of new skin pink with busy capillaries on the palm, pale and untanned on the back. Either Asgard's medical technology or their own healing abilities were amazing.

She smiled a bit, but still said gently, 'Not quite what I meant.'

'I thought not.' He sighed and was silent for a moment. 'Yesterday,' he said, and her heart wrenched at his tone even before he finished, 'my brother told me he hated me. That he had, for a long time, while I gave no thought to what he wanted or how he felt.'

What did you even say to that? Jane put a hand on his shoulder for a moment; the wet cloth of his cape bunched under her hand. She pulled one heel up to rest on the stone and put her chin on her knee, thinking. 'Was it true?'

Thor gave her a startled look. 'Loki plays with words, Jane, but I think he meant this.'

'And I'm sure he knows how he feels,' Jane said, 'but unless he's a mind-reader -- um, is he?' It suddenly occurred to her that this might not be so easily ruled out as she was used to. She waited until Thor shook his head before resuming. 'Well, did you really not think about it?'

'I thought I did,' said Thor. 'He wanted his books and his magic, I'm still fairly sure of that much. When we were very young--'" He swallowed. 'When we were very young, I had just made other
friends for the first time I can remember. We were racing, and he came running after us. I told him to go away and ran faster. I was scolded for leaving him behind, and I made sure that I never did again. At least, I meant to.'

'I'm pretty sure that's all completely normal kid behaviour,' Jane offered.

'Perhaps.' Thor sighed. 'He usually kept up, too. He has always been formidable in battle, even if much of it is stealth and deception.'

'I thought that made up a lot of battle,' Jane said. Not that she was an expert, but wasn't that why they had stuff like military intelligence, all jokes about oxymorons aside? Or even feinting, in her admittedly hazy notions about swordfights or boxing.

'Sometimes,' Thor said, frowning. 'For myself, I would rather face an opponent openly and have things plain--' He checked himself and shook his head. 'But I am meant to have learned not to think of war as a sport.'

'I'm, uh, sure that's a process. Learning, I mean.' However strange she found the starting point.

'I do not mean to suggest that I didn't take advantage of his tricks. We were very effective together. Even more when our friends were with us.' A soft almost-laugh. 'No matter how many times someone took offense at a jest, and I had to convince Loki one of them did not actually hate him, or vice versa....' He trailed off and swallowed. 'Perhaps I was wrong about that too,' he said hoarsely. 'I am almost glad they are away right now. We did tease him a great deal, but his tongue was always sharpest, or at least his retorts the cleverest. We did leave him alone when he asked, but he always came with us again eventually. I believed he wanted to be with us. I thought... that we'd be together. Always.' He shut his eyes. 'And now somehow I have driven him to this.'

'Whoa,' Jane said, alarm bells going off in her head. 'I think that might be going a little far.'

'Thank you,' said Thor, 'but I have to recognise my part in this. If I do not understand it yet, I have to examine it. Perhaps that was the trouble before, when he sent the Destroyer, that I did not know all I had done to offend him. Though at least there he listened enough to cease punishing others for my transgressions.'

'I'm not exactly arguing with that,' Jane said with a frown. And the Destroyer was the giant robot suit of armour that had practically killed Thor? Apparently when he'd been apologising? 'At least, not the part about taking responsibility for what you did and understanding how he felt about it. But you can't take responsibility for everything he does. I'm pretty sure Loki's making his own decisions.'

'Yes, but if I have been so blind to him --'

'Then the last thing that's going to help either of you is to act like it's all about you!' Thor blinked. 'I... had not looked at it that way.'

'Anyway,' Jane added, 'I know I wasn't there for most of this, but I'm pretty sure the correct response to feeling like your family is ignoring you is to talk to them about it or get counselling or something, not turn into Darth Vader and start blowing up planets.'

'Turn into what? Or who?' Oh. Right. 'Who. He's a fictional character. Sometime when we're back on Earth, I'll show you the movies.'
'You do that.' She leaned over and hugged him. He was still damp. 'With a few grains of salt, I guess. Part of the time I'm still pretty weirded out by SHIELD, and they're probably the least mind-boggling thing that's happened to me lately.'

'You provide a valuable perspective, even on things otherwise outside your experience.' And he said things like that as if they were completely normal. They were almost starting to sound that way, despite both the phrasing and the fact that she usually had trouble convincing people that her perspective on her actual area of expertise wasn't completely crazy. A second later, he added thoughtfully, 'SHIELD might be of some help.'

'With Loki?' She'd gotten the impression he was a little out of their league.

'Mm. We think he intends to conquer Midgard. It would be -- forgive me, Jane -- the easiest of the realms to treat so, but even so he could hardly do it all by himself. SHIELD should be given a chance to prepare, and they might know if there are individuals or factions on Earth he might ally with.'

'Oh, that makes sense.' She was sure Loki would find some takers, if he looked for them. 'You think he'll stick with, ah, local help?'

'Not necessarily, but it is worth a look. We're contacting the other realms as well. Though some of them are easier to talk to than others, even for Heimdall.' Thor grimaced. 'Another possibility is that he has found allies in other extradimensional creatures. On the bright side, few of those would dare try to pass Jormungand, and Father thinks our uncle could probably keep him from trying to unchain Fenrir.'

Jane blinked. 'Your uncle Loki? And I take it Fenrir isn't as much nicer than the mythological version as Jormungand?'

'Yes and yes. I don't know what your myths say about Fenrir, but it would be hard to make the stories less nice.'

'Ouch.' A pause. 'You know, among other things, the stories have both Fenrir and Jormungand as Loki's children.'

'Ahh,' said Thor, sounding a bit stunned by this prospect, 'definitely not. In that case our uncle would be much scarier.'

Jane was surprised into a giggle. 'I wonder how we got that mixed up, then?'

'Sigyn might have some idea. Or -- they do have a son who is sometimes called the Wolf, I think, though I've never met him. That might have done it easily enough.' His voice suddenly quiet, he said, 'He -- Uncle Loki -- visited Father last night.'

'Really.' Jane leaned back and planted her hands on the rock. 'I didn't realise he'd be able to. Did he say anything about your brother?'

Thor shook his head. 'They spoke of him, but our uncle was constrained not to give information that would help us to stop him.' He hesitated. 'He did say... that I reminded him of the Thor he knew. And that he was glad to see Mjolnir in good hands.' He sounded a little surprised. Wondering, maybe.

Jane looked at him thoughtfully. 'You sound like that means a lot to you.' Especially given it was
coming from someone he barely knew.

'I have heard much good of my eldest brother. And it was my uncle who brought Mjolnir from the Dwarves of Svartalfheim.' A pause. 'And while he usually makes his approval clear enough, my father is not altogether free with compliments.'

'Ah. I see.'

Rather wistfully, Thor added, 'They seem to have settled things.'

'After a thousand years,' Jane pointed out. 'I'm glad they have, but I hope it doesn't take you quite that long.'

Thor heaved a long sigh. 'Yes. So do I.'

Loki was standing in extradimensional space, a little past Jormungand’s coils, the greenish tint of the falconskin visible around him. Lopt was behind him, arms wrapped casually around his waist, while he waited for Loki to accustom himself. It felt unsteady, as if he was bobbing up and down although he knew he wasn’t, the falconskin ready to tip into motion at any moment.

‘Have you ever been skiing?’ asked Lopt.

‘No,’ said Loki.

‘Well, don’t try to stop suddenly. If you need to stop, circle a bit to slow down, don’t just dig your heels in or you’ll tumble. We’re going to take the route you already know, the one to Asgard. Part of the way, at least.’

‘And if there are wolves?’ asked Loki.

‘It’s one of the safest routes there is. If anything turns up, or if you look like you’re going to crash, I’ll take over long enough to get you out of trouble. Just don’t fight me.’

Loki tensed. ‘And what’s to stop you taking over and flying me right into Asgard?’

‘I’m bound not to go against your plans, remember? I doubt I could convince myself you intended to turn yourself in. But I also don’t think you plan to crash.’

Ah, yes. That had been unnecessarily paranoid of him. Still, he wasn’t sure how much to trust Lopt. Even though it was reassuring right now to have him there ready to correct any mistakes.

‘I’m ready,’ he said.

‘Go then,’ said Lopt.

Loki did, it was faster than he’d expected and nothing like either Bifrost or the casket. They just threw you straight at your destination, this way you still had all the obstacles you’d have on foot just coming at you at ten times the speed. Loki managed the first two turns, then realised he’d overshot the third and was heading into a space he didn’t know. His instinctive attempt to stop sent him head over heels into it. Lopt’s arms tightened gently around his waist as control was taken from him and the falconskin pulled out of its tumble.

‘Everyone does that at least once,’ said Lopt as he manoeuvred them smoothly back onto the path. 

Loki swore to himself that once would be all. ‘You’ve taught people before?’ he said, setting out
more cautiously and trying not to let the falconskin pick up too much speed.

‘My children,’ said Lopt. ‘Nari had a distressing tendency to take the falconskin off in order to talk to things, though. He nearly gave me a heart attack when he came home and said he’d spent the afternoon talking to Jormungand, who was really a very nice snake.’

‘Ah,’ said Loki. ‘I don’t think I’m likely to do that.’

The next time he overshot Loki forced himself to circle back instead of stopping and got himself onto the path again with minimal fuss.

‘Well done,’ said Lopt by his ear. Loki smiled both at the praise and because he’d completed the manoeuvre successfully.

‘Stop here,’ said Lopt a little later and Loki forced himself into a careful circle while he slowed. ‘You are learning fast,’ Lopt told him approvingly. ‘There’s nothing near here, we can take a short break before heading back.’

Loki relaxed, knowing already this was one of the safest parts of the way. It had taken a surprising amount of concentration to use the falconskin, although most of it had been used to fight his own impulses. Once he got used to it, and the proper techniques became instinctive, he could see it would be quite an easy way to travel.

‘We’re not as close to Asgard as I expected,’ he remarked.

Lopt sighed. ‘The space around Asgard is a mess right now. I noticed when we passed through it before.’

Loki nodded. The scavengers, of course. He wondered how long it would be before they managed to finish eating the wreckage of the Bifrost and moved on. Drifting here, in a place he had usually been travelling to or from Asgard on, brought back their earlier conversation.

‘Would you take me back to Asgard if you weren’t forbidden to?’ he asked, suspecting he already knew the answer but wanting confirmation.

‘For Midgard’s sake, yes,’ said Lopt.

‘Not for mine?’ said Loki acidly. It was the sort of thing Thor or Odin would say, that they wanted him back home for his own good.

‘No. Your family love you, but I don’t think they know what to do with you. And you don’t seem to have been happy when you were living there.’

Loki paused caught between wanting to agree that he had been unhappy and wanting to insist that he had been fine. Or would have been, if he hadn’t always been in Thor’s shadow. That it had been his brother’s fault, not something wrong with him.

‘You don’t know anything about me,’ he tried.

‘I do after you shouted it at half of Vanahem,’ said Lopt dryly. ‘It has nothing to do with being a frost giant, you know. Odin’s family runs to overwhelming personalities. I’d be in favour of you getting away from them for a while if you weren’t trying to take over a world while you did it.’

‘You didn’t like Thor?’ asked Loki. Surprised, oddly hopeful and even more oddly offended on his brother’s behalf.
‘I thought he was a nice young man who didn’t deserve the things you said to him. And also that if he was my brother I’d probably want to put frogs in his bed.’

Loki laughed uncertainly. ‘I used snakes. Only grass snakes,’ he added quickly.

‘I didn’t think you’d used cobras,’ said Lopt. ‘Ready to go back?’

The trip back was a little faster as Loki gained confidence and he was almost disappointed to reach Jormungand and have Lopt take control to bring them past the snake. It had been rather tiring, but Loki found himself looking forward to his next lesson.
Chapter 6

The message went out across the Nine Realms, via Heimdall and Verdrfolnir, via Freya's flights and Sigyn's own, and by others who dared the scavengers around the broken Bifrost out of curiosity or friendship. Asgard's Prince Loki, acting without the king's sanction, had departed Asgard and had reappeared declaring his intent to seek a kingdom of his own. He had released Odin's chosen Jotun brother Loki from his long imprisonment and coerced his help. Any who encountered them, or received inquiries about world-walking or war from unfamiliar parties, should deliver them unharmed if possible; more likely, send word to Asgard.

Gossip, of course, went with it.

The replies came more slowly. Verdrfolnir insisted on fighting his way to Asgard instead of avoiding the hazards. Heimdall had to wait for him because after long years as guardian, he smelled so much like Bifrost that even a falconskin couldn't keep him from being swarmed as soon as he stepped out of Asgard's space.

Vanaheim, of course, already knew. Alfhelm's reply was a little cool until Freya made her own flight to offer a less formal and more detailed explanation to her brother Frey and his wife Gerd. (The romance between the Vanir and Jotun ambassadors to Alfhelm had once been the scandal and delight of all nine worlds, friends on Midgard included.) Niflheim didn't think they'd be much help to the wayward prince but promised to bring him by if he turned up. Muspelheim said much the same, except for pointing out that this communication was as far as they ever got from their home star. Svartalfheim sent a delicate reminder that they had strict policies regarding the purchase of information and confidentiality; that said, they hadn't seen him.

The Norns' reply arrived slightly before Asgard actually sent the message; it noted that Asgard's princes were not welcome, had not been welcome, and Loki was no more welcome for his disobedience. Also, he would never be able to rule fate, but it would instead rule him. This was followed by a good deal of questionably coherent poetry about the shattered Bifrost, Baldr, Muspelheim, honey, and snakes. Heimdall sent Verdrfolnir anyway to avoid causality headaches.

Jotunheim's response was explicitly unofficial, somewhat incredulous, and very rude. This was probably understandable, but Thor still ground his teeth over it. Odin shrugged and had Verdrfolnir sent back with a pointed comment about hoping for improved relations under Jotunheim's new ruler; the second response was stiff, formal, and free of actual swear words. It also referred to large portions of the population that had not been involved in Laufey's decisions and asked for the casket back.

'I know you don't even have the casket right now,' Jane said, when she heard about this over breakfast, 'but is there anything you can do for them?'

Thor threw her a startled look. He hadn't really thought past not harming them -- would they even accept help from Asgard? Monsters would not. When he tried to think of them as a people as proud as Asgard's own... his first thought was never. Then he remembered Hnoss gloating over a sentence from one of her history books when they were still children -- The victorious Vanir helped to restore Asgard's blighted fields before they could starve. He no longer had any idea about the rest of that conversation, but he did recall grinding his teeth, and Loki's elbow bruising his ribs to shut him up. He'd asked Odin afterward, and Odin had said it was true.

Frigga eyed Jane more thoughtfully. 'Little enough without the Bifrost or the casket,' she said.
'Healers, perhaps, if they are willing to go -- and if they are promised safe sojourn there. Supplies, but only what a few can carry. We do not have many ice mages, which limits our ability to address the bulk of their problems.'

'The casket,' Odin added, 'in sufficiently skilled hands, could repair much of the damage to their planet. In theirs, it could also be used to try to take your world instead.'

Jane winced. 'Do you think they'd try that again?'

'I do not know.' Odin looked as if the words tasted bad, perhaps because he usually made a point of seeming to know everything. 'Such lessons can be learned, but I was less familiar with Laufey's heirs than Laufey.'

'It's something of a moot point for now,' Sigyn said, 'as we don't have the casket. We do have some ice mages who can world-walk, though, and one of them is a healer. And it is time I got in touch with my children.'

When the meal was over, Thor went out through the garden. He was barely steps from the door when a frost giant stepped out of thin air in front of him. Blue-skinned, bare-chested, and a head taller than Thor himself. He reached instinctively for Mjolnir, but forced himself still as soon as he'd gripped the handle. A head taller than Thor was unusually short for a frost giant, and he did appear to be alone -- so what was he doing here? 'Identify yourself!'

'I am Nari,' said the frost giant, and to Thor's complete surprise, bowed correctly for a citizen of Asgard to its prince, one fist to the opposite shoulder. 'Son of Loki and--'

'And Sigyn,' Thor finished with him, starting to relax. That was right, Sigyn had said Nari took after his father. It was still disconcerting. 'I didn't think she'd had time to get in touch with you yet.'

Nari blinked. 'She hasn't. I came to ask about some of the rumours I'd been hearing.'

'Ah,' said Thor. He hung the hammer back on his belt. 'And I suppose you didn't hear any that made you think twice about appearing directly into the palace grounds?'

A slow, amused smile. 'I heard some that made me think twice about walking through the city to get here.'

Thor snorted. 'I suppose that's fair. You'd better come in. I think your mother wants to send you to repair Jotunheim, by the way.'

'That should be interesting. Are you coming too?'

Thor blinked. 'I? Surely you heard of the reasons for my banishment -- or did that reach you only as rumour, too?'

'Yes, actually. Your father did not exactly make a planetwide announcement, although I'm not sure if that was to spare you humiliation or simply out of a habit of being cryptic.'

Thor couldn't quite help a laugh at that, even though he wasn't sure it was funny. 'Hard to tell. But I am not sure sending me to Jotunheim could possibly be seen as a friendly gesture, especially as I have no idea what you think I'd do there. I am not an ice mage.'

'No,' said Nari, 'but I understand you are as formidable a weather-wielder as your eldest brother, Prince Thor.'
'And what?' Thor asked. 'Would sleet help?' That... suddenly sounded less ridiculous than he'd intended. He had delighted his friends with snow and ice sculptures in the past, wind-carved with various levels of skill. He'd nearly ruined a carpet, three wall-hangings, and a shelf of books by sneaking several of them into Loki's room to loom over his bed once. After Loki's rather explosive response to this discovery, they'd spent three days carefully drying everything out.

Nari smiled again. The expression looked strange on blue. Thor decided he might be able to get used to it. 'It might. And there are many Jotun sorcerers who draw power from storms, instead of making them.' Well, that was potentially alarming. 'But you do have a point about the appearance of it. We'll see.'

'Come on in, then. Speaking of appearances, I'll try to keep you from alarming any of the guards on the way.' Thor turned back the way he'd come.

They did rather startle a guard, one of the two who'd nearly died during the incursion that interrupted Thor's coronation; he drew up still straighter as they approached, and his hands tightened on his spear. Thor introduced Nari blandly as his cousin and asked if Sigyn had gone this way; the guard gave them directions and proved his self-discipline by relaxing, at least physically, back to normal attention. 'Good man,' Thor murmured, clapping him on the shoulder, and set off in the indicated direction.

When they did reach Sigyn, in consultation with Odin and Frigga, she dropped what she was doing and flew at Nari, who caught her in a hug. Thor supposed he shouldn't be surprised this didn't injure her -- she was Nari's mother -- but it still looked like it ought to hurt. 'I was going to come looking for you today!'

'I'm surprised you haven't already. We've been hearing the most incredible rumours. Father free, or escaped, and nine worlds searching for him and our cousin? Who isn't dead after all? What is going on?'

'Well, those are mostly true--'

'You couldn't have told us?'

'It's been a very busy few days,' Sigyn said wryly. 'And you may be both pleased and chagrined to know that we have finally cleared things up with Odin. Your father never sought to destroy Asgard. We're looking for him because he's currently bound to obey the younger prince, who recently found out he was born to Laufey and is not taking it well.'

Nari set her away by the shoulders until he could look at her, appearing a bit headachey around the eyes. 'I'm not sure I'm taking this well either.'

'Not that badly,' Sigyn said. 'I'm sorry, that was a lot at once, wasn't it? Come sit down.'

'Just a bit. And from what I've heard, I suspect it would be impossible to take it worse than he did.' Nari bowed to Odin but didn't wait for the king to add his own invitation before sitting. 'So,' he said, 'I hear you need an ice mage.'

'It might help,' said Odin.

'I think you might need a more detailed explanation,' Frigga put in.

'I think,' said Sif's voice from the doorway, sounding a bit wary and a bit stunned, 'that we might too.'
'Sif,' Thor said, jumping back up and going to greet his friends at the door and bring them in. And hopefully reassure them that only one member of the royal family had lost his mind recently. 'Fandral, Hogun, Volstagg--' He clapped each of them on the shoulder as he spoke. 'How was the dragon hunt?'

'Oh, fine,' Fandral said a bit faintly.

'Let me introduce you to my cousin Nari,' Thor went on. Might as well simply bull ahead as if everything were normal. Relatively. 'Nari... my dearest friends and companions.'

Nari nodded to them, red eyes very bright with what appeared to be amusement, as they all stared at him. 'A pleasure. Especially as the dragon was in my area and wouldn’t listen to me. My neighbors and I were all very relieved to hear of your victory.'

'You tried talking to it?' Hogun asked.

Nari shrugged. 'Talking. Shouting. Icing over its nose. That one might have worked slightly better in winter.'

'I wasn't aware you had any frost giant cousins, Thor,' said Fandral.

'My brother Loki,' Odin said, 'is Jotun.'

There was a bewildered pause. Of course they'd all been aware of Loki's namesake, but like Thor, they'd assumed he was dead. And not a frost giant. 'Is?' Sif ventured.

'Indeed,' said Odin. Thor thought this was somewhat unhelpful.

'This explains the guard’s story, I suppose,' said Volstagg. 'He was a bit unsettled.'

'The guard I asked for directions,' Thor explained, 'was in the treasure vault during the, ah, initial disruption.'

Nari raised his eyebrows. 'You have an interesting sense of humour, Prince Thor. Are you sure you've never met my father?'

After the ensuing explanations had moved on into planning -- and at some point, planning had begun to assume that Asgard would be offering assistance to Jotunheim -- Nari remarked, 'I'd offer to glamour Thor and take him there as a power source, but I don't think I could convince everybody Mjolnir was just a sledgehammer.'

'I don't need Mjolnir to call a storm,' Thor said, somewhat indignantly.

His frost giant cousin regarded him speculatively. 'You'd let me take you to Jotunheim unarmed?'

Thor sat back. 'Not happily,' he said. 'For one thing, I don't especially like disguises.' Odin frowned at that; Nari didn't. It occurred to Thor that Nari was evidently capable of glamour and chose to walk around Asgard looking like a frost giant. 'Furthermore, I don't trust them. Finding out Loki was baiting them doesn't change the fact that they took the bait.'

Nari snorted. 'Do I hear the voice of experience there?'

Thor paused a moment to sort that out and then admitted, 'Yes.' He shrugged. 'All that said, there is only so much good I'm doing here.'

'I think it would be more useful to send you to Midgard than Jotunheim,' Odin said. 'So far we only
have eight worlds looking for your brother, and he's probably on the ninth. But I'll keep the possibility in mind.'

Odin assigned Thor's four friends to accompany him and Jane to Earth again, since they'd already been there. Freya was the one to take them this time, guiding the falconskins again. Jane leaned into the motion as hers took off and said to herself, very softly, 'Whee!'

Evidently not quite as softly as she'd intended. Freya looked back over her shoulder and grinned.

Jane blushed a bit and smiled back sheepishly.

'I'm glad you're enjoying yourself,' Freya said, laughter underlying her voice. 'Do you want to learn how to do your own steering? I can turn over control to you if you like. Don't worry,' she added, as Jane's eyes widened, 'I'll catch you if you go off course.'

'I'd love that,' Jane said. 'What do I do?'

Freya swooped back around to her. 'Sigyn says you've already shown you can move yourself here. Do that, but keep in mind it will be easier, because the falconskin will magnify everything. Don't try to turn or stop too suddenly.'

'Lots of momentum?' Jane asked, looking at Freya and then ahead again. Or at least, in the direction she'd thought was ahead. There were too many extra directions here, though. She could perceive one three-dimensional reference frame at a time, but then she'd move just a little bit in a direction she was only half aware of, and she'd be in a whole different one and searching uneasily for the cross-section with people in it again. She paused dizzily, trying to orient her mind. 'Um, wait. Where am I going?'

'Lots of momentum, yes.' Freya went around her in a lazy circle. Jane mostly managed to track her. 'Aim for where I was headed -- oh, you can't tell, can you? Try to follow me, then.'

'Okay,' Jane said gamely. She swallowed.

Freya smiled at her. 'Relax. I'm not going to lose you.' She launched forward in a slow glide.

Jane took a deep breath and thought about pushing off. The falconskin wobbled strangely; Freya glanced back, and it steadied. Jane thought about the way she'd leaned toward the moon and tried that instead--

'Oh.' There was a delicious swooping sensation, like starting down a ski slope or a roller coaster, but with no wind. Jane started to look around at the glints of light darting around her, then caught her breath abruptly and returned her attention to Freya. She rushed forward suddenly and thought Freya had stopped to wait for her until she found herself matching pace, and definitely still moving.

'Not bad,' said Freya, eyes gleaming behind the shimmer of the falconskin.

'I'm not quite sure how I did it, though,' Jane said, and promptly proved how much she had left to learn. She glanced ahead in the direction they seemed to be going, and when she tried to look back at Freya, she couldn't find her. 'Oh, great. Help?'

She felt a sort of tug on the falconskin, and then her perspective tilted and Freya was looking at her thoughtfully. 'You can move,' Freya said, 'and you seem to have a decent feel for the steering, but you can't see where you're going, can you?'

Jane grimaced. 'Not really.'
'All right.' Freya gave her a sharp-edged grin. 'There's nothing too alarming in the vicinity. Pick a
direction and make a loop.'

'Um,' said Jane. Nothing too alarming?

'I'll reel you in. Just do it.'

Jane sucked in another nervous breath, stared at Freya for a moment, and then launched out and
away. She lost everyone immediately, of course, and lost even the pretense of a sense of direction
within seconds. Colours came and went; things that looked like stars and nebulae and a hundred
things she couldn't name but desperately wanted to catalogue spun past her. She was in the midst of
more beauty than she could ever have imagined and she was completely and utterly lost.

The falconskin stopped responding to her, and Jane panicked for a moment before remembering that
the most likely explanation was Freya. She was drawn back alongside the Vanir woman, where she
could see the other five in formation. She panted for a moment and tried to relax taut muscles in her
legs.

Thor's falconskin shifted closer within the limited control Freya had left the rest of them. 'There you
are,' he said. 'Having fun?'

Jane stared at him for a moment and wondered if he couldn't see that she was shaking. 'I--' She broke
off in a nervous laugh and then... kept smiling. 'You know... actually, yes.' She looked over at Freya.
'Can I try that again?'

'Try to envision your path in advance this time,' Freya said, and then gave her a light shove
sideways.

Jane yelped but managed to keep track this time well enough to reverse the push and arc back to
where she could see everybody. She looked around, feeling the falconskin poised to follow any
thought or motion, and then firmly visualized the shape and feel of a wide loop and took off again.

She got lost that time too, when a moment's inattention took her off course. And the next. On the
fourth try she returned to fly between Thor and Freya without ever losing track of the reference
frame, and Sif and Fandral both applauded before looking at each other and bursting into laughter.

Freya took over the falconskin at that point because, she explained, they were turning. Jane
concentrated fiercely on the sense of changing directions as Freya accelerated along a fast, twisting
course around several half-glimpsed obstacles that seemed to pull on Jane in different ways. At one
point her sense of down switched abruptly to somewhere above and behind her head, and as soon as
that stopped, she found herself fascinated with something her brain insisted was an ultraviolet spiral.
That one pulled harder.

'Okay,' Jane said, when they stopped swerving, 'what exactly am I processing as "down" here?'

'A mixture of things, probably,' said Freya. 'The most comprehensive answer but perhaps the least
useful is the structure of space.'

'No, no, comprehensive is useful,' Jane said quickly. 'But specific is good too. What's affecting it?
Are we actually in a gravity well, or is it something else?' If it was gravity, she might be even more
disoriented than she thought.

'Mass is one of the things that affects it. Also magic. And intelligence. The direction you're
perceiving as "down" here and now is toward the nearest bulk of Yggdrasil.'
Jane blinked, torn among several questions, and settled on, 'Intelligence affects the structure of space-time?'

'Oh, yes,' said Freya, 'for all practical purposes.'

'But how--' Jane broke off in puzzlement.

'One of the features of Yggdrasil,' Freya explained, 'is that the nine worlds to which it leads most easily are populated worlds. Not necessarily comfortable ones from our perspective -- Niflheim would freeze a frost giant, and Muspelheim and Svartalfheim are stars -- but populated. If you're very energetic and adventurous you can go looking elsewhere, of course. But if you wanted to visit the other planets in your solar system, for instance, they'd all be in some sense uphill. Even your sun, since you don't orbit a populated star.'

'But is that cause or effect?' Jane asked. 'Or neither?' Or both?

'We don't know for sure. But minds tend to attract one another here, and energies unless they're specifically adapted for defence. That's one of the reasons the paths are complicated,' Freya added. 'If you think of the easiest route on Yggdrasil itself as a river valley, the route that water or something like it might take -- mindless and hard to damage -- then the path you actually want to take is one that accounts for cataracts, venomous plants, piranha, and the occasional dragon.'

That was going to take some thinking about. Meanwhile Jane threw herself into a new series of loops, refusing to let herself worry about getting lost or losing control and tumbling, but paying determined attention to everything she was seeing and to what she knew about how the cross-sections of higher-dimensional shapes worked. Gradually, what she saw began to form patterns and then to make sense; gradually, she started to get a feel for where she was going and to orient herself based on a directional tug that she was beginning to recognise as the pull of Yggdrasil.

She eventually ran into something -- she really got the impression of being attacked by a floppy kite, complete with a tail and string to get tangled in. It only plastered itself around the falconskin and recoiled, complaining, but it threw her badly off course and it rattled her. Freya came to get her that time and smacked it, and Jane agreed when she suggested a break might be a good idea.

'Could we try learning to fly these?' Sif asked. 'As long as we watch out for dragons?'

'Have at it,' Freya said with a wave. 'You could have gone earlier. It's not that hard to keep track of you.'

It was rather fascinating to watch, Jane found. The Asgardians seemed less disoriented than she'd been, though perhaps not significantly better at navigating. They were also much less cautious, even the generally reserved Hogun. Fandral flew with an abandon that had Freya fishing him back from a tumble every few minutes at first, Sif with a concentrated fierceness. Thor discovered he could combine Mjolnir's propulsion with the falconskin to induce all sorts of strange effects. Volstagg seemed to be joining in mostly because everyone else was, not that this damped his enthusiasm for dodging (or not dodging) and tumbling about with his friends.

Jane decided she might put off any further explorations of her own until they were less likely to involve collisions. She'd have thought all the extra dimensions would offer more chances to dodge, but it wasn't as easy in practice. 'So,' she finally asked Freya, 'have you ever colonised a world that wasn't populated before? Did it have any effect on Yggdrasil?'

Freya shook her head. 'I think it must have happened, but not within recorded history. There have been a few attempts to take over each other's planets instead. Asgard tried with us, and failed. Then
Laufey gathered Jotunheim to make a similar mistake with Midgard. Possibly they knew better, but the evidence of past glaciation was too tempting.'

Jane blinked. 'Asgard tried to conquer Vanaheim?' she asked cautiously.

'I believe they thought we weren't dangerous.' Freya smiled. 'They learned otherwise. It was not without cost that we blighted their fields and their bodies, but we did it. Killing their king was easier, in the end. It was only getting the chance that was hard.'

'Their king?'

'Odin's father Bor. Odin wanted revenge, but he was magician enough to know we had really done what we claimed. That his people would die unless it was undone. So he choked down his pride and asked for peace.'

That, Jane thought, might explain his comment about its being possible to learn such lessons. 'Were you... in the war?'

'I was.' Freya smiled again; Jane thought it seemed like far too bright an expression for the topic, even though she couldn't exactly say Freya was treating it lightly. 'I was a warrior and I was a spy. Sigyn caught me out and set me on fire three times. And I was one of the ones who went to Asgard when it was all over so we could repair the damage and get to know each other.'

'You seem to get along pretty well now,' Jane said, a little dazed.

'We do. We found we understood each other better than either side had expected, really.' Freya looked up and around. 'And I had better pull everyone back in. Even with the falconskins, all this cavorting is starting to attract attention, and I've already taken us in circles a few times to give you all a chance to practice.'

Thor directed Freya to Jane's laboratory, where they all made a joyous reunion with Darcy and Dr. Selvig (starting with both of them asking Jane 'Where have you been?' even though she had left them a message on that very subject), supplied explanations, and introduced Freya first to Jane's colleagues and then to coffee. Her verdict was a thoughtful, 'I could do something with this.' Thor resisted asking what, but he suspected Vanaheim was getting a new species soon.

'--Even got to look at the Bifrost mechanism,' Jane was saying. 'And Erik, you're not going to believe this, I met Jormungand!'

'I think it might have been lonely,' Freya put in, before Dr. Selvig could do more than look alarmed. 'It would have been some time since anyone stopped to visit.'

'I thought it was going to try to stop us on our way in,' said Sif. 'Even with the falconskins.'

Freya chuckled. 'It was only saying hello. When it used to try to stop people, the passage was much more exciting.'

'I can imagine,' said Thor.

Dr. Selvig gave him a curious look. 'You haven't fought with him? It?'

'Many of your stories are about an older brother I never knew,' Thor said briefly. One he had given more thought in the past few days than since, perhaps, his childhood. 'But fine as they are, I did not come to tell old tales but new ones. The brother I have now is on Earth, and your rulers should be
made aware of him. We think he has plans for conquest.'

'Ah.' Dr. Selvig, to Thor's surprise, looked faintly haunted. Well, perhaps he was only unnerved by the prospect. 'You'll want to talk with SHIELD, then. I'll put you in touch.'

'Jane said you had been working closely with them at their headquarters,' Thor said. 'I was surprised to find you here.'

'Yes, well,' said Dr. Selvig, 'everybody needs a break now and then, and they only got interested in me based on the work here. But I can make a call.'

And so he did, from the local SHIELD office. After several long silences punctuated by rather cryptic sentences, he handed Thor the telephone. Thor put it to his ear and heard a gruff voice say, 'Colonel Fury speaking. This line is secure.'

'I congratulate you,' Thor said politely. 'I am Thor, son of Odin, crown prince of Asgard, wielder of Mjolnir. My brother Loki may plan to conquer your planet. Asgard desires to keep your world free and bring my brother home. I understand your organisation is the best place to begin explaining, but I hope you can also direct me to whoever will deal with diplomatic relations with other worlds.'

There was dead silence from the telephone for long enough that Thor began to be concerned about whether it was working correctly. He gave Dr. Selvig a questioning look and found the scientist with his head down, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Finally, Colonel Fury said, 'I think we'd better talk in person.'

'Excellent!' Thor agreed. 'I look forward to our meeting.'

Despite assurances that Freya would have been perfectly willing to take Thor to him, or bring him to Puente Antiguo, Colonel Fury chose to arrive in an airplane. Thor told both old and new tales in the meantime, and then went with Dr. Selvig to wait.

At length they fell silent together, and a while after that, Thor turned to his friend and said gently, 'Dr. Selvig, Erik. You have the look of a man who could stand to be drunk.'

That got a rough laugh. 'Not exactly the time for it right now.'

'No. But we could go afterward.' Thor frowned, fingernails tapping against the end of Mjolnir's handle. 'Is it about Loki? I thought so, and was surprised that a man with a warrior's heart would look more grey than fierce at talk of a threat to his home. But then I thought that you looked weary before you knew.'

'It isn't Loki,' said Dr. Selvig. 'Or -- I don't know.' He looked wearier now. 'There's stuff I'm not allowed to talk about, but you should ask Fury about the project I've been working on.' A short silence. 'Is, um... has anything but your brother gone missing from Asgard?'

Thor frowned. 'He took with him the Casket of Ancient Winters, a powerful magic item built by the frost giants. But he had it a few days ago, so it seems unlikely that your SHIELD has encountered it without his involvement.'

'I didn't mean just recently. This would've been gone for a while. I don't know much, but the last people who had it thought it belonged to the Norse gods. On the other hand... some of them were pretty crazy.' He swallowed; Thor watched his throat work, with some concern. 'I wish I were sure I'm not.'
'My friend,' said Thor, 'I have never had cause to doubt your sanity. Even,' he added with a smile, 'when you had reason to doubt mine.'

'I've got cause,' Dr. Selvig said grimly. 'I'm not here for a rest. I'm here because I told SHIELD I was afraid I'd been compromised. It doesn't make any sense, but I started feeling like my thoughts weren't my own. No, worse than that. I started feeling like they *hadn't been*, and I hadn't noticed until I got them back. And that was only a couple of days ago.'

They sat in silence again for a moment. Thor felt himself at something of a loss. He had not known Dr. Selvig for very long, but he had always firmly believed you could form a valid impression of someone very quickly. His close friends had borne that out; perhaps only Loki was the exception, and perhaps that came of having always known him, or thought he knew him. The point was, Dr. Selvig did not strike him as being prone to delusions. Thor was inclined to accept the possibility that something external had been influencing Dr. Selvig's thoughts; unfortunately, he'd normally turn to Loki to consult about such--

Well. Damn.

'I will ask Colonel Fury about his mystery,' Thor said slowly. 'And then, when I have the chance, I will ask my father if it might be one of his. And if so, whether it could affect the thoughts of mortal men.' Or if it might be of interest to Loki.

Dr. Selvig looked suddenly and contrarily hopeful. 'Thank you. It would be... good to know the cause. And to know what was actually going on, for that matter. Or even just to rule some things out.' He sighed. 'Maybe I'll take you up on that drink later.'
Leikin arrived at the palace almost as soon as she was sent for, she’d evidently been nearby.

‘I wanted to come with Nari,’ she explained. ‘But I thought one of us would be sufficiently alarming. I suppose I might have been less so. But we thought I might be taken to be attempting to glamour myself and doing it badly. At least no one could accuse Nari of deception.’

‘Or subtlety,’ added Nari.

Sigyn smiled. If Leikin’s appearance had been a glamour it would have been a singularly bad one. She was mottled blue, with one large asymmetrical splotch covering half her face. Her hair was the same dark brown as Sigyn’s but her eyes had somehow wound up a deep purple, almost black.

‘It’s good to see you both again,’ she said. ‘Where’s Vali got to?’

Leikin grimaced. ‘I’ve been scrying for him while Nari went to find you, but I’m having trouble. I think he’s a wolf again and that always unbalances the spells.’

‘I’ll ask Heimdall since Odin officially wants him,’ said Sigyn, deciding to do things the easy way.

While they were still waiting for a message to reach Vali, Sif arrived. Sigyn ran to hug her old friend and offer condolences over Thor.

‘It was a long time ago,’ said Sif quietly. ‘But you should know…Magni and Modi are dead too.’

Sigyn shuddered but nodded. ‘I did wonder,’ she admitted. ‘When I saw that Thor’s brother had Mjolnir. I’m so sorry.’

‘As I said, it was a long time ago,’ said Sif. She had never been openly emotional but there was no disguising the sorrow in her eyes. ‘We lost nearly two generations in the last battles. Most of Asgard is too young to remember more than the tail end of the war. It makes me feel old sometimes.’

‘It makes me feel like I’ve come back to a different world,’ said Sigyn. ‘I just hope Loki’s having an easier time adapting.’

‘I’d be surprised if he isn’t,’ said Sif. ‘He was always good at that.’ She shook her head. ‘I’m sorry we didn’t realise the truth sooner. We did miss him terribly, and you.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Sigyn. ‘We believed the worst of most of Asgard and Loki…hardly went about explaining himself in the best way.’ She did wish Thor hadn’t died thinking Loki a traitor. Forcing herself to smile at Sif she continued more lightly, ‘Suppose you help me to catch up with all I’ve missed?’

‘That’s less than you’d think,’ said Sif. ‘Asgard’s been fairly complacent since the war with Jotunheim ended. At first there was a lot of rebuilding to do and people were focused on that. Once everything was fixed we’d somehow lost the habit of visiting other worlds. It didn’t help that never entering one another’s worlds was a part of the treaty with Jotunheim. The furthest most of us have gone in recent times is Vanaheim, to trade or visit friends.’

‘That treaty seems designed to cause superstition and mistrust,’ said Sigyn.

Sif nodded. ‘Laufey was insistent.’ She glanced around the courtyard to the guards who had been
ignoring their quiet conversation. ‘I think I should go and talk to Odin,’ she said. ‘I’ll find you later.’

Vali’s arrival caused less of a stir than that of her other two children had. He looked like an Asgardian, if not one who should be visiting a palace. Big and blond, dressed in worn leathers, and clean but faintly unkempt. He hugged Sigyn hard and then held her at arm’s length and scowled at her.

‘I’m still not happy about that sword,’ he said. ‘I had to kill Hod to get it back.’

‘I think your father has been punished more than enough for it,’ said Sigyn sharply.

‘Everyone seems ready to apologise,’ said Vali. ‘Except those young enough to just be confused. But he still nearly caused Asgard’s downfall, whether he meant to or not.’

Sigyn looked away, biting down on anger. ‘Go and talk to Odin,’ she said. ‘We’ll talk later.’

The next arrivals reached Sigyn while she was pacing around her room and mentally rehearsing what to say to Vali. She answered the knock on her door with a harried ‘come in’ and then when Ullr and Thrud entered the room she practically threw herself at them.

‘It’s so good to see you!’ she said, almost sobbing and aware that she was overreacting. It wasn’t that she’d thought they were dead, Sif would certainly have told her, but after hearing about Magni and Modi it was good to see some of Sif’s children alive and well.

Thrud caught her and hugged her back, looking puzzled, while Ullr put a gentle hand on her shoulder. ‘It’s been a thousand years for us,’ he said. ‘I suppose it’s a lot for you to take in at once.’

‘It’s been a thousand years for me, too,’ said Sigyn. ‘Just…’ She took a step back and remembered her manners. ‘Why don’t you sit down? I’ll get us some wine. When did you get here?’ she added, while she got the glasses out.

‘Not long ago,’ said Thrud. ‘We just got briefed by Odin and then kicked out so he could brief Vali.’

Thrud took after Thor, built like a bear with wild red hair and a boisterous good nature, as Ullr took after Sif’s first husband, being tall, dark and reserved. Sigyn smiled at them fondly as she poured the wine.

‘So you’re coming to Jotunheim then,’ she said, scarcely needing Ullr’s nod to confirm it. He was an ice mage and Thrud was a weather-wielder. She should have seen it coming. ‘So that makes you two, me, Sif, Nari, Vali and Leikin, and Eir,’ she said. ‘Is that everyone?’

‘Eight’s a good number,’ said Ullr.

Sigyn nodded. Nine as a number of power was more a tradition than a fact, but nine mages could be taken badly. However well intentioned those mages were.

Lopt was sitting in front of his laptop, one leg swinging and the other hitched up, staring at the screen in fascinated horror.

‘What are you reading?’ Loki asked, by way of announcing himself.

Lopt looked up blankly, then blinked and grinned. ‘Humans have strange imaginations. And Odin said mine was gruesome.’

‘I take it it isn’t a pirated horror novel?’ said Loki. ‘Actually I’m not sure I want to know, but I’m
going to ask anyway.’

‘Ah. No, it’s the Prose Edda. I wanted to see what the mortals had remembered about us.’ Lopt shrugged. ‘Apparently one of my sons was turned into a wolf, ripped the other’s guts out, and then they used the guts to tie me up.’

‘I can see why you were disturbed,’ said Loki. He started reading over Lopt’s shoulder and that was indeed what it said.

‘Nari did help bind me, and I suppose it would be generous to assume he was metaphorically gutted about it…’ said Lopt.

‘Still, disturbing,’ said Loki.

Lopt nodded, biting his lip. It was a slightly worrying gesture with teeth sharpened by the lack of glamour. ‘Vali was a shapeshifter,’ he said. ‘And wolf was one of his favourite forms. He’d fight as one, as a wolf as big as a bear, against the Jotuns. The Norsemen were terrified of him, but they had cold enough winters for the real wolves to get desperate. They called him *Vargrinn*.’

It meant ‘the Wolf’, Loki knew. But it also meant vagabond, murderer. There were kinder words for wolf. ‘Unfair of them, when he was on their side.’

‘Yes,’ said Lopt. ‘And he’d never hurt Nari.’

Loki’s hand was on the back of the chair, it would only take a shift of a couple of inches to rest it on Lopt’s shoulder. He felt as if he should, but wasn’t sure he wanted to. ‘Did you teach him to shapeshift?’ He’d heard stories, although probably only half of them were true.

‘I taught all my children to shapeshift.’ A soft laugh, aimed at himself. ‘I worried so much about doing it. Teaching them shapeshifting and glamour. Nari looked like a frost giant, and Leikin was mixed. I was habitually glamoured at that point - call me a hypocrite if you like, I know it’s true - and I worried they’d think I expected it of them. And then the one that took to it was the Asgardian looking one.’

Loki stood up straighter, hands falling to his sides. ‘So how did the Midgardians feel about the other two?’

Lopt sighed. ‘Roughly how you’d expect. Leikin managed to get herself mixed up with their goddess of death - she was a healer, and people got the wrong idea seeing her hovering over the sick and dying.’

‘Including the sick and dying?’ asked Loki acidly.

‘Don’t be a fool, they knew her. She’d hardly want patients scared to death of her.’

‘Then why not use a glamour so no one would be scared of her?’ retorted Loki.

‘She did, sometimes. When people who didn’t know her needed her. But it was a…a concession. To them. Not something she did for herself.’ Lopt’s voice had dropped. It was strange, Loki had thought they were on the verge of an argument. But Lopt seemed to be really trying to explain, and more, to explain something he hardly understood himself.

‘So what is it when you wear a glamour? A concession or something for you?’ Loki’s own tone was hard. Letting it sound like a real question would somehow give too much away.
Lopt was still looking at the laptop screen, through the screen really. Uncomfortable as well. ‘They asked me that too,’ he said. ‘I hate having people look at me and think *freak*. That doesn’t mean I think I am one, just that I’d rather not deal with it.’

‘You’d rather avoid discomfort than stand up for your beliefs,’ said Loki. At least he preferred an Asgardian skin because he truly felt it was what he was, and hated what it hid. ‘Coward.’

Lopt smiled. ‘Not always,’ he said. ‘I pick my battles.’

There really wasn’t an answer to that.

Those approaching Jotunheim for the first time usually saw a barren planet with a line of green around the equator - the taiga which supplied nearly all of Jotunheim’s wood. Most of the planet seemed to consist of broad icefields broken by jagged outcrops of ice covered rock. This was true of the uplands and, at a glance, the lowlands seemed the same. You could miss that most of it was tundra, a place where the thin soil lying over the permafrost was eclipsed by an abundance of eager life. Part of it was a matter of colour - the most common plant was the white lichen which could cling even to the rocks. The silver-blue mouse ear, with its tiny furry leaves, fought it for places with slightly deeper soil. Moonsilver, with its pale blue-green leaves, clung close about the bases of the rocks, out of the wind, and opened its blossoms only for a few nights at the height of summer - making up for lack of time to draw insects by having them shine like beacons with intrinsic magic.

The farmlands were only a little more obvious. Lichen, a staple food in most of Jotunheim, was grown in varieties which were mostly light tints of blue, lavender or pink. The effect was of a trick of the light, as if different fields of snow were somehow reflecting slightly different colours of sunlight, and even though Sigyn knew what she was seeing it made her blink. There was also colt’s ear, related distantly to mouse ear, which would keep its slightly fuzzy texture even when cooked but which was succulent with a mildly spicy flavour. One field was nearly empty - a close look revealed the oddly metallic green of peppermoss still struggling to survive in a few places. The first sign of the damage they had come here to fix.

‘I’m surprised moss is the first thing they’d lose,’ said Thrud, and then glanced up at the two guards escorting them as if thinking she might have been tactless.

‘Peppermoss is used as a seasoning,’ said Sigyn. ‘They’ve let it go to focus on staples. As long as the lichen crops don’t fail they won’t starve.’

‘They’re failing further south,’ said one guard quietly, bending down either to be closer to their level or to look at the dying moss. The other glared at him and he quickly straightened. ‘Byleist will show you the crops later if he chooses,’ he said. ‘We must get to the palace now.’

Jotun architecture tended towards a mixture of stone and ice. Normally foundations and supports were stone while roofs and walls were ice. Some buildings saved the decoration for the ice, where it was easier both to carve in the first place and to change if the owner wanted to follow a new fashion, but the truly important buildings had decoration carved into both ice and stone. The palace, in particular, featured elaborate designs carved everywhere they could be, yet subtle enough to keep from appearing overdone. Although Sigyn sometimes thought that very little would appear overdone to Asgardian sensibilities.

They were escorted into the palace past more guards and the Jotun equivalent of dogs - long silky creatures, pale gold with silver bellies, looking like a cross between greyhounds and weasels - and to the throne room where Byleist sat on an elaborate throne of ice. He was twice the size of any of them, far from small but with the slenderness of a youth who had yet to fill out. Sigyn felt abruptly
sorry for him, he was young to have a world’s worth of disasters dumped into his hands.

‘Your Majesty,’ she said, bowing correctly in the Jotun fashion. ‘We bring greetings from Asgard and offer our assistance in any capacity you wish.’

‘Your assistance is accepted,’ said Byleist heavily. ‘I bid you eat with me.’

‘We gratefully accept,’ said Sigyn. An offer of food was an offer of truce, safety for as long as they stayed on that person’s land, safety the whole world over coming from the King. Prisoners were fed on uncooked food simply to avoid the need to treat them as under the protection of hospitality. Or not fed at all if they fell into the hands of someone both crueler and more traditional - Loki had had a great deal to say about Geirrod, although Geirrod had felt quite justified since he had caught Loki spying on him.

The table and chairs in the dining hall were also of ice, leaving Sigyn grateful for the furs and warming spells they were all wrapped in, and, more problematically, Jotun sized. Cushions placed on the chairs helped, but left them balanced precariously with their feet swinging and generally feeling like children in an adult sized world. Food was served cooked but cold, the Asgardians might have been grateful for hot food but the Jotuns clearly hadn’t thought of it. It was good though. Roast ptarmigan with a colt’s ear and pine nut stuffing, served with lichen bread soaked in mead. Some of the textures were odd to Asgardian palates but there was nothing wrong with the taste. There was mead to drink as well; fruit was almost unknown on Jotunheim, wine doubly so.

Afterwards, when the food had been cleared away and everyone was sitting and sipping at their mead, Byleist spoke. ‘The energy from the Bifrost has caused a heatwave on top of the damage it did directly. There is flooding around the equator - permafrost is melting and there is more rainfall worldwide than there has ever been. We have had to abandon much of the coastline, and much of the taiga. There are still mages trying to save the Grave Yews. I’m not sure they would leave if I told them to.’

Sigyn winced. The Grave Yews were sacred, planted as saplings on every frost giant grave. The tradition went back beyond recorded history among the tribes of the taiga. After world-walking became common it had become the norm for frost giants everywhere. As long as a person’s Grave Yew was growing their spirit was watching over their descendants and its death marked them moving on. The death of whole swathes of them would seem like abandonment by the ancestors of every frost giant there was. She privately resolved to get a message to Freya, the frost giants would only be able to control the flooding not work on the yews themselves. A fertility mage, especially a Vane and especially one as good as Freya, could do a great deal more and would probably be welcomed even though the Jotuns would never ask for help.

‘Much of our land is actually ice-shelf between continents,’ Byleist continued. ‘Some of it is becoming unstable. But there is tundra on top of the ice, and some of it is farmed. We can’t afford to abandon more crops than we’ve had to already. We’re trying to move heat into extra-dimensional space but many of our mages have been needed to move refugees.’

‘I’m quite good at cooling spells,’ said Sigyn, thinking of the inside of a volcano and Loki pressed against her searching for relief from the heat. ‘Re-freezing large areas of permafrost might be a bit much, but I can certainly help others do so.’

Byleist nodded. ‘I know where I want some of you more than others. I hope you have no objection to being separated?’

‘You’ve promised us safe passage,’ said Sigyn. She looked around at her companions and received nods. ‘We’ll go where we can be the most use and trust you for that.’
‘We’ve set up a main hospital quite near here and are bringing in the worst cases from all over. There are injured and sickness is spreading too. Your healers, Eir and Leikin, would be welcome there.’

‘Of course,’ said Eir.

‘And there are problems with animals. Both herbivores and predators are starving and moving in on the towns. We have hunting parties out - I want Vali and Ullr to join Skadi’s.’

‘With a will,’ said Ullr, smiling. Skadi was an old friend of his, Sigyn remembered. They’d bonded over skiing and hunting.

‘He is to the west, some distance away,’ said Byleist. ‘You’ll be world-walking to get there.’

Sigyn was startled for a moment at the pronoun. Byleist had used the male one, more common when describing a warrior to the Asgardians. But Skadi had always been known to them as female despite also being known as a warrior; mostly because she had shown up demanding that someone get her with child in recompense for her father’s death. No one had followed her logic but Njord had willingly fulfilled her demands. If they hadn’t disliked one another’s worlds so much that relationship could have become much deeper, as it was it had remained fond but casual.

Byleist turned to Sif. ‘You are a fertility mage?’

‘Yes,’ said Sif.

‘Will you need to work on one set of crops all the time or can you move around?’

‘In bad conditions I’d need to work on each field for a few hours a day,’ said Sif. ‘Less, if they only need encouragement. Anything that needs to be seen less than once in five days can probably manage without me.’

‘I will assign you a world-walker and a list of farms in order of priority, then, and let you decide what you can do,’ said Byleist.

Sif smiled. ‘I can world-walk alone, certainly to places on one planet. Let yours deal with evacuation.’

Byleist scowled for a moment. ‘I would prefer to have one of mine with you. For your safety.’

And to prevent any treachery you might be planning, Sigyn translated. Well, she’d expected that they wouldn’t be trusted. It did leave her worried for Sif, who was no fighter and, unlike the others, hadn’t had any other Asgardians assigned to her group. But Sigyn had already said she wouldn’t object to their being separated and she did trust Jotun traditions of safe passage.

‘As you wish,’ said Sif, calmly.

Byleist turned to Thrud next. ‘Can you stop the rainfall?’ he asked.

Sigyn wondered how bad the flooding was. There had been shallow pools of water on top of both the sheer ice of the uplands and the tundra, but that was usual in summer since even small amounts of water would stay on top of the permafrost. It did mean that it wouldn’t take that much more water to cause a flood. Probably not a deep one, but enough to kill the crops now underwater. And those able to stop it would be focusing on the areas where flooding would be deep.

‘Not over the whole planet!’ said Thrud. ‘I can move water around. I can’t make it vanish.’
'You could stop it raining in one area though?' said Byleist.

'Of course,' said Thrud.

'And you can also turn rain to snow or sleet?'

'Yes.'

'Snow or sleet storms could be used to power other magic users. Preventing rainfall could be important to stop further damage to unstable or flooded areas. I won’t know where I need you until -'

He sighed. 'Until another disaster happens. You’ll have to return to the palace each night for instructions.'

Thrud nodded. 'And I’m not much good at world-walking,' she said. 'But I assume you’d send someone with me anyway.'

'For your safety,' said Byleist, sounding like he wasn’t quite sure whether he was being teased. Then he turned to Sigyn. ‘I might have to do the same with you. How good are you at moving heat?’

'If you bring me a flame I’ll demonstrate,’ said Sigyn.

This turned out to be a more difficult request than she’d anticipated and, after a fairly long discussion between Byleist and a servant followed by a short wait, she was finally presented with a bronze bowl with chunks of brush lichen burning in the bottom. Jotuns used fire only for cooking; she hadn't realised it had been so long since she had last been here that she could forget something like that. The bowl had been placed in front of her so she picked it up and walked around to stand next to Byleist - a move which she debated the wisdom of when the table came up to her shoulder. She had intended to place the bowl on the table in front of Byleist, but since that would mean having to stretch up to reach it she kept it in her hands and was grateful it was a small one by Jotun standards.

Sigyn took a moment to focus on more than three dimensions. Yggdrasil was always a good place to dump energy without doing any harm or, perhaps more importantly, attracting creatures and she reached for it. A moment later she looked up at Byleist and smiled.

'Touch the top of the flame. Be careful of the bottom though,' she said.

Byleist shot her a wary look. Jotuns had a rather low heat tolerance and, although their skin was thicker, burns could be nasty, but he put out one finger and held it over the flame for a moment before looking puzzled and lowering it to touch the light of the flame.

'It’s not an illusion?' he said.

'No,' said Sigyn. ‘It’s still burning, and I’ve left the bottom hot so it won’t go out. I’m dumping heat energy from the rest of the flame, though, leaving just the light.’ It was a parlour trick in some ways, not very useful for anything. It was also a show of skill, to dump only one form of energy and to do so continuously without showing effort. And without putting out the flame.

Byleist dipped his finger down and then pulled it back sharply, probably as soon as he felt heat.

‘Impressive,’ he said, folding his hands on the ice surface of the table. Sigyn hoped he wasn’t burnt, but decided it would be a bad idea to ask. ‘And how does this scale up?’

Sigyn let the flame go back to normal and handed it back to the servant. 'Quite well,' she said. 'I could hardly do a whole world by myself, but I’ve managed to keep the inside of a volcano at least somewhat cool for a thousand years. With less intense heat involved I could probably do a village.'
Scrambling back into her seat was hardly dignified, but Sigyn was relieved to once again be on eye level with Byleist instead of being loomed over. He was still looking at her thoughtfully when she turned to face him again.

‘Could you teach that to others?’ he said. ‘We don’t normally have much need for moving heat here, our climate is usually quite stable.’

‘On the job?’ asked Sigyn.

Byleist sighed. ‘Most likely that will be your only chance.’

Sigyn caught Sif’s eye; magical knowledge was normally hoarded more closely than gold. Byleist was asking her to give it away without anything in return and without Odin’s approval. Either he didn’t know what he was asking or was hoping to seem as if he didn’t and at least avoid offense.

‘I think,’ said Sigyn quietly. ‘That you are pushing your luck. And you know it. And that under the circumstances I’ll say “yes” anyway.’

Byleist dropped his gaze for a moment and Sigyn watched a tremor run through his shoulders as he suppressed a laugh, perhaps from relief as much as humour. ‘The Asgardians do owe us, currently,’ he said, nearly as sternly as he was trying for. ‘We were attacked when we did not have the casket to either defend ourselves or fix the damage. Nor were we a threat without it.’

‘Laufey tried to assassinate Odin,’ said Ullr calmly. ‘We’re not here to discuss this, but we are here to help of our own will. We are not offering you magic as weregild.’

‘We’re not authorised to offer weregild,’ said Sif.

‘We wouldn’t anyway,’ said Thrud, and got a reproving glance from her mother.

‘I’ve agreed to teach what I can while working,’ said Sigyn quickly. She could have sworn Vali had just growled, and while Nari and Leikin were quieter she didn’t think they’d approve of demands for weregild either. ‘Why doesn’t matter for now. And blame and weregild can be left for you and Odin to determine.’

‘Agreed,’ said Byleist. He looked at Sigyn as if he might say something else, then straightened. ‘I’ll have you shown to your rooms. Tomorrow you’ll be sent to your stations.’
Chapter 8

It was with some regret that Loki decided he now knew how to use the falconskin and it was time to move to stage two - dismantling it. He’d been expecting that part of things to be difficult, and was stubbornly ignoring the thought that if Odin had failed he had no chance. What he hadn’t expected it to involve was so much preparation.

‘We need to rent a workshop? Really?’ he asked. They had already rented a new apartment and he’d expected to be able to work from there.

Lopt shrugged. ‘It will be easier somewhere proof against extreme temperatures. We’ll have to use the casket extensively and it’s possible the defenses will use fire.’ When Loki looked disbelieving Lopt grinned, one of those expressions which still looked completely wrong on a frost giant face. ‘It’s a major export item and usually sold to magic adepts. The defenses aren’t as much of an overkill as they seem.’

Loki conceded the point and went looking for jewellery workshops to rent. He also acceded to Lopt’s insistence on leather aprons, leather gloves and safety goggles although not without complaining.

‘Are the goggles really necessary?’ he asked. ‘I’m sure you and Odin didn’t use them.’

‘Because they hadn’t been invented at the time. I’m all for taking advantage of mortal ingenuity, especially if it stops things trying to blind me,’ said Lopt. ‘This is going to be difficult enough without leaving ourselves vulnerable on purpose.’

Which was perfectly true and enough to carry the argument. The argument about glamours didn’t even need to be spoken. Loki was less than thrilled about the idea of spending long periods of time without one but knew the casket was their best chance of success, so as soon as they had the door to the workshop locked they both dropped the glamours they had been wearing on the way. Loki pulled on the gloves with a feeling of relief that it would stop him having to see his own hands.

Lopt put the falconskin, just the pendant since the chain was apparently unimportant, on the workbench and put their toolbox on the next bench over. As well as renting a jewellery workshop they had also bought some jewellers’ hand tools; the workshop didn’t come with them included and, in any case, Lopt had thrown a rather startling amount of magic into some of them.

‘Right,’ said Lopt. ‘The first layer of magic is self-destructive. If we get it wrong the whole thing will fuse. Fortunately, I remember how to do that after getting that far with, oh, about fifty falconskins over the years.’

Lopt pulled out a small, but thoroughly bespelled, metal punch and a hammer and put them next to the falconskin on the bench. He ran one finger from the top of the pendant to the bottom, murmuring spells as he did. Loki listened hard, trying to memorise them. Then Lopt picked up the punch, placed it carefully on the surface of the pendant, and tapped it lightly with the hammer. Cracks spread over the surface of the falconskin, but very geometric cracks. The final effect was something like a puzzle box; you could see how many tiny, intricate shapes went to make up the whole.

Lopt put the punch aside with a quick breath of relief. ‘And now for the tricky bit,’ he said, sounding positively gleeful about the prospect. ‘There are three types of pieces here, pieces that work the falconskin, pieces that serve as security and pieces that do both.’
Loki nodded.

'The best thing to do is deactivate pieces with security measures before removing them. Which means analysing everything very carefully before doing anything at all, since the touch of magic will activate them. Mostly it's going to be a long, slow process. And sometimes we're going to miss something and activate a piece. Some of them might activate when you remove their neighbours, sometimes we'll have gotten the deactivation spell wrong. Some might pretend to be just function pieces and then turn out to have hidden security measures.' Lopt paused and looked across at Loki. 'At that point you have until it goes active to analyse it and break the spellwork. Or rather I do, your job is to slow the spell down.'

'How?' said Loki. He was starting to feel more excited about this than he had about flying, similar to the feeling of first exploring the ways by himself. Doing something that should probably be impossible, was certainly going to be dangerous, and knowing he was going to do his absolute best to pull it off. Did Thor felt like this before a battle, he wondered, before frowning and pushing the stray thought aside to focus on Lopt.

'It's going to be a judgement call,' admitted Lopt. 'In most cases just throw your will at it and back that up with the casket. In some cases it can be set up to resist or reflect strong magic and you'll have to go for a lighter touch. If it doesn’t seem to be working, adjust your tactics. If you can’t hold it and it looks seriously dangerous then destroy it - you probably won’t have time to ask me in that situation. Try not to do that too much, though. We can afford to lose security only pieces, but not function ones.'

'I understand,' said Loki. 'Should I summon the casket now?'

Lopt shook his head. 'Summon it when we’re ready to remove something. For now let’s pick a piece and get started on analysing it.'

It was just as long and slow a process as Lopt had promised. Hours of analysis that were part magical theory test, part logic puzzle, followed by Lopt carefully implementing the deactivation spell they’d designed and then pulling the piece out with needle-nosed pliers, while Loki stood by with the casket between his hands and both of them tried to remember to breathe.

It was a few days before they slipped up. Instead of the normal slight fading feeling the deactivation triggered a burst of magic. Loki responded almost before he’d had time to finish the thought, pushing it back down. It felt like trying to hold an explosion back with his hands but, startlingly, he was winning. Lopt murmured a frantic string of words under his breath and, finally, the magic faded. It couldn’t have been more than ten seconds, but they were both exhausted. Lopt’s hands were shaking as he bagged the piece and tagged it with their best guess as to its function.

‘And we’re done for the day,’ he said. ‘Quick work,’ he added.

Loki nodded, less startled by the praise this time since he was sure he’d earned it.

The first time Loki felt like he personally had screwed up was a few weeks in. Up until then he’d been able to deal with activated pieces, and the few he’d had to destroy had been fairly clearly security only from the analysis.

This time Lopt had removed a long, thin piece. It was a strange collection of angles, and they’d removed several smaller pieces from its coils before getting to it. Loki nearly missed the telltale burst of magic it was so subtle and, when he threw his will at it, it somehow slipped aside. Grasping at it was like grasping a living thing, it slid through his hands like an eel. And, to his horror, it was doing a similar thing in its physical manifestation. It stretched out, losing its angles and curving sinuously,
slipping out of the pliers even as Lopt gripped them with both hands.

It dived at one of those hands, going through the leather glove with no more difficulty than if it had been silk. Lopt dropped the pliers and grabbed his wrist with the other hand; afraid it was trying to burrow its way further into his body, Loki realised. He wasn’t sure what magic he could use on it without hurting Lopt, or what further behaviour magic might trigger.

A sudden thought had him reaching for his throwing knife and his aim was as perfect as he’d trained himself to be. The knife pierced cleanly through Lopt’s hand and the magic didn’t so much fade as die screaming.

Lopt bent over, cradling his injured hand and shivering with reaction. He looked…turquoise, Loki thought, which was probably not a good colour for a frost giant.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Loki.

Lopt let out a shaky laugh. ‘Don’t apologise. You know as well as I do that you just saved my life.’ He reached for the knife tentatively, already wincing, and pulled it out. ‘You’re going to have to get the bits of falconskin out for me,’ he said.

Loki nodded. ‘Sit down,’ he said. There was a first aid kit in the workshop, he remembered, and tweezers would be better than pliers. Besides, they were going to need the bandages.

Lopt let him pull the pieces out without fuss but his colour was still bad and he was trembling. ‘Are you all right?’ Loki asked, somewhat worried about magical aftereffects.

To his surprise Lopt looked a bit embarrassed. ‘I’m not good with pain. It’s part of why I’m so useless in battle. I’ll be fine once I’ve had some rest and started healing.’

‘Will you be able to walk home?’ asked Loki. It was disconcerting but almost reassuring to find a way in which Lopt didn’t have him at a disadvantage.

‘Yes, just give me a moment,’ said Lopt.

Loki put their things away while Lopt collected himself, and they managed to make it home without trouble.

The town was falling. Ice was cracking, sharp as a hammer blow, and it seemed impossible that it should happen so quickly. Those who could world-walk were leaving, grabbing any children in reach and pulling them away into extradimensional space. They’d be back as soon as they could, but not soon enough. Sigyn pulled heat out of the ice desperately, already too late to do any good but hoping to hold down the fractures. It felt like cupping a shattering tea cup in her hands, she was trying to hold it together even if it only kept the pieces in place for another moment. If she could just keep it together long enough for the Jotuns here to get to firmer ice (the cracks were spreading invisibly under the tundra until the soil suddenly fell away, leaving a spider web of darkened lines). The icedrake dived into the ruins of the town with the grace and confidence of a cat. Sigyn swore. She hadn’t seen it coming, too focused on the buildings shaking themselves to pieces while the people hadn’t yet had time to get away.

Icedrakes were ferocious predators. They stalked the outer tundra, feeding on the great shaggy elk, and the edges of the sea, where they hunted seals and penguins. They were large predators, not built for taking small prey, and the inner tundra only had one species large enough to hold their interest. Those who had territories there made Jotun the primary part of their diet. There were a few tame
ones, owned by those with the means to feed them and the magic to control them, but the wild ones were fearless maneaters.

The Jotun child this one had singled out shrank back against the ruined wall of what had been a house. Sigyn threw up her hand and the icedrake stopped, finding itself surrounded by a circle of flame. The child was clearly too shocked to move, even as the flames further melted the wall behind them. The icedrake snarled. A hand grabbed the child’s and a moment later the street was empty, save for the icedrake making a series of small charges at the circle of fire. Each time it came up short, shaking its massive head in frustration.

‘Can you kill it?’ One of the mages who had been helping Sigyn hadn’t been a world-walker, and he was the one who asked the question now.

She shook her head. ‘How?’

‘Roast it.’

‘If it finds itself in a fire it would just run out of it. But it won’t run into one.’ Sigyn’s words sounded measured, distant even to her. It was hard to keep a flame going with no fuel, and the fire was more than half illusion even though the heat was real.

A moment later the world-walkers returned for the next wave of refugees.

Later that day, back in the palace and recovered from pushing herself, she told Byleist about the icedrake.

‘They’ve been attacking even towns that aren’t falling,’ said Byleist. ‘They’re hungry. I’ll send some mages to deal with them.’ He didn’t say that every mage was already needed in three different places, or that he was weighing up which lives had to be lost in making that call. But he looked tired.

‘Send Vali,’ said Sigyn ‘Wolf might be his preferred form but it’s not his only one. I’ve seen him as a firedrake before.’ Byleist might still have to send mages, Vali couldn’t be everywhere, but he wouldn’t have to send as many.

‘You’d send your son up against icedrakes?’ asked Byleist.

‘Not if I didn’t think he could handle it,’ said Sigyn. ‘He’s an experienced warrior. I trust him not to fight when it’s hopeless, or give up before it is. You could send me as well.’

Byleist thought for a moment and shook his head. ‘No. Carry on as you were. You’ll probably have to fight them anyway.’

Sigyn still hadn’t had that talk with Vali. They needed to protect people any way they could, but if he died doing this - well, that would be the least of her regrets.

Jotuns could do fire magic, but it wasn’t easy.

It was only days later, but the icedrakes were already growing bolder. Three at once had attacked the village they were trying to evacuate today – and while obviously, the most vulnerable places were being prioritised for help, Sigyn still cringed to think of what might be happening elsewhere.

She couldn’t think of elsewhere right now, when there were icedrakes here. At least she had help from the mages she’d been teaching to redistribute heat, even if some of them were looking understandably panicky.
‘Just focus the heat instead of casting it away,’ said Sigyn quickly. ‘It’s not that different from what we’ve been doing. Just hold it.’

She was supplying the illusory flames on all three circles. The mages next to her were having a hard enough time helping with the heat. One of the icedrakes abruptly stopped pacing, skin glistening with water. Trying to go dormant, Sigyn realised. Icedrakes did that, froze themselves at night as both an extra layer of protection and a way to catch parasites in the ice and shed them. Right now this one wanted to avoid the heat.

Sigyn grabbed the wrist of the Jotun who was holding that circle. ‘Switch with me.’

Heat, she thought. The icedrake’s slick skin reflected the flames, red and orange droplets sliding from it. She poured on the heat, stopping it from freezing, hoping the Jotuns could hold the other two. Hoping, too, that the icedrake was driven by instinct more than intelligence. The puddle around the icedrake’s feet reflected the turmoil of the flames as it slowly slumped to its knees, dehydration starting to kick in. Sigyn could feel sweat standing out on her own skin, under the heavy furs that normally only made the cold bearable. Just as it fell a cry went up and for a moment Sigyn almost mistook it for a cheer. Instead it was a cry of dismay, one of the other circles had broken.

The last circle flickered, the mages distracted by the free and furious icedrake. Sigyn threw her power into it, taking over, wondering only after she had whether she should have trusted them to pick it up again and tried to confine the escapee. There were screams, refugees still everywhere in the rapidly falling city. The strongest adults were converging, moving towards the icedrakes with weapons, often hastily formed of ice, and grim expressions. One stabbed the fallen icedrake in the throat with an ice spear, blood freezing and clinging to it in a layer of vivid red.

The icedrake looked at the circle of spears, and it could probably have charged through them without more damage than a man running through briars. It crouched, powerful hind legs gathered under it. It jumped, huge and lithe, passing over them like a shadow and landing among the children and elderly who were trying to get away.

‘Hold the last circle,’” Sigyn snapped. “No matter what happens.”

She tried to throw a circle of fire around the icedrake, even as she ran towards it, but it sputtered and died. The sweat on her face was freezing there, and she swiped it away with one arm. Exhaustion setting in, too much to conjure fire in a land of ice. She threw her will at it instead, the way she did with creatures in extra-dimensional space. But there will was action. Here ropes made of will were gossamer and she had to throw herself into it more and more to hold the icedrake. It snorted and shuddered, twisting against bonds it couldn’t see, confused but breaking the threads with every motion. Being closer to it helped, pouring her will into it helped.

Sigyn went from running flat out to face down in the snow without being sure how she’d gone from one to the other. Raising her head seemed to take effort she needed to use elsewhere, she twisted it to one side and let it drop again. The icedrake was twisting, snarling, churning the snow at its feet into a welter of slush. She was barely twelve feet from it.

‘It’s going to eat me as soon as the magic fails,’ she thought, her own voice oddly calm in her head. Perhaps she was too tired for panic. Loki will be distraught. But I took responsibility for these people. I had to do something.

She felt the motion of something charging, saw the huge shadow flickering at the edge of her vision. The other icedrake had got loose after all. Please let the refugees have got out in time.

The dragon that charged into her line of sight was rippled gold, brighter than the sun in this world of
pale colours. Long and sinuous, wiry muscles sliding under its scaled skin. Firedrake. *Vali.*

The flame that shot from its mouth and nose engulfed the icedrake and the creature yelped, a strange noise for something so large and menacing. Sigyn felt it break the last strands of her magic in its panic. Vali jumped it before it had time to react, claws digging into its shoulders as his serpentine neck swept over it to bite one of its back legs to the bone. He let go and it fled, limping. It would bleed out from a bite like that and Vali tossed his head in satisfaction before sweeping around himself and snatching Sigyn up in one claw.

Vali’s motion on three legs was both flowing and bumpy, with a sudden lurch every time his right forefoot should have come down. His scaly side was smooth and warm, impossibly warm it seemed, and Sigyn had to blink hard to keep herself from falling asleep despite everything. Vali dropped her gently but unceremoniously back among the Jotun mages. His head snaked around to look at her and Sigyn put one hand on his pointed nose, almost a beak, looking up into his worried blue eyes.

“Thank you,” she said.

Vali huffed warm air over her and turned away. A moment later he was charging to where the flames of the last circle were already starting to flicker out.

He ran straight through the flames, his gold scales turning red in their light and making him look like he was formed from flames himself. The icedrake, still held by the remains of the circle, ducked under him and came up, snapping powerful jaws at the base of his neck. Vali evaded it, sliding away and back into the fire again to come on it from another angle. The flames were lower still now, this would be the last time he could use that tactic. Sigyn wished she wasn’t too tired to raise the flames again.

Vali came out behind the icedrake, snapping at its leg and leaving a trail of red droplets, red as the last dying flames. The scene was hazy with smoke - no, not smoke, not from that sourceless fire - hazy with tiredness and the mist of Sigyn’s own breath. The two dragons wove together like knotwork, like a tapestry, bright as silk. The icedrake used its greater bulk to push Vali away, coming at him side on and getting its shoulder against him, only for him to coil around himself, seeming to snap over his own back like a whip flicking in midair, and get it under the throat. The position gave the icedrake an opening and it aimed a bite at the back of his neck, teeth tearing even as he slid out from under its crushing jaws before it could get a grip.

Blood ran down the back of Vali’s neck like some strange crest, a brilliant counterpoint to rippled gold. The red stood out more starkly on the icy blue of his opponent, one gash below its neck and one on its leg. The two separated, eyeing one another. The icedrake couldn’t run, although it wanted to, with its leg injured showing its vulnerable rear to its opponent would mean death before it could get away. Its eyes showed the awareness of its plight, vicious with fear now more than predatory intent. More dangerous than ever.

They circled, at first seeming just to be looking for an opening in one another’s defences. But Vali was herding it, gradually, carefully, towards the cracked and rotten ice. The icedrake backed up, hardly aware it was doing so, until the ice creaked under it. It stopped then, stock still apart from its head which was swinging from side to side, held low, looking for a way out. Vali stretched, tail held high, making himself look bigger than he was. He was breathtaking, an amber carving set in a platinum landscape, somehow dwarfing the bulkier icedrake. For one endless moment the tableau held.

Vali’s flame hit the rotten ice under the icedrake’s feet and a cloud of steam engulfed it. Sigyn saw it tense, pushing with its back legs like a cat in order to jump, and the ice gave way completely. The icedrake struggled to the surface, head rearing out of the water desperately. The icemages behind
Sigyn murmured a word together, so much in unison even that seemed loud.

The ice around the icedrake froze solid, holding it with its neck and head, and one claw, above the surface. Like a heraldic shield half submerged. Vali bent forward and bit its throat out, turning away with blood on his golden mouth.

‘They’re asking too much of you,’ said Vali.

‘They sent you out to hunt icedrakes, too,’ answered Sigyn.

‘Yes, but not to hunt icedrakes, and heat-dump, and world-walk refugees to safety, and teach people. If they wanted you to do the job of four people they should have allowed a larger relief team.’

Sigyn rubbed her head. ‘I feel sorry for Byleist. He’s trying not to worry his people by inviting too many of us in, but he desperately needs the help.’

‘He’s going to have to make up his mind whether he’d rather have them worried or dead,’ said Vali. He stood up and paced down the room. ‘And you should tell him you can’t stop him from having to make that decision by being everywhere.’

‘…They’re going to need me back on Asgard soon, anyway,’ said Sigyn, her shoulders slumping. ‘The Bifrost wreckage should be ready to be moved soon, and they always wanted me there for that. I’ve been trying to do as much as I could before leaving.’

Vali turned on her, almost snarling. ‘Don’t you dare feel guilty! None of this has been your fault, you don’t need to nearly kill yourself for them as some kind of apology.’

Sigyn looked at him sadly and shook her head. ‘It’s not guilt, Vali. I want everyone to come out of this alive and well. I want to protect them, even when I know it’s foolish.’

‘That’s the kind of thinking that gets father into trouble!’ snapped Vali. ‘Thinking he’s the only one that can make a difference, or knows how to make a difference. You as well. Neither of you have any faith in the rest of us.’

That is not true.’ The words came out more heated than she'd meant them to, and Sigyn's head came up as the anger gave her energy. ‘I know very well what you can do. I told Byleist you could handle icedrakes.’

‘Of course I can handle icedrakes, you’ve seen me fight dragons before,’ said Vali, running a hand through his hair in irritation and wincing as it hit the cut on the back of his neck. ‘That's not the point. You get to decide whether I can handle icedrakes, but who gets to decide what you can handle?’

‘I didn’t decide anything for you.’ Just what he'd be asked to do. But that was what they'd come here for, and not what he was complaining about. Sigyn folded her arms. ‘And I don't pretend to be the only one who can do anything, but I will try to do as much as I can when I'm the one on the spot.’

‘You're only on the spot because Byleist is trying to avoid making difficult decisions and you'd rather take them on yourself than leave him to do his duty!’

'I'm here. I can see what needs doing. I can't just turn away!' Except that she was going to have to leave. She closed her eyes and sighed. ‘He seems so very young.’ It was not quite a non sequitur. Sigyn didn't think she lacked faith in anyone who had come here from Asgard, but even though Byleist was doing relatively well thus far, she didn't know what to expect from him.
Odin had not been so very much older, at the end of the war with the Vanir. When he had gritted his teeth and asked for mercy from the people who had just killed his father. But she hadn't been old enough then for him to seem like a child.

'He'll have to grow up quickly then,' said Vali. 'Once food shortages really set in the people who still have supplies will try to secede before anyone can make them share.'

'Yes.' Sigyn rubbed at the back of her own neck and realised it was tenser than she'd thought. Then, 'They really need Vanir help, don't they.'

Vali came back over and sat down, the angry energy that had been sustaining him draining away abruptly. 'At least you're talking about getting them help and not handing them powerful artefacts,' he said.

Sigyn looked over at him with a slight frown, but she was too tired to get angry with him again and really didn't want to. And they did still need to talk about that. "I think the only one that would help is the casket, and whatever else he might be doing, I don't think Loki's namesake is going to hand that over. Hod was a different situation." Although, as it had turned out, still a bad idea.

'You should have told us,' said Vali, scowling at her. 'Even if you didn't trust Odin, you should have told me and Nari and Leikin. Not just decided only you and Father knew what to do.'

'We barely saw any of you during that time,' Sigyn pointed out. 'And when we knew where you were, it generally involved a battle. Or the preparation or aftermath. Or you were with Odin. Or several of the above.' In Leikin's case, she'd sometimes been with Baldr. Sigyn leaned back and pressed her fingertips up into her eyebrows.

'Did you really think we would help Odin with plans to conquer Midgard?'

'Did you really think we would want Asgard destroyed?' Sigyn shot back. Vali's mouth tightened, and her shoulders slumped. 'We were not fair to you,' she said quietly.

Vali looked startled, as if he hadn't expected the concession. 'I didn't know what you'd intended,' he said. 'It never occurred to me that you would hide something done with good intentions from the rest of us. It was easier to believe you'd betrayed us than that you'd trusted us that little, however much I wished not to believe either.'

'Things looked very different from where we were," Sigyn said, rather warily. Weary in general, not of this conversation, however heartsick it made her to hear that. And to think back over the long years of suspicion. It seemed entirely plausible, then, that after so much trouble Odin had decided to keep Midgard, through Baldr anyway. And that Asgard would go along with the idea. It's not as if we'd exactly balked over Vanaheim.'

'That was before my time,' said Vali. 'I didn't think of how things might look to someone who fought in that.' He scrubbed a hand over his face. 'I liked Hod too. That's part of why I wished you hadn't given him Mistletienn. Maybe Baldr would have killed him sooner without it, but he deserved a better death than he got.'

'He did. And I'm sorry it had to be you. For your sake and... because it added to our misconceptions.' She sighed again. 'I wish we hadn't now, too. We never expected him to get as carried away as he did, and in retrospect we probably should have.' Sigyn fell pensively silent for a moment. 'He and Baldr may have been the only people involved who each thought the other was behaving completely reasonably.'
Vali nodded, sombrely. 'Impossible to blame either of them for using power they were given. They were warriors of their people.'

'Yes.' Sigyn reached over for her son's hand. 'I think,' she said ruefully, 'there is perhaps only so far we can blame Byleist, either. He must have learned of the other worlds mostly from Laufey, after all.'
Chapter 9

Jane hadn't been in on Thor's initial conversation with the head of the SHIELD initiative, and strictly speaking she wasn't sure she had the security clearance for half of what she did wind up hearing. On the other hand, what were they going to do, complain that Asgard's background check procedures were too lax?

They started by wanting to triple security around the tesseract until Thor pointed out that not only could Loki probably still walk past it, but anyway he'd apparently lost interest before they realised anything was wrong. They did not quite flatly refuse to send the tesseract back to Asgard for safekeeping, but their reluctance was obvious. Freya suggested letting her set up the security and hoping he did come back, and after some debate, that was pretty much what they did.

Thor and his friends were introduced to some of SHIELD's top people. Sometimes this was in terms of rank. (Mostly that meant Fury.)

Sometimes it was current agents. Clint Barton hit it off bizarrely well with Thor by announcing, 'I saw you fighting your way to that hammer. It was great. I almost shot you.' Natasha Romanova seemed quiet and sweet right up until someone pushed her and discovered she wouldn't budge, and none of Barton, Coulson, and Fury batted an eye when she claimed (with a tiny smile) that she could have made it through the compound faster. She ignored both Fandral's flirting and Sif's bafflement that she fought with her hair loose in her face.

Sometimes it was people who'd started their association with SHIELD with about as much enthusiasm as Jane, which was a little troubling. After meeting Dr. Bruce Banner, Jane had to admit that she preferred her own problems. Turning into a rampaging monster if she lost her temper only sounded nice if she didn't think about the consequences. Dr. Banner was pleasant enough when he wasn't the Hulk, although for some reason half of SHIELD seemed to think they should understand each other's research. Jane wasn't altogether sure how much of this was cluelessness about the divisions within science and how much reflected a commitment to fostering interdisciplinary work. At any rate, they had a good laugh about the vague instruction to 'talk science', and Bruce discovered Freya had had centuries to study biology.

And then there was Tony Stark -- Iron Man, obnoxious playboy, and brilliant engineer. Jane had heard a lot about him. She had known he was a remarkable inventor. She had definitely not expected to like him.

As it turned out, Tony was full of himself, snippy, and inconsiderate. He was also heedlessly generous, brilliant, and willing to take her ideas seriously at least half the time, which put him ahead of some members of her thesis committee. She met up with him and Ms. Pepper Potts, the Stark Industries CEO, two weeks after returning to Earth and handed him the sketches she'd been working on since her first talk with Heimdall, for a miniature Bifrost prototype. They stayed up all night arguing over it; Pepper (who might still have been operating on personal-administrative-assistant reflexes) and Thor (for whom she had no explanation) periodically turned up with coffee, protein and sugar.

After all the time she'd spent hashing out the theory and her best guess on implementation, she nearly sank it by mentioning what happened if you left it on too long.

Tony slapped a hand down on the printouts. 'I'm not building a Death Star. I'm out of the weapons business, remember.'
Well, Jane had heard his interviews. Her eyes narrowed. 'What do you call the suit?'

'The suit is not a weapon,' he said sharply. 'It's more of a highly advanced prosthesis--'

'And the bridge,' Jane said, after mouthing the last few words with him, 'is a mode of transportation. Which normally does not destroy planets. Anyway, this is only going to be a little one.'

'Why?' Tony ran his fingers over her penciled-in dimensions and frowned, effectively distracted.

'For safer testing. And more reasonable energy requirements.'

'Oh, I can get you energy.' That she believed. His arc reactors were doing all sorts of exciting things to the energy economy, with a few buffering delays due to wariness of the untried, wariness of the single source, and the need to retool everybody else's manufacturing to make use of them.

SHIELD also spent some time coordinating as subtly as possible with other countries' obscure agencies in an effort to locate the wayward Lokis. The secrecy lasted all of three weeks, at which point the efforts to keep Thor under wraps went to pieces because when people asked him questions, he insisted on answering them.

To be fair, it had probably been hopeless anyway. It was one thing to sweep a few days of strange events under the rug, especially when they were the sort of events that most people assumed were the domain of tabloid headlines anyway. Aliens, strange weather phenomena, a flurry of small-town weirdos and military personnel around a meteorite. It was another thing entirely to hide an alien prince who was now a recognised ambassador and had Thor's grasp of subtlety.

Colonel Nick Fury confronted him about the first major news article, with Thor beaming from the front page and a tame twister over his shoulder. 'What is this?'

'I believe it is a newspaper,' Thor replied, accurately, and possibly without any actual intention of being infuriating.

Jane tried not to giggle.

Fury stared at Thor with no expression whatsoever for several seconds. 'Yes. Yes, it is. And it's an article,' he said, as Thor picked up the paper and began reading the article, 'that is quite possibly going to alert your brother we're looking for him, even if the reporter and photographer both have their careers go down in flames for faking it up with Photoshop.'

Jane sat up and frowned. 'Hey. You can't just do that to people.'

Fury eyed her.

'Well, you shouldn't,' she muttered.

'It would certainly be possible to deny any attempts to confirm the story,' Fury said. 'It might even avoid a media circus and widespread panic over aliens. It won't do much for operational secrecy, if this Loki fellow keeps up with the international news.'

'Loki already knows we are looking for him,' said Thor. 'At least, he must guess it.' He leaned back, turning thoughtfully to the continuation page for the article. 'And I will not deny attempts to confirm the story.'

Fury leaned both hands on the table. 'You... won't.'
'As a matter of policy,' Thor explained, 'Asgard does not intend to treat in secret with a single power of Earth when there are many kingdoms here. A first try at finding Loki without alerting him to anything was worthwhile, but we can't go on that way.' He folded the paper and slid it back across the table toward Fury. 'I am glad to count your country as an ally and your SHIELD organisation as comrades, of course. Perhaps you can advise me on who else to talk to first.'

'I see.' Fury straightened. 'I'll tell Coulson to arrange a press release.'

Of course he was right about the media circus. They announced that aliens and magic were real and there was alien royalty visiting Earth. Naturally, the news exploded, the reporters converged, and Jane couldn't get anything useful done for days. Thor proved to be charming, photogenic, impossible to embarrass, and apparently unaffected by either fatigue or lack of privacy. He gave the historians headaches, the politicians migraines, and inspired a large number of religious debates. He was touched when several Pagan communities held a day of mourning for his elder brother. Freya indulgently gave him a few days to enjoy himself, then entered the scene and inspired a whole new frenzy of adoration.

They were having a ball. Jane eventually demanded that they hold court... er, interviews... far enough from her lab to keep strays from wandering in. Thor promised with good humour and no apparent irony that he would charge the reporters on their honour and courtesy not to interfere further with her studies. This worked somewhat better than she'd have expected.

Lopt had been sent out to buy lunch, which normally meant a pile of sandwiches and the largest iced coffees he could find. Today he came back empty handed and grinning, and Loki reluctantly set aside the paper he'd been scribbling calculations on to ask him where lunch was.

'I think we should eat at the coffee shop today,' said Lopt.

'Why?' asked Loki, glancing wistfully at his equations.

'Because they’re showing the news,' said Lopt. ‘Your brother’s on television.’

‘It’s no concern of mine if he wants to play superhero,’ said Loki. He hadn’t bothered checking in on SHIELD since finding better uses for his time than keeping an eye on the tesseract.

‘He’s playing ambassador,’ said Lopt. ‘I’m an alien prince and my family liked to hang out in Scandinavia pretending to be gods.” It’s amazing.’

Loki stood up. ‘Let’s go then.’

The coffee shop was more crowded than he’d expected, but perhaps this was simply not the kind of news people could listen to alone. If they had no one at home to listen with then they listened to it in public, congregating to ask one another whether it was a hoax and whether they should be scared yet. On the television Thor earnestly assured them that they shouldn’t, that Asgard recognised Midgard’s right to rule itself and had no desire for conquest.

‘Hey, do you believe in magic?’ The guy indicated the television, trying to pull them into the network of opinion forming throughout the shop.

‘In a young girl’s heart?’ said Lopt before Loki had answered. He and the questioner both stared at Lopt, who shrugged. ‘It’s a song.’

‘I think I’m going to ban you from using the laptop,’ said Loki. He’d already put up with I'm Blue on the basis that commenting would just encourage Lopt, and I'm in Love With a Big Blue Frog,
apparently in honour of Sigyn.

‘But, seriously,’ said the guy, eyes drifting once more to the screen. ‘A race of magic using aliens?’

‘Actually two races,’ said Lopt. ‘They just haven’t noticed us yet.’

The guy gave up on them and moved on to find someone who would take him seriously. Loki smiled at Lopt and shook his head before going to buy the food they’d come here for in the first place.

Loki’s eyes kept drifting back to the television as he grabbed a selection of sandwiches and joined the line. It wasn’t as if he stood out in that respect, everyone was more or less glued to the screen. He’d never thought of Thor as a diplomat; Thor was a warrior and speech was Loki’s domain. Thor was doing beautifully, though, charismatic and golden - presumably because no one had asked him to lie about anything, but still. Loki wondered whether, if things had been different, this would have been his job. He couldn’t have seemed so honest, though, even if he was speaking nothing but the truth. Thor radiated goodwill.

‘Cheer up,’ said Lopt, when Loki returned to the table and handed him his iced coffee. ‘Don’t you think it’s going to make things interesting?’

‘They were interesting enough already,’ said Loki.

‘Why do you want the day off?’ asked the boy, sounding irritated more than forbidding.

‘There are Heathen communities holding a day of mourning for Thor,’ said Loki. ‘My Thor,’ he added hastily at the startled, panicky look that got. ‘I didn’t know he was dead until recently, I never got a chance to say goodbye.’

The boy shrugged. ‘Fine. I’ll go to the workshop without you, I can still work on the calculations.’

Loki let out a silent breath, he hadn’t expected to be allowed so easily. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s not important - I can certainly manage for one day without you,’ said the boy. He shot Loki a quick, suspicious look. ‘Stay in the apartment, though. If there’s anything you need I’ll get it for you before I go.’

Loki shook his head. ‘I don’t need anything.’

With the boy gone Loki went into his room and shut the blinds. There were Asgardian customs for mourning and there were Jotun customs for mourning, but Thor’s funeral had been too long ago for either to feel appropriate. As usual Loki would find his own way. He lit a candle and set it on the floor before sitting down in front of it, resting his hands on his knees, then bowed his head and…let go. It wasn’t meditation, not precisely, meditation was about consciousness. Loki simply plunged into his own emotions, fearless and needing no ritual to connect with them.

Thor, laughing with him over a joke, warm hand on his shoulder. Teasing one another around a fire. Arguments and reconciliations. Thor telling him not to be stupid over a scratch, even as he spread salve on it with gentle hands. A friendship that had lasted thousands of years and ended with Thor thinking him a traitor. Grief and regret washed over him, the world seemed aching and empty with Thor gone. Loki wept, softly and helplessly.

It was hours later when he came out of it, the candle burnt down nearly to its holder. He felt exhausted but cleansed and reached over slowly to snuff the flame, murmuring “farewell” as he
watched the smoke dissipate.

Then he crawled into bed and slept, deep and dreamless, until the boy came home and woke him up for dinner.

The room where Byleist met with Sigyn was surprisingly comfortable, which meant that by Jotun standards, it was sweltering. The walls were slick with moisture. It wasn't a good sign. It was a reflection of what Sigyn meant to bring up, which was about half of why she quelled the impulse to do anything about it.

She bowed. Byleist refroze her chair before inviting her to sit in it, so it wouldn't be damp. Before he could begin discussing new assignments, she said, very quietly, "This won't be enough."

'Is anything going to be enough?' asked Byleist. 'We're doing the best with what we have.'

'I know.' It certainly wasn't as if the Jotuns were sparing any effort, or were any less worn out. And some were as skilled and as powerful as the eight sent from Asgard... but, as on Asgard itself, most were not. Sigyn took a deep breath and found herself half wishing she hadn't sat down, and half glad of it, because she couldn't pace. 'And at this rate, everyone is going to be exhausted, and--' There was no need to give the and. Byleist knew it as well and as painfully as she did. 'Some of us will eventually be called to other duties on Asgard,' she said instead, and watched Byleist's expression go subtly more reserved. That might not have been much better. 'Your Majesty, would you consider allowing more mages onto your planet?'

Byleist dropped his gaze, clearly caught between the desire to trust her and uncertainty as to whether he dared. 'There are those who would say I am betraying everything my father stood for by allowing you here at all,' he said. 'No, I know how many more of us would be dead if I hadn't. But even so, there are those who would like to use it as an excuse to depose me.' He smiled wryly. 'I'd almost like to let them.'

Nearly anything Sigyn could think to say regarding Laufey and what he stood for would have been decidedly impolitic and, speaking to the child he'd raised, probably unkind. 'You have not had an easy reign thus far,' she said. 'For what it's worth, I think you've been doing well -- with, as you say, what you have. Might your people have an easier time accepting Vanir?' They'd sided with Asgard and Midgard, but they had neither casket or bridge, and the bitterness might be less.

'Would the Vanir have any interest in helping? Our history with Asgard has been...varied...but we barely have any history with Vanaheim at all, except that they were your allies."

'They would.' She debated saying it, thought of the dying crops and of the mages doggedly working to enchant the underlying ice against melting, and went on, 'There is certainly less bad blood between you than when they saved Asgard.'

Byleist looked puzzled for a moment, that war and its aftermath had been long before he was born, but his expression cleared as he recalled what she was talking about. 'I see. I think...that we are beyond the pride it would take to refuse them. And that at least I will have Skadi on my side.'

Sigyn hadn't been sure if Laufey would have taught him that history, although on reflection Laufey probably would have enjoyed that bit. She was rather relieved not to put her own pride through the exercise of explaining it. 'And Skadi is a formidable ally,' she said with a smile. Then, thoughtfully, 'You have at least one relation with Vanaheim, I think, but I was... out of touch for a while. Have you been in communication with Gerd?"
'Is she...' Byleist stopped and looked deeply embarrassed. 'She is still our ambassador to Alfheim. I think. Perhaps I should get in touch with her.'

Sigyn blinked, confused, then realised what must have happened. There had been political and trade coalitions on Jotunheim before Laufey had united the entire world in his eagerness for conquest. Gerd had represented one of those, and could plausibly have been considered to represent Jotunheim itself afterward, but Sigyn could easily believe sorting out diplomatic relations with Alfheim had not been one of Laufey's priorities. 'The Elves are also very good with trees, after all,' she agreed.

'Assistance from Alfheim?' said Byleist. 'Laufey never considered them very powerful.'

'They're not very warlike,' said Sigyn, 'and their approach to agriculture and industry is... unusual. But they're very, very good at trees. I admit, I'd overlooked them a bit too -- I thought of the Vanir saving the Grave Yews -- but the Elves would likely be pleased to renew the acquaintance.'

'I think that perhaps my people would feel least threatened by elves, of all the possible peoples that might aid us,' said Byleist quietly. Least threatened, but perhaps most likely to have their pride hurt.

'Perhaps so.' Sigyn paused. 'Though for the food crops, you really would do best with Vanir. And Freya is one of their greatest sorcerers, and will certainly come if I ask her. I believe she has an official diplomatic role on Midgard now, but she won't have any trouble making the change.'

'Midgard has official diplomats now?' said Byleist, rubbing his head. He looked tired.

'Ah. Yes. As of very recently. At least, from Asgard and Vanaheim.'

'I didn't realise Midgard had become so important.'

'We had taken some interest in them before, and Prince Thor has developed some ties there.' Sigyn hesitated, but Jotunheim had already been informed of the search. 'And we suspect Prince Loki may be in hiding somewhere on the planet.'

'I assume Odin wants him back and that planet, ah, undamaged,' Byleist said. 'That must have been an interesting way to resume contact.'

'You assume correctly.' And it probably had been an interesting thing to explain. She rather suspected Prince Thor had actually been a good choice for it; he had probably been straightforward, polite, and unembarrassed. 'And I would like my husband back, myself. I understand the opening of diplomatic relations has thus far been rather more successful than the actual search.'

'I wouldn't care to be the one searching for your husband, I've heard stories,' said Byleist. 'As for Loki Odinson, I think he should be glad it's his family that have the means to search for him and not those he hurt.'

'Likely he should.' Sigyn's voice was even. 'Though, as you can probably imagine, I would not recommend trying to take your revenge, should you meet him. Fortunately you seem to keep a cooler head.'

Byleist looked startled at the pun, and nearly laughed before catching himself and frowning at her. 'He killed my father.'

'Who was standing over Odin and had just declared his intention to kill him,' said Sigyn. 'I certainly don't expect you to be happy about it, but this would be a poor time for a feud.'

'It's immaterial anyway,' Byleist admitted. As he'd said, Jotunheim was in no position to look for him
in the first place. Sigyn wasn't sure she understood Prince Loki's plans well enough to rule out his inexplicably deciding to drop by Jotunheim again, but she imagined her own Loki could probably talk him out of it. For everyone's sakes. 'And I wonder if Midgard would not hide him,' Byleist went on. 'Somehow I doubt they remember us kindly.'

'Not very,' said Sigyn. 'Battles aside, your idea of a comfortable climate is rather hard on them. And their crops. But while he might conceivably have made a few allies there, most of them are not likely to want him taking over their planet either. More likely it's just that no one's recognised him at all.'

'I see.' Byleist looked thoughtful. 'I will try to contact Gerd. You offered to talk to Freya on my behalf?'

'Yes. She's become a good friend, despite all the times we tried to kill each other.' And she really shouldn't tease him, even if that was absolutely true. 'She'll come.' Thinking of Gerd, she added, 'It's possible Vanaheim will reassign Frey.'

'So Gerd might not be on Alfheim when I get in touch with her,' said Byleist. Taking it for granted that the ambiguity of her status with Jotunheim would allow her to go with her husband if she chose. Considering he'd have heard that story as a romance from before he was born, perhaps he took it for granted that she'd choose to go.

Which was entirely possible. 'That might depend on how long you wait.'

'And that might depend on how soon I can spare someone for scrying.'

'You won't find that any easier if you wait until I'm gone,' said Sigyn. 'And if you go ahead, you'll know where she is.'

Byleist drew breath, looking as if he wanted to protest, then nodded instead. 'I think,' he said, 'I'll tell her she should go with Frey to Midgard.'

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'He's worse than Stark,' Agent Coulson lamented one afternoon, regarding Thor's interviews. Jane felt a certain level of schadenfreude about this. Granted, Coulson had his good points, but he had still confiscated her research.

'He is not,' she said, instead of snickering. Although to be fair, many of Tony Stark's annoying facets might affect Coulson less than they did her. He flirted like he breathed -- unaffected by his ongoing and chaotic romance with his CEO or Jane's own firm request to cut it out -- and was convinced he was the most brilliant creature ever to walk the Earth, and at this point possibly the other known worlds. She didn't think Coulson was subjected to the flirtation, and he seemed not to be nearly as annoyed by the competitive posturing.

'Do you know what he's done today?' Jane shook her head -- she hadn't seen Thor since morning and had been rather surprised at Agent Coulson barging into her lab. 'He has explained to eighteen reporters that his little brother is trying to take over the world and is very dangerous, but his family still loves him and wants him to come home. How this did not cause a public panic and a breakdown in diplomatic relations....'

'I don't know about the panic,' Jane said, 'but I'm not sure anybody wants to give up on diplomatic relations with the high-tech advanced aliens just yet. Especially not when other people haven't.'

'I meant among countries on Earth.' Coulson rubbed a hand over his face. 'Oh well. That part's not my job until after it becomes a complete mess.'
'Thanks for the update.' Her mouth quirked. 'Should I remind you Tony's showing up this afternoon?'

'Oh, believe me, I know.'

Jane was actually looking forward to it.

Tony came in carrying something that looked rather like a steel soccer ball, a miniature skeleton of the intact control chamber she'd seen in paintings. Jane felt a leap of excitement at the geometry of it, even if that was silly. It was probably the easiest part to get right, and the error tolerances weren't something she could judge visually. (Actually, the error tolerances weren't something she was too sure about even theoretically. In practice she'd asked Tony 'How good can you get them?' and received a withering glare and an answer of 'a few picometers', which was almost certainly an exaggeration. She'd annoyed him further by rolling her eyes and mollified him somewhat by telling him to use his best judgment.)

'You know what this reminds me of?' Tony said, as they began the setup.

'I hope you're not going to say the Death Star.'

'Aah... no. But that was a good guess.' He held up a fresh arc reactor and tapped it with the index finger of the same hand. 'The geometry is actually very similar to the internal structure of vibranium.'

'Really.' Jane took a step toward him and nearly collided with an incoming robot arm. 'Oops, excuse me,' she said automatically, then felt silly.

'Excuse me,' it replied, and she jumped. She'd heard Tony talking to JARVIS, the improbably polite AI he had brought along to help run the equipment, but having him -- it -- JARVIS address her conversationally was still a little startling. 'Please be careful.'

'Right, sorry.' She retreated to a less busy area at the edge of the room. Her fingers twitched, but they really did need JARVIS's mechanical precision. 'So. As I was saying. You're talking about the crystalline structure in the metal?'

'Yep. Annnd I think it's echoed at a subatomic level, although that, obviously, can't really be pinned down the same way.'

'Hmm, no, but--'

'Ooh. Is talking about pinning down another of those things I'm not supposed to say around you?'

Jane looked up and eyed him over her notebook. 'Not until just then, and you know it. Anyway, that's an interesting point. I'd like to go over the properties of vibranium, because the three-dimensional geometry we're talking about actually seems to be favorable for interacting with extradimensional space.'

Tony frowned. 'Well, the vibration damping is the big one. That's pretty much a bulk property of the polycrystalline structure though. There is some strange behavior in the arc reactors -- not in a bad way! I'm getting better efficiency than the theoretical calculations suggest. I don't see what it could have to do with extra dimensions, though, unless your extradimensional space acts like a capacitor.'

Jane chewed on the end of her pen. 'It just might,' she said. 'I don't know nearly enough about its properties, but they are very, very strange in ways that I'm not sure the additional directions account for.'
'That your next field of study?'

She gave him a bright, toothy smile. 'If I can figure out how to get there.'

Tony rubbed his hands together. 'Well, let's start with a rock.'

The first test was in some ways a bit silly. To see if they could move something through extradimensional space, they were going to move it a few meters across the room, which was close enough that it might not even be taking a shortcut. Even so, when everything was aligned and the pebble had been inserted into what Tony insisted on calling the basketball, they both held their breath as JARVIS dispassionately started the countdown.

There was a hum, a flicker of colors. Then they fused into white light with a painful shrill sound that wandered upward and eventually outside human hearing, which was a relief. Jane squeezed her eyes shut, dazzled even behind light-responsive safety lenses, and thought that next time she would put in earplugs. When she got them open again and could blink away the tears and afterimages, the first thing she saw was the pebble in the target tray.

She shrieked. Tony whooped.

'I'd hug you,' she said, darting over to the pebble, 'except, you know. It's you, and you'd be obnoxious about it.'

'That is what I do. In addition to revolutionising technology, living the high life, and occasionally saving the world.'

'And convincing people you're still an irresponsible twit. That must take a lot of effort.'

'Are you kidding? That's the most fun I have outside a workshop.'

Jane was happily scribbling notes on all the sensor readings from the tray. 'Nobody's going to believe this. I can hardly believe this. We made an Einstein-Rosen bridge!'

'I think for now it's just a bridgelet.'

She laughed giddily. 'We made a rainbow bridgelet! Wait until I tell Thor.'

'Well, obviously he'll believe you,' Tony said. 'He thinks this is normal. Anyway, he saw all the plans. You might give somebody in SHIELD a heart attack out of sheer glee. Fortunately, that person is not me, as I have had more than enough experience with cardiac arrest.'

Their next test was to send the rock into another room; the third was to send it to a carefully prepared spot in Tony's basement workshop. Or so he'd said. When Pepper phoned them to demand an explanation for the sudden arrival of a new paperweight, Jane eyed her lab partner's smirk and vowed not to take Tony Stark's word for coordinates again.

A flash drive made the (local) trip with all its data intact. Tony asked if she had a mouse. Jane spent twenty minutes explaining to him that it had only been two weeks and as astrophysics ordinarily did not require live experimental subjects, she didn't have any of the authorisations and was definitely not going to risk either an ethics investigation or a hantavirus by trying to catch a wild mouse for the purpose.

In the end, Tony captured a late-afternoon mosquito that had been sipping from his arm, and Jane surrendered to curiosity since there were far fewer regulations regarding non-endangered invertebrates. The mosquito sat still just long enough to activate their device, then flew lazily out the
end of the tiny cyclone in the next room over. And then she escaped, presumably to find the nearest standing water and lay Stark-flavoured eggs.

'So should we try to send something to Asgard next?' Tony asked.

'That's going to be a little trickier. I got some information from Heimdall about the spatial relationships, but the calculations get more complicated when you leave what is effectively an internally stationary reference frame and start aiming at another planet orbiting another star existing in a three-dimensional space that does not actually intersect or even share any axes with this one.'

'Ooh.' Tony sat on her desk. Jane considered poking him with a pencil. 'Fun math.'

'That about sums it up. Fun math with parameters I don't have yet.'

'How about a moon rock? Or Mercury, that'd be fun. We can get parameters for that. And didn't the Romans think Odin was Mercury? Maybe we should give him a rock.'

Jane paused and then, reluctantly, giggled. And tried to imagine Odin's reaction to that. She wasn't sure if he'd be offended, amused, or possibly convinced they were lunatics. 'How about we take a look at your capacitor problem—'

'I wouldn't exactly call it a problem—'

'Your capacitor bonus, and see what it might suggest about the properties of extradimensional space.'

'You're no fun at all.'

'I got you a chance to build your own version of alien technology!'

Tony tossed their test pebble into the air, bounced it off the ceiling, and caught it. 'Okay, you're a little bit of fun.'

Jane was immersed in extradimensional calculations and the attempt to visualise what she was describing when Tony yelped and nearly fell out of his chair, then started circling her warily. 'Jane. Jane. Dr. Foster. What are you doing?' He sounded oddly... flat, like his voice wasn't quite there. Jane turned her head.

Tony said, 'Gaaah!'

Jane swallowed. She couldn't see him. When she turned her head back carefully to its previous position, she could see her notebook. But part of her vision was the strange not-quite-dark of extradimensional space, and she was only intersecting the laboratory.

She swallowed again and moved minutely toward it. Everything snapped back into focus again, and she let out a breath that was aching in her lungs. Her vision swam a little.

'What was that?' Tony demanded.

'I went... sideways,' Jane said. 'A little way into extradimensional space. By accident.'

'That's a hell of an accident.'

She rubbed a shaky hand over her face. 'Yeah. I might need to talk to somebody about that.'

'Thor?'
'He doesn't travel that way on his own. I was thinking Freya.'

Tony was surprisingly understanding about it, or maybe not so surprisingly when she remembered what Sigyn had looked like when receiving a message from Verdrfolnir. He offered to go disrupt the interviews to get Freya for her, which Jane suspected he might enjoy a little too much. She declined anyway, feeling more than a little awkward about it and also not sure what he might wind up announcing in front of thirty or so privileged reporters, but she did decide to give her brain a rest from extradimensional theory for the moment and go home.

She wasn't exactly surprised to smell coffee when she opened her own front door. Several people had keys to her apartment at this point. She was surprised to discover it wasn't any of them. 'Sigyn,' she said. 'Hi. I thought you were on Jotunheim.'

'I was.' Sigyn gave her a rather apologetic smile and went to get another mug. 'I hope you'll excuse me for letting myself in and drinking your coffee. Your lab was in an interesting state, I wasn't sure Freya and Thor could be diplomatically interrupted, and it was the coffee or fall asleep on your table.'

The **interesting state** of the lab reminded Jane to be gleefully excited rather than just freaked out, but she managed to keep both down for the moment. At least she probably didn't need to worry about getting lost for the moment, as Sigyn would know what was going on. Still, she didn't drink more than a sip of the coffee Sigyn poured her -- it was a summer afternoon in the desert, no time for hot drinks, and her nerves didn't need any extra jangling. 'Hey, I said to drop by any time. I was just surprised. You're welcome to either the coffee or a nap,' she said, then added with a laugh, 'although I can't really recommend sleeping on the table.' Sigyn did look tired. Not alarmingly so, but certainly as if things hadn't let up for a while. 'If you want the bed, though--?'

Sigyn shook her head and gestured to her mug. 'I'm awake now. Do you know how long they'll be?'

Jane glanced at the clock and tried to estimate. 'Another hour or so, maybe. You *could* interrupt them, though, if it's urgent?'

'Urgent, yes, but in the sense of "tomorrow morning would be good" rather than "this instant." I want to ask Freya if the Vanir would do something about the Jotunheim's crops. And maybe the Grave Yews, although the Elves might take care of that. I'd meant to send a message nearly a month ago, but it's been very busy.'

'Grave Yews?' Jane had a vague idea that yew trees were associated with graveyards, but it startled her to hear about it on another planet. Also, Elves?

'Jotunheim doesn't have any deciduous trees,' Sigyn explained. 'Where Asgard thinks of Yggdrasil as an ash tree and the Vanir actually use ash in world-walking, to the Jotuns it's a yew.'

Fascinating, if not exactly the part Jane had questions about. 'How does that translate to graves?'

'Symbolically. A link between life and death, not just planets.' Sigyn grimaced and finished her coffee. 'The structural damage to the planet is in some ways the least of the problems. It's the climatic and agricultural ones -- we've barely had a chance to think. The yews are sturdy, but they can only deal with so much extra water. It's not a pleasant thing, to choose between the crops that will keep people alive and the trees that give them hope.'

'I'd think losing their forests wouldn't help with the climatic problems either,' Jane said, getting up to retrieve the newest pot of coffee and hold it over Sigyn's mug. 'And Vanir magic is pretty heavy on biology? They could keep the plants alive?'
Sigyn nodded. 'Byleist didn't think to ask, but he agreed. Their king,' she added. 'Laufey's youngest, born after the war. Jotunheim's been isolated all his life, and many of his people are either still stinging from the war, or don't remember when they actually got on with other worlds.' She accepted the refill and sipped at it, apparently unaffected by the fact that it was still scalding. 'Besides being worn out, some of us are needed back on Asgard. Heimdall says most of the smaller fragments of the Bifrost have been consumed by the scavengers, and if we could just retrieve the largest pieces, we could start on repairs.' Her mouth quirked. 'I did not feel compelled to share that news with Byleist yet, but if things get bad enough, he might at least appreciate that it's easier to transport food that way than by falconskin.'

'You're going to be involved in repairing the Bifrost?' Jane asked, feeling only slightly guilty for her excitement after hearing about Jotunheim's problems. If people waited until everything was perfect everywhere before getting excited, the world would probably have collapsed in despair ages ago. Anyway, it actually was important.

Sigyn looked amused. 'I helped build it. I wasn't as central to the effort as some, but--' The amusement fell away into a sigh. 'There are only so many of us left who were involved at all.'

Jane winced. Everything seemed to keep turning depressing. 'Tony and I built a little one,' she said anyway.

Sigyn choked on her coffee. 'But you don't do magic,' she said when she could breathe properly again. Jane felt better for realising that in addition to slightly strangled, Sigyn sounded excited too. 'You made a bridge? Is that what was going on around your lab?'

'Yes it was. And we didn't use magic.' Jane grinned. 'So far information and live insects pass through it unharmed. Um, but I might need -- well -- you said willing myself someplace in extradimensional space would show I had potential as a sorcerer?'

Sigyn eyed her thoughtfully. 'Yes, and you did. Did something else happen?'

'I sort of... slipped sideways. Freya taught me a bit about how to navigate on the way back here, but it's not somewhere I want to start going by accident!' Jane thought Jormungand might stop her if she started to wander past, if it thought she didn't mean to, but -- distance was a strange thing in extradimensional space. There were routes along the structures and folds that put everything from the moon to other inhabited solar systems within walking distance, and the same properties meant there was, in practical terms, an infinite amount of space and directions to get lost in without technically being more than a few yards from your starting point.

'No,' Sigyn said. 'That's definitely something you should learn to control. Can you leave?'

'What? You mean -- try it now?'

Sigyn laughed. 'No, no. Although that would be a place to start. But we're leaving, so we'll have to take you with us to teach you anything.'

'Oh! Right. Okay.' Relief made Jane feel almost shaky. 'Yes, I can go.'
'You want to leave for another planet again?' Coulson asked skeptically, eyeing Jane and the two Asgardians with her. 'I suppose I should be glad you mentioned it in advance this time.'

'Safety training,' Jane said, 'for the extradimensional work. Tony and I managed to create a miniature Einstein-Rosen bridge, but it turns out I ca--mmf!'

Thor had swept her into his arms and kissed her. Most people did not think this was an appropriate form of congratulations to someone who was in mid-sentence with a government official, but Jane was having a hard time complaining about it. 'That is a great accomplishment,' he said, putting her down with a warm smile.

Sigyn cleared her throat, sounding amused. 'So it is.'

'Anyway,' Jane said, trying to recover her train of thought, 'in the process, I slipped into extradimensional space myself. And before you get any ideas about applications, research or travel or anything else, this is a really good way to get completely lost if I don't learn to control it. And I wouldn't necessarily have a chance to warn you first.'

'Which I can teach her,' Sigyn said. The beginnings of worry on Thor's face cleared at once. 'It will probably also be interesting for her to be present while we repair the Bifrost itself, which I originally helped to design and build.'

SHIELD agreed. Actually, once convinced, there was some discussion of whether Stark should be sent with them too, but as he had a multitude of other projects and was not actually in any notable danger of drifting into other dimensions by mistake at this point, they decided against it.

Freya sent a message home that she was leaving Midgard for Jotunheim and they should send a new ambassador, which prompted Darcy to ask just what Freya's relationship was with Vanaheim's government. (Part of the answer, apparently, was "Trusted." Jane missed most of the rest of it in the process of preparing to leave her experiments and explaining her latest discoveries to Erik.)

In Asgard, and after Sigyn had spoken with Odin, she took Jane aside into an airy, warm-toned room lit by the afternoon sun. 'I have to tell you,' Sigyn said, 'Midgard would actually be a safer place for you to have this problem, but on balance, I think supervision is more important.'

Jane swallowed. 'I'd prefer to stop having the problem, really. I felt much safer once I ran into you.'

'That's understandable.' Sigyn paced the sides of the room, touching the walls. 'I can't be with you constantly, but I may be able to teach you enough magic this evening to avoid accidents. After we retrieve the pieces of the Bifrost, the scavengers won't be so much of a problem. And if necessary, I can create a temporary binding to prevent you from leaving the dimensions you're in.'

'I'm still having trouble believing I'm going to learn magic,' Jane said with a nervous laugh.

Sigyn turned back to her, looking baffled. 'I'm not sure what else you think we'd do. The binding would be something of a nuisance for both of us. Such things are easier to establish on locations than on people, and either one would interfere considerably with both your travel and your research. I don't think you want that to be permanent.'

'That's not--' Jane shook her head. 'It's not that I wanted you to do everything. I'd much rather learn to control where I go, or don't go, myself. It's just a really strange thought. An adjustment. I'm not
used to thinking of magic as *real*.

'I would call that the really strange thought.' Sigyn gave her a long, appraising look, then gestured to a chair.

The chair looked uncompromisingly rigid and blocky. Jane sat in it anyway and found it wasn't actually rock-hard, but did poke oddly at her back and left her feet dangling several inches in the air. This did not make it that unusual, as furniture went. What did was that after about three seconds, it adjusted -- her feet hit the floor, and the subtle curve of the backrest suddenly offered excellent lumbar support. She resisted the urge to twist around and eye it.

Sigyn took the facing chair herself, which didn’t require nearly as much adjustment. She pulled it close enough that Jane had to move her knees aside a little, and wrapped strong fingers around Jane's wrists. 'I will not lose you. Are you comfortable?'

'Surprisingly so,' Jane said, looking up at her and trying to swallow another inappropriate giggle. 'I wasn't expecting your furniture to accommodate short people this way. Did you do that or is it built in?'

Sigyn grinned. 'Built in, but it's part of why I picked the room. I got rather tired of Jotun-sized furniture over the past weeks and thought you might appreciate it. Now, what I want you to do is think about extradimensional space. Try to become aware of it, but don't go there.'

'All right.' Jane wasn't sure how well this was going to go. She did know that sitting absolutely still was harder than it sounded. Still, she trusted Sigyn, she needed to learn, and she had to start somewhere, so she shut her eyes and thought about extradimensional space. The star-shot darkness of being in it, and the equations and abstractions and geometry and--

She could feel the shift, a sudden sense of unfolding, of awareness of more directions all around her. She jumped a bit, involuntarily, and Sigyn's hands tightened. 'Will is action,' Sigyn said in a low voice. 'Choose to be still. You can breathe--' There was a hint of amusement in her voice as Jane realised she'd been holding her breath and gasped. 'You can open your eyes, look around, blink, even talk to me. Moving in other dimensions is largely a matter of the mind; it's not something the ordinary movements of your body are going to cause.'

Jane opened her eyes. There was a hint of darkness shot through with something that might not be quite starlight, at the edges of her vision, and despite what Sigyn had just said she found herself half afraid to turn her head. 'I can't decide if that's reassuring or not.'

'It just is.' Sigyn smiled faintly. 'You really didn't believe magic existed? I know Midgard at least used to have it -- one of Heimdall's teachers was from there.'

'What did she teach?'

'Far-seeing. Scrying. He had one from each of the nine realms -- the more accessible ones first, of course. Now he can observe nearly anywhere he wants.'

Jane paused, a memory itching at her mind from the reading she'd done after Thor disappeared. Or maybe it was something Erik had said, and that was why she couldn't pin down a reference. 'Do those nine teachers by any chance explain why we've got a story about him having nine mothers?'

'That's the origin, yes. Although if you're wondering why your poets described him as pale with gold teeth, I never figured that one out.' Sigyn looked thoughtful. 'You have a *concept* of magic. What is it, exactly, that you didn't believe in?'
'Well, it's--' Jane paused. Thought about that for a minute. 'Harder to define than I thought. I guess... something that doesn't operate within the laws of nature. Except sometimes it just winds up being used to mean people exerting control over the universe in ways we don't understand yet. That's the attitude behind one of our authors who said sufficiently advanced science would be indistinguishable from magic. And Thor said--' She hesitated, partly because the thought distracted her from extradimensional space and brought back an entirely different star-filled darkness, with the cool of the desert night and a near-stranger telling her unbelievable things. 'Thor said magic and science were one and the same, for you.'

Sigyn chuckled. 'I'm afraid Thor isn't exactly an expert on either subject. Or rather, he's very good at weather magic, but in a different way from what you're going to learn. I wouldn't have said what he did--' She looked thoughtful. 'But given what you've just told me, I suppose it did make the basic point that we don't consider them contradictory. What do you say science is?'

That was easier. 'It's a way of thinking, of learning about the world by systematic observation and measurement and testing hypotheses, and the body of knowledge we've gotten that way. It's about believing nature is comprehensible and worth trying to comprehend, and going at it with an open mind, and revising our assumptions when they don't match the evidence.' She paused. 'Sometimes we're not as good at that last part as we'd hope.'

'It can be difficult,' said Sigyn, 'but very valuable.' She looked pensive, and Jane wondered if that had to do with revising assumptions very quickly after spending a mind-boggling length of time trapped in a misunderstanding. 'We have a similar concept of science, anyhow, which is a start. But you're going to have to let go of defining magic as something you don't understand, let alone that doesn't exist.'

'I'm working on that,' Jane said with a wry grin. 'I'm convinced what you call magic does exist, but maybe it'll help with the other part once I actually do understand some of it. So what is it?'

Sigyn smiled and, somewhat to Jane's consternation, let go of her to lean back. 'It's not a very technical term,' she mused. 'It can refer to a kind of energy, or to ways of manipulating reality that rely more on thought than direct physical interaction. In addition to deliberately enchanted objects, there are objects that naturally have magic in them, and animals that use it, though I am not sure if there are any on Earth. And there are nine main categories of magic.' A sudden grin. 'You'll run into disagreements on exactly what they are, but nearly everybody will tell you there are nine of them.'

'Oh, boy.' Why nine? Why were there different lists, and what were they? Okay, one thing at a time. Or possibly nine. 'Well, what's your list?'

'Fire,' said Sigyn, an apparently unfueled flame blossoming in her open hand and then snuffing when she closed it. 'Ice, and weather; fertility, shapeshifting, and enchantment; world-walking, far-seeing, and illusion.'

'Well, that sounds... pretty far-ranging.' Jane was surprised that world-walking was one of the top nine categories, but now that she thought about it... there was getting there, there was navigating, there were the things that lived there, and the space itself seemed to have some very strange properties that she was desperate to find out about. (If she could get there and find her way around safely, at least within Jormungand's coils, maybe she could figure out how to study them.) Extradimensional space was surely going to require a new category of science; why shouldn't it have its own category of magic?

Jane shut her eyes again for a moment to concentrate on here-and-now. She didn't usually make quite so much of an effort to ground herself -- either she was working, in which case her thoughts were off in mathematics and outer space or fixed on her instruments, or she wasn't and it didn't matter that
much. What Sigyn had said so far was probably enough to fuel several hours of questions, minimum. Jane resisted shaking her head at herself. Of course it was. It was enough to fuel literally centuries of study, by a lot of different people, for whom a war that happened a thousand years ago was recent and still stinging. She wanted to ask everything, but right now she was supposed to be learning how not to get herself lost or eaten completely by accident. Focus. 'Are you going to teach me just about world-walking,' she asked, 'or do I get to ask about all nine?'

'Just world-walking today. Or how to avoid world-walking, to be more exact. As for the rest...' Sigyn tilted her head. 'I've been teaching some of my better fire magic secrets to frost giants who aren't even allies. I don't think there will be a problem teaching you.'

Jane shifted and pulled her feet up to sit cross-legged, partly to see if the chair would adjust to that. Dividing her attention was starting to get easier, and she was starting to feel less like she might turn and drift off. 'I didn't mean to ask about, uh, anything proprietary,' she said uncertainly. She was inexperienced with industry and new to governmental paranoia. Academia was largely about publishing, and while it was sometimes a good idea to keep things quiet, it was mainly so you wouldn't lose credit when you did publish. And that was a nod to practicality, not part of the collegial attitude intended to encourage the spread of knowledge.

That, and her main problem until recently had been getting anyone to listen in the first place. People did not normally jump aboard the work of crackpots.

'There's nothing wrong with asking,' said Sigyn. 'For that matter, it's entirely traditional to go nosing about trying to find out other magicians' secrets that they aren't willing to tell you, although it's not especially safe. But I like you. You should be fun to teach. And it would probably be useful for both our worlds.' A thoughtful look. 'You're having misgivings. Is it about the spying? That's really not something you're likely to have to worry about.'

Jane felt her cheeks warm. Was she that transparent? 'It's not that,' she said, trying to put words to the sudden unease. 'It's more... I do want to learn. But you're right about Thor's key point being that magic and science weren't contradictory, because I think he'd picked up that I had always assumed they were. That if magic was real and wasn't sufficiently advanced science, but was about... spirits, and objects not playing by the laws of nature, and doing things just by willing them, we'd never have been able to figure out the patterns.' Sigyn was looking baffled, and Jane wasn't sure whether this was encouraging (not a problem!) or disheartening (failure to communicate). 'How am I going to be sure I'm not subconsciously messing with the results of my own experiments?'

Sigyn shook her head. 'How do you know you haven't put your thumb on the scales when you determine a mass? You should learn enough control not to do magic at all without intending it, especially as it isn't strong enough in you naturally to be used by instinct. You should certainly be able to recognise whether you're doing it, despite not growing up with the idea. It shouldn't be a problem.'

Jane thought about that. Sigyn was treating what you did with magic, and with your mind, as something that was as observable and controllable as what you did with your body. Which made sense on one level, but she also thought about clinical trials and placebo effects -- things that weren't normally an issue in her kind of work -- and decided she might have to think about whether she could work out some blind tests as extra experimental controls. Just to be safe. 'Okay,' she said. 'And we work around the behavior of conscious agents all the time. Of course.'

A nod. 'You're doing well at that part so far. You seem comfortable with not accidentally moving into extradimensional space, and that's actually one of the trickier examples of magic to contemplate without carrying out.' Sigyn grinned suddenly, and she flicked her fingers toward a candelabra,
which suddenly flared alight and then went immediately back out. ‘So, want to learn to set something on fire?’

There was a frost giant on the television. Loki had been watching it in case Midgard’s rapidly expanding web of extraterrestrial relations affected his plans. And to keep an eye on his brother. Somehow he’d missed that the diplomats had changed, there was someone he didn’t recognise from Asgard and then, when he’d expected Freya, instead the producer had announced Frey, the new diplomat from Vansealheim, and his wife, Gerd, the diplomat from Jotunheim.

Loki missed whatever he said next because there was a frost giant on television. In a dress. She was wearing a sheer white silk gown, tied with a white sash, and little white silk slippers that should have looked ridiculous on a frost giant instead of somehow elegant. Deep bronze hair was coiled on her head, held there with carved wooden pins. Somehow he was surprised she had hair, which was stupid. He had hair, Lopt had hair, there was no reason for them to be the only frost giants to have hair. Her jewellery was wood too, rosewood polished to a high shine.

It was rather disturbing to realise she looked gorgeous.

Not that she looked greatly feminine, without the dress he might not have been able to tell she was a woman. Less muscular than the warriors, but that was true of him and Lopt as well. Even then she would have been a beautiful man, though, with her even cobalt skin and amazing cheekbones. Disconcertingly the mortals seemed to agree, acting around her as they would any beautiful woman, even as she towered over them.

‘What are you watching?’ asked Lopt, folding his arms over the back of the couch as he paused to see. ‘Oh, Gerd’s here. Too bad Freya left.’

‘You don’t like her?’ said Loki, feeling unreasonably embarrassed and keeping it out of his voice. It wasn’t as if Lopt could read his mind and tell he’d just been admiring a frost giant’s beauty.

‘What? Oh, she’s here because Frey’s replaced Freya, is she? No, I didn’t mean that. It’s just funnier when you have the two contenders for most beautiful person in the universe in the same room.’

‘She’s here as Jotunheim’s ambassador, although it does seem like she’s come with Frey,’ said Loki. ‘Why would Jotunheim send an ambassador?’

‘Maybe they’re in need of friends,’ said Lopt. ‘And there’s trade. The interesting thing here is that so far Alfheim haven’t.’

‘Hmm,’ said Loki. Alfheim was known for maintaining relationships with everyone. They’d even managed to have both an Asgardian and Jotun ambassador throughout the war. ‘Nothing they want, no military or magical strength?’

‘That wouldn’t stop them normally. Things like that can change,’ said Lopt.

Loki nodded. ‘What would Jotunheim want from Midgard? In a trade situation, rather than trying to take it over.’

‘Chocolate,’ said Lopt promptly.

Loki twisted his head around so he could give him a look, and Lopt ducked his head to hide a giggle. Both of them liked chocolate, and had a fondness for Midgardian sweets in general, but the question had been serious.
'Really,' said Lopt. 'Fruit, sugar, sweets. There’s very little on Jotunheim that’s sweet and, as a race, we have something of a sweet tooth.'

Loki looked away sharply, disturbed that something he had thought was him turned out to be a Jotun thing. 'And Asgard?' he asked.

Lopt snorted. 'Nothing, or they’d have maintained contact.' A pause. 'Maybe science. I don’t think they’ve done anything we haven’t, but they have done it in other ways.'

'Did you realise you use “we” to refer to both Jotuns and Asgardians?’ asked Loki.

'Why not?’ said Lopt, cheerfully.

On the screen Gerd was smiling at Frey with open affection, red eyes full of love.

The largest piece of bridge came into view, a huge jagged thing. Glimmers of rainbow light shimmered through a lumpy coating of what appeared at first to be dried grass and then proved to be wriggling. Occasionally a fatter, tentacle-like piece would drop off and wander out of sight. As they changed angles, Thor saw that there was a large protrusion on one end shaped like a broken eggshell, streaked in black and green, with no squirming grass on it. It took him a moment to put together the shape and size. 'Is that the control room?’ he asked in surprise, coming to a halt. 'It exploded. I didn’t think there would be that much left.'

'We did build it to be sturdy.’ Sigyn sounded rather satisfied. 'That will help a bit.' She looked over at him. 'Well, it will make the retrieval a bit more difficult, but it will make everything else easier.'

Thor grinned at the hint of apology in her tone. 'So I should try not to break any more of it, then?’

Sigyn laughed at him. 'If you don't mind!’

'I'll see what I can do.' He squinted at it. 'Is it moving toward us?’ He didn't feel any pull along that direction, so he wasn't sure why it would be.

'Yes,’ Sigyn said. 'Mind -- intelligent thought -- is among the attractive forces here, so we're disturbing its course.'

'So if we had them both, we could just bring Jane and Loki out here and get it to follow them home?’

His aunt, at this point, broke down in giggles. 'It doesn't work quite like that. But it would probably have drifted farther if not for the minds of the population of Asgard, for instance. And it may stick to you until you get back into our home dimension.'

'That may be good.’ Thor studied the shape they were approaching. 'I was trying to figure out where I could get a grip on it.'

When they reached the end of the Bifrost, Thor took his hammer and began systematically knocking away the creatures clinging to it. Sigyn watched his back and fended off strays, with spell and sword.

'I didn't know you trained with weapons as well,' he remarked. Sif would be interested. Sigyn didn't move like someone who used a sword regularly or exactly expertly, but on the other hand, she didn’t seem to be uncertain about it. She was really quite deft for someone who had to be a thousand years out of practice.

'They're not my best area, and I'm better with a knife than a sword, but sometimes I need the reach.'
She lashed out with magic, then skewered a tentacle coming up hopefully toward the underside of the chunk of bridge. 'It's also useful to have a quick alternative to spells here -- some creatures will simply eat the magic you hit them with if you don't tune it properly.'

'Is that like striking a chord?' Thor punted without quite thinking about it, then hoped he hadn't offended her. Loki usually responded to music-related jokes about 'tuning' magic with a sour look or a swat, when he didn't join in, and while there had usually been what Thor thought was a hint of amusement lurking about the corners of his mouth when he wasn't already in a foul mood, he was starting to second guess himself there. And even if his brother had enjoyed them, that was no guarantee about his aunt.

Sigyn laughed, though, and then answered the question seriously. 'Not quite. You want dissonance; harmony makes things easier for them.'

Freed of the tentacle-creatures feeding on it, the material looked strange. Instead of smooth and flat on the original surfaces and sharply jagged at the broken place, it was worn down all over to rounded bumps and pits. 'It looks like they've been licking it.'

Sigyn looked it over. 'Close enough.'

Thor hung Mjolnir back at his belt and turned off the falconskin, which was necessary in order to get his arms around one of the remaining protrusions. From this point he would mostly be relying on Sigyn for defence as well as guidance, although dropping the bridge to fight would be somewhat less hazardous here than in a place where gravity worked normally.

She moved ahead of him, taking a few steps back toward Asgard, and Thor leaned toward her. The piece of bridge... budged. Reluctantly. The problem wasn't precisely that it was heavy, but that he didn't really have anything to dig his feet into.

Sigyn looked back at him after a moment, analysing the struggle. 'We do need your physical strength for this, but you're thinking of it too physically. You don't need the ground here any more than you do when you fly.'

'I don't fly without Mjolnir.' Though that still might be the way he needed to think of moving. After a few more laborious steps, however -- and realising they were still steps -- Thor shook his head and let go. 'And maybe that's what I need to do after all.' He went around to the other end of the chunk and braced his shoulder underneath where the remnants of the control chamber curved upward, then hefted Mjolnir and pointed it forward. 'To Asgard!' he cried, and set off.

Only to promptly veer off in a weirdly shaped swerve, because of course he was propelling it from a strange angle. He slowed and brought it under control again. 'Oops.'

'It's not a bad idea for propulsion,' Sigyn said, slapping away a few interested scavengers and sounding as if she was trying very hard not to laugh, 'if you can get the angles right.'

Thor reoriented himself based on his extremely amused aunt, shot her a grin, and set off again. It took a few tries and a great deal of effort to find a way to hold the bridge and keep it pointed forward, but he mastered it. As they began drawing closer to Asgard, more scavengers began to find the exposed Bifrost energies and swarm around; Sigyn drove most of them off, and they mostly bypassed Thor anyway, but the weaker ones that touched him felt like midges, and the stronger ones like wasps. He gritted his teeth and pressed on faster, until Sigyn shouted at him to stop and, with a slight sideways tug on his arm, brought him back to normal space, next to Heimdall.

Several women -- sorcerers all -- who'd been called upon to work on the repairs, standing with Odin...
a little way down the bridge, jumped back. The chunk of bridge thudded down, making the intact part of the Bifrost vibrate with a hum that was still going on when they finished mopping up the scavengers that had followed them through.

After a few minutes of scurrying around and double-checking that the area was clean, there was a pause, and then everyone broke into a cheer.

Loki paced back and forth along the bench as if looking at the last two pieces from several different angles might be the way to solve the problem. The boy was standing a little way away, red eyes following Loki’s pacing.

‘I think we can do it,’ he said. ‘We’ve done the analysis three times now.’

‘And the analysis says that using magic on either will trigger both,’ said Loki. ‘They’re going to have to be deactivated at the same time. And they’ll both trigger as soon as we start, so it won’t be a case of doing the deactivation first and then separating them.’

‘So we’ll take one each,’ said the boy. ‘I know I haven’t done the…quick deactivations before, on the active ones. But I’ve deactivated dormant ones. And it’s not the same as the ones that activate when we get it wrong, I already know the deactivation spell.’

‘You’ll have to do the slowing down at the same time though,’ said Loki. ‘Are you sure you can do this?’

‘Yes,’ said the boy impatiently. ‘Please have some faith in my assessment of my own abilities. What about you? Should I let you access the casket?’

Loki looked at him in surprise. It would make his chances of pulling this off much higher, but he hadn’t even considered asking. ‘It would help,’ he said.

‘You have permission to access the casket. For this one task, and this task alone,’ said the boy. ‘Now, will you stop dithering?’

Loki nodded, smiling slightly. ‘You’d better start by summoning the casket. We’ll need it nearby if we’re both going to use it.’

The boy nodded and spread his hands, bringing the casket out to appear between them with the normal drop in temperature. This time he placed it on the bench, ice crackling along its sides as it formed. Loki felt there was something satisfying about using the casket that went beyond the practical; Laufey’s most precious treasure in the hands of his unwanted sons.

Loki picked up a pair of pliers and held them out to the boy, realising, with slight amusement at himself, that he was offering them with the same ceremony a warrior might use in handing over a sword. The boy took them solemnly and the two of them took their stations on opposite sides of the bench. Taking the pieces apart would trigger them as surely as using magic, but starting with the separation meant there was less chance of the deactivation spells interfering with one another. They each carefully closed the pliers around their pieces and Loki started to count. ‘Three…two…one…now.’

They each pulled and started the deactivation spell at the exact same time, the murmuring of a completely different spell a distraction Loki tried to ignore to focus on his. Something made harder by his desire to keep track of how the boy was doing. Maybe the need to concentrate on something else was making them sloppy, but the casket responded to both of them drawing on it by coating most of the workshop with ice. Loki could feel the ice crystals in his eyelashes.
As soon as the magic faded from his piece Loki turned to help the boy. But the boy had his piece dormant before the motion was even finished. They both reached for bags at once, motion almost mechanical, and wrote out the tags before putting them gently into the box with all the others. Then both of them just stood for a moment, filled with the emptiness that sometimes follows the completion of a task that has, for a while, been all consuming.

Then the magnitude of what they’d just done hit him and Loki started grinning. ‘Freya’s going to be furious,’ he said. ‘And Odin…he’ll be furious too. And delighted. And definitely jealous.’ He started laughing. ‘You have to give me permission to tell him this. It’s too perfect.’

‘Not yet,’ said the boy pensively. ‘We don’t know if we can build one of our own yet.’

‘You sound just like him,’ said Loki, delight making him thoughtless. ‘When you complete an impossible task you should celebrate. Not complain that there’s another you haven’t done yet.’

The boy looked away and said, ‘This is a stepping stone. If this as as far as we get then all we’ve done is turn a useful item into a useless one.’

Loki put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Humour me,’ he said softly. ‘I’ve tried to do this for centuries and I couldn’t. Not even with Odin. Let me enjoy success for a while.’

A sigh. ‘What do you want to do?’

‘Celebrate properly. A meal out, good food and wine. And tomorrow we can get back to work.’

‘Very well. I doubt we could continue today,’ said the boy.

Loki squeezed his shoulder. ‘Thank you.’

The restaurant they picked was a nice one. The food was good, the portions were large and the waitress was pretty. They started off with salad and breadsticks and then the main course arrived, in Loki’s case a steak in bearnaise sauce while the boy had lambshanks. To his surprise the boy took a mouthful immediately. He seemed equally surprised when Loki ignored his and just sipped his wine.

‘You’re not eating?’ he said.

‘Too hot for me,’ said Loki. ‘You can eat it at that temperature?’ For the first time he wondered what Odin had meant by “deeper than glamour”. Just what had he changed to make the boy seem Asgardian?

‘I’d prefer it cooler,’ the boy admitted. ‘But at feasts they normally stop serving if I take too long.’

‘We’ve got time,’ said Loki. It was progress that the boy was willing to admit it, he thought, rather than claiming that being able to eat hot food made him less of a Jotun.

By the time the food cooled to the point he preferred Loki had managed to talk the waitress into giving him her phone number. She really was very pretty, he thought, watching as she went into the kitchen with a blush still reddening her cheeks.

‘And a few months ago you couldn’t use a telephone,’ said the boy dryly. ‘Aren’t you married?’

‘Sigyn doesn’t mind,’ said Loki, putting the number in his pocket. ‘I’ve never been faithful but I’ve always been honest.’

‘And that’s enough?’
‘It was her choice,’ said Loki. ‘She was eager enough to marry me.’

The boy looked down, eyes on his plate. His reaction to surprise always seemed to be to still himself rather than fidget. ‘It wasn’t political, then?’

Loki briefly considered taking offense before realising where the assumption had come from. ‘Because I’m a frost giant?’ he asked.

The boy shrugged. ‘I suppose you can glamour yourself,’ he said.

Loki shook his head. ‘Sigyn is a very adventurous woman. And quite fond of me in all my forms. But, unless you want to grant me permission for conjugal visits, she’s also not available.’ He stopped to take a bite of his steak. Excellent. ‘It would have been a stunningly useless political marriage, actually. Laufey was perpetually embarrassed that Asgard kept remembering I existed.’

‘I thought you were a prince,’ said the boy.

‘I was disowned. It made the politics of the situation interesting when I became Odin’s family after having been cast out of Laufey’s.’ The boy was tense and nearly managing to hide it. They probably needed to discuss Laufey, if only to clear the air about his death. But not while celebrating their triumph. Loki picked up his glass. ‘To us,’ he said. ‘And our next project. May it go as well as this one.’

The boy picked up his own half-full glass and gazed at it as if it might hold answers. ‘To us,’ he murmured, and drained his glass.
Chapter 11

The Bifrost project was proceeding well and speedily, or so Thor was informed. It was certainly keeping a good portion of Asgard's magicians busy, including both of his parents and Sigyn. It was occupying Jane as well; given the time and energy she had spent pursuing both the Bifrost and the lesser natural phenomena it was based on, Thor couldn't be surprised that she divided most of her time between her magic lessons and using them to watch the process in fascination.

It was a little odd for Thor himself, though, especially as his usual closest companions were all on Midgard… for one reason or another. He found other ones easily enough, though it wasn't quite the same. And he flew out every day to watch for at least a little while. He wasn't the only one; it was a magnificent project, and much of the populace either remembered the first building or had never seen quite such a momentous undertaking. So they would come out as they had time, by horse or on foot, to where the rainbow stretched out flat instead of arching and the turbulent sea curved away beneath it.

Admittedly, it wasn't always much to look at from his perspective -- 'speedily' was perhaps a relative term, and naturally part of the work was actually going on in extradimensional space, although the younger magicians had had to be taught how to find it first. Frequently, from a normal perspective, it looked like Heimdall calling out incomprehensible instructions while everyone else stood around and stared at empty space and muttered at each other. Thor found it more interesting to watch Jane, rapt and chewing on her pen. (One evening, he drew back from an odd-tasting kiss and lit a lamp to find that there were four colours of ink staining her mouth.)

...Still, he wished Loki were there to see it too.

A fortnight after he and Sigyn had dragged the last largest pieces back into Asgard's space and the true work of rebuilding began, Thor turned restlessly away to return to the city and found Nari gazing at the workers too. 'Good afternoon, Cousin,' he said.

Nari started slightly at being addressed, which made Thor feel slightly better about not having noticed his arrival, and then smiled. 'And to you. Are you going?'

'I was. But not for anything urgent.'

Nari half-smiled. 'Do you feel awkward watching the repairs when you did the breaking?'

Thor blinked in surprise. 'Not particularly. Why should I? It was necessary at the time, and I would do the same again if I had to.' A frown. 'Although I might do something differently with Loki. What amuses you so?'

Nari was laughing softly. 'I suppose that's reasonable. '

Thor looked at him thoughtfully. 'Now that I think of it, I'm surprised not to have seen you alongside your mother in the building.'

'It's not my area,' said Nari. 'I can world-walk, yes, but I would only be so much help in creating devices for it. And I might be distracting to some of the people with more useful skills.'

Thor glanced back. 'Perhaps so,' he allowed.

'That, and I needed a rest after Jotunheim. It's easier to do ice magic there than here, but there was so
much of it.' A wry look. 'Mother should have rested more than she did, but then, she had been working on her endurance for quite some time. And apparently there is some invigorating drink brought back from Midgard?'

'Coffee!' Thor said happily. 'Yes, it's excellent. You should try it!' He paused, slightly doubtful. 'Well, perhaps you should try it cold. I hear they make an iced version, though I am not sure it would be improved by dilution.'

'It could be made stronger to start with, maybe?' Nari suggested. 'And I am half Asgardian genetically, and phenotypically only mostly Jotun.' At Thor's slightly blank look, he filled in, 'I handle heat better than my father, and he handles it better than the average frost giant.'

'Ah.' That seemed to make sense.

'Actually, I was going to ask...' Nari's smile held a certain secretive mischief, of a kind that meant I'm not telling you what I'm up to just yet, but it's going to be good. It made Thor suddenly and sharply homesick even though he was, in fact, at home. 'How are your temperature tolerances?'

'Reasonably wide.' Recalling one of Nari's remarks the day they'd met, Thor added, 'I was not too badly chilled on Jotunheim before.'

'Vigorous physical activity can make a difference,' Nari observed, a little dryly. 'As can weather magic. Shall we go see how the Vanir's efforts are going?'

Nari, of course, took a shortcut off the Bifrost. He made a brief stop just outside the treasure room so Thor could leave Mjolnir there, where it was generally supposed to stay whenever Thor didn't have it. (And Odin hadn't dropped it on Midgard to make a point.) Thor took a sword instead -- it was less recognisable, and by this point he would be surprised if nothing tried to eat them on the way.

'Was it courtesy that kept you from entering the vault directly,' he asked, back in extradimensional space and thinking suddenly of the invasion that had started all this, 'or could you not?'

'That room is well defended against world-walkers. Odin may have rediscovered it independently, as your brother did, but he certainly remembers learning more of it from Jotuns. Having you along and approving might have been enough, but I didn't care to count on it.' A wry look. 'Especially after what your brother did. I find it curious that he could still free my father as son of Odin so long afterward.'

'He was hiding from Heimdall,' said Thor. 'We thought he was dead.' He wanted to say He is still my father's son, but under the circumstances, that was not exactly a good reason to allow him to run around freeing dangerous prisoners. Even if this one had turned out to be innocent. Relatively speaking. Innocent of wanting to destroy Asgard, anyway.

'I suppose that would do it. Speaking of hiding,' Nari added, 'if we're trying to be subtle, I had better glamour you. Hold still.'

Thor obligingly stilled. Nari's magic felt like a dip in ice water, where Loki's had tended to prickle and Odin's banishment had felt like being scoured from the inside out. Thor had no idea whether this was because of the person casting it on him or the type of spell -- Loki was more a frost giant than Nari, by birth, so that probably wasn't it. When Nari nodded a few seconds later, Thor looked down at his hands and found that they were blue -- touched his forehead and felt faint ridges under his fingertips.

'Yes, it's a tactile illusion too,' Nari said. 'Your body temperature is the same, but anyone who
happens to touch you will find you as cold as they might expect.' He grinned. 'You'll still feel the cold, so don't jump too much.'

A little way onward they emerged into a blaze of dazzling white and promptly dropped several inches. Thor blinked -- he'd been expecting darkness -- and waited a few seconds for his eyes to adjust, then bent down and swiped a hand across the snow he'd just sunk into. It came up damp, and he flicked the droplets off his hand. They stood in a field of snow crusted with wet ice. The mountainside nearby was coated only with ice, also damp. The shape of the rocks was familiar: this was near where the Bifrost had placed them.

'It's warmer than before,' Thor said quietly, not sure how sound would carry, or who might be nearby. 'And much brighter.'

Nari didn't quite stop looking grim, but he snorted. 'The second part is because you arrived in the middle of the night before. The first... turn around.'

Thor turned.

They were very near where the Bifrost had opened before, but the ledge where they'd landed last time was gone. The gap revealed that it had been part of an ice sheet over a cavern, which explained the icedrake disappearing under the ice and then emerging to menace his friends and brother.

Far below, there was now a yawning pit, shallow at the edges and strewn with rocks and chunks of ice, funneling in toward a steep neck punched into the center. Cracks led back outward, in some places disappearing under the uppermost layer of snow as they reached level ground. Thor suspected that in the depths of the hole there would still be traces of the Bifrost mark.

'And this is making it warmer?' he asked.

'Not the hole in the ground as such,' said Nari, 'but the excess of energy that degenerated into heat as it struck, yes.' He grimaced. 'Come. I'll show you what it's doing.'

Nari took him into the town and the fields nearest the palace, which meant the walk was half-familiar. Thor thought the ensuing tour would have been more informative if he'd known what Jotunheim was meant to be like. It had looked dark, looming and decrepit before. Now it looked daylit, looming and decrepit, and partially melted. Nearly everyone was a few feet taller than he was and blue, which was stranger when he wasn't fighting them. Most of them seemed to be scowling, although a few offered Nari a civil nod or other greeting. Many shot the two of them exasperated glances and then looked pointedly away. And as Thor paid closer attention, he realized nearly all of them looked exhausted.

It occurred to Thor to wonder about Nari's decision to walk into the Jotun capital on what he'd thought was to be a low-profile trip about the time Nari walked up onto a hummock of ice that grew out of the street as he mounted it, then cupped his hands around his mouth and called, 'I'm looking for ice mages who aren't completely exhausted--'

'Good luck,' someone shouted back.

Nari smiled in much the way Thor himself did when anticipating a battle, and then Thor had to catch his balance as the ground heaved him up beside Nari. 'This is Rym.' Thor looked at him at that. It was a nickname -- strictly speaking, his older brother's nickname. It meant noise; it could refer to thunder; and it sounded marginally like rime. He supposed Nari could hardly introduce him as Thor, but he hadn't been expecting an alias. 'A weather-worker who hasn't had much time with ice mages who are good at working off storms. Anyone want to give it a try, or are we on our own here?'
There was a hopeful stir in a few spots, and Thor offered them a warm -- well, perhaps that wasn't the right word -- an encouraging smile.

Then there was a mutter, not quite soft enough to have been meant to go unheard, of 'More half-Asgardian runts?' in a tone ugly enough that Thor's fingers flexed around where Mjolnir's handle wasn't.

Nari kicked him in the ankle, hard enough that Thor felt it through an armoured boot even though Nari was barefoot. 'Rym isn't half-Asgardian,' he said, in an exaggeratedly reasonable tone of voice, but his red eyes burned. 'And enough of you have seen me work to know that when Asgard sent you the children of the runt King Laufey discarded, we did better for you than all but a handful of your own.' His voice sharpened. 'Now, do you want to spit insults and have a fight, or do you want to help cool things down?'

Thor folded his arms, watching them. And what Nari had done for them earlier must have made an impression, because even the complainers didn't volunteer for a fight. Some of them even came along. Grumpily.

Nari led them out of the city and then gestured to Thor. 'Call your storm.'

'If you can,' someone muttered snidely from a few feet up.

Thor shot him a look and then lowered his head -- not out of shame, whatever the Jotun might think, but to concentrate. It had been a long time since he called a storm without Mjolnir. The smolder of anger simplified it, though, and he could feel the charge building in the air already.

Remembering his purpose here, he swept together all the warmer bits of air he could feel within miles into the nearest larger mass, separating it, pressing it down and trapping it around them along with all the moisture hanging in it, before letting it try to rise. Clouds boiled and lowered above them, pressing up into an anvil and spreading out for miles around.

The humidity Thor hadn't packed into the clouds yet was condensing on the frost giants, running down their skin. One of them scowled and wiped at his forehead. He began, 'Lokisget, I don't think your little weather-mage is much--'

Thor let go, punching his air mass upward, a fist slamming into the palm of his other hand in lieu of swinging Mjolnir. The grey sky lit blue-white and the end of the Jotun's sentence was lost in the crack of thunder. Thor had the satisfaction of watching everyone else jump, even Nari, before a frigid wind screamed down around them and he could see nothing but pelting sleet.

Nari let out a shout of triumphant laughter, barely audible over the wind, and Thor hauled the rising air into a wide upright spiral and kept feeding it. It was invigorating -- more effort than with Mjolnir, but for all his temper, it had been centuries since he'd really cut loose with a storm. He'd built this one so that left alone, it should keep going for hours, maybe even a few days. But he found he could actually feel the ice mages using it, spending it faster. He swept in warm wet air from farther off, as he was fairly sure nobody actually wanted it there, and he kept pushing, exulting in the feel of wind in his lungs and lightning in his nerves.

Lightning laced the clouds above them and peppered the ground; thunder played an endless drumroll; and Thor had to shake himself free of snow and climb several times to keep from being buried in his own blizzard.

Cold hands finally found him and shook him by the shoulder; Thor started to shove them away, then remembered where he was and with whom and why and cleared the air around him to find Nari. A
puff of wind brought the shouted words to his ears. 'I think that's enough for now. Aren't you tired?'

Thor blinked. 'Not really,' he said. The storm fed *him* in return, after all; it would have been more effort to keep it short-term and narrowly confined. 'Why, how long has it been?' His words sounded a little strange and his mouth felt stiff; he realised his face and hands and feet had gone numb. An affinity for weather made him harder to freeze than the average Asgardian, especially in a personally created storm, but there were limits. Perhaps it was time for a break.

'Nine hours!' said Nari. Oh. That explained why it was dark again. 'Leave the storm, unless it's likely to come and start knocking over buildings, and we'll go have some dinner.'

'If I let go of it, it will just drift that way,' Thor said, after taking a moment to think about the prevailing winds. He pointed.

'Shouldn't be a problem.' Nari inspected Thor's hands, presumably looking past his own glamour, and then towed him back toward the city.

'Should we not go home to eat?' Thor asked, thinking of the agricultural problems Nari assured him were there. That was why the Vanir had come. He wondered a second later if he should have been referring to Asgard as Nari's home, then remembered that he'd been right the first time as, appearances to the contrary, Nari had never actually lived on Jotunheim.

'You might prefer the cooking there,' Nari said, 'but if I'm asked why I've had you gone this long, I'd rather it not be on an empty stomach. I'll try to dodge our companions' hospitality and get a chance to thaw you out -- if we find the right restaurant and claim to be in a hurry, we can get food to go that will still be warm.'

Thor laughed, trying to keep it quiet. 'I won't complain about that.'

It was a reasonable plan. It fell apart just outside the city, when a billow of snow blew aside to reveal a looming blue form just in front of them. Nari halted abruptly and bowed, which cued Thor to do the same, a little late. 'King Byleist.'

'Nari.' Byleist stared down at them. 'You keep interesting company.'

'Famed for it, once,' Nari replied. This was true, for all the story had been told less in recent centuries. Thor's elder brother and namesake had fought his way past Jormungand a few times; Nari had somehow decided to stop for a chat, leading to the somewhat mixed blessing of easy passage to and from Midgard. Jormungand had not been interested in the wars.

'I heard word you had come back here with an unknown and unusually short weather-worker.' Byleist gazed over their heads at the clouds, where lightning still flickered. 'And now that in nine hours with a handful of exhausted ice mages you've measurably altered the average temperature on this continent and cleared up a few floods.'

'You have skilled monitors,' Nari told him.

'One might wonder where he's been all this time.' Thor knew perfectly well that Byleist was younger than Loki, born some years after the war ended; he'd been old enough to remember making snide comments about Laufey's new son, and being told firmly that he should expect to meet the Jotun prince on equal footing one day. He'd been sceptical. In spite of his relative youth, Byleist was apparently nearly as good as Odin at being sternly sarcastic. The height advantage might be helping.

Thor lifted his chin and said, 'And yet I don't think you do.' (Beside him, Nari sighed.)
Red eyes flickered. 'This is a change from your previous visit to our capital, isn't it.'

'The circumstances are different.' No recent raiding parties. Less temper. Thor would admit to Odin that he'd been in the wrong that time, disobedient and imprudent; he wasn't saying anything of the kind to Byleist.

'So they are.' A long look at each of them. 'I don't wish to catch you at this again.' And the Jotun king turned his back on them and left.

Nari rubbed a hand over his face. 'That could have gone worse. We don't do subtle well, do we?'

'I never have,' Thor admitted readily. 'But I do speak it well enough to know he as good as invited me back so long as he can pretend I'm not here. We must have impressed him.'

Nari looked over at him and laughed. 'Oh, don't be modest. Of course we impressed him.'

Thor smirked. 'Now, weren't we going to get dinner?'

The food was... strange. They carried it away freshly cooked, penguin meat and unidentifiable vegetables wrapped loosely in something that was not quite like bread, and Thor ate it hot, preserved from burning his numbed mouth by the fact that nothing stayed too warm for long in this climate. The least unusual part of it was the meat, but he thought he could tell the unfamiliar flavours had been meant to be at their best after being chilled together for a while.

There was less fuss when they got back than there could have been. Heimdall asked, very dryly, if they'd had a good time. (Thor said yes.)

Nari and 'Rym' made a few more visits to Jotunheim, which Byleist and Odin both pretended to ignore. Freya came back and forth from Jotunheim now and then herself and pretended not to be nosy about the Bifrost or what Sigyn was teaching her apprentice. Thor told Jane where he'd been, when she emerged from her own work long enough to notice he'd been missing, and was for some reason soundly kissed over it.

Their next return to Earth came after Sif informed Heimdall that SHIELD had recently located both a missing hero and another small frost giant. The journey took longer than usual because Nari and Jane stopped to commune with Jormungand, and they arrived on Earth (in New York City, where both SHIELD and the ambassadors conducted much of their official business) with Jane still talking excitedly about laboratory facilities and Nari looking both intrigued and slightly confused. The main thing Thor got out of the entire conversation was that Jormungand wanted company and liked Jane, which seemed a reasonable attitude.

Agent Coulson greeted them with an air of suppressed glee, which was outside Thor's previous experience of the man, and barely did a double-take upon being introduced to Nari. 'You want to meet him, don't you?'

'Probably,' said Jane, without missing a beat. 'Who?'

'The man who's been frozen in a block of ice for seventy years and survived it?' Coulson was grinning.

'The new frost giant?' Thor asked, somewhat confused.

'That would be unusual even for a frost giant,' Nari murmured. 'We do have to eat and breathe.'
'What? No.' Coulson shook his head. 'No, that's Jack Frost. We've known where he is. Although not the frost giant part.'

Jane blinked. 'Seriously?'

'He was amnesiac and wandering around on a glacier when they found him and started calling him Jack for lack of any better ideas. The surname's a joke, but he picked it out himself.' Coulson grinned again. It was a strange sight. 'But he actually came to see an old friend. Steve Rogers. We found Captain America!'

Jane's eyes widened. 'Oh my God.'

Thor caught Nari glancing at him for an explanation and shrugged slightly. He had asked for tales of some of Midgard's great warriors, but so far he'd missed this one.

'I think Jane is free to meet him,' Thor said politely, 'though she may also want to talk to you about attaching a laboratory to Jormungand--'

Coulson was distracted enough to look stunned instead of smiling, and Jane squeaked, 'I haven't even written up a proposal yet!'

'However,' Thor went on, 'I should greet the new ambassadors, and Nari wants to meet the new... er, other frost giant.'

'They're supposed to be meeting each other shortly,' Coulson began.

'Excellent! We shall join them.'

Coulson was silent for a few seconds. 'You know, I'm going to assume you know the Nine-Worlds protocol for inviting yourself to other ambassadors' appointments. Follow me, please.' They did. Jane looked around, shrugged a bit, and followed as well.

'More flexible than you might think,' said Nari, clearly trying not to laugh. Thor didn't see Coulson's problem -- they all had reason to speak with each other, even if some of them didn't know about it yet. 'At least when you're either on good terms or holding a significant power advantage.'

Agent Coulson turned to give him an appraising look. 'And which is it with Jotunheim?'

'All parties involved will assure you earnestly that it's good terms.' For just a second there, Nari sounded like Loki, when he was only pretending to be subtle.

Coulson raised his eyebrows. 'Are you not involved?'

'I'm not a diplomat.' Nari smiled. 'It's not false, just not entirely complete.'

'Well, I'd already heard enough to gather that.' Coulson opened a door on what appeared to be a sitting room, whereupon Nari proved that somebody was on good terms, at least, by getting a cry of 'Nari!' and a sudden hug from the Jotun ambassador.

Thor went over to clasp hands with Frey. 'Ambassador. May I present Dr. Jane Foster of Midgard, a physicist and... very dear friend.' He tilted his head toward the two Jotuns embracing and talking over one another. 'They are previously acquainted, I take it.' He'd actually never met Frey before, but aside from the regalia marking him as Vanahheim's ambassador, the man looked like a male version of Freya (a concept which, up until about nine seconds ago, Thor would have classified as unimaginable).
'Lady scholar.' Frey kissed Jane's hand lightly; Jane took this with less flustering than when Thor had first done it. 'And yes, since before she ever went to Alfheim.' He looked up with a fond smile. 'Prince Thor, allow me to introduce my wife Gerd, ambassador from Jotunheim.'

Thor tilted his head back to meet red eyes in an unexpectedly breathtaking cobalt face. He'd heard that Gerd was beautiful -- granted, until recently it had never really struck home that she was supposed to be a beautiful frost giant. (And lately, he'd been spending so much time on Jotunheim that the greatest incongruity was not the towering height or blue skin, but that they were accompanied by a softly draped dress, the elegant angles of her features framed by an elaborately feminine hairstyle and dangling earrings like a string of white bells.) His first impression when she'd flown at Nari had been mostly a rush of white silk; up close and still and smiling, she was rather overwhelming. She smelled, improbably, like an autumn forest. Probably a perfume from Alfheim.

'Charmed,' he said, taking her chilly hand and kissing it.

'Likewise.' She gave him a brilliant smile.

Thor returned it. 'I'm afraid I had limited patience for love stories in my youth, but I see your beauty was not exaggerated.' He straightened and stepped back. It was probably not polite to either Gerd or Frey to stand too close when his face was at the level of her decolletage. 'I don't doubt their account of your abilities as a diplomat, either, but I confess some surprise at learning Jotunheim had sent an ambassador to Earth at all.'

'I was surprised myself at being recalled from Alfheim, but Jotunheim does have interests here.' Gerd cast her eyes down for a moment, then swept them upward, bronze lashes glinting in the light. 'I was also surprised to hear of your visits to Jotunheim.'

Thor opened his mouth, then caught himself short of saying that might have been ill-advised. More than one visit meant she had heard of his more recent ones. 'And here I thought those were not officially acknowledged.'

Gerd smiled. 'They are not. But an ambassador must sometimes hear from her king.'

'Indeed.' Thor wasn't sure if that meant conversations at a distance in this case, or if someone had been back and forth. Interesting, anyway. He hoped their interests here didn't include a quiet effort at tracking down Loki. 'Well, then. I will also admit that I've been wondering where Jotunheim's women are hiding. It's one thing not to meet shieldmaids among the guards, but among your towns--' He broke off. Gerd was looking off to the side at Nari, and Frey's mouth was twitching. 'All right. What have I said that's so amusing?'

'I think I'd better explain,' Nari said, 'at risk of Frey proposing an educational demonstration, that generally speaking frost giants only have one sex, which can both beget and bear children.'

Thor blinked. So Gerd... So Loki....

'That's fascinating.' Jane said. 'Like... flowers, some of them anyway, or earthworms....' As Gerd smiled and Nari started to laugh, she went pink. 'Oh, God, that sounded bad, didn't it?'

'Don't worry,' Gerd said, grinning. 'I've known Freya for a long time. I am used to sorceresses and scientists.'

'Oh. Still.' Jane looked relieved.

Thor tried to block out the elaborately feminine presentation (which was much in Freya's style, come to think of it) and look Gerd over without being rude about it. The low contralto could be a tenor, the
features would require less alteration than Freya's to be taken for male, the dress was the sort lean and straight-bodied women wore to create the illusion of curves. Assume they were all illusory, imagine her dressed as everyone else had been on Jotunheim, and maybe he would have only thought Gerd would be popular with women, not that she was one.

...This was still not translating easily to his brother.

Helpfully, Gerd added, 'The nearest equivalent to earthworms on Jotunheim comes in two separate sexes. We tend to adopt whichever pronoun is most convenient, which is frequently male for social reasons and because in most cases the secondary sexual characteristics--'

Someone cleared his throat, rather loudly. Gerd looked away from Jane and past Thor with a fleetingly startled expression. Thor turned to look at the door, where another frost giant -- this one shorter than he was, and wearing Midgardian clothing -- and a probably-human blond man were both staring fixedly at the opposite wall. The human looked rather red in the face. The frost giant coughed somewhat less noisily and said, 'I thought I had an appointment, but if I'm interrupting a... uh, personal conversation....'

Gerd said, 'I beg your pardon. I've been living with a Vane for a long time. You must be Jack Frost. And your friend would be Captain... Rogers?'

'Yes, ma'am,' said the human. Then, 'Er....'

"Ma'am' is fine,' she said. 'Or Ambassador. Or Gerd, if it would make you more comfortable with the forays into alien biology.'

Captain Rogers, or America, cracked a smile. 'Ambassador Gerd. I didn't plan to intrude -- I was just walking with Jack on the way. It's been a while since we saw each other.'

'You're welcome to stay, if you prefer,' said Gerd. Thor thought perhaps she'd read the same thing he had in Jack Frost's quick glance at his companion -- he wasn't precisely daunted, but he'd just as soon have a friend present. If, in this case, a friend who had for most practical purposes just returned from the dead. 'How do the two of you know each other?'

'Steve is one of the first people I can remember meeting,' said Jack.

'I was on a mission in the Arctic.' Rogers's mouth quirked. 'That didn't involve crashing a plane. And we found this guy wandering around up there, mostly naked and obviously disoriented -- we were amazed he was alive.' He looked over at Jack. 'We caused a couple cases of frostbite and I'm afraid we half killed him trying to warm him up. Then he encased himself in ice and we realized there was something weird going on.'

'I don't remember that part very clearly,' Jack said. 'I remember being surprised by them.'

Rogers chuckled. 'You were a bit of a surprise yourself.'

Jack smiled, then looked over at Nari and Gerd again. He looked a little stunned by Gerd, which Thor thought was an understandable reaction. 'Up until recently,' he said slowly, 'I assumed I was an unusual human.'

Gerd nodded. 'And then Earth suddenly received an alien visitor with blue skin and ice magic.'

'And apparently a few other less unheard-of things in common that I would just as soon not start discussing again.' Jack paused. Courteously, nobody attempted to discuss them while he was thinking. 'I'm not sure there's a delicate way to put this,' he said, 'but does my presence here have
anything to do with past attempts to conquer Earth? Could anyone have been, ah, left here?'

'No.' Gerd's response was unhesitating. 'I assume you've noticed you aren't aging as fast as the humans around you, but you're definitely too young to have been here since the war.'

Jane glanced questioningly at Thor; he shook his head slightly. He had been alive since the war over Earth, though he'd been born near the end of it, and Jack Frost did look somewhat older. But Thor was of Asgard and had Idunn's apples, and while he wasn't sure what was normal for frost giants, there had never been anything noticeably odd about Loki in that respect. Anyway, presumably Gerd knew what she was talking about... and if for some reason she was lying, Nari would probably say so eventually.

'What about descent? Could I be part frost giant and part human?' A pause. 'If that's actually possible.'

'I'm part Asgardian myself,' said Nari. 'Gerd and Frey have children. There are some biological challenges, but it's conceivable --'

'The puns are hereditary, aren't they?' Frey said under his breath.

'--And the traits could even have come out after several apparently human generations.' Nari hesitated, looking at Gerd. 'But that wouldn't explain the amnesia.'

Gerd sighed. 'No.'

There was an awkward pause. Frost frowned; Rogers looked between them. 'You have a theory that you don't really want to tell him,' he said, 'and are probably going to anyway.'

Gerd closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and said, 'I notice Captain Rogers made no mention of a head injury?' When Rogers shook his head, she continued, 'You may have been outcast on Jotunheim.'

Frost took a half-step back. 'Why?' he asked, a bit sharply. 'Are you suggesting I was a criminal? Or would this be because I'm human-sized?''

'More likely the latter. I have no reason to think ill of you.' She sighed again, heavily, and stepped back from him. 'Every so often, for various reasons, there are small frost giants. Runts, if you will. It is an ugly side of our culture that they are often treated poorly and regarded as an embarrassment to their families. Those with exceptional talents have a higher chance of making a place and role for themselves, but it doesn't always happen.' A breath. 'And most of us have some talent for world-walking -- crossing out of the three dimensions of our planet and going elsewhere. Someone who'd been driven out, or grown fed up with their home, might go seeking somewhere else to be. But there are hazards between worlds.'

'There are traces of Ratatosk on you,' said Nari.

Frost's fixed expression faded into bewilderment. 'Isn't that a mythical squirrel?'

'...Squirrel?' Gerd now looked nearly as confused.

'Frenetic. Large teeth. Loves to chatter and carry information,' said Nari. 'Cracks thoughts instead of nutshell. He's actually one of the more dangerous creatures out there in extradimensional space, but fortunately distractable.'

'Well, that sounds pleasant,' said Frost, scowling. 'You think I was either driven away from home or
ran off on my own, and got... partially eaten? By a squirrel.'

Rogers put a hand consolingly on Frost's shoulder and said, 'We always knew you were a nut.' (Frost snorted and smacked his hand away, but the frown was gone.)

'I'm afraid it seems like the most likely explanation.' Nari looked sympathetic. 'I doubt it was what you were hoping to hear.'

Frost rubbed at his forehead. 'Can't say that it was. I find I haven't developed an urge to visit, anyway. Not that everybody on Earth necessarily wants me and my abnormalities around, but all the friends and memories I do have are here. And as far as exceptional talents go, I doubt I'd stand out on Jotunheim in polar research.'

'If you're still curious,' said Nari, 'I can answer questions. Or just tell stories. It does have its good points, although it's currently in the middle of a climatic emergency and not a great time to visit.'

Frost blinked. '...Well, now I definitely have questions.'

From which point, they all ended up talking about the weather.

Eventually, the conversation broke up, as the people who'd originally been invited to it all had other commitments. As Thor, Jane, and Nari were in no particular rush, Thor stopped a few random people to ask for tavern recommendations. They were joined at their booth by a short series of hopeful reporters, whom Thor invited to drink with him. He answered questions amiably until the last staggered off without being replaced. At that point, they finally ordered food. Jane spread out some papers and started designing something that occasionally made her flicker briefly out of normal space, and Thor and Nari settled in to sample a wider variety of Midgardian drinks than had been stocked in Puente Antiguo.

'A day of many revelations,' Thor said at last, after many samples. 'Were you expecting what you had to tell him, Nari?'

Nari swirled his drink and swallowed the rest of it before answering. 'There are only so many possibilities to explain a stray human-sized frost giant in Midgard. I had not realised he didn't remember.' He glanced up. 'I didn't plan to surprise you, though.'

Thor snorted. 'It's difficult to imagine Loki as, uh, also a sister....'

'If it helps, my father claims some areas of Jotunheim still refer to yours -- well, as of a thousand years ago -- as a great sorceress.' Thor and Jane both blinked at Nari for that. 'Gerd did mention the role-based pronouns.'

Thor paused. 'It does not.' At all. Teasing Loki for his magic was one thing; the thought of an actual mix-up, especially as Odin was *not* a Jotun, was... wait. Hiding Loki's true physical nature from most of Asgard would be simple enough, but there were surely times it would have been impractical. Although, granted, unlike Jack Frost he didn't think anyone had ever believed Loki in danger of freezing to death. He frowned into his drink. 'Actually, Nari, how in Hel.... Even aside from that part, would all the doctors have to have been in on it?'

'What?' Nari blinked. 'Oh. Your Loki. Yes, of course, giving them a glamoured patient would be foolish. I suppose Odin could have let Eir in on it, although that might be uncharacteristically forthcoming of him, or Loki could actually be shapeshifted into an Asgardian male.'

'Shapeshifting,' Jane said, 'sounds oddly fascinating, but it makes my brain hurt.'
'Not my area,' said Nari. 'You want Vali for that. He turns into dragons.'

Thor looked up again, intrigued. Vali had certainly looked ready to fight when he'd turned up at the palace, but he'd shown no signs of turning into a dragon. (Let alone more than one. Would that be different types of dragon for different occasions, or more than one dragon at a time along the lines of Loki's doubles?) 'Really. Do you think he'd care to spar sometime?'

Nari chuckled. 'I think he'd love to.' He turned his head. 'Jane, you're flickering. I'll come find you if you disappear, but hasn't Mother been teaching you not to do that?'

'Yes she has.' Jane held up a finger. 'But first, I need to see what I'm doing. I am trying to design an extradimensional lab.' Her other hand tapped the sketches on the table. 'And second, I am very drunk at this point. You notice, I am still coming back on my own.'

'You haven't had that much to drink, have you?' Nari asked doubtfully, then, 'Oh, but you're tiny.'

'And human,' Jane said. 'Although even reduced to mortal, Thor has really shocking alcohol tolerance.' As Thor and Nari exchanged a shrug, she added, 'Does that have anything to do with Jotunheim trying to take over Earth before? That we're at most the size of their "runts"?'

'Well,' said Nari, 'you're hardly the only ones. Jotunheim had been in contact with other worlds for some time by that point. From what my father said, the treatment of runts... improved somewhat after encountering Asgard. Mostly.'

'Thor didn't seem surprised by hearing about it.' Jane looked sideways at him.

Thor shrugged. 'I heard what Laufey did to two of his sons. And I have been spending much time on Jotunheim lately. It was not their faults that surprised me.'

'I can't say it had nothing to do with the decision,' Nari said, 'but it was probably more that you seemed weak enough in other ways to be conquered with a minimum of fuss. Fragile, short-lived, inadequate weapons, less mobility.'

'Ouch,' Jane muttered. 'That hasn't changed, has it?'

'Well,' said Nari, 'no. Or maybe. Both planets have been isolated of late, but you've grown, technologically, while Jotunheim has mostly been licking its wounds.'

'What does that mean for diplomatic relations? I mean... they sent Gerd, I know, but....' Jane rubbed a hand across her face. 'I feel like these should be Darcy's questions.'

'You can tell her about them,' Thor suggested.

Nari drained his glass. 'Sending Gerd means that the kid they've got on the throne now knows he's better off playing nicely.'

Jane raised her eyebrows. 'Kid?'

'Byleist is young,' Thor explained. 'Very young, to be king with none to guide him.'

Nari's mouth quirked. 'Maybe that's why he listened to my mother.'
‘We’re going to have a problem with material,’ said Lopt. Pages of observations, Loki’s neat print and Lopt’s scrawl, were scattered over the desk between them.

‘It’s amber, isn’t it?’ said Loki. ‘A special type, I take it.’

‘Very special. The Vanir normally start the process by making a tree.’ Lopt stretched and sighed. ‘It would be almost impossible to steal the crystallised resin, especially with most of the nine worlds looking out for us. And, besides that, each tree is attuned to the magician who grew it. We’re going to have to improvise. A lot.’

‘Why not make a tree as the Vanir do?’ asked Loki.

‘It’s fertility magic,’ said Lopt. He picked up a piece of paper and began doodling leaves in the margin, deep in thought.

‘Fertility magic may not be my best area, but I completed the simpler exercises without trouble,’ said Loki. ‘I don’t see what good it does to give up on creating a tree without even trying.’

Lopt put the pencil down carefully. ‘You can do fertility magic?’

‘I did just say so,’ said Loki, annoyed. ‘Do you disbelieve me?’

Lopt shook his head. ‘Frost giants can’t do fertility magic. Or, if any can, I’ve never heard of it.’

Loki closed his eyes. He was a Jotun, there could be no doubt of that despite the flicker of hope caused by Lopt’s words. But he had been able to do the normal spells, to grow blue daisies and roses the size of dinner plates. He’d found it difficult, more so than nearly any other type of magic and that, along with Thor teasing him for spending so much time on flowers, had led him to focus on other things. But it had not been impossible then and knowing he was a Jotun shouldn’t make it impossible now.

‘I can,’ he said. ‘Tell me how the Vanir do it.’

It started with an ash key.

‘Ash for world-walking,’ said Lopt, in the half distracted way of someone reciting something they had memorised a long time ago. ‘Willow for healing. Yew for protection. Birch for...I don’t know. But I’m sure about the ash.’

They picked a bunch of them, ripe and brown by this time of the year, so as to have backups. Loki picked one healthy looking one and separated it ready for use.

‘According to the internet they take two winters to be ready to plant,’ he told Lopt after doing some research.

‘We’re going to have it fully grown and flowering in a month or two, if we manage to do this the same way as the Vanir,’ said Lopt. ‘So I think we can speed up germination. And I’m certain we can manage to chill it.’

‘...It needs to be protected from severe frost.’

‘We can use the fridge if you’re worried,’ said Lopt. ‘Although I’m sure you could tone it down if
you tried.’

Loki looked thoughtfully at the seed. ‘Is the flowering important?’ he asked.

‘It tells you that the tree is ready for the sap to be taken,’ said Lopt. ‘If it doesn’t manage to bloom it hasn’t absorbed enough magic.’

‘I thought you didn’t know fertility magic.’

‘I can’t do it. That’s not the same as not knowing it. Besides, falconskins aren’t the only things the Vanir use sap for. I was spying on their techniques for Odin.’ He sounded completely unabashed by it. Not that Loki felt he should be ashamed, but it was the sort of thing Thor and his friends would despise.

‘So that was how you made yourself useful during wars,’ he said. ‘I’m surprised glamour would get you so far, it failed us on Vanaheim.’

‘That was the currency,’ said Lopt. ‘And I wasn’t glamoured when I was spying. I was shapeshifting.’

‘You mentioned shapeshifting before,’ said Loki. At the time he hadn’t thought much of it, but it probably had more uses than he’d considered. ‘But I’ve never seen you do it.’

Lopt disappeared and in his place stood a large white dog. It wagged its tail at Loki, tongue lolling out in a doggy laugh, before turning back into Lopt.

‘You could teach me that,’ Loki observed.

‘I could,’ said Lopt. ‘But it’s a difficult discipline. Still, I will if you ask.’

Or command, thought Loki. Perhaps Lopt only offered so easily because he would rather be asked than ordered. The dark lines of runes had become a normal part of Lopt’s appearance to him, it was a jolt to recall exactly what they meant. ‘Why so difficult?’ asked Loki.

‘You have to forget,’ said Lopt. ‘Forget that you are not the creature whose form you have taken, then forget that you have forgotten. The better you can do that, the more layers you can take it through, the better your shapeshifting will be. Only excellent shapeshifters can lose themselves. Only the best are able to lose themselves but don’t.’

‘That,’ said Loki. ‘Sounds more like poetry than magic.’

‘Poetry and riddles,’ agreed Lopt. He grinned. ‘There’s a reason Odin takes an interest in both.’

Loki looked away. ‘There’s no time for this now. I need to focus on the tree and the falconskin.’

The seed resisted his efforts to convince it to germinate. Tucked up tight in its shell it remained stubbornly the same ash key it had been to start with. After days of throwing magic at it, pushing it to take what he was offering, he succeeded only in cracking the shell and killing it. The second fared no better. Loki knew that the anger he felt with himself for failing was unnecessary, but he hated to fail. Especially at this. It felt like his frost giant nature conspiring against him, as it had all along.

‘You’re trying to do a difficult spell in an area that isn’t yours,’ said Lopt. ‘Give yourself some leeway.’

‘You expect me to fail,’ Loki snarled. ‘But I can do this. I will.’
Lopt backed off. Loki got the impression that he was amused but hiding it. Which was all the more infuriating and pushed Loki into trying still harder.

It was the fifth seed that finally worked. Loki had been holding it cupped in his hands. He’d dropped his glamour in order to chill it at the same time as working on forcing magic into it (somehow his body temperature always dropped when he wasn’t glamoured. It meant he didn’t have to think about a cooling spell, at least). Suddenly it went from resisting everything he was pushing at it to drinking in magic so fast it felt like it could have been used as a mildly effective defense against spells.

He went to find Lopt feeling slightly dazed and found him going over their notes again.

‘It’s taking in magic now,’ said Loki.

‘You look like you need to sit down,’ said Lopt.

‘I’m fine,’ said Loki. ‘It just decided to start quickly. Does it need to be planted now?’

Lopt came over to look at the seed cupped carefully in Loki’s hands. ‘It looks like it,’ he said, pointing to a tiny rootlet showing at one end. ‘Looks like it did decide to start quickly. Good thing we already prepared the pot.’

They got it bedded down and watered, with the pot stood in a sunny spot in the front room. The tree seemed thirstier for magic than it had been for the water and Loki was reluctant to stop giving it after the slow start and the ruined seeds.

‘Just don’t make yourself ill,’ said Lopt. ‘Remember that I can’t do it any good.’

Loki did start pacing the magic he gave it, at least to the point of not exhausting himself. It seemed to be enough, nevertheless, and tiny seedling leaves, so dark green they were almost black, showed by the end of the first day. A few days later it was a sapling, only a few inches high as yet, but recognisable as the tree it would become.

It was not, Loki thought regretfully, a handsome tree, with its grey twisted trunk and dark ragged leaves. It grew vigorously, though, and greedily drank down all the magic Loki could feed it.

‘The ones the Vanir grow look different, don’t they?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Lopt. ‘But it doesn’t matter. Not so long as it works.’

Once it bloomed they would know, one way or the other. As buds finally started to show on its branches Loki found himself unable to sleep. He would wind up kneeling beside it instead, feeding it still more magic.

Then, one morning, he walked into the front room to find it had bloomed. Every tiny blossom was a perfect blue-white star and the air around it smelled of snow.

‘That’s…interesting,’ he said, reaching out to touch one of the blossoms.

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Lopt, looking up from where he had been reading the newspaper. ‘But it shouldn’t be possible.’

‘Don’t say such things in front of it,’ said Loki. Not that the tree understood language, but it was very magically sensitive. Best to keep certain concepts away from it.

‘I suspect it’s hardier than you give it credit for,’ said Lopt. ‘It’s certainly been determined enough to
‘And now we gather the resin,’ said Loki. He found himself oddly reluctant. The resin had, of course, been the point. But the tree had been difficult to grow, at least at first, and he’d put a lot into it. Cutting it to take resin felt somehow riskier than it was.

‘It’s not as if it will hurt it,’ said Lopt. ‘It might be magically sensitive but it can’t feel pain.’

‘I know that. I was worried about damaging it, there’s no guarantee I could grow another,’ said Loki. He brushed his hair back with one hand. ‘We may as well do it. Do you have the spells we’ll need worked out?’

‘Yes,’ said Lopt. ‘You’ll have to do the cutting though. I’m not quite sure how it would react to me doing magic around it, although it seems…cold weather proof, at least.’

The spells around the cutting were to make sure they got a decent amount of sap, mostly, instead of it stopping flowing once the cut was sealed. Loki had to do them three times after the tree drank his first two efforts.

‘Do the Vanir ones do this?’ he asked after the second time.

‘No idea,’ said Lopt. ‘I never saw the Vanir having problems, but they might just have had more experience. Or better behaved trees.’

‘Don’t complain about it. It’s the only one we have, or are likely to have,’ said Loki.

That time the spells took, and when he nicked the branch sap formed a swelling globe over the cut. Ash tree sap was thin and sugary, this was thick resin like dark honey. Loki gathered it with the blade of his knife and scraped it onto the plate Lopt held, the rim of which was already decorated with the runes they needed. Loki said the few words necessary to activate them and watched the resin harden into a messy blob of amber.

‘…Should it be blue?’ he asked, after a moment.

Lopt picked it up and held it against the light to look at it. Which caused it to promptly resume a honey colour. Putting it down again, or turning to look at it under the light, made it go back to being blue.

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ said Lopt. ‘But I don’t see any harm in it. And it feels like the same stuff the falconskin used.’

The boy was sleeping deeply, a small smile on his face, and Loki felt an odd tenderness at the sight. The boy had been sleeping so badly lately, always getting up to feed the tree.

‘Like having a newborn baby in the house,’ muttered Loki as he went through to the front room, where the tree stood flowering innocently in its corner. Except with newborn babies the first time they let you sleep through the night wasn’t a sign it was time to draw their blood and crystallise it. Loki shook his head, he wasn’t sure where that analogy was going but it didn’t seem to be anywhere good.

He walked over to the tree and ran a finger over the blossom. It really was beautiful. Sigyn would like it. (There was a trick to this, like with shapeshifting, and it was the same trick. Forgetting that he had another reason for doing this, a reason that he was bound not to act on, and then forgetting that he had forgotten.) He broke off a spray of the little starry flowers and, holding them gently in one
hand, stepped into extradimensional space.

He didn’t have a falconskin this time and wished he did. Even his old skyshoes would have been an improvement. The memory made him grin; they had been the only half-successful attempt at replicating a falconskin. Just as fast, but only a tenth as manoeuvrable. No one but him had ever been willing to use them more than once, and even for him it had been almost as terrifying as it was exhilarating. Having them now probably wouldn’t make the journey safer, but it would still be faster.

Once again he made himself invisible as he entered the palace. It wasn’t that he thought he’d be unwelcome now, but he didn’t have time for questions. There was only one person he was here to see.

Sigyn was in the same room that had been hers a thousand years ago, sleeping with her face turned toward the window so that the planes of it caught the moonlight. Loki dropped his invisibility and bent down, stroking her hair back from her face. She woke instantly, blinking up at him for a moment before smiling.

‘Should I be jealous you came here to see Odin before me?’ she asked.

Loki laughed, low and soft. ‘This time I came only to see you. And I brought you flowers.’ He tucked the little spray of blossom behind her ear.

Sigyn reached up for it, taking a moment to untangle it from her hair. ‘They’re lovely,’ she said, looking faintly puzzled at the smell of snow. ‘Are they from Jotunheim?’

‘Did you ever see anything like this in Jotunheim?’ he asked, and then distracted her from answering with a kiss. They had long since worked out how to do this without burning or freezing one another, but her lips still felt hot against his mouth. When they drew back for breath Loki sat next to her on the bed and took her hand.

‘How have you been?’ he asked. ‘Do we need to talk about any of it?’

She laughed at him. ‘No. If there’s nothing you need to tell me we can move on to other things.’

Loki squeezed her hand. ‘You should probably tell Odin that his son is as well as can be expected. And I’ve been having more fun than he might think. My binding…’ he trailed off. He’d been going to say it was not onerous, but the truth was he hated being confined despite his growing affection for his captor. Despite even how much he’d enjoyed working on the falconskin.

Sigyn lifted his hand and kissed the wrist where the first band of runes lay across it, the way she would kiss a bruise - as if love could be applied like salve. Loki sighed and shivered at the touch of her tongue. ‘Will you kiss all of them?’ he whispered.

Sigyn looked at him, solemn and smiling. ‘Come here,’ she said, and Loki willingly obeyed.

Loki had left all too soon. Sigyn knew this had been necessary and was just as aware she hadn’t exactly made it easy. Somehow, after a thousand years barely leaving his side, five months apart felt like an eternity.

Now she lay languid but nowhere near sleep, retracing his skin in her mind and breathing the cool snow-scent of the flowers he’d left her, petals soft against her face.

*Did you ever see anything like this in Jotunheim?*
Sigyn sat up abruptly.

She twirled the spray of flowers in her hand. She'd never seen anything quite like them anywhere. Springtime flowers in autumn were only strange until you started traveling between hemispheres and worlds, but these were a strange shape, naggingly familiar, and infused with so much ice magic that her fingers were growing cold.

Three minutes later, she was in a guest room and shaking Freya awake.

Freya woke up rapidly and not very graciously. She grabbed Sigyn by the wrists, teeth bared, and Sigyn felt a thorny binding spell start to wrap around her as well. She burned through it, a little more forcefully than was probably really necessary, just as Freya yanked her down so they were nose-to-nose. Freya, as usual, smelled of some brain-fogging medley of flower, fruit, fragrant leaves, and desire. Sigyn easily shook off a sudden urge to kiss her, but had somewhat less success with the keen wish for Loki to come straight back (which hardly needed Freya's help) or the feeling it was time for breakfast.

"Oh, it's you," Freya said, sounding disgusted. She let go.

"Yes, it is." Sigyn brought the spray of flowers absently back to her nose. "Who were you expecting?"

"I was hoping for someone I could legitimately injure for waking me up at this hour," Freya said crossly. Her eyes narrowed. "Loki's been here."

"Yes. He brought me these." Sigyn held out the flowers. "What are they?"

Freya sat up and took her by the wrist to examine them. "Strange--"

"I knew that part."

"Shush." Freya ran her finger along the twig, delicately. "Modified ash, infused with -- oh." Rage-fueled magic washed out from her in a shockwave. It broke and parted around Sigyn, but the ash-spray grew six inches and wrapped roots around her hand. A carved-wood spiral bracelet around Freya's arm sprouted like a vine, and the earth under the palace heaved.

"Enough!" Sigyn growled. She shot to her feet and forced Freya back and down by the throat -- with the hand that didn't have a tree grabbing it -- and sliced through the connection to the ground before there could be any real structural damage. "Control your temper, Vanadis!"

Freya's eyes looked close to throwing sparks. She shut them for a moment, and the air stilled. "Let me up."

Sigyn let her go. "What was that about? What have they done?"

"I'll explain in a minute. But we need to put that in water."

Sigyn looked at the tree, which was now hopefully trying to poke its roots into her hand. It itched. "Not dirt?"

"We'll have an easier time soaking it loose to start."

Freya coaxed the baby tree off Sigyn's hand by holding it in a basin of iced mineral water, which she then filled with rotted leaves and sand until the mixture was cohesive enough to move to a small pot and drain. She still wouldn't answer the question properly until they had rousted Frigga out of bed.
and invaded Odin's study.

"Your son and brother," she said to Odin, punctuating this with a stamp of her heel but thankfully no further earthquakes, "have taken apart a falconskin." She gestured at the tree Sigyn was still carrying. "They think they know how to make one. So they grew that."

"Under other circumstances," Odin said, sounding a little annoyed and a good deal as if he was trying not to laugh, "I'd congratulate them."

"They grew an infused tree!" Freya shouted. "Two frost giants! I helped teach your son fertility spells, and he's Jotun! What did you do to that child?"

"I brought him as an infant to Asgard at midsummer," Odin said dryly. "Frigga and I infused him, and established a shapeshift, so he wouldn't have to fight the climate so much."

"And to hide him, I suppose?" Freya frowned. "That must have been a challenge."

"Thor was the only one of the family who was properly awake for the next week," said Frigga. "That was a challenge."

"But what," Sigyn asked, "are they going to do with falconskins?"

The others looked at her. "What anyone does with falconskins, I should think," Freya said irritably.

"No, I see your point." Odin shook his head. "The casket can move armies; it has. If the goal is conquest, why turn its power to making falconskins? Unless they want something the casket can't do, and are working to merge and change incompatible types of magic...."

"Or just gloating," Freya suggested sourly.

"I don't think so," said Sigyn.

"The mortal seers!" Frigga's hand came down on the desk. "And the Norns' babbling. Perhaps they were not so mad after all. Odin, perhaps we should speak to Muspelheim again."

Loki woke near dawn with the vague feeling he’d overslept before remembering that the tree didn’t need to have magic poured into it anymore. Still, he wouldn’t be able to sleep again now. He padded through to the kitchen for a glass of milk, still in his pyjamas, and paused to give the tree a smile. The flowers stood out all the more against its dark leaves. Would it later produce fruit? The scent of snow was unlikely to attract bees to pollinate it. Ashes were wind pollinated anyway, but it wasn’t entirely like an ash anymore. He’d have to ask Lopt.

The thought caused him to still. The apartment felt empty, to all his senses, and, abandoning the idea of milk, he went over to Lopt’s bedroom and quietly opened the door. The bed was untidy, but only because Lopt never made it in the morning. It didn’t look like it had been slept in.

Loki took a deep breath, more angry with himself than with Lopt. He was the one who had been stupid enough to leave loopholes in a contract with a being known for finding them. But Lopt had seemed so...tractable. Resigned to being bound and oddly complacent about it, willing to enjoy work on the falconskin even knowing the use it was intended for. He’d threatened Loki once and then shown no signs of following up on it.

Loki went to get dressed. When Lopt returned Loki would have to face him, and he would need to do it with at least some dignity.
Lopt appeared before the sun was up, stepping into the front room with a sleepy, contented smile. He yawned and walked over to the window, apparently not caring that he was unglamoured, to look out at the early morning streets.

‘Lopt,’ said Loki.

The giant turned, startled, and then looked sheepish. ‘You’ve caught me, then,’ he said. Loki had expected more alarm.

‘Where have you been?’ he asked.

‘With Sigyn,’ said Lopt, smiling again. It seemed obvious what he had been doing, although Loki suspected him of using that assumption as cover.

‘I thought you’d need my permission for, oh yes, “conjugal visits”,’ he said. ‘What have you told her?’

‘This is the first I’ve managed. Your permission would have made it possible sooner,’ said Lopt. ‘You can’t blame me for missing my wife, surely. And I haven’t told her anything, or disobeyed your orders.’

Loki shook his head. ‘Who else have you crept away to visit?’

‘Odin,’ admitted Lopt. He held his hand up when Loki tensed. ‘I needed to talk to him. We’d been at odds for a thousand years over a misunderstanding and, even when I thought he’d imprisoned me so I couldn’t stop him taking Midgard, I missed him. He’s my brother. It wasn’t about your plans.’

Loki drew back, unsure whether the words had even been meant to wound. Odin and Lopt’s situation was not his and Thor’s. ‘I doubt you failed to mention me though. What did you tell him?’

‘That I was shocked by your poor grasp of history,’ said Lopt.

‘Do not mock me,’ snapped Loki. ‘You are lucky I don’t order you to stay in the house until I say otherwise.’

‘That really is what I said,’ Lopt replied softly. ‘I couldn’t say more, not without revealing your plans. I did have some questions for him though.’

‘What did he tell you?’

‘That you tried to destroy Jotunheim,’ said Loki. ‘I’d guessed as much from what you said on Vanahem, he only confirmed it. And he asked me not to kill you.’

Loki turned away. ‘I’d already bound you not to,’ he said, voice firm. Would Lopt have killed him without the binding or without Odin’s request? Even though he had dragged him out to celebrate and toasted him? Even though he had rescued and reassured him earlier than that?

‘I’ve never actually killed anyone,’ said Lopt.

‘You said you’d been imprisoned for killing the last son of Odin to try to take over Midgard,’ said Loki. He wasn’t sure now whether he’d ever believed it. How could he have been so at ease around Lopt if he had?

‘I said I’d been imprisoned for his death,’ said Lopt. ‘He was at war with a friend of mine. I gave that friend a weapon capable of evening the odds. I wasn’t actually expecting him to defeat Thor with it.’
He sounded a little amused by the memory. From what Loki had heard of his brother’s namesake he could see why Odin would have been alarmed.

‘And he killed this son of Odin’s?’

Lopt nodded. ‘Baldr. They were at war.’

Loki let out a breath. It didn’t sound like Lopt had intended to kill him, then. In fact he had gone out of his way to save him, and the more Loki thought about it the less he was sure it had been necessary. Binding someone to help with your plans didn’t necessarily force them to assume you hadn’t meant to plunge into danger. And he had just left Lopt behind to be captured, though he’d been assuming at the time that he’d been conspiring with Sigyn about it.

‘When you came after me, when I left Vanaheim,’ he began, ‘did my binding actually force you to do that?’

‘No,’ said Lopt. ‘But you’re my brother by blood or my nephew by choice. I don’t want you dead.’ He sighed. ‘I don’t think anyone does.’

‘And did Odin also tell you I’d killed Laufey?’ asked Loki, flinging the words like a challenge.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Lopt. ‘It’s extended my patience with you considerably.’ His smile was humourless, sharp and brittle, eyes burning with memories. Loki had, he realised, somehow assumed Lopt incapable of hate despite the fact that he was a frost giant. Or perhaps because of it; having realised he wasn’t a monster or a wild animal, Loki had assumed he was a docile pet. A domesticated frost giant. But the feelings showing on his face now were as complicated and painful as Loki’s own.

‘You…wanted him dead?’ said Loki.

‘For a long time. But it wouldn’t have been politic for Odin to kill another king. Taking me in offended Laufey enough. He’d been hoping I’d been kicked out soon enough to die from it.’

‘If that’s true why keep you so long? Why not abandon you the way he did…’ Loki swallowed.

‘He left it too long,’ said Lopt bitterly. ‘At first he thought I’d just been born small and might grow later. And no one is allowed to abandon a babe they’ve suckled. So he had to wait until he could at least pretend he’d meant me to survive.’

‘He…suckled…Laufey?’ said Loki, sure he’d misunderstood something in that sentence.

‘Ah,’ said Lopt. He pressed his palms against his eyes for a moment, visibly calming himself down. ‘You don’t know about that, do you?’

‘Know about what?’ Loki demanded. Frost giants might not look entirely like people, but Laufey hadn’t looked remotely female.

‘Frost giants only have one sex,’ said Lopt. ‘We usually use male pronouns around the Asgardians - they tend to regard males more highly and no one wants to be called “it”. At least unless there’s a reason to do otherwise. Gerd switched to female pronouns when she fell in love with Frey, she was planning to bear him children and it made it easier.’

‘Bearing children,’ said Loki, feeling dazed. ‘Can you? Can I?’

‘Yes and yes,’ said Lopt. ‘You don’t have to,’ he added quickly. ‘Really, it doesn’t have to make any difference if you don’t want it to.’
Loki considered that. He wasn’t male. Physically, anyway. He still felt the same as he had before finding out and he’d always thought of himself as male. He’d always thought of himself as Asgardian, too.

‘…I’m going back to bed,’ he said.

Lopt patted him on the shoulder. ‘I’m sorry. If I’d realised you didn’t know I’d have found a better way to bring it up.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Loki curtly. ‘I’m sick of not being told things. I just need some time to think.’

He didn’t actually go back to bed, just sat on the edge of it staring at his hands and wondering how he could know so little about himself. Jotuns were very different from Asgardians, but not in quite the ways he had thought. Different physically, different culturally. But capable of the same depth of feeling, the same love and hate. Lopt had hated his father but never thought of taking revenge himself, he was no warrior. Loki hadn’t thought about frost giant women before, not until he’d seen Gerd on television, and then he’d been surprised by her existence. In a way it didn’t surprise him that there weren’t any, only that he himself…

Lopt too, he’d been thinking of him as male. Although now he knew otherwise it wasn’t so hard to think of him that way. The way he’d bent over his hand, shaken so badly by the pain. But that was Asgardian prejudice. Sif would kill him. Lopt, he suspected, would only laugh. But he was starting to think Lopt hid things behind laughter the way Loki hid them behind silence or sarcasm. Lopt had more depth than he’d been showing, he was, after all, Loki’s slave.

Loki winced at the thought, for a moment unsure how it had ended up that way. He hadn’t set out to enslave anyone, but Lopt had hardly seemed a person at the time. And now it was too late to set him free, when he knew so many of Loki’s plans. Later. When Loki had his kingdom Lopt could have his freedom. It would have to be enough.
Chapter 13

Odin gave the message to Heimdall, who passed it to Muspel's best far-seer. He didn't need Vedrfolnir now that the extradimensional space around the Bifrost was mostly clean. It was an extremely formal note and very brief, mentioning that Asgard was well on its way to restoring the Bifrost and had lately discovered the missing prince was making forays of his own into world-walking and the combination of disparate types of elemental magic. Perhaps, then, it would be appropriate to investigate further whether it was certain he had not contacted anyone from Muspelheim?

Sigyn tried not to be impatient. Would Muspelheim take the hint? Take too much offense at the very quiet threat implied in discussing Prince Loki and the Bifrost? Turn out to genuinely have no idea what was going on? Launch an investigation?

The response, when it came, raised eyebrows all around, because it was not precisely an answer. Sinmara asked an audience.

This took some effort to arrange. Heimdall was by no means the only one who could converse across the worlds, but he was the expert and it was more trouble for anyone else. Odin and Frigga joined him in the working of it, and Sigyn followed at Frigga's right hand as assistant and attendant and, to be entirely honest, curious onlooker.

Heimdall raised his arm, straight forward from the shoulder. White fire blossomed across their vision, hot and dazzling. It struck tears into Sigyn's eyes and refracted shards and rings of rainbow as if the Bifrost had exploded. While she blinked hard, a shimmering mirrored shadow of Heimdall released his hand and bowed. He returned the gesture and they both stepped formally aside.

As Sigyn's vision cleared and adjusted, a blot took shape against the fierce light, as if she were looking at a person made of sunspots.

Odin spoke first. 'Hail, Sinmara, Kindler of Muspelheim, Keeper of the Sword.' There was little contact with Muspelheim, between the heat and brightness of their world and the people's inability to travel, and Sigyn had to stop and think about the titles. Kindler was loosely equivalent to Allfather as a title, treating the queen as lifebringer to her people; Keeper of the Sword referred to her role of deciding whether to go to war. It might also be a dig in this case, as the sword Laeveteinn that they'd given to Hod was one of a very few forged in collaboration with the Muspel giants. Sigyn didn't let her expression change.

'Hail, Odin, Allfather of Asgard. Frigga, Queen of Asgard.' Sinmara's expression was difficult to read, mainly because Sigyn couldn't see more than the faintest hint of it. Her voice, though, held a subtle note of strain. 'Muspelheim must cast itself on your mercy.'

'That wasn't subtle. There was a somewhat stunned pause before Odin said dryly, 'This is a more drastic shift in position than we were expecting. Please explain.'

'We treated with your wayward child and concealed the fact,' Sinmara said stiffly. 'I knew it was not wise, but we are desperate.'

'Do you know where to find him?' Frigga asked.

Sinmara said reluctantly, 'No.'

Frigga inclined her head, disappointed. 'Tell us everything. What dealings did you have with him,
and in what desperation?'

'Our star is changing.' The deadly white heat behind Sinmara seemed to fade a little and take on a hint of dull red. 'We have delayed it as long as we can. Some of our population can adjust. Many cannot. Your prince came near and spoke with Surt, Wielder of the Sword, and offered us rescue. He said he would find a way to take us to Midgard's star if we would then deliver him the living planet.'

'Evidently,' said Odin, 'he is making some progress.'

'Indeed.' The white flame brightened and shimmered; Sigyn resisted the urge to wipe at her eyes and wondered if Sinmara could see if her tears spilled over, or had as much trouble seeing them as they did with blaze and shadow. 'But we might lose more than we gained if Asgard should turn its wrath on us.' The Muspel queen's voice was bitter. 'Particularly if you catch him before he can help us.'

'I would have said, before Midgard burns,' Odin replied. 'We bear no ill will toward your people. Tell us if he does speak with you again, Kindler, and we... will seek a better solution.'

There wasn’t actually much in the freezer except for chocolate ice cream and ice for drinks, which was what Loki was looking for when he opened the door and found…Asgard. It was taking up a whole shelf, sculpted in ice, and recognisable instantly despite an oddity of scale and perspective which left it full of sweeping lines and strange angles that the real Asgard didn’t notably contain.

‘Why is there an ice sculpture in the freezer?’ he called.

‘I felt like making one,’ Lopt called back. ‘Why? Is it taking up too much space?’

‘Not exactly. But try to restrain yourself from larger sculptures. Waking up to some sort of nightmare dragon looming over my bed once was enough.’

‘I thought you weren’t raised around other Jotuns?’ said Lopt, appearing in the kitchen doorway.

Loki grimaced. ‘My brother is a weather mage. Do Jotuns often play such tricks?’

‘All the time,’ said Lopt. ‘It’s very rare for one to be born without enough weather magic to work ice and sculpting is encouraged as a way to learn fine control. Most children find uses for their creations other than simply leaving them to be admired at some point. There was one village…’ He broke off and glanced at Loki, possibly to see if he was about to be stopped. Loki gestured at him to continue.

‘There was one village where a group of young children came home one day saying there was a dragon in a nearby cave. People were skeptical - a lot of hunters had sheltered from wind storms in that cave - but the children were obviously distraught so they sent a group to look. They came back to say that there was a dragon in the cave, although it had thankfully been asleep at the time. They prepared to evacuate - if a dragon moves in nearby you’re lucky to lose only livestock, well, you’d know, there’s a similar species on Asgard - and to send notice to the palace. At that point a group of older children came forward and admitted to sculpting it to scare the young ones - their younger siblings hadn’t believed their tales of a dragon in the cave so they sent a group to look. They came back to say that there was a dragon in the cave, although it had thankfully been asleep at the time.

‘They prepared to evacuate - if a dragon moves in nearby you’re lucky to lose only livestock, well, you’d know, there’s a similar species on Asgard - and to send notice to the palace. At that point a group of older children came forward and admitted to sculpting it to scare the young ones - their younger siblings hadn’t believed their tales of a dragon in the cave so they’d decided to make it a bit more convincing. The sculpture’s still there, it’s quite famous. Or it was a thousand years ago.’

‘And did you play such tricks?’

‘Frequently,’ said Lopt. ‘The other children were twice my height but trickery made me useful to my friends and a problem for my enemies.’ He sighed. ‘I lost most of my friends once they were old enough to realise my father despised me, no one wants to be in disfavour with the king.’
Loki thought of his own childhood, he’d always been smaller than those around him but by inches, not feet. Perhaps that was the reason Lopt disliked fighting, attempting to learn by sparring with someone twice as big as you could only be painful and humiliating. The freezer was still open and Loki was looking vaguely at Asgard’s towers while he thought, he shook himself and reached for the ice cubes he’d been after in the first place.

‘I did better in other kingdoms,’ Lopt continued thoughtfully. ‘As a servant, but at least not a despised one.’

Loki shut the freezer door and turned to him, drink, now with ice, in his hand. ‘What other kingdoms? You can’t mean Asgard. Did you go to Alfheim, or Vanaheim?’

‘Other kingdoms on Jotunheim,’ said Lopt. He continued, with deliberate cruelty, ‘Jotunheim was far more like Midgard politically, back then. Before Laufey forced it to unite.’

Loki hid his discomfort behind a sip of his drink. It was unexpected, somehow, to have words with a bite thrown at him, even though Lopt had once been famous for his sharp tongue.

‘If you’re so interested in carving things you should be working on the falconskin,’ he said, deciding to ignore that subject. This was no time to start doubting his purpose.

Lopt shrugged, probably waiting a chance to return to the subject of Laufey. ‘Ice is easier.’

‘Did you break the energy balance again?’ asked Loki. The piece, a thin and perfectly symmetrical pair of coils, had been driving both of them mad. They had given up on making a practise piece in normal amber on the basis that when they did finally get it done they wanted it to be a piece they could use. Fortunately, even though Loki felt horrible about the amount of sap they were wasting, Tree didn’t seem to mind, and was, in fact, flourishing.

‘Yes,’ said Lopt, eyes going distant as he mentally reviewed what he’d done wrong and how to do it better next time. Lopt was easily distracted by interesting puzzles - Loki had occasionally considered buying a sudoku book to throw at him when he was being annoying but that, sadly, was probably not interesting enough. ‘How is enchanting the ones I have managed to carve going?’

‘Nearly done,’ said Loki. ‘And I’d better get back to it.’

'So,' Sigyn concluded her summary for Jane, 'we are trying to solve the problem first.'

Jane rubbed her eyes, feeling as if she'd been the one staring into a star, and said, 'You threatened them with the Bifrost?'

'Obliquely,' said Sigyn. She looked a little put off her stride, as if she hadn't been expecting that reaction. It was unsettling, and Jane found herself remembering Freya casually mentioning Sigyn had set her on fire more than once. 'We may as well let Prince Loki's rashness work to our advantage.' She must have seen that Jane was disturbed, because she added in a less careless tone, 'The message to Muspelheim merely noted that the Bifrost was working again. It's been used to transport warriors often, but only that once as a weapon itself.'

'Right,' Jane said, a little faintly.

'No one is actually planning to destroy their star, even to defend Midgard.'

That made her feel better. Sort of. 'And they weren't planning to destroy Midgard,' she said, half to herself. Just... conquer it and hand it over to Loki. She might have to examine her reactions a little
'No,' said Sigyn, 'but some of them were -- and possibly still are -- prepared to attack it in payment for a new home. It would make things considerably easier if they don't feel they have to.'

'Because the star they live in is running low on hydrogen and about to transition to a red giant.' Lower temperature. Lower density. Less mass overall. It was hard for her to wrap her mind around living in a star, even though it was the case in two of the nine realms, but it was certainly easy to see why that level of environmental shift would be a problem. It was remarkable that they only wanted to move part of their population.

It was easy to see why they'd be desperate.

Jane's mouth quirked ruefully, just a little, as she looked up at her newest mentor. 'I can see why they need to move, but I'm glad I don't have to talk people into thinking they'll be great neighbors.'

'They probably will, honestly,' said Sigyn. 'Aside from the current issue, I don't believe you have any conflicting interests as worlds. Your internal wars wouldn't be likely to affect them, nor theirs you. You'd be to some degree natural allies in the event that some other realm or faction went to war against you. And they could probably extend the lifespan of your star, although that's a rather long-term consideration.'

'Uh, yes. Just a little.' Somebody carrying on a war in the sun wouldn't affect Earth? Well, no, maybe not. Or not more than the existing sunspots and solar flares. Jane flipped open a book in shimmering ink that Sigyn informed her was spectral data on Muspelheim. She was pretty sure she could translate it into familiar conventions with enough questions. 'But come to think of it, why our sun? I mean, is there any specific reason for it besides Prince Loki wanting Earth, or would some other star do as well?'

'I don't actually know,' Sigyn said after a moment's thought. 'Svartalfheim wouldn't do them any good, of course, and I'm not sure Niflheim's is habitable for them. But most of the others are relatively similar.'

'But travel is the same basic problem regardless.' And one that had gone unsolved for a very long time. Jane frowned and removed the pen she had unthinkingly put between her teeth. 'I'm really not an engineer. It would probably help to talk to Tony. It would definitely help to know more about their physiology, or at least their, um, energy readings. What the extradimensional predators are sensing, how it's transmitted.... Can they leave at all? I mean, I assume it would be tricky to study extradimensional predators, but if they could just step out of the star briefly and let somebody take measurements....'

'If they do that, you won't have any trouble finding extradimensional predators.'

'O-kaaay. Well. Maybe we can try to start with a prototype.' Jane realized she was chewing on her pen again and wiped it off with a sigh. 'I'll talk to Tony. And maybe figuring out how extradimensional space works will give us some ideas.'

Figuring out how extradimensional space worked was after all her new project. It was a little outside the field she'd trained in, but then it was a little outside the field anybody else had trained in too, practically by definition. Jane wasn't the jack of all trades remotely applicable to mechanical engineering that Tony Stark was, but she knew multivariable mathematics, she knew how to start trying to measure the properties of space, and in addition to her particular area of speciality she was more or less well acquainted with several other highly esoteric areas of physics that were rapidly turning out to be special cases.
She was also, and this turned out to be very important, acquainted with Jormungand. Her first several experiments in extradimensional space had to be conducted only with what she could carry with her, items held in position relative to one another by her expectation that they would stay that way. The results weren't exactly useless, but she couldn't find a way to avoid thinking of them as suspect, even though she couldn't seem to make Sigyn understand why. The only thing Jane was sure of on the subject was that she didn't know enough yet to decide to what degree this disconnect reflected different attitudes toward how to acquire knowledge (and perhaps the difference in magic and science as disciplines), versus something about Sigyn's greater awareness of how extradimensional space worked or even her extra few thousand years of practice in being sure whether she had, as she'd put it when Jane asked about this in the first place, metaphorically put her thumb on the scales.

The point was, however, Jane was trying to learn about extradimensional space without taking any more for granted than she absolutely had to, and she didn't have several thousand years of practice in doing magic and in not doing it by accident. Which was why she wanted a laboratory that would hold together without her actively telling it to. (Sigyn asked, half joking, how she could be sure it wasn't doing that because she expected it as well. Jane paused and then said she'd keep it in mind as something to question later, but she had to stop somewhere short of solipsism as an assumption or the whole endeavour became pointless.)

So one of the first things she'd done was to start trying to design a laboratory. And when she faced the question of how to keep it still -- at least, still relative to something -- she turned the question over in her mind and looked at it from angles she had not previously been able to envision, and she ultimately decided that the idea that struck her on the way to Earth with Nari really might be the best possibility.

And she went to talk to Jormungand.

She still hadn't gone into extradimensional space on her own very often. The first time, even knowing Sigyn would come after her if anything went wrong, had been exhilarating and terrifying and as dazzling as the first time she saw it. Maybe more so because by that point she'd been able to see, or sense, or recognize and process so much more of her surroundings. It still gave her a rush every time.

And this was definitely her weirdest project proposal ever, and considering her last one had involved identifying the atmospherical effects of a theoretical deep-space phenomenon, that was saying a lot. She'd never actually asked to stick a laboratory to someone before.

Jormungand stirred ahead of her, head looming larger than the moon seemed and with more depth. (The moon was only three-dimensional, like her, and did not think.)

Greeting-and-welcome. The thought nearly swamped her being -- not destructively, like some of the mental predators or even the ones that could bend you out of shape trying to be friendly, but like being caught up in an ocean wave without anything to bash against. Jormungand was in many ways far more alien than anyone else she'd talked to, but did like company. And not to eat.

(It was not wholly clear to Jane what Jormungand did feed on. The energy of Yggdrasil, maybe, though that was one of the things she was still trying to make sense of. But she also got the impression, between communing with Jormungand and talking to Nari, that Jormungand viewed having a territory as supplying the requirements of life. There was possibly a point of view here by which Jormungand had already eaten the Earth, but as this didn't seem to interfere with its being habitable, Jane was saving it for the next time she wanted to freak somebody out.)

'Hi, glad to be here.' Jane grinned up/out at the serpent, reciprocating the senses of greeting and happy-to-see-you in thought and body language as well as words. And added, 'I have an idea.'
Jormungand felt interested at her.

'You know I'm curious about this place. About extradimensional space in general.' What lay outside the three dimensions she was familiar with, what lay beyond the type of three-dimensional space she was familiar with.

An enormous assent arrived, and Jane didn't bother to fight down a laugh. Jormungand didn't personally go exploring, but seemed to approve of curiosity as a general concept. And heartily agreed that Jane was curious.

'I want to study it,' she said slowly, 'and I think it would work better if I can have things hold still relative to each other without having to actively hold them that way myself.' And because this was a particular kind of conversation instead of a formal document with everything spelled out, she could sort of feel Jormungand looking at the concepts and assumptions in her mind and tried to keep them clear and at the top of her attention, partly for his sake and partly because it was good for her to have her thought processes on this out where she could see them. 'Would you be able to help with that? Would it be okay with you and, um, comfortable for you to let me attach things so they'd hold still relative to you?'

The corrosive whipsnap of offense was a shock to her, and she reeled back a step, bewildered and frightened. What had she done? What was Jormungand going to do?

--And Jormungand gentled the communication, though it still caught in her throat like the smell of bleach, and she could understand that the reaction was not at the request but at the idea of being discomfitted by anything of the sort. It was also more like being miffed than seriously offended and Jormungand was rather worried about her now.

'I'm not hurt,' she said, then paused to swallow hard and grimaced at the burning sensation in her throat. At least, she didn't think she was. It felt like she'd just swallowed back a mix of bile and hot peppers and alcohol, which could involve mild chemical burns but didn't seem likely to represent a serious injury to mind or body. 'Humans are more fragile than Jotuns and Asgardians, though.'

Jormungand did not so much promise to be careful as resolve, and let her in on it.

'Thanks.' Jane took a steadying breath. 'I didn't really think it was likely to hurt you. I can see that you're very tough and wouldn't dream of implying otherwise. But I'd be annoyed if people just assumed it was okay to stick things to me, even if it wasn't actually uncomfortable. And while I'm sure it wouldn't actually prevent you from moving if you felt like it, for example, it would kind of be a problem for me to have everything break the first time you decided to wiggle.'

This was, Jormungand acknowledged, reasonable. And this laboratory she wanted to build would mean more company?

'I'd probably be spending a lot of time there,' said Jane. 'And I'd probably need to bring other people here to help at some point....'

She was suddenly being propelled, against a texture of soft-furred hard scales. (Could that be right? The tendency for body and brain to interpret unfamiliar sensations into familiar ones was one of the reasons Jane wanted more objective readings out here.) Jormungand directed her, with an air of helpfulness, to what seemed to be a wall of huge faceted scales that tesselated or overlapped depending on just how she angled her head. She touched one surface, and it felt furry and smooth and sharp-edged in turn as she moved her hand.

'This is a good place?' she asked aloud.
It was. Jormungand hadn't had occasion to move it since wrapping around Midgard, and it was a comfortable place to watch over. Would she need a place on the outside of the coils to compare?

Jane paused over that. 'That's not a bad idea, especially if there are any different properties due to being your territory.' Wouldn't help with identifying different properties due to proximity to Jormungand, but it was a start. 'But outside might be a more dangerous place to be lost in thought.'

_Not with me paying attention to you_, Jormungand informed her with an air of utter certainty.

She looked up from inspecting the scales and trying to think how to attach something to them. 'That's really nice of you.'

The Midgard Serpent's response was merely a rather smug purr.

SHIELD had already approved, conceptually, of the idea of an extradimensional laboratory. Possibly even one attached to Jormungand. It would be more accurate to say they'd told her to find a way to make it happen, which she'd have resented more if she had been less eager in the first place. And the funding... well, Jane was _not_ used to the kind of money either SHIELD or Tony Stark threw around on a regular basis. SHIELD, of course, still required as much paperwork to account for it as any other government agency, but the speed when they wanted something done was astonishing. It still felt weird to be essentially working on military research, even if she wasn't sure about its immediate military applications.

And Tony was entirely capable of blowing enough money to fund a five-year lab-founding grant on a whim. It exasperated Pepper, but he could do it. He was fiercely jealous of his independence and thought everybody else should be too even though (because?) his father had built the company largely on work he'd done with the military. He insisted that people should have responsibility and control over how their work was used, which sounded great but Jane was mildly curious how this worked in terms of Stark Industries' employment contracts.

The point was, this project was fast-tracked and had what Jane considered a wildly extravagant budget with some strings of uncertain length attached. Accomplishing it was nevertheless a puzzle.

She worked through several ideas until she hit dead ends, then rang up Bruce (not really his area, but she didn't know of any zoologists who were aware of Jormungand's existence) and Tony (who reserved 'not really my area' for things that didn't interest him) and tried to describe the structure of the scales to them, wishing she had Nari there to do it better. Tony kept shoving holographic reconstructions at the camera. Suddenly she stopped, eyes lighting up, and both men regarded her with immediate alertness. 'How about if I take you to see it?'

'Okay, that might help,' said Tony.

'You can _do_ that?' asked Bruce, sounding rather startled.

'Yeah, I didn't exactly realize that was an option.' Tony said. 'What kind of preparations would it take? Should I fly over?'

Jane couldn't stop grinning. 'I'll come get you.'

'You'll wh--'

Jane stepped out of her usual three-dimensional space, took a second to orient herself as Sigyn had taught her, and then went back in and leaned over Tony Stark's shoulder as he peered into the area of holographic space she had evidently just vacated. 'Boo.'
Tony spun around. 'Whoa!' In the next floating holographic monitor over, Bruce applauded. 'That didn't look like a lot of preparation,' he remarked. 'Are you coming here next? Can we just--' He wiggled his hand in the air.

'Well, I've been being instructed for months,' said Jane. 'But yes, as long as you stay in contact with me, I think I can take you there. It's confusing, and the area around Earth is actually relatively safe but you can still get lost or make bizarre mistakes.' She paused. 'Maybe we should tie ourselves together or something.'

'If there are extra dimensions, won't knots just slip loose?' Tony asked, mercifully letting multiple opportunities for innuendo slide for once in favor of practicalities. She supposed being taken on a walk in extradimensional space had innuendo beat in terms of novelty.

'Theoretically they could, yes,' Jane said. 'But a lot of things could kind of... unravel, and usually don't seem to do so spontaneously.' She refrained from mentioning that there seemed to be no problem with inadvertently slipping out of your clothes in an unexpected direction. There was no point presenting him with that much temptation. 'I can probably find you as long as you don't get too far away, anyway.' She paused thoughtfully. 'And if I can't, Jormungand probably can.'

'Here.' Tony picked up a couple of coils of an odd-looking cable, looped one around his waist, and pinched the end against a spot on the length of it. What looked like tiny metal fibers flashed out around the point of contact as if it were fraying, then apparently wove into each other. He handed Jane the other end and rubbed his hands together. 'Lead on, then.'

'I knew you were the right person to consult about a materials question,' Jane said. 'Bruce?'

'Come on over. I'll let them know to expect you in the lobby.'

Jane grinned at Bruce. 'Sounds good.' It was preferable to teleporting onto the street and less annoying to SHIELD generally than trying to bypass their security. And in this particular case, Bruce was currently consulting on the tesseract's small periodic bursts of radiation, so bypassing the security this way might be hazardous to impossible given that they were actively trying to avoid Loki doing it.

She grabbed Tony's arm and pulled him in a direction he had presumably never gone before, and promptly ran into problems. He was craning his head in all directions and nearly following it for the next several seconds, and Jane had to struggle to hang on to him and not be dragged off. 'Hey! Hey, follow me here. Come on. I'll take you back out later.'

Tony focused on her, and she managed -- panting a little -- to drag him to just outside the SHIELD building in whose depths the tesseract lay. At which point she stopped, staring, at a fine mesh of twisting, thorny vines winding through and around it.

'What is that?' Tony asked.

She yanked on his arm reflexively as he started to drift toward the thorns like a wayward balloon. 'Those must be some of Freya's traps. Please don't poke them.' As Tony settled down, she added, 'It looks like Sleeping Beauty ought to be in there.' Now that was an eerie thought, the whole of the SHIELD personnel trapped in sleep. Jane shook herself a little. That was obviously not actually what was going on here.

Tony snickered. 'Or the Beast.'

'That's a different story,' Jane said absently, towing him toward the edge of the vines and from there into the lobby.
'I do know that,' Tony said. 'Oh, hi, Bruce.'

'Hi. Thought I'd come to meet you. Jane, you look a little frazzled.' Bruce frowned at her. 'What happened?'

'I forgot to explain,' Jane said ruefully, 'a lot of what goes on out there is mental. If you think about going somewhere, you're likely to do just that. I almost wound up on the moon that way before Sigyn pulled me back.'

'I was going to ask you what kind of weird mistakes you meant,' Bruce said. 'So, if we concentrate on staying with you, we should be all right?'

Jane took a steadying breath. 'I think so.'

'Well why didn't you say that in the first place?' Tony asked. 'Focus. I can do focus. Just in case, though--' He looped his strange cable around Bruce as well. 'Let's go!'

The second effort was less strenuous. They were both fascinated -- Jane could hardly blame them for that -- but Tony could indeed 'do' focus, and Bruce had his own practice at mental discipline.

Now that she had other people out here with her, she breathed in the glinting darkness and wished, with an ache that caught at her heart, that she could bring Erik Selvig to see this. But her mentor, unsettled by the idea that Loki had had a gateway into his thoughts, was taking some time with his own, lower-security projects. She'd take him out later, she promised herself. When she was better at it. He'd love it once he got out here.

'In what way is the area around Earth safer?' Bruce asked, carefully looking around without drifting too far.

'A lack of extradimensional predators,' she said, 'because they can't get past that.' Jane bobbed a little toward each of them, then tugged at both their arms and directed their attention to a pair of sightlines marked by arrows glowing with dull red light. (For some reason, this fell under illusions even though Jane was pretty sure it was real light. Sigyn insisted that they were not real arrows.) She could see the exact moment when each of them spotted the bulk of the serpent ahead -- Tony's goggle-eyed expression, Bruce's mouthed 'wow' -- and then the surprisingly identical shock-and-freeze when Jormungand looked at them, and they processed that they were being looked at.

Jormungand's greeting rolled over them like a long slow wave, Jane waved back, and then Tony whooped and shot forward. Jane laughed and let him tow them, turning to grin at Bruce.

Bruce shook his head. 'Only Tony,' he said, 'would meet a snake that size and decide to lunge at it.'

'I heard that!' Tony called. 'What do you think I'm going to do, scare him? Hello, giant world-snake-cat-creature. I am here to have a look at your body, although I can see that's going to be quite a job. I should warn you I am not a biologist. My appreciation of bodies is ordinarily on a very different, uh, scale. But if you want an engineering problem solved there's really no one better.'

Only Tony, Jane thought in amusement, would meet a snake that size and decide to flirt with it. Well, sort of.

'No wonder I don't make you nervous,' Bruce quipped in her ear.

Jormungand's surface seemed to ripple slightly as Tony examined it, angling the different types of apparent textures toward him in turn, and the enormous head levelled on Bruce and caught his eyes. Jane, who'd still been trying to formulate an appropriate response to the joke, abandoned the idea and
just stood back from whatever private communication was going on.

When Jormungand withdrew that overwhelmingly focussed attention, Bruce looked thoughtful and a little shaken up and... rather delighted. They spent a while longer there, examining the scales, and at the end of it Tony nearly found his way right back to his workshop all on his own, apparently through sheer eagerness. (Sigyn would later confirm that world-walking could be guided, to a limited extent, by a sense of home.)

It was a busy time and a gleeful one, despite the two urgent hovering questions of what Loki was up to and whether the Muspel giants could be rescued. (And, subsequently, where they would actually go.) They figured out -- mostly Tony figured out -- how to build something that would hook onto the texture of Jormungand's scales like an extraordinarily complex form of Velcro, and the laboratory took shape as scaffolding and platforms. The first few items had to be very light, as they had to be walked out there. But once Jane figured out how to describe the extradimensional coordinates and Tony successfully scaled up the rainbow bridgelets, moving equipment got a lot easier.

Tony discovered that she knew her way around circuitry, and the arc reactor that was going to power her equipment was accompanied by a bunch of monitors of its own. (This was actually standard; having user-accessible readouts was the unusual part.) Jane, giddy with the successes so far, tried out a far-seeing spell to get in touch with Sigyn, who was astonished and pleased to hear from her, and told her to stop it and go to bed immediately. The brief conversation left Jane exhausted for three days, during which Sigyn and Thor dropped in to see her, hear everything she'd been doing, and tease her about trying to be Heimdall.

Jane settled in to collect data, losing herself happily in basic research and emerging periodically to hash over her discoveries with a few of the engineers and magicians on multiple worlds who had turned their attention to moving the Muspel giants. The repaired Bifrost would not serve, though it was -- ironically enough -- saving lives on Jotunheim by moving large quantities of food, medical supplies, and apparently Elves.

'It also helped a great deal,' said Freya, who was taking a break from Jotunheim to catch up with her brother and her adoring fans on Earth, and had relayed the bit about the Elves, 'when the Mists heard about the situation.'

'The... who?' Jane asked.

Freya laughed suddenly and clasped a falconskin around Jane's neck. 'Come and see.' She swooped out past Jormungand, and Jane followed as best she could, still a bit clumsy but surprised at how much easier it was this time.

They landed on a rock beach covered in a thin slick of ice from freezing rain. Jane's panting breath struck cool air and steamed, but the falconskin kept her warm enough not to be very uncomfortable. Several very tall blue people turned to look at them, as did a horde of penguins. Jotunheim, then. The giants' attention drifted away after a moment -- Jane supposed they must be getting used to this sort of visit, no matter how abruptly out of place she felt.

'Look there,' Freya murmured, somewhat unnecessarily as Jane was already turning instinctively to look the direction everyone else was looking, toward the sharper cold--

She saw a... sort of humanoid figure, wreathed in flowing clouds, that was sliding in and out of extradimensional space in stages and seemed to have several heads. Ice spread out from where the figure stood, on what did not look precisely like feet, and the rocks cracked when they shifted.

'Niflheim,' Jane breathed. Mist-home. 'You -- you went and translated on me.'
Freya smiled. 'Their planet's atmosphere is mostly liquid. Their ice magic is magnificent. Jotunheim is uncomfortably warm from them in general; they normally only visit the poles, and that during winter. That's why this one keeps moving.'

'Does Jotunheim have a tilted axis and seasons like Earth, then?' Or did their seasons work differently? (Jane wasn't sure she could rule that out. If she understood correctly, Asgard used to be a somewhat smaller planet and had been... built up, in ways she still didn't quite follow.)

'It does. More dramatic seasons than Earth, in a way. Substantial parts of the ocean freeze over or thaw. The poles are harsh climates even for frost giants -- well, normally -- but they are valued places to go for working magic. As are the yew forests near the equator, for different purposes.'

'The Elves are working with those... right?'
Freya nodded. Then called out, 'Angan! May I introduce someone to you?'

The Mist turned and then gestured upward -- at least, it looked that way from the movement of the billows -- and out; Jane took a breath and followed Freya into extradimensional space, where the fog of condensation around the Mist promptly fell away. Jane... had not been prepared for this. The Mist appeared to have three bodies back to back, topped with a quantity of androgynously pleasant-faced heads she couldn't quite manage to count because they were all looking around and kept moving out of her accessible fields of vision, and supported by a mass of tentacles spreading out like (and possibly under) a very full brown skirt. The face and hands were a glossy charcoal grey; she was guessing the bright red on the torso was clothing.

'Angan, this is Jane Foster, a scholar from Midgard and Sigyn Incantation-Fetter's new protégé. Jane, Angan is a--' Freya paused briefly. 'High-temperature farmer. Relatively speaking.'

'Hello,' Jane said, a bit nervously. 'I... have no idea what your world's protocol is and am suddenly not sure I'm physiologically capable of it.'

'Hail and well met!' The head looking most directly toward her grinned, an unexpectedly familiar expression amid strangeness. 'People who are too fixated on ceremony don't usually visit the other worlds. I think there are groups on all nine who go in for handshakes, and if we're involved, that's likely to be painful for all concerned. Shall we just bow?'

Jane wasn't so good at that either, but she managed one of her more graceful bows mostly because Angan was too relaxed and friendly to make her particularly self-conscious. 'So... if you don't mind my being curious... high-temperature farming?'

'I tend useful plants and livestock that live in the hotter parts of our planet,' Angan explained, readily enough. 'What do you study?'

'Astrophysics,' said Jane. 'And, uh, I'm starting to learn magic, and trying to study the properties of extradimensional space.'

Angan nodded politely in the same way humans tended to respond to that sort of answer. Well, the astrophysics part, anyway. 'I've heard human magic is pretty flexible, but I never met one before. I'm actually nothing special as sorcery goes -- don't tell the Jotuns that, please -- but our intrinsic ice magic is enough to be useful here and I can tolerate the heat better than most.' The eyes on two or three heads rolled. 'As long as I take frequent breaks, anyway. My thanks for the excuse, though I shouldn't stay long.'

'We won't keep you,' Freya said. 'I whisked Jane from her own work, too. But I thought you'd both
appreciate the chance to meet.'

They both thanked her and then parted amicably, with Jane's mind reeling a little at the realization that they'd just gone almost casually on a jaunt between worlds for a few minutes of conversation.

'Angan suits his name well,' Freya said cheerfully on the way back. 'He's a delight. He's also fond of travel, but your type of interest in extradimensional space -- or even mine -- is to his like the difference between a geologist and a hiker.'

'I thought it might be,' Jane said. 'I'm used to polite incomprehension. It's people who know what I'm talking about and don't think I'm out of my mind that I'm still getting used to.'

And there were a lot of them to get used to. SHIELD was forced to be selective in what they kept private because the existence of ambassadors from other worlds naturally made other people wonder about methods of travel, including -- rather to Jane's delight -- the possibility of visiting the rest of the solar system. Jane ended up spending rather a lot of time trying to help with this, although helping partly involved explaining that just because it was a couple minutes' walk to the moon didn't mean it was safe, and then that she was very well aware of the hazards of space travel but these were not the same ones. One of the easiest ways to demonstrate how easily you could get lost was to take someone out just a bit. Explaining the increase in hazards once you got past the guardian serpent was somewhat more complex.

She managed, with considerable difficulty, to resist both external pressure and her own enthusiasm and not spend all her time teaching NASA employees how to navigate extradimensional space. After the first flurry it became easier, as people settled down to projects such as calculating how to get to Mars and whether it was necessary to perform the whole walk in a spacesuit or if you could tow a planet-suitable suit in a predator-proof case and put it on once you got close. Jane though the rainbow bridgelets might be a good solution, but those were currently supposed to be a secret and anyway they were still working out the navigational kinks there, too.

And she did finally persuade Erik Selvig to come out with her. Not to her lab -- he still had a security clearance but refused to look at anything that would require it, tesseract or no tesseract -- but out, nonetheless, to share a whole new level of wonder with the man who'd first driven her into the night, away from all the light pollution, to gaze up at just how big the universe could be.
Chapter 14

Loki rested his finger on the falconskin, a flat ovoid like the one they had copied, and whispered, ‘luka’, close. It glowed, briefly, light strangely green-gold rather than blue, and then faded back to blue, looking as if it had never been anything but a single carved pendant. There was a hole through it, built into the design, for the chain. The only thing that mattered there was that it was a high carat gold, including the catch, since gold would conduct the magic best. They had three chains ready, just in case, and Loki picked one to thread through the falconskin. Lopt let out his breath audibly and Loki couldn’t help grinning at him.

‘Can I test it out?’ asked Lopt. It would make sense for him to do it, he had much more experience of extradimensional space and travelling in it. Loki had only learnt to use a falconskin recently, and with one made by the best not their experimental copy. On the other hand Loki wanted to be the one to test it, even if it wasn’t something he could justify.

‘No,’ said Loki. ‘I’ll test it.’

Lopt sighed. ‘Worth a try,’ he said. ‘Having two people in it when it’s just being tested probably wouldn’t be a good idea. But you’ll let me try it later, right?’

‘Of course,’ said Loki. He looped the chain around his neck and did up the clasp, feeling the subtle buzz of magic against his skin. It felt different from the one he’d used before and, although it actually felt better, easier to use, he frowned, not trusting his instincts.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Lopt.

‘It doesn’t feel like the other one,’ said Loki. ‘It feels…light. Almost like it’s part of me.’

‘It was your tree,’ said Lopt. ‘And your magic, mostly.’ He actually sounded a little jealous; he’d never be able to make a falconskin that was his quite the same way this one was Loki’s.

‘I’ll just step out and back to make sure there aren’t any major problems before I try it out properly,’ said Loki.

The transition to extra-dimensional space was the same as always, a step sideways to a place of darkness and distant lights. Jormungand’s coils formed a barrier you could see if you were looking for it, but that would only be something to worry about once he started flying. Right now it was a protection, just in case this falconskin didn’t ward off wolves as well as the Vanir ones. Later, of course, he’d test that (or, on second thoughts, have Lopt do it). But one thing at a time.

Anything that went wrong would be magical so the spell he prepared, and held the casket ready to back up, was the one for clamping down on magical effects which he’d used when dismantling the other falconskin. Even if a part exploded it should give him time to get the falconskin off and get away. He took a deep breath and the falconskin flared to life around him without anything fusing, blowing up or otherwise going wrong. Loki held the pendant in the palm of his hand, checking carefully for magic build-ups in any particular spot. But the energy balance was doing its job and the falconskin was working without stress.

Loki dropped his connection to the casket, held his position a little longer just to make sure, and then de-activated the falconskin and stepped back. ‘It’s fine,’ he said, and let Lopt hug him for a moment before pushing him off. ‘I’m going to try flying next. So I might not be back for a while.’

‘You’re not going outside Jormungand, are you?’ asked Lopt.
‘No, I just want to put it through its paces thoroughly,’ said Loki. He smirked. ‘I thought I’d leave the outside test to you.’

‘Oh, that’s right. Make me do the dangerous bits,’ said Lopt, sounding both relieved and like he was looking forward to it. ‘Try not to bump into Jormungand, he probably won’t mind but he’s a bit big to risk annoying.’

‘I never would have thought of that if you hadn’t told me,’ said Loki. He took the step sideways once again and this time activated the falconskin as soon as he was through.

There wasn’t enough room inside Jormungand’s coils to take the falconskin up to its top speed and going forward really meant a gentle curve. But it was a safe place to practise turns and loops (the falconskin was very slightly sluggish on turns, and Loki was already wondering if they could correct for that in a second one). It was fun, being out here alone and playing around just because he could. No one could see him so why not loop the moon in nine different directions and stop even pretending this was a test any longer?

He’d stopped for a rest, bobbing close to Jormungand’s side, when he sensed magic. Someone else was out here in extradimensional space. His first feeling was, oddly, a sense of resentment, like a child finding a secret den invaded. But Midgard and the space around it weren’t his yet. The second was a powerful sense of curiosity. Who was out here and what were they doing? Was he sensing someone looking for him? He turned the falconskin off (it was good for many things, but not sneaking up on people) and set out cautiously towards the feeling of magic.

Someone - presumably someone very brave - had anchored several metal platforms to Jormungand with a metal lattice that looked almost like spiderweb. Metal cuboids in two different sizes stuck up from the platforms. Tables and chairs, probably magnetic, Loki realised. Equipment rested on the tables, and who knew whether that was reacting to whatever passed for gravity out here or stuck down with still more magnets.

Mostly it was empty, but one person was sitting at a table taking notes. She looked up, although she couldn’t have heard him and he hadn’t been in her line of sight, and looked straight at him. Jane, Thor’s mortal love. Something else moved above her and a head so big it almost couldn’t be recognised as one also fixed deep, coppery eyes on Loki. The twin gazes held him, something eerily similar about they way they held their heads. Jormungand had told her he was here, Loki was suddenly sure of it. He swallowed and held up his empty hands, doing his best to look inoffensive. This would be a very bad time to frighten Jane.

Jane had been immersed in trying to design a new set of experiments when Jormungand suddenly shifted his head and communicated direction. She looked up, rolling her pen absently between her fingers, and then very slowly set it down.

She hadn’t seen Loki before. She’d worried about his possibly turning up when she’d started setting up the lab, and then the idea had gradually slipped from her attention, rather like a piece of paper vanishing under the other contents of a desk. But she had seen portraits while in Asgard, and really, who else could this be?

Suddenly dry-mouthed, she felt a gentle pressure from Jormungand’s mind and got an impression that she could only seem to translate as kitten and mine. That steadied her and almost made her smile, which might have been hard to explain.

She swallowed once and, for lack of anything better to say, started with, ‘Hello.’
'Hello.' Loki looked past her, at Jormungand, and his lips flexed in what looked like a faint and nervous smile. Jane wasn’t entirely sure whether to believe it. ‘Between the two of you, I have rarely felt quite so intensely looked at.’

‘You’re kind of riveting.’ And yet she could see how he might fade into the background -- which seemed improbable shading into bizarre, for a man Thor’s height and about as handsome in his own way, a thousand years old and with a level of power she was just now starting to comprehend based on Sigyn’s lessons. And for someone who had made plans to take over Earth, with the sun as payment to his army. But he stood very still, didn’t project the kind of presence that Thor had even when temporarily mortal, and she couldn’t be entirely sure he wasn’t doing something self-effacing magically. Except then she probably would have lost track of him by now. ‘I’d tell him you’re not a threat, but I’m not actually sure about that.’

Loki’s eyebrows went up a bit, his eyes still on Jormungand. ‘I sincerely doubt I’m much of one right now.’

‘That’s... good? Um, what are you doing here, then?’

‘Finding out what mortals are doing out here. Aside from making friends with the locals, it seems.’

Jane shot a fond and rather grateful look at Jormungand, who responded with something like a purr that felt, to her mind, as if it ought to be causing earthquakes in Midgard. The scaffold of her laboratory didn’t so much as quiver. ‘Research.’

Loki blinked at her. ‘Into extradimensional space?’

‘Yes!’ Nervous as she was, her enthusiasm and slightly incredulous glee at being able to do this leaked into the answer.

Loki looked very faintly amused. ‘And what have you discovered? I assume you haven’t been able to travel far from Jormungand?’

‘Ah, I haven’t exactly tried to go anywhere on my own. I’m working on measuring the properties of extradimensional space itself. I - for example, I think lightspeed is still constant, once all the directions are accounted for, but I’m still working on the energetic properties and I’m completely confused about the pseudo-atmosphere.’

Amusement faded from Loki’s face, replaced by interest, and he moved closer. ‘These aren’t even questions I’d really considered. I was much more interested in finding my way around and avoiding -’ He stopped and frowned, then finished, ‘Monsters.’

‘Well, I’m interested in that too.’ Jane looked back at her work and then was startled to find Loki suddenly next to her.

‘But now I’m curious.’ He was practically looking over her shoulder. ‘Especially about these energetic properties.’

And what harm could it really do to show him her results? At least these ones. She was hardly going to announce that Earth and Asgard were now working on how to help the Muspel giants travel, and the specifics of how were elsewhere and currently involved impractical quantities of vibranium. Jane mostly forgot to be wary of him in the fun of explaining her very latest work to someone who was interested in it and, once they got past some vocabulary issues, understood what she was talking about. Loki himself apparently stopped worrying about Jormungand. He even offered interesting suggestions.
‘Without Heimdall,’ he said, after examining the near end of a few rainbow bridgelets, ‘you’d probably be better off with something like the casket that you can control and travel through at the same time. Obviously not with mice though.’

‘Yes,’ Jane said, trying to imagine how that would work, ‘I’m sure mice are even worse than I am at steering.’

Loki blinked at her. ‘What?’

Jane cleared her throat sheepishly. ‘Never mind.’

‘Oh, come on.’ He was smirking at her, but it was more a playful expression than smug. ‘You can’t just leave it there.’

Jane sighed. And buried her face in her hands. And explained about hitting Thor with her car. _Twice._

Loki actually laughed at her rather less than Darcy had done. He looked as if he wasn’t sure whether to be entertained or horrified. ‘If Fa - If Odin hadn’t made him mortal,’ he said, sounding a little strangled, ‘your car wouldn’t have survived. I’m - you should be relieved he did.’

‘I wasn’t going that fast,’ Jane muttered defensively, even as part of her mind noted where he’d stopped himself. ‘He was up and around right away. Especially the first time. We thought he was concussed pretty badly and probably drunk, but that was because he kept talking about a hammer and didn’t seem to know what planet he was on. Which, in retrospect....’ She waved a hand, as the conclusion was obvious. ‘Still. I’m amazed he didn’t hold a grudge about that, really.’

‘I don’t think he does grudges.’ Loki sounded rather wistful. ‘I’ve never noticed him holding one, anyway.’

Jane looked at him for a moment, then said, ‘That would explain a lot.’

Loki stiffened, his face going closed and something about his motion (or magic, maybe) making it hard to keep her eyes on him again. ‘I should go.’

She reached out automatically - comfort, trying to get another reference point as to where he was - before remembering as her hand landed on his arm that it was probably a bad idea. ‘I didn’t just mean you,’ she said, suddenly anxious that he not leave on that note. ‘Or me. There’s SHIELD -’

Loki didn’t quite look at her, but he didn’t vanish either. ‘That organisation that stole Mjolnir?’

‘They stole my _research,_’ Jane grumbled. Okay, _she_ was still holding a bit of a grudge, even if she could work with them now. ‘They more sort of... set up camp around Mjolnir.’

‘Hmm. And couldn’t budge it. For an organisation of heroic mortals, they seem a little short on worthiness.’

Jane honestly wasn’t sure what ‘worthy’ was supposed to mean with regard to Mjolnir, but she knew Thor’s status in that respect had changed sometime between when he was being detained by SHIELD and when Loki had nearly killed him. And that Thor had been able to pin Loki with it. So this was probably an awkward topic. ‘Hey, I’m not going to argue the point,’ she said, as lightly as she could.

Loki snorted. ‘Good.’

‘Still,’ said Jane, feeling compelled to make some effort at fairness, ‘they’ve been a lot less
obnoxious since Thor convinced them he was actually an alien.’

‘Interesting.’ Better than taking offense, at least. He leaned back comfortably on his seat, which was mildly impressive since it was a backless bench designed for someone a foot shorter than he was. ‘You know, we once had far less trouble convincing you Midgardians we were gods than Thor seems to have had convincing you of the truth.’

Jane laughed a little. ‘Yeah, at this point I think aliens were probably an easier sell.’

‘And now you’re studying something that my father couldn’t even describe to your forefathers with any accuracy.’

‘It has been a thousand years.’ Jane looked around at the laboratory that looked like it belonged in some later century yet. ‘I’d hope we’ve learned something in the meantime.’

Loki shook his head. ‘You live far faster than I’m used to. Asgard’s technology has changed little in a thousand years. I was surprised to find the casket and the Bifrost were developed during my father’s lifetime, and he is thousands of years in age.’

Jane gave a soft, helpless laugh. ‘Honestly, I still have trouble getting my head around a lifespan measured in thousands of years.’

‘I imagine you and Thor will find it difficult,’ said Loki. ‘For him, you’ll fade far too quickly. And he’ll be just the same with most of his life to go.’

Jane tried not to stare at him. His tone hadn’t changed in the slightest from discussing relative rates of cultural progress. ‘That’s occurred to me, yes,’ she admitted after a moment. Once she’d started believing Thor was really that old. It was hard to remember sometimes. He didn’t seem it.

Loki was very still again now, eyes fixed on her. ‘And it doesn’t deter you?’

She tried not to shift uncomfortably. ‘Not at the moment.’

A slow nod. ‘Enjoying what you have while you have it and accepting it won’t last? I suppose that’s how flings with mortals usually go.’

‘I guess from your perspective,’ Jane said, trying not to feel the sudden resentment or at least to keep it out of her voice, ‘that’s how our whole lives go.’ A breath, then stubbornly but as unaggressively as she could manage, ‘But I think I’ll consult Thor instead of you on whether it’s a fling.’

‘As you wish.’ She tried to hide the breadth of relief that he didn’t lose his temper and suspected she had probably failed. Loki was still looking at her, and she couldn’t figure out whether he was out to mess things up for his brother or make her uncomfortable or - and maybe this was a ridiculous fancy, except for the reaction to the story about the car - worried about Thor’s attachment to someone whose life was so transient. Or maybe it just didn’t seem that important to him at all. ‘Well, now that I’ve troubled you,’ he added, his voice rather dry and still not very informative, ‘I think I will go. I’ve been gone longer than I planned.’

‘It’s been fun,’ Jane said on a whim. ‘Tell your uncle I said hello.’

Loki raised his eyebrows. ‘Very well.’ He stepped off the edge of the platform, and she lost him.

Jane looked at Jormungand, who no longer seemed to be concerned, and then moved over - partly physically and partly mentally - to lean against that absolutely enormous presence.
Even if he’d just been playing around, some of the questions he’d raised were ones she’d been... not exactly avoiding, but pushing to the side because there were so many more immediate ones. Well, maybe avoiding a little, but really - she was only thirty and had put a lot more thought into her career so far than her love life. But now that they were in front of her, and now that they’d actually been together for a few months, Thor’s age and relative maturity and aging process and where they thought the relationship was going... were probably things she ought to ask.

Oh, and she should tell him she’d talked to his brother. And found out absolutely nothing of any tactical use, although she had some new research ideas. That was going to be interesting.

...And damn it. The energetic properties of extradimensional space might be exactly what he needed.

Loki was pacing back and forth across the floor of the apartment, caught between anxiety about what was keeping the boy and a nagging suspicion that he knew and it had happened before. A chat with Jormungand wouldn’t do the boy any harm, if Loki’s suspicions were correct, although he would like to know why more than one young man in his care felt the need to worry him half to death while talking to a giant snake.

When the boy arrived, slipping in neatly from extradimensional space, Loki asked, ‘Where were you?’ and had to stop himself adding, ‘do you know how worried I’ve been?’ as if he was the boy’s parent and not (brother, uncle, friend, thrall) whatever he was to him.

‘I ran into someone,’ the boy said, taking off the falconskin and placing it very gently on the table.

‘Jormungand. And I hope you didn’t mean that literally,’ said Loki.

The boy moved into the kitchen, actions betraying the tautness of held in restlessness. ‘Not just Jormungand. He had someone with him, Thor’s little mortal lover, and I don’t know which of the two was strangest. She’s built a laboratory on him.’

Loki couldn’t help smiling. ‘Inventive of her. What’s she studying there?’

‘Extradimensional space. She’s been able to make miniature recreations of the Bifrost using mortal technology.’ The boy was pulling a can of lemonade out of the fridge as he spoke, he sent Loki a questioning look and threw a can over when he nodded. ‘She’s sent mice through them. And she has measurements of the properties of extradimensional space, including how energy behaves while inside it.’

Loki opened the can and took a drink. ‘That’s a very mortal approach,’ he said approvingly. ‘We always had mages that could feel how it worked as they interacted with it so we took it for granted. Working it out by mathematics they might catch things we’ve missed.’

‘They might,’ said the boy. ‘And I think they have.’

There was a note to his voice that Loki took as warning, the sound of someone with a plan. ‘Your brother is heavily involved with these people. Especially his girlfriend,’ he said.

‘Energy compatibility is the root of our problem. Even with the falconskin working we don’t know yet how to merge it with the casket to make something powerful enough to work with Muspel giants without harming them. That information is something we need.’

‘Something you need,’ said Loki. What he needed, he decided, was some vodka with the rest of this lemonade. He walked over to the kitchen cupboards to grab the bottle and a glass. ‘We’d figure it out anyway, in time.’
'We don’t have time. The longer we wait the more chance there is of someone finding out about this before we can follow through with it.’ The boy blinked, then looked at Loki with suspicion. ‘Or is that your plan? Keep this wrapped up in the mechanics of working it out and hope we never reach the point where it’s practical?’

‘Figuring out how is the fun part,’ said Loki. He took a long drink of vodka and lemonade and then put the glass down. ‘What’s your plan? Once all the fun bits are over and you have Midgard where you want it what are you going to do with it?’

‘End war,’ said the boy.

‘No. You’ll exchange war between mortals for war between yourself and Asgard.’ Loki shook his head. ‘Who do you think you’d impress? Odin?’ He picked up the falconskin from where the boy had set it down and dangled it by its chain from one finger. ‘If you want to impress him take him this. Show him you’ve done what he couldn’t. Taking over Midgard? He never did that because he didn’t want to. But this -’

The boy snatched it from him and for a moment they stood almost nose to nose facing each other. ‘I will have a world to rule,’ the boy hissed.

Loki backed away a step, ducking his head as he took another drink. ‘I can’t stop you.’
Chapter 15

Loki flung himself away from Lopt, out into extradimensional space, without bothering to put the falconskin back on. He almost didn't, even when he thought of it. *If you want to impress him take him this.* His hand clenched around it hard enough to make his palm hurt, and then he sighed and clasped it around his neck anyway.

Seconds later, he was very glad he had. Still frustrated, he'd set off for the SHIELD research facility, and almost before he noticed it he was surrounded by a literally thorny puzzle. Loki stopped and hovered, deliberately calming down as much as possible and holding himself very precisely still, and checked first himself and the falconskin for damage, and then his surroundings for signs that his precipitate arrival had had any effect.

Not yet. He thought. And these patterns were familiar. They'd had Freya's assistance with security, then. He smiled faintly. They'd probably thought he was still after the tesseract. Which wasn't altogether a bad guess.

And when Freya put her traps in place, they would have been extremely effective. But Loki had spent the past several months studying Freya's work, much of that time specifically focused on her traps and other security measures, and now he oriented himself and began methodically working through them.

There seemed to be a curious lack of *deadly* traps here, but this was not to say it was easy. They were interlocked, interwoven, and fiendishly complex. Some he disarmed; some he blundered into. Time and again he was swamped by sudden, overwhelming sensation or emotion -- the first time was merely salt and citrus, and he froze in panicked flashback to the 'wolf' that had temporarily taken his vision. The second roused situationally inappropriate appetites, the third nearly made him break down in tears, and he wasn't sure which was more embarrassing. Four times he had to shake himself free of gazing entranced at the pattern of her work; twice he found himself following cleverly laid false trails.

When he finally pulled himself free, Jane was talking frantically to a balding SHIELD agent, with a familiar notebook on the table beside them and her hand on it protectively. 'I'll have that,' Loki said, stepping forward.

The agent leveled a gun at him. Jane jumped and put herself in front of her notebook. Loki sighed, snatched the gun from the man's hand and tossed it aside, and gave Jane a stern look. 'I recommend you get out of my way,' he said, almost gently, 'or you will not like the consequences.'

Jane swallowed and shook her head hard. 'I have had *enough* of -- augh!'

Loki picked her up by the upper arms and set her aside, ignoring the squawk of protest, and put his hand out for the notebook she'd dropped.

And suddenly the falconskin burned against his throat, the air closed in around him, and he *couldn't move.*

Loki’s hand went to his throat, clutching at the falconskin even as it burned his hand. *Mine.* The thought echoed like a struck gong, no subtlety at all, just a claim resonating with every drop of sap it contained. It may have been Freya’s design, but it was *his,* sap from his tree, from a seed he had grown. The falconskin cooled in his hand, and the smell of snow drifted into the air. He dropped it back against his throat and turned to see Freya in the doorway. He smirked.
‘Nice try,’ he said, forcing his voice cool and level. ‘I suppose those traps were yours too? I’m afraid I’ve become quite good at getting past your tricks lately.’

‘Some of them,’ said Freya. She was leaning against the doorframe slightly, the skin around her eyes drawn tight with an effort he couldn’t see.

Loki frowned, he could move again, she wasn’t affecting the falconskin directly, but what was she doing? Maybe just trying to recast the spell he’d broken. He lunged for the notes, deciding to grab them and leave before she could, only for Jane to do the same thing at the same time. Surprisingly, she moved faster.

Jane clutched the notebook to her chest and ran around the end of the table to try to get away from him. Loki, feeling this was fast becoming farcical, vaulted over it, then halted warily at a clatter of footsteps from two directions. A worried-looking scientist charged in from the far door; the near one admitted a very fit man with a soldier's posture and, to Loki's astonishment, a small frost giant. Jane darted behind them, obviously heading for the door. Loki slammed it shut with magic before Freya could prevent him.

‘You won't get away,’ Freya said. Jane made a distressed noise and slid down against the wall, shutting her eyes.

Loki summoned the casket, wincing as his hands turned blue when it appeared between them. For all the times he’d now used it, he was still not quite used to that, especially in front of anyone but Lopt. Ice washed over the room, a neat circle around Jane remaining free from it since Loki didn't want to freeze the notes to her. Being forced to kidnap Thor's girlfriend would be even more ridiculous than this had been already, and inconvenient as well. Around Freya the ice melted, rather than avoiding her, leaving a strong smell of summer rain and new turned earth. Freya brushed a hand across the front of her sopping wet dress and pulled a face.

From around the frost giant and the soldier, the ice shattered. The shards started toward Loki like flechettes and then checked in midair and dropped to the floor. ‘Steve?’ the frost giant asked.

The soldier replied through gritted teeth, ‘Fine.’

Loki sent another wave of ice across the room, this time the other frost giant put his hands up and it stopped before it could reach him and Steve, piling into a jagged wall. The frost giant's wrists were trembling, clearly this was taking all of his strength and Loki was impressed he was managing it at all. Stepping past them while the frost giant couldn't concentrate on attacking him he reached out towards Jane.

He could feel Freya melting his ice, but of more immediate concern was the fact that Jane was flickering. But if she was trying to escape into extradimensional space, Freya's own defenses balked her. She opened her eyes with a gasp, blood trickling from her nose, and then Steve tackled him. It worked - very briefly - breaking Loki's concentration enough that the casket vanished and even knocking him down. But he was still a frost giant, neither shapeshifted nor glamoured, and burns were appearing on the soldier's hands even as he didn't seem inclined to let go.

The other frost giant joined the scuffle, less skilled than the soldier but untroubled by the cold, while a very level voice on the other side of the room urged someone named Bruce to calm down.

Freya was doing something to make him dizzy, but Loki managed to shove Steve off him by dint of greater than mortal strength. The frost giant, rather to Loki's surprise, flinched at the knife he conjured to his fingers. Loki surged back to his feet, disgusted by the discovery that he had some of
Steve's frozen skin stuck to him, and summoned the casket again just as the door he'd sealed burst open and two more frost giants charged in.

'Is there a treaty between SHIELD and Jotunheim that I was unaware of?' Loki asked. He really wasn't sure what to think if there was, he'd been surprised by how quickly the mortals seemed to accept Gerd, but surely they weren't suddenly hiring frost giants for security?

'SHIELD is not an entity with the authorization to make independent treaties,' said the balding man, somewhat pedantically.

The shorter of the newly arrived frost giants stepped forward onto the ice, which cracked under his weight, and said, 'Loki.'

It sounded like... 'Thor?' Loki said, his voice coming out as an undignified yelp. He took a deep breath and managed to continue at a lower pitch. 'Why are you - are you glamoured? As a Jotun?'

Thor looked down at himself as if he had somehow missed this, then said, 'We were in a bit of a hurry.'

Loki blinked. The situation was surreal. Having his brother see him as a Jotun had been strange enough, but seeing Thor as one was just bizarre. 'That doesn't explain anything,' he said, feeling that he sounded remarkably calm under the circumstances. 'I take it you didn't do this just to confuse me, but why did you do it?'

'I did it,' said the other new arrival. 'He's been helping repair Jotunheim's climate, but having Prince Thor walk around the planet openly would have been, shall we say, awkward. I'm Nari, by the way. I would guess Father's mentioned me.'

Loki was left reeling. Nari. The son who looked like a frost giant, who Lopt had worried about but who had never taken to wearing glamours. A son he had somehow thought of as being a long time ago and a long way away, not someone he might meet. There was a darkness to the thought, to the realisation that this was someone Lopt would have rather been spending time with given the choice, a familiar shadow on the edge of his mind.

With that going through his head it took a moment for the other revelation to penetrate, and then it left no space for anything else. Thor - Thor who had gone there furious, to start a battle, who had dreamed of killing Jotuns as a child reading about wars - was fixing Jotunheim. It felt unfair in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. Thor could accept frost giants enough to help them. Thor was fixing Loki's mess. Both of those things were somehow terribly wrong.

'Why would you care so much about their planet that you'd willingly wear the form of a monster?' he snarled.

Nari arched an eyebrow. 'I admit, I wondered at first if he'd go along with it....'

Thor glanced up at Nari, then looked back at Loki and said heavily, 'They... are people, Loki. We have both gone too far, before, in thinking of them as enemies.'

Loki opened his mouth to deny it. Except - except Lopt, who he was angry with right now for trying to talk him out of his plans, but who had, not that long ago, been telling him stories of his childhood, who had hugged him when he came back safe from trying out the falconskin, who played music specially chosen to annoy him and talked him into watching silly Midgardian films. It was impossible not to think of Lopt as a person, whatever he thought of Jotuns as a group.

'Enemies,' he said, feeling on safer ground with that. 'Even if they are people, they have been our
enemies since before we were born.'

'Under truce,' said Nari. 'Wars do end.'

Wars ended. This one had a long time ago, but it had never felt ended, not with the stories, with the memories in history books. It wasn't like the war with the Vanir, over so long ago the fact that his friends' mother had fought in it had never felt real. Besides, if it was over, if everyone, even Thor, could accept with a little time and even be content to wear the shape of their hated enemies themselves, then why had he spent his whole life in a skin that wasn't his, feeling different without knowing why, until now neither of his shapes really felt like him? He looked down, knowing he couldn't ask that, couldn't scream everything at Thor without leaving himself vulnerable in ways he couldn't bear.

'I do not say it was easy,' Thor said. Slowly, this time, as if he was fumbling more than he had in their first conversation. 'You asked if Jane had changed me. I never answered you. I did not tell you we sat through the night, looking at the stars, and she asked me of the other eight worlds as if they must all be wonders alike. That I had wished you there to answer her questions better.' He swallowed. 'It was not comfortable to greet Nari. Nor was it comfortable to know a citizen of Asgard had risked appearing from thin air in the palace gardens over walking the city streets in his own face.'

Loki breathed in sharply, transfixed by Thor's face. It was so strange to see Thor's expressions there, to see the helpless earnestness in red eyes, and know that this was Thor feeling useless in a situation he wanted to resolve with words. 'Jotunheim is no wonder,' he said, remembering ice and darkness.

'It... has its wonders,' Thor said. 'Although I would not particularly want to live there.'

Nari snorted. 'You didn't see it at its best, either. Laufey was a stubborn, prideful idiot who made a poorer treaty than the Allfather would have given him, and then spent the next thousand years sulking about it. Even without that,' he nodded at the casket, 'it could have been better off than it was.'

It looked like Nari had inherited his father's hatred for Laufey, although he sounded more dispassionate about it. But then, he had not been the one to be either abused or abandoned. 'Is there a new treaty, then, with Laufey dead?' He should grab Jane's notes and run, trust that Thor would hesitate to hurt him long enough for it to work. But part of him wanted to know the consequences, good and bad, of what he had done without thinking of any of them.

Thor blinked, then gave a slightly choked laugh. 'You've missed quite a bit, brother. Asgard sent them eight mages to help first, and the Vanir and Elves and Mists came.'

'After Mother talked Byleist into it,' Nari put in.

'Everyone has been helping Jotunheim?' Four out of eight worlds, anyway, and the Muspel giants wouldn't be any use even if they could get there. 'Why? And they can't possibly have sent you disguised as a frost giant as a mage.'

Even as he spoke another thought occurred to him - how severe had the damage been that Jotunheim needed four out of eight worlds to put it right and the aid was still ongoing? The damage should be severe, he thought, starting to shake his head and then suppressing the tell. He'd meant to destroy it. A world full of people like Lopt, and Nari and...and Thor, if he had really been what he appeared to be right now. That wasn't even a logical thought, Thor was not a frost giant. It shouldn't have the power to wound him.

'I... am not officially there,' said Thor. 'Hence the disguise.' He sighed. 'They help out of mercy,
Loki. Or old obligations. Or because kin or friends asked them to.’

'Is that what you offer me then? Mercy to an enemy?' Loki asked, forcing venom back into his voice. Where had the old anger gone? No, he was still angry, there was still too much pain between them, but he could not hate Thor as he stood there talking of helping Jotunheim in secret, not even considering that he would get no credit for his graciousness to an enemy fallen low. The lack of hate felt like an empty bubble inside him - he'd started this hating so many things, so many people. When had he stopped?

Thor's eyes (red eyes) were bright with hurt. 'I have never wanted to be your enemy.'

'I could never be your equal as a friend.' Thor had changed so much he wondered whether that was still true, but maybe it was truer than ever. Before he had wondered what Odin had been thinking to make Thor king, now he could see the beginnings of someone who could rule. The confidence that had always been hidden under arrogance, kindness that had been condescension, diplomacy that had been gregarious boastfulness. Underneath Thor's childishness there had been something that could be great. Underneath Loki's exterior - was a mess of pain and anger, something as monstrous as his true exterior.

'I want you back as my brother.' Thor let out a pained sigh. 'And you are a good friend when you choose to be.'

'Naive,' Loki spat. 'I manipulated you, pushed you into actions that Father would banish you for, knowing you'd be too stupid to realise it. A good friend indeed.'

'I don't think you spent all our lives at such games,' Thor snapped back.

That was more like it, Thor's anger was familiar as his forbearance was not. It made things so much easier. 'As if you would have been able to tell if I had.'

'I think we'd have had a higher rate of unmitigated disasters.'

Loki snorted, a laugh trying to make its way up his throat without his permission, the corner of his mouth twitching with it.

'...I was serious,' Thor protested.

Loki swallowed. What were they doing? This whole thing seemed like stalling tactics, but which of them was stalling and why? We're both stalling, because the alternative is to fight or leave, and neither of us wants that any more. He touched the falconskin at his throat, take him this, accepting Thor's offer and going home had never sounded so tempting. Go home and admit he was wrong, had been wrong all along, that he wasn't sure he was capable of ruling Midgard any more even if he succeeded in forcing it to bow to him.

Thor looked at him, with red eyes, and was also silent. As he should be. If Loki couldn't find words, why should Thor?

The room was eerily silent, except for some piece of equipment emitting an irregular, vaguely plaintive beep. Possibly the ice or icemelt had damaged it. No one else spoke. No one else moved toward him. As if everyone, even the mortals who couldn't possibly understand, even Freya and Nari and the unexplained random frost giant who might think they had something to contribute, could feel that this was between him and Thor.

This was unbearable.
He thought to wrench away. To leave, to flee like a coward without what he'd come for (Jane still sat against the wall, eyes wide and wary; it was a shame, he'd enjoyed the academic discussion) -- when he tried to move, he ran into that choking closeness of the air again. Not the air, space. His eyes darted to Freya, finally comprehending what she was working at so hard, and that was when Thor started talking again.

'We spoke with the Muspel giants,' he said, and Loki's breath froze in his throat. 'I think all would be glad if you still helped to save them.' Return home with me to our family in peace. Was that even possible, if they knew everything? 'That is... also becoming a cross-world project. Asgard, Vanaheim, Earth -- it sounds as if you have made more progress, though. The Jotuns are rather, ah, preoccupied, but I think when they have more time --'

Loki's tolerance broke. It occurred to him, hazily, in torn wisps of awareness, that Thor probably shouldn't be telling him any of this, especially the relative estimates or where to look, where to interfere. Fool. But all he could focus on was that the worlds were coming together to help Jotunheim, the worlds were coming together to rescue Muspelheim and Earth from him and Thor expected Jotunheim to help -- and why should he not, with them turning up all over SHIELD --

He had to get out of here.

He threw himself against whatever Freya was doing to constrain him, hard enough to startle her. She looked -- worried, too, and he wasn't sure if it meant she wasn't sure she could hold him, or 'You're going to hurt yourself, foolish child.' The second thought nettled him, made him feel more frantic to be away, but it also spurred him to be more methodical: he called on the power of the casket and aimed it at her, throwing her back in a breaking wave of icewater as she tried to counter, and then turned it away and simply ripped a passage out through her defenses. That was part of what the casket was for, after all.

He didn't aim very well. He found himself floating in extradimensional space, the pulse in his throat beating hard against the falconskin, encased in blue-white energy.

Jormungand looked at him. Loki's stomach lurched, and he shot downward again and into the kitchen where he'd left Lopt. Who looked up from the next room as Loki wandered into it. A dewy, mostly full glass sat on a coaster beside him, and drew Loki's attention. Suddenly lemonade and vodka sounded like a very good idea.

Lopt grabbed for the drink half-heartedly, but sighed and sat back as Loki gulped it down. 'Didn't it go well?' he asked.

Loki put the glass back on the coaster. His hand was shaking. It was also blue - he'd used the casket to get back and he'd forgotten, just like Thor had. 'Thor was there.'

Lopt stood up, looking at Loki with concern. 'Did you fight?'

'No.' Loki could feel tears stinging his eyes and forced them back. 'There was no point. Father was right.

Lopt blinked at him, concern deepening. 'About what?'

'About Thor.' There was a breathless quality to Loki’s words, but he couldn’t stop his chest rising and falling as if he’d been sparring for hours. 'He was right to spend more time with Thor, to pay more attention to him, when he’s going to be a-a good king. And I’m just a monster.'

'Loki,' Lopt said, softly, hand grabbing his wrist, blue on blue. 'I’ve told you. Jotuns aren’t
monsters, we’re just people.’

‘I know that. I know you’re not a monster, that the Jotuns aren’t, and it’s taking four worlds to hold their planet together because of what I did, so what does that make me?’ The question came out anguished, Loki backing away a step and half doubling over with the force of it even as his wrist remained in Lopt’s grip.

‘No.’ There was a thready note of panic in Lopt’s voice and he swallowed quickly, before continuing more calmly. ‘You didn’t know. And now that you do know you wouldn’t do it again. That’s enough, that’s all any of us can do to atone for the past.

Loki shook his head, minutely, the trembling getting worse. ‘I’ve known you were a person since you wanted Laufey dead. You’re still - ‘ He ran the fingers of his free hand over the band of runes on Lopt’s wrist. I thought my desire for a throne was more important than your freedom.

Lopt winced at the reminder and then quickly masked his expression behind neutral concern, both reactions feeling like blows to Loki’s chest. ‘If you think this is wrong then undo it,’ Lopt said, his own voice starting to tremble. ‘You’ll be forgiven the instant you do.’

Loki’s fingers rested on the runes, he could feel their magic pulsing beneath him, find the thread to pull and undo the spell holding them there, but not yet. Perhaps it was fear holding him back, afraid to see what Lopt was like without that hold over him, afraid to lose the act if that was all it was. Or perhaps it was a reaction to a plan not yet fully formed, thoughts coalescing like hailstones in the back of his mind.

‘It’s not enough to be forgiven. To just pretend it never happened and trust to the mercy of everyone around me to pretend the same, as if nearly destroying a world could be erased. Going home and living there knowing all the time that I don’t deserve it.’ Pride and shame and remorse mixed sickeningly inside him. His eyes were burning. ‘I have to give them what I owe them. The casket, so they can fix their world, and myself, so they can have justice.

‘No!’ Lopt grabbed Loki’s other wrist, his grip on both tightening until it was painful. ‘I won’t let you go like this!’

‘It’s the only thing I can do,’ said Loki, voice wavering so much he wasn’t sure the last few words had been intelligible.

‘It’s not!’ Lopt was crying, making no effort to stop the tears running down his cheeks. ‘I didn’t want you to see Jotuns as people so that you’d see everyone as a person but you. I’m sorry.’

Loki jerked against the grip on his wrists, he had enough guilt of his own without taking Lopt’s on as well, and his voice snapped out, cold and ragged, ‘Let go of me.’ Lopt’s hands jerked back as if they’d been burned. ‘Kneel.’ Lopt’s legs folded under him at the tone of command, the push of will in Loki’s voice. Loki’s voice became softer, no longer giving orders, but still just as cold. ‘Now tell me how forgivable I am, how much you understand.’

Lopt’s eyes were wide and stricken, but he met Loki’s gaze, and deep down Loki could see a flickering spark of anger. ‘I’ll forgive you for this just as soon as it’s over. But I won’t forgive you for throwing your life away. You’re not afraid of not being forgiven, you’re afraid of going back home and finding nothing’s changed, that everyone treats you the same as they always did and you’re still unhappy and confused. And you’d rather run away from it all than face up to the fact that you could change it.’

‘I’m not running away. I’m facing the consequences,’ said Loki. His voice sounded remote to his
own ears.

‘If you want to die it’s not even a punishment,’ Lopt snarled. ‘You don’t deserve death.’

‘I don’t want to die,’ said Loki. He didn’t want to live with forgiveness he didn’t deserve, with kindness from people who were ashamed of him. But he wished he could have made another falconskin, one that wasn’t sluggish on the turns, and he wished he could have seen how Jane’s research turned out and maybe collaborated on a way to move Muspel giants, and seen that silly pirate movie Lopt had been talking about, and gone adventuring with Thor to see how deeply his attitude had really changed. It wasn’t that there was nothing left he wanted to do with his life, there was nothing left he deserved to do. ‘And your attempt at manipulation is transparent. You are forbidden to leave the apartment. You are forbidden to phone, or otherwise contact, anyone outside the apartment. If they choose to imprison me rather than executing me, I’ll release you from there.’ Lopt’s hands moved convulsively against the floor as he tried to reach for Loki. ‘You may stand up.’

Lopt stumbled to his feet, swiping away the tears that were blinding him with the back of his hand. ‘I hate you for using this to stop me saving you.’

Loki closed his eyes. ‘I know.’ The falconskin flared to life, blue-green light encasing him, and he stepped into extradimensional space.
Chapter 16

Thor started forward with a cry as Loki disappeared, then stopped himself and turned to look around, forcing his mind past the dismal conviction that it had all gone wrong again. He'd desperately wanted to offer Loki safe return home, amnesty, but he wasn't sure he could promise that on Odin's behalf and he wasn't sure it would be fair or right if he could.

At least no one was frozen or severely hurt, thanks to Freya and Jack Frost and perhaps to his own efforts to increase the temperature in the room. He should probably stop that now. He could hear the 'climate control' systems' labored groaning. The humans were mostly heading off for medical attention, but they were all walking even if some were helping each other. Coulson didn't look exactly well, but he didn't look like he intended to go anywhere, either. Next to him, Bruce looked a little wild-eyed, probably more from worrying that he'd become the Hulk reflexively than anything else. Thor was not unaccustomed to the idea of berserkers, but it would perhaps have been an awkward place for one.

Freya, dripping and slightly wan, picked herself up and began casting healing spells.

Thor went to Jane, who was still wrapped around her precious notebook, curled up against the wall. When she raised her head as if exhausted, he saw that she was frightfully pale and blood was dripping from her nose. 'Jane.' His heart clenched. How had he not noticed? He'd been focussed on Loki, had thought she was only staying out of the way to protect the possession she'd told Nari was in danger. 'Are you... you are not well. Did he harm you?'

'Are you all right?' Jack was asking Steve Rogers, in an undertone.

Steve smiled, a little hollow-eyed. 'I don't remember much of being frozen,' he said, which was not exactly an answer. 'I didn't know you could do that.'

Jack let it pass. 'I didn't know I could do that!' He frowned. 'We should get you to medical.'

'I'm fine, I just--' Thor stopped listening at this point.

Jane giggled, rather unsteadily, and placed the notebook carefully on the one remaining patch of dry floor before clamping a hand over her nose. 'He said to get out of his way or he'd do something I wouldn't like. Then he picked me up and moved me. I think he liked me. Oh God....' Her head flopped back against the wall; Thor got a hand behind it just in time and tipped it forward again so she wouldn't choke.

'Jane....'

'He came to my lab. Earlier today. We actually almost had a nice talk. I think he's glad I didn't kill you with my car.' Her eyelids fluttered as if she were trying to stay awake. 'I messed up. I'm sorry. But he didn't do anything to me. Just everybody else. It was the c-communication spell....' She started shivering. 'Knew it from last time. But I had to call you.'

'It wasn't actually a bad idea,' Freya said, kneeling beside them in a sweep of flower-and-spice scents. She pinched the bridge of Jane's nose sharply, and the flow of blood stopped. 'Although you are going to have to rest for a while.'

Jane looked up at her. 'Did you,' she began, then looked uncertain, then plunged ahead anyway. 'Did you let him go?'
'I did,' said Freya. Everyone stared at her, and she looked around coolly, regal despite the sopping wet gown clinging to her. 'He was thinking, at last,' she said. 'He'll have gone back to the elder Loki. A talk with him is very likely the best thing for him at the moment.'

'Then we should be leaving,' Nari said, interrupting the consternation before any of the sceptical-looking Midgardians could speak up. 'We left a storm going on Jotunheim that is probably still under the influence of Thor's emotions.'

Thor winced slightly. He didn't want to leave Jane, and he wanted to ask more about what she and Loki had said to each other and what Freya was thinking, but... Nari did have a point. That could be dangerous, as tumultuous as he was feeling. More so than if he'd withdrawn from it altogether, as then Jotunheim's own weather-workers could manipulate it more easily.

'Then by all means, you'd better go--' Freya broke off and swore in a manner that would have appalled the Vane who'd remonstrated with her over 'wilting'.

'What?' Thor asked, alarmed.

Freya's eyes were unfocussed, or focussed somewhere that wasn't in the room. 'I think he's just gone somewhere else.'

Nari frowned. 'Where?'

'I don't know,' Freya snapped. 'As you can see, I didn't follow him in the first place. But I got a very good "look" at his falconskin -- I still can't believe they did that -- and he's just made a second trip.'

'That leaves him little time to have talked to our uncle,' said Thor, frowning.

'Thor,' said Nari.

'I know.' Freya was frowning. 'But Nari's right. You need to go. I'll trace where your brother went from here and deal with that; you get back to Jotunheim.'

Thor wanted badly to protest, but they were right. And at least the colour had come back into Jane's face, even if she still looked drained. He kissed her lightly on the lips, got a shaky smile in return, and then stood and offered his hand to Nari, looking again at Freya and searching for words. 'Deal kindly with him, if you can,' he said at last.

Freya rolled her eyes. 'I will try. Go.'

Nari pulled him into colour-shot darkness, and they retraced their path of moments before: back to the nearest convenient Bifrost site on Earth in seconds, then a shout to Heimdall and two quick trips that deposited them back on Jotunheim.

One of Jotunheim's strange electrical bees landed on Thor as soon as he returned to the site of the storm, its wings a buzzing whine, and was evidently in an ill temper as it promptly tried to sting him. Thor ignored the tiny spark-shock as he began wrestling the weather under better control than his own emotions, but he was unsurprised when Byleist loomed over him as he was turning the storm out toward open land.

'Just what was that about?' Byleist asked. They had mostly been avoiding each other, as Thor's presence on Jotunheim was unofficial, but Byleist had -- somewhat to Thor's surprise -- also turned out to be a weather-worker.

'An emergency.' Thor thought for a few seconds before admitting, 'Loki showed himself on Earth.'
Byleist looked at him sharply. 'What did he do?'

'Visited SHIELD.' Thor sighed. 'Escaped Freya's grasp.' And went... somewhere, apparently. Maybe she knew where, by now. He didn't mention that part.

'Escaped--' Byleist frowned. 'Of course. He does still have the casket, doesn't he.' He gave the storm another push of his own. 'To my understanding, though, it's not exactly subtle. Could someone not find him that way?'

'Freya said something about that,' Thor replied, deliberately vague. 'I couldn't stay.'

Byleist gave him a hard look, then turned abruptly as a breathless messenger arrived.

'Your Majesty. You're needed at the palace. Loki Odinson is offering surrender.'

Byleist sucked in a breath, turned back to look at Thor -- who stood open-mouthed, mind in complete shock -- and then said to the messenger, "Tell them I'm coming," and set off on foot. The messenger merely vanished.

Thor thought about dispersing the storm, or at least letting go of it. Then he hurried after Byleist without doing either.

Byleist glanced back at him and Nari once, eyebrows drawn together. 'I think I believe you were surprised,' he muttered. (Thor half expected this to be followed with 'No one would look that idiotically astonished on purpose;' then realized that was more Loki's line and he wasn't sure why it had come to mind. Byleist was Loki's younger brother by birth, even if he didn't know it, but the family resemblance wasn't exactly overwhelming.) 'What will you do?'

'I have no idea,' Thor said honestly. 'At this point I have no idea what he's doing. But he is my brother.'

Byleist huffed out a long breath and didn't pursue the subject. As they neared the palace, more bees started appearing, swirling around him. Thor collected his own eddy of them, which he eyed with some suspicion, but they didn't settle on him, whereas they kept landing on Byleist and staying there.

Thor finally couldn't resist asking, 'Are you collecting the bees to make an impression on him or something?'

Byleist glanced back irritably. 'They sense the lightning. Farbauti gave them to me when I showed ability with storms. Didn't anyone give you --' He broke off. 'Ah, Asgardian bees use toxins, don't they?'

'And they disembowel themselves to leave the weapon behind in their foe,' Thor agreed.

'How bizarrely impractical,' Byleist muttered. Thor told himself he had greater concerns than being offended on behalf of Asgard's bee population. Like what Loki was thinking. Or, as that remained a mystery to Thor nearly as often as Loki claimed the reverse, what Loki might be about to do.

Loki was waiting, in the same place they'd stood and disputed with Laufey. He was still dressed as he had been moments ago, in casual Midgardian dark grey and green. He looked Asgardian instead of Jotun again and very, very pale. Thor winced and halted as Byleist continued past and turned, everyone else's attention following him as he seated himself on the throne.

'Loki Odinson,' he grated. The bees hummed... more than hummed, a dull roar now. More of them seemed to be coming from all directions to swirl around the area in a cloud, like a swarm that hadn't
quite settled. Loki focussed briefly on them and then on the carpet of them on Byleist's body, looking bewildered, then jerked his eyes back to Byleist's face. 'You come to Jotunheim and ask an audience with me?'

Loki moistened his lips and said, 'I come to Jotunheim to surrender myself and make what amends I can.' He passed his hands one over the other, and the casket appeared between them. Blue crept up his hands and into his face.

The murmur among the assembled Jotuns rose above the wings of the bees.

Byleist stood up, very slowly, incredulity plain on his face. He walked down to Loki, towering over him, and placed his hands on either side of the casket. Loki's fell away, and he stumbled back.

Byleist raised the Casket of Ancient Winters over his head.

The murmur grew to a roar.

Loki paced the apartment, trying, frantically, to think. There had to be a way out. He'd agreed to this, yes, but surely the boy couldn't have been that thorough. He'd forgotten for more than a day to order Loki not to kill him.

There wasn't. Not one he could think of. He wrenched the outer door open, heedless (not thinking) of who might see him, but couldn't make himself step outside. The runes on his skin felt tight, burning as cold as Niflheim. He tilted his head back but couldn't form Heimdall's name, let alone shout it. He couldn't push from his mind the reason to strip away the boy's concealments that diverted Heimdall's attention from the apartment.

He couldn't find a way out, and he was going to lose the boy, it had all gone wrong in a way that had never even occurred to him (again, it always did) and everyone would--

...He was being infected by the boy's viewpoint. No one would blame him this time, and for a moment he almost understood why the boy was going, because that almost made it worse.

He sank down next to the ash tree the boy should never have been able to grow. They'd had to repot it several times and now there was room to sit next to it in the container, arms looped around the slender ragged trunk. Although salt water, he thought hazily, was probably not very good for it.

He'd barely sat down when the air ripped open and Freya stalked in, from kitchen to living room. 'Loki! Where did he go?' He sat up abruptly; she frowned. 'Are you all right?'

'Jotunheim.' The word was out before he realised he could say it, that he'd only been forbidden from talking to people outside the apartment, and his next sentence came out so fast it almost tripped over itself. 'You have to tell Heimdall, he's gone to surrender and they'll kill him.'

'He's what?' Any other time Freya's incredulity might have been comical. She lifted her chin slightly, and he felt the boy's concealing spellwork shatter. 'Heimdall! Tell Odin his child has gone to surrender on Jotunheim.' She glanced at Loki. 'We could use a lift, too.'

'I can't,' Loki realised he was still curled in a plant pot clinging to the tree. Freya hadn't commented, either because it was less urgent than just about anything else or because she was a Vane and taking comfort in trees didn't seem odd to her. He stood up, still with one hand resting on the bark. 'I can't leave the apartment or talk to anyone outside it.'

Freya rubbed a hand over her face and sighed, then said, 'Never mind the bridge,' to Heimdall and
sat down on the edge of the container, wringing out her hair over the roots. 'He expected you to warn us if you could. Of course. Then, is there anything else I should relay?'

'You could still go and help,' said Loki, although truthfully he didn't want to be alone right now. He sat down on the edge of the container as well, trying to slow his racing thoughts enough to pick out anything that might help. 'He's taken the casket.' No, that might be useful to know, but it wouldn't help them save the boy. 'He decided Jotuns aren't monsters, but that he is anyway because of what he did before.' Loki shivered, bowing his head. 'I didn't mean it to turn out like this.'

'Perhaps I shouldn't have let him go.' Freya put a hand on the tree trunk, looking up at it curiously. 'I expected him to come talk to you, settle down and perhaps consider returning to Asgard, not have a crisis of conscience and rush off to make reparations.' She pulled her gaze from the branches and looked at him. 'I'm not blaming you.'

'I should have been able to say something to stop him. But I didn't see it coming at all, I still don't understand why he'd do it.' The link with Heimdall through Freya was a second chance, if he was able to find those elusive words to send to the boy that would stop him doing this then he still could. But he had no idea what to say.

'Because he is young and dramatic and has Odin's sense of honor without his pragmatism.'

Loki blinked. 'Do you know him?'

She laughed at that, not happily. 'Yes, though not terribly well. He and Thor and my daughters used to visit each other. I taught him basic fertility spells--' Her nails tapped the bark. 'Although this is still something of a surprise.'

'To me as well,' said Loki. 'He spent days only sleeping a few hours at a time, pouring magic into it.'

'I was furious when I realized what you two were doing.'

Any other time that comment would have got a grin. 'You know I live to annoy you, but it wasn't actually my idea this time.' It came out flat, awkward.

'I am not sure I should believe that,' Freya said, almost lightly. She sat erect and fierce, as if she might pounce on something at any moment, like one of her cats at home. As if the problem invigorated her even before she could do anything about it. 'You're good at planting ideas in people's heads.'

Loki winced at the choice of phrase, tears starting again even though he knew both that she didn't blame him and that she'd been talking about something else entirely.

'Oh, Loki....' Freya let the words out on a sigh, then leaned over and kissed him on the lips, soft and open-mouthed and for her relatively brief, before sitting up again. She might as well have just patted him on the shoulder. 'Sigyn will probably go,' she added, after a moment. 'Byleist's been listening to her.'

'That's good. I'm glad she'll be there.' Maybe not quite as much as he wished she was here. Despite Freya's attempt at comforting him they simply weren't close enough for him to cling to her the way he felt like doing.

'Mm.' Freya did not say that might save the boy's life. 'I don't suppose he grafted part of his life to the tree, or anything like that?'

Loki gave her an incredulous look. 'Is that even a real thing?'
She glanced over sharply, then shrugged. 'It's not common. It was my first guess about Idunn, though.'

'No, neither of us would have had any idea how to do that. He's...emotionally attached to it.' Loki patted the bark of the tree affectionately. 'Really, I think he needed a pet.'

Freya's lips flexed in a faint smile as she watched the motion. 'It's hard to put that much into something and not get attached.' A slight pause. 'Evidently that's part of what they did to him, to fit him for Asgard's climate at that age.'

'He doesn't know that, does he?' asked Loki. 'I thought it was a glamour at first, before I realised how deep it went.'

'I don't see how he could know. If I am reading correctly through Odin's pride and reluctance to explain anything, he was about half conscious by the time he told even part of the truth, and Frigga doesn't seem to have gone into much detail without him. And of course when he's holding half a planet's worth of ice magic it drives the change off him.'

'If -' A pause for a breath that just escaped becoming a sob. 'At some point I am going to make Odin tell him everything. Or make Odin tell me everything and pass it on. Every time there are gaps in his knowledge he fills them in with the worst thing possible.'

'I do believe you might be the only person who could get "everything" out of Odin.'

'I'm very persistent when I want to be.'

Freya nodded agreement, and an uneasy silence grew for some moments before her head turned abruptly toward him. Loki looked down and saw what she'd seen, before he felt it; the runes softened and blurred, then ran, as if they'd melted, and vanished entirely. The skin under them tingled as if the blood had just come back into it.

Loki stared at his wrists, the unmarked blue skin there leaving him shaken and dizzy. He couldn't think anything beyond, *Angrboda and Ymir, please, no*. It couldn't have happened that quickly, surely, but they would hardly have needed a trial. Everyone knew what the boy had done, why wait to kill him for it?

He clutched at the tree for support now, afraid he would slide to the floor without it, as he tried to jolt his brain out of its empty panic. There must be another reason, maybe, he had to believe he hadn't failed completely. 'Ask - ask Heimdall. Is the boy dead?' he said.

'Ask him yourself,' Freya retorted, seizing him by the arm and whisking him off abruptly to a desert's midday heat, almost as dizzying as his thoughts. Nothing stopped them. *Heimdall!*

Loki grabbed at her arm for balance, blinking in the sudden sunlight. They were going to Jotunheim, and he didn't know whether it would be too late to matter, but at least he would be there. He didn't ask Heimdall in case it distracted him from just getting them there as quickly as possible. The Bifrost mark was right under their feet and he'd never been so impatient for the bridge itself to arrive.

It did, in a roar. The rush of light took them to the rebuilt control chamber -- which didn't seem to have changed much. Odin and Frigga sat astride Sleipnir, who lowered his head and snorted into Loki's hair. They looked grim, and impatient. Sigyn threw herself into Loki's arms.

Loki's arms tightened around Sigyn, even as his gaze fixed on Odin. 'Why are you still here? Is he dead? Why didn't you leave in time to stop him?'
'He lives,' Odin said shortly. 'There were orders to be given in case we do not return. But your bonds broke when he gave up the casket.'

The light took them again. And set them down, rewriting its mark, in the midst of Byleist's open-air court.

Byleist did have the casket in his hands. There was an expression of wonder on his face, and the casket shone with a cold white brilliance greater than it had ever evinced for the boy, who had never entirely liked using it. The boy was before him, looking small and pale and so washed out by the light that it was hard to tell which form he was in, but still on his feet.

Byleist turned his head, not all the way to them at first but to glance toward two shorter figures at the inner edge of the crowd. (Nari was nearly managing to loom despite being smaller than most of the frost giants there. It took a moment for Loki to identify the other, blond one as a glamoured Thor.) Then he completed the motion, studied Loki himself for a moment, then raised his eyes toward Odin. 'Allfather.'

'King Byleist.' Odin's voice was level, but tight, and his fingers were white on the reins.

Loki let go of Sigyn and raced towards the boy. It was stupid, they were in the middle of a tense political situation, they only had seven people with them in the midst of Byleist's seat of power, but until he had touched the boy he wasn't going to be able to believe he was alright. He managed to get his arms around the younger Loki before the boy or anyone else caught up enough to object, and let out a shuddering breath at the feel of the boy's body - warm, in his Asgardian form while Loki was in Jotun form - and solid in his arms.

The boy's eyes flicked back and forth between Loki and Byleist. He was as stiff in Loki's arms as the tree had been. 'Your bonds dissolved when the casket left my possession,' he said, sounding unnaturally calm.

'Yes,' said Loki. 'I thought you were dead. Please don't make me go through that twice in one day.'

'I see you managed to keep hating me,' the boy said, and there was a faint tremor in his voice there, 'for all of... less than ten minutes.'

'I told you I would forgive you as soon as it was over.'

'Not for this.' Back to sounding distant, and the last word drowned in a rumble of thunder overhead. Byleist was draped in bees, a sure sign of a Jotun weatherworker, but Loki rather suspected that this storm belonged to Thor.

The temperature of the air dropped sharply, and the glow around Byleist spread until everyone was lit in cold blue, with the hovering bees casting huge fleeting shadows over their faces. The cold seemed to make them more lively, as if they had been torpid with heat before. The ice underfoot had a sudden crispness that hadn't been there before, the air felt drier as moisture was sucked from it and frozen. It wasn't intentionally dramatic, Byleist could have done this with far more awe-inspiring effects, but what he was doing didn't need effects and he wasn't about to waste power on them. The raw magic emanating from him spoke for itself. Loki wondered how far it stretched, whether the Casket of Ancient Winters in the hands of Jotunheim's King could truly heal the whole planet at once. A light snow, small and hard flakes like powdered sugar, began to fall.

When the light faded enough for them to see Byleist clearly, tired lines had joined the clan markings on his face. 'Your transgressions against Jotunheim have been great,' he said, looking straight at the boy. Loki let go and backed off a little, one hand still remaining on the boy's shoulder, although he
wasn't sure which of them it was for the sake of. 'But,' Byleist continued. 'Your gift of reconciliation is also great.'

The boy opened his mouth. Loki squeezed his shoulder hard, fingers digging in, without much hope that this would convince him not to speak. Apparently Byleist was smart, in spite of being raised by Laufey. Loki decided arbitrarily to credit Sigyn.

'My sons rarely do anything by half measures,' said Odin. He inclined his head to Byleist -- Sleipnir put them about on a level. He looked greyer than usual, with the fine flecks of snow beginning to drift in his hair and the ridges of his armour. 'And Asgard would offer further gifts, for his sake.'

Loki breathed again. Odin evidently couldn't figure out how to say the right thing to his son, but he'd just acknowledged Jotunheim's right to the casket, reinforced Byleist's cast on the situation, and made his own position very clear. The boy shut his mouth and looked dazed and vulnerable.

Byleist moved his hands together and the casket vanished, but even so something of it seemed to stay with him. Not its magic, but his sense of its power. He was now a king who could fulfil his responsibilities to his people and make Jotunheim stand as strong as any other world, and that confidence lingered. 'I invite you to visit at a time better suited to hospitality and bring any further gifts you would wish to offer. For now, this is enough, and there is too much I must do to entertain you as one king should another, so I must ask you and your son to leave.'

'I will be pleased to meet with you at a later time.' Odin beckoned to them, and Loki steadied the boy on the short walk past Byleist and to Odin's stirrup. Frigga dismounted to clutch at him. There was a startled murmur from the watching Jotuns as Thor and Nari joined them, the glamour suddenly gone, and then the world was light and coloured wind again.
Chapter 17

Heimdall brought them in, looking as impassive as ever. The control room looked the same as it always had as well, as if it might never have been broken. Loki wondered whether he should apologise to Heimdall for freezing him, or whether the fact that Heimdall had been trying to stab him at the time meant he didn’t need to be sorry. Odin nodded to him and they continued on, walking onto the part of the Bifrost that stretched between Heimdall’s control chamber and Asgard where it was too close to their planet to risk its continual presence as pure energy.

The glittering trail stretched out in front of them, winding a safe way through extra-dimensional space that nothing deadly could approach. The last time Loki had been on the Bifrost he’d been fighting Thor, seeing it smashed, falling. The stars beneath him - not real stars, some of them were planets and others were alive, and he could tell which these days - were the same as the ones he had fallen into then. If he looked down he could almost trace his own fall, the way he had tumbled, terrified, so far off the safe tracks he’d painstakingly mapped out, thoughts a jumble of adult despair and childish once I’m dead they’ll be sorry, before the instinct to live pushed him to catch himself and make his shaken way back to a place he recognised.

Thor’s hand gently took his shoulder and steered him inward and Loki realised he’d been walking almost on the very edge. Falling now wouldn’t have hurt him, he was still wearing an unactivated falconskin, but the gesture of concern was enough to break something and Loki crumpled to kneel on the Bifrost as it became a smudge of light through tear filled eyes.

Thor knelt as well, a blurry presence in front of Loki, and put his hands on Loki’s shoulders. ‘Brother,’ he began.

‘I’m not - I thought I’d have to die to make things right and I’m so relieved I didn’t,’ Loki managed. In the background he could hear Lopt saying something sharp in an undertone. ‘And you were all there.’

Odin’s hand closed over one of Thor’s, resting with it on Loki’s shoulder for a moment before Thor moved away to let Odin take his place, and Loki blinked up at him trying to clear the tears enough to see his Father’s face. ‘I am proud of you,’ said Odin, quietly. ‘For wanting to put things right. And more relieved than I can say that you are still alive.’

Even though Loki knew perfectly well that Lopt had just prodded Odin into saying that he could hear nothing but sincerity in Odin’s voice. Maybe he was just too tired and emotional for cynicism, but he clutched at Odin like a lifeline and when Odin awkwardly put an arm around him Loki pressed his face against his Odin’s shoulder and didn’t try to stop the tears. Everyone else was gathering as well. Frigga stroked his hair, Sleipnir, maybe attempting some horsey comfort of his own, tried to eat it, and gradually Loki’s breathing evened out leaving a calm that was not the earlier numbness of just trying to get through his life’s last moments without breaking down. Now he had broken down, and his life would go on, and none of it had been as bad as he feared.

Loki wiped away the tears and stumbled to his feet, feeling better but even more exhausted. ‘Thank you,’ he croaked.

Frigga put an arm around his waist, possibly for physical support as much as emotional. ‘I think you need to go to bed when we get home,’ she said. ‘You too,’ she added to Lopt, who, when Loki glanced over, was holding tightly to Sigyn and looking as tired as Loki was.
‘Save your maternal instincts for where they’re needed,’ Lopt said, lightly.

‘Does that mean you’ve finally started acting like an adult?’ Frigga teased back.

Lopt grinned, faint but real. ‘I’ve been an exemplary one.’

‘Bed sounds good,’ Loki admitted. It did and tomorrow - well, he didn’t know what he’d do tomorrow. But he could work that out when it arrived.

Bed sounded good to Thor, too, but he had obligations to discharge -- and he probably would have lain awake anyway, had he tried. His nerves were thrumming with a mixture of lightning and jubilation, worry and the awkward standing-down of a crisis resolved without a fight.

He watched his brother all the way off the Bifrost, first. He believed Loki when he assured them he was glad not to have died, and he was grateful for the words and intensely grateful today that Loki liked to explain things, and had done it then. He also knew very well that his brother was now more than a thousand years old, even if the celebration did seem at once yesterday and, with all that had happened, a long time ago -- and Odin having found him explained why they were so close in age, nearly twins by Asgard’s standards, where most parents waited at least a few decades between children.

And the point was, Loki was perfectly capable of walking along a broad bridge, even dead on his feet, and especially with their mother to lean on, but Thor couldn’t stop himself from watching anyway. Even though Loki would probably be exasperated by Thor’s hovering and accuse him of acting like a mother hen, if he were more alert to it. Just about the only person Thor would take that from, too, just as Loki wouldn’t put up with ‘cow’ jokes about his helmet from anybody else. Thor had been surprised at how casual some people on Midgard could be about comparing people’s behavior to that of animals. He’d confused Jane once by asking if there were more shapeshifters around than he’d thought.

When Loki had been seen into bed and the other Loki had gone off with Aunt Sigyn, Thor turned to his parents. ‘I should return to Midgard,’ he said quietly. ‘They should be told of this.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Frigga said, looking puzzled, ‘but is it really that urgent?’

Thor blinked at her, startled, then heard Freya’s musical wry laugh and realized that -- of course -- they had hardly stopped to explain anything, and Loki had been making a point of frustrating Heimdall’s far-seeing. ‘He tried to capture Jane’s notebook. It’s why Nari and I went to Earth in such a hurry. Jane called us.’

Odin grimaced slightly. ‘How bad was it?’

‘Not very,’ said Freya. ‘No one is dead or permanently maimed -- and yes,’ she said, forestalling whatever Odin had opened his mouth again to say, ‘I am accounting for mortal recuperation and medicine. I also performed a few healings before I left.’

Odin inclined his head to her. Frigga looked relieved.

‘I’ll go with you,’ Freya informed Thor, then looked at Nari. ‘Do you want to come?’

‘I am not a diplomat,’ Nari replied, drawing a faint smile from Thor at the echo of Nari’s first meeting with SHIELD. ‘Thank you, but I think I’ll tell the tale to my siblings.’

It was a swift trip back. Heimdall raised an eyebrow under his helmet but didn’t need to ask
questions now, so their first real halt was at the SHIELD security check, where Thor apologised for bowling them over in his earlier rushed entrance.

He and Freya took the stairs to the laboratory, where Fury straightened and turned, nearly managing to loom. ‘Prince Thor of Asgard. Lady Freya of Vanaheim.’ He paused, eye fixing on Freya. ‘I heard a report that I think must have been a misunderstanding. That you’d said something about letting him go?’

‘I did, General.’ Freya smiled formally at him. A muscle in Fury’s temple twitched. ‘All things considered, I thought letting him retreat was the best choice at the time.’

‘Loki is at home now,’ said Thor. ‘He surrendered the Casket of Ancient Winters to Jotunheim’s king and returned voluntarily with us to Asgard. He has abandoned his plans to conquer Earth.’

Fury stared at him. ‘He told you this?’

Thor blinked. ‘He came home.’

Fury rubbed a hand over his face. ‘And I guess that tells you a lot.’

It did. ‘Yes, of course.’ As it apparently told Fury somewhat less, Thor added slowly, ‘He has returned to our family instead of trying to set himself apart from us. He has offered recompense and reconciliation to Jotunheim rather than continuing to protest that the people he was born to are monsters... as I’m afraid we both believed throughout our childhood.’ He looked Fury squarely in the eye. ‘Asgard will not permit Earth to be conquered. And I believe neither Loki nor the Jotun king is likely to try now.’

‘Well, I hope not.’ Fury sighed. ‘And you’re the one who told us he was planning it in the first place, or we might not even have known he was here’ This was likely true; they hadn’t been able to find him even when they knew to look. Loki had evidently been very quiet about taking apart falconskins and growing impossible trees. ‘But isn’t this an awfully abrupt change of heart?’

‘Less sudden than it seems to you, I think,’ said Freya. ‘How is the scholar?’

Fury frowned at the sudden new topic. ‘Jane?’ He glanced up at Thor. ‘She seems to be all right.’ Back to Freya. ‘She said you healed her. Medical couldn’t find anything wrong, but she was exhausted, so they put her to bed when they were done with the tests. Not that long ago.’

‘May I see her?’

‘Could I stop you?’

Thor paused before answering, at first baffled and then thinking, coming up for air from his preoccupation with family matters. It was a bit of a relief. But of course Fury was on edge. His pride had been stung -- partly Thor’s fault -- and he was worried for his people. ‘Because of the trust I have for you, yes,’ Thor told him. ‘Is there a reason to?’

Fury stared at him for some seconds, chin tilted downward and his one eye rolled up to meet Thor’s. The missing one gave him, to Thor’s mind, an air of longer experience than he probably had. Then he sighed and said, ‘Not really. Although I’ve heard you don’t have the best history with medical facilities.’

Thor rather hoped he wasn’t blushing. ‘Earth’s are somewhat different from the ones I know in Asgard, and I misunderstood the situation. I do not plan to disrupt the one here.’
'You know where it is, I think?'

Thor nodded and took his leave of Fury. As they set out, Freya murmured, 'Is there a tale here, and how much mead must I offer to get you to tell it?'

Thor covered his eyes briefly, then gave her a rueful smile. ‘I’ll tell it, but I may ask for the mead later as consolation. My first meeting with Jane and her colleagues was tumultuous. It was when Father had just banished me and made me mortal. I inadvertently alarmed Darcy, and she felled me with one of this realm’s weapons. They took me to the nearest equivalent to a healing room -- but I did not recognise this, and it seemed to me that I’d been attacked and awakened in a strange place where people attempted to manhandle me and spoke of taking my blood.’ He looked away. ‘They subdued me with drugs and tied me down. My second attempt to escape was quieter and somewhat more successful.’

‘I can see why you were concerned,’ Freya said. Her tone was tinged with merriment, but not altogether unsympathetic. ‘Under the circumstances, it sounds as if you did rather well.’

‘Less well if I had not encountered Jane again,’ he said wryly, ‘and if she had not been kind.’

Freya waved a hand. ‘It is one thing to manage the wilderness alone. It’s quite another to manage a city, even a little one, without knowing anyone. Though I am hardly surprised you made friends.’

They had arrived at the medical wing while speaking, and Thor strode up to the desk, offering the official there a warm smile. He could practically feel Freya being dazzling from half a step behind him. ‘Thor Odinson and Freya Njordsdottir,’ he said, ‘to see Dr. Jane Foster, if we may.’

‘You can do that,’ the official told them, frowning slightly. ‘Room M04. She was actually very emphatic about allowing visitors. Especially Thor. But she might be sleeping.’

‘She will sleep a great deal for the next few days,’ said Freya. ‘Perhaps we should ask her if she’d like to do so in Asgard instead. What formalities are required to release her from your care? Would it help that I treated her initial injuries?’

Thor glanced at her in surprise. The official frowned more deeply. ‘Lady Freya,’ she said, ‘I’m not sure what you’re getting at. Dr. Foster isn’t injured.’

‘I know,’ Freya said patiently. ‘I did just say I’d treated her.’

Thor smiled, carefully didn’t laugh, and gestured to indicate his intention before setting off.

He went first to the doctors’ break area and helped himself to a cup of coffee, then went looking for Jane’s room while he sipped it. The medical ward SHIELD maintained here at their scientific facility was a small one, mostly to deal with laboratory accidents, not long-term patients. Room M04 proved to be decorated in slightly warmer colours and held none of the medical equipment that surrounded most of the beds there. Jane lay on a bed less than knee-high from the floor, rather than high enough to work at while standing. Thor looked around and decided this might be where their doctors napped during long days or other periods of high alert. He knelt by the bed; there was just room to sit on the edge, but only because Jane took up little space, and he didn’t want to risk tipping it over. ‘Jane.’

She woke slowly; her eyelids flickered without actually parting several times, and her eyebrows drew together slightly. Thor began to suspect she’d forgotten what she was waking up for, so he called her name again.

This time her eyes opened, although she still looked rather bleary. ‘Wh-- Thor! What happened?’
‘Loki took the casket back to Jotunheim,’ he said. ‘Byleist acknowledged it as a gift of reconciliation, and we left in peace. He’s home now.’

Jane blinked at him a few times, then sniffed. ‘I think I need coffee to process this....’

Thor offered her his cup.

‘Oh, but you’re drinking that....’

‘I can get more. Or get you more.’ He smiled at her as she sat up and decided to take it after all.

‘Besides, it’s customary in Asgard to share cups between guests or couples.’

She took a sip, savored it even though it wasn’t very good coffee, and regarded him bright-eyed over the fragile paper rim. ‘I thought it was customary to throw them around.’

‘It depends on the occasion. Smashing them is mostly for emphasis.’

‘Mm. You’ll have to tell me when it’s appropriate.’ She drank again again and handed the cup back, and Thor put his arm around her. She snuggled into it. ‘So... that’s all okay? Loki’s not trying to take over Earth anymore, Jotunheim’s not starting it up again, we’re all friends now?’

‘Something like that. He is... he is home and acting like part of the family again.’

She rubbed her forehead. ‘Is it just me, or is this really sudden?’

Thor couldn’t help smiling. ‘General Fury said much the same, but less charmingly.’

‘Not just me, then. I mean... he was just here. Attacking people and trying to steal my notes.’

‘True.’ Thor turned the cup in his fingers. ‘He used the casket more expertly and less harshly than on Vanheim, but I am aware that is only so much help. I could apologise on his behalf, now, but I suspect you would rather hear it from him.’

Jane looked rather intrigued, around a yawn. ‘D’you think that’s likely?’

‘He seems to have decided -- rather abruptly, as you say -- to make everything right. I do not think he can have come here intending to return the casket. When next you speak, it would make sense for him to apologise. Especially if he hopes to discuss your work again.’ A pause. ‘Freya was suggesting that you could sleep as well in Asgard as here, and I could guarantee you a better bed. Would you like to come?’

She hesitated -- he wondered if she had experiments running, but he was fairly sure she shouldn’t be sleeping in laboratories. ‘I wouldn’t be in the way? Of the family stuff?’

‘I would like to have you there,’ he said sincerely.

She looked at him for a moment, then kissed his cheek and took a deep breath. ‘Guess I’d better pretend to be awake long enough to tell SHIELD, then.’

Thor grinned at her. ‘I think Freya is telling them. You need only consent.’

Jane chuckled. ‘And when Freya tells you something, you are told.’

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Thor had just put Jane to bed (she’d fallen asleep on the way off the Bifrost) when a messenger sprinted up to tell him the king and queen wanted him because Byleist had established a far-seeing
connection. He joined them in the throne room as the formal greetings were ending, to see Byleist, seated now on Jotunheim’s throne with the casket on his knees and his hands resting casually atop it. The image was slightly translucent and a bit glassy, as if seen through ice.

‘Ah,’ said Byleist. ‘Rym.’

Thor bowed shallowly. ‘I regret my lateness. I had an errand in Midgard.’

‘I did not exactly arrange a time in advance.’

‘Nonetheless, this is not so much unexpected as unexpectedly early,’ said Odin. Thor rather expected him to ask why, but he simply left the statement there.

‘I would prefer to go forwards better informed,’ said Byleist. ‘Your younger son has so far been volatile in his motivations and surprisingly effective in his actions. My planet has been nearly destroyed and then saved on his whim. So I think you’ll understand when I wish to know what he is thinking, and what is being done with him.’

Byleist, Thor thought, was not the only one. Although he supposed they could hardly say that.

‘I can understand your concerns, yes. If you want Loki’s own report of what he is thinking, you’ve called too early,’ said Odin. ‘Thus far, we’ve sent him to bed.’

‘Could I trust his own report of what he is thinking?’ asked Byleist. ‘And I doubt sending him to bed can be the whole of your solution.’

Odin paused for a moment, with an air more of thought than of hesitation. ‘I imagine you could, but he might not say much.’ He met Byleist’s gaze squarely for a long moment. ‘What I can tell you,’ he said gravely, ‘is that I had failed to realise how thoroughly the war dominated his perception of Jotunheim, in comparison to the prior millennia of friendlier relations. And that having fully considered his prior actions, his gift was sincere and made with little expectation of survival.’

‘The war dominated the perceptions of all of us born after it. If I hadn’t come to the throne needing your help I might never have discovered it didn’t have to,’ said Byleist. ‘I don’t doubt his sincerity. I doubt his stability.’

‘I admit that he has been very abrupt. I do believe he is calmer now; it may be somewhat more reassuring to you that he is also where we can keep an eye on him. Not to disparage my brother’s efforts in that vein.’

‘That is something,’ said Byleist. He considered Odin for a long moment. ‘I think you should know that many of my people are expecting you to punish him, since we returned him to you. Skadi is one of them, and somewhat imaginative in her suggestions, although I think she would stand up for your right not to.’

Thor stiffened slightly. He wasn’t surprised that there were people on Jotunheim who wanted Loki to suffer, but --

‘I thank you for the information,’ Odin replied. ‘I think it only fair to tell you, in turn, that I am much relieved to have him home,’ which Thor supposed was roughly as surprising as what Byleist had said, ‘and thank you for your forbearance.’

‘For what it’s worth,’ said Byleist, ‘and from a purely practical point of view, I am quite glad he will not be punished. Unless you intended to lock him away permanently I doubt punishment would do more than stir up trouble for all of us.’
'Then you are wise beyond too many of your elders, on many worlds.' Odin’s voice was a touch rueful.

‘Becoming king of a world in crisis forces one to be aware of the responsibilities of the role rather quickly,’ said Bylest dryly, then smiled, one hand curling over the casket on his lap. ‘I am looking forward to enjoying some of the privileges.’

‘I remember that.’ Odin didn’t quite smile back, but his expression did lighten. ‘And I do wish you joy of them.’

Bylest bowed his head, returning Odin’s not quite smile. ‘Since I am assured you will keep an eye on him, I think I know all that I could hope for. I will speak with you again, when Loki Odinson is awake.’

‘Until then.’ Odin bowed his head in return. ‘Farewell.’

The image melted away. Thor watched a breath of frost evaporate from the floor. ‘General Fury shares some of his concerns,’ he said, ‘although of course Loki has done rather less to Midgard.’ Aside from intruding on SHIELD’s research facilities, his preparations for conquest had evidently been very quiet.

‘I share some of his concerns,’ said Odin. ‘But I hope that encouraging Loki’s sense of responsibility will help him to be less volatile.’

‘And showing him he is loved,’ Frigga said mildly.

‘That as well.’
Chapter 18

Loki woke up in his own bed, the sheets almost ridiculously cool against his skin after the cheap ones he’d been sleeping on on Midgard, and sat up, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. Nothing had changed. His books were on a bookshelf covering the whole of one wall, shelves on the opposite wall contained ingredients, potions and half-made amulets. His desk and workbench were clear, but only because he never left anything out when he’d finished with it. A quill, slightly ragged at the end where he’d sucked it and enchanted to produce its own ink, was the only thing still on it.

Slightly to one side, in front of the window, were two tall saplings almost large enough to need planting outside. They were dark and ragged, speckled with beautiful flowers and the smell of snow drifted from them to fill the room. Loki frowned. ‘Either I’m seeing double, or someone has been propagating my tree,’ he said out loud to the empty room. He walked over and checked the soil, starting with Tree and moving on to Tree Junior. Both were moist, someone had watered them after bringing them here.

Outside he could hear the sounds of Asgard going about its daily business, quite different from the sounds of Midgard. Horses’ hooves, laughter, the distant clash of weapons from the sparring grounds. He patted Tree and went into the shower room to clean off before going to find Lopt.

As he passed through the palace garden he noticed a young woman reading a book, and something was just off enough about her for him to take a second look. There were blotches of blue skin over her bare arms and he realised who she must be just as she looked up.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘I was looking for your father.’

Leikin smiled and Loki realised with a shock that she was pretty, her piebald appearance making it easy to miss. ‘He’s in Mother’s room, and I wouldn’t disturb either of them if I were you,’ she said. A distant cheer made Loki glance quizzically towards the training grounds and Leikin, catching it, added, ‘That would be our brothers having fun. Vali’s such a show off when he gets the chance.’

‘So is Thor,’ said Loki, finding himself sharing a fondly exasperated smile over the foibles of older brothers.

‘They’re probably having a great time then,’ said Leikin. She closed her book and stretched. ‘Shall we go over and see if they’re nearly done yet?’

Loki hesitated. Half of Asgard was probably over there, and they’d all know what he’d done. But he’d have to face them sometime. ‘We might as well,’ he said. As the two of them started towards the sparring ground, Leikin still holding the book absently with her index finger in it to mark her place, he asked, ‘What were you reading?’

‘Nine flowers for an easy childbirth,’ said Leikin. ‘Freya lent it to me.’

‘It looks rather long for covering just nine of them,’ Loki remarked.

Leikin laughed. ‘It covers growing them as well as using them. Some of them take rather a lot of magic.’

‘You can do fertility magic?’ asked Loki, then felt foolish. She was half Asgardian. ‘I’m sorry, I thought -’

‘No, I can’t,’ said Leikin, waving her free hand. ‘But Freya is convinced I should be able to if you
can and it’s easier to humour her. Besides, the theory is interesting.’

Loki laughed. ‘It’s usually easier to humour Freya,’ he agreed. It was strange how at ease he felt with Leikin. Seeing Nari had made him feel jealous and displaced, but being around Leikin he just wanted to get to know her.

‘It’s not impossible that I can do fertility magic if I find the right way to approach it,’ said Leikin. ‘I can’t say I’ve put that much time into trying after completely failing the standard exercises. Maybe you could tell me how you made it work?’

‘I don’t think I did anything that different, Freya’s the one who taught me so I was using her technique. But Tree - the tree,’ he corrected himself, slightly embarrassed, ‘does show signs of having had ice magic used on it. I could go through the process in more detail if it won’t bore you?’

‘Please,’ said Leikin. ‘I am curious to see if I can make it work now.’

Which was why they reached the arena deep in a conversation about the technical aspects of fertility magic, and whether Loki was harnessing his natural talent for ice magic to bridge gaps in his ability with it.

Perhaps it was the conversation, or perhaps it was a desire to stay engaged with someone who seemed to like him for fear of looking up and finding other faces looking at him accusingly, but it wasn’t until they reached the arena that Loki gave it more than a cursory glance. Which was the only explanation he had for how he could have missed a huge, golden dragon. It was rearing, curved around the edge of the arena, body as far out as it could get, head tilted inward and snapping at Thor. Mjolnir caught it under the chin and it coiled around, reversing its whole body impossibly fast and knocking Thor down with its tail before sweeping back in with its head, jaws open. Loki bit down on an oath and lifted his arm, ice magic already gathering in his palm.

Leikin grabbed his wrist, laughing. ‘That’s Vali,’ she said. ‘How did you get all the way here without noticing a dragon?’

Loki let the magic fade, feeling embarrassed. On the arena Thor had rolled away, one arm bleeding slightly, and swung Mjolnir into a huge shoulder. The crowd cheered. ‘It was an interesting conversation!’ he protested.

‘It was a dragon!’ retorted Leikin.

‘I see what you mean about your brother showing off,’ said Loki. ‘Does he often do this?’

‘Mostly wolves,’ said Leikin. ‘Or bears. Dragons are his most impressive form, though.’

‘And do you change shape?’ asked Loki.

‘No. Do you?’ asked Leikin.

Loki looked down at the duel, Thor was using Mjolnir as a distance weapon now, forcing Vali to stay on the opposite side of the arena, but it was clear the stand off was going to break soon. ‘Am I not doing so now?’ he asked quietly.

Leikin patted his arm. ‘I suppose so,’ she said.

‘I never saw any of you in Asgard before,’ Loki said, not sure whether he was changing the subject or not. ‘I suppose you and Nari would have had difficulties, but does Vali just not like to visit?’
He took Father’s betrayal - what we thought was a betrayal - very hard,’ said Leikin. ‘And he’s always preferred the wilderness to cities.’

Mjonir flew towards Vali, half warding half testing, and he snaked his head under it, taking it on his shoulders and being knocked off his feet even as his jaws closed on Thor’s legs. There was a gasp from the crowd and then Thor called, ‘Surrender,’ and the crowd burst into cheers as the dragon gently laid him down. Thor was back on his feet almost at once, while Vali, now a man built along the same lines as Thor, needed Thor to help him to his. He slapped Thor on the back, grinning, and Loki saw Thor laugh.

‘He seems happy enough now,’ remarked Loki.

‘He had it out with Mother while we were all on Jotunheim, I’m hoping that means he won’t take it up with Father,’ said Leikin. ‘Knowing it wasn’t what we thought it was is a weight off all our minds. And we’re realising that things being awkward with Odin was never a good reason not to get to know our cousins.’

‘You’re not angry with Lopt?’ said Loki.

‘It’s been a while since I heard him use that name,’ said Leikin, and then was quiet for a moment. ‘No. It’s not his fault. He loves easily, but trust doesn’t come naturally to him. He survived too long by being suspicious.’

Loki nodded. Lopt’s life was disturbing to dwell on, mostly, selfishly, because it could easily have been his if Laufey had kept him. He didn’t want to be grateful to Odin for raising him, less out of resentment than a strange feeling that it made a complicated situation more complicated still. Towards the front of the arena he could see Thor’s friends talking together, Nari beside them. Thor waved at them before he and Vali disappeared to clean up, not seeing Loki at the back of the crowd. Loki hesitated, but decided he’d rather face them sooner than after avoiding them, and without Thor there.

‘Would you like to go and join your brother?’ he asked Leikin.

‘We might as well,’ said Leikin, looking at him searchingly. ‘And your friends.’

‘Yes,’ said Loki, turning and walking down between the thinning crowd. Most people didn’t notice him, to his surprise and relief, but it wasn’t until he was nearly at the bottom that he realised he was sending out a mild command for them not to. He pulled himself together and put a stop to it. He would face this.

Sif, vigilant even under these conditions, saw him first. Her body language shifted, a subtle increase in alertness, readiness. Fandral, Hogun and Volstagg echoed it a heartbeat later, before they even looked around, in a way that spoke of many shared adventures and made it suddenly more obvious Nari wasn’t really part of the group. Not because of any hostility, not because of the blue skin that Loki had nearly grown used to seeing on Lopt in the workshop, but because he didn’t move with them.

It made him miss them and those adventures, the feeling sudden and sharp in his throat, and it made him want to look over his shoulder, and that was when he realised he’d done it too. As if he were with them instead of the reason to watch.

Leikin had just time to look at Loki with concern before Fandral, ever dramatic, clutched at his heart. ‘Loki! I am out of practice with your habit of seeming to appear from nowhere.’

‘And I see you’ve become no more vigilant in my absence,’ said Loki. It wasn't much of a retort, and
the faint uncertainty in his voice robbed it of bite completely.

Fandral let out an annoyed huff, but there was laughter in it, whether that was friendly or just habit. Leikin exchanged nods with the rest of the group -- Loki supposed they must have met her sometime in the intervening months -- and crossed behind him to hug Nari.

'You look well,' Volstagg offered, after a brief awkward pause. Then he shattered the brief awkward pretense of normality as well by adding, 'Not particularly maniacal.'

Loki dropped his gaze. 'No,' he said. 'I'm sorry. You weren't the ones I was angry with, even then.' He thought that was true. It had been Odin and Thor he'd wanted to hurt, Thor's friends had just been caught in the crossfire. Although he had been angry that they'd chosen to believe the worst of him — anger not much mitigated at the time by the fact that they'd been perfectly right. 'Mostly,' he added, feeling honesty was called for and then feeling ridiculous for the amendment.

'You did not exactly look maniacal then either,' said Volstagg. 'Mostly....' He trailed off.

'Smug,' Hogun said. 'If you can be smug without looking like you are enjoying yourself.'

'There are times it's not wise to show vulnerability,' said Loki. 'Or that it doesn't seem wise.' Now might be one of them. The stilted words that were an attempt to hold onto his dignity still. But what else could he do? His remorse might be genuine, but he couldn't think of an expression of it that wouldn't feel artificial in one way or another. The tears were already shed and gone.

'It's just as well,' said Sif. 'Had you seemed at all worried, you might have got away with it.' A pause. 'Whatever you were actually trying to do.'

'You know what I was trying to do,' said Loki. Attempting to destroy a planet was many things, but subtle wasn't one of them. 'Are you angry?'

'In retrospect it didn't seem very organised,' Sif muttered. 'And yes. But I think we've all grown rather tired of being angry with you, too.'

'Anger is rather hard to hold onto for months at a time,' said Loki. 'I don't really know how I can make amends where you are concerned.' He'd betrayed their trust, but done them no actual harm that could be undone.

'Stay where we can see you,' Fandral suggested.

Volstagg scoffed loudly and swatted him for it. 'He argued longest in your favour,' he explained, and Loki winced.

Fandral rubbed his arm where the blow had landed. 'Are you planning any more dramatic gestures we should know about?'

'My plans at present shouldn't require any,' said Loki dryly. 'If you want to keep an eye on me you might have to come to Midgard, though,' he added. 'I believe I'm still helping Muspelheim, and the mortals have the knowledge I need.'

'They do?' Volstagg asked in surprise. 'Do you think they'll tell you?'

'I think one of them will tell Thor, if he asks on my behalf,' said Loki. 'Possibly only Thor, since she's rather protective of her notes.'

That got a general laugh; even Sif chuckled. 'Ah, the scholar Jane,' said Volstagg. 'You need not
seek her in another realm just now. Thor brought her here.'

'She is supposed to sleep most of the next few days, though,' Hogun put in.

'She is?' Loki couldn't help a glance behind him, in the direction of the palace, irrational as it was. 'I had rather a nice conversation with her. And then tried to steal her notes. So I suppose I'm on the same uncertain terms with her as with everyone else.'

'Have you had trouble making up your mind lately?' asked Fandral.

Loki actually laughed slightly, a laugh that was barely more than a breath. 'I suppose I have.' It was a relief not to be torn against himself. Nothing he intended to do now involved hurting, stealing from, or keeping imprisoned someone he liked. Or anyone at all.

Fandral studied him for a moment, serious this time. 'What about now?'

'I don't really know what I am going to do now, beyond helping the Muspel giants. I owe them that, I think.' Perhaps he had too few plans instead of too many now. He wasn't torn between impulses, but neither was he sure enough of who or what he was to decide on his future. 'If you mean am I still having trouble deciding whether people are friends or enemies, though, then no. I know whose side I'm on now.' Or something like that. The sides had altered lately, and he wasn't sure anyone was currently on the opposite side at all.

They nodded, though, and did not challenge him to be more specific about either the identity of the sides or which one he was, in fact, telling them he was on. He wasn't sure if they meant it as trust or futility until Sif said, 'If you've come back to us for good, then, will you try a match with me?'

Loki glanced at the arena, and then up at the seats, still sparsely occupied. 'Why not?'

After the duel Loki decided to follow up something he'd noticed that morning and left his friends to rejoin Thor, wandering alone through the guest wing set aside for visiting Vanir and into the enclosed garden it held. It was a wilder garden than the usual Asgardian style, given less to lawns and flowerbeds than a profusion of bushes that cast everything into dappled shade and nearly hid the paths. Loki gently pushed glossy leaves aside, and trod around a grove of bluebells nestled between two oaks, to find Freya sitting at the base of a silver birch and whittling rune staves. Two, already done, lay beside her. A little black kitten was pawing at one and Loki wondered whose it was. All cats tended to gravitate to Freya.

'Freya,' he said.

She looked up at him and smiled. ‘Hello, Loki. How are you feeling?’

‘Better,’ he said, walking over and sitting down across from her. The kitten pounced on the edge of his cloak and he decided not to bother removing it. ‘I have a question though.’

‘Oh yes?’ Freya put her half finished stave aside, carefully sliding the sheath back onto the knife blade before putting it down as well.

‘There are two trees in my room,’ he said. ‘I know I only grew one.’

‘And you think I must have something to do with it?’

‘Don’t you?’ asked Loki. She wasn’t the only one it could have been - Idunn for instance - and he wasn’t sure how even she could have done it.
‘Well, yes,’ Freya admitted, looking slightly embarrassed about it. ‘It was something of an accident.’

Loki raised an eyebrow. The tugging on his cloak continued and he reached back, picking up the little bundle of black fluff and setting it to one side, giving it a slight stroke as if to settle it in place. It rolled onto its back and purred at him. ‘I don’t see how you could do it at all, let alone by accident,’ he said. ‘Maybe you could reverse engineer it, guess at how someone with frost magic might create a tree that could produce sap for a falcon skin. But you’d have to know that was what I was doing.’

‘And you can’t guess how we knew?’ asked Freya, sounding slightly amused.

‘Lopt told you, of course,’ said Loki. ‘I’m not a fool. But he was bound.’

‘He gave Sigyn a spray of blossom. If you want to know how he managed that, take it up with him.’ Freya’s lips twitched. ‘You’re lucky he likes you. People have forced Loki into oaths before, and it often goes badly for him and far worse for them in the end.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind, but it’s unlikely to come up again,’ said Loki.

‘You’re also lucky you weren’t here when I found out. You and the elder Loki both,’ she said. ‘I’m thinking of suggesting patent laws.’

‘Do you really think that legal sanctions would be a more effective deterrent to reverse engineering than attempts at setting fire to people?’ asked Loki.

‘I wasn’t thinking of choosing one or the other,’ Freya muttered, smile going rather sharp. Loki eyed her warily until she laughed at him. ‘I’ll forgive you this time. But don’t try reverse engineering any other Vanir technology. We’ve improved our safeguards.’

‘Now that’s a worrying thought,’ said Loki. He stood up and bowed to her. ‘Thank you for your time,’ he said formally.

‘It’s always a pleasure,’ she answered.

It was after lunch that Loki caught sight of Sigyn on the other side of the dining hall. He approached her a little tentatively, it was embarrassing to remember just how thoroughly he’d dismissed her at their first meeting. She smiled at him, though. ‘Were you looking for my husband?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Loki. ‘I was, ah, told not to disturb either of you earlier. But if you’re around then does that mean he is?’

‘He’s out on the balcony,’ said Sigyn, pointing to a door from the dining hall that led onto one. ‘Go and talk to him.’

Loki followed her directions, walking out to find Lopt looking up at the sky, looking Asgardian rather than Jotun. There were birds circling above, so high he couldn’t make out what they were. ‘You told them about Muspelheim,’ he said flatly, walking over to lean on the railing beside Lopt.

Lopt shook his head. ‘They guessed.’

‘Because you gave them one of Tree’s blossoms.’ Oddly Loki felt angrier about that than the betrayal. The betrayal had been deserved, but Tree was his.

‘I gave the blossom to Sigyn because it was beautiful. I never thought about what they might deduce from it,’ said Lopt.
Loki caught his shoulder and pulled him around to face him, searching his eyes for a lie. ‘You believe that,’ he said. ‘You made yourself believe it.’

Lopt nodded, mouth twisting in a wry smile. ‘It’s not the first time I’ve needed to get around magical bonds.’

Loki let go of him and moved away, looking up at the birds himself as Lopt resumed his previous position beside him. ‘When was the first?’

‘A long time ago,’ said Lopt, voice distant. ‘I’d been spying on a Jotun called Geirrod and he caught me…I was careless, I knew I’d been spotted and was playing around with his guards instead of getting out of there. He starved me until I would have done anything for a bite to eat and then told me to bring Thor to him unarmed. I accepted the bond.’

Loki bit down on his response. He had betrayed his own Thor, his brother, although not for cowardice. Who was he to say Lopt’s actions had been worse than his own? ‘What did you do?’ he asked instead.

‘I told Thor that Geirrod was a friend of mine I wanted him to meet and we should go unarmed for courtesy’s sake. We both had friends in Jotunheim and Thor believed me, more easily than he should have done, perhaps. On the way it occurred to me that we were going close to the house of a Jotun we were both friends with already, Grid, and that we might as well stay the night since we’d started quite late and go on to Geirrod’s in the morning. I fell asleep quickly but Thor stayed up talking to her. He happened to mention where we were going and she told him Geirrod hated Asgardians and armed him without me knowing.’

‘And Thor won,’ said Loki.

Lopt smiled. ‘Naturally.’

‘Do you know who you are?’ It wasn’t the right question, Loki thought after he’d said it. Not quite.

‘Yes,’ said Lopt. ‘Do you?’

‘…No. Not really. When I saw Leikin I felt like I should look like that.’ Loki looked at his own hands. They were his, long pale fingers without a trace of blue. Like they’d been nearly all his life.

‘That would surprise people,’ said Lopt, and Loki frowned at him for the note of amusement in his voice. ‘You’re not half and half,’ Lopt continued. ‘You’re fully both. Like me.’

‘You’re not Asgardian,’ said Loki.

Lopt’s hands clenched briefly on the rail. ‘By mingled blood and oath,’ he said. ‘I’m Odin’s brother. As fully as if I’d been born of his parents.’

‘Sorry.’

Lopt turned around to face Loki more fully, leaning his hip against the balcony. Eyes a deeper, brighter green than Loki’s own. ‘It’s fine. You’re not the only one to think like that.’

‘I’m the last person who should, though,’ said Loki.

Lopt smiled. ‘Not really. Coming from you it’s not an insult, at least.’ He frowned suddenly and grabbed Loki’s hand, peeling his cuff back to reveal a bruise on his arm, then his eyes darted up, flicking back and forth across Loki rapidly, pausing at his collar where the edge of a bruise showed.
‘What happened?’

‘Nothing. Just Sif,’ said Loki, pulling his hand away and folding his cuff back down.

‘She hurt you?’ The alarm in Lopt’s voice brought Loki up short, and he looked up from his cuff to find fear in Lopt’s eyes.

‘No,’ said Loki quickly, a little embarrassed. ‘Sparring.’

‘Oh,’ said Lopt, sounding embarrassed as well. ‘Isn’t that still a little rough?’

‘If she’d been angry she would have been gentler. Sif wouldn’t let loose if she couldn’t trust her emotions,’ said Loki, hearing the satisfaction in his own voice.

Lopt rolled his eyes, looking reassured. ‘Warrior friendships,’ he muttered.

‘I would have thought you’d be used to it, raising Vali. He took Mjolnir to the shoulders to win his bout, fortunately he was a dragon at the time,’ said Loki.

‘I forget you’re a warrior as well as a magician,’ said Lopt. ‘It’s quite rare.’

‘Isn’t Vali?’ Loki asked, thinking of the shapeshifting.

‘Not quite. He has a knack for one type of magic, but he never studied to try to extend his range.’

‘Like Thor, then,’ said Loki.

Lopt nodded and there was silence for a moment, Lopt’s gaze wandering back to the birds as he frowned in thought. Loki turned his own gaze upward as well, grateful to not be looking at Lopt as he broached the other reason he was here.

‘Will you come and talk to Odin with me?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Lopt, very quickly. He laughed when Loki looked at him inquiringly. ‘I was just wondering how to ask you whether I could be present when you two spoke.’

Loki followed the boy into Odin’s throne room and wandered off to one side to sit down with his back against a pillar, one knee hitched up slightly with his arm resting on it. Odin raised an eyebrow at him.

‘Don’t mind me, I just here to make sure people say what they mean,’ he said. The boy gave him a look that said winding Odin up wasn’t meant to be part of what he was there for, and Loki grinned at him.

‘You think we’re hopeless, don’t you,’ said Odin.

‘At this point I wouldn’t blame him,’ said the boy. ‘I asked him to come.’

There was a slight movement from Odin, an almost hidden flinch, and Loki wondered whether he should start his job by saying the barb hadn’t been deliberate. He had a feeling Odin could work that out for himself, though.

‘Considering our last few conversations, perhaps you have a point. Guards,’ Odin added, ‘you are dismissed.’ The throne room guards -- mostly ceremonial, when Asgard wasn’t at war -- bowed and departed, although one of them looked uncertainly at the boy first.
The boy stood with his head slightly bowed, looking unsure of himself. He licked his lips. ‘What did you do to me?’ he asked. ‘Magically.’

‘When I first picked you up, you changed your appearance on your own,’ said Odin. ‘When I brought you to Frigga, we infused you with our magic and caused you to shapeshift to an Asgardian child.’

The boy glanced at Lopt who said, ‘Instinctive magic can be used right from birth. It’s rare, but it happens.’

‘Did you bring me back because I’d looked like an Asgardian child when you held me?’ asked the boy, turning back to Odin.

‘No.’ The single word was sharp and offended. The boy tensed; Loki sighed, and Odin glanced at him and added, ‘I recognised my brother in you. Although I could not have left you behind even had I not.’

The boy relaxed slightly, looking at Loki curiously as if searching for the family resemblance Odin had seen. ‘You established a shapeshift,’ he said slowly. ‘But I can use fertility magic even while I’m in a Jotun form.’

‘That... may be because of the infusion.’

The boy looked up, sharply. ‘You don’t know what you did to me?’

‘I told you what we did,’ Odin said, sounding so nettled that Loki nearly started laughing at him. ‘I cannot necessarily be sure of everything that changed.’

‘I’m rather disturbed that you...experimented on me, without any way to be sure of the results,’ the boy snapped back.

‘Be fair,’ said Loki. ‘He didn’t have a whole lot of options. A baby Jotun would be at risk from Asgard’s climate, it wasn’t just a matter of hiding you.’

The boy looked at him, startled and almost betrayed, and Loki wondered whether it had been unwise of him to speak on Odin’s behalf instead of sticking closely to his self-appointed role as mediator.

‘You lived,’ Odin said, drawing the boy’s attention again. ‘We were not sure you would at first. Aside from the climate, you were badly dehydrated... and you objected to being put down, which made keeping you cool slightly more of a challenge.’

‘You could have shapeshifted yourself,’ Loki pointed out, amused.

‘...I tried that. He screamed so hard he vomited.’

‘I’m not sure I needed to know that,’ the boy muttered.

Loki considered that, rather surprised by the new information, if a little amused by the boy’s reaction to it. People usually didn’t remember their experiences as newborns, but that didn’t mean they didn’t affect them, and if the boy had learnt right from birth to associate Jotuns with pain and anger...well, maybe he’d been overcoming more than he knew in persuading the boy to accept his Jotun form.

The boy looked down, considering what he wanted to say next carefully. ‘Do all Jotuns hate runts?’ he asked, putting a bit too much emphasis on the last word, clearly not intending to but trying too hard not to falter on it. Loki could guess at the unspoken question there, ‘What do they think when
Odin let out a long sigh. ‘No. Actually, I would guess that very few, strictly speaking, are actively malicious -- but it’s broadly regarded as a sort of disability. And it is not rare to regard it as too burdensome to live with, for the family and for the child itself.’ Wryly, ‘The attitude did become substantially less common while Jotunheim was in regular contact with people roughly the size of a small-born Jotun.’

The boy looked relieved and then rueful. ‘They have plenty of good reasons to hate me. It shouldn’t matter to me if they hate me for a bad one.’

‘...Perhaps not,’ said Odin. ‘But it is natural to want to know.’

Loki leant forward slightly, thinking that it did matter to be hated for what you’d done rather than what you were, but unwilling to interrupt right now just to offer his opinion. The boy was looking down at his hands again, still, thoughtful. ‘What...’ he began softly, and then trailed off. It was a moment before he started again. ‘What did you intend me to be? I know...not a relic, but...an advisor to Thor? You always have plans for everyone and Thor was always going to be the King. So what was I meant to be?’

‘My son.’ As Loki raised his eyebrows and the boy’s eyes flicked up, Odin huffed low in his throat. ‘I wasn’t finished.’

The boy glanced over at Loki and then, with maybe the barest hint of humour, said, ‘Please go on then.’

‘I loved you as my child,’ Odin said quietly, ‘and as kin to the brother I... sorely missed.’ A glance over at Loki, in his turn, very nearly the same motion, before he returned his eye to the boy. ‘Not that I was particularly fond of the rest of them. I admit also to taking some satisfaction in the thought of how Laufey would rage if he knew. When I said I had hoped to bring about peace through you, it was more symbolic than practical. You had a claim to Laufey’s throne, but not one that could ever have been readily defended. Here... yes, most likely Thor’s advisor, although I considered you as king longer than I did any of my own brothers. I am still hoping you’ll both learn to think ahead more.’

The boy winced and said, ‘I see,’ very softly. Loki could almost see him wanting to say more, and holding back.

‘I would not have given Byleist the casket, for instance,’ added Odin, and Loki debated shaking him until he went on, ‘but perhaps it is as well that you did.’

‘Oh.’ The boy looked at Odin, less wary than before, then glanced almost pleadingly at Loki.

‘I don’t know what you want to say to him,’ said Loki. ‘So I can’t say it for you.’ He shot a look at Odin, willing him to say something reassuring. The last thing they needed was anything more left unsaid festering between them.

Odin, for all his other talents, had never been that good at reassurance. The oath and the cool assumption that his kin at home would welcome whom he welcomed had worked on Loki, those thousands of years ago, but the boy’s worries were different in kind. But at last Odin said into the silence, ‘You have reminded me of myself, often. Magician and warrior. Explorer. Less lonely than I was in Asgard -- in retrospect, that may have been more fault in me than in my potential companions -- but less sure. Or perhaps I should say less arrogant. Sometimes more prudent. I tended to calculate the risks and then ignore them.’
The boy looked a little stunned. ‘Thank you,’ he said, then, in a rush, ‘I don’t know that I want to be Thor’s advisor. I don’t want the responsibilities of a king without the rights and unless Thor has changed more than it seems that is what it would be. The responsibility belongs to the one who truly has the last word, not the one who seems to, and he is trusting. Easily manipulated. The power behind the throne is either a thankless role or a sinister one and I don’t want that.’

Loki could see the boy tense up afterwards, expecting - what? Not a blow, certainly, that had never been Odin’s style. Criticism?

‘I am not sure you can avoid advising him,’ Odin said bluntly. ‘I doubt you will break contact with him altogether, or refrain from giving your opinion. That said -- those are valid concerns.’ Loki rather thought he could have started with that. ‘Thor does need to learn not only to think ahead, but to think for himself and to recognise when someone is trying to manipulate him, or even simply giving poor advice. This is one of several reasons I wanted to keep an eye on the beginning of his reign.’ A wry look. ‘He has had a number of lessons on the subject lately. And you might do well to distinguish argument from manipulation.’

‘Thor can be somewhat stubborn when argued with directly. Although I can believe that’s changed more easily than that he’s stopped trusting too freely,’ said the boy. He was frowning slightly, not as if he was upset by Odin’s answer but as if he needed to turn it over. ‘You are right I wouldn’t refuse to give him my opinion if he wanted it. Or even if he didn’t,’ he added with a glimmer of humour.

‘He is supposed to be able to trust you,’ Odin pointed out.

‘That’s a fairly optimistic assessment,’ said the boy.

‘It was a statement of ideal, not of present fact,’ Odin said ruefully.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said the boy. He shifted on his feet slightly, as if thinking of finding a way to take his leave.

Then Odin drew a breath and said, ‘You have not asked what I thought you would.’ Loki shut his eyes for a moment. Of course. The big question, the one he’d asked already but the boy hadn’t, the lie of omission that they needed to confront and probably didn’t want to. It was something, anyway, that Odin had finally brought it up.

The boy’s shoulders went back, his hands folded into fists, and he went still and pale. After all the time watching him with the casket, Loki found himself translating the current pallor into what it would be if the boy looked Jotun now. The bloodless shade of a hazed sky at noon, maybe. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

Odin bowed his head for a moment. As if he needed to think, even though he’d prompted it. ‘Because for all my wordcraft, I did not know how. Because when you were a child, I told myself I did not want to burden you before time with the secret. Because when I saw you set apart, I feared you would feel more so if you knew you had been born to those our people now thought of as enemies. Because I did not want to explain that Laufey had not wanted you, nor tell how I knew and the tales of your namesake. And so I waited for you to ask, though I had left you no reason to guess it.’ He sighed, raising his head to meet the boy’s heated green eyes. ‘If you hoped for a good reason, I cannot offer one.’

‘Maybe I would have felt more set apart, then. But what am I meant to feel now, when I thought I knew who I was and now find I’m someone else entirely?’ The boy’s skin turned blue, red eyes fixed on Odin, and then he slid back into his Asgardian form. ‘Which of these looks like me to you, father?’ There was venom on the honorific, but his voice was shaking slightly too.
‘I have grown used to this one,’ said Odin. Loki wasn’t sure how helpful that was, but he supposed at least it was honest. ‘It is how I call your appearance to mind. But you do realise you look nearly the same in Jotun shape.’

‘I do?’ The boy looked so startled by that revelation that Loki was having a hard time not laughing. What did he think he looked like?

Odin blinked. ‘That’s usually the case in shapeshifting, unless you choose a form with drastically different facial anatomy, and even then people are often surprisingly recognisable.’ He glanced at Loki. ‘Your uncle can choose to shapeshift with an alternative face. I have to use a glamour for a real disguise.’

‘But you can shapeshift into a Jotun,’ said the boy. ‘Do you look like yourself then?’

‘See for yourself,’ Odin replied. He changed as he spoke -- all of a piece, not like the casket’s ice magic flowing over the boy; his skin blossomed blue, his height nearly doubled, and his voice gained an ice-rock timbre mid-word as his larynx and ribcage both expanded. He rose from the throne, hands spread.

The boy took a hurried step back. From his expression he hadn’t been expecting Odin to turn into a full-sized frost giant.

‘Oh, stop looming,’ said Loki. ‘There was no need for you to stand up for us to see how big you were.’

‘I beg your pardon. My sense of drama overcame me.’ Odin did sit back down, though.

Loki snorted. ‘It usually does.’

The boy had a derailed sort of look, as if he was having trouble remembering how this was meant to have gone. Since he probably hadn’t expected it to go well that might actually be a good thing.

Odin touched the eyepatch briefly. It had altered to fit along with his clothing -- that sort of adaptation was the second major thing you learned when shapeshifting, if you didn’t want to spend a lot of extra time either naked or tangled in fabric -- but Loki suspected he hadn’t taken this form since losing the eye. ‘Well?’

‘You still look like yourself,’ said the boy. ‘Only much bigger. And bluer. Neither of which you needed me to tell you.’

Odin laughed -- sort of; only a huff through his nose, still a bit grim. ‘True.’ He changed back, just as suddenly.

‘I am still not happy about being lied to,’ said the boy. ‘At least you don’t pretend you were right to do it.’

‘I am still not sure when I should have told you,’ replied Odin, ‘but almost anything would have been an improvement.’

‘Not falling asleep in the middle of it would have been an improvement too,’ said the boy. ‘But I don’t actually believe you intended to do that.’

Odin grimaced slightly. ‘Certainly not.’

Loki managed to keep the facepalm internal. The Odinsleep wasn’t always very convenient, but that
had to be the worst possible timing.

‘What would you have told me if you’d managed to stay awake?’ the boy asked. ‘Would anything have actually made finding out like that better?’

‘I hope I would at least have explained myself more coherently,’ said Odin. ‘I would have told you -- again -- that you are my son. That you are not a monster, however the war has poisoned our memories of Jotunheim. And very likely a great deal more history than you really wanted to hear at the time.’ That was certainly plausible. ‘Whether it helped or not, at least staying awake would have removed a few complications.’

‘Like my brief reign,’ suggested the boy drily.

‘And your friends blaming you for my actions.’

‘I didn’t realise you’d noticed that.’

‘I could hear you.’

‘How? I knew you were aware of things during the Odinsleep but I thought they had to be in your bedroom.’ Possibly the boy was rethinking the plan that had led to him luring Laufey into Odin’s room there. At any rate he sounded rather dismayed.

‘Ah. No. My awareness during it is somewhat broadened, although not at Heimdall’s level.’

‘In other words,’ said Loki. ‘He only sleeps once a year, and even then he can’t let go.’

Odin rolled his eye, but let Loki’s description stand. ‘Something like that.’

‘That is something else you could maybe have told us about,’ said the boy. Then, looking rather pale. ‘Did you watch over Thor? When I - when he was in SHIELD custody?’

‘When you told him I was dead?’

‘Yes.’ The boy looked rather sheepish now.

‘Your concealment was actually very effective, but the aftermath was revealing.’

‘I don’t think giving him advice on how to be sneaky is the right response here,’ said Loki.

The boy gave him a look. ‘Are you taking this seriously?’

‘Yes,’ said Loki. ‘Well, mostly. But you’re clearly not going to be in trouble for it. So I think I can tease Odin a bit without ruining the mood, such as it is.’

‘I’m not?’ asked the boy, looking at Odin. Considering the other things he wasn’t getting in trouble for Loki wasn’t sure why he was singling this one out to be worried about. Maybe because it had been motivated by spite.

Odin rubbed a hand over his face, possibly quelling the urge to laugh. ‘Would there be any point to it? It is a lesser offense than the plans you made with Muspelheim, or bringing raiders into the vault. Although I would like to ask what you were thinking.’

The boy looked down. ‘I was thinking it would stop Thor from trying to return...but mostly that it would hurt him.’
‘Anything more I could say about it, I think you already know.’

‘Yes,’ said the boy. ‘Thank you, for explaining. And for listening. Father.’

Odin smiled. It was slight, especially compared to the fierce laughter that had grown rarer outside of battle since Bor died, but it was there. And the boy was probably more used to that. ‘I am glad to have you with us again, my son.’

There was a moment where Loki felt like there ought to have been a hug, but instead there was just a look and a shared smile. Oh well, at least they were getting along.

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